**Salt: Movement 03 (New World. There's a new world coming; this one's coming to an End.)**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/11322669).

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**Salt: Movement 03 (New World. There's a new world coming; this one's coming to an End.)**

by catchandelier

**Summary**

Love is a shambling thing, gray-faced and gasping. It moves in from the west, the setting sun behind it. Those who see it avert their eyes. Love does not eat or drink, love separates its many teeth and consumes. Love is a shambling thing, grey-faced and gasping. -Let’s not dwell on our corpse strewn past. Let’s celebrate our corpse strewn future!


The secret to a long life lies in how acutely you perceive Time; and if you're afraid of the dark, which can't be seen through, don't be. Most of the truly frightening things are too small to be seen or inside your body already.
Home Again, Home Again.

There truly is nothing so disheartening as packing up to leave somewhere. It’s not so much that you’re leaving- depending on where you’re going, leaving can actually be the very best thing- it’s the packing. You’re creating physical proof of the fact that all things we experience in this world are transient. We are not eternal; we will not last forever.

In the moments we exist, it isn’t really possible to face our inevitable cessation head on.

Humans aren’t good at looking eternity in the face and bowing to it.

I’m thinking all this because I’m trying to stall myself from packing up the dishes. It’s strange- I feel the same sort of melancholy I felt when I packed up my portion of the dorm each summer. On another note, student loans are the darkest form of magic known to man and I don’t care who knows it. I can pay them off, now that I’m an adult, but good lord those people are assholes. They don’t want you to pay it all in a lump sum, of course- they don’t even want you to pay more than the minimum payments. Because, you see, they can get more money out of you the longer they stretch the payment cycle out. Fuck that noise.

You’ll take my money and like it.

Packing up animals is a bit different; I can’t actually move them until I have somewhere for them to go. Or rather, I don’t want to- if it’s not me putting together their living spaces...

Let me explain.

There are two species of quail that are commonly kept in Skua. The Jungle Bush quail from Nuevo Paraiso is popular in avaiaries and is the smaller of the two, but the common Valley quail is more popular for producing eggs or meat with smallholders and back garden farmers. They are, when kept correctly, very productive; producing about 230 eggs per year, making them an ideal solution for small outdoor spaces unsuitable for larger birds. They are more nervous than other poultry and do not like being handled. Care must be taken when catching them because they are able to fly vertically upwards to escape capture. Quail will get used to you over time however, and mine will call between themselves when approached. Being native to Skua and having traveled with me all over Paradise, their haki makes them much tougher and more expressive than normal- so I know for a fact that this particular flock really loves kale.

(Their calls sound a bit like ‘pirp-pirp-pirp’ and it’s really very cute.)

Rats are a real problem to quail and one of the first things to be considered when building a run and houis for them is securing that enclosure from rats. Ventilation in housing is also paramount, as quail droppings produce far more ammonia than other poultry.

Quail can be kept with or without a run as long as they are provided with grass or greens in their diet. I get the best results from single level rabbit hutches. Keeping domesticated rabbits as pets is a very common practice Worldwide, and the hutches provide adequate ventilation, easy access, and a nice place the laying quail to hide and lay eggs. Chicken coops are wasted on quail. They don’t need such elaborate nest boxes, although they do appreciate somewhere dark to lay. Furthermore, quail don’t always make nests; they will usually lay their eggs in discreet places in their bedding or in thick grasses, much like the pheasant. Perches are also wasted on quail- which is another reason not to use
a chicken coop, as most coops are raised off the ground.

Quail actually prefer a habitat more like a pheasant's. Their natural habitat is amid wild grasses, scrub, brush, and open woodlands; they mostly eat seeds, berries, fruits, and insects. Practically speaking, it’s much easier to just... let the grassy deck grow long and let the quail run around in it, although the rabbit hutch does give them a nice place to lay. They also dust bathe regularly; to keep them healthy and happy in a domesticated environment, an area for them to dust bathe in is required.

They do need more protection during cold weather, when the ambient temperature is approaching freezing or below. If it’s bad enough, it’s best to move them indoors; however, for the most part, a simple bit of forethought will suffice. A sheltered position, an extra handful of centimeters for bedding depth, and they’ll be well insulated from the floor. It also helps to keep them shut in their hutch on cold or rainy days. Wet and draughts will cause problems for anyone, of course--but for the worst of the weather, it’s best to cover them with a bit of sacking or tarp. So long as the sacking isn’t left on them, this covering of them isn’t problematic.

Quail feed needs to be relatively high in protein, maybe a fifth of the total mixture by ratio? So. It’s best to make your own feed- that way, I know for a fact what all is going into my animals. I use thirty percent protein floating catfish feed, costs around 1700 beri for fifty pounds (or 23 kilograms, rounding up). It’s best to have a dedicated grinder for farm work. I do, now, I use a very sturdy blender- anyway, the pellets get ground to about the consistency of cornmeal, although the laying quail will eat the pellets whole. The high levels of protein are necessary for egg production and overall growth. Quail don’t overeat, so they can be fed with grazing feeders. Young quail need a high protein starter crumb; specialty feeds don’t usually exist specifically for quail, non-medicated turkey starter crumb is common enough at most feed stores that it will work just fine. However, in absence of turkey starter, domesticated chick crumb will work if protein is added as I mentioned earlier. The chick crumb I use is gradually mixed in with breeding feed, which contains the aforementioned fifth of protein by ratio. I put in seeds as well, for variety’s sake. Adult quail eat about fifteen grams of food per day. Greens should also be provided for them, so I grow grasses and dark leafy greens in and near their run so they can peck and graze at them with fluttery abandon. It enriches their lives, and incidentally keeps the grass from overgrowing.

Ignoring the entertainment of just watching them do their thing--which is quite entertaining, and good to do when spinning as I’ve mentioned before (I can’t watch myself spin, it turns out lumpy)--my quail are very productive in the egg department. They start laying at eight to twelve weeks, assuming there is enough light, so they are productive very quickly compared to other poultry.

Four quail eggs are roughly the same as a chicken egg, although they have a slightly higher quantity of yolk to white in an egg. Sanji has made an entire table of egg to egg ratios in his revised Skuan cookbook- with little notations about the standout qualities of each egg. Seagull eggs, for example, have a much higher water content than most other eggs, while duck eggs have a very rich yolk.

All this is to say I need to have an area prepared for the quail before I try to move them onto the Thousand Sunny. I’m thinking some kind of sunflower house. A sunflower house is a ring or square of sunflowers, grown in Skua for the purposes of child rearing. Children like places they can feel like they’re alone with themselves at a certain age, and adults don’t like not knowing where their children are.

There will be a patch of easily scratched up dirt and dust for the quail to bathe in. A shallow dish embedded in the dirt with a big jar that allows water to flow into it slowly, so they can drink. And lots of grasses and things to hide under, for enrichment purposes. Their nesting area proper will be a woven bamboo cage, open on the sides, and topped with a green... it looks like a leaf but it’s really a roof rig that makes it easier to lift the hutch off the ground. The hutch itself actually fits neatly into a
furrow in the ground- or lawn (garden) deck, as the case may be.

My Angora Opossums are a bit different.

An opossum is a marsupial mammal. Their unspecialized biology, flexible diet, and reproductive habits make them successful colonizers and survivors in diverse locations and conditions. The Angora opossum is thought to have originated in Angora, Goblin Desert, although the facts remain unclear - mostly historical. Wild Angora possums are still found in the Angora area, as their incredibly thick, soft fur offers protection from the harsh black and white sand desert they make their home in. No one's entirely sure how the ancient Four Kingdoms went about domesticating possums, but their usefulness is undeniable.

What is known for certain is that Skua, Nort, and Est have raised angora possums for their fiber for centuries and the Chillage are credited for making their wool popular around 790- although the rest of the World wouldn’t see the luxurious fiber until 920.

There are five Angora possum breeds that dominate in fiber production: Este Angora, Chiller Angora, Saint Angora, Giant Angora, and Pixie Angora. Other breeds such as the Jewelry Woolsey and the Sabaody Fuzzy Lop also produce wool. However, they tend to be much more fractious in personality, so breeders tend to avoid them, thusly their fiber rarely comes on market.

The big five breeds are calm natured and known for their docile disposition. They make wonderful pets and are gentle with children and childish adults. That said, daily care for this rabbit typically falls onto an adult- or, in my case, a sewing professional- as the grooming can be overwhelming.

Great pets aside, Angoras are mostly kept for their plush coats, which produces the softest and warmest fiber in the World suitable for garments. As an animal primarily used for wool production, Angora possums are no-kill livestock, which can be very appealing to a lot of would-be farmers. There are also commercial breeders that raise Angoras for meat, fiber, and showing; tripling their investment. Angora wool producers typically promote and market their fiber to the hand-spinning and knitting cottage industries and can expect to enjoy nice prices for their product.

Skuans have been playing silly buggers with their farm animals for years; thus, the fact that domestic possums have more in common with rabbits than they do with their wild brethren, including lifespan. Angora opossums, being no-kill livestock, live on average for twenty years, so long as they’re cared for correctly. Ancient Skuan thrift at it’s finest, y’all.

Angora possum wool is high in demand and considered top drawer in the fiber production market. It can be sold raw, meaning right off the possum, spun, dyed, or left as undyed roving. As a fibre, it is so fine that it’s usually blended with other fibers such as sheep’s wool, mohair, silk, and cashmere. The texture of angora wool yarn alone is too fine to hold the dense stitches of knitting- and yes, it is, I’ve tried it. You’ll either snap your yarn, or snap your needles. More importantly, angora wool alone is seven times warmer than sheep’s wool, and too warm for most garments- there are some very specific specialty garments where such warmth is required, but those garments are very much a pain in the ass to make. Blending angora fiber with other fibers will add softness, warmth distribution, and a ‘halo’ effect to the yarn and the resulting garment.

Wool is harvested from the possum by either plucking or shearing. Some breeds, such as the Pixie Angora, naturally molt (referred to in most fiber texts as “blowing their coat”) three to four times a year. Other breeds need to be sheared.

I have Pixies crossed with Sabaody Fuzzy Lops, giving them enormous ears they can glide with and
very strong leaping and bounding muscles. Their personalities are pretty mellow, but they will bite if they feel scared or threatened, and they tend towards cuddling, which can be smothering. They molt every three months exactly, and use their tails like bullwhips when they fight.

Sanji likes all of my pets, and he respects my beehives, which is really all I can ask for. Speaking of Sanji, he’s the first crewmate I’m going to be picking up for transport back to Sunny, as it’s been two years, and we all have two weeks grace to get back. I am excited to be with my crewmates once more.

I never really had a big group of friends before, and even though being around all of them all the time could be a bit draining, I still missed them. I missed them all so much.

Sanji actually really loves the little turtle I made for him, and has a newfound hobby of collecting them- stuffed animals, I mean. Rather, he has three fish he loves very intensely, and I’m okay with having them on their own shelf in our bedroom. I made him an adorable rainbow trout, a fancy little flying fish motherfucker, and a big-n-squishy whale shark with the spots and the stripes and everything. Stuffed animals are the shit, and they give good hugs and they don’t ask invasive personal questions and they don’t leave hair or scales or feathers or poop in weird places like live animals. Live animals are still better for comforting purposes, but there’s an undeniable allure to the plushie that ought not be denied.

So… I’d actually forgotten, but one of the first ways I ever learned to masturbate was with a stuffed animal plush. I would wear the eyes and noses of my toys off- y’know, press everything into the right spot, cross my legs, and grind myself to a Joyful Being. Of course, Sanji and I have become close enough that when I thought of this, he heard me think of it, and uh…

Well, you know that stereotype about the girls with their beds covered in stuffed animals? I was that girl; and I can tell you here and now, the reason my bed as a child was covered in stuffed animals with hard eyes and noses was because I realized if I rotated my uses of them, I’d get a longer life out of them.

So anyway, Sanji wanted to see me do this and I- being me- was okay with showing him. So… he watched. And then we had sex. And then he watched again, and we had some more sex. He let me watch him, and I ended up giving him a blowjob?

That teddybear will never be the same… the things it's seen! The things it's done!

So, uh- every member of my crew has their own stuffed animal. Some have more than one. Everyone kind of had shitty childhoods? I mean, I did too, sort of. I guess. So, uh, I have my old realistic stuffed iguana from when I was a young girl, and a scorpion I made for myself, and Petunia the Taxidermy Alligator who is to hang from my studio’s ceiling. She’s a “happy twentieth” birthday gift from Mom- or rather, having her live and angry self sprung on me at four in the morning was the present, and I taxidermied after killing her with my spear. I don’t really like her, but she’s a conversation non-starter, I guess.

I mean, I suppose Mom knew I could kill her, and I do like Taxidermy, but hardly anyone lets me stuff their animals anymore... honestly, you let one beaver bite the nipple off a cousin, people think you can't be trusted with the particulars of stuffing a beaver.
Families are weird.

Captain and I made his sock monkey together— it’s stuffed with sand and pebbles, it’s not actually a soft toy except on the outside, just like Captain. Then I made a cute wolf pup plushie for Old Ray after he told us about his adorable child, Issun Walter.

Zoro has a tigershark, a momma boar and her adorably stripey baby, and a pair of lambs (one black, one white) which are under no circumstances to be confused with Mark’s lamb and ram. Nami has a trio of chubby cats and a maneki neko (calico with collar and golden bell, lifting it’s right paw; Nami likes money and luck). She’ll be getting something else as soon as- no, best not to say it before she does.

Usopp got a sawtooth stag beetle, considering Hekate-chan is an atlas beetle; the stuffed toy beetle is made of soft squishy leather.

Chopper got a pile of menacing microbes, and a much more benign set of body cells.

Robin got a squishy Estern crane; Franky got a very soft baby rhino; Taffy got a cloud fox because she missed her Su-mama; and Bryony got a blue crab.

Brook got a little whale he can keep in his skull, right next to the Tone Dial with all his old crew singing on it.

Marguerite got a set of starfishes.

I’m taking the long way to do this because I’m stalling out of useless fear of meeting my friends again and finding them to be strangers. If they’re strangers, we’ll just have to become friends again.

HIGITUS FIGITUS!

I would like to have everything’s attention, please! We are leaving now- arrange yourself into the packing position, post haste. Oi- furniture and books go first, you know better, Sugar Bowl.

-Cicero, you belong in with the ‘C’-s- all books stay alphabetized if you please!

-Oi oi oi- hold it, hold it. Sugar Bowl, Tea Set is damn near cracked to pieces already, and your surly attitude is not helping matters. Be gentler or I’ll find a replacement, got that? Good.

Where the hell was I…?

“Hockety pockety, Mab.”

“Thank you, Sanji.”

PRESTIDIGITARIUM!
And then I close my carpet bag with an alligator snap.

“...It really is amazing how you can fit everything into your purse.”

“The wonders of Mathemagic, Sanji. You packed too?”

“Yup.”

“Said your goodbyes?”

“Yup.”

“Alright, then- let’s go!”

We sail out into night-dark waves, and with the passing of the moons behind a bank of clouds, transport from the open ocean to the dark and quiet Soldier Dock where Nautilus! will now make her home.

“I’m home...!” calls Sanji.

“Welcome home.” I reply.

We smile at each other, in the gloom. I lead us both up, into the men’s dorm- as we made our way to the dorm, duffles and accoutrements in hand, I unpacked the ship. It’s still empty of actual stuffs for our crewmates, but everything lays ready- if they all showed up right now, I could have beds made up for them in a trice.

However, I don’t have to go get anyone for the next three days or so.

So.

“Mm, Sanji- since the pantry’s empty, and my studio is still packed up... we could go bless those rooms real quick?”

“...We sure could. And I mean- I’ll have to wash the pantry anyway, we’ve been gone for two years now...”

“Mmmh. Y’gonna eat me all up, love?”

“If you’d like.”
We smiled at each other and- uh. We didn’t get much sleep that night. Or do much other than eat and write out grocery lists the next day.

Because we were having hot, fulfilling sex. And lots of it.

*Everywhere.*

I had grass stains on my ass and it was Nostalgic.

Mm, Sanji doesn’t like ejaculating just anywhere, and with good reason; the inherent magic in his come can burn right through condoms, much less a slow-release medicine. Every time he comes inside of me, the chance of me becoming pregnant goes up, just a little bit. With that said, there’s few things the two of us enjoy more than a good old-fashioned cream-pie, with his dick all burrowed deep in me and his hot thick burning come filling my womb to the brim, the thick clouds of steam and vapor that arise from our congress- magnificent. We also recently discovered that Sanji really likes biting me, when we fuck- because we realized that sometimes, we want to take the time to make love. And sometimes, we want a quick fuck so we can calm the hell down and go the fuck to sleep already, goddamn.

I like my husband. I like fucking my husband. My husband likes me. My husband likes fucking me. We haven't tried pegging or toys yet, but I can feel it coming. M-much like I can feel- aah- I can feel- *S-sanji-*!

Aaah, Sanji, you-
Goddamn but I missed my studio and laundry.

So the very first rounds of laundry (after the pissed on sheets and bedding is fully clean again, and the towels too, and the rubber sheet) I put in are the things that didn’t manage to get washed before we packed up. Cover sheets, stored bedding, the various drop cloths that protected our floors and so on- those get washed next. I spend most of the day alternating between growing the sunflower ring in which the quail are going to live, setting up the Possum Tree and hutch- they’re free range, really- airing out the rooms below deck, checking all the rigging for damage- none so far, but I won’t rest easy until I’ve double checked everything- and switching out laundry. Dollperganger is very helpful in getting everything looked over, particularly sails and rigging which require a great deal more scrutiny than anything else- the rest of the ship can more or less be seen to as we go, but the sails are *my job* and I’m not leaving it to chance.

Folding laundry with one pair of hands, planting seeds with another, ushering chirruping quail into a cloth lined crate for transport with a third; second check of sails and rigging. As I walk through the flowering lawn-deck, past the pen of goats and nearer to the dove cote, I hear in the distance the steady buzzing roar of Shearwing on the wind. In Sunny’s lee, Shearwing comes screaming down, wailing in a rather lovely Amazonian brogue about- no, no, that’s just Gurry. He’s a bit excitable.

Ah, Taffy, Gurry- and Bryony? On Shearwing? Goodness gracious, that must have been a tight fit.

“Ahoy the ship!” calls Taffy.

“Ahoy! I’ll open the dock for you!” I call back.

One of me opens the dock, while another of me goes into the dock where our runabouts are kept. Taffy steers Shearwing into her berth with a quiet thrum, and I help her secure the little pink boat. Gurry staggers into the ship proper, hands gone white knuckled around his duffle. Bryony chortles, before helping haul Shearwing into its travel position.

I give the girls their marching orders-

“Taffy, Bry, you’re on the Lines- we’re checking them over for damages before sailing on. Gurry, when you’ve put your things on a bunk in the men’s dorm, you’ll be with these two. They’ll show you what needs doing.” I said.

“Yis! I’ll put my things away, then I’ll go.” said Taffy.

“Mm, it’s good to be home.” said Bryony.

“A-ah, right. Thank you.” said Gurry.

Gurry is glancing at Taffy who is carefully staring straight at me. As he returns his gaze to me, Taffy starts glancing at him. Bryony sighs very softly and rolls her eyes; ah, she’s grown so well!
I don’t say anything because they can probably figure this one out, but- there is no “right” moment when it comes to matters of the heart, merely moments that aren’t completely wrong. I wonder if Taffy knows that?

No matter- three of my Dollpergangers return to my pockets as tiny fairy charms, neat as you please on their sorting threads, and the rest of me continue apace.

Gurry has experience sailing- of course he does, he’s from Amazon Lily. Gurry also has a deep seated hatred and mistrust of seagulls, and will barely tolerate the News Coos. His duffle has sea-creatures and seashells patterned on it. His favorite pair of waders are a beaten up pair of canvas sneakers, just like Jackie- and he likes painting en plein air. I’d almost go so far as to say the only way he knows how to paint is en plein air, with oils. Well, he’s in for an education, I suppose.

I like him.

Mark has done a rather spectacular job in keeping our home-farm going- not innovating, per say, but the animals are happy and healthy, and the various fruits and flowers and vegetables are growing with abundance. Miss Shakky, of course, must have come by every day and kept things in working order- fed the birds, milked the goats, made sure the water was clean… Farming, even a small one like ours, is hard work every day. I suppose the excess fertilizer from the dove droppings was sold off, for a tidy profit of course- as was the milk, eggs, and squab.

The dog kennels are really more of a loafing shed now, they’ve gotten much bigger. Pearblossom, Bubbler, and Buttercream bite much less often now, because they know us and trust us- and seeing them hunt seals and large fish is a goddamn miracle. My goodness they’re lovely dogfishes. And they missed all of us; Captain especially, because he gives them his bones after he’s gnawed most of the meat off of them. Best thing for a sad boy is a happy dog; best thing for a sad dog is a happy boy. Sometimes, all a boy really needs is a dog; and sometimes, all a dog really needs is a boy. Buttercream actually picked Sanji; I saw them together sometimes… Oh, I know what I’m going to do. Hm. Truffles. That’ll be interesting.

Aha, here we go- a nice spot to put the quail. I’ve got those loops for drilling into the deck, so that things can be lashed down- sort of like, like posts for a tent? What get driven into the earth? Like that. I guess the shape of the Quail Run is going to be square. I’ll just- grow the sunflower house for them now, and- rearrange the lawn so that they have a sandy, dusty spot to scratch and bathe in, and little things to hide under, and lots of grass to nibble on… Their hutch-run will go here, and make sure it’s nice and sunken in because they don’t like ramps, do they- and the hinges all work, and the locks are all in working order. If a big wind comes, the roof of their house won’t go flying off. I’ll just put the Possum Tree over here, and their Hutch goes there- and now I can turn the possums loose from where they were sleeping in their travel bag. They’ll wake up on their own in their nice new hutch, and I’ll leave them to it.

The last thing to do is grow the sunflowers and let the quail settle in again. I grow the sunflowers thick enough that they form a natural fence that the quail aren’t strong enough to peck through, and then I take their crate and open it up. It takes a good twenty minutes for them to settle into their new home, and I feed them some fresh greens to keep morale up. Then- it’s done and dusted, isn’t it.

Whop-whop-whop-whop.
That must be Usopp, Luffy, and Mark- on Hekate-chan, too. I’d know that particular cadence of wing beats anywhere.

Hekate-chan comes gliding in on her enormous wings, landing on the Sunny’s grassy lawn with a minimum of noise and pressure. Asteria-sama can move silently, but- well, I shouldn’t judge her on her mother’s merits. Hekate is her own beetle.

Um.

Um.

Oh no.

Oh no- no, I’m not dealing with that. I’ve cleaned out the Nautilus! so all that’s left to do is go get- shit, I already left, so- I’m leaving, I don’t want to know. I can go work in my studio, maybe? Something that isn’t here.

“Hey Mab, d’you want to hear about what I just did-?”

“NO I DO NOT, MARK. I’M GOING TO GET NAMI AND ZORO NOW.”

“Hey, Taffy-”

“-Yis?”

“-nevermind I gotta go eat some things. Talk later!”

“Okay…?”

That actually came out of his mouth. Mark has grown.

Focus, Mab!

Go get Nami and Zoro.

Okay so.

First things first, cards on the table- this story is insane and when I tell it to people I’m usually met with slacked jaws and Mab just gently whispering to herself “oh no oh no oh no” for like, 80% of the story because it’s just a series of progressively more terrible decisions.

This story is also really really not safe for the work place, so- okay here we go.

Alright so this story happened on the way back to Sabaody from Rusukaina where Luffy was staying and it happened in early January- which actually makes the story and the reaction to it even
worse because like, all three of us did some crazy shit during our two years training trip, but this was apparently too much too far too insane- which I guess I can’t argue with but anyways moving on.

So.

Luffy, Usopp, and I only managed to get together three times during the separation, and we missed each other fiercely at all other times. The other thing to know is that the three of us together are Trouble with a capital T. Just- awful decision making skills and we have this thing where basically every time we’re together and we’re not going on an adventure, no matter what we’re doing it’s gonna ramp up into sex without exception. This is probably the worst and most dangerous time it happened.

So we’d all packed our shit onto Hekate-chan, Usopp’s partner beetle-mount and we were on our way to Sabaody. Hekate-chan flies fast, but it’s still a good twelve hour flight from Rusukaina to Sabaody, and that’s without inclement weather delays. So. It’s the second day’s grace after new year’s, and we’re all going back to the Sunny and we’ve missed each other so much. Luffy has no libido to speak of, he just likes spending time with us- and we all decided if it was okay for Usopp to be with Malila like he was, it was okay for me to have fun. Which I did- but dammit, nothing quite matches having sex with your lovers. Nothing. Not even fucking sweet firework-wizard battles across the harbor of Water 7 with the guys at Dock 1, the guys at Franky Family Salvage, and us at the Circus. That was fucking awesome and we didn’t even set anything on fire or explode any buildings or nothing. I did have to shoot John a little bit but that’s alright, he’s an asshole and didn’t die or take offence.

Anyway.

Hekate-chan isn’t human, and she doesn’t have human morality- she honestly doesn’t care what we do on her back, so long as she can fly and has a good idea of what the Thousand Sunny looked like. And with Mab already there, she really didn’t need Usopp or Luffy or me directing her.

So here comes terrible decision #1- none of us think it might be a Bad Plan to have the three of us (two of whom are Very Horny and one of whom Is Down For That) on the back of a giant riding beetle that can fly herself places without directions.

-Hekate-chan is huge. Like, she’s small by her species’ standards, but that doesn’t change the fact that a beetle the size of a small cart is fucking huge. And of course, literally none of us- not me, not Luffy, not Usopp, and we’ve already established Hekate doesn’t care- literally none of us thinks “hey maybe we should have more than The Three Lovers on That Beetle especially when they are basically guaranteed to have sex at some point today”. We could have fit more, or even different, people on Hekate-chan’s back no problem, it would have stopped literally everything that follows.

Shit, the people on Shearwing would have been more comfortable, even, we could’a taken Gurry. We might have invited Taffy or Bryony or anyone else in though, so it’s probably best that WELL OKAY ANYWAY MAYBE that’s why no one but us was on Hekate-chan.

So. It started more or less innocent with Bad Decision #1- Luffy stuck his hat in an easily closed basket so it wouldn’t go anywhere and then Usopp started kissing him and I watched and started masturbating because my guys are fucking hot- but we were all agreed that it maybe wasn’t the Best Plan to have sex like we wanted to on the back of a giant, flying beetle.

So we’re flying and then Hekate goes above the cloud layer and starts making for Sabaody and at this point Usopp is enjoying himself with his mouth and tongue and face between my legs which he hadn’t had time for in months and I was making out with Luffy and that’s when Bad Decision #2 happened because Usopp-
Usopp checked in with Hekate to make sure she wasn’t being bothered by us- NEWS FLASH: SHE WAS NOT.

And so then Usopp started fingering me and stretching my asshole and I started whining and whimpering because holy crap that was not where I was expecting this to go and Luffy was starting to get into THE MOOD. Luffy doesn’t actually feel desire- he just keys off of what me and Usopp are feeling and by then I was- my pussy was being rubbed and stretched by Luffy and Usopp was stretching and licking my asshole and-

Bad decision #3 was Usopp deciding to put his dick in my ass while Luffy was in my pussy. The thing of it is, when that happens, Luffy can actually feel Usopp through me- through the flesh? And uh. He gets clingy and he wants to roll and uh- okay, Hekate is big, but the actual riding space on her back is very, very small. Certainly not big enough to roll around on whilst having “I haven’t seen you in six months or more” sexy times. None of us were really interested in that right then though, we were too busy making love.

So I’m between my lovers and I’m like ‘this is fucking awesome’ and so this goes on for like ten minutes until Usopp nuts and holds me like a prayer. Then Luffy surges and rolls and I’m on my back the skin of the small of my back against the leather saddle and Usopp has his second wind and is now fucking Luffy in the ass and- here’s where bad decision #4 comes into play.

See, none of us noticed it, but we’d actually run out of available space on Hekate-chan’s saddle to have sex on, so when I felt myself pressing against a coil of rope- I swear, I just thought it was odd, not that WE WERE ABOUT TO FUCK OURSELVES OFF THE GIANT BEETLE AND ALMOST FALL TO OUR DEATHS.

And then we fucked ourselves off of the giant beetle and almost fell to our deaths. I say almost because- that coil of rope was actually a loop, and it was knotted to the horn of Hekate-chan’s saddle, and when we went over, it went taught and held us suspended over fucking nothing. Bad decision #4 was- we didn’t stop. We could have, and gotten back onto Hekate-chan- but we didn’t.

And that’s how we had a buncha rounds of sex hanging off the side of a giant, flying beetle.

So I’m making love with Luffy, Luffy’s making love with Usopp, and this goes on for another half hour. Now, here’s the thing- to get Luffy to orgasm, we have to do a lot of stimulating. Usually, it’s not that big a deal- I like switching things around, Usopp has stamina for days, and Luffy is always very satisfied by the end. However, at this point in time, we haven’t seen each other in months and we’re not going to let a little thing like INCREDIBLY IMMINENT DEATH get in the way of our pleasure.

Que bad decision #5.

See, Luffy likes my pussy fine. He also likes Usopp’s asshole. Thus, when he said to Usopp “switch out”, Usopp- being a nineteen year old man- Usopp fucking did it. As far as dicks go, Luffy’s is a little… springier, while Usopp has an amazing amount of technique he can bring to bear. Bad decision #5 is thus- when Usopp gets entered from behind while his dick is in my pussy, all his normal technique gets amplified and he has to hold onto something with his whole arms, not just his hands. Luffy, of course, thrust into him from behind as soon as Usopp was settled into me. So I was the only one holding onto the rope keeping us all from falling to our deaths.

AND WE STILL WEREN’T STOPPING OR EVEN REALLY COGNIZANT OF OUR IMMINENT DEATH, LURKING BELOW US.

So we’re going over the thick clouds and I’m pretty sure we’re still not there yet and Usopp is
making a game attempt to get me pregnant with sheer enthusiasm alone (which he can’t, I’m on the shots, no babies for me right now) and Luffy has entirely forgotten that men can’t get pregnant like that because he’s got his arms wrapped around us both and is going to town and I have my arms wrapped around the rope tight enough to bruise and Hekate-chan does not fucking care. We’re going fast enough that I can’t actually tell how fast we’re going and this is fucking awesome so I make bad decision #6 and I let go of the rope and wrap my arms around my lovers.

There’s nothing holding us up now except being balanced on the rope and Hekate-chan’s very steady flying.

Luffy says “switch out” again and Usopp whines but he does it and we’ve been having sex for like 3 hours now and I’m moaning so loud and I keep moaning their names and squirming and gyrating and orgasming because I can orgasm at the passing of a stiff breeze across my face I am a HORNY MOTHERFUCKER OKAY and I’m breathing pretty hard and at some point the rope went from holding me like a belt to cradling me along my spine and we’re all getting close to orgasming in unison because we’ve orgasmed individually at least once excepting Luffy who takes some work. So right when Usopp can feel Luffy is about to orgasm- Luffy will stop thrusting right when he’s almost there so what Usopp does is he pulls Luffy out of his ass and shoves his dick into my pussy alongside his own.

So I make bad decision #7 and I start rolling my hips up into both of them because 1) they’re going to orgasm better if I do this and 2) they’re too big for me to do this without moving a bit and spreading my juices over them both and by god I want them.

So we’re clinging to each other like vines and all about to come undone and Usopp’s grabbing at my hair in it’s braids so he doesn’t bruise my skin and Luffy’s begging for us to ‘keep going keep going Mark please bite me please’ and I’m arching my back and sinking my teeth into the thick muscle of Luffy’s shoulder and he’s screaming with pleasure and he’s screaming our names as Usopp ruts underneath him and into me and this goes on for like ten minutes and I-

I’m thinking this is the greatest fucking thing I’ve ever done in my life because I am twenty years old and this is one of the craziest things I’ve ever done so obviously I’m going to see it through to the end.

So as we get maybe two hours from Sabaody, Luffy orgasms, I orgasm, and Usopp orgasms too, and then it’s afterglow city for the next, eh, hour? And then an hour after that we all climb back onto Hekate-chan, clean things up, and put our clothing back on.

Then Hekate-chan landed us on Sunny’s grassy lawn deck, just as neat as I left it last summer, and we unloaded her. Usopp clicked off her heavy saddle and carrying nets, and she shook herself clear and trundled off into a brick area on the floor I’d prepared for her in advance.

Usopp, Luffy, and I went back to the men’s dorm to put away our shit but we got distracted because Luffy started kissing the bruises the rope had left on my back and Usopp is basically always horny and uh- we didn’t get much done that day. Pretty much everyone who normally sleeps in the men’s dorm was sexiled to the women’s dorm or different parts of the ship.

So uh. It was only in telling all this to Bryony and Taffy that I realized 1) what fucking terrible decisions me and my guys make when we’re together and not adventuring and 2) maybe I shouldn’t tell that story to very many people. Because it freaked out Bryony and Taffy when I told them what went down, and they’re pretty crazy people themselves.

So yeah, that’s how me, Usopp, and Luffy got back to Thousand Sunny.
So. Kuraigana Island is so much better, now that the Curse is being addressed and people are tending to it. Zoro is also much better than where he was last I saw him- I was the one to stitch his eye closed, you see. He decided that he didn’t want to get used to a new eye, he’d be fine with one and his own Haki. I mean- he’s not wrong… Difference in styles, I suppose, and I’ll leave it at that.

Anyway- he got used to having one eye very quickly, and took to the challenge of half-blind fighting with his normal aplomb.

Perona actually escorted him to Kuraigana’s dock, along with her lovely daughter. Dessie is growing so quickly- she can walk and talk now; and I don’t really understand what she’s saying, but she’s saying something. Cute kid; eyes like a hawk, but rounder than her father’s, and her hair is just the most lovely shade of maroon I’ve seen in a long while. Perona looks- settled, is the best way I can describe it. Motherhood really suits her, and her gang of Alkonosts took to foster-parenting without much more than a ruffle of feathers. Then again, Florian Alkonosts are sturdy, stoic, stubborn people- Zoro really fit right in with the adults.

Zoro put all his things- a duffle and some wickerwork furniture- ah, a bassinet swing-rocker, lovely- onto the Nautilus before taking a knee and saying goodbye to Dessie. He’s going to be an excellent father- it’s odd, even though he’s not very… he sees the world in a very different way, it’s true. And he still manages to be one of the most child friendly people I’ve ever met. I think maybe the only children who don’t like Zoro are the really really shy ones, and even then they tend to like him eventually. The man’s gifted with small critters of the human variety.

Anyway.

He nodded solemnly to Perona- and then he’s on the ship with a leap.

I waved to Perona, who waved back before dutifully following her daughter’s commands in building a sandcastle. So cute.

“Gonna miss that kid.”

“Mm. Ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Have a seat wherever. Oh- just so you know, after we get Nami I’m taking the scenic route back, to make it easier on myself. Should take about a day.”

“Okay…?”

“So after we get Nami, I’m going to be up in the helm room. The door and walls are soundproofed, and- if you need me for something, you can use the intercom. Otherwise, you two will be on your own. Okay?”

“Oh! Uh. Y-yeah, yeah, that should be fine.”
I smile at him, and he smiles back.

“Cool. So- there’s still some food in the fridge, and the bed’s made. If you want to lay down or whatever, go for it.”

“-Right. Thank you, Mab.”

“You’re welcome, Zoro.”

I take the helm, and I sail us away- and without much more than a plop as we move from blue sea to white, we sail into the harbor of Weatheria, where Nami has been training.

I’m prohibited by Law from saying all that much about Weatheria. I can’t even discuss the weather on the skisland, it could be used to divine the location.

There’s not much to do once we’re wharfside other than stop the ship and moor it; Zoro helps me tie things down. Then, nothing to do but wait.

Nami looks different. Longer hair, bigger bust- I’ll have to take her measurements again- and she’s wearing the traditional garments of a Weather Caller; a Weather Witch. She’s even got her staff all put together- it’s not quite a full Limiting Staff, but she’s not been near Usopp and Franky or me for a while now, and all four of us have some ideas about what to build her… and of course, she’s not yet had the- ahem. Not until she says it, Mab.

When I glance over at Zoro, I see on his face an expression I don’t really remember seeing on his face ever before. Nami looks at Zoro and her face breaks out into quite possibly the happiest smile I’ve ever seen.

It’s only fun to be the third oar when you’re invited to participate.

I leap onto the dock, take Nami’s duffle from her, and wink at her in passing when she makes to say something. Nami’s pretty smart- I carry her duffle back to where Zoro left his, shut the door to the helm firmly behind me, and leave them to it.

After we unmoored the Nautilus!, Zoro and I settle into the soft pink couch in the living room of the houseboat. Mab goes back into the helm room, and we sail away from Weatheria without fanfare.

There’s a great big mirror against the smooth wall; Mab went behind it to go to the helm, so- I suppose that’s the stern? Interesting-

I’m avoiding talking to Zoro.
“Hi, Zoro.”

“Hey, Nami. Been awhile, huh?”

“Y-yeah.”

I let him come up behind me, watch him watch me shrug out of the soft hooded cape-dress-thing that marks my mastery of the Weather Arts. He slowly wraps an arm around my cloth covered stomach, hooks his throat over my shoulder and- and- the scruff of his cheek is rough and wonderful against my neck. I press my hands together and rub them over my face, rub one through the fuzzy green hair on his head and gently dance the tips of my fingers around the bone of his blind eye, press the palm of my hand to his cheek and stroke down the side of his jaw, his neck. I watch in the mirror as his eyes flutter, his face slackens with pleasure. He wraps his other arm around me and draws his hand up underneath the fabric, against my skin, squeezes the warm fullness of my chest-

“Gently, Zoro.”

“Of course.”

It’s not something that came up often in the conversations Mab, Robin, and I had together about sexual preferences, but- I really love it when my breasts get played with. Not so much lately, for a reason I need to tell Zoro, but- ooh, oh yes!

Zoro and I talked a lot about sexual preferences. There wasn’t much else we could do, considering we were both so busy with training- so, when he picks me up and re-sits us both down on the pink couch, I know exactly what he’s going to do.

“It’s okay if you have to scream or cry, Nami.”

“Oh? But- Mab-”

“Mab can’t hear us unless we use the intercom. And the intercom is over there.”

“Oh. Oh, oh, Zoro-”

And then I was too busy enjoying myself to consider my own insecurities and anxieties. Zoro likes kissing me- not just my mouth, but my neck, the back of it especially. I don’t quite understand the appeal, but God his fingers, his fingers are- he has impeccable control of his strength and a curiosity to match and god, oh god, when he touches me it’s like trails of fire over my skin, like- like little pleasure-lightnings over my whole body but especially between my legs. The air crackles thick with ozone and his soft laughter and my sharp cries of pleasure- Zoro that’s too much, that’s too much I’ll break-

Finally, when I can’t stand it much longer, I go to pleasure myself but Zoro won’t let me. He nudges my questing hands aside and takes it upon himself to please me, rough strong fingers rubbing and
digging and nudging and delving- **deeper**- than I ever managed. **So good!**

I can’t even close my legs, he’s got them hooked over his and spread us both wide. Staring into the mirror it all looks- so- **aaaaaAAAAAH**!

It’s just me being stirred and squeezed by strong, controlled, callused hands and I can’t even see what he’s doing against my orange-flower, my clothing is in the way.

It eventually occurs to me that we’re wearing far too much clothing.

“Z-zoro. Zoro, stop- we’re. Hah. We’re wearing way too many clothes for- this boat has a bed, right?”

“-Yeah, yeah it does. Come on.”

And somehow- somehow, I’m not worried about following him.

I only have to lead him a little bit, the door to the room we need is wide open, beckoning.

I let my clothing fall to the floor and Zoro follows suit, and then he follows me into- into- into **something new** for us both. Soft thumps on the bed, and the world melts into pleasures untold.

When I wake again the next day, it’s in Zoro’s arms. I’m sore, a little, but more because I haven’t done anything like that- that much, for that long- for nearly two years. I’d never been with a virgin before, and most of our- activities- were spent in an exploratory way. I never really took the time to explore, before. It was- it was really good.

For example, Zoro likes it when someone kisses and licks his extensive scars, but especially the big one across his front. I like licking and kissing his extensive scars, especially the big one across his front; and he’s very ticklish on his feet, so while he likes having his calf scars rubbed, I have to be careful or he’ll start giggling and squirming, which knocks him right out of the sexy-times headspace. I mean, we’ve had giggly sex too, which is great fun, but…

Zoro likes blowjobs. I like giving Zoro blowjobs. Zoro likes giving cunnilingus. I like getting my pussy licked by someone with so much enthusiasm. And his learning curve! He started out sloppy but by the second time he was good and by the fifth I was having paroxysms of joy because the man knows how to keep a steady pace and steamrolls right over any objections I might have about having orgasms back to back.

There is nothing quite so good as having back to back orgasms for several hours.

More importantly… I’ve lain with Sanji before, and Sanji has almost no refractory period. I’m not sure how that works, but it’s true- get Sanji going and he’ll just keep going until you both pass out.

Zoro is not like that. Zoro can hold off his orgasm for **hours** and pull me through ten or twenty of them before even considering letting go. Zoro’s not as long as Sanji, but he’s much thicker- and I didn’t realize I had a preference, but thicker dicks rub better. They just- do. And Zoro can rub inside of me all night long, too, which Sanji just- well, maybe he can now, I haven’t asked Mab yet.
Back when I fucked him in Est, he certainly couldn’t- he could do any position I asked for, he just didn’t have the same kind of staying power. I had no complaints- but he just wasn’t there for the cuddling, and the petting, and the hand holding, and the warm, heavy looks like I’m the most beautiful, the most expensive, the most- I can hardly stand to look Zoro in the eye when he’s rolling his hips against mine like the most inexorable wave across the shore and it’s not just because of the way it feels it’s-  

He has sharp, brown eyes, darker than mine, and they can snap and flash like the edge of a blade- but when he’s making such wonderful love with me, his eyes become warm and soft and caressing and I almost can’t bear to look into them- but even more, I can’t bear to look away.  

Even when after the latest orgasm I burst into pleasured tears, I still can’t look away.  

When he presses a hand against my hardening womb, his eye widens with sudden delight, and a perverted flush races across his cheeks and I can feel him, his dick, his legs and his hips and his whole body shuddering against me tipping me over the edge and I orgasm for the last time and he can’t hold himself back and he moans long and low and loud against me before collapsing.  

Nami from two years ago would have said something like “it’s not the size of the boat, it’s the motion of the ocean”. I definitely remember saying “it takes a long fucking time to get to Paradise in a rowboat” to Mab during our discussions of sex. And then, when I was having sex with Zoro for the first time I realized- even if it takes a long time to get to Paradise in a rowboat, you’re still in Paradise. -Which is to say, it takes a long time for him to orgasm, but when he does, he can’t stop for a while and he can’t get up and go again for another while. I don’t mind- he’s very attentive and considerate and he makes me beg him screaming for his dick sometimes which is exactly what I want from him and by god it feels good to get what you want.  

He’s so warm and so heavy and deeply sleeping on top of me; I’ve never felt so safe and protected in my life.  

And then I realize that he’s watching me, just like I’m watching him.  

“...Something you want to tell me?” said Zoro, with gentle expectancy.  

“Ah. Well… do you still have that fetish for pregnant women?” said Nami, softly smiling.  

“...Yeah. I don’t even like Perona like that, so it was the most confusing, awful thing to learn that about myself,” sighed Zoro. “I- I know the timing is bad, but- I mean. It’s not like our lives will ever get less dangerous.”  

“True. And… I mean. It’s not like Mihawk isn’t hot… Anyway, Weather Arts were actually developed by and for pregnant people first; then for everyone else. So, I- we talked about me stopping my birth control, and I did, and… um. Well. If my timing is right, you should have impregnated me about eleven weeks ago. Maybe twenty? Chopper did the blood test already, so. Um. Surprise?” said Nami.  

“I- Ah. R-really? That’s wonderful! Nami, that’s really wonderful! I- Um. Nami… Nami, what are we going to do?” said Zoro, grinning like a fool and touching Nami’s womb- then a sharp pang of
worry raced across his brow.

“I- I guess we just keep going? There’s not much to do, really, that isn’t already done- and I wasn’t going to be getting in many fights anyway, and… I can already feel my Weather Arts getting stronger, Zoro.” said Nami, laying a comforting hand over the hand Zoro had put on her womb.

“…I’m really happy. I’m happy for you and I’m happy for the baby, too. Kid’s gonna be Strong, with Strong Parents.” said Zoro, grinning again.

“It might even be said that our child has the Strongest Parents in the World.” said Nami, grinning.

“Heh. Uh. Do you- do you want to get married?” said Zoro, haltingly.

“…Are you just asking because I’m having a baby with you?” said Nami, sharply.

“No, I’m asking because I love you. I mean, you having a baby with me is just a kick in the ass, one I needed to, to man up and ask you, again I mean, a-and you don’t have to marry me-” rambled Zoro.

“Zoro, stop. I’ll marry you.” said Nami.

“Really!?” said Zoro, grinning with shining eye.

“Yes, Zoro. Really,” said Nami, smiling gently. “And you can say your perverted things now, it’s okay.”

“I- only if your comfortable with it. I don’t want to make you-” said Zoro.

“Aw, Zoro. I thought you’d have something to say about me, now that I’m set to get all fat and round with your baby?” said Nami.

Zoro smirked.

And then he spoke. And when he stopped, Nami was flushed from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes, and squirming as Zoro lavished kisses on her slightly protruding womb.

“You really don’t mind that I’m going to get fat…?” said Nami, breathless after hearing what lurked in the heart of Zoro’s libido. It was actually quite poetic, and really sweet; fairly tame, even. (She’d certainly heard and thought worse.)

“No, not at all. Having babies with you- having children with you- is something I’ve thought about for a while. Knowing that you’re going to become so beautiful- god, Nami, I can hardly believe it. You’re already so beautiful, to know you’re going to become even more lovely- to know that you’re going to marry me- Saa, open your legs, I’m hungry again. If- if that’s alright-?” said Zoro.

“Oh yes~!” squealed Nami, blushing hard enough to give a maple leaf in autumn pause.

AAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!♥
“...There a reason you’re rubbing my belly like that, Zoro?” said Nami, sweaty and blushing and breathless.

“So I thought I didn’t have any real fetishes but I do, and you’re fulfilling it, Nami. Sorry, I can- I can stop.” said Zoro.

“No, no! I- I like it, actually, I like knowing you think I’m so...”


“Oh my god, Zoro-” said Nami, beginning to laugh.

They laughed themselves breathless, before Nami’s stomach growled.

And then they laughed some more.

-Damn these Shadow Powers! Still, I’m glad for them. And I’m taking this knowledge to my fucking grave.

For me, the day and night passed quietly. When I docked us in the Sunny’s hold, I checked out in the Nautilus!’s living room and found Nami and Zoro cuddling on the couch- fully clothed. You could almost swear nothing happened between them at all.

Almost.

So I’m going to go out on a limb and say that Nami and Zoro had a really good time together last night. Nami is dressed in something a bit more her style and moves with that swing to her step- heyooo, someone got laid. Oh, those pants are two weeks away from being too tight- better get on that, Mab. Zoro is a bit- frankly, he’s a bit tired looking, but he also seems to have a new appreciation for the world, and everything in it, and Nami’s ass especially.

Seems to me they had quite an evening.

(They had an evening’s fun quite a few times, but Nami isn’t showing yet and it’s only fun to tease about that sort of thing when you know the people you’re teasing won’t take offence. I’m not sure yet- we’ll see.)

Robin’s instructions for going to get her were very clear- I was to appear to her in person, then we were to walk casually around a corner and vanish, only to reappear in the Women’s dorm of the Sunny. Woman likes her theatrics, and I’m honestly happy to oblige her- it’s not like I don’t, after all. We turn the corner in the Revolutionary Army’s base of operations, Robin’s duffle over one of her shoulders, and then we turn another corner into the Women’s dorms. Easy-peasy.

Robin’s hands carry her duffle to her bed in a flurry of flower petals, and I can hear, faintly, the screams of horror as- Luffy?- regales the crew with how exactly he got from his training island to the ship.
I’m not going out there. Shan’t.

“You’re not leaving me to brave it alone, Mab.”

“Robin, I specifically left to get Nami and Zoro so I wouldn’t have to listen to that.”

“Une Fleur: Grip!”

“THAAAAaht’s my wing! Alright, alright, take it easy, I’m going-”

So I had to listen to Captain and Mark and Usopp explain how they got to the ship. In the key of “not on your life will I ever try that, Sanji” because, actually, I’m the shy one in our relationship. Or maybe I just don’t like exhibitionism? My point is, the entire time those three were outlining their journey from Luffy’s training island to here on the ship, I had both my hands over my face and was chanting “oh no oh no oh no” until it was all over.

At least they changed their sheets? And wiped down what they might have… stained? That’s really all I can ask for.

“Ah, hey Franky.”

“Hey, wing-sis! How’s it been?”

“Pretty good. I’m thinking we might need another soundproofed bedroom or two. Just on a hunch.”

“Y’know, I had that same funny feeling- one for the three crazy kids, and one for…?”

“Me and Zoro, of course.” said Nami.

“Aha, decided to say it aloud, eh?” I said.

“Well, it’s not like we’re fooling around- or fooling anyone else, for that matter.” said Nami.

“True.” I said.

“Sure, Nami-sis. What kind of room do you want?” said Franky.

“Well, we’ll need room to expand into, seeing as I’m expecting...” said Nami.

I left them to it.

Nodded once to Chopper, who got here somehow and I don’t want the details, dammit, I’m just-god, I’m really glad everyone’s here, now. Ah, there’s Brook, too. Everyone really is here.

Ah, Bryony!

“Bryony, I’m going to need you to make a set of baby monitors.”
“Eh-? You and Sanji-?”

“No. Nami and Zoro; I’ll need them ready in a bit less than ten weeks- maybe more than that, but aim for then please, Bry.”

“Aha. Gotcha. Will do, Mab.”

“Attagirl.”

This is something I can think about- Weather Arts are reserved for people with vaginas and working uteruses because the hormonal changes a person undergoes while they’re pregnant, and again while they nurse a baby allows for transcendent understanding of the Weather. I don’t understand how, because I never studied the Weather Arts- but. It has something to do with the heightening of senses during and after pregnancy? I don’t know, I didn’t study it.

I and Taffy are Nami’s midwives, while Chopper is of course, our doctor. A blood test confirmed it- Nami is pregnant. She’s going to have her baby in about twenty seven more weeks- or seventeen, it’s not terribly clear; I did some midwife divination, and she’s going to have a fast, mildly cryptic pregnancy. She’s already on her prenatal vitamins, and other than that- I’ll have Chopper make up some rubbing lotion for her stomach, although everyone does get stretchmarks eventually- still, it might be best. It’ll give Zoro something to do when he isn’t training.

The man broods.

I mean, she’s not showing yet but she’s about to bloom out- her abdominals are just not strong enough to keep that uterus squeezed so small, and Zoro is not a small man.

Alright, final check- Captain Zoro Nami Usopp Sanji Me Chopper Robin Mark Taffy Bryony Franky Brook Gurry. That’s everyone. We, of course, can’t quite sail yet- best leave it a few days so that everyone gets used to everyone else, and so I can take an accounting of what all we need in terms of clothing. I’ll also have a better idea of what might be appropriate to make for Nami and Zoro’s new addition, and what I should just purchase.

Oh this is exciting, I’m so glad to see everyone again!

Let’s see. While I’m thinking of it, let me just do an accounting of the clothing being currently worn by my crewmates.

Captain is wearing a red ruffled cardigan with four yellow buttons down the right side. The cardigan has three quarter sleeves and a faint, silky shimmer to it. He wears it open, perhaps to better show of the giant X shaped scar across his chest- I don’t know how he got it. It honestly looks kind of like a beast got him? Or maybe a beast got him once and then got him again another time? I’d ask but if it’s important I’ll find out about it anyway…

Where was I? Clothing, right.

Cuffed blue-jean shorts of the cut off variety, but he allowed me to hem them this time, so the fuzzy pilling isn’t quite so extensive. The old cuff on his last pair of jeans looked rather like fur, but was entirely cotton denim; pissed me off every time I saw it. Boyshorts are, of course, stitched directly into the pants, and as no one except his lovers will ever actually see them, maybe- well, I got bored, so some of them are plain, and some of them aren’t. Prints are fun. Panties: reduces fuss and friction.
Bright yellow sash, rayon; really ties his whole outfit together. New sandals in the same style as his old ones; and of course, his Hat. (If Captain dies, but the Hat makes it, Taffy gets the Hat. In all honesty, Taffy’s the one who’ll either follow in Captain’s footsteps, or give the Hat to a worthy successor, when the time comes.)

Oh, yes, and his old coat got devoured by armed ants- not army ants, armed ants, they had fucking rifles and shit. So, I’m making him a new one. Apparently they needed the fabric for food? Or rather, they could tell the old coat was made of spider silk, and they needed it for food pretty desperately? Captain’s story was not terribly clear… The point is, I’m making him a new coat because he’s just as susceptible to chest infections and wind chill as the rest of us. Also, it will be useful to have an easy way to see him- it won’t stop him from vanishing entirely, of course, but we’ll at least notice when he’s not there. There’s also every chance that the coat will end up in Mark’s wardrobe, not Luffy’s. I’ll add some extra buttons just in case, and prepare a striped number with a fluffy collar.

**Zoro** is wearing the boots he got in Water 7, which he broke in over his training years. His old boots were on the verge of rotting through in the uppers in Sabaody, and he’d been breaking in his new ones on and off for weeks prior to Fucking Kuma… Ah, yes, and he wears thigh high boot socks, and no, I don’t know why. Mine is not to question why, mine is to make the fucking clothes. If anyone asks Zoro, he’ll say he wears athletic pants. He is wrong. Zoro wears ath-leisure wear, a silk and cotton blend that he tucks into his boots. The cotton is black, the silk is green- that’s why his pants shine green in the light when he moves. At some point, he just stopped wearing shirts- he says there’s nothing wrong with the ones I make him. That’s what he says. I say he’s trying to impress Nami subconsciously. That might change when the babies get here; nothing quite like getting vomited on to make you really appreciate layers of protective fabric.

And the fucking jacket- it’s not a robe, it’s too long to be a trench coat… I don’t know what the fuck it is, just that he drew it and told me how he wanted it to move on him, and I had to make it for him because that is my job. He didn’t even let me give him a new Serious Fight bandanna, said his old one still had some fights left in it. What the fuck does that even mean?

And he still wears his awful, awful pea-puke green haramaki. It’s not like he doesn’t have other options- he does. And it’s not like they’re not nice to wear or don’t have the internal pockets he likes- they do. It’s not even like they don’t fit him- they fit him fine. He just likes that one. (I give it another two weeks before Nami starts wearing the ones he’s not; there’s some good ones in there, and as I recall the womb-pudge (Pudge) gets cold way faster than it feels like it should…)

He’s got a wine-red-maroon sash for his swords now, in addition to his original sageo, and he’s moved his earring pendants onto individual hoops in his left ear. His right ear has a tangerine and orange-blossom dangling from the lobe- Nami has the other one, of course. I suppose that’s how they’re doing their engagement-

“Hey, Mab?”

“Yes, Nami?”

“Sorry to interrupt, but- um, can you make me a wedding dress?”

“Yes, of course. Do you want a white one, or red, or-?”

“…It’s a bit early for white, don’t you think?”
“Never too early to be silly rich.”

“Um. Okay, so, it fills me with joy and amusement that ‘silly rich’ is where you went for ‘white dress’; but where I went is ‘funeral’. I really just want a pretty, new dress- something I haven’t worn before.”

“Ah. Do you want to match Zoro, or…?”

“-Can you do that?”

“I mean, a wedding haramaki isn’t out of the question-”

“Mab!”

“What? They’re warm and comfortable-”

“-But his is so…”

“-Ah, no, he just likes that one. He’s got way more of ‘em than just that one he wears all the time. Ask him to show you, I know he didn’t throw them out or lose them…”

“…You’re kidding.”

“Nope. He just likes that one.”

“…I’ll have to go ask him right now, actually- and you’ll have to convince me about the haramaki, I’m not sold yet!”

“Okay! Bye Nami!”

“-Bye Mab! Ah, remind me to talk about marriage tattoos later!”

“Okay!”

Which leads me to Nami. Nami’s style and her actual needs are about to clash in a big way.

So, her shoes are okay for now- they’re her regular chunky orange sandals. They’re cute, strappy, sexy heels; and entirely inappropriate for the later stages of her pregnancy- they’re fine now, but as she blooms out and starts being unable to bend all the way over in any direction, she’s not going to be able to wear them- not to mention her feet are going to start swelling in a big way, if they haven’t already. Zoro will help her put the shoes on, of course, but dammit- a woman should be able to put her shoes on herself! So- I’m thinking first, if she wants a sandal, she could wear these cork soled pair I got in her size as soon as I was aware of her current condition; nothing else felt quite as good while I was expecting- And anyway, and if she doesn’t like those, she could try these Water 7 specialties. They’re famous Worldwide, but it’s a fame they well deserve, considering their comfort. I wear my pair as slippers. (And yes, they exist because Mom was sentimental about her old friend, and Mrs. Stitchworthy had a few designs floating around and… apparently they’re favored by Seafolk who’re learning to walk on land. Tom’s Shoes exist because the man called Old Tom was beloved by his family and friends.)

Concerning her pants… I don’t like the way she’s on the verge of muffining out of her pants right now, nevermind how things are going to go in a few weeks. I’m thinking the traditional Est fisherman’s pants should be just about perfect, dark blue to start and if she likes them I’ll make her a
pair in every color she wants. Perhaps athleisure wear like Zoro? Really, whatever she’s comfortable in- I was most comfortable in skirts, but Nami doesn’t really like the flowing kind of garment I found to be most comfortable…

As far as breast support goes, for now I’ll let her use of swimsuit tops go, but I’m going to start giving her sleeping options- the breasts get bigger as the pregnancy goes on, and it’s not uncommon for the breasts to be a whole two pounds heavier and two cup sizes larger by the end of things. Honestly, it’s odder that my own breasts aren’t larger, although I suppose my illness- No, call it by Name, Mab. My psychotic and depressive breaks and subsequent long recovery does account for the fluctuations in my body fat index. Although really, my dissatisfaction with my breasts has nothing to do, really, with their size or shape, but rather my own deep seated issues -which I am doing my best to address, of course.

Concerning Nami’s Witchy clothing: the jumpsuit is much like mine, in that it bends and stretches with the wearer, no matter how their body changes. Cloudsilk, is, of course, the normal fabric for such garments; and hers is without reproach, although she might want some kind of pocket or belt with pouches, depending on how her post-natal exploration of the Weather Arts goes. Similarly, I can’t do anything to her cloak; it’s already perfected for who she is and what she’s going to do, I think. I can, of course, change it as she likes, but I think she’s going to stick with the classic look. The only thing I can really think to add is some sort of baby-carrying sling, and that’s really just a length of fabric she likes the feel of and some belt rings, which I have at the ready. I suppose I might as well make one for Zoro, and perhaps just a regular spare, as babies are messy, no matter what kind they are.

Ah, I shall have to remember to start making the various Baby clothes.

Right.

Usopp has his old-fashioned Skuan Cavalry uniform, of course- not what he started with, but the slightly better suit … I think?

I know he considered most of the more complicated, better gear sets to be hopelessly ostentatious, but… I don’t know. I suppose the most basic gear sets are such because you can really use any sort of material in their construction, making it easier for the campaigner to keep themselves outfitted.

And then, of course, there’s his leisure wear: his boots - which don’t change outfit to outfit, and a pair of very loose, very sturdy, very carefully lined overalls - or rather, the most basal layer of his Skuan Cavalry Uniform.

The Boinsea is a Summer Archipelago; it’s not just one island that’s directly from the hottest portions of Hell, it’s fucking all of them. Except for the Winter Islands, of course, because that would be too easy. Oh god, and the hat.

I don’t know who let him have that… that… thing - it’s not even that it’s a bad hat, it just looks so god-awful on him! With his little beard thing, and the hair, and the hat- I’m reminded of my brothers every time I see Usopp, and that’s in the good way, and in the “oh god what the hell is he wearing” way. So. Yay? I mean, when he bothers to braid it down, it’s lovely, and he does have the most stunning collection of traditionally romantic Este hair pins and hair combs I’ve ever seen in my life. Usopp keeps them in a lovely basket he traded Nami some things for. Mark, apparently, believes in showering his loved ones with adornments.
Sanji almost exclusively wears double breasted suits. Now, a double breasted suit is just about the easiest way to show off the physique while still looking classic, masculine, and just a bit military-when done right, of course. The shoulders are the most important part of the jacket- everything else can be tailored and hemmed and so on, but… in essence, the shoulders of a suit jacket are the keel of a ship. Anyway, the seams of his jackets at the shoulder must correspond to his natural shape; the collar should rest against his shirt collar, with no gaps or bunching when he turns to the side. The pitch of his jacket’s sleeves needs to correspond with his natural stance so the fabric doesn’t twist or wrinkle in odd ways. Well, that’s the basics, anyway.

Double breasted jackets have peak lapels, which make the chest look wider and create an hourglass shape. Back in the day these lapels were ultra-wide, but today’s more modern versions are on the understated side. Really, Sanji goes both ways on his lapels- some days, he’s feeling on the flamboyant side and wants great big lapels, and some days he’s feeling rather conservative and wants something slimmer. Concerning the torso, classic jackets of the style are cut in a more boxy, loose shape. While I would like to cut his suit jackets slimmer, and closer to his sides, as that would be more flattering; he needs more movement than that will really allow. -Cloudsilk has a lot of movement in it, true, and it stretches wonderfully but it is not the cloth to use in a suit jacket. Too much cling.

Still, his jacket doesn’t pull when buttoned and the lapels always lay flat. I can do that much, at least. (When it comes to fit, too tight is just as unflattering as too big, after all.) Sanji likes the traditional six external button style for his jacket, which he can wear comfortably due to his overall height and torso length. Generally speaking, double breasted suits look best when they’re buttoned closed- but as with all fashion, there are always exceptions.

A double breasted suit jacket is typically a bit longer in order to create space for the big lapel and complicated button motif, and to balance out the look. The jacket ought not be too long- it just passes the crotch-line of Sanji’s trousers at its longest and hits the middle of his zipper at it’s shortest-because he has more than one suit, of course. His jackets lay flat around his hips; and if the vents pull open, the jacket is too small.

Finally, the pants: flat-front pants are perfectly acceptable, if not preferred, and the cuff at the bottom is antiquated. He prefers single color shirts of the long sleeve, long collar variety, and usually wears plain color ties- although he does enjoy the occasional amusemen of a paisley or silk tie. For hotter and more humid days, he has a selection of shorts and capri-length pants, which he pairs with his shirt and jacket of choice. We still wear our matching sleep sets we got in Water 7, although he does sometimes wear a shirt and a pair of boxers if it’s hot.

I’m considering making more sleepshirts; something a bit more… I’d honestly like a chemise, now that I think of it. That’s how I slept as a child, you see- a cotton or linen or sometimes wool-blended chemise with nothing at all underneath; now that’s what I call comfort.

I’ll add it to my list.

He wears black socks almost exclusively, although he does have various dress socks, all in silk, of course. His shoes are the normal Derby, as, much like me, once he finds a pair he likes in a style he likes, those are The Shoe of choice. He does have more than his daily blue-black pair, however- he has a brown pair, a flat black pair, and a yellow pair. I’m not sure why he wanted yellow ones, but they’re not mine and I didn’t make them.

(Ah, yes, and we’ve moved from normal women’s outerwear to lacy undergarments almost exclusively. The man knows what I like and is willing to entertain my fetishes, which is really all I can ask for. I do love him so. Lace! Ruffles! Strappy numbers! Latex! PENCIL SKIRTS!
My new clothing is really the same as it ever was- jump suits, leotards, leather pants, lacy panties in every color, backless everything I can get away with.

Brassieres, as my breasts got bigger, which- well, it’s nice that, after all my training finally released all those pregnancy hormones, my breasts finally became a bosom. They’re proportionate to my body; not melons like Robin and Nami have, more like… mangoes. Juicy, bouncy, mangoes. Sanji likes them a lot.

Leather kung-fu shoes, flat boots, socks made of silk...

Oh, alright, let’s get detailed.

I have tight jumpsuits with interesting backs that cling snug to my skin and cute print jumpsuits that go all the way to my toes, loose and soft and some go even below my toes, they’re lovely! I have plunge neck jumpsuits with wide legs in stiff fabrics, and I have halter top jumpsuits in flowing fabrics. I have formal lace jumpsuits, and formal jumpsuits in two-tones with a v-neck and wrap-style upper, jumpsuits cut sharp like a suit, jumpsuits cut soft like a chiffon dress and dazzled at the bodice; and I have formal jumpsuits that are exercises in minimalism and elegance. I have jumpsuits you can see right through in places; and jumpsuits that expose no more than my simple shirt and pants combination does, yet is all the more alluring for it.; jumpsuits that are asymmetrical; jumpsuits that are symmetrical; velour and lace and one that’s really a dress in silhouette, with how the legs are cut. Polka dots; Chiffon; Full-cut; Printed.

Latex, for my husband's pleasure; Leather, for my own.

And a work jumpsuit, for the studio.

I have jumpsuits in every conceivable cut and style, print and fabric.

Leotards, for training or when it’s hot; mostly, just underwear I can pull on if I can’t be bothered with underwear and a brassiere that day, or if I need another layer, or a layer less; best for hot weather, or skirts.

New leather pants, which I made myself this time- my old unisex adjustables got worn right through during the Separation, and I still need leather pants. Light armor is a must at high speed.

Brassieres are one of the few things I’m okay with having made specially for me- sometimes, anyway. The few I have that I didn’t make myself are extremely high quality versions of the restrictive garment, while mine are more… Ergonomic. I’ve almost perfected a brassiere that completely arrests the motion of the breast in motion; Bryony, my beta tester, really likes the new one I’ve come up with, but until it’s absolutely perfect, I won’t allow her to wear it. Robin and Nami also tried the new sporty kind of brassiere I’ve been making, and are very interested. I’ll have to start patenting things soon…

Leather boots in the Farnort style, with increasingly tough and insulated boots the colder and more cruel the weather becomes. I’ve made galoshes for myself and the entire crew, as there are days when you just don’t want wet feet, dammit; or your shoes don’t protect quite enough. I, personally, finally got myself a new pair of bunny boots: while I don’t do ultra-high atmosphere maneuvering anymore, the sheer insulation of the boots is enough to ensure I added a pair for myself, and the rest
of my crew. No frostbite.

All my jewelry is the same as it ever was; I got my charnellements lightened so I can wear them all the time. They were solid gold, if you can believe it; now, they’re much lighter, being hollow. They’ve also got runes of protection and return if stolen or lost imbued in them, so- no, Mother. I will not forget thee. I also got my spin-rings coated; they aren’t flat ivory now, they’re a lovely 24 karat gold-coated set of fourteen.

Really, the only thing that’s different about me personally is I’ve started wearing my hair short again, like when our adventure together started - I can only stand to have my hair so long for a time, before I simply must cut it back. New-old glasses- it’s nice to have my glasses back, I suppose. And if anyone asks, I wear the weird shit I wear because I can and no one can stop me. So far, the weirdest thing I’ve made myself is the jeans with the PVC plastic cutouts, but they honestly aren’t that bad- especially once I dug out the bug stickers. Bug stickers make everything better.

More interestingly, my studio is starting to become a bit… interesting. People give me things when they get my help, and I don’t want to just throw away the things they give me, so… my studio’s starting to look more and more Witchy, which is odd because… well, Stitchwitches are very humble, frankly, and… I guess the Taxidermy Bananagator Petunia who Hangs from the Ceiling was a Sign.

Clothing. Talk about Clothing, Mab.

Chopper is much the same, but he’s wearing brighter colors now, and a shirt, and his hat is new. His fully human form is a little different- apparently he can look like whatever he feels like? I don’t know, there are Rumble Balls involved for the weirder shit. Mostly, he’s a Doctor and his Doctor’s Pack is bigger on the inside without the use of a Devil Fruit. I can’t explain more than that. Trade Secret.

Robin has a very elegant, even sexy style. She’s always been mature, of course, but it’s really nice to see her loosening up and embracing more relaxed styles. I honestly don’t have much to say about Robin- she puts in her requests, and they’re generally very simple. I don’t have to invent an entire wardrobe for her at the drop of a pin; she knows what she likes, she knows what she looks good in, and she has the body-confidence to wear whatever she likes.

Franky hasn't changed at all, the jerk.

Mark has an eclectic style. He wears boxers or boxer briefs in all colors, then either Est fisherman pants or, more often, dark grey or brown harem pants. Bright red boots that he always has to wash and polish after breakfast, and thick white socks; jutti shoes if it’s a less heavy working day, or if he’s going to bed. He’s not terribly adventurous with his sock choices, unlike Usopp, who collects character socks; or even Sanji, who has yet to meet a print he won’t wear.

There’s his gun belt, which hasn’t changed much at all- other than replacing the leg ties because his thighs are much more muscular and thick now. His ammo bag sits at the small of his back, and is more or less exactly what I first designed for him those years ago internally. His purse is still shaped like a fish; and his hat is one of the largest fedoras I’ve ever seen.
His shirts are a different matter— he actually prefers blouses, and particularly likes high collars and boat neck shirts, all in white. One piece shirts with maybe one button at the collar and none or one per sleeve is preferred to full on button up shirts; and he’s simply enamored of various kinds of cufflinks.

I assume that in his travels, he was inducted into one of the secret societies of the Djinn; he certainly wears bronze jewelry now, so I assume he was accepted into the fold. He has also taken to wearing wide belts, or rather waist cinchers in a lurid red leather— they match with his boots, so I’m inclined to ignore it.

Taffy… it’s most correct to say that Taffeta’s battle costume aesthetic has taken over her regular wardrobe. Her daily wear takes quite a few cues from Sanji, but where my husband has a very old-fashioned and elegant military flare to his wardrobe, Taffy prefers a more modern, avant-garde approach.

She alternates between very floral-lace seafoam underwear sets, wine red underwear sets, and the sport bra and singleton underwear mix-n-match sets that I made for her on request; after buying the underwear, first. Some things it’s just easier to purchase when the merchants come around, and that was a rather long week for training, anyway.

She’s always worn loose socks in the school-girl fashion, though which kind changes from day to day. She has a medical/sewing kit on one side and a knife and lockpick set on the other; underneath her socks, of course. There are perks to obscuring the shape of one’s entire ankle, I suppose.

Her shirts are uniformly backless to accommodate her wings, long sleeve (as she prefers), with a surgeon’s cuff— in case she has to go guts deep on a man, she can save her shirtsleeves. Hopefully. Her vests are also quite uniform, utilizing the principle of asymmetry to create a visually interesting line across her body. She has them in black, dove grey, navy blue, and dark brown, and each of them has a pocket large enough for one of Bryony’s specialty Den Den Mushi.

Her sword belt is a fairly simple affair, quite different from Zoro’s method of sword carry— a jian is not a katana, after all. She did keep the sageo rope tied around the scabbard, as it allows her just one more tool if she needs it, and is a mark of her respect to Zoro’s teaching of her.

Midwifery Lotus Badges come in various styles— both she and I got ours changed for the belt buckle style, as it fits our aesthetics and lifestyles quite a bit more. Taffy wears hers on her sword belt— mine is on my tactical belt. This is not problematic, as we both wear these belts every day— more importantly, our pin badges are still on our persons, though hidden; the belt buckles are merely in addition to our traditional stamps of honor.

She wears either bootcut dark wash jeans, or wide leg tuxedo pants, black, of course. If she’s wearing the jeans, she’ll also be wearing some kind of braces, and those are always hidden under her vests— suffice to say, they’re either brown or black. The tuxedo pants fit her differently, and generally don’t require quite the same level of support to stay where they should be on her body— and it’s not quite a matter of fit, the jeans, I mean. To allow her the kind of movement she needs, her jeans have to be just enough oversize that they don’t quite cling the way they ought; thus, the braces.

After quite a bit of consternation, Taffy finally picked a pair of shoes that pleased her fashionable heart and her sneaky sensibilities both— a pair of ankle boots, really. Not my first choice, but then again, I don’t have to wear them— and they were made for her specifically, they aren’t off the rack boots. She has a pair of creepers for when she wants to be a bit more inconspicuous. Taffy, unless she’s actually hidden, is not inconspicuous.
Finally, bow ties- she doesn’t always wear them, mind, but when she does she has a large variety to choose from. She likes ribbons, as an aside. Her most casual outfit proper is actually her swimsuit top, alongside her most casual bottoms, her boardshorts, with a pair of canvas sneakers if wading is on the agenda.

Taffeta is not a casual person- she’s a jokester, and a prankster, a lovely friend and stalwart companion- but she is not casual about anything. Even her use of canvas sneakers as wading shoes is a matter of practicality more than anything else.

Bryony wrestled fiercely with what she wanted to convey with her clothing- after she outgrew her original choice of bikini and translucent skirt, she went through several permutations of very different styles before finally finding one that mostly works for her.

Because of the size of Bryony’s breasts, she cannot fight to her full effectiveness without wearing a compression sports bra. It’s nothing to do with gender- really, it’s to do with the physical motions required by kickboxing. Breasts that are fat get in the way, frankly. She prefers a racerback, as it spreads the weight distribution in a way that regular brassiere style sports bras do not. Which is not to say she doesn’t have normal bras- she does, of course- merely that her everyday workhorses are her various racerback sports bras. She has them in a variety of prints, along with matching underwear- and she does not like panties, she wears boyshorts or nothing.

Bryony likes crop tops, but mostly of the simpler kind. She does not like- and subsequently, will not wear anything with- spaghetti straps, tube tops, halter tops, and what she calls “floating sleeves”. I call them something else, but blow me down if I can remember what...

She wears black harem pants, but of a longer and fuller cut than Mark’s. Once she started wearing harem pants, she didn’t want to stop- they seem to fulfill her longing for flowing garments while also offering various practicalities- pockets, separation of the legs, and so on- that she now has pairs in tan, and red, and in exciting prints as well.

She has three distinctly different jackets- the clear one that’s basically a rain jacket, the tan one that’s embroidered, and the one with the fun print. Luffy is not allowed, on pain of Pain, to wear them- and it’s not me that would be dishing out the pain, it’s Bryony. Training for two years made both of them stronger for sure, but… Bryony will probably always be just a bit stronger than Luffy, physically. Just a hair. Or at least, she will be in her legs, which is what she’d use to hit him if he gets meat juices on her clothes again…

Oh, yes. Most importantly of all- Bryony tolerates only one kind of sandal, and all other shoes can rot for all she cares. She’ll go barefoot before she wears a pair of shoes that she doesn’t like- which I honestly admire. Nothing worse than having blisters on your feet.

Brook… Brook’s clothing is odd. Where everyone else has physical flesh that catches and pulls on fabric, giving clothing it’s weight- Brook is literally a skeleton. For him, I find myself designing things that look good on hangers or simply hanging because that’s basically what his body is, and that’s what clothing on him does. It’s honestly a pain in the ass- easy to cut and sew, I suppose, but a pain in the ass none the less. He likes vibrant prints, single breasted suit jackets, long sleeve shirts, cravats, and top hats. He’s like a dead, musical, Cousin Sabo.

Honestly, he’ll take whatever I make him, so I tend to grab prints I think he’ll like, and then just-stitch clothing for him. Pain in the ass though it is, his gratitude at my giving him new clothing to
choose from is really quite heartening- he was rather a dandy in life, and having a larger wardrobe to play around with brings joy to his heart. Except he, of course, has no heart. Hmhmhmhmhmhm! Skull joke!

Not much to his wardrobe, really. Although- he does require several extra pairs of socks, as he is literally a skeleton and doesn’t have feet, merely foot bones to walk around on. Doubling and tripling up on his socks seems to have solved that issue, although I do wonder… Ah, I’m getting distracted.

Gurry has an eclectic style that really reminds me of my sister, Del. He wears clothing from thrift stores more often than not, and is absent-minded enough in pursuit of his art that all of his clothing has some kind of minor oil paint stain on it. The only thing of interest is his fur peplum-shrug, something I haven’t really considered before. The Fae tradition has the traveler’s cloak being made of feathers, after all- but the Amazonian tradition is for fur or leather, depending on male or female. Otherwise, it’s fairly similar day to day- high mandarin collars on sleeveless shirts, warrior’s armbands, leather vambraces, loose cut trousers tucked into leather boots; nothing really stands out in his cold weather gear.

His warm weather gear is cut off jean short shorts over brightly colored lycra shorts, strappy sandals, and tank tops. This is also what he considers painting clothes- with the addition of an apron, of course. His colors are mostly tan, with some plain greys and blues thrown in.

While I’ve been going over the wardrobe, things have been happening on the ship- people leaving, getting supplies, returning; a veritable flurry of activity. Hmm. While I’m here- Shakky might have- Miss Shakky is pregnant again- how do I know that? Nevermind, she is, I can feel it… I’ll get her some things too, might as well.

I get up, stretch, and amble up into the kitchen where Sanji, Gurry, and Taffy are hard at work- Sanji is busy making various stocks and things we’ll need for the journey ahead, bread dough starter and such, whilst Taffy and Gurry are helping prep things. Taffy is also making some of Chopper’s medicines into candy- drops, and so on. Gurry is doing prep-work so Sanji can actually cook; washing dishes, mostly, until Sanji trusts him with one of the kitchen knives.

“Need to go visit Miss Shakky, and get a few things- I’m reminded of a conversation we had a long time ago, about massage?”

“Ah. Right, we never did get that manual…”

“Mm. I need to get a few other things too- it’s been two years anyway, all the makeup I have needs to be replaced… Need anything while I’m out?”

“Uh… New hairclips?”

“Gator-clips this time, or d’you still want the old standard?”

“Gator clips. I really didn’t think my hair was so thick…”

“Mm. Taffy, Gurry, you need anything?”

“I’m good, Mab.”
“Ah… a set of watercolors and some paper I can play around with? I have money for it- here-”

“Ah, thank you Gurry. Do you have brushes?”

“Um-”

“I’ll see what I can get for you. Be back later, everyone. -Ach, nearly forgot the most important thing-”

And then I step alongside Sanji, nudge him with my shoulder. He tilts his head my way and lets me press a kiss to his mouth, returns it with such simmering joyful pleasure- god I fucking love him.

Anyway, I’ve got shopping to do.

I’m really glad I have bullshit Devil Fruit powers, otherwise this shopping trip would be a terrible hassle.

So there’s things I desperately wanted when I was pregnant- or rather, things I was given that I don’t have anymore and Nami’s going to want. Let’s see… first stop is the bookstore, I think.

First, it’s about time to get a manual or two about sexual positions and things you can do in the bedroom. Sanji’s into some kinky things- nothing to get arrested over- and I’d like us to have resources to do it safely. Also, manuals about massage, including what’s more or less a textbook on it because Nami’s going to need the support and that sounds like Zoro-work (with some help from the rest of us women, of course). Hm, a text on makeup and hair care, because Nami will want to be pampered… I already have the lounging set for Nami… And that should be it for the bookstore.

Next stop, crafts bazaar- not the one that sells crafts, the one that sells cool shit for crafts. Zoro made Nami’s necklace and their earrings, after all, and I like supporting such skills as they pop up. Oh, those are nice knitting needles- I’ll get a pair. Can never have too many knitting needles.

Why are they selling daily journals at the crafts bazaar? Nevermind, I’ll take a bunch of them. Oh, this is a nice journal… Snoogles are buy one get one free today only? I’m sold!

Oh, so this is where the rest of the bazaar is- ah, point and print film stock, the rig that goes with it, and a few albums because I meant to take pictures but I didn’t. Oho, a big assorted basket of- yes, I recognize the brand- Lush does good work- and Nipple Cream. Quadruple up on that nipple cream. Nami’s about to learn her some things.

Damn, second buy one get one free sale today- I’ll take one of everything, yes, everything, this is my card- yes, thank you, you don’t have to give it to me free, I’ll purchase it. Thank you! Onwards!

Several spray bottles for fabric freshener because it’s going to stink, I remember my time in the maternity ward. Aha, notions! Okay, I need a big box of safety snaps, Nami doesn’t like the new disposable sanitary napkins- most people I know don’t- and the big bottle of witch hazel oil. Six bolts of flannel- no one in our crew is going to be running out of sanitary pads for years if I can help it. Three new laundry hampers, for reasons that will become obvious eventually. Aha! Portable hand sanitizer! With the holders! Because people will want to touch the New Baby and Nami won’t know where those dirty bastards have been. It’s actually just fine for her to stare at someone trying to touch her newborn with their dirty, filthy hands like a crazy ass psycho killer until they use the hand sanitizer, and only then allow that person access to her precious, mewling critter. Yes, I mostly mean
Luffy. I want one for Nami, one for Zoro, and a few more just in case.

I don’t actually like making diaper bags, so- if she really wants me to make one for her, I will. However, I think… dammit, I’ll have to make her one. She’ll want all the secret pockets and mommy-hidey-holes I can cram into a bag, and have it look cute, and she won’t know she wants this but she wants the removable liner that can be thrown into the washing machine. I know she does.

_Sanji, I’m buying a coffeemaker._

_What!? You don’t-_

_Sanji, we’re going to need more coffee than the Norten press provides. I prefer pressed coffee, but-we need one of the big drip machines._

_Uuuuugh._

_Trust me?_

_Yeah, fine. Does the grinder do-?_

_It does, I’ll show you._

_Alright, honeybee. Get one with like, a timer or something; we’ll set it up I guess._

_Service and Sacrifice, Sanji._

_Aye. Service and Sacrifice, Mab._

And that’s it for the shopping. WAIT NO TELL A LIE- some of these newfangled Audiobooks-yes, two sets of everything, no I’m not kidding- with the nicest, comfiest headphones you have. Yes, I’m completely serious. Pair of hospital grade baby nail clippers- Chopper has a pair, of course, but it’s nice to have spares and I’ll teach her how to use them. Two big bottles of dry shampoo. A “dim” type flashlight that can be worn around the wrist or kept in the basket of changing supplies. Carpet cleaner- the stuff for pets, not the regular shit. Works just fine on regular fabrics- babes are critters, after all, it takes a good few years for a baby to start being “human”. Peri bottle, since we don’t have a bidet and I know Miss Shakky doesn’t- babies hurt coming out, and stuff’s likely to tear, and all the stuff that comes out when a person menstruates has to come out after a baby is born and it takes a month and- peri bottle. Because she will not want to wipe that shit and frankly I don’t blame her; I didn’t either.

And finally, at the baby specific store- Franky wants to make the changing table, but he’s never actually been around a baby before and I know what I’m about. I’ll allow it, but first- just in case- I’ll just get the diaper pail… really, it’s a small home-kitchen trash can with a waterproof bag on the inside and yes, I do want the replacement set. I’ll get the twenty-four mixed pack of diapers- these are too big but they’re all they’ve got, I’ll make more in the appropriate sizes later-

_Aha! This store sells fabric!_
There are only so many fabrics I can actually make- and bamboo fleece isn’t one of them. Bamboo fleece is an excellent fabric for cloth diapers and soakers. It’s quick to grab moisture and holds a lot of liquid. It’ll shrink about ten percent when washed, and it’s felting up properties help give it good absorbency value. It is sewn smooth sides out, 2 layers thick, for the best absorbing, quick-to-dry soaker pads or diaper inserts. Cut into squares of appropriate size for baby washcloths and wipes. Also wonderful for blankets, receiving and otherwise, and snuggly-soft clothing. And it takes dye beautifully. Since I’m over here, get the hemp too, which isn’t as fluffy soft, but is even more absorbent.

I buy four bolts of both fabrics in their natural colors. Babies are messy and I know my Captain- the second he feels the bamboo fabric, he’s going to want something to cuddle with. I can already sense it. As for the hemp- it has it’s uses too.

More lavender oil, and chamomile just in case Nami’s nose says no to lavender- it might, it happens, just be ready for it. And some dye packets, and the wax resist tjanting pen-things. Yeees. Oh, that’ll be fun. Ah- travel wet bags. Useful for more than just diapers, honestly, we are pirates and swimming is a thing that happens…

And I want two of the diaper sprayers. And the cloth-diaper safe diaper cream. And it’s a real pain in the ass that this store only had flat diapers, but it’s kinda cool that they have a multitude of diaper covers- which I’ve never made, so… I’ll buy thirty and split ‘em. I’m pretty sure I can reverse-engineer some that Nami really loves…

Let me explain.

First cue first; start with diaper materials. Obviously, waterproof diapers are preferred for a number of reasons, especially if you’re at sea. Cloth diapers- which are the World standard, no matter how advertising tries to market the new disposables- actually have quite a few choices for how you achieve this waterproofing feat.

Polyurethane laminate (PUL) is the most common material used in cloth diapers. PUL is made by laminating a lightweight polyester interlock knit fabric to a polyurethane film of one or two millimeters thickness. (Polyurethane is a durable and flexible form of plastic. Thermoplastic urethane (TPU) is a specific type of polyurethane formed with a heat-bonding process.) What matters is PUL is found in pocket diapers, AiOs, Ai2s, and diaper covers, as well as in pail liners and wetbags. I don’t like it for diapers myself but some people swear by it.

Merino wool is highly favored as a pull-on style cover for overnight use. Forget your preconceived notions of hot, itchy sweaters- merino wool is naturally antimicrobial, regulates temperature beautifully, and feels like cashmere. (If, however, the baby doesn’t like wool- which happens- I can substitute for a silk-heavy blend of silk and angora.) When washed gently with lanolin, wool becomes highly water repellant, while still maintaining its softness. I actually lanolize all the wool socks and most of the wool sweaters- it does tend to smell a bit like wet dirt when our heavy woollen garments get wet, but Zoro actually finds the smell soothing. Well, he did spend his formative years on a sheep farm, so it’s not really a surprise. (Ah, yes- sometimes wool covers are referred to as wool soakers, which is highly confusing when one is trying to learn cloth diaper jargon. My advice is to simply go with the flow.)

Finally, the newest of the fabrics is artificial fleece. It can be used as a cover, particularly for overnight use. Although it isn’t quite as stretchy or breathable as merino wool, artificial is one hundred percent polyester, meaning it’s much less expensive, can be machine washed, dries quickly, and doesn’t require lanolization. I don’t like it- I have ethical and environmental concerns about the
production of artificial fleece, and when I did the burn test on a sample piece, it melted into hot, plastic slag. I won’t be using it on any baby clothing.

If we’re using prefolds or flats, we can use a separate fastener like a Snappi or Boingo to secure the diaper around the baby. However, most modern cloth diapers have built-in closures for convenience.

Hook & loop closures (specific brands include Aplix, Velcro, and TouchTape) make cloth diapers just as easy and quick to put on as disposables, allowing for the most precise fit around baby’s waist. However, even with special laundry tabs meant to keep the hook & loop sides together during washing, rogue unfastened tabs in the washing machine are fairly common and will cause early wear and tear on an entire load of cloth diapers.

Snaps are by far the more popular closure option for cloth diapering parents (75% to 80% prefer snaps). Although it may take a few extra seconds to fasten snaps in the right place when changing baby, they simply hold up better over time. In addition, snaps are much more difficult for older babies to unfasten, cutting down on those spontaneous toddler streaking events.

One major reason that cloth diapers have become popular again is the use of “stay-dry” fabrics, which keep moisture off baby’s skin without the use of chemicals. Although many babies don’t seem to mind a wet diaper, stay-dry materials are useful in preventing diaper rash and keeping baby’s skin smelling fresh.

These fabrics are all 100% polyester:

Microfleece was the first stay-dry material used in cloth diapers. It’s a bit stretchy and feels wonderfully soft. Over time, it may show wear by pilling a bit, as it is a cloth made with synthetic fibers. Suedecloth is incredibly smooth and does not pill. However, as a synthetic fiber cloth, it does not play nicely with all detergents. Athletic wicking jersey is durable and extremely lightweight with a “meshy” feel, which makes it work especially well for fast wetters.

The important thing to remember about stay-dry materials is that they don’t absorb wetness – that’s why they’re supposed to keep baby feeling dry. If you pour water on any of these fabrics, the water will just sit for a little while before soaking through. That doesn’t mean there’s something wrong - stay-dry fabrics work when the diaper is secured snugly. The pressure of baby’s weight against the diaper and the flow of urine force the wetness to pass through the stay-dry layer where it is absorbed by another material underneath.

I don’t like these because stay dry fabrics really only work with pressure- and that’s not what diapers do in their natural state, really. It works right up to when you actually need it to work, in my experience. -If you’ve gone to all the trouble of using a cloth diaper system, you really… I think of it like this: what are the most comfortable panties or boxers you own? That breathe the best and so on? I prefer a cotton panty myself, while Sanji likes silk- my point being, stay dry fabrics just don’t work as advertized.

As far as absorbency is concerned, if one is using cloth diapers; a selection can be made from a wide array of fabrics based on their feel, level of absorbency, and environmental sustainability.

Cotton was the only choice of diaper material for many years, and is still used today. Many parents prefer organic cotton, as industrial cotton tends to involve heavy use of pesticides, herbicides, and insecticides.
Hemp is one of the most environmentally friendly natural fibers today and is quickly becoming a popular choice for cloth diapers. Alone, hemp is such a rough-feeling material that it’s typically blended with cotton for diapering purposes. Industrial hemp production is permitted in Nort but restricted in Sout.

Bamboo has a silky, luxurious feel. It is highly promoted as a sustainable fabric because grows like a weed (which it is!) without requiring the use of pesticides or other chemical agents. (You may also hear that bamboo has anti-bacterial properties, but that seems to be a questionable claim; I’m considering it as “good” because of how clean bamboo fabric can get. And we used it in the Skuan Maternity Wards all the time, so.)

Microfiber refers to ultrafine fibers (about 1/100th of a strand of human hair). The microfiber typically used in modern cloth diapers is “split”, meaning if you could see the cross-section at a microscopic level, it would resemble an asterisk. I’ve been playing around with electrospinning- I think I can make a spider-silk microfiber, which would open entirely new possibilities in cloth for me...

Anyway.

There are four kinds of diaper systems- and yes, it’s not quite enough to just throw a cloth diaper on a baby and call it done. There’s a method to these things.

A pocket diaper consists of two separate pieces. The pocket (sometimes referred to as the sleeve) is the piece that fits around the baby and looks like a diaper, with elasticized legs, a closure around the waist, and a waterproof outer material. Sewn to the waterproof outer layer of the pocket is a soft layer of “stay-dry” fabric such as microfleece or microsuede that sits next to baby’s skin. Either or both ends of the pocket have an opening to allow the insert to be stuffed inside.

When the diaper is changed, the insert should be pulled out of the pocket and both pieces tossed in the diaper pail. (In other words, the pocket should not be re-used with a fresh insert).

An Ai2 is another two-piece system in which an insert (sometimes referred to as a soaker pad) is simply laid inside a cover (sometimes referred to as a shell). The beauty of this design is that the waterproof cover can be re-used with a fresh insert as long as the cover stays clean. Many all-in-two systems have snaps that anchor the insert to the shell to prevent it from moving out of place. The insert or soaker is useless without the cover, as it can’t be fastened directly onto the baby.

A hybrid diaper is a specific type of Ai2 system in which the manufacturer offers both cloth and disposable inserts that fit with their cover/shell. This allows you to use disposables in stealth mode if you’re on vacation or need a short laundry break.

An AiO is simply a diaper with the waterproof exterior and the absorbent interior pieces sewn together. (I prefer to call AiOs “one-piece” diapers to avoid confusion with another cloth diaper term you’ll hear frequently, “one-size”. One-size refers to a diaper that has an adjustable rise and-or adjustable elastic so that it can be used on babies of a very wide weight and age range. Just about any type of cloth diaper system can be “one-size” – you can find one-size pockets, one-size covers, one-size fitteds, and yes, one-size all-in-ones.) The most appealing aspect of AiOs is that there is never a need to stuff or snap inserts as with pockets and Ai2s. Various brands of AiOs may look very different on the inside – some have all layers sewn down flat, while others have pieces of the soaker pad that flap, hang, or fold in different ways to allow for a faster drying time. Some even offer a pocket opening where you can stuff some extra absorbency if needed.
Some might group these types of cloth diapers with “all-in-twos”, but I think they are different enough to deserve a separate category.

Unlike the inserts/soakers used in Ai2 systems, flats, prefolds, and fitteds can be fastened directly on baby so that they will stay on without the use of a cover. Many families use these types of diapers for the sake of simplicity and affordability.

When they were babies, your mother and grandmother probably wore what we now call flats – large, thin pieces of cotton fabric that can be folded in many different ways (which may seem a bit like diaper origami).

If you were cloth diapered as a baby, you probably wore prefolds. Prefolds have three vertical sections with a thicker center section and only require tri-folding instead of the more complicated folding procedures necessary with flats. Also, if you like the idea of cloth diapers but don’t want to wash them yourself, prefolds are generally the type of cloth diaper provided by diaper services.

Fitted diapers are a more recent innovation, cut to fit the shape of a baby without any folding needed. They have elastic at the legs and may or may not have an integrated closure in the form of snaps, velcro, or ties.

Flats, prefolds, and fitteds all have one major thing in common: they are not waterproof.

Therefore, a separate cover is required unless you have a specific reason for wanting baby to go coverless. The cover can be used multiple times between washings, which is one of the reasons these types of cloth diaper systems are so inexpensive. Today’s covers are much more convenient than the pull-on plastic pants of yesteryear; plus, with the wide array of vibrant colors and darling prints available, your baby’s bottom can look just as adorable as any, more expensive, cloth diaper. I don’t like flats, but not because they’re not good diapers. They’re fine diapers. It’s just- do you know what nurses and midwives did first in training? Well, in Skua, we had to clean, wash, and fold flat diapers. Every day. For six months.

The things I have seen in the white cotton depths of a pediatric diaper will haunt me to my grave. - And the stench!

Anyway, since I’ve come this far I might as well go over the features. Yes, there are features, too.

Rise snaps are a grid of snaps on the front of a cloth diaper to allow its length to be adjusted as a baby grows – a common feature of “one-size” cloth diapers. For someone unfamiliar with modern cloth diapers (like basically everyone on the crew except for Taffy), looking at the front of a diaper with adjustable rise snaps can be intimidating due to the number of snaps. However, keep in mind that once the rise setting is adjusted to fit the baby, it’s best to leave it that way for quite a while – usually at least a few months – until baby has grown enough in length that the rise needs to be let out by one setting. You don’t have to un-snap the rise when you wash the diapers. Rise snaps are typically laid out in two to three columns and two to four rows.

Leg gussets are crescent-shaped, elasticized pieces added to the legs to provide extra protection from leaks. This feature is particularly appreciated by parents of babies who are not yet eating solid foods and may be prone to the occasional explosive diaper event.

A tummy panel is a narrow piece of waterproof material – PUL or TPU – on the top inside panel of a pocket or all-in-one diaper. This strip of waterproof material may help prevent leaks at the tummy, particularly for tummy-sleeping babies. Depending on how it is sewn, it may also help prevent inserts from bunching up at baby’s waistline.
Tummy elastic provides extra leak protection for tummy-sleeping babies. Although elastic in the waist at the back is common to all cloth diapers (which is what makes them so much more effective at preventing blowouts than disposables), elastic at the tummy isn’t quite as common.

Crossover snaps allow for a very small waist setting because the waist tabs can be cinched up tightly and fastened one over the other, similar to how most hook & loop closure diapers can be fastened. This is a particularly helpful feature in one-size diapers, allowing for a good fit on young babies.

Side snaps are a variation on the usual style of diaper fastening. On most diapers, the wings of the diaper wrap around from the sides to be fastened on top of the front panel (as shown in the above photos of crossover snaps). Side snaps, however, work so that the front of the diaper fastens over the wings, making a smooth front panel on the tummy. Some say that this can make it easier to pull pants over the diaper, which may be true if baby isn’t wearing a onesie. The downside to this construction is that it may take a little more finesse to fasten the diaper properly on your child, as you can’t easily see what you’re doing!

Adjustable elastic can be found in the legs or back of some diapers. Adjustable elastic allows for a truly customizable fit, preventing leaks around the legs for skinny babies and red marks from too-tight elastic for chubby babies.

Finally, the care of the diapers. Oh yes, there’s more.

The first reaction of many people to the idea of cloth diapers is that cleaning them at home will be disgusting and-or very time consuming. Guess what? Not true! Mostly; mostly not true.

Firstly, the Detergent.

Don’t let the decision paralyze you. Simply avoid anything with brighteners, softeners, bleach, or fragrances (although fragrance from essential oils is generally acceptable). By weeding out detergents with those additives you eliminate most of what’s on the shelf at your local conbini. Although it seems like a natural choice for baby items, avoid Dreft (which contains brighteners); however, Original Tide is recommended by several cloth diaper manufacturers. Feed stores often carry cloth-friendly, clean-rinsing detergents such as Country Save, Tom’s Soap, or Always Naturally. There are also many detergents made specifically for cloth diapers, including Rockin’ Green and SKWEE-E-Z-CLEAN. Some prefer homemade laundry detergent; if you do this, just be careful to avoid recipes that call for grated soap, which is notorious for building up on diapers and may cause skin irritation.

Secondly, the Prepping.

“Prepping” refers to preparing new cloth diapers for their first use. The extent of prepping required depends on whether the diapers are made of natural or synthetic fibers.

Diapers made of synthetic materials (such as the typical pocket diaper with microfiber inserts) should be washed once with a small amount of detergent. Follow with an extra rinse.

Natural fibers (excluding wool, which has special care requirements) require repeated washing and drying to reach full absorbency. For the wash cycle, only a minimal amount of detergent is necessary since the items have not yet been used; for the drying, you can use the dryer on high heat as long as there is nothing in your load that contains PUL or elastic. After two wash/dry cycles, pour a small
amount of water on the material. If the water soaks in immediately, you can begin using the diaper. Understand that it will continue to shrink and increase in absorbency over the next few uses, so if you do experience a leak, give it another chance. If the drops of water do not absorb immediately but bead up before soaking in, then repeat another wash/dry cycle.

Thirdly, the Regular Routine.

The best washing routine for your cloth diapers is one that is simple and regular (at least every 2 days). With a good, cloth-friendly detergent and enough water, you shouldn’t need to add any other products. Too many variables will just make it more complicated to troubleshoot down the road should you ever encounter problems with smells or rashes. The most important thing about washing cloth diapers is finding the right balance of enough detergent to get the diapers fully clean and enough water to fully rinse the detergent away.

First, do a short rinse cycle using cold or warm water; no detergent is necessary. Choose whatever load size setting you would normally use if you were just washing clothes.

Next, run a wash cycle using hot water and the recommended amount of detergent. Consider up-sizing the load setting. Don’t let your water temperature exceed 150 degrees, and don’t use the “sanitize” setting – extremely hot water is hard on the diapers.

Finally, add another rinse. Since many washing machines have an automatic setting for an extra rinse, this step may not even require any of your attention. However, during the time period when you’re still getting the hang of your wash routine, it’s a good idea to peek in the washer during the last rinse to make sure you don’t see any suds. If suds are present, rinse some more and make a note to use a little less detergent the next time.

You can put cloth diapers in the dryer if you’re in a hurry – just avoid using fabric softening sheets and the high heat setting. To get maximum longevity out of your diapers (and keep your electricity usage lower), hang them to dry.

Fourthly, the Placement.

Diapers are to be placed in these locations: in their spot near or under or in the changing table; in their pocket in the diaper bag when soiled; and in a basket separate from the towels during laundry.

And then there’s the fucking butt cream. You can’t just use any old whatever with a cloth diaper. You have to use cloth friendly ingredients. All of the “cloth friendly” ingredients should rinse away easily in regular the hot wash cycle of your washing machine (or washing, no judgement) without additional cleaning measures. These ingredients are not overly greasy or thick. They are best for preventative use-

Beeswax – locks in moisture; naturally anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, anti-allergenic, and germicidal; Vitamin E – high in antioxidants; benefits the skin by helping it retain its natural moisture content; Lanolin – a rich source of skin lipids; Shea butter – effective at repairing damaged skin due to high levels of natural antioxidants and essential fatty acids; Cocoa butter – a natural skin softener, high in Vitamin E; Aloe vera – cool and soothing; can reduce skin inflammations, itchiness, and blistering; Coconut oil – contains a unique combination of fatty acids that moisturize skin beautifully;
Olive oil – a gentle moisturizer for dry skin, containing Vitamin E, Vitamin A, and four different antioxidants; Grapeseed oil – aids with skin repair, as it has mildly antiseptic qualities; Jojoba oil – acts as a natural barrier to environmental allergens, and may help slow the growth of bacteria because of its anti-microbial properties.

I can use the regular laundry detergent with the baby fabrics, probably. Baby skin is very sensitive- if a rash develops- which it might or might not, who the fuck even knows- it could be any number of things. The thing I can control is the detergents and fabrics.

Finally, I’m getting subscriptions to a few magazines full of children’s fashions, buying the big look-books of children’s clothing for the past few centuries, and a big stack of on sale baby bodysuits in all the sizes they have available and more notions because I’m going to have to make more. Yes, I’ll take the variety packs of baby-safe fabrics, you fucking cutthroat shark bastards. Yes, just take my money, I wasn’t doing anything with it.

It’s fine.

God in heaven, I almost forgot the burp cloths! That would have been a mess- they’re basically just towels, but with cute patterns and designs on them, and yes I will make cool ones but dammit I want to have literally everything we might need ready to fucking go in the wardrobe before the baby gets here . Ah! Coolers! Little ones that are easy to carry around like purses- really, they’re lunch bags but yes, thank you, I’ll take twelve.

Seriously, spooky bullshit Devil Fruit powers make shopping like I do very easy and I will not discount their utility. Is it weird that I mostly use my bullshit Devil Fruit powers for efficiency and time saving stuff, rather than fighting? I mean, I have fighting skills with it, but… I really do just like seeing the expressions on people’s faces as I shove things that shouldn’t fit into my bag into my bag and have nothing more than the occasional misplaced noise escape. S’great fun, really.

Ah, and last on my list- I’ll talk to my crewmates when I get back. Now, onto Miss Shakky!

Oh, she’s changed it from a Bar to a Cafe? Right, Issun Walter- she must want to attract a different kind of crowd. And she’s changed the menu, too- the Hard Drinks list is as expensive as ever, but the Soft Drinks list is quite reasonable.

“Chairete, Miss Shakky.”

“Salaam, Miss Tailor. How’ve you been?”

“I can’t complain- how’re you?”

“Ah, well- expecting again, which is a little sooner than I’d like but, well, I missed Ray while he was gone quite a lot…”

“I understand. Really, I do. -ah, I brought some things for you, since I was out shopping
anyway…?”

“Like what?”

“Oh, a sprayer for your toilet, some other things you might want or need. You know. Stuff.”

“-You got me a sprayer!”

“It was buy one get one free at a few places, and you know I can’t really resist a sale…”

“-Saa, just like Morgan. Thank you, Mab.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Shakky. I’ll just put things away for you, if that’s alright?”

“Um- sure…? It’s a bit, well-”

“I’m the oldest of ten girls total Miss Shakky, and I’m a midwife- got the badge and everything. There’s nothing you have that I haven’t seen.”

“Well. Well- hahaha, fine, go ahead.”

“Thank you.”

And then I go up to Miss Shakky, Old Ray, and Little Issun’s apartment, behind the Cafe, up the stairs. It’s a nice place; very green.

The apartment’s a bit of a hot mess, though- clean laundry all rumpled in baskets, garbage and dirt everywhere- the baby’s things are clean and spotless, and the kitchen work surfaces are spotless too, as are the weapons and guns and so on.

Return Beat: Dollperganger Step Twelve!

New Beat: Dollperganger Cleaning Crew!

Clean up!

Check it-

The LIST:

Check it off!

Did that?

Check it off!

Uhn, did that one too!

Check it off!
Did that?
Check it off!
Uhn, did that one too!
Check it off!
Did that?
Check it off!
Uhn, did that one too!
Check it off!
Did that?
Check it off!

The last thing to do is make sure all the dishes are dry before I put them away.

End Beat: Dollperganger Cleaning Crew! Nice!

And now the apartment is clean; laundry folded in- haha, three laundry baskets! Dishes put away, new things neatly stored with the old so there’s no confusion- I even installed the sprayer for her.

Anyway, that’s that done and dusted- literally, in fact. Hmhmhmhmhm! -Honestly, though, the reason I stopped in, to see to Miss Shakky… She was Harri- Or Harry, the spelling isn’t precise, that letter doesn’t exist in the Common- Miss Shakky was Mother’s friend. And Mother is gone, now; so I’m checking on Miss Shakky to make sure she’s okay.

And she is, I think. I mean- her cafe has a small gang of preteen girls running around, one of whom has the unenviable job of child-wrangler, and Miss Shakky has set herself up a little empire of people she can boss around… I think she’s going to be okay.

I think she’s going to be fine.

I give Miss Shakky a hug, assure her that- yes, Taffy and I shall return for the birth of her second child. Old Ray does a spit-take when he hears that part of our conversation- ah.

“You hadn’t told him?”

“I was getting to it, just- I was a bit more concerned with other things.”

“Miss Shakky, boinking your husband is always a good idea, but- you really should find the time to tell him these things. He’s old, after all; surprises like this, while good in theory, can’t be healthy for him.”
I leave, smirk firmly on my face. Miss Shakky laughed so hard she had to start beating the counter to gain her composure back, to no avail; ach, shit. I sounded like Morgan there, didn’t I? Ah well.

It’s actually almost impossible to not, in some form or fashion, embody the best and worst parts of the people who made us who we are. It could be our looks, or our preferences; it could be our voices, or what we choose to say. It could even be the qualities of our mercy- the point is, no matter who or what you are, you were marked by the people that made you. It’s up to you to decide what that mark looks like- but it’s still there, a handprint on your heart.

Titania- brother, rapist, hated foe, prophet- he only went that far because he was Morgan’s favored heir. The Court requires a certain kind of person, of the one who sits the Throne. Either you bow to their wishes- becoming the monster in truth that Titania was- or you defy them, like me, and become your own kind of monster.

Still, because I knew him- because I knew Titania, I was changed for good. I mean- with Fairy twins, the thing of it is… there’s a good one, and a bad one. Always. It’s not a question of, of-nurture, it’s nature. There’s always a bad one, if the twins be Fairies. Titania was the bad one. So I had to be the good one.

You can’t imagine all the awful, awful things I don’t do because I’m the good one.

You simply can’t imagine.

So I’m back on the ship; things are being unpacked and rearranged at an astonishing pace. I spent, oh, a good three hours sorting all the things I bought, throwing things out in the dorms, putting new things away, labeling boxes and putting things away in storage for Nami until she has need of them…

And there are a few other things I know she’s going to need, so I put the appropriate crewmates on the job.

To Franky, I gave the job of making an auto-swing or bouncy chair; my notes on the subject were that it needed to have a horizontal swing action if at all possible, and it needed to be easy to clean and maintain. Then I handed off the list of requirements to Usopp, who was actually around newborn children for a few year’s and has a better idea of what might be useful in a bouncy chair.

To Chopper, I gave the job of creating hemorrhoid cream. Because Nami is going to need hemorrhoid cream, and possibly the other things that go with it. I’ll leave it at that.

To Usopp, I gave the job of creating a mobile for the crib- every mobile needs a crib, er, other way-every crib needs a mobile, if for no other reason than to keep demons and ghosts away from the baby. I’d offer the use of mine, but I didn’t actually have one.

To Sanji, I gave the job of- with Chopper’s nutritional guide in hand- creating one handed recipes Nami can eat. I also gave him the one handed recipe book, which he scoffed at before immediately beginning to read. He’s a food snob, and it’s adorable.
Anyway, the misery of pregnancy is starting to be felt; certain smells make Nami almost violently ill, such as brussel sprouts; others make her very horny as a sweaty post-training Zoro found out to his tired delight. Nami cannot drink coffee; she can’t drink any kind of alcohol (although, in a choice between a whiskey sour and toasted whitebread with butter and honey, I’d rather she have the whiskey sour); and the sex she can have is not the kind of sex she wants to have. It’s only going to get worse from here on in.

Zoro sent me with a missive for his Aunt and sisters; he wanted a jam jar full of dirt from the family farm, so his child’s feet will know where to return to. Roronoa Merriweather was very kind, and gave me Zoro’s old pig-doll, named Tusker.

So now Zoro has a whole family of soft pig friends, and a blanket he used to wrap himself in when he was Overwhelmed? Aha. He is a changeling and a Changeling, too.

Interesting.

Anyway, the dirt was put in with the baby-birth box, quietly awaiting The Moment. Maybe I should find a bag? Decisions, decisions.

So we’ve got about five more days until Captain will have us set out, and things are starting to settle back into- or rather, we’re starting to find our rhythm.

The sails and rigging are sound, with a few minor repairs and only one line needing replacement. All my pressing duties have been attended to; the ship has been cleaned from Observatory to Bilges which stunk like a sewer but it needed to be done so I did it, we’re going to the launching point at Takoyaki 8 where Old Ray will coat our ship in two days, and… Damn. I don’t think I’ve got anything left to do, except for getting a jump on the Imbolc Rites and supplies and we’ve already done most everything that needs doing.

I can’t start making baby clothing until we’ve got a better handle on how many there are; I’ve already marked out all the fabric, it’s too late in the day to do cutting… laundry’s done, amenities have been replaced, Gurry likes floral scents, replaced all the condoms and lube, washed and sanitized all the dildos and vibrators in both dorms, organized and reshelved the softcore porn in the library, refluffed the mattresses...

Hmm.

Maybe time for a game night? A good game is like acid on the social politics, stripping away everything that doesn’t matter to get right to the bones of a person… and we’ve not really been near each other day-to-day in two years…

Actually- there’s one game I always loved playing in school. It’s called Grease. Technically, it’s called Grease th’Wheel, but mostly it’s called Grease.

You need a deck of cards with eight suits - a deck of Line standard ♥♦♣♠ will do for one, but you need a Skua standard of Clover, Tears, Moons, and Stars for the total of 104 cards that are not at all the same. 104 individual cards, and 9 Trump Cards- that, depending on the Rules in Use, will either instantly win, instantly loose, or instantly reshuffle the game. The 9 Trump Cards, in order of strength, are: Death, Fortune, Fate, Mystery, Sacrifice, Freedom, Beauty, Truth, and Love. They can
be used to instantly win that round of the game, as one Trump beats any hand in the game, but at the
cost of not being able to play that card again for the rest of the game. Period. More interestingly, one
of the ways to win the game requires collecting all the Trumps and playing them in a Wash, but
that’s… unless you’re very good at counting cards and have a good Grease-face, you’re not going to
manage it.

Anyway. I have the deck of cards, and I have the nine trump cards… If it was Greased Lightning,
I’d have to use thirty one, but it’s not, it’s just Grease...

Grease is a game that has elements of Blackjack and Poker, but also elements of… I want to say
Roulette, for how quickly things can go, but that’s not right either. The most notable aspect of the
game is that it requires a deck of cards with eight suits total in it. The game divides these suits into
pairs- Hearts and Clovers, Diamonds and Tears, Clubs and Moons, Spades and Stars, with the
trumps floating around and tripping people up. Hearts are weakest out of the suits, with Stars being
the strongest, actually- what I mean to say is, if a Grease is played with Hearts and another Grease is
played with Clovers, Clovers wins. Diamonds beats Hearts, Clubs beats Diamonds, and so on. The
pairs exist for tie-breaking purposes.

Anyway. Each player receives a hand of five cards face down, and may discard up to four of them,
receiving new cards in their place. Then a further five cards are dealt face up to each player except
the dealer, who receives theirs face down. The first player begins by assembling their cards into one
of the winning hands and displaying it. The next player must then create a more valuable hand or
fold. If that player is successful in creating a more valuable grouping, the original first player may try
again to create an even more valuable grouping for themselves, or fold. This process passes left
around the table until only one player remains, who then wins the round. There are eight rounds
total, with the winner being the person with the most winning hand, the most unplayed trump cards,
or the most Money or beans or whatever, if you’re playing for stakes. There’s one more, but I can’t
remember it.

The hands go like this:

E-Z-Bake, two cards with values totalling 20; Two-cards Over Easy, two cards with values totalling
21; Hot Simmer Days, a set of three or more cards totalling between 16 and 21 inclusive, and with all
but one in the same suit-pair; Hot Simmer Nights, three suit cards with values totalling 21; Wok the
Moon, same as a Hot Simmer Day but with all the cards being in the same suit-pair; Four-card
Cookoff, same as the two- and three-card hands before; Broken Crowns, the combination of 678 of
any suit; Five-card Chili, same as two- and three- and four-card hands before; Royal Luck, the
combination of 777 of any suit; Six-card Chili, same as the two- and three- and four- and five-card
hands before; Three Years, the combination of 888 in a hand when eights are wild; Seven Days a
Week, same as two- and three- and four- and five- and six-card hands but with seven cards; Lovers,
two picture cards and two aces; Watches, three picture cards and three aces; Seasons, four picture
cards and four aces; and Grease for the Wheel, five picture cards and five aces.

The Modifiers are used to mess around with the value of a hand, and to make the game more
interesting. Apart from “The Soapy Water” rule, modifiers are optional, which may or may not be
included in a game. They are as follows:

Soapy Water (Wash Up): If a player displays a Grease for the Wheel, an opponent may display a
nine-card running flush and instantly win the hand. If a player displays a nine-card running flush, an opponent may display a ten-card running flush and instantly win the hand; a player with a ten-card running flush can also use it to steal the win from someone who has previously Washed Up with a nine-card running flush. This is the only non-optional modifier, making it an actual rule.

Week of the Dead: in a normal hand, eights may be played as if their value were zero (but can still be played with value eight if the player wishes). Thus they can be included in an existing Grease in order to improve it’s size by one (or more) cards, which is important when tie-breaking. Whenever this is done, eights become wild cards in the following hand, and this modifier cannot be used in that hand. After one hand with eights as wild cards, they revert to normal, and this modifier becomes available again.

No Soap in the Wild: When eights are wild, you cannot Wash Up if your running flush contains more wild eights than the Grease or running flush you are trying to beat.

Double Trouble: Paired Aces are Trumps for this hand, but cannot be played as anything else for the rest of the game.

Eight Years: When eights are wild, the grouping 88888888 is considered a Grease; it beats normal Grease hands (except for Greasepaint), and can be Washed Up like a normal Grease.

Lady Be Good: A player may reveal the Queen of Spades (also called the Lady) for one of two effects: if eights are not wild in the hand, the player may draw two cards from the deck, then choose one of these cards to replace the queen in their hand. (Lady’s Night.) If eights are wild, the player can force every opponent to devalue one ace in their hand to value 1 (rather than the ace’s normal value of 11). The opponent chooses which ace is devalued. (Lady’s Choice.)

Fate Be Cruel: If the Lady has been played and replaced with another card from the deck as above, the King of Tears (also called the Lord) may be revealed and replaced in the same way, also rendering all aces held by the player who played the Lady unplayable. (Lord’s Mercy.) If eights are wild, the player may be played to immediately cause them to cease being wild; but if played this way, any other player (who did not play the King of Tears) who holds the Queen of Spades may reveal it to cause their eights to remain wild. (Lord’s Judgement.)

Black Spot: If a winning hand has even one black suit card in it, it is immediately discarded. -Dealer rule: if the dealer’s hand has even one black suit card in it, their hand is automatically the lowest hand in the game, regardless of what cards it is made of.

Red Handed: If a winning hand is made entirely of red suit cards, it is immediately discarded. -Dealer rule: if the dealer’s hand is made entirely of red suit cards, their hand is automatically the lowest hand in the game, regardless of what cards it is made of.

Can’t Keep Down the Clown: All Eight Jokers can be played as a Grease, but can be Washed with an eight card running flush. Greasepaint can beat any other Grease; Greasepaint cannot beat a Half-Baked. Jokers are otherwise Null.

Half-Baked: If a player has ten cards that add up to a value twenty-one, they can play the hand. This hand beats everything except a Grease (excepting the Greasepaint).

Norland Roulette: All Trumps are immediately played, with the highest trump card knocking the player who plays it out of the game.
Djinni Trader: Before the facedown cards of the dealer are dealt, the players may exchange their faceup cards; up to eight cards may be exchanged in total amongst all the players.

Wizard of Odds: A player who reveals the Queen of Clovers may subtract eight from the value of one of their cards and add it to the value of another. Card values must still range from 1 to 11.

Witch of Waste: A player who reveals the Queen of Moons may take any card, even a trump, from the discard pile and add it to their hand. The Queen of Moons must then be discarded for the remainder of the game.

Pandora’s Box: A player who reveals 9 black suit cards may exchange their single unrevealed card for any other unrevealed card from the deck. This exchanged card must then be immediately played in the next hand. -Dealer Rule: The dealer must reveal all but one of their cards; this last unrevealed card is the Hope card. For the remainder of the game, once per round, the dealer may exchange any one of their face-up cards at any time, as many times as they like; but only that one card. If their face down card is anything other than a face card, a joker, or a trump, their hand is null. The Hope card cannot be traded, stolen, killed, or discarded at any time, under any rule. Only by its revelation can it be discarded or played.

Alone Time: A player who reveals a set of four cards, each either a nine or ten (or a wild eight), plus the Queen of Clovers, may shift points of value between their cards to create a Lovers, and may consider any other nines or tens in their hands as ones (not aces) and twos respectively. However, any other Lovers beats this hand.

Sharpeyes Send their Regards: Displaying a Jack of Diamonds (the Sharpeye) when eights are not wild causes the aces of any other player who has used a Null Eight to become unplayable. When eights are wild, displaying a Jack of Diamonds makes all aces unplayable and bans wild eights from taking value 1 or 11.

Death Rides Alone: Displaying a King of Spades ‘kills’ one picture card in the hand of every player who has more than one in their hand. A ‘killed’ picture card may not participate in a Lovers, and if eights are wild may not participate in a Watches either, but may still participate in other high hands.

Swan Lake: When played, the Jack of Moons and the Jack of Stars are wild in all hands. However, any player who plays either Jack must play all of their eights as null eights. Further, any opponent may reveal a King of Spades after the Jacks are revealed to cause the Jacks to cease being wild and also cause all other players to reveal a card they have not yet revealed. -Dealer Rule: The dealer may trade their entire hand, and their unplayed trump cards, for the entire hand and unplayed trump cards of any player.

Buns in the Oven: If the Jack of Clubs is declared by any player before the first player has played their first hand, Bakes and Greases switch places in score value. Thus, Double Bakes, Triple Bakes, etc. become the most valuable hands, with the exception that a Grease will still beat a Half-Baked. It also, of course, becomes possible for a player to Wash the Oven.

All Modifiers must be declared by the player or dealer before they can be used.

It’s easiest to have this list of rules and hands just out in the open, when you’re playing the first few
times. It’s also helpful to have a box of those golf pencils and some sticky notes handy, to remember which cards are valued what in a non-permanent way. And a little board with something to mark it with, so you remember other things- who won what hand, which rules we’re playing under, tallies of who’s won what and how, and so on. Little things.

So.

I’ve got a gallon of chalkboard paint in here somewhere- time to talk to Franky.

I go down to the shop, and- ah, preliminary drawings of the new super-tricked out baby-swing-chair. Cool, cool-

“Hey Franky.”

“Hey, Mab-sis! Need something?”

“Well… firstly, your swing-chair is looking good so far.”

“Haha, thanks; most of the extras are actually from Usopp, if you can believe it.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. E’said there can’t actually be too many things in the chair to distract the baby with- and if Zoro and Nami have more kids, it’ll be better to have more options on the chair because each baby is different and likes different things.”

“That’s true.”

“Yeah, we’re actually tricking the thing out way more than I thought we’d need to. Anyway, you usually don’t come down here without a reason- the new aprons are nice, as are the extra belts and so on, but… what’s up Mab?”

“Well. It occurred to me earlier that we’ve not really cohabitated- all of us as crewmates- for a good two year’s or so; thus, the best way I can think of to re-establish bonds in our group is a friendly game night.”

“…With our crew?”

“Well, now that I’ve said it out loud, it sounds stupid.”

“I mean… Nami’s probably not going to play unless it’s for real money, and she is...”

“Nami is Nami; and Nami likes that sweet, filthy lucre.”

“She surely does.”

“Ah well. I guess having a chalkboard in the Galley would be nice anyway- we use it as a meeting room and all, and it’d be nice to have a wall where we can write stuff and clip magnets to...”

“…”

“Oh, right- I got a gallon of special magnetic chalkboard paint. Goes on in three coats, the bottom
most one being the most heavily magnetic, and the topmost one is the blackboard coat. I just don’t want to have a magnetic chalkboard and have there be no shelf for the damn chalk.”

“Aha! Now that’s an easy job- you thinking of doing it now?”

“Well, it’s still a few hours to dinner, so no. Probably do it the day before we set out, when Sanji does that barbecue Captain wants- that way-”

“-there’s no paint fumes while he’s cooking. Smart.”

“Mn. Considering the room, that patch of wall right by the ladder- the one beside the mast?”

“The one by the pantry, adjacent to the corkboard?”

“Yes.”

“That the one you want for the Games board?”

“I mean, where else can we put it? Ah, and maybe a storage container- like a shelf, or a box that’s secured under the sofa- for games, too... The wall behind the sofa is already cork boarded and covered with pictures- which reminds me, I need to label, protect, and organize those-”

“-Wow you are neurotic-”

“-yeah, and bored; and what part of the wall isn’t cork is storage space for the snail phone, or calendar. We can’t put it on the mast because that’s where our Altar is, and that’s not a thing for moving-”

“-That’s true, there’s really no better place to have it-”

“So.”

“...I see your point. As for games storage, I think the best spot will be on the far side of the couch; there’s a little dead space right there that’s just big enough for a locking cabinet. I’ll make it just level, maybe a little lower than the arm of the couch, and... add leaves, so it’s like the snail cabinet. -We can’t keep games in the snail cabinet?”

“No, it’s full of snail-phone things; phone books, catalogues, and so on. Need to organize that, too.”

“...If you’re organizing things, I have a drawer or two where various tools have gone to die...?”

“I’ll put it on my list, sure.”

“Thank you.”

So. That’s how I ended up going through literally every receipt we have, and every coupon, every advert and free delivery menu and- everything. Everything in the Snail Cabinet. And then I organized it. And composted everything that was no longer of use or too faded to see. And put all the paper in an accordion file-folder, with the strappy closer on the button, because I did not buy all of these office supplies in vain, goddamnit. I also curated, labelled, dated, and added little anecdotes to the hundreds of pictures from the over-the-couch cork board. Precious memories deserve our protection and remembrance!

So we have photo albums now. Each picture is on it’s own page, with acid free writing in graphite
“Captain?”

“Neh, I didn’t realize you’d taken so many pictures, Mab.”

“Ah. Mmhm- I don’t always remember things when I write them down. But I always remember what I’ve seen. So.”

“Mm. We’ve changed, since then.”

“Well… yes, Captain. You’re a different man today than you were yesterday. Different doesn’t mean bad, and it doesn’t mean good- It just means ‘not the same’; and you’re not.”

“Mm.”

“…You know, if you want to hug or cuddle, we’ve got a sweet couch right here and I don’t mind…?”

“Kay.”

So I spent the intervening hours between the finishing of my self appointed tasks of organisation and dinner holding my captain on the Galley couch. He settled into a snuggle with his face mooshed into my chest, his ear pressed flat to my heart behind my ribs. Luffy, for all his training, for all his growth, still smells like meat and barbecue sauce; the faint tang of woodsmoke and summertime heat, like wet dirt. He’s lean, and muscular; his ribs a strange give under my arms. It really is just exactly like hugging a shark-type fishman, only his skin doesn’t do the scratchy thing when you rub it the other way.

I needed a nap anyway.

So I explained to Mark and Bryony about Gurry, and they kinda looked at me, and then Mark grinned and said “Have you got to casual sex yet, or…?”

And I said “It’s been long enough, even with the extra time.”

And Mark said “So. It’s a lot of hot, filthy, sweaty work to get the sails back in order- when you’re done for the day, why don’t you show Gurry to the bath house and scrub his back?”

And then I smacked Mark in the arm, right on his sunburn because holy fuck, you asshole. Mark flinched, cackled, and scuttled up the lines. Prick.

Bryony was more… something. Kind?
“Well. You do like him, and he likes you- and you know you’ll feel better eating dinner if you’re clean, and Gurry’s never really done anything like this before. Bathing is the ritual for cleansing, after all; and if you don’t want to do anything more than wash, don’t do anything more than wash.”

“...right. The worst he can do is say no.”

“Mm.”

And then Bryony started hauling the ropes towards their storage spaces; she’ll re-coil them before putting them away-away, make sure they’re properly waterproofed and everything.

I go to find Gurry; he’s still hard at work, carefully looking over every square inch of the shroud on the deck, making absolutely sure that each part of it is in good condition and making marks on his clipboard if there’s a part that isn’t- Mab actually put in this grid system in blue squares, in the shrouds I mean, and each square is labelled. Each sail has it’s own tally-sheet, and… basically, it’s just a way for someone other than Mab to know where weak spots on the sails are, and fix them when the time comes. So far, on his sheet, I only see one little red ‘x’ marking; in the same general area as those usually show up, it’s a high tension area and the wear on that part of the fiber is just a touch more than anywhere else on the shroud. Mab can’t reinforce it anymore than she has, it’ll throw off the wind distribution.

Gurry is so beautiful in his lycra shorts- he shucked out of his jean short-shorts about a half-hour in when we all decided that his artist’s eyes were best suited to the absolutely vital job of checking over the shrouds, and now he’s down to his shorts and he’s rolled his shirt up to his bicep and unbuttoned it and underneath he’s wearing a sleek v-neck tank top and the v is deep enough I can see the full swell of his generous breasts and the play of his muscles rippling under his skin, and it’s- both his shirts are stained with colors because he’s painted in literally all of his clothing but especially that shirt, the v-neck, and- his- I want him, I want to kiss him and- breathe in.

Breathe out.

I can see the firm bulge of his cock and his balls, the tight strain of them against white shimmering fabric clinging tightly to his thighs and his crotch, I can see the rivulets of sweat dripping down, the dark wet stain drawing itself down the crack of his ass and pooling behind his balls, I can see the sharp narrow cut of his thighs and the hot sweaty arch of his throat and I want- I want to touch the liquid fire of him, but- even now, he’s only just coming into the first blush of spring. The first month of spring is the last month of winter, the cruelest face the Goddess shows because you get hope for the springtime, for leaves to spike out from barren branches scraping at the dull grey sky, you get hope for the purple crocus-petals in the depths of the snow, and the returning of the birds- and there still could, in the turning of the heavens, be another six feet of snow and forty days of ice left.

Winter’s grip is harsh and cruel and firm and in the very last month, crueler than anything, because finally, finally, there is hope- that this is not the end. That the world will not always be… this.

I can see the light dancing over his sweating skin, and I can see the curve of his dick and his balls and the hard swell of his breast, the dark brown whiskey shot of his- eyes. I swallow back my drool and blush so hard it feels like I’m sunburned. Gurry swallows, and blushes, and forcibly returns himself to the task at hand.
I walk away; go inside, get cold water bottles from Sanji because it’s still only just after lunch, a-and, um. All I’ve got left to do is replace all the hidden weapons on each deck; make sure the explosives are properly stored for them and so on. So.

I take our water bottles; I grab the sack of knives and things; and then I start at the top of the ship, hand Mark his water bottle and secret away a multitude of deadly materiel. Bryony gets hers on the beam, and then I’m down the mast from the Crow’s Nest and next to a still faintly flushing Gurry again. I let my feet make noise on the decking to alert him, approach from his side. He stops and he looks up at me from underneath his hat; I crouch down, heels flat to the deck so’s I can look him in the eye, sidelong a little maybe, and speak with him plain enough. He’s very fast, and competent, is Gurry- he’s gone through all the shrouds already, and all the red ‘x’ marked pages with the sail names on are marked up and stacked neatly; his job’s half done. So is mine, really.

“Brought you a water bottle.”

“O-oh! Thank you, Taffy.”

“Sure, Gurry. Ah- since you’re done with this part, the next thing to do is hand over the damage tally to Mab, down in her studio. Have you been there yet?”

“Oh, um- no, I haven’t.”

“I’ll show you- I need to go down there anyway, and the ship’s layout can be confusing if you’re new to it.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

So I take Gurry down through the ship, giving him more than just the two-beri tour; the actual, careful, measured tour, with anecdotes and little stories and jokes, and with quiet determination I scratch and chip away at the awkward moments that almost are, because… because I like being friends with Gurry. And I thirst for him, desire him- but being friends with him is good, too.

We amble along, drink our water, and I do my job. Along the slightly meandering route we take, I secret away weapons and dangerous material; I hide caltrops and the beginnings of traps.

Gurry, for all his appearance of being an airhead, is really just like me, and Mab, and Sanji, too, though Sanji tries to pretend that he’s not- sharp eyed, sneaky, likes to know where everything is. We pause in a weird little nook, between one room and another- an idiosyncratic space I know exists because I asked Franky for it.

We talk, and then we just... don’t stop.

“Can I put poisoned things in with the...?”

“So long as they’re labelled in a way you’re sure the rest of the crew will understand, yeah. Mostly, it’s me, Robin, Mab, sometimes Sanji, and maybe Mark who use these- Usopp’s bolt-holes are up in the rigging, and the rest of ‘em don’t bother with this stuff. Don’t put poison in the galley proper, though, or the supply room, or the infirmary- it’s not worth catching Sanji’s temper. And Chopper will either give you a taste of his temper, which is terrifying- or he’ll give you this look, and just.
“Ugh.”

“Hmm… I’ll think of something to use. Usopp’s the one who makes most of the labels, right?”

“Yep- at least, if it’s for something that isn’t fabric, Usopp does it. If it’s for fabric, Mab does it. And anything else you need made that isn’t fabric, or a cool gadget, Franky does it.”

“Gotcha. Sanji cooks, right?”

“Yeah- Sanji’s the cook. If you want something really specific, you can ask him if you can cook it in his kitchen; and if you’re like me, and mostly bake and make candy, which he doesn’t consider really cooking, he’ll let you. So long as you ask first, of course.”

“And I guess it’s the same with the rest of the areas in the ship?”

“Some are more commons than others- the Library, Garden, Observatory, Aquarium, and Crow’s Nest are all common areas, for example. So’s the Bath House, more or less. Dorms- unless they’re your own, like your bed’s in there, you can only go into the other one by invitation. Um… Now that Luffy, Usopp, and Mark have their own room, they shouldn’t sexile you guys from the men’s dorm, but… well, I hear the table-thing is very comfy in the winter. I dunno; I mean, the couch in the women’s is very nice and has all these really comfy blankets, so… The Workshops down on the third level are technically common, but unless Franky knows for a fact you can use the equipment and tools safely… and Usopp gets very picky about his worktable. Unless he’s right there, it’s better not to touch anything on it. You can mess with the junk in his junk-pile, but don’t take anything without asking.”

“Seems legit.”

“Oh, and- always, always, no matter what, ask before you take anything from Mab’s Studio. Laundry Room is more common, and a good secluded spot for trysting, but- under no circumstances, at no point in time… never, ever, no matter what, should you tryst in Mab’s studio. She will be very angry. Um… let’s see- I told you about Robin and Nami, and you experienced the Bugfucks-”

“-?”

“Luffy, Usopp, and Mark. They’re all fucking each other, or rather- making love? They’re a trio, and fucking nutbars- so, Buglovers maybe. But Bugfucks is snappier, so.”

“Ha!”

“Yeah- you can call them that, I guess, just explain why - um, what else. Oh! Mab and Sanji are happily married, their marriage is so far closed, and they have sex five times a day at least- excepting on the equinoxes, where they don’t have sex with each other at all.”

“Blood and fire, that’s a lot of sex! Wait- why not on the…?”

“Ghostly possession.”

“Ah. They’ve got the old blood, then.”

“Yep.”

“Zoro and Nami?”

“Engaged. Zoro really only has eyes for Nami, and Nami… she talks a good game, but she’s fairly
monogamous.”

“Ah. Robin and Franky?”

“Dude, even they don’t know- stay out of it, is my advice.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. Bryony…”?

“Bryony is casual only with the crew; everyone else has to date her quite a bit before she’ll open her heart to them. As far as I know, she’s only just starting to consider a man she met, but… probably not.”

“Gotcha. And you, Taffy?”

“…Gurry, you already know that. I’m not all that subtle, when it comes to Sex and Romance.”

“…I’ve noticed.”

Gurry shoots me a quick soft grin, and I can feel an answering smile on my face- as well as the soft heat of a blush shooting across my body. I can feel the faint itch of my loosened hair which stuck into my sweat-coated skin drying, and now it itches because the hair is loose and long and sticking to my skin still and I- I-

Gurry’s fingers are very soft and gentle, as he tucks a long loose strand of hair away from my face, gently brushes scraggles into line and tucks the whole slickening line of them back behind one of my pointed ears. He brushes a thumb under my eye, where my singular freckle is- Mab calls it a beauty spot, while Mark says it’s a tragic beauty spot and Bryony smacks him on the back of the head. I call it a freckle and leave it at that.

Gurry’s hand traces over my cheek, fingertips against the sharp swell of my jaw, the warm-cold touch of his fingertips over my lips. My bag of hiding-weapons is empty, a-and- ah-

He smells like musk and sunlight and the faintest hint of flowers and- ooh-

I nuzzle into his hand, just for a moment; glance at him hot and heady and wanting, just a look, just a moment- and then I step away, and open the door to Mab’s studio.

Gurry takes two steps after me and stops dead- I honestly had the same reaction when I came in here the first time, and that was before Mab unpacked everything she got over the Separation.

“Okay- yep, everything’s still laid out the same; Gurry?”

“…wow…”

“Gurry…?”

“Wow, you’re beautiful.”
My eyebrows went up and my eyes went wide and my face went hot and I just—smiled—and, um-

“-S-sorry! Sorry, Taffy, you were saying something?”

“Don’t be, Gurry, I don’t mind. U—um—over here, see this thing with the hooks? This board, I mean? Your clipboard goes on this one, and the papers go into this basket—the one marked in red, see?”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Anyway—once you’ve signed off on the papers, put them in the Damages Inbox, and put away the clipboard—pen goes in the little drawer, right there—yep, that one—and you’re done. I’m done too, so—this bag goes on this hook and…Woo! We’ve actually finished our jobs way ahead of schedule, and I know the others won’t be done for a while, and… I know you don’t really like crowding? So, um. I just thought that, if you wanted…we could go scrub the day off?”

“…Wash up for dinner?”

“Yeah. I’ll wash your back—a—and if, ah, if you’re not ready for more than that, I can just wash your back, s—soapy water and a washcloth and that’s it, um—”

“Only if you let me wash yours, Taffeta.”

I stared deep into Gurry—Marguerite’s warm brown eyes, and blushed, and he smiled, and blushed, and so I nodded.

“Okay, Marguerite. Let’s go wash the day away.”

The bath house on Thousand Sunny is marvelous. The first room has the sink, and the door to the toilet, and baskets to put your clean clothing and your towels and the things you don’t want getting wet; and there’s a big laundry basket and a rack for swords and whips and staffs and things. There’s a new hook for Gurry’s war fans, which you’d never see on him unless he was gutting you with them and by then it’s too late. Gurry and I have bathed together before, just—never here.

Stop by your dorm and get fresh clothing, clean towels from the towel shelf; go up to the bath house and put your things in the basket. Take out what doesn’t need to get wet; for me, mostly ninja things I keep in my socks, a few other things, nothing special—mostly just a fat coinpurse I keep in my bra. Gurry is much the same, with the addition of his hat; our shoes go on the shoe rack, and our dirty clothing go into the dirty clothes bin.

Through the bath house door, there’s a big tiled room and a deep soaking tub and little stools in a stack for the sitting on and a shower and a sprayer and soap and conditioner on the little shelf and it’s all—home. I’m home. And now, to scrub the years away, and become myself again.

I do my preliminary rinse, hand the sprayer over to Gurry so he can do the same; scrub down with my bar of soap, shampoo my hair which I haven’t done in several days and I need to because it
stinks; Gurry hands the sprayer back and I rinse my hair, the thick heavy weight of it sliding all over my neck and back and breasts. Soap and grime pools over blue tile, and my skin begins to soak up the water that’s sluicing over it. I examine my breasts; they are the same size, a little paler than the rest of my skin, milk white and criss crossed with pale blue veins because my chest gets almost no sun exposure at all. I gently scrub the tops, which are fairly clean, and I more firmly scrub underneath each pudgy handful, rub the grime away from my nipples until they flush a peachy rose and pebble under my fingertips. My wings really only need a rinse, which I do with the sprayer; I scrub my sides, my stomach and the small of my back, my ass and my hips and the thick fur between my legs, my thighs and my ankles and my feet.

I step over and stand under the hot spray, scrub everything again and when the water runs clear from my skin and pools beneath me clear and steaming I sluice the hot clean water between my legs. Soap is not good for vaginas; water is okay, though.

Gurry has been doing the same- but not to his penis, or his upper shoulders. Right. Amazon Lily’s method of inter-sexual bathing shares a lot with Skuan Hospitality. So. I turn the sprayer off, and the shower- he finished before I did and watched me, he’s thick-hot and throbbing from watching- me-

I fill a bucket with water, and settle myself on a stool behind him.

I start with the nape of his neck, which corresponds to the area of his body just above the pubic bone; the stretch of skin between his navel and the base of his penis. I wet, and soap, and scrub the dirt away from that stretch of his neck, and he sighs, softly. Go down his spine and you go down the perineum; shoulders are thighs, and the farther from the spine you go, the lower on the legs you get. Use the flat of my fingernails, tips turned into my palms to scrub and scuff and scrape away the gunk of days, warm water sluices away the filthy suds until only his warm pink skin remains. I mouth a kiss at the nape of his neck and Gurry sighs and moans, a little bit- soft, like the cooing of a dove.

Now that I can see it clearly, Gurry has washed his cock and his balls; meaning, actually, if I’m reading this right…

“Margurite, if you want me to stop, you need only say ‘stop’. Do you understand?”

“Mm. Yes, Taffeta. I understand.”

“Okay.”

I fill my palm with my coconut oil conditioner- it’s literally just coconut oil, hot from the mist of the shower and my own burning palms. I smooth my slick hand over Gurry’s pubic… it’s not a mound because it’s not… but. There. Where the fur begins. I let myself drape over his shoulders, let my cleaned wings wrap around us like a blanket. I can’t actually hold his cock with one hand when he’s aroused, it’s too big. I nudge his thighs open anyway, rub the excess oil onto my other palm and cup his fat roll of cock with both hands. He sighs raggedly.

Ah, I’d almost forgotten; in each version of back-washing, hospitality, or what-have-you that’s heavily codified- like this- there are certain parts of the body that, when touched certain ways, are questions. If kiss the nape of his neck, like I did, it means I think he’s handsome; if I kiss behind his ears, like I’m about to, it means I think he’s romantic. Side of the neck; sexy. Corner of the jaw; virile. Mouth to mouth? Have sex with me. Open-mouth kissing is “have sex with me, please”, and the more tongue you add, the more desperate you seem. Biting is, on Amazon Lily, basically a
demand for sex, right now. His ex-wife would bite him as soon as she got back from the campaign, and she would not be best pleased if he didn’t obey her demand.

Just brushing the teeth- no pressure, no bite, just touching them to skin… that’s an indication of desire. An offering; “I want you.” That’s what that means.

I stroke his cock gently, and press a kiss behind his ear. Gurry shudders. I mouth a line of kisses up the side of his neck and peel back the skin around the tip of his cock with my fingers; stroke thin-sharp fingertips around the seamy edge where skin ends and glans begins and press the flat front-sides of my teeth against the skin of his neck. His hips shiver, and shake, and his thighs rattle under my forearms. Gurry moans, soft still- he’s not very loud in the bedroom, and neither am I, usually.

I find the corner of his jaw and kiss him there, to the sound of his soft whimpers; I cup and stroke his balls, like stones in my fingers covered in soft, thin skin. Gurry turns his head, his eyes near black with desire; I press my lips to his, feel it open against my lips, and our tongues curl and stroke against each other. I saw slugs mate, once, saw them slide and wriggle over each other, felt their palpable joy in the act of fornication- oh, oh Gurry, Gurry please.

When he sucks my top lip into his mouth and presses firm teeth to it, I’m only surprised at how long that took him to do; I draw his lower lip into my mouth, and nip back a reply.

We break apart, slimy spit a string between our mouths, panting breaths gently echoing off the nearby tile.

Gurry wiggles out of my embrace, shoves the little stool to one side with a soft scrape. He turns, and sits on his ass, and pulls me into his lap so the sensitive joints of my wings are flat to his breast and my legs are spread wide open, hooked over his and his- hand- starts stroking and rubbing and delving.

Gurry is so big, I can’t actually take him in all in one go; and when I get aroused, I get so wet and slippery, he actually pops right back out if he tries to just put his tip in and take it slow. We found that out the first year of the Separation, during Beltane. He can get inside of me, it’s just… he can’t hesitate, and I can’t really do the work of pushing him into me.

I don’t have the strength to push myself down onto his dick and stay conscious. It’s too much for me. My strength is in pulling, not pushing.

I’m flat on my back, now, slick juices pooling in my pussy. Gurry’s big thick cock keeps popping back out of my pussy; I’m tight and a little squirmy, and I don’t think that’ll ever change. Gurry presses the tip of his cock against my pussy, and then with one quick snap of his hips, pins me to the ground, straight through. My legs clamp around his hips and my whole lower body clamps down sharp-hard-tight a-a-and oh, oh Gurry, Marguerite please, please please please-

*Please don’t- go-*

When I orgasm, and I’m not sure if it’s a product of my first orgasm being with Keimi and leaping up to meet god or what, but- when I orgasm, it’s usually so intense I pass out. I discussed it with Gurry a long time ago- so long as he doesn’t pull out, he can just keep going and I’ll keep orgasming. He’s the one in control of our pace, not me, is what I’m saying.

So.
When I come back inside my body, my belly is protruding with his cum and his body is a heavy sweaty weight across me. His cock is a big, heavy line against my thigh, and his cum is oozing out of my throbbing pussy. Oh god, that was so good.

I press kisses all over Gurry’s sleepy, grinning face, and he returns them.

“S-so. Are we dating, now?”

“If you like. It’s too early, to talk about marriage- we don’t know if we’d be good together, like that. But, Gurry- I like you, quite a lot. I- you like me, too, so. Let’s see where this goes, alright?”

“Alright, Taffy.”

I don’t know which of the ancient Amazonians decided that having their menfolk be virile and more than prepared to ejaculate at least five times in one round of sex would be a good thing, but the Amazonians have never had fertility problems except in War-husbands, and that’s usually resolved within the first two generations. What I mean to say, is- I have a fetish for cum, and being cummed in, and Gurry provides.

By the gods both old and new, Gurry provides.

Gurry and Taffeta were a little late to dinner; they smelled faintly of soap and sex, and… Ah. So that’s how it is. Dinner was lovely; I don’t remember much of it because cuddling with Captain made me long for Sanji. I missed a whole round of sex with him, due to Captain.

I aim to collect my due.

Sanji, who in all things matches me, is happy to oblige. Thank god for soundproofing.

New day, new things to do; Nami wants a blade for under her bed, something that’s soul will be well with it’s life of mostly ceremonial use. Zoro, being our resident swordsman, took money and some other things and told her that he’d go get one for her, right then and there. I said that’s all well and good- but I’d be going with him, because we’re on a schedule, and there’s no guarantee he’ll find a blade that suits on this archipelago in time.

To which he replied, fair enough.

And off we went.
All the Hell We Put Men Through

Soft, on the breeze- a Syreene’s Song of Fornication. Such has not been sung for a good thousand years, not since long before the current era.

Spadille’s up to something.

“So- any idea about what kind of blade, exactly, you’re going for?”

“Knives, plural.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah- both Nami and I use triadic weapons- her staff breaks into three discrete pieces that have their own specific attributes. My swords are three discrete weapons with their own unique attributes- thus, she needs at least three distinct blades for ritual protection.”

“Hmm. You could also invoke the Goddess with three knives- three and one would cover all the gods, but I’m not sure...”

“I was actually thinking three and two.”

“Oho!”

“Well- they’re for Nami, right?”

“Right.”

“So- she uses Wind, Cloud, Rain, and Thunder and Lightning.”

“Ah. The Jin Brothers. I like it.”

“Mm.”

We walk through Sabaody’s winding streets; and the tone of the whole town... now that the Goblin Market’s had time to settle in, the whole tone of the city has really changed. Everything is quite a bit more boisterous- people aren’t scuttling in fear anymore. There’s a certain tension, in a crowd that’s all afraid of the same thing- now, Seafolk are walking openly down the street, and Fae traders are calling in tones similar to seagulls. It feels very much like a street in any Faeland port-town; the hawking of wares, the multitudes of Tribefolk, the overall air of humanity, seething and pulsing like simmering vineapple chowder in a pot...

Zoro, in his dark green and with his three swords, cuts a swathe through the crowd like a hot arrow through mist. I walk at his side, my tactical belt over my hips and my spear at rest on my shoulder.
We’ve been to nearly every reputable weapon shop on this archipelago by now, and it’s only mid-morning; the only places left are pawn-shops and back alleys.

“So… y’know, if this pawnshop doesn’t have what you want… I can just make the knives.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“We still going to the pawn shop?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. ...you know, it’s okay if you don’t find a knife here.”

“I know.”

I look over at him, at his slightly reddened face, and his carefully pinched mouth- ah. We’ve been walking for hours. Time for a break.

“I think it’s time for a rest, actually- at the very least, we need some water. You want to go to the cafe on the corner, or the bakery up the block?”

“...Cafe.”

“Okay.”

And so, we go to the cafe. The hostess, a little Djinni boy- can’t be more than fifteen- shows us to our seats. We settle into a little glass table, and start sipping water in the shaded canopy. Zoro sighs, and settles into the seat, and- ah, brooding.

“So, what’s this really about?”

“...What if I hate them?”

“Hm?”

“I’ve only ever babysat before, I’ve never- I’ve never been wholly responsible for any child, ever, I- what if I hate them?”

“Ah. Let me tell you a story. When I was… oh, I had to be at least twelve, maybe thirteen, I took my original oath of Midwifery. You don’t actually need any of the pertinent knowledge of the profession to swear the oath; you just need to mean it, in Skua.

“The very first thing I ever had to learn, when it comes to taking care of children- especially babies- is that it’s okay to not like them.”
Zoro stares at me.

I smile.

“Zoro, the most interesting thing about a baby is that it’s cute. Otherwise, it’s a tiny wild animal that you’re predisposed to liking and caring about, and all it does is eat, sleep, shit, and scream- and sometimes, it just screams for fun, but mostly it screams because it can’t speak, and it can’t register most sensations as anything other than pain. Gassy babies scream like nothing else- and they vomit, too, all over your favorite things, and they’re sticky, they put things in their mouths, they cry for any reason, they cry because they want you to pay attention to them- oh yes. The very first thing you learn, in the Creche Ward, is that you can love any baby they put in your arms. And you can still not like them all that much.”

“Are… are you saying that I’m not going to like my kids?”

“At first? God, no. It’s a lucky man indeed who likes every member of their family; I love our Captain, but… uurgh.”

“…Yeah, okay, I can see that.”

“The romance industry really does people a disservice. Love, real love, the kind that lasts and you can grow a child on, isn’t passion and grand gestures. It’s holding your husband’s hair back as he vomits into the toilet, because he didn’t listen to you when you told him the Order of Spices in Meat Dishes is absolute, and he’s gone and poisoned himself again. Love is reading a book you don’t care about at all, and taking the time to learn what it has to say, specifically so you can talk to your friend intelligently about something they’re passionate about. Love is training until your bones crack, and your feet bleed, and every limb aches at the end of the day so you have to spend time you can’t get back getting a massage for medical purposes, because if you just shift a little more on that turn, if you just reach a little farther, you run a little faster-”

“Love is Discipline.”

“Love is Devotion, too; love isn’t something you feel. You feel passion, you feel lust- but love is something you have to practice. It’s a little different, when you’re making something… a ship, a story, a new law or a job or a baby- when you do something like that, there’s this sensation of anticipation. Part of you has dreamed that thing forever- and yet, and yet, you’re making that dream become now, and… it’s hard. So many things can go wrong, but by the gods you have to try. You can’t not try, you’ll die if you don’t do this thing-”

“…Miscarriage is really awful, huh.”

“-Yeah. Yeah, it is. It’s not… easy for me to talk about. And… I don’t think I can talk about it here- not that I can’t talk about it, or that it shouldn’t be talked about, but…”

“Not here.”

“No. Not here, Zoro.”

“What can you talk about?”

“Mm… I can say, without shame, that the second most important thing I ever learned as a midwife… the first thing is you’re going to get overwhelmed, and you’re going to fuck up. It happens; it’s always happened; and most babies survive it. I’ll do my best to teach everyone what to do if the fuck
ups are headed towards lethal, but there’s going to be at least one diaper made out of a kitchen towel, some wax-paper, and duct tape.”

Zoro blinks at me.

“If the baby’s a girl, the first time Sanji’s on baby-watch, he’s going to panic. Kitchen towels are very absorbent, and also-crucially, because he asked- sterile. If Chopper had to, he could use one as a gauze pad. Wax paper, with the waxy-side in and out, so there’s no leaks in either direction. And duct tape, to keep everything on. I already know that’s coming, if the baby’s a girl. And it’ll happen if the baby’s a boy because he’ll still panic, only he’ll get mad about panicking which always makes it worse.”

“Pfft. He’s still Sanji, even with...” Zoro sniggers.

“Mnhm. The second most important thing is: it is of vital importance to ask for help. There will be moments, Zoro, when you will look at that screaming critter that hasn’t let you sleep for eight hours in a stretch in six months, and you will stare down their red gullet from which wails will echo, and you will hold them as far away from you as you can and you will think to yourself- what if I just shake them so they’ll be quiet. This thought comes to every parent at least once, when their baby won’t stop crying no matter what they do.”

“...Really?”

“I’ve read the logbook; answer me honestly, Zoro. What would you have done to eat food, or drink some water, when you were tied to that post and waiting? Not what you did- not what you think you could have done, or what you should have done- what would you actually have done?”

“...Ah.” said Zoro, weakly.

I nod, solemnly. I drink more water, ignore the people listening to our conversation. Zoro has a low, commanding voice, and mine’s not much higher; and we both expect to be heard when we speak. It’s not surprising, that people can’t help but listen when we have a conversation.

“So. There will come a time when you will want to shake your baby, or not be a parent to them, and it’s okay. That happens. What you need to do is put the baby somewhere safe, and take some time for yourself. You’re allowed to be human, as well as a parent.”

“Okay.”

“...And, really- if we don’t find what you’re looking for in the pawnshop, we’re going to the smithies and getting materials. I’ll make the blades you want, Zoro.”

“...Thank you, Mab.”

We finished our water, left a tip for the waiter, and went on our way.
I mostly spent the last day, before we’d sail, going over maps with Nami. It’s funny- I’ve learned so much from each member of the crew, but Nami’s the one I’ve learned the most from. I don’t quite have her instinctive knack for the Weather Arts- but that doesn’t mean I don’t have the talent. According to Nami, I do have the talent.

Nami’s a prodigy in Weather Arts. According to her, I’m a journeyman; I actually outmatch her in personal movement and small crafts, which makes sense- but it’s not a big leap to go from piloting a Skuan skimmer to being the helmsman for Sunny. That’s what she wants me to be, actually- even with Bryony being so much stronger, even with Mark being so much faster on the draw… Nami says that I’ve got the qualities she’s looking for.

“I need someone who can wait, and listen. Not just to me- to the Sea, and the Sky, the wind and the water and the ship between them; I need someone patient, and cunning, and steady as anything. Mark came back, and I’m glad he came back- but he’s not…”

“He’s a Wind-runner, now.”

“Mm. He can tie the shrouds like no one else, find a puff of wind in the dullest of days- but he’s not right for the helm. Bryony… she’ll help, in a storm, but… she’s better at weighing the anchor, or hauling sheets in a driving rain. Or moving canons.”

“Mm. It has to be me?”

“Of all our crewmates, it’s you and Mab I trust the most with the Log Pose; and for this, Taffy, you’re the one who doesn’t have other responsibilities to distract you from the duty of it. So; will you accept the burden of Navigating for this crew, for the months I will be unable to?”

“...Yes, of course. I’ll guide us well, Nami.”

And Nami smiled at me, before she began drilling me on weather again. She’s a Master of Weather Arts, now; and I’m her apprentice. It’s not formalized because we haven’t signed a contract- but that’s because… because Nami is still wording it, I saw her drafting it earlier today.

I’m going to be a Journeyman in the Weather Arts for real, soon. I’ll earn my right to Guide the Way, and wear the Compass Rose of the Navigator- if Nami has anything to say about it. However, there is something I want to make for her- if she’s going to take a formal vow as my Master of Weather, I’ll need the apprentice’s mark.

For the Weather Arts, the mark of the Apprentice is the Compass.

I need to make a Compass- I won’t take hers from her, nor the log poses, it’s honestly more like a comfort object to her. And the Compass, you make for yourself or earn.

The ancient Skuan Compass was comprised of these things; Four Bird Skulls, from the birds of
South, North, East, and West; Three Needles, of Bone, Wood, and Metal; Two Strands, one of braided hair, one of leather; and One Clock, to keep the pace. Of course, in the old days, the Clock was properly the Astrolabe, which Nami already has; she doesn’t leave her bedroom without knotting the very long leather thong of it to her pant’s belt loop, and she pulls it out at least once a day to check that time is still moving as she expects it to be.

Bryony has the skulls, but I’ll need something to trade for them; Mab has needles, but she won’t give them to me for free; I can manage the braided strands; and the Clock… Mark. Mark will know what to do for the clock.

We finish training a bit before lunch, and I accept the formal contract of apprenticeship to read over—I can’t just sign it, there’s a Negotiation that has to happen, and Nami is supposed to have put in at least four unreasonable demands for me to argue against, there’s a whole thing to this that must be observed.

I’m excited.

Bryony’s worktable is actually a table that usually lives underneath the couch. It clamps onto the couch’s arm, and has a swing in it, and a lock, and… there are boxes of things under the couch too, skulls and bones and bits. She makes her fetish-eels, or fake eels, or feels for short, on the couch where anyone could see. Sanji’s not bothered by the galley becoming more and less filled with gently writhing feels, their clattering jaws and rustling bodies making the air thick with Bryony’s Attention.

It creeps me the hell out. However… there is something I can trade.

In Amazon Lily, high in the mountains, there is a quarry, and in one of the pits of that quarry, there can be found emeralds, in the clay. And along one wall, there are thick red seams of iron. The stone I have is orange-rust colored, heavy for it’s size and clingy, to all things metal. It’s a hunk of **maghemite** the size of my fist; and I found it in an ancient crater from a falling meteor. If it’s not a chunk of star-metal- but it feels *cold* to my hand, so I think it must be. I’ve also got three pieces of hematite, the blood-stone; hold those cobbles in your palm and it feels like your heart is in your hand.

Bryony has an interest in such things.

I go into the galley, wings pressed flat to my spine, and hands full of iron-stones to trade. Bryony lets her wordless song end, and the feels writhe around us like multicolored tendrils of some unspeakable horror.

“Hey Taffy.”

“H-hi, Bryony.”

“You usually don’t come around when I train like this- it must be important.”

“Y-yeah. I need the Four-bird skulls.”

“...and what, exactly, shall you exchange for thus?”

“A star stone that sings of metal, and three pieces of blood-stone.”
Bryony’s black eyes glitter strangely—now black, now blue, now black again. And then she nods, once, and reaches under the couch—pulls out a tiny box, not much bigger than a Reading Digestive Magazine, small enough to fit into the cargo-pocket of those new cargo pants; thick, like a brick. Longer than a half-brick, but—ah, right.

I hold out the star stone, and the blood stones.

Bryony opens the box.

Inside, there are four bird skulls, each with little nubs on the brain-case; the South Bird has two distinct nubs, while the North Bird has a heart-shaped nub; and the West Bird has three distinct nubs, while the East Bird has one nub that curves forwards, like a crest.

Bryony nods; I nod. And then we trade, stones for bones.

I take the bones in their box; Bryony takes the cooing metals.

“Mark’s in the Workshop, right?”

“Mhm. He’ll want precious gems, or fangs, maybe—Ivory, try Ivory.”

“…We’ll see.”

“Hm? Pffuhuhuhuhuhu! Alright, Taff. Go on, then.”

I leave Bryony to her cackling and her creepy feels.

There’s a river in Amazon Lily, and every year the salmon return to spawn in this river before dying. At the bottom of a falls, because there’s always a falls, you can find—once a year, you can find—the carcasses of thousands upon thousands of enormous salmon, and little bastards too that couldn’t make the cut this year.

I have tens of thousands of salmon vertebrae, and one of the things I did to unwind was file the spikes off the bones. I have several duffle-sacks full of bone beads, each one sorted further into smaller sacks of like-sized bits. Because I was bored. Strung up one fish’s worth of bone on a thread of twisted horse-hair and realized that the big fish-bones would be too heavy for me to wear. Talked to Mab about the importance of bones; the more bones a Fae wears, the more… dangerous, powerful, cunning, strong, beautiful… that Fae becomes moreso when adorned in bones.

I have many bones.

And I have lots of fish bones because there were lots of dead fish. I have a Plan for the fish bones, and Mab’s gonna help— but for Mark…

Tusks. Mark will take tusks, I think.
“-so I tried to make curry and I got chilli-powder burns all over my face, so I thought to myself ‘hang on, doesn’t milk soothe chilli burns? it does!’ and I couldn’t ask anyone because it was just me in the house and I couldn’t see and Taffy wasn’t even my friend yet so I just had to blindly feel my way to the fridge and pour out a bowl of milk, and then plant my face in the bowl of milk and try not to drown.

“Anyway, at that point the rice cooker went off and triggered a power surge which turned the house’s electricity off, which I didn’t notice at first because I had my face in a bowl of milk and when I emerged from the dairy prison I thought I had gone blind with chilli burns.

“So no, I don’t really cook much food, Sanji.” said Gurry.

“Pfffffff-ttt-ttahahahahaha!” I laughed.

I laughed so hard I started crying, and I couldn’t stop for a good ten minutes. When I wiped the tears away, I saw that Gurry was grinning too- but, oh- oh no, hang on-

“Oh god, that reminds me of the time I tried to use a hunk of ginger as a dildo.” I say, snickering.

“What.” says Gurry, wide eyed.

“Okay, so- I was a horny, horny little shit as a young teenager. Like, I’m pretty horny now, as a man, but oh my god; I was a horny teenager.

“So, this, more than anything else, fucked me up for a good long while. What had happened was, on the Baratie- it’s the restaurant-boat I grew up on, and it’s crewed entirely by men. I dunno if you’ve heard of this tradition, but… getting shore leave on the Baratie was half lottery, a quarter being smart enough not to bet your shore time in a game of chance, and a quarter in the hands of the gods. So, what male sailors will do to relieve tension…”

“Oh, like on Amazon Lily. Homosexual relationships are more common because sex between man and woman is for fornication and ceremonial purposes only- you have sex with your husband or your wife, or you have sex with the God or Goddess of-the-moment to Turn the Wheel, and otherwise seek pleasure from men if you’re a man, and women if you’re a woman.”

“Aha. Yeah, that’s about right- except it’s almost entirely men, on the Baratie, and the Old Man enforced strict rules about the Waitstaff.”

“Waiters and Waitresses were off limits?”

“On pain of his boot up your ass, yeah.”

“Classic.”

“Mm. So. I’d walked in on some of the older cooks before, and I’d seen them kissing and such, but that was all before Puberty really had a grip on me. So I ended up walking into one of the supply
closets and seeing Patty and Carne screwing on a pile of… I think it was a box of dishware, now that I look back. Anyway, I’d opened the door quietly enough that I got a good long look at what, exactly, sex between two men can look like.”

“So… intercrural, up the ass…?”

“Intercrural is the one where you basically rub your dick between someone’s thighs, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, no. It was up the ass.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes. So, long story short, this was also right around the time I started getting adventurous with my masturbation.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes. So; the Ginger Harvest came around the end of every third or fourth week during the months that weren’t winter, and the Old Man would always send someone to go get the ginger from the port, and bring it back to the ship. This time, it was my turn.

“I went to get the ginger and… It looked like a penis. Like, a really beautiful penis, with thick veins and a nice straight line and everything. The ginger-seller was very proud of it, too, in his dirty old man way.”

“I’ll fucking bet he was.”

“Hah. So, I helped put the ginger on the boat, and when no one was looking, I swiped the dick-ginger and put it in my bag.”

“Oh no.”

“Wait, it gets better- the skin of that ginger, because it was so fresh, was very easy to rip. And because it was literally fresh out of the field, it was also covered in dirt.”

“Sanji. Sanji, no.”

“Sanji yes. I got back home, put my bag in my room, and put it from my mind. After work, I went back to my room, got the dick-ginger, washed it off, and accidentally scratched through it’s skin. At this point, I hadn’t ever gotten ginger juice in a cut, so I didn’t Know.”

Gurry is already flinching.

“I found out, though. I honestly thought, and quite reasonably for what I’d done, that I was going to melt my asshole off and die. And, of course, since I was fourteen, I couldn’t fucking tell anyone that I’d fucked myself with a giant hunk of ginger. And I couldn’t eat it, either- it’d been in my asshole, you see.”

“Sanji, oh my god.”
“So, yeah. After that- strictly masturbation and heterosexual trysting.”

“Oh my god.” says Gurry, before dissolving into a cackling snake man.

The embarrassment is worth the relaxation in his shoulders, and the straightening of his spine.

Gurry’s alright. His use of poison as an equalizer is a product, I think, of his personal anxieties; he’s actually strong like… Usopp, I’d say. He’s just not a back-line fighter.

Four Bird Skulls, from the birds of South, North, East, and West; Three Needles, of Bone, Wood, and Metal; Two Strands, one of braided hair, one of leather; and One Clock, to keep the pace.

I have a string of salmon-spine beads, on a twisted strand of horse-hair thread; I have the four great tusks of a Mountain Boar, and the curling horns of a Battering Ram what roamed the cliffs near my cave and nearly killed me twice before I cut him down and ate his flesh. I have a wand of jade as thick as two of my fingers together, and as long as my forearm; and I have pearls, at the largest the size of quail’s eggs- and at the smallest, the size of sunflower seeds, bulging in a sack that once held a peck of apples.

Down in the workshop, Mark considers metals. He’s making… something. Thread of Gold, if I’ve any guess; or perhaps something else… Ah. Boning for a corset, I think; or maybe boning for an umbrella. I can’t tell for sure.

I let my feet scuff and scatter the metal-scale that’s littering the floor in here; Mark looks up, looks over, and sees me with my Trade goods.

“Taffy? You almost never come down here; what do you need?”

“A clock, to keep the pace. If you don’t happen to have one, I’ll commission one from you…?”

“Ah. You know a Djinn’s Clock is paid for in bone, right?”

“I do."

“What have you to trade, then?”

“Salmon-spine beads on a twisted strand of black horse-hair; the four great tusks of a mountain boar. The curling horns of a battering ram- and for you, dear one, a wand of jade and a bag of pearls, too.”

“Now that’s a Trade I can call Fair. And… you didn’t have to bring me anything, Taffy-”

“Yeah, I did.”
As for why I did, that’s between me and him.

I hand over the bones and gems for a receipt, expect to return for my commission in three day’s time. Mark says he’ll throw in a chain, as a gift from a brother to his sister.

Can’t never break a Chain.

The Dynastinae are among the largest of beetles, reaching more than 150 meters (492 ft) in length, but are relatively harmless to humans because they cannot bite or sting. Some species have been anecdotally claimed to lift up to 850 times their own weight.

Their common names refer to the characteristic horns borne only by the males of most species in the group. Each has a horn on the head and another horn pointing forward from the center of the thorax. The horns are used in fighting other males during mating season, and for digging. The size of the horn is a good indicator of nutrition and physical health.

Hekate-chan, if she were old enough- she won’t be for another hundred years, but she says that the most handsome male beetles are the ones with big, strong horns, who win lots of duels during the mating seasons, or so her mother told her.

The body of an adult rhinoceros beetle is covered by a thick exoskeleton. A pair of thick wings lie atop another set of membranous wings underneath, allowing the rhinoceros beetle to fly, although not very efficiently, owing to its large size. Their best protection from predators is their size and stature. Additionally, since most species are nocturnal, they avoid many of their predators during the day.

When the sun (or moons) is out, they hide under logs or in vegetation to camouflage themselves from the few predators big enough to want to eat them. If rhinoceros beetles are disturbed, some can release very loud, hissing squeaks. The hissing squeaks are created by rubbing their abdomens against the ends of their wing covers. Rhinoceros beetles are relatively resilient; a healthy adult male can live up to 2-3 years. The males rarely live long after they mate.

These beetles' larval stages can be several years long. The larvae feed on rotten wood and the adults feed on nectar, plant sap and fruit. Hekate says that honey is an okay substitute, but the mangrove sap is too strong to be eaten as it is; I’d need to mix it with honey for her.

Anyway.

The larvae hatch from eggs and later develop into pupae before they reach adult status. The females lay 50 eggs on average per mating cycle. Contrary to what their size may imply, adult rhinoceros beetles do not eat large amounts, unlike their larvae, which eat a significant amount of rotting wood.

Rhinoceros beetles have become popular pets in parts of Sout, due to being relatively clean, easy to maintain, and safe to handle. Also in Asia, male beetles are used for gambling fights; beetle pitting. Since males naturally have the tendency to fight each other for the attention of females, they are the ones used for battle. To get the two male beetles to lock in combat, a female beetle or a small noisemaker is used to duplicate the female's mating call.

Entomologist Séveral Insectorzo suggests the larvae contain much more protein (40%), than chicken (20%) and beef (approximately 18%) and they could become a protein source for a large human.
population. Cousin Allegria cooked larva stew sometimes, and I have to say- they don’t taste bad, if they’re spiced correctly. Really, most things are a matter of spices.

Some species can become major pests in tree plantations. Usually though, beetle population densities are not as high as in some other pest insects, and food trees which are typically already sick or dying from some other cause are preferred. Some species’ larvae, however, will attack healthy trees or even root vegetables, and when they occur in large numbers, can cause economically significant damage. The fungus Metarhizium anisopliae is a proven biocontrol agent for beetle infestation in crops; however, the Riding Beetle, which Hekate-chan is, was bred specifically to be resistant to this fungus.

Dr. MinJun Kim, leading a team of engineers in International Science Foundation-funded research, examined the function and aerodynamics of the Allomyrina dichotoma beetle, with the help of researchers in Drexel University’s Mechanical Engineering Department and in collaboration with Konkuk University on Trillity. Rhinoceros beetles could play a big part in the next generation of skycraft design.

I know all of this because Mab not only lent me books on the subject, which are back in the Library now, but got me a magazine subscription to Bug Lover’s Monthly, a research-fanzine about all kinds of cool creepy crawlies.

This month’s edition was all about beetles.

Luffy likes reading them too, and he likes helping me wipe down Hekate-chan’s carapace. I like pressing him into the warm bulk of Hekate-chan’s body, taking honey-sweet kisses from his lips and stroking gentle hands through his short hair. He’s hot and smooth in my arms, his skin like velvet or the smooth dusty rubber of a rain boot when it hasn’t rained for weeks.

Congress of the lips, dance of the tongues; and Luffy likes it when I pin his hips with mine.

God, I missed him.

And god knows Hekate-chan doesn’t care at all; she’s taking a nap, actually.

I still don’t like bugs, of course. Gurry offered to feed Hekate-chan, but I told him that I’m trying to get over my phobia- so he said he’d watch from the Galley door, and if I was looking odd, he’d come over and help.

I take Hekate-chan’s bucket of feed- honey mixed with berries and sliced fruit- in it’s weird plunger thing, because honey is still very sticky, and I carefully walk over to her feeding trough and shunk it all in for her. I check her water, see it could use refilling. As I recall, her watering hose is over on the other side of her, so- I walk around, grab the hose and start uncoiling it. Plop the hose end into the water-trough, and go back around. I ignore Usopp pounding a whining Luffy into the brick, his springy dick and balls bouncing with each of Usopp’s thrusts, and I turn the water on. There’s a specific change in light I have to watch for across Hekate-chan’s elytra, because her water refracts in different ways when there’s more and less of it.

Meaning, I end up voyeuring on Usopp and Luffy. This is not the first time I’ve done this; those two
in particular will fuck anytime, anywhere, for almost no reason I can see. Boredom, even. Luffy is so flexible, he can actually autofellate himself, which I haven’t really done since I was sixteen; that’s when my core muscles really started building up, and now… I’m flexible enough to do it, I just… hm. Mab might like to watch me do that, actually; that might be fun, and a better reason to do that than just general sexual frustration.

I screwed a coconut out of sexual frustration; and then I had to eat the cum covered fruit within, because Wasting Food is Bad. I didn’t eat the ginger, though. Some things ought not be eaten.

Luffy comes in shuddering white spurts against the brick, with Usopp not far after. White oozes out of Luffy’s pink asshole, over his black-haired balls, dripping across his thighs and against the brick of Hekate’s courtyard.

As Usopp reduces Luffy to a mewling, squirming mess, his head pressed between Luffy’s thighs and steady slurping sounds rasping out- the light changes. I turn the hose off, and start coiling it back up. Hekate-chan isn’t a horse, so the sliding motion of the hose doesn’t spook her; and Luffy and Usopp are so interested in each other, they really haven’t noticed me at all. Believe me, I’d Know if they had.

Hmm.

I think I’m bisexual.

_Mab!_

_Sanji!?_

_Mab, I think I’m bisexual!_

_Ah! Um… I mean…_

...that’s not as big a surprise to you as it was to me, is it.

_Sorry, my dearest one._

_Right. Um… while you’re out, could you… I know Fae can do all kinds of things concerning gender. Um._

_Sanji, do you want to try homosexual relations with your wife? Who can turn herself into a man, if the occasion calls for it?_

_Yes. If that’s okay?_

_Okay; I’d be delighted. I’ll need to get some toys, and some other supplies; I’ll finish up here at the foundry, and then bring Zoro back. After lunch I’ll go get what we’ll need._

...As simple as that?

_If you want, yes._

_Oh. Okay. Yes, as simple as that._
Okay. See you soon, my dearest!

Love you, honeybee.

Holy fuck, I love my wife so much.

“So, that’s the last pawnshop that might have had a suitable blade; and you were not satisfied. Iron Works?”

“Iron Works.”

“Okay- take my hand, I don’t want to lose you in this crowd.”

The street is nearly empty because it’s almost brunch-time, but my point still stands; I don’t want to lose Zoro in this crowd. It’s all hookers, drug dealers, flower sellers, and pickpockets over here; Zoro would kill someone, left unguarded. We passed three opium dens and a goddamn Tastee Freeze to get here, this place is Not Good.

Anyway.

Consider the construction of the necessary blades. Estern philosophy holds that during pregnancy, blades- usually knives, but swords are acceptable- are placed under the woman’s bed to protect her from evil spirits.


A nodachi. Because I can.

Bagh Nakh; used in open hand fighting, a palm full of claws.

Sai are technically speaking, blades- they’re the lovechild of tonfa and daggers, and if I tip them- no, not the center tine, the outer two, those are the parts that can slash and cut. The center of a Sai is for sword-breaking; and Sai come and go in sets of two. Blue and yellow wire wrapped handles on the Sai; not traditional, but… these are primarily for ceremony. Of course, like all true ceremonial blades, they’re still weapons.

Rain, Cloud, Wind, Thunder and Lightning. Cutlass is the favorite of pirates because it’s nature is water; nodachi billows like a cloud; bagh nakh, because the wind is an open palm full of claws; and sai, thunder to break, lightning to stab and shatter.

“I always forget your mother’s a blacksmith.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t really come up much, does it.”
“Still- it really is kind of astounding how many skills you have.”

“You think?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, and you don’t? I’m no jeweler- the closest I get is silversmithing.”

“I’m honestly best at gem-cutting, if we’re talking jewelry.”

“Hm. You might like glassworking; crystalsmithing, maybe.”

“Oh?”

“Mm. Yoru does not have gems in it’s hilt, after all.”

“...Those are **glass**?”

“Of course they are, gems couldn’t take the weight distribution runes. Let’s see… Ah, I remember. The green cabochons in the cross-guard; I made those when I was… ten, maybe? That, and I ground the shape of the blade; that’s apprentice work, after all. Yes; the green ones help distribute the weight correctly on the sword, the blue ones protect it from rust, and I think that’s it…”

“...”

“...What, you thought he just **found** that sword?”

“I- your mother really is the Greatest Blacksmith in the World, isn’t she.”

“Weaponsmith; the Greatest Blacksmith is… I think a village blacksmith somewhere on the Red Line? And she only really does four kinds of weapons; I’m the Greatest when it comes to Silversmithing, spears, needles, and knives, too.”

“...Really?”

“Mm, since Gabby went into architecture, yeah.”

“...Will you make me a dagger?”

“If you have dagger money, sure. I’ll write up a price for you, after you tell me what you want.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Oh.”

“Mm, thinking of it now, I’m going to have to get some cast off junk, so- this me is going to go get basic iron and other metals. That me is going to get some other things- tools, mostly. And I’m staying with you; we need things like wood bits and such, for handles and scabbards and so on.”

“Okay.”
Four Bird Skulls, from the birds of South, North, East, and West; Three Needles, of Bone, Wood, and Metal; Two Strands, one of braided hair, one of leather; and One Clock, to keep the pace.

I have traded for the Skulls, and- after Mark quick quick coated them with sapphire so they wouldn’t chip or break, put them away until I have need of them, away in my locker.

I still have horsetails of white and black, and I will weave a strong strand of twisted horsehair soon enough… it’s the leather that’s giving me trouble now.

Hell with it; I cut simple deer leather cords, braid them square and long enough to strangle a man with, cap them with bronze fixings and tiny golden bells shaped like seed pods or closed up clams I had in my jewelry box- really not much more than a cloth lined curio basket no bigger than a hand mirror, I don’t really wear jewelry. Oil the leather with coconut oil; coat the metal with waxy polish. Done.

Silky horsehair cords, monkey’s fist knotted around a baoding ball- one of two- then braid the twined horsehair threads down, down, wax to make it smooth and stick together tight, down, down, down again until- the horse hair braid is the same length as the leather, long enough to strangle a man, monkey’s fist around the other baoding ball. They chime, but soft, soft- and I can make them silent, if I need to. Hang it from my neck, and the round ends chime gently where they bump against my stomach.

The set of things is tradition; I can change it, if I want, and I do want. So. Four Skulls of Bird; Four Spines of Fish. Seven Needles, All Wood. Three Strands; Of Horsehair braided fine, of Leather, woven stiff, and of Metal, chained unbreakable. A Clock, to keep the pace. A Log Pose of Paradise, to know where we’ve been- and, I’ve a hunch. I’ll see if I can’t make a better compass…

Draw it first, Taffy.

Mab makes it very easy to forget how strong she actually is. Physically, she’s as much a member of the Monster Quartet as me, Sanji, and Luffy; she’s carrying all the tools and all the metals she just bought, and the other things- woods, leathers, coils of wire, uncut gemstones and precious materials; all of that, she’s carrying in large duffles across her back. She carries them like it’s nothing.

I mean, it makes sense- I helped her with laundry, before we had a washing machine; she still doesn’t use the thing if the weather is nice. She says that line-dried is nicer, and machine washed clothing makes people weak.

There are very few things heavier than a vat of wet clothing; Mab moves six or seven of them around like they’re weightless, or the toys of a child. I still have trouble moving one without spilling- Mab can move three at a time without making the water jostle at all.

Mab can actually lift all of my weights- not sustained lifting, that’s not what she’s trained for, but. She can pick them up and move them, if they’re in her way. She can catch them out of the air, too, if they’re falling. That’s actually what she’s best at- catching things midair.

Anyway.
We go back to the ship; lunch is... don’t ever tell Sanji I wrote this, but it’s extra delicious, which usually means either Sanji’s celebrating some random holy day only he really cares about aside from the big eight, or he’s learned something that’s upsetting. I mean. He could have figured out that he’s bisexual; he’s actually very attracted to every member of the crew, not just Mab and the other women. He’s even attracted to Mark, Taffy, and Bryony, and he treats them like younger sisters, or older daughters- still, if he got a chance, he’d definitely have sex with them.

Sanji, even with the alleviation of his faults of inflexibility and misogyny, is still a horndog. If it was willing, he’d fuck it. Man, woman, old, young; alive, undecided- Sanji would fuck a goddamn ghost, if he got the chance.

I’m not sure if he’s actually realized that about himself yet, or what. I mean- I remember guys like that from back in Shimotsuki...

The tradition for the summer is, every person who turned fifteen that year would be initiated into the Mysteries of Ares and Aphrodite. It was a ceremony, a holy day, a rite of passage, and... gods, I can look back on it and smile, now. Not quite then- but now.

The first half of the ceremony is for Ares, god of War- he’s got many names, of course, but his planet is Mars, and his Moon is Hevring, and he holds dominion over all things war is- a battle for food, for water, for women to fuck who aren’t your sisters; for land, for kings, for gods, for dominion. Ares is also the god of Harvest- when the war is done, you go home; walk behind the ploughshare and put away your sword. Drink, and feast, and work until the job is done; put babies by for the wintertime in their mother’s gardens, and enjoy the pleasures of life, until you are called to arms again.

So.

The first half of the ceremony is outdoors, mostly in the morning; everyone who is of age or older strips down to their bare skin. Us youngsters, who were just being initiated, were anointed with palm oil steeped with sacred herbs- everyone else got covered in regular palm oil, maybe with some rose petals in if it was a good year. Then, we play the Games; the Knock-down Game, which the miller’s daughter, Anais, could not be beaten at. Rin’levio, a favorite of the herding boys from out in the country- and my sisters, and Jack of Nimville, are unmatched at that game of tag, chase, catch, jail, and escape.

As the day wears on, the adults- well, I say adults, but they can’t have been more than teenagers, older than us initiates and flush with pride in it- they’d separate the initiates into groups of two or three, tug us away from the big games to play smaller ones. Touch this- find the grossest thing you can and touch it, first one to say “No” or “I will not” is out. Stretch and hold- what weird shape can you fold your body into, and the winner is the one who stumps the rest. Feats of strength, which was my passion at the time- pull this treestump from the ground, lift this rock, push this down- that’s what I was good at.

Anais was huge; the size of a full grown man at the age of fifteen, and she’d only get bigger as time went on. Last I saw her, she was the size of Fuckin’ Kuma, and that was four year's ago at least. She was curvy, too; she’d been fat as a child on bread and milk and sugar, and then she’d grown muscles under the fat as she did more and more work in her father’s mill, after he took sick. Every harvest, us boys at the dojo would bring her the wheat, after we’d threshed it- and, looking back on it now, she would only get more beautiful as the years passed.

It’s an odd ceremony, that Mystery Rite; for one thing, all the “normal” rules about having children out of wedlock are put aside- called “gifts of the gods”, it’s almost encouraged that the boys in the ceremony impregnate the girls.
Anais had an oval face; a sharp nose, a bit like mine but with a big, classical curve in it, like the statues of the Gods in the temple. Her hair was the color of wheatstraw, and her eyes were the color of cornflowers. Her tits, at fifteen, were the size of cantaloupe melons, the kind you bring to someone’s house as a gift; her hips were round, and even though there was still a layer of fat over her muscle, it wasn’t bad at all.

As day turns to night, so too do the games of the ceremony become less challenge, and war-like, and more teasing and caressing. Eventually, it was me and Anais in a bower of roses, with the instruction to rut and make merry with each other until the sun rose up again. We had a basket of food, and jugs of water and wine, and each other, naked and oiled and filthy from the war-games- and we were fifteen, and horny.

We kissed, but it was awful; I realize now that Anais was actually a lesbian, and she knew it, even then- but where she was willing to go along to get along, I eventually- well. We rutted, as we were bid; her vagina was warm and deep and willing, and I was fifteen and stupid with lust, and I suppose I must have slept at least once or twice, because I can remember awakening to my hips helplessly thrusting into her warm pull. I poured my seeds into fertile earth, that second night and day and night again; and when the ceremony ended...

I can remember, as the sun rose again, seeing her face pinched with- and that, and my own drive to become, stopped me from having sex for a good year after that. Of all the people from my home village, Anais was the one, after Kuina, who knew me the best; Kuina was my rival. Anais was my friend; she’s the one who fed me, made sure I could find my way back to the dojo, had clothing for the winter. It was Anais who told me, six months pregnant with my seed, that I didn’t belong in this tiny backwater village at the edge of nowhere special. Told me that I wasn’t ready for anything like the responsibility of being a parent- said I’d be miserable, and make them inside her miserable too.

Said, “Fah, Zoro- if you want to be the Greatest Swordsman in the World, go! You would give them your name? Fine, I’ll take it for them; but we are not married, or lovers. I don’t need you here; I’ve siblings, and friends, and a lover…”

“Anais, are you really sure Rosie means to marry you?”

“Aye. I’m sure.”

“...Alright. I’ll go. -Thank you, Anna.”

“Zoro, if you become anything less than the Greatest in the World, I shall be very disappointed indeed.”

And that was that. I fought on my sister and my good-sister’s behalves- Rosie, and Anais- when the time came to defend their suit in the Court of Swans. Two women had never married before then, in Shimotsuki Village; and, as in all things, Roronoa Rosa Maria had to be the First.

I gained renown as the best Swordsman in Shimotsuki, because my sister married Anais, and they’re both my sisters, now; hadn’t thought of it in years, but there it is. Defeated all challengers in open combat, as is proper; stayed for the marriage ceremony, which was long and rather boring. The wedding- the dances, the party, the food- that was nice, actually.

And the birth was… eh. I was mostly there so Merimay didn’t pass out or decide to fight anyone; we
spent that long hot afternoon fighting each other in the mud and grass out back near the mill-pond, when Anna’s time came.

Five girls my good-sister brought into the world, with hair of dark avocado green, and soft honeydew rind green, and green like the shell of a grasshopper, and green like a chunk of turquoise, and green like linen before it’s blanched- a sort of golden-green color. Five pretty girls, to follow like ducklings behind their mothers’ skirts. Dorothy, Alice, Coraline, Finn, and Riley. Rosie will teach them how to do all manner of things; and Anna will keep them upright, and good, and grounded in the good earth. My nieces will grow up strong and happy and so, so loved; which is really all I can ask for.

Told my sisters all about Nami; both of them were so happy for me, so proud that I’d managed to see beyond the blackness of my blades to the rest of creation. When I told them my intentions regarding Nami- not the, er, the sexual things, merely that I would marry her and have children with her, if she deemed it good- they sent me more well wishes, and asked to be introduced to Nami, which I did.

It’s funny- some of the coolest things Mab’s ever done has everything to do with her being lazy. Like- the system by which our watches are run? Entirely because Mab was tired of taking third watch every time- and never mind that she’s always awake at five in the morning, she didn’t want the job all the time. We have a schedule now.

I’ll let her tell you about the new postal service though.

And that should do it- I’ve finished sorting all the metal we got at the foundry, and put away my new-old tools, and I’m coming back from the sex shop in the Goblin Market; Sanji and I will explore his new to him side slowly, and with lots of care. Mhm.

Nami wants to have her children in her own bed, if possible- which is fine, as the Infirmary isn’t all that comfortable, and her bed really does have a great deal more space. Honestly, she could have her baby in the bath-tub, and it’d still be fine; women have been having babies in weird places since before there were places to have babies.

She’s also asked me to give her baby- or babies, we’re not sure yet as I still can’t get a heartbeat and she refuses to let Chopper use that new-fangled ultra-sonar device until more is understood about the effects it may have on pre-natal tissue, more power to her- their first bath, to which I, weepingly, agreed. It’s a very… it’s something you ask a sister to do, or your mother, or your grandmother. Robin’s helping Nami pick their names, and the Kids are helping Nami with other things- toys, baby room, and so on- but…

Ach, think of something else, Mab, or you’ll weep the day away.

Much like the old Oharan bookmobiles which, even though Ohara is gone, the perambulating bookmobiles, with their kind-eyed librarians and their carefully tended boxes of lending-books, are not; so, too, are the many postal services, clinging to life.

Each Blue had their own clunky postal service.

Nort had the Tradesmen, caravans of traders and horse-sellers who could certainly put a letter or two
in with their other papers, and carry them on to the next city.

Est had their Waveriders, mostly couriers who’d take letters on if they were asked nicely.

Sout had Hopalongs, knifegrinders who, in the course of their travels from village to village, would share gossip, news- and would certainly take a letter on to th’ next town.

Wes had Door Priests, who would protelestize for free and carry letters for a small donation, thank you, thank you, good gods thank you.

Skua? Skua had Charnel Workers, actually; the Gravediggers all know each other, and if you need a letter to get across the world in a hurry, no one else can manage it quite like those who tend the dead.

None of these people talked to each other.

Now, I’d spent a while ferrying letters back and forth amongst the crew, and… it occurred to me that there had to be a better way. Enter Kikiora of Tiffany Harbor.

Kikiora’s mother, Kiki, had come to stay some twenty years before- started a delivery service, of all things. Married a man named Tombo. Anyway, Kikiora, thirteen when we spoke and fourteen when we agreed, decided to expand what her mother did- but rather than expand her mother’s old business, which her brothers were happy to take over, Kikiora decided that she wanted to go international.

All this to say, I’m the silent funding partner of the new International Postal System and Courier Service. IPSCS has a uniform of red head adornment, be it feathers, a cap, a hat, a hanky, or a bow; black under-suit, much like a charnel worker’s; and an overcoat the Postal Worker provides for themselves. I also brokered the deal by which the IPSCS carries missives from the Bank, which makes the IPS respectable. It’s almost entirely manned by witches, too, which is fun.

Anyway, it meant I got to design the clothing for working witches in a job that was entirely new; new struggles, new worlds, new ideas needing to be expressed.

They are heirs of the New World - the world beyond the control of the old World Government. And I got to codify their uniforms!

Ahem.

It is said that as many days as there are in the whole journey, so many are the witches and birds that stand along the road by-the-sea, each bird and witch at the interval of a day’s journey; and these are stayed neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed.

IPSCS. Accept no substitutes.

Four Skulls of Bird; Four Spines of Fish. Seven Needles, All Wood. Three Strands; Of Horsehair braided fine, of Leather, woven stiff, and of Metal, chained unbreakable. A Clock, to keep the pace. Four Log Poses of Paradise, to know where we’ve been- and three for the New World, to know where we’re going.

And three Eternal Poses, so we can always go home.
Better, but not quite right.

It’s put together much like an astrolabe or—really, a gyroscope, my compass. The first ring-layer is the Skulls, which move freely in any direction when unlocked; then the second, with four log poses, and the third, with three eternal poses; and the final one, which has the New World pose in the center. It’s just a drawing, right now.

Can’t make it just yet.

Soon.

Anyway, it’s time to fix my shuko and ashiko; they’re for climbing on shear surfaces, not fighting. I mean, I can fight with them, but I’d really need a pair of Bagh Nakh for that particular style, and… I just haven’t found a pair I like.

It’s funny—after I grew my hair out, the hairstyle I picked was the traditional Wanokuni Women’s cut; the clothes I wear are Skuan Professional Standard. And yet… for some things, I still haven’t found what I like.

I haven’t seen Banana around for a while, but I’m sure she’s fine.

Banana, stop climbing the galley’s table lamp! I know, it’s nice and branch-like, but it’s not rated for your projected future weight—at least let Franky-mister fix it up first! Come on!

No, I won’t let Marzipan can your noodles, and I won’t let him make eggs with you; yes, really. You’re much too young, for one, and for the other, Marzipan is a girl. Come on, Banana—attaboy. Let’s find you a nice patch of shade, alright?

Alright.

“Hey, Franky?” I say.

“Y—yeah, Gurry?” stutters Franky.

“Can you fix anything hanging, like these lights, so they’ll hold more than one hundred and thirteen kilograms? Banana is still just a pup, really…” I say, cheerfully and then I realize I’m talking in front of a group of people I only mostly know what if they don’t like me BACK, ANXIETY! FREDDY; BACK I SAY!

“If I do that, I might as well make a snake branch or two, give both of them some enrichment…” muses Franky.

“Ahh, really!?” I chirrup in unison with Banana and Marzipan.

“Hey, you never said you could talk to snakes!” shouted Chopper from the doorway of the Infirmary, before realizing—and goddammit, Chopper will not hurt me, come the fuck on.
“Ah, sorry. It just… didn’t come up? But, um, how did you think any of the Amazonian Archers did
their thing without being able to…? It’s almost like expecting a Fae to not be able to speak to bugs,
really…” I say.

“Wait, what?” says Bryony- when did she- no, she was on the couch, calm down Anxiety!Freddy.

“Yeah, almost every Fae can speak to at least one kind of bug, mostly on instinct. Taffy’s a little odd,
in that her snake eats bugs, but you get some like that; my father spoke to hawks and eagles, so. It
comes up, now and again… And Mab’s ability to speak to all bugs is just a sign of how much she
sacrificed, to keep her treasure.” I say.

My crewmates blink. Sanji sighs, then nods, once-

“She really is the kindest woman in the world.” says Sanji.

“She really is. If it meant never having a snake companion again… god, it’d be like… like not being
able to draw, or cook, or make music, but deeper- like cutting out a piece of your tongue forever, and
having to accept that you can’t make it better and it’s never coming back. I don’t think I could do
that.” I say, holding Banana close to my chest as I think about the sheer sacrifice the Queen of
Maggots made for her Treasured ones.

I couldn’t have done what she did. She surely is born of monstrous strength.

The sound of Franky doing something to the hanging light over the kitch- Galley, the galley table
fills the room. Breathe through the silence. Breathe, Gurry. Breathe.

Franky finishes, and-

See, was that so bad? He’s done now, so you can go right back if you’d like. I thought you might-
yeah, here you go.

Marzi, you leave that sweet boy alone, he’s just a baby. No, Marzi. Let’s go find you some crickets to
eat, okay? Okay.

And I leave the Galley to do just that.

I’m sure she’s fine. Banana’s a good girl, hardly ever does silly things like try to eat things bigger
than the thickest part of her body, or climb on branches that don’t exist.

Now, concerning the proper attunement of my Compass; there are four directions, and four elements.
I have the directions… really, I don’t need four log poses.

So.
Four Skulls of Bird, who always know the True Directions.

Four Spines of Fish, for myself because I’m a fancy bitch and I know it.

Seven Needles, All Wood- to invoke the proper elements.

Three Strands; Of Horsehair braided fine, of Leather, woven stiff, and of Metal, chained unbreakable.

A Clock, to keep the pace.

Four Eternal Poses, so we can always go home.

And three Log Poses, so we can find our way.

Four Log Poses of Paradise, to know where we’ve been- and three for the New World, to know where we’re going.

And three Eternal Poses, so we can always go home.

Each element can be categorized with a few descriptions about what it does and what it’s for.

Water: the cold of the deep places, a pebble falling into a pond and disappearing without a ripple, a river flowing around the stones in it’s path, a mirror reflecting endlessly, a womb.

Fire: the bright flame of a candle in the dark, the heat of a hearth in winter, a wild fire which consumes even ash, the touch of a lover, testicles.

Wind: the gale which crushes the tree down, the breeze which cuts with its quickness, the endless aerostream which grinds the mountain to dust, the cooling of sweat with a fan, the first and last breath of a living being.

Lightning: the twitch of muscles firing, the lightning bolt which flies unerring towards its target through anything in its way, the static attraction of a storm clinging to your skin, the jolt of a new idea, the first spark of baelfire.

Earth: the solid dam which holds back the river, the crushing weight of a meteor, the pillar around which fires flow and is not consumed, the darkest black of a mineshaft, bones.

Metal: the ability to become more than what was before, the thing that carries what is vital, the flexible nature of that which can always change, a coin, a blade, a drop of blood.

Wood: life, memory, magic, patience, love.

I understand all the elements; but Wood is the one I have the least language for. Honestly, I could just ask Franky to make some for me out of Adam wood, but… I dunno. I can’t get them as gifts; they have to be traded for.

Hmm.

Maybe just talk to him about it? Just talk to him about it.
I stand, loop my woven strands over my swordstand’s bracing, and go on down to Franky-town.

Oh god, what the hell, why did I say that?

It’s interesting; during the Separation, I actually became much more cognizant of World Events. So, in order:

During the War of the Paramount, Monkey D. Luffy and Portgas D. Ace are revealed to the public—as are their sires. Harriet Morgan, the Nightmare Shichibukai, died when former Admiral Akainu’s magma fist went through her chest. Akainu then died in battle against the Queen of Maggots, resulting in the creation of Three Mountain Pass, the destruction of Marineford, and the Sundering of Heaven.

Blackbeard revealed that he invaded Impel Down in order to liberate and recruit several convicts from the apocryphal Level 6: Vasco Shot, Catarina Devon, Sanjuan Wolf, Avalo Pizarro, and the former chief jailer of Impel Down, Shiliew. However, on the field at Marineford, Shiliew of the Rain, and his sword, Raindancer, were killed by Dracule ‘Foxeye’ Taffeta, and her sword, Kusanagi. As far as any expert can say, the Kusanagi which fought at Marineford is the true Kusanagi.

With the imminent destruction of Mariejoa—the mountain on which Mariejois sat—and the subsequent shattering of Marine power worldwide, Dracule ‘Hawkeye’ Mihawk quit the field and joined the flight of Luffy and Ace. There’s also some debate over whether or not the Hawkeye and the Foxeye are siblings, as they share remarkable similarities; it might be so that the World’s Greatest Swordsman was merely following behind his younger sister, for a change.

Marshall D. Teach, aka Blackbeard, quit the field not because of the arrival of Shanks and the Red Hair Pirates, but because in the course of the Battle of Three Mountains, after Akainu was slain, a Hurricane was left in the place of the two destroyed mountains. This Hurricane, being an island-killing storm, made every able-bodied soul on the field of battle flee for safety.

The War of the Paramount ended with a Hurricane destroying not only Mariejoa, but scouring Marineford nearly clean of all man-made structures, taking it down to bare dirt, and—of all things to survive—a bell tower, with it’s bell and ringing mechanisms still intact.

It was this bell that Monkey D. Luffy, Captain of the Straw Hat Pirates; Portgas D. Ace, the Pyreman, Second Division Commander of the Whitebeard Pirates; Gol D. Spadille, the Wandering Sparrow, Sage of the Salt Wastes, Captain of the Sparrow Alliance; and Mab Morgan, Queen of Maggots, the Sexiest Woman in the World, rang. Portgas, Gol, and Morgan rang the bell in honor of those that had fallen in battle. Monkey rang the bell to usher in a New Era. This event is called The Winning Hand at the Bell-Tower.

Monkey D. Garp, sometimes called The Hero of the Marines, sometimes called The Fist of Justice, resigned from the Marines, citing age, conflict of interest, and dissatisfaction with his job. Sengoku,
who lost an arm in battle with Vritra, a Leviathan of the Sea, also resigned from the Marines, citing age, injury, and dissatisfaction with his job.

Monkey D. Luffy, Jinbe the Sea Knight, Trafalgar Law, the Surgeon of Death and Captain of the Heart Pirates were the first outside males ever permitted to set foot on Amazon Lily, an island that is usually off-limits to foreign men. On the Forging Shore of Amazon Lily, where volcanic sand and the mother of the Amazons herself, Medusa, keep watch, Harriet Morgan was prepared for entombment.

Her funeral was not a traditional one; as, although her flesh was stripped from her bones by her eldest living daughter, and those bones were then adorned with gold, gems, and other precious materials, and those beautiful charnel pieces were carried off by Death’s Own Rider, the Crow Goddess Morrigan- as is proper, for a Queen of the Fae who dies in Battle… Even with all of that, Harriet Morgan’s flesh was not consumed by her children. Thus, her funeral cannot be said to be in the traditional manner of the Fae; and, while some speculate that the corpse laid to rest on the black-sand shore of Amazon Lily was perhaps not truly Harriet Morgan, those who know the traditions of the Fae are quick to point out that the Fae do not bury people in the manner in which that body was unless it has earned such.

For most of history, which precedes the written word for millennia, the Fae did not bury their dead at all. It is only now, in these more civilized times, that the great roasting pits of the fae fall silent, and their hills of bones and gold no longer cast their grim shadows over all.

After the Funeral of Harriet Morgan, the various factions that had gathered on Amazon Lily departed, in the general confusion following The Winning Hand. It came to light some months later that the Heart Pirates, led by Trafalgar Law, and the Moon Pirates, led by Trafalgar Lamia, had allied themselves permanently- swearing a blood-oath of fraternity, a sacred bond that even now, in this modern era, even the most heretical of persons counts as sacrosanct.

The original childhood lab of Dr. Vegapunk on Karakuri Island exploded; known to the world as the "Nightmare of Baldimore ", this event spawned The Legend of the Sacred Burning Beast of Baldimore. According to Franky, the Legend is really like this: The Scariba Imminent, who once dwelt in the winding caves and tunnels of Baldimore-Below, had various bolt holes and hides in their Hive. In truth, the Hive was built more like a warren.

Now, after the Nightmare of Baldimore, which Franky accidentally caused, the local Marines began investigating the lab, and all the secrets that had been revealed in it’s destruction. The Scariba Imminent were almost discovered several times; however, due to prior planning, and quick thinking on many parts, almost all the revealed passages into the Scariba hive were dismissed as natural formations that were covered during the construction of the old laboratory.

Unfortunately, the cave in which the Destructor, William Danaus, had secreted Franky in was different. Due to some mistakes in construction, a hollow chimney had been left active in that high cave; and, with various doors, once open, now shut, this chimney poured smoke like from the top of a crucible during the forging of a sword.

Franky, at the time, was wearing the pelt of a tiger as a warming cape, and various tiger-striped piecemeal garments to help protect his body from the bitter cold. He was also, and this is important, trying to find where the chimney actually was in the face of the rock.
Basically, Franky accidentally set himself on fire and ran out, screaming, because he couldn’t get the fur off of him quite fast enough. He just happened to do this right when the Marines were at the entrance of the cave; and, as those particular Marines were a superstitious and gods-fearing lot, they took the appearance of a screaming, flaming tiger as a sign from the gods, and fled that place.

That cave was declared, without debate, as sacred ground. Franky burned only half his eyebrow off.

And thus was The Legend of the Sacred Burning Beast of Baldimore created.

Congruent to that, was this: Monkey D. Luffy decided to disband the Straw Hat Pirates for two years in order to allow the crew to train and become stronger. Mab Morgan, using her mystical powers, informed the crew of the Captain’s orders, hid their ship, the Thousand Sunny, and—along with all the other Straw Hats—vanished from the public eye.

Buggy the Clown was invited into the Shichibukai, and accepted.

Sometime later that year, the Admirals Aokiji and Kizaru fought each other for the vacant position of Fleet Admiral. Engaged in a duel to the death on Punk Hazard, which lasted for ten days and left both men severely wounded, the position actually went to Senior Admiral Tsuru. She appeared on the field of Battle and stated that ‘She had neither time nor patience for idiot boys measuring their dicks; there was work to be done, and she needed able hands to do it.’ Then, in classic fashion, she Washed them Up and Hung them Out to Dry.

Tsururao Kohinoor, who now calls herself Tsuru, is one of the few remaining descendants of Uzumiki Kohinoor, who survived the Siege of Frostfang Ridge, which was the final battle of the Winter Wars, and the reason House Morgan is Royal at all. During the Winter Wars, the Alliance of Morgan, Portgas, Blair, Basajaun, Aodh, Leland, Samir, Nou, Purnima, Shankara, Tsetseg, and Shihab threw down the old Queens of Winter, thus breaking their power over all Fae, forever. This alliance, called the Zodiac Alliance, set the stage for the Long Summer, wherein the ancient Mother of the Fae, Pandora, was born.

During her youth, Tsuru was known as the Ghoul of Winter’s Grace; and, being pure-blooded Fae, as most Royals are, she can trace her Line back through the Ages some forty generations. Thus, while it was an old woman who joined the field of battle at Punk Hazard, it was a young woman, beautiful and strong, at the very height of her powers, who quit the field, a pair of abashed young men following in her wake.

Thus it was that the Great Staff of Justice, the Ghoul of Winter’s Grace, Tsururao Kohinoor became the Fleet Admiral of the Marines. She advocates for Radiant Justice, and with Aokiji and Kizaru behind her, has begun a systematic divorcing of Marine power from the Nobility. (Find evil, wherever it may lurk, and drag it to the light.)

The results of Fleet Admiral Tsuru’s ascendancy are as follows: Marineford, as the seat of the Marines power, was transferred to an undisclosed location in the New World. The relocation of the G-1 branch, and the reconstruction of the Marines as peacekeepers without bias for or against any Nobility. Now financed by the Bank of Dwarves, the Marines have the freedom to dispense Radiant, or ‘Clean’ Justice, as they see fit.

The battle between Aokiji and Kizaru caused one side of Punk Hazard to be permanently burnt to nothing, leaving the other half permanently frozen over. There is also a great cleave down the dividing line of these two states, put there by Fleet Admiral Tsuru herself. The World Military draft is held, swelling the ranks of the Marines to recover from their disastrous losses, and the two vacant Admiral positions are filled by Issho (Fujitora) and Ryokugyu.
In the Payback War, Marshall D. Teach was slain by the Pyreman, Portgas D. Ace.

This I can actually speak a bit more candidly about- during the Separation, I helped train Ace with his Devil Fruit power. He was stuck using only the physical applications of fire; there is more to fire than just the physical.

As a Shadow exists in all people, regardless of the presence of light or physical form; so too does Fire exist in all people, regardless of the presence of a physical flame. According to Asher, there’s a core of fire right behind and a little below the sternum in men, and right behind the navel in women, closer to the hips than anywhere else. If Asher flares that core of fire, that person will burn to ash so quickly, they won’t have time to scream. It’s a quick, painless death- there, then gone.

Asher killed his enemy, and was done with it. Blackbeard’s commanders quit the field in terror- and though there is no confirmed sighting of their corpses, the lower levels of the crew were no more than ash on the wind by days end. I had to hold Asher for a long time, after that battle; he’s still not quite okay about what he did, but… well. He got what he wanted; he wanted what he got. And still, he is not satisfied.

All I can say about it is: Death is inherently unsatisfying, to those who do not die.

Anyway.

What else was there- ah, yes. Bartolomeo the Cannibal appeared in the New World as a powerful new Super Rookie. Apparently, his nickname comes from Est, as he doesn’t actually eat people; he’s just really annoying.

Trafalgar Law obtained a bounty of 440,000,000 beri- that’s 4,400,000 dola, for those with an interest in such things- for reasons that were not released to the public. Lami, also, won’t say exactly what her brother did- and not because she doesn’t know, she just won’t say. After sending the disembodied (but living) hearts of 100 pirates to Marineford, he was appointed to a Shichibukai position. As far as I can read from between Lami’s lines, he’s doing it for shits and giggles; and also to maneuver himself into position for something.

Hell if I know what- it really doesn’t seem like his style at all.

According to Bryony Lovelace, who knows all kinds of secrets she ought not, Scratchmen Apoo, Basil Hawkins, and Eustass Kidd, are in an alliance to kill Kaido. They have not been successful.

Oh, yes, and most interesting of all: Capone Bege started planning the assassination of Big Mom sometime the summer before last. How do I know that? Forensic Accounting, mostly; and, of course… Bugs.

Here’s something most people don’t know; Capone Bege is a zealot, an intensely religious and gods-fearing man. Big Mom is a cannibal, and in the strictest sense; as far as my little Bug-friends can say, Big Mom hasn’t eaten any flesh but the flesh of humans since she was very young indeed. Cannibalism isn’t necessarily Wrong; but Big Mom feeds her appetite with Murder, which is Wrong. And Zealots are always ready to Correct those who are Wrong.

For the kind of zealot Capone Bege is, the proper way to ritually prepare to assassinate someone is
to capture red dye cochinial beetles and grind them into a powder, which is then used to dye fabric that the instigator of the assassination wears until their enemy is dead. Capone Bege wears bright red ties- or cravats, or what have you. He has since last summer.

It’s amazing what you can find out with a well-placed swarm of incredibly common (now, anyway) damsel-flies. They’re like sea-crickets. They show up just… everywhere.

I don’t look it, but the knowledge that my work so long ago is bearing fruit like this is just so… mm. Warms the cockles of my blood-filled heart. And it happened so long ago now… I rather doubt anyone realizes just what they are. Ehehe.

Like I said.

You simply cannot imagine the things I could do if I weren’t so committed to being… kind.

So. After we moved the ship to Takoyaki 8, we had to move it again to a location I won’t speak much on. I will say that it had very nice sand for digging a barbeque pit in, and Sanji cooks a delightful spread of food. So tasty.

Sanji doesn’t know how to act around men he thinks are attractive. He has deeply internalized androphobia, which he expresses as homophobia. So. The very first thing I did, once I read the instructions for the Dreamie Brand Removable Gender-reversal Masque and Body Shifter; well, actually…

Okay.

The Masque and Body Shifters are classed somewhere between dildo, piercings, and a medical device. Technically, the MBS is a kind of G or P-spot style toy.

Mundane versions of that kind of sex toy are designed to stimulate one particular part of the anatomy- the g-spot, in the vagina, or the prostate gland, in the anus. Most dildos are designed to give a more generally satisfying feeling of fullness, and perhaps feel good when moved in and out. Orgasming with a vibrator or with your hands and with a dildo can be very satisfying, as it gives you something to clench your vaginal muscles or your anal muscles around. If you like penetrative sex, like I do, a dildo is very handy in simulating intercourse with a partner. Mundane dildoes are available in a wide variety of shapes and textures, so one need never be bored.

Sex should not be boring.

Now, an MBS is a specialty device created with the aid of Djinni technology. It was invented primarily for the use of prostitutes, whereby a single woman or man could have the physicality of literally any tribe-member, without actually changing who they are. Think of it like a very interesting costume; basically, it became a useful way to schedule proper breaks and rest times for the prostitutes of Skua without sacrificing on availability of the various prostitutes, or saying “not available” to the customers, and every reputable whorehouse has their girls and boys using them.

For women, the procedure to use an MBS- of any kind- is fairly simple. A special grain-like device called a Shifter is inserted into the glans of the clitoris; it’s not a terribly painful procedure, and the grain is really no bigger than a poppy seed. The Body is another, slightly larger grain-like device, which is inserted into the very bottom most layer of scar tissue in the navel; the grain is about the size of a large mustard seed, and again, isn’t very painful. Finally, the Masque, a thread-like object that
gets inserted subdermally in the scalp. Of all the procedures, it’s the Masque that’s the most painful—
and the messiest. It’s also the one that healed the fastest.

Anyway, after that, it’s just a quick bit of training— in store, no less— to ensure that the person who
gets an MBS can operate it correctly. Honestly, once I got used to having it, it’s very comfortable; a
bit like wearing glasses, honestly. Now that I’m used to wearing them, I can hardly imagine life
without mine; similarly, I can hardly imagine not being able to alter my outer appearance at will.

With that said, my specific model was built to reverse a person’s gender; when I use my MBS, I
don’t change from say, a Fae woman to a Mermaid. I change from a Fae woman into a Fae man.
Because of that, I was actually able to specifically select the features of my Male-form penis and
testicles. In my… male aspect, let’s go with that. In my male aspect, I am physically very similar to
my brothers, Ace and Spadey; not just in body type, but in facial anatomy as well. I believe I have a
squarer face, and no real facial hair to speak of; some people can grow it. The best I can manage is
sideburns. Anyway; my width when aroused is along the lines of two inches, or five point one
centimeters; and my length is about six inches, or fifteen centimeters. I picked those dimensions
because that’s the general width and length of every dildo I’ve ever liked enough to use more than
once. I also like the slightly eye-popping sensation of being first penetrated, and the stimulation of
my g-spot and other deep tissues— so the head of my male aspect penis is slightly knobby at the tip.
My male aspect is fairly handsome, and has the most beautiful metallic blue wings I think I’ve ever
seen.

Sanji can hardly stand me when I’m in my male aspect. He can barely stand to be in the same room
as me. But he doesn’t want me to stop; he says that this thing is a problem he needs to get over, and
he wants me to help him.

So. Exposure Therapy, of several kinds; because Hekate-chan is a giant female rhinoceros beetle and
there may come a time when Sanji needs to ride on her back.

He’ll get there eventually.

Oh, and I also did the procedure to give Mark an MBS too; now, if the mood strikes him, he can be a
man with a vagina, or a man with a penis— or even both, because I got him the super deluxe version
because that two-for-one sale spread all over the island and I aimed to take advantage of it. After
some thought, I got the super-bulk deluxe multi-pack, so now— everyone that wants to have the semi-
illusory ability to change genders at will, can. Procedure takes about ten minutes per person, is
mostly non-invasive, and— when done correctly— totally harmless.

The MBS is considered a dildo because, although the surfaces change according to gender or
whatever preferences you have in mind… the persona created by the MBS is sterile. In my male
aspect, I am sterile— I can orgasm, and I read as entirely healthy, but… I can’t make sperm. I’m a
woman, underneath the facade.

Similarly, if, say, Luffy were to get a MBS and change into a woman, he wouldn’t be able to get
pregnant because these are dildos from a sex-shop, not medical devices.  I mean, yes, I know how to
jailbreak them so they work like the medical versions meant for people who are transgender, but…
I’m not going to do that unless it’s specifically necessary. Or requested of me.

Oh, and I also got a bunch of lube, and the bulk box of multi-size condoms because our crew is
horny and one pregnant person is quite enough at a time, dammit.
Old Ray coated our ship in about eight hours of work; the extra two days where we couldn’t actually sail the ship for any reason was because it takes a full forty eight hours for the coating to cure. I took a look at the mix of coating he used— it really is just Yarukiman Mangrove sap with some powdered chemicals that Old Ray asked me not to name, so I won’t.

Let’s talk about tree sap.

Most people know what tree sap is but not necessarily the more scientific definition. Tree sap proper is the fluid transported in the xylem or phloem cells of a tree.

Xylem sap consists primarily of water, along with hormones, minerals, and nutrients. Xylem sap (pronounced /ˈzaɪləm/) consists primarily of a watery solution of hormones, mineral elements and other nutrients. Transport of sap in xylem is characterized by movement from the roots toward the leaves.

Over the past century, there has been some controversy regarding the mechanism of xylem sap transport; today, most plant scientists agree that the cohesion-tension theory best explains this process, but multiforce theories that hypothesize several alternative mechanisms have been suggested, including longitudinal cellular and xylem osmotic pressure gradients, axial potential gradients in the vessels, and gel- and gas-bubble-supported interfacial gradients.

Xylem sap transport can be disrupted by cavitation - an abrupt phase change of water from liquid to vapor- resulting in air-filled xylem conduits. In addition to being a fundamental physical limit on tree height, two environmental stresses can disrupt xylem transport by cavitation: increasingly negative xylem pressures associated with water stress, and freeze-thaw cycles in temperate climates.

Phloem sap consists primarily of water, in addition to sugar, hormones, and mineral elements dissolved within it. Phloem sap (pronounced /ˈfloʊɛm/) consists primarily of sugars, hormones, and mineral elements dissolved in water. It flows from where carbohydrates are produced or stored (sugar source) to where they are used (sugar sinks).

The pressure flow hypothesis proposes a mechanism for phloem sap transport, although other hypotheses have been proposed. Phloem sap is also thought to play a role in sending informational signals throughout vascular plants. Loading and unloading patterns are largely determined by the conductivity and number of plasmodesmata and the position-dependent function of solute-specific, plasma membrane transport proteins. Recent evidence indicates that mobile proteins and RNA- the splitter function of the Lineage Factor- are part of the plant's long-distance communication signaling system. Evidence also exists for the directed transport and sorting of macromolecules as they pass through plasmodesmata.

A large number of insects of the order Hemiptera (the half-wings), feed directly on phloem sap, and make it the primary component of their diet. Phloem sap is nutrient-rich compared with many other plant products and generally lacking in toxins and feeding deterrents, yet it is consumed as the dominant or sole diet by a very restricted range of animals. This apparent paradox is explained by the fact that phloem sap is physiologically extreme in terms of animal digestion, and it is hypothesized that few animals take direct advantage of this because they lack two adaptations that are necessary to enable direct use by animals. These include the existence of a very high ratio of non-essential to essential amino acids in phloem sap for which these adapted Hemiptera insects contain symbiotic microorganisms which can then provide them with essential amino acids; and also insect tolerance of the very high sugar content and osmotic pressure of phloem sap is promoted by their possession in
the gut of sucrase-transglucosidase activity, which transforms excess ingested sugar into long-chain oligosaccharides. I actually have a thriving colony of such microorganisms, and Fae are predisposed to process a very sugar-high diet; it’s one of the only ways to build up enough of an energy store in anything approaching a reasonable timeframe. There’s a reason my emergency ration kit is a handful of small cardboard packets of heavily starched fortified protein powder suspended in honey, and it’s not because I like the taste. Fedloem is not tasty, and there’s no way to change that without sacrificing one of it’s vital aspects; be it shelf stability, weight, or nutrient content. Sanji’s tried. It can’t be done.

A much larger set of animals do however consume phloem sap by proxy, either “through feeding on the honeydew of phloem-feeding hemipterans. Honeydew is physiologically less extreme than phloem sap, with a higher essential to non-essential amino acid ratio and lower osmotic pressure, or by feeding on the biomass of insects that have grown on more direct ingestion of phloem sap. Eating honeydew ants is much… well, I can actually store the energy I get from that, whereas if I try to eat fedloem straight… It’s strictly dump or burn, that stuff: you use it, or your body throws it out. It’s too- I want to say toxic, but that’s not quite right either.

The only other person on the crew who can come close to stomaching fedloem in large amounts- as in, more than a drop from a packet- is Taffy. Sanji can handle two drops; Taffy can handle half a packet; if I’m fighting seriously? I can go through three packets in an hour, easy.

Luffy can also actually handle one packet- but just one, and then he has a really nasty sugar crash. Anyway, making my stored glycogen become the fine layered adipose tissue is not merely a pain in the ass; it requires a strict, almost austere adherence to a very specific meal-plan, with very specific amounts of various herbs and spices, to be cooked in a certain manner, and eaten within a certain time.

Sanji became just a little bit obsessed with perfecting my Training meal-plan. To be fair, I’d never eaten that particular selection of food and had it taste so good; even if, with some of them, I had to bolt them down. My husband can cook so well, and I am so proud of him.

Anyway.

Tree sap flows through sapwood, which produces carbon dioxide. Sometimes this carbon dioxide causes pressure to build up within the tree. If there are any wounds or openings, this pressure will eventually force the tree sap to ooze from the tree. Oozing tree sap can also be heat related. In early spring, while many trees are still dormant, the fluctuation of temperatures may affect the flow of tree sap. Warmer weather produces pressure within the tree. This pressure can sometimes cause the tree sap to flow from the tree through openings produced from cracks or injury. During cold weather, when temperatures fall below freezing, the tree pulls water up through the roots, replenishing the tree sap. If the tree sap freezes, the tree will explode.

Sometimes trees suffer from unnatural blistering or oozing of sap, which may be caused by numerous things such as disease, fungus, or pests. On average, however, trees do not typically leak sap unless damaged in some way. Bacterial Canker is a disease afflicting trees that have been previously injured by impact, pruning, or cracks from freezing, allowing bacteria to penetrate the tree through these openings. Bacteria cause the tree to produce abnormally high sap pressure, which forces fermented sap out to flow from cracks or openings of the infected tree. Affected trees may have wilt or dieback on the branches. Slime flux is another bacterial problem characterized by tree sap oozing. Sour-smelling, slimy-looking sap leaks from cracks or wounds on the tree, turning gray as it dries. Root rot fungus generally occurs when either the trunk of the tree is too moist from water hitting it or the soil has been overly saturated for an extended period. Insect pests, like borers, are often attracted to tree sap. Fruit trees are most likely afflicted with borers. Borers may be present if there is a noticeable
gummy-like sap oozing at the top of dying bark and sawdust at the base of the tree.

Sap is not to be confused with latex, resin or cell sap; it is a separate substance, separately produced, and with different components and functions.

**Maple syrup** is made from reduced sugar maple sap. The sap often is harvested from the Sugar Maple, Acer saccharum. In some countries (e.g., Miqueot, Lyneel, Jervan, Flvnce, Germa) harvesting the early spring sap of birch trees (so called "birch juice") for human consumption is common practice; the sap can be used fresh or fermented and contains xylitol.

Preparations made from the sap of Aloe vera are widely used for their purported soothing, moisturizing, and healing properties. Aloe vera gel is also used as an ingredient in commercially available lotions, yogurt, beverages, and some desserts. Note, however, that so-called aloe products such as "aloes", "aloe gel" etc. are not generally true sap. They are different from each other and different from the true phloem and cellular saps; produced in different cellular structures, much as other distinct materials such as latex and resin are produced in special vessels in various other species of plants.

Certain palm tree sap can be used to make palm syrup. In the Cursed Islands they use the Cursed Island Date Palm while in Frabarmy they use the Hottentot Wine Palm to make their syrup called miel de palma.

As an aside, latex is a stable dispersion (emulsion) of polymer microparticles in an aqueous medium. It is found in nature, but synthetic latexes can be made by polymerizing a monomer such as styrene that has been emulsified with surfactants. Latex as found in nature is a milky fluid found in ten percent of all flowering plants (angiosperms). It is a complex emulsion consisting of proteins, alkaloids, starches, sugars, oils, tannins, resins, and gums that coagulate on exposure to air. It is usually exuded after tissue injury. In most plants, latex is white, but some have yellow, orange, or scarlet latex.

Since the 3rd century of the modern calendar, latex has been used as a term for the fluid substance in plants. It serves mainly as defense against herbivorous insects.[1] Latex is not to be confused with plant sap: it is a separate substance, separately produced, and with separate functions.

The word is also used to refer to natural latex rubber, particularly non-vulcanized rubber. Such is the case in products like latex gloves, latex condoms, and latex clothing. Many people are allergic to rubber latex. It is most easily cultivated via dandelions, the common “weed” plant.

In polymer chemistry and materials science, resin is a "solid or highly viscous substance" of plant or synthetic origin that is typically convertible into polymers. They are often mixtures of organic compounds, principally terpenes. Many plants, particularly woody plants, produce resin in response to injury. The resin acts as a bandage protecting the plant from invading insects and pathogens.

I’m reciting all of this so that Sanji can relax a little bit, in my meaty arms. I didn’t realize I could switch aspects in my sleep. I didn’t realize a lot of things. Sanji’s afraid of men. I’m afraid of being restrained by a man. Sanji’s not afraid of men if they’re restrained. I’m afraid of being restrained by a man.

It is an impasse.
This could be better.

“Mab?”

“...sanji?”

“I think… I think I need to be the big spoon for a while.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. I- it’s going to be a long time before I’m okay with hugging. Er, being hugged. By- you're not a man, but the body... I- I just... I Know you. I know you, and I love you, and you would never, ever hurt me. So- I just. Need to hold you, in your male aspect. For a while.”

“Okay. I can do that; for however long you need. ...um, just holding?”

“Maybe a little cuddling, if the holding works out. Not- not ready for anything else. ...you can keep talking to me. You still have a nice voice, no matter what.”

“Okay. I only want to go as far as you do; let me just...”

I shift, and shuffle, and let my face snuffle into the junction of his neck and his shoulder. Sanji shudders when the scruff of my sideburn rubs over his skin, then hums and sighs again, as he wraps trembling arms around me. Certain as the sun, rising in the east; just a little change, small to say the least. Becoming better friends, when somebody bends, unexpectedly- and, you know… Sanji’s always been the Beauty. So, I’m the Beast.

Yeah, fit your head around that one.

Hmm.

Ah, I know.

Moda of the Sargasso, who once was Moda of the Ryujin, is smarter than I ever was. She realized very early on that- while she could become a member of the Sea Court, she would fuck it up in short order. Moda has the Charisma to be a queen; but almost none of the toughness.

So, she abdicated; I’m not entirely clear on the laws of succession, but I do know this: Sea Knights are actually ranked as Princes.

Jinbe, Knight of the Sea, did not swear his allegiance to the current ruling family; he swore it to the last ruling family, which was Moda’s family. There are things Moda will not speak of; things I don’t know about her.

But I do know this.

She gave her place in the succession to her cousin, Shirahoshi. And, Like all true Mermaid gifts, it was both a blessing, and a curse.

Honestly, it all comes down to Joy Boy, and his ship, NOAH.
We can’t start there, though.

Let’s start with the Goblin Market. It’s basically the black market, except… not. Not just that… Hm… how to explain it…

Ah.

Goblin Market is the colloquial name for the entirety of the Red Light and Black Door district; all the whorehouses, brothels, dance halls, drug dens, and so on- all of them can be referred to collectively and colloquially as “the Goblin Market”. However, it is important to know that the Goblin Market has more than just so called ‘Sins’ for sale; in the various cities of the World, the Goblin Markets are often the only places where real Fae can be openly found.

The Goblin Market has existed for as long as the Fae have existed- and so, we come to Joy Boy. During the Void Century, the people of Fishman Island- then known as the Ryugu Kingdom, had a great friendship with someone called Joy Boy. The Royal Line of the Ryugu holds the power called Poseidon; the Ancient Weapon, Poseidon, is what they called it when you can speak with beings like Vritra, or Fafnir, and bid them aid you in battle or daily life. Moda has that power; it’s probable that all her children will have that power too.

What’s important to realize here: Joy Boy was not a man. I can’t remember yet what Joy Boy was- but he was not a man.

Lots of people make much of the ancient powers left to this World- but few ever seem to realize that those ancient powers were always intended for use. Thus, what I remember about NOAH is this: NOAH is a trading ship, one of the very first Laputa ever built by Skua. The records for its production are still part of the textbooks for every engineer who trains in Skua; NOAH is very historically important to the Skuan people.

As for what a Laputa is… A Laputa is an artificial island, built for very specific purposes- be it trade, voyaging, or war. NOAH was a voyaging ship.

And that’s all I can remember about that.

“...sanji?”

“...gnnnh...”

“...love you...”

“...love you too, mab...”

“...night...”

“...night night...”

It never fails; a warm, comfy bed, a deep, mellow voice, and some of the most boring recitations in the history of the World will serve to make a person lose their fear and consciousness without much more than a sigh.

We set sail for Fishman Island in the morning.
I'm dreading it, actually; Taffy's taking over as Navigator until six weeks after Nami's given birth and she's actually never given orders to her crewmates before. She's never had a position of authority, ever. Furthermore, the people we are in port are not at all the people we become at Sea; and with everyone still so new...

We might actually have to have that game of Grease, just to get things out in the open.

This will be fun.
The Vows of Nami Stormborn to her Apprentice, Dracule Taffeta, were as Follows:

With the first step, I will learn what you do not know; and you, what I do not know.

With the second step, we will develop mental, physical, and spiritual strength.

With the third step, we will share the worldly possessions.

With the fourth step, we will acquire knowledge, happiness, and peace.

With the fifth step, we will create powerful and virtuous techniques.

With the sixth step, we will allow the other to become more than just a master or apprentice.

With the seventh step, we will always remain friends and cherish each other.

The Vows Nami Stormborn asked of her Apprentice, Dracule Taffeta, were as Follows:

I will give my Master all my money.

I will give my Master the precedent of my time.

I will obey my Master in all things.

I will not engage in Sex or Romance without my Master’s permission.

After a bitter negotiation, Nami struck the Vows to the Apprentice from the Contract, as Tradition demands; replacing them only with this: “I will do my very best to learn what you have to teach me.”

I signed the revised Contract between Nami and me; I am Dracule “Foxeye” Taffeta, apprentice to the Master Weather Witch, Nami Stormborn, now. We have vowed to teach and learn from each other; her the Guide, me the Follower.

My compass is thus: on a flat medallion of Adam Wood stained golden-red, a total of seven Poses are inset in the wood, like gems. Three Log Poses of Paradise, so we know where we’ve been; three Log Poses of the New Word, so we know where we’re going. In the center, there is one Eternal Pose - to the Twin Capes, actually, so we can always go home. On the opposite side is chiseled the Compass Rose of Skua, the sygil of the mystic order of which I am now a part. I had to cut it into the wood myself, before setting the Poses in place. It hangs on a fine metal chain, down my chest and resting just at the bottom of my sternum.
Four Bird Skulls hang between the complete spine of a salmon—one fish for each bird; each smoothed spine bone is coated in mother of pearl, and the bird skulls are coated in sapphire. I’ll break before they will, now. This is one of the strands; it hangs much longer, and I generally tie it into a knot for ease of movement. Like a string of dancer-pearls.

Instead of needles, Franky carved for me beads; I pulled them onto the leather strand, and… well. Horsehair that chimes, gently; pearlized bones; leather, and a fine metal chain.

I’ve got a compass, now; I just need to attune it to the elements and get used to checking it constantly. (Oh gods, I’m going to be a Weather Mage, just like Nami. Aaaah! Exciting!)

I said before that each element can be categorized with a few descriptions about what it does and what it’s for. I’m going over them again so I don’t forget or chicken out of doing what needs to be done.

Water is the cold and the dark of the deep places, a pebble falling into a pond and disappearing without ripple or remaining trace; it is the river flowing endlessly, time in it’s course, a mirror that only reflects the truth, the womb from which all life springs, eternal. Wet, Cold, Flowing.

Fire is the warm and the bright of the star, the sun’s harsh-gentle light which calls all things in the World to live again come winter’s end; it is the heat of the hearth and the inferno of a crucible, the wild thing that eats even it’s own ashes, the bright sudden touch of a lover, the seeds from which life grows. Burning, Hot, Dancing.

Wind is the gale which crushes the tree down, the storm that shakes the heavens, the tempest of feeling that flings a person outside their body, a breeze which cuts to the quick and also tugs a child’s kite high into the air; wind grinds the mountain to dust, cools sweat, and washes through a person from first to last. If the elements are a circle, you start, and end, with wind.

Lightning is the twitch of muscles firing in sequence, the bolt which flies unerring towards its target; the relentless strike that destroys all in its path, the tingle of fear down your spine, the jolt of a new idea, the spark of intention. Baelfire comes from lightning. Sharp, Dry, Shifting.

Earth is the solid wall which holds back the world, the blackest black of the mine in the earth; the gentle swell of fields flush and heavy with grain, the shifting bareness of sand, the crushing weight of a meteor, the dizzying height of a cliff, the ravine which reveals gems in it’s layered seams. Earth is the pillar around which fires may flow- and it will not be consumed. Earth is bone; limestone and bones are exactly the same kind of thing. Limestone is the Stonebone. Solid, Pressure, Stillness.

Metal is the male-gendered mutable element; so called because it changes. Variable, as it is at once harder than stone, yet softer than even water; solid, liquid, gaseous, it can be hard, shiny, malleable, fusible, and ductile. It has good electrical and thermal conductivity, and- of all the elements, save Earth… there are some who combine Metal with Earth, and for good reason. Blood is born in the bones; and there are those who assume that, surely metal must be born from stone. As this is only sometimes true, I conclude that Metal and Earth are different elements. Metal is vital; it is iron that carries air through your body, and so Hematite, being an iron-ore, is the Bloodstone. Metal is flexibility; it is a coin, a blade, a kiss, a drop of blood. Changeable, Formed, Vital.

Wood is the female-gendered mutable element; so called because, while Metal must be acted upon to change, Wood changes on it’s own. Similarly variable when compared to metal, and yet- there is a curious strength to the root of a tree, which, if given time, can shatter stones. Wood is the only element that lives; and with that life comes a memory, magic- wood is patient in a way that the other
elements are not. Wood is resilient; self-healing, holds the capacity for eternal life. Wood is vitality; it is the seed, the wish, the promise, the love that makes small things grow large. Changing, Forming, Fertile.

There’s a reason Zoro instinctively made Nami flowers out of Earth and Metal as a courting gift; and most of the stones are pearls, which is earth with a not-insubstantial grounding in water. Zoro has an instinctive understanding of magical concepts that is only really visible from the outside; and there’s a reason the other Mages at the place where Nami trained kept trying to steal her love-tokens. They are powerful protective magical artifacts; and Zoro made them without thinking twice about it.

They’re love-matched, and it’s rather astonishing to witness.

Saa- the only things I actually need to carry with me as an apprentice to Nami are my compass and my pocketwatch; my other strands are for ceremonial purposes.

I give my signed contract to Nami at Breakfast. Mab lands a small swarm of honeyjackets on Luffy’s hand when his fingers wriggle towards Nami’s breakfast. Good.

Nami reads the contract over, looks at me, and at my new compass, and nods.

“Everyone, I have an announcement to make. Until about six weeks after I give birth, I’m going to be irritable, irrational, and on a hair-trigger for my temper. Therefore, for everyone’s safety, until six weeks after I give birth, Taffy is going to be our navigator. I’m still head navigator; I’ll be double checking her work until I’m sure she can do the job. There are some things that are going to be beyond her; however, as we’re still in Paradise, I think having her navigate us from Sabaody to Fishman Island will be a good test of her skill.”

“Uh, Nami-hakase, that’s… are you really sure I’m ready for something like that?”

“Well, you can navigate yourself all over the World; you can take people with you when you do so; you can sail, and read the compass and the weather enough to get us where we need to go. I think you can handle it, Taffeta.”

I had to wait a moment, to let my stomach stop roiling with nerves- and when it didn’t, I handed Luffy the rest of my breakfast. I’d eaten most of everything already, I just… oh gods.

“Neh, so- are we still going the undersea route, or are we going through the new Three Mountain Pass? It sounds interesting.”

I pause.

I take a long, bracing drink of Zoro’s breakfast grog; it’s apple juice with a half-shot of tequila in it. Zoro blinks at me, but Nami nods, solemnly.

And then I speak.
“Three Mountain Pass is a very odd little stretch of ocean. Due to it’s former status as a part of the Red Line, it does not behave like any other part of the ocean on the Grand Line. Log Poses do not work in Three Mountain Pass; Blue Standard Compasses also do not work. The only way to navigate the Pass is with Celestial Navigation, Wayfinding, or having an accurate map.

“I can do two of those, but… As far as anyone can tell, there are no real reliable maps to navigate that stretch of ocean. This is due to the presence of two, very different, dangers.

“Geographically, as far as we know, Three Mountain Pass is actually very narrow; there is only a small oceanic corridor through which an adult Sea King may pass, and although an adult Sea King is large when on the surface of the ocean, in the water it is much smaller, due to pressure. Of all the things in that area of the world, Sea Kings are the least of your worries.

“The first danger is the Scylla. Scylla is a female-gendered current; her waters are cold, but full of nutrients, which attracts lots of different fish to feed. Which attracts other, more dangerous things, of course. Scylla has twelve different currents, six of which are deadly, as they wind through ship killing shoals and reefs. Further, due to the bounty of Scylla’s very gentle counter-currents, wolf-sharks patrol the waters with a vicious efficiency. If a person is bleeding, and falls into the countercurrents of Scylla, they’re not coming back out in one piece. Even out here, at Sabaody Archipelago, the howling of wolvarks is blood-chilling. They aren’t the gentle, shy beasts of the Five Blues, after all; these are the ones that can be best described as “Big, and Bad”. -They never became dogs; they were always sharks. And in the pass, they hunger.

“As far as I can tell, based on the maps of the region- which never match each other- and sailor’s accounts- which more often than not, do match up- Scylla’s most dangerous, most bountiful, and fastest currents are centered in an underwater cave on the Trunorthern side of the pass; and every six to eight hours, the main current and subsidiary reverse current experience a tidal shift. Meaning, it is entirely possible to be stuck, going in a circle, in the currents of Scylla’s most vicious portion-forever. Whether you’re alive to enjoy it, or not.

“Oh, yes, and most horrifying of all; four times a year, every year, Scylla’s twelve currents change formation, reverse direction, and- so far- have done so at random. Mab says a pattern will assert itself eventually, but it might be ten years before that happens.”

I stop. Take another drink of Zoro’s mug, as my crewmates glance at Nami, who is nodding. Usopp is blanching around his forkful of eggs.

“On the Trusout side of the pass, there is what’s known as Charybdis. No one can agree if she’s a particularly nasty whirlpool, a Sea King, or both; what is known is thus. Every day, thrice a day- at, so far, unspecific times- Charybdis will swallow down everything that gets trapped in her racing tides. And then, at unspecified times, her motion will reverse, and she will projectile vomit everything she has swallowed.

“Three times a day, every day.

“Charybdis’ racing tides are so powerful- and so big - that even a ship like ours, made of Adam Wood, would be scuttled trying to escape. The Coupe de Burst wouldn’t be much use either, due to all the dangers in the air.”
I don’t want to say this out loud.

“There are Tiktiks, in the pass. In the two years Three Mountain Pass has existed, thousands of ships have been lost at sea there; and not all of them were pirate ships. Merchant ships, pleasure boats… they’ve all gone. And they have not returned.”

“…Neh, a Tiktik makes that sound like tiktitkitkitkitkitkitkitkik and the quieter it is, the closer it is, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And… it eats unborn babies, and newborns, and small children too, right?”

I nod. So does Mab, and Sanji, and Zoro; Nami has wrapped her arms over her stomach, which has started to protrude. The smell of ozone, in the air, has started to thicken. Robin’s hands are loosely curled, her forearms crossed on the table. Franky’s knuckle’s creak with tension. Chopper’s fur has fluffed to nearly twice his size, and where his horns would be most of the year- he drops them mid-winter, and he just has stumpy velvety bits, but rising from his skull is the shadow of his horns, longer and wicked, sharper than I’ve ever seen them; and the face he wears is the face of a man, and his hair which grew long over the Separation is thick and bushy and wild. Usopp has gone still, and very quiet; his eyes are sharp and flick-flick-flicking from each person at the table. Brook looks every inch his age, his dark eye sockets filled with chthonian blackness. Mark is steadily tapping out a simple war-beat; one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four. Bryony is humming, softly, her fingers in deceptively loose fists.

Gurry, and Marzipan, are very still; like the stillness of a viper, right before it kills a mouse.

Banana tightens on my arm; I make myself put the empty tankard down, out of my hand, before I crack it worse.

The dogs, under the table, are silent; Buttercream is sitting quietly, staring at the door to the infirmary, while Pearblossom and Bubbler are- well, ‘Blossom is sitting on the couch, her big red ears flicking this way and that. Bubbler is sitting right next to Nami, her dark blue fur fluffed to nearly three times her normal size.

Tiktik eat everything that’s unborn; every kind of baby. Suckle the blood from their hearts, in fact.

Chopper lets out a long breath, then shakes his head; and then he speaks.

“The first time I ever saw an aswang, I was… mm, maybe a year into my studies with Doctorine. There’d been a rash of miscarriages, and people were starting to get scared; it wasn’t food, it wasn’t the water, it wasn’t anything in the blood that Doctorine could tell; just… the worst one I saw was where the baby was stillborn at eight months, and it’s heart had been yanked right out of it’s chest and chewed on. The baby’s heart had bite marks on it.
“It was a little girl baby, I remember that; and I remember Doctorine’s face, when I told her what the baby’s heart looked like. I had to dry and grind so many of our hothouse peppers, I thought I’d never be able to see again- the dust was so hot and thick, because I wasn’t good at grinding them yet, and…

“I remember, they caught the aswang with a net made of birch-bark, rowan, and rolled in chili pepper powder that had been blessed by the brewer, the baker, and the blacksmith.

“After they killed her, the aswang, I mean, they cut her stomach open. It was full of the bones of babies; mostly their skulls, because at that age, when they’re that young, it’s the skull that forms the most and is hardest to chew. After that, I never complained about grinding herbs again.”

Mab’s fingertips rattle across the table.

“We call them Pontianak, in Skua. They sound like the chirping of baby junglefowl; chickens, if you’re not… Well, that’s what they say. Really, they sound like screaming pigs; and the louder you can hear it, the farther away they are from you. I don’t know if everyone knows this, but most Fae who immigrate are middle class or rich. I’m actually spectacularly wealthy- not just me, personally, but my entire family.

“I wasn’t always personally wealthy, though- in fact, when I went to school, it was without any money to use at all. Mother said it would teach me discipline; it was actually her subtle way of getting me killed. It didn’t work- but that’s what it was.

“I was lucky; not because I have a knack for making money, though I do, but because I’m a very good scholar and I got the chance to study to the highest levels of our university system. During my time as student, because I had no money and no goods or services to create a bribe, I had to live in the poorest of the poor dorms, and go to the worst classes.

“My dorm was in Vivace, which is a very rural village. It’s the kind of place that only exists because there needed to be a well to get from the larger town of Cadenza to the city of Montrullly, and if you go to all the trouble of digging a well, you might consider planting a few shade trees, and why not have those trees be fruit bearing? Mangos are nice, right? And then it’s three-hundred years later, your village is eight houses, a well, a stand of mango trees, and a student dorm for the very poor students of the Skuan Military… In that sorry excuse of a village, you could walk for hours in any direction and not see anything, not even a person; just green plants and mist.

“My dorm didn’t have electricity, or gas; our oven and stove was made of cast iron, and we- because I wasn’t the only student in the dorm- we had to use wood for fire, as coal was too expensive. There was no public transportation; to get to school, we had to go ten miles in one direction and be in our classes before the eighth chime of the morning. There’s a reason I wake up at five at the very latest, every day. Ach, we were so poor, we couldn’t even afford a storm lantern, or even oil to light it.

“There’s a reason I’m so good at making candles.

“So, everyday, I had to wake up at four-thirty AM to get ready for school; then, it was a two-hour walk to get there. School lasted from Eight to Eight, and then I’d have extra-curriculars, and then I’d get home, maybe, by eleven-thirty PM. This was during the weekdays- on Fulday, or Friday, I’d have more time to get home as my classes ended early. I’d usually make it back to the dorm, do
laundry, help around the house; sleep in a real bed.

“If I didn’t get home by midnight- if I couldn’t leave in time to make it, or just didn’t feel right about going, I’d either have to find a place to spend the night in- usually a tree, or near a chimney in the winter- or I’d have to risk going through Bushwilds past midnight. It was never said out loud, but… Maenads roamed that area during the night, as did wild creatures. I wasn’t so strong, then; excepting for the very worst storms, I usually spent the night holed up somewhere high and small. Where nothing bad could get me.

“Out there, all the old monsters of the World still roam freely; they were pushed out of other places, and they fled to the boundless Sky. Civilized times, or so they tell me; what’s so civil about a pack of Maenads tearing a man apart and gorging on his flesh in front of his only daughter, I’m sure I don’t know… -Martha never was quite right, after that. She’s better, now- but she never was right.

“There weren’t really any doctors, out there, either- mostly, there were albularios, witch doctors maybe, who cured people and animals. A lot of people in that county-kingdom die without ever seeing a doctor; and, quite rightly, blame supernatural things for untimely deaths. Some things are illnesses, which, once the nuns started sending their midwives out, got much less common; but for other things, it was definitely a ghost. Or an aswang. Or a pontianak- you get the idea.

“I didn’t really care about that stuff, though; all that mattered to me back then was to do my best so I can get out of school with honors. I had… I had a job to do.

“This happened to me when I was in my seventh year of study, which is the last year. I was the top ranking in my grade, the manager of the student betting pools, and a teacher’s assistant; because of this, I had to do a lot of additional work, aside from my normal studies and extracurricular activities. By then, because I could finally fly fast, and was licensed to do so inside city limits- which you need to be, if you’re under seventeen, it’s for safety reasons- I could get everything I needed to do at school done within the daylight hours, and fly home. It’s very dangerous to fly at night in Skua, and I’m about to explain why.

“There were some days when I just couldn’t do it; in this case, I was tabulating the betting tables for the schoolwide betting pools, and I was setting up a, in retrospect, fairly spectacular prank- and because of the sheer volume of the bets I had to organize, I had to stay late. All the bets were coming to fruit the next day, you see; I had a huge influx of people making last minute bets, and had only managed to close an hour before I would have usually gone home.

“Anyway. I had a classmate named Maria; she lived a few miles from the school, in the student housing, and offered me a place to stay for the night. She said it was her birthday the next day, so I’d be her only guest. She wasn’t really celebrating her birthday on the day itself, as it was a Tuesday; she was planning on celebrating on Friday, and maybe taking advantage of the four-day weekend.

“We weren’t that close, but we knew each other; her brother was my classmate as well, and she was also a scholar like me. We got to see a lot of each other, be it in shared lab space, at different library tables; we shared two extracurriculars, even. She was one of those people you end up seeing around a lot, because you just… do. You live in the same place, you go to the same sorts of things- one of those.

“She was a half-Djinni girl, fairly pretty but easily outshone. I actually liked her, but I never entertained the thought of courting her because I was too focused on my studies; further, behind the student facade I was still a Princess, and Princesses don’t court. And really, I didn’t have the money to treat myself; there’s no way I had the money to treat a girlfriend to some fun.

“Anway. I finished my tabulations, put all the money I’d gotten in the betting into the strong box, to
be portioned out the next day. My prank was set to run itself during the night, and would go off during the middle of classes, to give ample time for it to be seen. After I packed up all my things, with everything done for the day, I met up with Maria and we started walking to her house.

“Now, understand, the area we were walking in- even though it was fairly near the school, it was still very rural. After a few blocks, there’s only tall grass and a path towards the forest. That’s where Maria’s family lived. We were both awkward, but we tried to talk and get to know each other. She said that her whole family lived in a big compound inside the forest and they rarely had guests over. When we got there, her brother greeted me and I met her family. They were very welcoming; her mom, her dad, aunts, uncles, and little cousins. It wasn’t a mansion or anything fancy, but their place was pretty big compared to my dorm, and very homey compared to either of the palaces. The Winter Palace hadn’t been home for more than a decade, by then; and every time I got used to staying in the Summer Palace, and almost started calling it home, I had to go back to school.

“This crew is the only home I’ve ever really had.

“Anyway, their property was maybe a few hectares; there’s a row of cement houses, each belonging to various relations of Maria and her family. The houses were a few yards away from each other, with paths towards each house made of road-metal; crushed granite, if you like. The spaces in between the houses was filled with flowering plants, fruit trees, and tall grass. Maria’s house stood at the end of the middle row and it was the biggest house in the compound.

“I had a really great dinner, that night; ate until I was half-full, because I didn’t want to eat them out of their house, and I could always double up on breakfast the next day. After dinner, we prepared for sleep. I was expecting to sleep on the floor of her brother’s room, her room, or the family room; but they let me stay in their spare room all by myself. I didn’t really mind sleeping on the floor or in any part of their house, actually; but I was more than happy to accept the spare room, after they insisted a bit.

“Manners. Makes society gurgle onwards.

“After we said our good nights, I didn’t have a hard time falling asleep. That was the first cloud-mattress I had ever slept on without worrying about assassins; so, it was really good. And I had it to myself, even, and there weren’t holes in the mosquito netting or anything. It was really wonderful; I ended up going to sleep about ten minutes after I got in bed, which is rare even now for me. Around two-forty five, I woke up because I thought I heard a noise from outside; it wasn’t my stomach growling, though I was a bit hungry. -Back in those days, I would drink lots of milk to make up the difference, when I didn’t have enough to eat; Maria knew this, and on the way back to her house, I had told her why. She’d told me that her family actually kept a herd of milking goats in their compound, so I was free to drink as much milk as I liked, at her house; and her mother took me aside before dinner and confirmed it. The Portgas appetite is very well known, in parts of Skua; and Maria’s mother wanted to feed me, but she also needed me to not eat all the food in her house.

“Anyway.

“The sound I heard that woke me up- it was like a wailing, an animal noise coming from a distance, but that sound… There was something really off about it, it wasn’t familiar or anything like the normal sounds you hear in the Skuan country. It wasn’t crickets or cicadas- I would have known if it was a goat; it wasn’t a fox, or a raccoon. And it wasn’t dogfish, or skeels, or anything like that. And it just kept going, too- I didn’t mind it at first but when it didn’t stop, I decided to investigate. Maybe an animal was hurt, I don’t know- thought I might be able to do something to help, or offer mercy, maybe. Something made me grab the garlic oil from my school bag; I’d made it myself back at the dorm, and it was definitely real garlic oil.
“Jamie’s mother had shown me their milk-fridge... Oh, um- some Fae believe that it’s unclean to keep dairy products- milk, cheese, eggs, yoghurt, and so on- in with the rest of the food in the kitchen. I’m fine with it, although I do have opinions on how food should be stored- um, so, Maria’s family had an entire fridge, a bit bigger than ours, that opened on both sides and was full of milk. The back side was where the milk got loaded into the fridge, from the dairy; the kitchen side was where you took milk out from. So, after I drank a few bottles of milk and rinsed them out, I took my garlic oil and went to see about that sound.

“It was dark, that night, but the moons lit the area and it had a pale, silvery sort of beauty; the road-metal looked like crushed silver stones, and the night was full of the smell of blooming flowers. At that time, it was the fashion to have bells on the thong of the sandal, and so mine did- even if they were just clay with some paint on, they were still bells. I’d also figured out how to move silently in them- and, I guess so I wouldn’t scare the animal away, I was walking silently.

“I walked all the way around Maria’s house; the sound didn’t really change but I saw for myself that it wasn’t the goats, or something caught in the fence or anything like that. Everyone was asleep; all was quiet, excepting that faint shrieking which was slightly louder, in the out-of-doors. Before I turned to walk back into the house and go back to sleep, sound be damned, I noticed that there was giggling and laughter coming from one of the houses across from Maria’s so I went there.

“Out of curiosity, I carefully peeked through an open window and saw her whole family having a meeting and sort of celebrating. I thought maybe Maria’s parents and relatives were having a pre-dawn party or something because it’s her birthday- I didn’t want to intrude so I walked back to the house, taking a different route so no one would see me while I navigated through the tall grass towards the house. Besides, I was still trying to look for that poor animal, it’s shrieking had gotten worse.

“And then… Alright. You all know Sanji’s a horndog. I am also a horndog. Our marriage works as well as it does because our libido is fairly matched, one to one. When I was a teenager, my libido was much higher; I won’t go so far to say I was sex-crazed, but a lot of things that I did as a teenager make me cringe now. So, when I saw that it was Maria, bathing near the back part of her house at the pond there, I didn’t walk away, and I didn’t go back inside and sleep; I hid in the shadow of the goat-hutch and watched her.

“I know it was awkward and perverted- but at that time, I hadn’t had a real date in two years, and there’s only so much porn can do. And then I wasn’t aroused anymore, I was confused- I had thought she was bathing, but… there wasn’t any kind of bathing area out there, no deck to keep the dirt off her feet, nothing to cover her or to bathe with, no running water nor a pail to keep the water in; and instead of pouring water over her head like most people did, she was pouring oil into her hand and spreading it over her entire body. While she did glisten in the moonlight, my stomach was churning; something felt wrong, like something bad was about to happen.

“When I heard the sound… you know the sound of, of when I tear open a fish with my bare hands? It sounded like that. She had stopped moving and she just looked up at the sky with her mouth hanging slightly open, like she was struck mad by the light of the moons and the sight of the stars, and then she started panting and shrieking. The sound I had been hearing was her all along.

“Something began to come out of her, shaped faintly like wings. Not the kind I have, or Taffy, or even my sister, Tilly- she has the wings of a bat, does my baby sister. No; these were the wings of no creature or beast of the good earth, and no sky creature I’d ever seen. I’d frozen in shock where I was hiding; and then I froze harder in terror, because it wasn’t just horrible wings coming out of her, the rest of her began to change too. Her face transformed into a sagging mess, her hair became unruly and spiked, and her teeth became misshapen fangs. Taffy has fairly functional fangs; so do
Luffy, and Usopp, and Sanji, even.

“Maria didn’t.

“I couldn’t make myself move, while her upper and lower halves separated. You know how sometimes when cheese gets nice and melty, you get long strings? That’s what it looked like, as she separated into two halves; and it smelt like blood, and shit, and rotting fish-sauce, but there was no actual blood, or shit- there might have been fish sauce, but I doubt it. The only proof that someone-some thing - was even there was the other half of her body, standing next to the pond. Her severed torso flew away leaving the parts below her waist naked and intact, just standing there as if nothing happened. Like a disassembled mannequin in the back of a clothing shop; just legs and a butt.

“The shrieking sound, I realized, was a tiktiktiktik sound, like the sound pigs make when they scream, almost. When she flew up, the shrieking was almost silent; but as it steadily got louder and louder, I remembered the most important thing about pontianaks: the farther they are from you, the louder their sound gets.

“I’d taken oaths as a midwife, by then; there’s some things I can’t allow. So, I poured a palmful of garlic oil in my hand, and crept silently to her standing legs, and I rubbed garlic oil all over her gristly wet half. It was cold, like dead meat, and strangely wet. The oil smelled like… I don’t know how to describe it. That’s the only time I’ve ever smelled anything quite like it.

“And then I noped the fuck out; I washed my hands, put more garlic oil behind my ears, packed all my shit up, and fucking ran. Told myself that I was not about to be the main dish for that party; I’d take being eaten by Maenads over that anyday. Maenads, at least, are like getting eaten by a shiver of sharks; in their hunger-frenzy, they don’t know any better, and they eat you because they’re hungry, and only because they’re hungry. Pontianaks do their hunting and eating out of… part of it is hunger, to be sure. But part of it is malice, too; I’d noticed that their goats didn’t have any kids- just swollen teats. I’d put it up to… I don’t know. I knew better, but…

“So. I ran through the dark woods faster than I’d ever run before, or so it felt. I went the right way; I made it all the way back to town, and the school, and there was a guard there, even.

“I told him my story and he believed me; I begged him to let me stay in the guard’s barracks, and he took me back, told the other guards there what I’d told him, and they believed me too. They let me in, gave me some tea to drink with a shot of young rum in it, to steady my nerves. I ended up sleeping on the barracks couch for the rest of that month.

“So, apparently, the women of Maria’s family were known in that town to be pontianaks. I didn’t know this because I lived in the ass-end of nowhere; and I hardly had time to eat, much less pay attention to gossip. The guards at the school were actually barangay tanods, low level law enforcement; they had been tasked to hunt down the pontianak that had been terrorizing the town for years. Unfortunately, the tanods, their direct superiors, were made up of Maria’s dad and other male relatives; so no one could really do anything about her, or her family. The official story was that there are no such things as pontianaks- which no one with sense believed, so almost no one in my class- and every time the pontianak would attack and kill someone or someone’s baby, there was no evidence to lead to any perpetrator. Nevermind the very obvious trails of blood, from the victims.

“The night I stayed over at Maria’s house, they were actually celebrating her rite of passage: turning into a full pontianak, and making her first human kill. I thank the gods here and now and again that I was not the victim that night.

“I never saw Maria or her brother after that. There was a death announcement, for Maria; her brother left school and just didn’t come back. I paid out all the bets; my prank was a success; I even had a
safe place to sleep, for a while.

“And I killed a woman, that night, and meant to kill her.

“Word about what I’d done spread like wildfire- as did my name. That’s what cemented my reputation as the Queen of Maggots; because, as everyone knows, maggots are a sign of murder—necessary murder, true; but murder, all the same. And, as I was a princess-to-be-queen, potentially...

It was said, when the police went to investigate that compound in the woods, that the entire family was gone; maybe so. I’m not so sure; it might be that some men from the town got together and Hunted them down, killing the entire clan. It might be they just left.

“I know this; out in the Tomb Hills, which are more Wild than any place I’ve ever known, there was a rash of unexplained killings around Pumpkin Hill, which is the town the Charnel Workers keep watch over. And then, there was a massacre; forty pontianak were ritually burned, and their husbands, brothers, sons, and uncles killed too. Charnel Workers don’t fuck around.” she said.

Brook’s voice, when it comes, is selpurichal.

“In my life, I have killed three wakwaks. The first was our yaya, Rrysha.

“My mother used to make us bathe with vinegar; she would wash the babies with it too, and herself. She was a… ah, I believe the polite term is prostitute, now, but back then she was the woman with the red door, down at the end of the lane; a bit past all the other houses of our village, not quite to the briarpatch. No better than she should be; the whore, and her brood of bastards; that was us.

“I never disobeyed her in this, the habit of us bathing in vinegar, because when I was… mm, eight I suppose, maybe nine, I woke in a cold sweat, on my pallet in with my brothers and sisters. There were five of us at the time, and mother was pregnant again; and something had woken me.

“Even then, my hearing was exceptional; and I could hear a sort of tiktiktik sound, quite loud. At that time, one of mother’s customers had given me a knife to keep my silence on the matter of his visitation, and I kept it with me at all times; so, when I realized what I was hearing, I took the knife from under my pillow, and I went to check on my mother.

“I also tapped my sister awake; she was second oldest, and very calm in a crisis. She kept a bag of forge ash under her pillow; when I woke her, she heard what I heard. I suppose, back then, we were much of the same mind; she sat up, put her bag of ash in her hand, and nodded to me.

“Thusly did I go to check on my mother. I don’t know what compelled me- the tiktiktik was rather loud, when I first heard it, but as I crept silently through the kitchen, grabbing the bottle of vinegar and opening it as I went, it got quieter and quieter.

“By the time I got to mother’s room… behind the blackened doorway, I couldn’t hear the tiktiktik sound at all.

“When I went in, there was… the wakwak had the upper body of a woman I’d seen before; of course I had, I’d recognize our yaya anywhere. She was always very supportive of my mother, kind and defensive of us children, when others would jeer… a yaya, I think our maid, is the translation. Looking back, of course she was a wakwak, village whores don’t have yayas. She was always so...

“She was naked, and from her exposed ribcage hung her pulsating guts. Her hair was long, and dark,
and… they weren’t wings, that sprouted from her shoulders. I don’t know what they were, but they weren’t wings, as our Mab, or our Taffeta, has. They were something else. Something that made my eyes sting to look at for longer than a second or two.

“She was doing something between my mother’s legs; I know now, of course, that she was using her long tongue-mouth to go up into my mother and eat the baby’s heart. Still. I knew, even then, that the thing in our house meant my mother no good.

“So, I stabbed the wakwak in the shoulder, and in the flaring confusion- this scar, on my skull? I got it from her. In the confusion of her flailing and my barely adequate technique with the knife, the bottle of vinegar splashed over everything.

“I killed her by strangulation, as the vinegar melted her hanging guts; I just kept squeezing her neck until she stopped. And then I succumbed to my injury; I did not awake for two long weeks. In that time, my mother lost the baby; and she died not many hours after.

“It was after she died, and that horse kicked me in the head, right on the scar- that’s when I started hearing the music. I was tone-deaf, before then; but after the wakwak, and getting struck where she struck me… I could hear.

“The second wakwak I ever killed was my own mother, come back to fright us; while she was alive, our mother loved us as mothers do, kindly, exasperatedly, wanting only the best- or at the very least, better, for us than what she had gotten. When she came back, she loved us still; but her love was akin to the dragon, and it’s gold; or to the child, and their toys.

“She wasn’t truly my mother at all, in the end. Vinegar kills wakwaks; and it doesn’t matter if they’ve bodies or not. For a long time after that, I carried a flask of vinegar on my person like some men carry strong spirits; I wasn’t willing to take chances.

“Well, after that, with our mother truly dead… I lied my way into the army because of all of us, my oldest sister and I were the only ones who couldn’t be adopted. Her, because she had the calling of the Witch, and in those days, witches had to wander and find places where they were needed; she became a smith, I believe. As for me, because I was the bastard of the village headman, and since he wouldn’t take me in, no one else would either. All the rest got taken in; the butcher, the baker, the wandering Oharan librarian, the goat-herders… But not me. And not Mascarette, either.

“That was the second wakwak I ever saw myself, and the second I killed; the third, and last, was in a ruined town that had got caught between our army and the enemy’s. I was a fife-player, about the only job you can give a boy who says he’s a small seventeen but is really only fifteen, and though his being the son of a whore from the back-country accounts for some things… Ach.

“The song that came from that town haunts me, even now; and, having actually spoken to a new-made wakwak, I can’t bear to sing it. Sanji would know it; it’s the Norten version of “Dark is the Night”.

“That wakwak was made on a battlefield; she was born of a woman who was cut down- pregnant, and the baby tossed around for sport. Soldier’s sport, as if- no. No, best not say more. She was sad; I remember that. She was angry, and sad- mostly sad- and she gave me her violin because she couldn’t bear to play it anymore. Said that her instrument was the finest in her village; said that before she left, she’d give all of her good to me, the kind boy who saw her for what she was and was laid low by one of her kind not once but twice. Said that the injuries done to me were of the body and the soul; said that, god willing, her presence would only injure my mind.

“Said that, all things being equal; she’d take my peace of mind, in exchange for a Dream. I gave her
my flask of vinegar, and I took her violin and the knowledge of how to care for it, tune it, what it looked like to play it- I’d never seen one before then, you see- and then she drank the vinegar down.

“And then she died; and I left that place, my ears ringing with her screams. I learned to play the violin because when I was making it howl like a cat, or screech like an owl, or sometimes, not often in those early days, but sometimes, playing sweet music with it- I couldn’t hear her screaming.

“I still hear her, even now. It’s better, now that I’m not alone- but it’s not the kind of sound you forget. My mother was right to bathe us in vinegar; to monsters like that, it really is a deadly poison.”

I take a deep breath; Captain didn’t know. So we told him; and now, he’s angry.

“So. Creatures like manananggals, aswangs, tiktiks, and wakwaks are known to live in Three Mountain Pass.

“Manananggals, or as I know them, tiktiks, are a kind of vampire. Similar to the aswang and wakwak, as in it’s a difference of local name, they are usually women who transform into an ugly monster with bat-like wings, separating its upper torso from the lower half. They hunt at night and prey on sleeping people by piercing a tiny hole through the roof with their string-like elongated tongue and sucking the blood of their victims. Their favorite victims are pregnant women or pregnant female animals, where they suck the fetus' heart. This is only older tiktiks though; younger ones don’t have the same patience or forethought, and are known to simply tear the babies out of the mother, to eat them whole.

“They abhor garlic, salt, powerful spices, light, daggers, and whips made out of the tail of a stingray. The only way to hurt them is by spreading forge ashes, crushed garlic, or salt on its more vulnerable half. This prevents the tiktik's upper and lower half from rejoining and then the creature will perish because of the sunlight drying it out. Another thing, although I'm not entirely sure whether the wakwak, aswang, tiktik or the manananggals are truly related- they probably are... but when you hear a tapping sound or maybe a shriek similar to what we've all experienced, be alert because they might be hunting. The louder the sound, the farther they are; if you hear a faint sound, that means that a tiktik yis near.” I say.

“...We don’t have anywhere near enough hot peppers. Or garlic, or vinegar, or strong spices, then. Or even a whip, made of the right stuff.” says Luffy.

“No. We don’t. And that’s not getting into the various rocks, reefs, and- oh, the flocks of migratory Screaming Sky Eels, which swarm, go for the eyes first, and prefer to nest in pregnant animals. There are also the Germa Birds, which have poisonous everything, beaks made of bronze, and murderous xenophobia. Oh yes, and are flesh eating.” I say.

“Huh. Three Mountain Pass is just a little too much right now, in that case; we might check it out later, but… I think we’re gonna have to pass it for now.” says Luffy.

Mab goes from “right the fuck now” ready to fight to “Mm, okay” ready to fight: the black rings around her eyes fade away, her claws turn back into fingers, short nails and golden rings. Mab’s basically ready to throw the fuck down with anyone, anything, at any time.

Sanji’s red war-stripe softens down into his skin, and his hair changes from midnight’s own black to his normal blond, and his eyes aren’t so- sharp hot, like the pilot-light in the oven. Zoro’s eyes turn
back to their normal brown, instead of molten steel, and his shadow is no longer split into three. Captain tilts his hat back from where it had been shading his eyes.

Everyone else relaxes in fits and starts.

“But when we know more about it, we’re definitely checking it out.” he says.

“Dammit, Luffy, really?!” hisses Nami.

“Yup. Not this time though. On our next go-round; you and the new crewmates are more important than adventure, right now.” he says.

“Ah. Well, alright I guess.” hums Nami, a bit relieved.

God love my Captain, because there are moments I do not. Not this one, though; this one is pretty good.

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Taffeta’s going to be just fine as our Navigator, while Nami’s out of commission. Takes a special kind of wording to make Captain mind; not telling him what to do, because he won’t. It’s best to tell him why you don’t want to do something. And he’s always responded best to personal stories, real, concrete reasons for not wanting to do something beyond “I’m scared”. In this case, we weren’t just scared; we were remembering other times, and other places.

Captain’s not stupid; while we could protect Nami across Three Mountain Pass if we had to, it’s better for everyone if we just… go another route. This time.

Honestly, I’m with Captain; I really want to explore Three Mountain Pass.

Not today, though.

The Sea of Monsters will still be there, ere our next circumnavigation of the World.

Mmm. Since we’re barbecuing today, Lunch is going to be the barbecue, which Sanji prepped yesterday to give everything time to marinate; and because of that, dinner is going to be a sandwich buffet and leftovers. Meaning, if I help Sanji with the cooking, he’ll have three hours of dead-time to play with. Which means we could have sex in the middle of the afternoon.

Opportunities like that don’t come around often.

Plan: Sexytimes?

Mab-? Oh! Uh. ...Really~?

Mmmhmmm.
Okay. Yeah. Let’s go.

So that’s what I spent my day doing, after the whole mess with Taffy getting us to set sail was worked out. Poor girl panics, and it just makes everything worse.

She’s much better now, though.

Really, she is.

Oh god I’m going to get us all killed. I- I can’t even manage to get the Sunny out of the harbor without nearly getting us all killed and we all already know how to sail. Fuck.

Fuck!

Anyway. It honestly reminds me of what we used to do in school, in the dorm, for conflict resolution- what happened after the barbecue lunch, I mean. It’s funny- it was almost impossible to get enough money together for a bribe that would actually work, but we in my dorm could buy things fairly easily.

This is why Sacabah exists at all.

“Mab, are you telling a crazy roommate story to compete with Mark?” says Bryony.

“Yes.” I say.

“...Can I broadcast to the entire ship? We’re already underwater, and it’s been a few hours; the fun’s starting to wear off.” she said.

“Fine with me.” I said.

“Oh boy.” said Sanji, drinking his cup of coffee at the table.

“So. Sacabah is what happens when you try to say Sock Combat after eating a triple bacon deluxe meat-monster burger, a full tray of pot brownies, and two pints of milk in about an hour. Without passing out.

“I’ll say this here and now; I did not come up with Sacabah. That was Lamia- Trafalgar Lamia, you know, Torao’s sister? Trafal-guy? Traffy? The Guy with Broken-glass Eyes? Shady McShades? Yeah, Him- his sister, she- with the murderface? Remember her- she punched Aokiji’s ice wall into water? Yeah, that’s Lamia. Lamia was the one to come up with our last resort for settling disputes in the dorm more or less peacefully. After that, we had to use my method.
“In the hell pit that was our very easy to repair dorm, we would go down a short list of solutions and discussions to solve any problems between us before we arrived at Sacabah.

“Firstly, if one of the disputers was that week’s Queen of Cock Rock, as determined by our running Grease tournaments… Ah, Grease is a cross between Poker, Blackjack, and Roulette. Very popular in Skua. I’ve got a deck if anyone wants to learn-? Hi, Nami.” I say.

“I heard there was a card-game I’ve never played before and I came right over.” said Nami, her eyes sparkling.

“Right. I wrote down the rules, for just such an occasion.” I say.

“Mab… these are laminated.” she says.

“Yep. Anyway, the Queen of Cock Rock would be the current winner of our Grease tournaments, and, so long as she had possession of the giant chunk of malachite carved in the likeness of an extremely stylized penis- no real dick I’ve ever seen has quite that many veins, spikes, and ridges at the same time- she was automatically right.” I say.

“...Dare I ask what happened to the Cock Rock, pchelka?” said Sanji.

“Stolen by Maenads during the Dead Week, which is the week after Finals.” I said.

“Oh.” he said.

“Mhm. At least they didn’t mess up the trampoline, that would have been much worse; and the lesbian orgy was pretty much over by then, so it wasn’t really a terrible loss. It did turn Martha’s vagina green for about a day and a half, and she got the worst yeast infection- hello, Robin, Chopper.” I say.

“MAB, MALACHITE IS A TERRIBLE DILDO MATERIAL-” growls Chopper, sitting at a chair next to a choking Sanji.

Nami is still reading the instructions to Grease, and is making notations on a small notepad about the game. Oh dear.

“Mab, you know how I feel about recent anthropological traditions.” said Robin.

“I mean. We didn’t mean to end each year with a lesbian orgy but the older you get, the less fun just jumping around on a trampoline in the woods buck naked becomes.” I said.

I hand Sanji a handkerchief; reel it in, babe.

“Of course. -Well, don’t let me interrupt your story.” says Robin.

“Ah, sure. So, if it wasn’t something that could be decided by the Queen of Cock Rock- like, that was stuff like ‘Which Takeout are we getting this time?’ or ‘Am I getting the good lube from the conbini or just more coconut oil again?’ For things that mattered more, we actually talked it out a lot.
I was getting my doctorate in psychology, and a lot of my labwork was actually facilitating genuine communication between my roommates. Usually, that worked- for stuff like ‘Can I date your ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend?’ or ‘Can you help me study this again?’ or ‘I can’t make myself orgasm anymore but my pussy’s about to wither on the vine, can you help a girl out?’ . You know. Stuff you need to talk over.” I say.

I hand Sanji another hanky, and **Continuity Error** him the pitcher of cold fridge-water; I give everyone a glass, too, just so it’s fair. Mm. Water.

“Anyway. Level one- Queen of Cock Rock. Level two: Conversation Communication. Level three was the straight up Compromise: if it’s the same price to get less of both of what you want, get both. Share the shelf; share the bathroom; share the clothes, or the dildo- well washed and sanitized, yes, Chopper- or the bed with the good mattress. We actually had a rotating schedule, for the good mattress.

“Ah, before we got to the actual physical side of conflict resolution, there was one more thing we could do; we could Weigh the Consensus, which means we would figure out the issue, and weigh in on a side; the side with the most votes would win, in that case.

“If all that didn’t work, we’d go to Sacabah. Sacabah also had a lot of rules, mainly because of what had happened in previous instances of Sacabah when we didn’t have some of the rules and things got… well, there’s only one time Sacabah went all the way to Throwdown, and that was… bad. Sacabah was the last step before we started getting into no-take-backs, serious consequences areas.

“In our time together at school, my dorm mates and I only really had one Throwdown each year; and those were **real fights**, the kind that can end friendships and leave people with permanent injuries. Sacabah only accounted for one, during the first year; the others were things that managed to fester all year before exploding during Finals Week; thus the Orgy, during Dead Week. Moda is actually very smart about interpersonal relationships; and considering we were all we had in the dorm, and would know each other the rest of our lives…” I said, before stopping to drink some water.

“Hm. So, you would play a sort of war-game to settle disputes after exhausting an escalating tier of conflict resolution solutions, and if that was not effective, you’d go have an actual fight- after which, to repair the communal relationship, your cohort of dorm mates would engage in ritualized orgiastic affirmations of trust, respect, and care?” summarizes Robin.

“That’s about right, yeah. ...You’re writing this down, Robin?” I said.

“Of course!” she said.

“Uh- I’ll give you a second to finish, then I’ll explain Sacabah.” I said, drinking some more water.

Sanji is a bit pale, but he’s not bleeding anymore; Chopper gave him a stick of silver nitrate and he’s cauterized himself.

“Hey, Franky.” I said.
“Hey, Mab-sis! Mind if I...?” said Franky.

“Sure!

“I was on the rules of Sacabah, right? Right- okay, so.

“Rule the First: Combat was held in the main room of the dorm. If you left the front room you forfeited.

“Rule the Second: Combatants must wear protective headgear, a mouth guard, a cup, kneepads, elbow pads, and for those with glasses, eye-protecting cage guards. Gloves are optional, but recommended, and additional protective gear will be allowed on the basis of how cool it looks.

“Rule Three: Combatants are allowed one sock of their choosing, filled with a substance of their choosing.

“Four: The sock can be attached to the end of a pole or stick to increase range, but each time you strike your opponent with your pole it’s a foul. Four fouls and you forfeit.

“Five: You may bring two items from your room to place strategically in the main room as either cover or as a hazard.

“Six: No using noncombatants as shields.

“Seven: No condoms. This was instituted after Lamia got her MBS- that thing Mark has that lets him switch physical forms at will; which I also have, and can give to other people if they ever want...? Lamia’s genderfluid, so- no, no, she described it as being a very accommodating bisexual? Lami’s got one of the strongest senses of self I’ve ever seen, so that’s probably why... - anyway, Lami tried to cockslap Perona for twenty five minutes, that Sacabah. Here’s a fun fact for you: It’s incredibly difficult to stay erect when you’re trying to cock slap someone as they swing a sock full of marbles at you, so Lami was also furiously masturbating for those twenty five minutes of Sacabah.” I said.

“Eh!?! Mab- does the MBS create a full physical change, or is it just cosmetic?” said Chopper.

“Currently, it’s a cosmetic change; if Mark wants to be a fully working man, I’d need to jailbreak the MBS.”

“Jailbreak…?” said Chopper, tilting his head in question.

“Oh. It’s a process of removing restrictions on the information matrixes of the device, imposed due to the method of it’s purchase. Because I got the MBS’ we have at a sex shop, which was cheap, they were pre-optimised for use by prostitutes; there are medical versions too. The only real differences between the prostitute standard and the medical standard is price and packaging; the ones meant for prostitutes are much less finicky, but need to be jailbroken to have access to all the bells and whistles, while the ones meant for medical purposes are very precise, but require a lot of maintenance which can be… ugh.

“I mean- it’s cheaper to make just one machine and alter it after the fact, than it is to make two different machines, so that’s what they do but…”

“Oh. So… you could be a fully working physical man, if you wanted?” said Chopper.

“Yeah. Or a mermaid. Or a mink. It works with all the Tribes of the World- including the Automata, although that seems a bit… problematic, to me- and… Sanji, yes, I can be a mermaid if you want.”
“...What kind of mermaid would you even-?” sighs Sanji in bewildered glee.

“Little Tunny. Or a Mako Shark- but to start, a Little Tunny Mermaid. Breathe, love. We can do that later today, if you’d like- but not if you’ve passed out from excitement.”

I leave Sanji to his sparkling eyed sex-noodle dance. Oh my pervert-husband, how I do love thee so.

“Isn’t that kind of…?” squints Nami.

“It’s honestly like putting on a costume, Nami; using one… even the medical ones, you’re never entirely unaware of the fact that you’re playing a role. And I know we’ve had the ‘roleplay in the bedroom’ conversation, so-”

“Okay, I mean. Hm. Do they all switch genders, like yours, or…?” said Nami.

“No, there are male and female specific versions- which, considering the overall size and form of the whole individual unit… I mean, it’s kinda like how Bryony will link her snails to get a better signal; you can link MBS’ together to create more dynamic forms.”

“Hm.” said Nami.

“Not while you’re pregnant.”

“Aw, come on!” whined Nami.

“Nope, even a non-jailbroken version that only changes you cosmetically has the potential to seriously injure you during pregnancy. That’s why the prostitute versions make a point of having all their physical shifting functions locked, and the medical versions require extensive pass coding.”

Robin looks at me, and waggles her eyebrows. I blink back at her, and sigh.

“Robin, if you want the so called ‘Full Human Experience’, I’m going to say it now; I can only give you one gender. Not because you can’t handle both; but because your sense of self is very eroded. You can be a woman, who can look like other women; you can be a woman who looks like many different men. **You cannot be both.** Make your choice, and I’ll make it happen- and I’ll make it happen as far as you want it to go. But only in one direction.”

“...Ah. This is one of those “Who you really are” things, isn’t it.” sighs Robin.

“Yep. Sorry, bae; I can’t ethically allow you to destroy your sense of self more than you have already. I love you too much to let you hurt yourself like that.”

“...Fine.” grumbles Robin, before a shadow passes across her face- too fast for most people to see.

I am not most people.
“So- if you don’t want to talk about this with me later, will you journal about it?”

“...We can probably talk about it later, sure.” hums Robin, before shaking off her malaise and smiling at me, gratefully.

“Cool beans. Now, where was I- six seven- aha. Eight: No putting socks over the body. This, surprisingly, wasn’t made a rule after the Cock Slap Debacle, but after Lami bought thigh highs so she could literally kick the shit out of Martha.

“Nine: All weapons have to be approved by at least two of the noncombatant roommates. This was because of the Cock Slap Debacle, actually.

‘Ten: No going full Norten. This was instituted after I filled a hockey sock with hockey pucks and tied it to the end of a goalie’s hockey stick and became completely unstoppable for about three months. Every time I participated in Sacabah I tried to go full Norten again, but was always shot down- excepting for one time, which is what this story is about.” I said.

“Mab.” said Sanji.

“Yes my love?” I said.

“...Really?” sighed Sanji, exasperated at my past antics.

“I was not about to sit through another showing of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde: The Musical. I would be dead and buried on that hill, if necessary.”

“Mab, your musical tastes are a bit...”

“Die upon that hill, Sanji. Upon that very hill. Hello, Brook!”

“Mab, you can’t be saying- Frank Wilhorn musicals are still being produced?” said Brook, agog.

“Yes, and it’s terrible and I had to see it five times before I put my foot down and fought all my roommates who kept making it the Dorm Outing of the Week and aaaaaargh-”

“Mab, I’m so sorry.” said Brook, agast.

“Thank you. That really means a lot to me. Now, Rule Eleven: One song played on a loop until the fight ended. The first song of choice was ‘Bring Da Ruckus’.”

“Hrm?” squeaks Bryony, suddenly very interested.

“I’ll let you borrow my taped sessions, Bryony. Then, of course, that new moving picture show came out and we all loved ‘Come A Little Bit Closer’; and finally, we just decided to alternate between the first two and ‘Turn Down For What’.”

“Oh my god.” said Bryony.

“Yeah, I always forget how young you are, Bry. It came out about four years ago; I think I still have the LP somewhere...”

“Mm!” chirps a very happy Bryony.

“Yeah, remind me tomorrow and I’ll make a mixtape for you, I guess. I mean, we all knew if the
fight went on too long the song would inevitably devolve into the Skuan version of “I Wanna Fight Your Father”, but that was because Perona’s a little shit with the sound mixers.

“Anyway. Rule Twelve: No grabbing your opponent by the balls. That’s an automatic forfeit.” I said.

“Lamia?” said Sanji.

“She got grabbed; Moda did the grabbing. That was... that could have been bad, yall. And finally- the Thirteenth Rule: Fights go until someone forfeits, someone surrenders, or the referee calls it- because one of us always had to sit it out, to make the teams even, y’see.

“So in like, March of the Fifth Year, Perona and I had a pretty significant issue with each other because of some incorrect relationship decisions she had made. She was dating one of my exes, which normally for us wasn’t a big deal, but my ex had cheated on me twice and then dumped me when I called them out on it, so there was pretty significant animosity between the two of us. The issue between Perona and I wasn’t about if she should date them or not; she’s her own person and is allowed to make her own terrible decisions. The issue was that I declared that my ex wasn’t allowed over ever because I never wanted to see them ever again, not ever, and I didn’t trust them in my house, even with other people there.

“Perona thought I was overreacting; I thought she was being an inconsiderate fuckwad. This led to the use of the penultimate level of our dispute system, which didn’t go well.

“Lamia had won our Grease tournament that week, so we had to actually compromise, which neither of us were willing to do, so we moved on to the vote. Moda and Lamia sided with me in the vote, but Martha thought my ex was actually quite nice and that more went wrong in our relationship that just them cheating on me- which, yeah, but dammit that’s why you talk to your girlfriend about your issues- and Easeelie just wanted to watch us fight so we split the vote.

“So, two days after the vote, Perona and I gear up and meet in the living room where we all discovered that she is literally the most stone cold bitch out of all of us because she has two pool balls in a pair of silk stockings. She had made Sacabah nunchucks and it was fucking awesome.

“So I attempted to go full Norten again, because obviously why not; and Easeelie and Martha argued that if we were to allow fucking bomb-ass nunchucks I should be allowed to use my favorite. Plus, Easeelie pointed out that if Perona got within three feet of me I was basically fucked because I wasn’t allowed to hit her with the stick, which was something that literally none of us had thought of before that moment.

“I lived with geniuses, but let me tell you- there’s nothing quite as stupid as a group of smart people.

“So we go to our corners in the main room and Martha reminds us of the rules and we begin our fight. We both come out of our corners and immediately I wind up and swing as hard as I possibly can at Perona’s knees, because firstly, I’m a fucking asshole and won’t grow out of it probably ever, and secondly, I genuinely wanted to hurt her.

“I caught her on the inside of her left knee and her leg literally snapped out from underneath her. I took her out in one swing, and she had been talking for three days about how she was going to fuck me up.

“I’m not the nice twin; the nice twin is dead. I’m the other one.

“Anyway, Perona’s on the ground screaming like a stuck pig because I just broke her leg with sock
full of pucks and I’m screaming with sweet sweet victory because I fucking won and that meant the Ex would never again darken our doorstep and uh. So, yeah, we loaded Perona into Lami’s rickshaw and helped run her to the clinic nearby- the one for animals, because they had the kind of plaster Lami would need to set Perona’s leg with.

“I broke Perona’s femur in just one place but it fuckin’ snapped, y’all. So we got back home a bit after noon, and Perona had left her snail-phone in the dorm and she had like a dozen text messages from the Ex.

“A text messenger is an add-on for a baby den den rig; it looks like the receipt printing part of a cash register, with a funny bar thing where the letters are, and the ink cartridge? There’s a secondary add on for something like a typewriter, so you can send and receive messages- only works if you have the right receiving device on both ends, though. Bryony has a few, if you want to take a closer look. So, the Ex had sent a bunch of messages, talking about how Perona’s a great girl and being with her was so fun but her friends (mostly me, but not gonna lie, Easeelie was a piece of work) were fucking terrible and- the Ex knew if they asked Perona to pick between them and us that she would always pick us so they were ‘making the decision for her’ and breaking up with her. They sent this shit to Perona literally an hour after we got to the clinic- Lami had just finished sedating and straightening Perona’s leg, by then.

“It’s been ten years, now, and Perona still gets almost incandescent with fury if I ask her if she remembers The Time I Broke Her Leg Over That Person Who Dumped Her Not Two Hours Later. Hello, Taffy, Gurry. Sup?” I said.

“Mab-mama, you’re fucking savage, you know that?” said Taffy, admiringly.

“Mm. Yep. Anyway, time for my nap so’s the Narcolepsy doesn’t give me trouble; Sanji, you gonna join me?” I said.

“Mmmhm.” said Sanji.

And then we went to go have a nap for twenty minutes.

“Uh, Nami- why do you want all these coins, exactly?”

“Because we’re going to play a game, Gurry.”

“Uh. Okay…?”

So Sanji has a fetish for mermaids. I mean, I kind of always knew this but, um. Well, it’s a gooAAAAAH good thing he’s already cauterized himself today, otherwi- I- I- nnngh. Ffaah!

Oh oh aaah! Mmmnghaah!
“You were talking about me having a fetish?”

“Y-you do!”

“Hm. I don’t know, are you sure you’re not just sensitive?”

“Gnnaaaagh- ah, ah, ah, don’t pinch! It feels too good- Sanji, S-saaah ah ah ah ah ooooh oah ahaaaaah-”

My back arches off of our bed as Sanji’s long fingers dig into the tender swollen flesh of my pu-aaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAH scissors his fingers and stretches me open to see down into my shallow pinkness and ah ah ah ah AH AH AH AH ughnnnggh e-every time he digs h-his fingers into me a jolt of pure pleasure races through my body I- I- I can’t- gnnnngh! Nngaaaaah!

I kick and buck and it’s too much it’s too good I can’t-

Step outside my body to see this: the MBS doesn’t rely on actual reality to work. It relies on magic. So. If I had been a Little Tunny Mermaid, I would have been the size of Brook. From tailfin to the top of my head, I would have been the same length as Brook, flat on his back.

Flat on my side , Sanji has his legs wrapped around me; one extends beneath my waist, supporting the curve of my spine with his massive thigh. The other wraps over my hip, keeping me from flailing out of our bed.

My back is covered in dark blue scales, with white trails like the wriggling of earthworms arching out in organic patterns, like the stripes of a savannah cat. Against what would be the calves in any other Tribe, sharp spiky fins jut out in pale cold-silver; my skin is the same color but I have less of it showing; most of my upper body is covered in scales, from the blades of my shoulders where my wings usually are, all down my spine from the back of my neck, patches of skin across my arms-though not where my marriage tattoo rests- and over my breasts, down my ribs, down down down my body is covered over in silver scales on the front and black-blue on the back, the sheen of metal where smooth skin once lay. Golden scales are flecked here and there where prominent freckles normally would be; and there's a smaller smattering of bright red freckle-scales where some of my sun-spot freckle patches are. My caudal fin is fairly small, sharp almost; it’s honestly not built for style at all, but pure speed. My primary and secondary dorsal fins are basically triangles attached to my spine; a ridge of spikes going between my dorsal fins and my caudal fin and up again in the front to show where the split would begin in a few more years. My pelvic fins are triangles too, stubby, almost, and more or less there to keep me from rolling over.

Saaaaah ah ah ah, Sanji’s playing with the base of one- snap back inside my body, focus on his calloused hands teasing and toying with the sensitive base of my pelvic fin and scrEAM into the pillows as another jolt of pure pleasure rockets across every sparking nerve-

Sanji’s hand is burrowed inside of me, the tips of his fingers exploring, plumbing the quivering depths of my pussy; teasing the warm pads of his fingertips over the almost oversensitive surface of my cervix and aah aaah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah aaaaah AAAAAH AHA AH AHAH AH AH AH AH AH AH OH OW OW OW-
“BUTTERSCOTCH!”

“OH! Shit, sorry, I’m sorry-”

“Nnngh-”

“Am I hurting you?”

“N-yes, yes that really hurt-”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry for hurting you- do you want me to take my hand out?”

“N-yes, t-take it out, please, Sanji-”

“Okay, I’m- mmngh- i-it’s out-”

“Nnngh- Faaah, ah, ow, ow-”

“-Do you want me to stop touching you entirely?”

“Nngh- no, please don’t go, please don’t leave me-”

“Okay, I won’t. I’m not going anywhere, Mab.”

“Nothing above the waist right now, I- I can’t. Nnnugh… -It was too much, and, and it wasn’t good when it was- I- I’m sorry-”

“No, I pushed too far too fast, I’m sorry-”

“I should have said the slowdown word e-e-earlier, Sanji, I-”

“We can both be at fault, Mab. It’s- I don’t think it’s a contest. Can I hold you, or do you still need to hold yourself?”

“You c-can- hah- you can hold my hand, I think.”

“Okay.”

Sanji interlaces his fingers with mine, his grip almost painfully tight; I hardly ever use my safeword, so… I don’t know why him pinching my cervix with his fingers, of all things, triggered me, but it did. My heart is racing in my chest, and I feel like I need to fight something- but there’s nothing here but my husband and our bed and a snail on an alarm clock. I shift between his legs and return to my natural state; from Mermaid, to Fairy.

I shift, and squirm out from beneath him, never letting go of his hand, until finally I can rest my head on his shoulder. Sanji wraps an arm around me, presses his palm flat to my back and strokes along the velvet of my spine. Dorsal velvet; it’s called dorsal velvet.

I wrap my other arm around him, press my cool hand between his shoulder blades and stroke tiny circles into his skin. He slowly starts shaking, and I rearrange our legs a little more, before tilting us both back down; when we’re flopped on our sides, I tuck our legs and feet together, press my naked stomach and chest against his. I let go of his hand, draw away and up; press a cold hand onto a hot face.
He’s always so furious when this happens; a helpless, sickling fury because the person who hurt me is dead and all that’s left behind is my broken pieces. I’m better now, than I was before; but I’ll never be quite right again. Shhh. This is not your fault; this is not your fault, Sanji.

I tuck myself into his embrace, and let him hold me. Aftercare isn’t just for the submissive, after all.

“...I’m alright, now. Sanji, I’m alright.”

“-I’m… not.”

“I know. You can hold me as long as you need to, okay?”

I feel Sanji nod, his hot face and tears smearing over my shoulder and neck, his hot breath shivering out of his shaking body. I tuck myself into him, pull him tighter to me and he sobs a little; shhhh. Shhh. I’m here. I’m here. I’m here.

I start to scratch fingers against his scalp, rubbing fingertips into his skin; I tuck my hand over his head and stroke my thumb against the back of his ear. He shudders, and sighs, and smiles against my skin.

I’m still horny, actually, but- I can wait. I’ll wait for however long he needs.

“...You’re still horny?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“...I mean. I just… I’m so angry, still, that you got hurt like that, and- I’m. Mmng. Is it weird that I’m still horny too?”

“No, or at least- I don’t think so. I mean- I’m still angry, about what happened to me. I try not to hold onto it, because it turns into rage so quickly- but, um. Fff, yeah, still horny.”

“Mm. I- angry sex. We’ve never had angry sex, have we?”

“No. ...D’you want to?”

“Um. Yeah. I- maybe not with me on top?”

“That’s probably for the best, yeah. -Can I touch your horns?”

“What.”

“They’re just buds, right now, but- I mean. Can I touch? Is that okay?”

“...Fine. I guess.”

“...I won’t if you don’t want me to-”

“Mab, if anyone’s going to touch them, it’s going to be me or you. I’d prefer if it was you, first.”

“Ah. Well. Alright...”
So. Remember how Udoroth is known as a Demon Lord? That’s not hyperbole. He was an actual Demon- or he became one. Demons have very strong Line traits that mark them out; for males, it’s horns and tails. Females have bat-wings and multiple sets of dugs- er, breasts (like most female Mink, actually). These traits don’t really pop out until puberty is about done with you; so, since Sanji’s twenty one, now, his horns and tail are just starting to come in. I mean, he always had the ridge…

Ah, right.

There’s a thick, bristling ridge of fur that starts at the lowest point of his hairline in the back and runs all the way down to where a nub is starting to form; reversed from the normal hair patterns, ridgebacked. That nubby bit is his sacrum, which is now about the length of my pinky, outside of his body; it’s going to grow, now that his major bodily changes are mostly finished. He’ll have… basically a tail a bit like a kitten or a cat’s tail, in the end- it depends on a few things, really. Mostly, lineage, though there is some debate about aggression being a deciding factor- to which, I say it’s the horns that would be changed by aggression, not the tail.

Tails are for balancing; horns are for fighting.

Anyway. Right now, his little tail is very ticklish, and he doesn’t like it being touched; so, I don’t touch it. It does tend to curl when something feels really good for him, which is cute as hell, and it flicks at the tip when he’s really contented, and I want to pet it - but he doesn’t like it being touched. He does like getting scratches at the very base of it, where his very bristly dorsal ridge turns into more velvety fur; says it feels nice, like a hug but scratchy. It'll get maybe as long as… from the base of his wrist to the tip of his pinky finger? Double in length, by the time he’s thirty. So cute! No touch!

The horns are different. He’s always been very careful of his head…

His horns are growing out of his frontal bone, in his skull; just over his temples, actually, and a bit anterior to them. Sensible placement for protective horns, really. Right now, they’re just velveteen nubs, only just starting to get ennervated; as far as I know, they’re basically… they have about the same amount of sensation, when fully formed, as a fingernail. Heat, pressure, not much else; and surprisingly sensitive, for two pieces of keratin-covered bone.

Sanji’s horns are just about big enough to start poking out of his hair, and they’re going to get bigger as the month progresses; by February, he won’t be able to hide them under his hair, and by May, they’ll be almost full size. Probably not bigger than the length of his hand, from the heel of it to his fingertips; a nice rack.

Oh my god I get to make ‘nice rack’ jokes about my husband, fuck yes.

Hm. Demon horns, while they’re in velvet, are blood-hot and waxy, and Sanji is very sensitive about having them touched. He watches me with glittering eyes that blaze blue through the slits of his eyelids as I gently card his hair away from his face, and then he shudders as I stroke a fingertip down the hot waxy velvet of his right horn. His red Norten stripe is thick and dark over his face, and his teeth- his fangs- squirmed around in his mouth and his mouth can’t decide if he’s smiling or grimacing or snarling as I gently gently gently stroke a circle around the softly rounded tip and he shudders again.

Huffs, snorts, tugs himself away and I let him go. Hot, panting breath from a mouthful of fangs; my husband is surely the most beautiful man to ever live.
“This turns you on?”

“Yes.”

“-Can I bite you?”

“Oh yes. Please don’t break the skin.”

“...I think I can do that.”

And then he closes his mouth over the meat of my shoulder and everything moves very fast after that. The last moment I can talk about coherently, before snarling and yowling and the thrashing buzz of my wings is Sanji hooking one of my legs over his shoulder and the eye-watering pop of his dick plunging deep inside of me the glorious stretch of him against my soft and liquid places and the deep bone-shaking growl that came from his body as his fangs- not, fangs, really, pin teeth, teeth like needles or a deep sea-fishes teeth, hidden inside his gums unless he’s very aroused and then they pop out and- aaaaaaaah-

Mmm. It’s not very often that Sanji actually marks my skin; partially because he’s so careful, and partially because I just don’t bruise very easily. So the fact that I had bite marks across my shoulder and neck for about three days afterwards is a pretty good indication of exactly how hard he was biting me.

Looking back on everything, this is probably when he impregnated me. This moment, right here; it might have happened the next day, but… I have a feeling that this particular round of lovemaking was the one that put buns in my oven.

There is no such thing as a one hundred percent effective method of birth control, after all- aside from abstinence, which only really works if you’re already informed of the dangers; or a vasectomy or tubal ligation, and even that doesn’t work all the time. Life finds a goddamn way; and Sanji… he’s adaptive. All of him is; which means, since Chopper didn’t reformulate the anti-implantation medicine, not only did my body adapt to it; so did Sanji’s.

And we don’t really use condoms; him because they haven’t figured out how to get silicone thin enough yet and that’s one of the only substances that will keep it’s integrity when faced with his spume, and me because I like barebacking, okay? With a partner who’s clean, and disease free, and uncircumcised, and very enthusiastic and- mmmngh.

I have a cum fetish; I realized that about the first time Sanji ejaculated inside of me and several things about my past sexual history suddenly made logical sense. I was always chasing that warm-cold feeling of male spume being squirted into me; but Sanji’s spume is actually fairly close to boiling hot; he’s very, very virile. I know this because I checked.

So. After our nap and wild fornication, we took a shower, made out for an hour after that, and then went back to the galley; Sanji had to lay out the dinner things, and I promised to help him.

We walk into the galley, hand in hand; Sanji leads, and I follow. We come in through the infirmary, where Chopper is carefully picking broken glass out of Gurry’s arm. Marzipan is in a small bath, herbs floating on the water. Wha-?

“Um.” I say.
“Nami is very competitive, which is fine, but her pregnancy has given her a powerful fear of snakes, and Marzipan is actually very venomous which I guess is what she was really reacting to- anyway, Franky cleaned up all the glass and mopped up the water, too, and Robin’s nearly done disinfecting all the blood, and Nami’s being cuddled by Bryony on the couch and she’s really upset so try not to make her feel worse, okay? Mm, Brook’s playing a lullabye, so, if you feel sleepy going in, well... But, yeah, I understand now why Nami made Taffy the navigator for the next while, she’s really not at all herself.” says Gurry.

“I’ve got almost all the shards out; next time, try using your *weapons* instead of your goddamn forearms to block, Gurry. Marzipan- well, the calming bath should have him back to rights in another half hour or so, but- Gurry, maybe consider just letting Nami take your damn money?” grumps Chopper, his nose and mouth covered with a facemask and his fingers delicately moving over Gurry’s bloody arm with a pair of tweezers shining bright.

“I’ll let that woman have my money when she wins, Chopper. Otherwise, no. I will not.” says Gurry in a bland, dry voice.

“Right.” says Chopper, his eyes flat black and resigned to living on a floating ship of goddamn assholes.

“So, can we go through to the Galley, or-?” says Sanji, his free hand over his eyes and my hand clenched tight in his. Not too tight- but tight.

“I mean, it should be fine? I mean, Nami’s not crying anymore, and the cards are all picked up again, so- oh, uh, we broke a glass? And there shouldn’t be blood in your kitchen, Sanji, but if there is, I’m sorry.” said Gurry, cheerfully.

Don’t get it twisted, friends; Gurry is shy, but *savage*. Sanji lets out a deep, grumbling sigh.

“Chopper, can you do physicals for everyone? Stuff happens when you’ve got Fae blood and you turn twenty, that’s why the age of majority in the Faelands is twenty- anyway, things being how they are, pretty much everyone in the world has at least a little Fae blood in them, whether they ken or no, and... Well, I need a check up. Schedule it in, aye?” Sorry, love- but I care about you more than I want to salve your pride.

“Aye aye, Mab. Oh, I need to restock the bandages- not the wrapping ones, the gauze pads. That was a weird game.”

“Alright. ...Gurry just broke the glass, did he?”

“Yeah.”

“Heh. I’ll make some more gauze, sure.”

Anyway; we went into the galley. The detritus of a fairly disastrous game of Grease litters the galley table; coins are scattered everywhere. Nami is sitting on the couch, being held by a gently humming Bryony. Brook is playing a soft melody, incidental music to soothe the temper. I *Continuity Error* the coins into a bowl with a lid, resuffle the cards and tuck them back into a box that’ll fit all of them; both bowl and box go into a bigger box, along with the golf pencils, the post-it notes, and the
flippin’ coin which isn’t actually worth anything. It’s a commemorative coin I got when I graduated; worth less than the metal it’s made of.

Sanji stalks into his kitchen and checks everything over; but no, Robin knows how to clean up blood. He still starts wiping everything down because he’s a bit obsessive.

Hm.

Think about something, Mab. Boredom is the enemy of all good things.

A submarine or a ship can float because of the weight of water that it displaces is equal to the weight of the ship. This displacement of water creates an upward force called the buoyant force and acts opposite to gravity, which pulls everything in the World- however, unlike a ship, a submarine can control it’s buoyancy, thus allowing it to sink and surface at will. Thousand Sunny is not a submarine; he’s a ship. However, due to the bubble-coating, the overall buoyancy of the ship was more or less inverted- so now, and I’m not entirely sure I’m right, but now our ship is more like a submarine than a ship.

So. To control our buoyancy, the ship has ballast balloons and tanks, which can alternately be filled with water or air. Before the coating was inflated, the main ballast balloon was filled with air; as we descended into the water, the main balloon was filled with water. Changing the ratio of water and gas in the balloon changes our rate of descent. When we need to surface again, our ballast tanks will be filled with air, thus making our ship less dense than the surrounding water.

As we dive, the ballast tanks will be flooded with water and the air in the ballast tanks is vented from the submarine until its overall density is greater than the surrounding water and we sink. Negative buoyancy.

A supply of compressed air is maintained aboard the submarine in air flasks for life support and for use with the ballast tanks. In addition, we have movable sets of short ‘wings’ called hydroplanes on the stern that help to control the angle of the dive. Think fins on a fish, maybe; the hydroplanes are angled so that water moves over the stern, which forces the stern upward; thus, the Sunny is angled downward.

To keep our ship level, because we have to dive in increments; we can’t just dive all at once, we have to equalize… it’s the same going up, actually. Anyway; we have to maintain a balance of air and water in the trim tanks so that its overall density is equal to the surrounding water. Neutral buoyancy.

When we reach our next cruising depth- should be in about half an hour, actually- so that the ship travels level through the water. Water is also forced between the bow and stern trim tanks to keep us level. We can steer in the water by using the rudder to turn starboard or port; the hydroplanes control the fore-aft angle of the submarine. To keep forward momentum, we’ll be using the sails and, if necessary, the engines.

Mm, Franky’s Cola Engine- I’ll get to that, hang on.

When we surface, compressed air flows from our compressed air flasks into the ballast tanks until our ship’s density is less than the surrounding water, and we’ll rise.

Positive Buoyancy.
We’ll also angle the hydroplanes so that water moves up over the stern, which will force the stern downward; therefore, the submarine is angled upward. In an emergency, the ballast tanks can be filled quickly with high-pressure air to take the submarine to the surface very rapidly.

There are three main problems of life support in our new closed environment: maintaining the air quality; maintaining a fresh water supply; and maintaining temperature.

Maintaining the Air Quality comes first; the air we breathe is made up of significant quantities of four gases: Nitrogen, Oxygen, Argon, and Carbon Dioxide.

When we breathe in air, our bodies consume its oxygen and convert it to carbon dioxide. Exhaled air contains about four and a half percent carbon dioxide. Our bodies do not do anything with nitrogen or argon, usually. So this is the problem; our ship is a sealed container that contains people, animals, plants, and a limited supply of air. There are three things that absolutely must happen in order to keep the air on our ship breathable.

Firstly: Oxygen has to be replenished as it is consumed. If the percentage of oxygen in the air falls to low, a person suffocates.

Secondly: Carbon dioxide must be removed from the air. As the concentration of carbon dioxide rises, it becomes a toxin.

Thirdly: The moisture that we exhale in our breath must be removed.

Our oxygen is supplied in four ways; we have pressurized tanks of oxygen, an oxygen generator set up in the soldier dock, oxygen canisters that releases oxygen by a very hot chemical reaction, and our ship garden. As we go down, however, the garden will become less useful- plants need light to grow. We have grow-lights, but they’ll contribute to our temperature… Hmm. Oxygen will be released continuously by a system of some kind that Bryony is looking after; there are sensors that monitor the percentage of oxygen in the air, and the oxygen is released in batches periodically through the day.

Carbon dioxide can be removed from the air chemically using soda lime (sodium hydroxide and calcium hydroxide) in devices called scrubbers. The scrubber is also a main component of the gas-shells, in case the gills just aren’t enough. Anyway, the carbon dioxide is trapped in the soda lime by a chemical reaction and removed from the air.

As for moisture, we actually have several very powerful Dials scattered around the ship, acting as dehumidifiers; normally, they mostly live in the bath house. They prevent moisture from condensing on the walls and equipment; and I have lots and lots of them, so… and yes, they can act as another source of water if we absolutely need them.

Secondly, the Fresh Water Supply. Sunny has a set of intakes up in the bow; it’s connected to a distillation apparatus that can take in seawater and produce fresh water. The distillation plant heats the seawater to water vapor, which removes the salts and impurities, and then cools the water vapor into a collecting tank of fresh water. Our distillery can produce thirty eight thousand to one hundred fifty thousand liters of fresh water per day. It’s mainly used for cooling equipment and for supporting the crew- drinking, cooking, personal hygiene, watering the plants… Chopper also distills various
chemicals down in the distillery, because he wanted a still room.

And there’s also a still for alcohol down there; Chopper swears by the ‘grain alcohol is a main component of cough medicine’ rhetoric of cough medicines. He calls his eventual creation “Knockout” because it knocks you the fuck out.

Like, you can set it on fire. It’s one fifty one proof if it’s a day.

Thirdly, and finally, temperature: the temperature of the ocean surrounding the ship is typically thirty-nine degrees Fahrenheit, or four degrees Celsius.

As a side note; I know most of the World uses Celsius to measure temperature. I grew up with Fahrenheit. To understand Fahrenheit, don’t think of it as a numerical metric- think of it as a percentage. One hundred degrees Fahrenheit is one hundred percent hotness levels, go inside you crazy person; get some water, sit in the shade. Hot! On hundred and fourteen percent hotness in the shade: go find a cave or a basement, do your shit at night. Don’t go out there.

Thus, fourteen percent hotness levels is cold as fuck.

One hundred degrees Celsius is how many you need to boil water; zero is when water freezes.

Four degrees Celsius is cold as hell; and the coating of the ship does conduct a little of our internal heat to the surrounding water. The problem is, the coating doesn’t conduct enough of our heat to the water; thus, the heat sinks. Meaning, the ship is now cold as balls, because our natural heat, just thrown off from being alive, would cook us alive. So, I’m knitting angora-things now.

So fluffy. So soft.

We also need electrical power; to operate the lights and so on. Normally, this supply is provided for by specialized plants in our garden; they’re called Electric Banana Palms. They work by turning sunlight into electrical energy in the fruiting body of the banana; this energy can be released by… there’s a process by which batteries are made. You need copper, a non-conductive container, and something to mush the bananas with.

Nami loves them.

It’s actually time to harvest them again; and this time, Sanji’s going to take about half of the product and freeze it, so that Nami can have the electric banana fruit she loves. He’ll probably add it to smoothies and breads and so on, there’s not much else to be done with pre-frozen banana slurry...

We also have a turbine system, but Franky’s in charge of all the engines.

As I said before; Light does not penetrate very far into the ocean, so we must navigate through the water virtually blind. However; because we’re not going through the so far uncharted Sea of Monsters, we can use our navigational charts and sophisticated navigational equipment. Taffy and Nami have a lock on that.

The one thing we don’t have, but could, is a SONAR system.
"Mab, what is sonar?"

"SONAR- Sound Navigation and Ranging; it’s a system by which pulses of sound waves travel through the water, reflect off the targeted area and return to the ship. By knowing the speed of sound in water- which is a constant rate- and the time for the sound wave to travel to the target and back, a computer… Oh, I was almost a computer, it’s a person that does complicated calculations, usually for the purposes of telemetry or something like that. Rockets, and things- anyway. A computer can- and must- quickly calculate the distance between the ship and the target. Whales, dolphins, and bats use the same technique for locating prey; it’s called echolocation. You actually use something very like it, when you do your job during the night.”

"Oh. That sounds like the active form- I would assume the passive involves merely listening to the sounds generated by the target, or prey, whatever. You could also identify known ocean floor features, or perhaps identify hidden dangers in the water, like mines..."

"Yeah, you’ve gotten it. Anyway, what’s going on with your sensory air-timing rig, I heard you cursing earlier…?"

"Oh. Well, I realized that in enabling mechanisms to combine together general symbols in successions of unlimited variety and extent, a uniting link is established between the operations of matter- and the abstract mental processes of the most abstract branch of mathematical science. A new, vast and powerful language could be developed for the future use of analysis, so it may become of more speedy and accurate practical application for the purposes of mankind than the means hitherto in our possession have rendered possible. Then I realized that the machinery I’d set up couldn’t quite do what I needed, and I had to redo everything that it’d taken me a good five hours to set up. Ach, I was so downhearted, the only thing I could do to feel better was take a nap.”

"I’d wondered about that, usually you’re much more awake at that time of day-"

"Yeah, the only thing that could fix it then for me was a good long nap.”

"Aw, honey."

"Ah- I’m okay, now. I’m alright, really. I just have to pick a code that’s simple enough to be going on with, and complicated enough to do what I need.”

"Hm. Do a yes-no code; one you can use to write out all the other bits. As far as I can tell, your sensors are just watching for an ‘If this’ situation, to tell your release valves ‘Then that’. It’s just a logic problem, it looks like.”

"If-then; if-then… Binary code… morse code, because then it can be interpreted by snails, and you use a binding key to encode your code so you don’t get foxes in the hen-house and- thanks Mab, I need to go- think about some things- see you later, Sanji I need a sandwich, thank you, bye everyone-”

And she’s gone.

Here’s the litmus test for sandwiches. Or rather, my litmus test: I pretend I am the original Earl of Sandwich. I have asked for non-bread foods to be brought to me inside bread, that I might more easily consume them one-handed while gambling. If it does not enable my wretched gambling habits, it is not what I asked for. Thus, I shall not deign to grace it with the name of my house.

Ergo, it is not a sandwich.
This does mean, however, that a pop-tart, one of those things that bake in the toaster or the toaster oven, is a sandwich—technically a grilled sandwich.

“MAB, POP TARTS ARE FUCKIN’ CALZONES, DAMMIT.”

“A CALZONE IS A SPECIALLY GRILLED SANDWICH, SANJI, AND YOU KNOW IT.”

“THEY’RE DIFFERENT THINGS.”

“NOT!”

“YES!”

“NO!”

The world of cuisine is an ever-changing place. New trade routes open, new ingredients are found, and new ways to prepare even the most basic meals can be discovered in as little as one year’s time. One thing that doesn’t change, though: opinionated people arguing over what food even is, and which one is the best.

Sanji and I have been yanking this piece of conversational gristle between the two of us for fourteen years, now. I remembered all the letters he wrote me, after all; and, after beating his memory with a stick for a while, he remembered all of my letters to him.

We’ve been arguing over, among other things, if toasting pop tarts are sandwiches or calzones for years now. We also argue over if white or red wine is more appropriate for the luncheon meal; Sanji says red is always appropriate, while I say white is better for lighter meals, and neither of us can agree how to mix a damn roz-ee-

“TWO PARTS RED TO ONE PART WHITE, MAB-”

“NO! TWO PARTS WHITE TO ONE PART RED, IT WON’T BE THE RIGHT KIND OF PINK OTHERWISE-”

“AAAARGH-”

Conversational gristle we’ve been yanking on for years now.

“So anyway, do you want me to mill down things? I’ve got knitting on the stitch, and it’s no big deal for me to just… add another thing.”

“Yeah- we’ve got soft fruits that need to go through so I can preserve them, and we’ve got another brace of batteries- oh, and I guess I might as well start planning baby foods? They’ll be able to eat soft food… when?”

“Uh- about four to six months after birth. Really, it’s whenever they start growing teeth; that’s when
you can start supplementing milk with food-things. Teeth-growing usually coincides with the bacteria colonies in the gut maturing; no gut bacteria, no digestion. So- um, right now is okay to start considering their meal plan, but really? Nami’s kids will eat what she eats- and, as they grow, they’ll start eating the food of whoever their favorite person is.”

“...Favorite person?”

“Mmm. When I was a toddler, like, three or four- you don’t actually start making real memories until you’re five or six, but, um, when I was three or so my favorite person was mother’s Guard Captain, Maege.

“Captain Maege hated vegetables, especially the ones I needed to eat to be healthy; she actually really loved junk foods, cookies and things like that. So, of course, since she was my favorite, I wanted to be like her in every way; especially in what she ate. If it wasn’t on her plate at mealtimes- because the Captain of the Guard is actually the personal body-guard of the Queen, and so she was at Mother’s side, always- if it wasn’t on Maege’s plate, I didn’t want it.”

“...So Meg had to eat all the things she hated, so you would eat food you needed.”

“Parenting is not just the domain of the one person who squeezed the baby out of their body, or was there when it hatched. It’s everyone who comes into contact with the baby too; everyone who ever meets that tiny human will leave some kind of mark. If you end up that persons favorite, even for a little while, you have to do your best to help them, and keep them from being hurt.”

“...Mab, I don’t actually like children all that much.”

“Ah- neither do I, Sanji.”

“-You’re a midwife, Mab. And a doula?”

“Still don’t actually like children.”

“-but you’re so much better than me at-?”

“Sanji, I don’t like children all that much; that doesn’t mean I can’t do my job, or be good to them. I’m not entirely sure I’ll even like mine- ours- all that much, but the most important thing is this: You must never, ever, let them see it. They can never know you don’t like them; you get on their level and listen to what they have to say, engage in conversation and do your very best to pay attention to them. It’s a lucky person who likes every person they love.”

“...Huh. It’s a bit like you’re working with customers you want to return, like the ferrier’s set back at the Baratie. But you actually love them, so- hm. I can do that.”

“Mn. And it might well be that we do like our children; we won’t know until we get there, after all. Pass me the big funnel, would you?”

And then I start pouring the banana slurry into the wooden casing, through the stopper. Franky scrubs them out when the electrical energy is spent, and the waste product is actually fairly good for Nami’s Weather Garden.

Ah. Weather Garden.

Nami has to… I guess put weather phenomena into forms she can carry around with her? So, uh,
when the electrical energy is spent from the banana slurry in the batteries, it becomes a very good medium for the cultivation of weather-in-hand that Nami uses to supplement her arsenal. Weather eggs. That’s what she calls them. They grow in cloud-silk roving, iron dust, and de-electrified electric banana slurry. Different chemical and electric mixes, more or less water- and then, she spins them into egg shapes and packs them into non-conductive tubes, for carrying purposes.

She’s got basically her own ammo pack, full of various weather cartridges that she can load into her new Climatact- or rather, Usopp has broken her Climatact down into three distinct weapons. Her Weather Orb is optimized for defence; it’s normal form is a small golden bell that hangs on a chain and gently clinks over her steadily protruding stomach. Like a pregnancy bola, except this one isn’t just a soft chime that rests over the Pudge; if she flicks it with her Haki, the entire thing will become a… well, I fought her using it once, and good god that was not fun.

It’s basically a localized thunderstorm, and Nami doesn’t take it off.

Second weapon is a collapsible bo-staff that Usopp built after he got a look at some of the intricacies of Ryuu Jingu Bang; he can’t put in all the things that the Monkey King’s Staff does, he’s not that good a fabricator, but. He can make it super-extend and super contract; he can make it synergize with the director functions of the Eisen Whip, and eventually back-engineered the Eisen Whip enough to make an Eisen Bo . So she’s got an iron-cloud bo staff that she can appear out of nothing, and then smack the shit out of someone with it; and she can load it on the fly with various Weather Eggs, or pre-load it, and so on.

Her final weapon actually surprised me, because I could have sworn that I didn’t make a very good whip- but her third weapon is actually a whip. For when she needs a wind-sword, she says. Nami’s good with a Weather Orb; and she’s vicious with her bojutsu. But if she pulls out the whip I made for her all the way back in Water 7, it means only one thing: Nami is going to kill someone. I saw her fight with the whip only once, against a crowd of marauders.

Nami can split a man’s skull open with one flick of her whip; take a man’s head from his shoulders, gut him, tear his arms from his body and his legs from his hips. She prides herself on being able to crack flesh from bone with one snap of her whip.

Zoro’s swords number three; Nami doesn’t need a blade to cut a man down.

As women have more to protect, it therefore behooves a woman to be far deadlier than her male counterpart. Sanji would never poison a man.

I would.

“Well. I would.”

“I know.”

“Gurry would too, actually.”

“Mm.”

“...If I couldn’t fight someone openly, and I needed to protect someone, you can bet your tasty buns I’d use poison.”

“Yeah, I know. I- no, you’re right, Mab. I’d never poison a man. I would put broken glass in my enemy’s bread, though.”
“Would you really?”
“Yeah.”

Hmm. My husband is so wonderful.

“Hahaha. Sent them off, then?”
“Yeah.”
“...And just what are you remembering now?”
“Oh, nothing important.”
“Mmhm. -Roger again?”
“Heh, maybe. -You know, Roger… Roger was a hell of a lot like Luffy, back in the early days. Hat and everything. Destiny is starting to take shape; Luffy’s more than proven that he’s worthy of wearing that hat.”
“Mm-hmm. O-oh!”
“Hm?”
“Ha, kicked. Come here, feel-”
“Ah. Um- is it really- you’re sure it’s alright?”
“Ray, you won’t break me. Come here . Give me your hand- tcha, you can drink a mug of coffee in a six-bell squall, but this makes your hand shake?”
“Well, I’ve only been here for the making of- them- oh. Well. N-now that’s a hell of a thing.”
“Hmm. Kicking. Issun punched, too, but she’s a kicker only, so far.”
“Ah. -strong. Strong little kicks, eh. Does it hurt?”
“Mm; no, not really- sometimes it’s annoying, when she won’t stop kicking me at night, but mostly it’s fine.”
“...Sorry- she?”
“Mm. I had a feeling last time, with Issun, that he’d be a boy. This time, my feeling is for a girl; my mother had the same feelings for all her daughters and sons, and her mother before her. It’s a girl. It’s a little odd, actually- feels almost like there’s more than one in there, but I’m awfully small for that… Oof!”
“Woah, kiddo- be gentler on your mama, hey?”
“Hahahaha.”

“Heh. -I’ve decided. I’m going to live a few years more.”

“Oh?”

“Well. For one, I’d like to see how this New Pirate Era shakes out; for another, it’d be nice to see how our kids turn out, hey?”

“Mmm. I’d like it, if you were around; I know you’ll go off and do what you do, but... it’d be nice, maybe, if you spent some time here. With us.”

“Mm. The Sea calls me strong, Shakky; has since I was a boy. I’m- can’t be a pirate anymore. Don’t want a crew, won’t follow anyone but Roger...”

“Ah. Well, Ray- Fresh fish is nice, if you want.”

“-Do you want?”

“I wouldn’t mind it. If you’d like.”

“Mm. Alright. -Woah!”

“-That was three different feet; triplets, I think. All girls.”

“Hah. -I’ll find a fishing boat, or a horse, maybe.”

“Mm. -Issun, what are you up to-?”

“-Washin’ Marbles for games later, Mama!”

“Aha. Finish that up then come here: your sisters are kicking, and I know you wanted to feel-”

“AH-!”

I watch our son come scrambling into the living room; his arms are still a little sudsy. Three years old and smart as a whip; but here, he’s just a little boy, and still a little scared of his papa- but this time, Ray’s taken my advice. He scoots a space between himself and me, glances at our boy and then at the space he’s made for him- Issun, sweet boy, but he leaps before he thinks. He’s scrambled up between his papa and me, and all but squealing with excitement; his papa’s chuckle makes him shake for half a second, and then Ray’s caught Issun with one arm and- ah.

“Ready?”

“...y’s.”

“Heh. Here- and there they go again.”

Issun Walter looks just like Ray; same eyes, same rounded chin. Fluffy mop of hair, like the feathers on a duckling; bright yellow, striped with my own black. I don’t let hats be worn inside my house;
but Issun won’t go anywhere without that flannel-looking thing Grim Mark gave him as a going-away present. He keeps it in his front pocket, on his overalls; it’s a little flannel hanky looking thing, and he always tucks his hair up into his hat. There’s even a little “secret” pocket in the hat, because it’s actually a very nice hat Grim Mark gave my little boy, I just…

I’ve never liked hats, really.

-And the both of them are awed by my girls, kicking at my guts. Tch. Sweet boys, but they don’t know a damn thing- still… It’s nice, having my boys on the couch with me, all of us together. Like seeing forty years into the past, all on one stretch of couch cushion. -Having Mab visit is like that, too, but I can hardly be around her for longer than a few hours. She’s so much like Captain Harry, it’s painful for me; I can hardly bear it. I wish I was stronger- but I’m not.

I’m not strong enough for that.

I’m not strong enough to face the demons of thirty years ago.

The undersea world, which we can still see because we haven’t gone quite that far down, is magically beautiful. We can see enormous fish, swimming by us; tuna, schools of sardines, mako sharks; seals and dolphins. Everything’s gotta eat, bae.

The roots of Sabaody are what we’re carefully circling- because, as I said a long time ago: Sabaody Archipelago is actually a forest of mangroves. The roots of that forest lay in Fishman Island.

“You never said that, Mab.”

“I didn’t? Whoopsie-daisy. Yeah, Sanji- the roots of Sabaody Mangrove Archipelago are on Fishman Island.”

“Neat. And… I’m going to go out on a limb and say that the bubble our ship is in is the same kind of bubble we saw all over Sabaody?”

“Right, we were- yeah.”

“Yis- Hallo, Sanji, Mab- anything strong enough to go through the bubble will go right through, so we can fire cannons if we have to. Still on course, no changes needed; Usopp, come on in, it’s Franky’s turn for watch.” said Taffy.

“Hey, Taffy.” “Hi, Taffy.”

“Will do, Taffy. - Brr, it’s not just cold in the air but cold in the soul, down here. Anyway, you said we can fire weapons through the bubble? Does that mean arrows, too?” said Usopp.

“We can, but be careful Usopp; if we put more than one or two holes in the bubble at once, it’ll pop. We can’t let a Sea King bite into it or smash it into a reef- and we definitely can’t shoot more than one shot through at a time.”

“Huh.”
“Mhm. Right now, we’re about to be through the Euphotic Zone and into the Disphotic Zone; we’re going to lose sunlight by tomorrow. If you have something you want to do in the light of day, today is the last time you’re going to get until we get to Fishman Island.”

“...!”

“Yis, Bryony? Something wrong?” said Taffy, listening to the snail clinging to her shoulder. Bryony does good work.

“Nnnno, not wrong exactly- just, uh. Nami just used a length of rope to tie up a man named Caribou, and uh- I mean, I guess she handled it but I just did not realize she would move quite that fast.”

“Does he rate a sandwich?” I murmur.

“No one is going hungry on this ship; I’ll bring it out to him myself.” growls Sanji.

“Hmhmhmhm. Careful, love; if he hurts you, I shall be very upset.”

“Neh, Taffy-”

“Hey Captain-”

“-Why can’t we just sail straight there? Wouldn’t that be faster?”

“Mah, if we were self-propelled and in the Sky, sure. Down here though, if we just go straight forwards we’d be swallowed up by currents and then we’d hit a volcano or a sea mountain before we got down where we needed to be- alter course twelve degrees starboard, Mark.”

“Yes, Taffy.”

“Thank you- ah, there’s really only one safe route. Mab-?”

“Coats are aired, and should have appeared on the outdoor hooks in the mud-shed by the galley door; if you need socks, leg warmers, arm warmers, a jumper, a shrug, or a shawl, I’ve got those on standby as well.”

“Right. Everyone, please put on your coat, and remember that Mab has more warm clothing if you need some- it’s going to be very cold for the next few days. The colder levels of the ocean have what are known as Deep Currents; these are large ocean currents normally invisible to the naked eye that move in a completely different way than the surface currents. They’re very slow, for one thing; if we go that deep, and we get caught in one of those currents, it could take nearly two thousand years to return to a part of the sea that gets sunlight at all. Anyway- in order to get to Fishman Island, we need to ride a descending current that will take us from a surface current to a deep current-”

“-Taffy, it’s come into view.”

“I’ll be right there, Franky.”

We- Gurry, Chopper, Bryony, and myself- follow Taffy out to the bow of the ship.

“Mother nature really knows how to get things done.” said Franky, awed.
“She is our First Mother; if she can’t get it done, no one can.” said Taffy, similarly awed.

I understand the exclamation; at the bow of our ship, near enough to see but maybe a half-hour’s sail away there rises an enormous, churning wall of silt. It looks like thick grey woolen roving, being drug all in one direction, only it’s like ink, too; oiled dust black and violent, thrashing through the water thick as nightmares. There are seams of bright, clean water, which only makes the vicious strangeness of the Downward Plume more unnerving; I’ve never been more tense.

It looks just like a storm-cloud, but sideways- a-and Wrong, because there is no wind, and there is no lightning, n-no stink of petrichor and prickle of thunder in my bones, this is not a storm, I- I- I- Sanji wraps an arm around me, pressing my wings back into his chest. I can feel his steady heart, beating against my back. I breathe, deeply, slowly- it’s okay. It’s okay.

“Yis a Kraken; a malicious spirit is inhabiting that Downward Plume: thus, we call it Kraken. Mab’s very sensitive to foul spirits; and with Nami in such a state… Captain, I bring it to you: We go forwards? Or we go back?” said Taffeta, golden fox-eyes sharp in the encroaching gloom of night.

“Forwards; if we go back, it’s because we’re going through the Sea of Monsters. Now’s not a good time to try and get through Scylla or Charybdis, so- we’ll face the Kraken, instead.” said Captain Luffy, firmly.

“Aye, Captain. Bryony- I need you on our fins; Mark, you’re on the Lines; Franky, I need you to keep watch a little longer, I have to pee-”

“I’ll get some more protective gear out, excuse me-” I said, shifting away from Sanji- not before kissing him hard on the mouth and hugging him, god I love him- and running off because god in heaven I’m cold as fuck. The guy we tied up was yelling something; a ship being towed by a Sea King came up alongside but got caught in a riptide and torn apart, the Sea King hauled down out of sight in the roiling storm-wave.

Blood fills the water like sheets of silk.

*The vast undertow fought to drag us below as we took arms against our gargantuan foe!*

At the end of things, we’re deep, down in the Underworld of the Sea. And Luffy, Sanji, and Zoro are not with us.

Franky seals a barrel shut; and Luffy, Sanji, and Zoro are not with us.

We sail through and then away from plumes of volcanic smog; and Luffy, Sanji, and Zoro are not with us. I’m wearing enough fluffy angora-blend wool garments to pass for a snow-bunny; I only need a layer of silk on the outermost, and I’ll have achieved that coveted ‘stay puft’ look. Luffy, Sanji, and Zoro are fine! Probably definitely fine!

Yeah!
I- just need to. Do some things that aren’t. Here.

I’ll just go and- clean up the kitchen. Yeah.

I’ll do that.

Washing dishes, cleaning up the remains of the sliced veggies; I’ll turn them into a mixed salad, that way- and all the cheese, meat, and bread got eaten because of course it did. I close up the jars of sauces, mayonnaise, mustard, tomato ketchup, mushroom ketchup, worcestershire, barbeque; I close the jar of peanut butter, and the nutella, and the honey, and the marshmallow fluff. I wipe down each jar before putting it away; my crewmates can get very messy, which is why Sanji really doesn’t like doing serve-yourself style; they’ll combine things that have no business being next to each other. Mayonnaise and peanut butter do not belong on the same sandwich; there’s a limit to historical connection, Robin, and that’s where I draw a line.

Anyway; I actually hate washing dishes and the annoyingly precise work of preparing bases for the next day’s meals, but since Sanji plans parts of our menu a full month in advance, I can just look at his schedule and do what he’d have done if he were- here-

Deep breath. Exhale.

He’s. Fine.

Think about something else.

The Flying Dutchman is the oldest currently active ghost ship currently sailing the ocean without a Letter of Marque from the Florian Council of Screams. It is old, and worn from time. According to one report from the Florian Mariners, the Flying Dutchman is an idealized ghost ship: its sails are torn and tattered, and moss and barnacles are growing from various spots on the ship. The mast is similar to a clock tower in design. On the bottom front sail is the name “FLYING DUTCHMAN”, and the top one bears the crew Jolly Roger, a fanged skull with crossed swords- cutlasses, for reference- their blades pointing down in place of crossbones. The ship’s figurehead bears the same mark, indicating that the ship was built after the formation of the crew- and a general arrogance to the crew that’s hard to describe except like this: think of every pirate crew you’ve ever known. Now, consider- how many of those crews have had their ship’s figurehead and their pirate-mark be at all the same?

The Flying Dutchman is the only one I’ve ever heard of. It’s also supposed to be huge- the same size as a full grown giant, if you can believe that. It’s not coated, since it’s crew is almost entirely Seafolk; and it’s reported to sail almost exclusively in various Deep Currents, specifically, the Tradesman’s Currents that run parallel and a little adjacent to the Big Deep Currents. That’s more than ten thousand feet below Sea level. It’s- well, it’s a marvel of Seafolk engineering, and I would love to get a look at those building plans, n-n-not that I’m, that I’m unhappy with Sunny or anything, Sunny’s a wonderful ship, I just- woooh. Every ship has it’s charms, and I really want to know how that particular ship does what it does.

Legend says that the Flying Dutchman can never make port, and is doomed to sail the oceans forever. Says that it all came to pass because of the Captain committing atrocious crimes; three, right after th’other.
The signs of the Dutchman’s approach are thus: Light, where no light should be, in the black waters of the night. Songs, from no throat on the ship. And finally- if the ghost ship is hailed, it will try to send messages to people long dead. It’s said that, in the old days when Navigation was still in it’s infancy, the crew or the captain of that ship were struck low with pestilence and died, and- having gained their vile afflictions by doing Wrong, their souls were ordained to stay, and sail onwards on the ocean in which they perished, until the period of their penance expired.

‘Fast gliding along, a gloomy bark
Her sails are full, though the wind is still,
And there blows not a breath her sails to fill.’

Some say the ship was originally a vessel loaded with great and astonishing wealth, on board of which some horrific act of murder and piracy had been committed- and in those days, Peace mains were the sort of Pirate that roamed the Sea. It’s said that the crew of the Dutchman will try to pass on letters to people long dead for delivery, but accepting them brings nothing but misfortune and ruination; it’s said that the captain of the Dutchman is in league with the Devil, who rules all of Hell.

That last bit’s not true- at least, not anymore. Granny’s not an active pirate anymore, and her alliance of pirates is long gone and mostly forgotten- I mean, people still remember Davey Jones, and Jack Sparrow, The Barbarossa Brothers, the “Sea Dog” Sir Cuttley Flambe Drake, “Buccaneer” L’Olonnais (which was mistranslated as Roronoa and- considering Bucky’s habits… “I’m Buck and I like to Fuck” is a very old joke because, and I can’t stress this enough, it was goddamn true . Roronoa Zoro is just one of the most prominent members of that clan, there are Roronoa’s everywhere, it’s a very common name because Buck really liked to fuck-), Granuna herself- Maleficent “Greenteeth” Morgan (and her ship, Jenny), Danelphe themselves- now called Elphame Morgan, then called something else that I’ve misplaced in my memory, damn- no, tell a lie, they were called “The Devil”; “Calico” Jack Rackham, Ladie Bonney, Lorna Reed; Wilmot “Smithy” Turner, and- lastly- “Henrich” Vander Decken.

Vander Decken was a staunch seaman, and would have his own way in spite of the devil. For all that, never a sailor under him had reason to complain; though how it was on board with them nobody knows. In doubling the Ryushima Cape they were a long day trying to weather the Moonlit Bay. However, the wind headed them and went against them more and more, and Vander Decken walked the deck, cursing the wind. Just after sunset a vessel spoke to him, asking him if he did not mean to go into the bay that night. Vander Decken replied: “May I and my crew be eternally damned if I do, though I should beat about here until the day of Judgment.”

To be sure, he never did go into that bay, for it is believed that he continues to beat about in these seas still, and will do so long enough.

As for what they say in Skua?

It goes like this: In the old days of Gods and Demons, the Age that came before the Age of Heroes, the Sea was Ruled Absolute by Calypso, daughter of Atlas Skybearer. Calypso ruled the wine-dark
seas with an iron fist, and all those who sailed her Sea both loved and feared her in equal measure.  

But because she too had mortal blood, she fell in love with a young sailor named Davy Jones. She rewarded that love by making her lover immortal, as she was- her lover could no longer be taken by disease or age, though, like her, battle could still catch him. In order to gain Atlas’- her father’s-blessing, Davy Jones took up the duty of ferrying those souls what had been lost at Sea to the Otherworld. The Challenge was Thus: Ten Years at Sea, and One Day Ashore. If Calypso did return his love, after ten years of his absence, his task would be complete and they could be together forever; a new captain of the Flying Dutchman could be found. But when Davy Jones returned from the Sea, Calypso was nowhere to be found.

As the Sea is fickle, so too was it’s goddess.

In those days, the Pirate Court still reigned; and though now, only the King still retains his powers and titles, in the ancient days there were Twelve seats: the Four Blue Lords of the Sea; the Seven Kings of War; the Pirate King, who ruled over all; and the Fool- sometimes called the Devil- who spoke the truth only, and kept things honest, in their way. At the convening of Court, Davy Jones, who was a prominent King of War, plotted with his fellows to tear the rule of the Sea away from Calypso.

It is important to note that the Devil, or Fool, was never the King’s man; the stories argue about who the Devil really was, but they were never the King’s man. It was Davy Jones who knew the secret weaknesses of Calypso; and it was Davy Jones who told the Court how to strip her of her divine strength and mystical powers, and bind her then in the form of a mortal woman- but it was the Devil who made it possible for this thing done for one day be undone.

It is said that Calypso betrayed Davy Jones; it is said that Davy Jones betrayed Calypso. I think it’s fairly interesting that after his betrayal of her, he cut out his own beating heart and locked it into a box, burying it in some secret place where it would beat forever more. His heart had, after all, betrayed him- and so he would have no more of it. He then returned to the Sea; only now, instead of carrying out the duty with which he had been charged… well. Davy Jones is a name feared even now; the man who once loved Calypso had become fierce and cruel, and reveled in the bloodshed and horror he could now unleash.

All things secret are one day revealed; and so it was that an ambitious mortal found the heart of Davy Jones. That mortal knew they could use the heart to force Davy Jones to do their bidding; and so it came to pass that a Kraken, no malicious spirit but the true unnatural monster rose from the deeps. The dread and gargantuan beast scuttled many ships; and it brought its master, Davy Jones, many a lost soul onto his accursed ship, where those dead souls would be impressed into an eternity of servitude.

The Pirate Court became afraid of Davy Jones, King of War; and so convened again in secret. However, they could only argue and fight amongst themselves, as they were afraid of Calypso’s wrath at their treachery. The Devil did not wait for agreement; they’d been in league with the Goddess Calypso all along. They took those things which had been used to bind her to mortal flesh, twenty tokens of betrayal and ten of trust, and they undid the spell that had betrayed her. Cats, The Devil, and the Sea.

It’d have been thirty pieces of silver, but all the Court was flat broke at the time of their betrayal, so it was basically whatever they had in their pockets at the time. Playing cards, dice, scrimshaws, bits of string, chunks of amber and interesting bugs, bits of bone- y’know. The kind of stuff pirates-interesting pirates- have in their pockets. Kittens.

Once freed, the Goddess’ wrath was horrible to behold, and even worse to experience. She gathered
all the waters of the Sea around herself in a powerful maelstrom, at the center of which there was fought a terrible battle. It was in that very battle that Davy Jones’ heart was pierced at last, freeing him forever. With his death, Davy Jones was welcomed into the dark heart of the Sea- for Calypso loved him still, and he her, in their own ways.

And thus it comes to this: under the old Pirate Laws, whosoever kills the Captain of the Ship has the right to it, and the crew, if they will follow them what did the deed. Mostly, enemy pirates try to use this rule to justify going after the enemy Captain. Really, it’s there so that, if your Captain goes crazy, you and your crew have options.

“Neh, Davy Jones… is real?” said Captain.

“He was. He sailed on the ghost ship- The Flying Dutchman.”

“But- we just saw it, and-” said Captain.

“Vander Decken stabbed his Captain in the heart, Luffy. And, when my Dana, The Devil, in those days, asked him why- he said that it had to be done. Said ‘There are some who ought not walk ‘neath the living sky, Scratch.’ And that was it.”

“‘Cuz I was gonna say- Vander Decken isn’t a… Dutchy’s a Kingdom down Sout, right?’ said Captain.

“Yep.”

“Vander Decken is not a Dutchy name.” said Captain.

“He basically stole the ship, Captain; your guess is as good as mine about why he didn’t change the name.”

“-why’d he have to take the ship and the crew, though?” said Captain.

“It has to do with the heart, Captain. In those days, Devil Fruits weren’t exactly what they are now- I don’t know exactly where they came from, I can’t remember, but- they weren’t as they are now. The powers… shifted? There used to be fewer of them, and they were more… More. As Granny tells it- ‘If I had stabbed That Damnfool’s heart, mine would have taken it’s place. I’d have sailed the Sea for all eternity; that ship was built for one job, and must have a Captain to do it. I’m of the opinion that the safest, and best, place for a heart is where it belongs, inside my chest. ’ So.”

“When Davy Jones broke his Oath, he Cursed himself.” said Captain.

“Yep.”

“-And his ship, and his crew, too.” said Captain.

“Yep.”

“…Do you know how it’s green flash works?” said Luffy.

“Yes, but for legal reasons ours- if we get one- can’t be green. I’ll collaborate with Franky on it, if you’d like.”

“Cool!” cheered Luffy.
I smiled, and started straining the flowers out of the water; that’s the roses, which I did second of the batch. Rinse out the pot, put the petals into the compost barrel, and move on to the next one.

“Mab-sis?”

“-Yes, Franky?”

“Tell me about the Flying Dutchman.”

“Alright. The Flying Dutchman weighs about four hundred twenty tonnes, and is approximately one hundred and seventy feet long-”

“-I can do the conversions myself, keep going-”

“-Alright. Approximately one hundred and seventy feet long, from stern to bow. It is armed with forty-six cannons, which do not include the paired triple-barreled chase guns. The Dutchman is considered to be the fastest ship both on and beneath the Sea; however, it was never able to maintain pursuit of the Black Pearl, which had an edge with a following wind, while the Dutchman is fastest with a headwind.

“In such cases, the crew needed to call upon the Dutchman’s most potent and powerful weapon to destroy their enemies. The ship was thus fitted with a Kraken- excuse me, Capstan Hammer, which was thus used to summon the dread beast from oceanic depths. As far as I’m aware, the Dutchman is the only vessel currently immune to the Kraken’s destructive rage.”

“Do you know how that’s possible, or…?”

“I’d have to double check a few things, but at a guess? Frequency; like, sound frequency. Not something you can really mess around with on the fly.”

“No. Anyway, you were-”

“-Right, sure. The Dutchman’s rigging consists of three masts: the fore, the mizzen, and the main. She’s square rigged on both the fore and the main, but the mizzen carries one lateen sail and one topsail. Like all 7th century galleons, the Dutchman originally had a bowsprit with the spritsail topmast on its end. The bowsprit carried two square spritsails, but after it was broken, the new bowsprit was placed almost exactly above the Dutchman’s terrifying figurehead. How do I know that? Nevermind- Two staysails can be unfurled on the stays connecting the foremast and the aforementioned new bowsprit- no, seriously, how do I know that?”

“I did just draw the ship, and it’s not like I’m hiding it or anything-”

“Oh-! Yeah, that’s- oh, that’s interesting.”

“What?”

“Mm, Vander Decken moved the nameplate; it’s been moved from it’s original spot, there, to that spot on the lower stern gallery. The hull is made of pyrobloin-coated- er, pyrolyzed- gold, bronze, and Adam Wood. Her cannons emerge from those ports on either side of the ship; those carvings of animal heads, lions and fish and so on; also pyrolyzed. Pyrite isn’t just the proper name of Fool’s Gold; it’s the name of gold after it’s been treated with pyrobloin. Oh, that one’s bronze- the even
rows are always bronze, on these kinds of ships—let me see… Aha. Her main armament consists of
twenty thirty-six hundred pound cannons and eighteen twenty-four hundred pound cannons,
supplemented by three-pounders on the quarterdeck and forecastle, making her capable of delivering
a one million one hundred fifty two hundred thousand pound broadside. This overwhelmingly heavy
broadside proved on multiple occasions to be a destructive, if not fatal, blow to any ship that was at
range. She also carries two large triple rotating bow chasers.”

“Can you say what the figurehead is supposed to be?”

“Mm… looks like either a bananawami or a barracuda. I’m going to go with barracuda; I like fish.”

“What color are the sails in daylight?”

“They should be clean white, a bit cloudy; they look ragged when wet, but that’s an artifact of their
construction and the material, they’re actually whole sails.”

“-And the green flash?”

“It’s something very like our Coupe de Burst, but with a flashing firework in-front to blind our
enemies and make it seem like we vanished into nothing. S’ Boffo.”

“-Like the joke shop?”

“Exactly like. People are always more willing to believe a good bit of Boffo- oh, am I taking the
shine off the magic for you, Franky?”

“Little bit, yeah.”

“I mean- I taxidermied my bananawami, Petunia, because I like taxidermy. Normally, I’d have just
ordered her out of a Boffo catalogue- you’ve never seen the catalogue, have you.”

“N-no. Huh.”

“I mean… Crowns, helmets, Mihawk’s Sword- those are all boffo too.”

“Mihawk’s Sword is Boffo?”

“Yeah- there’s no secret or fancy trick to it; it’s only magic is keeping rust free and balanced. All the
rest is good old fashioned blacksmithing, and Mihawk’s own dread skill.”

“…Really?” said a fairly disgruntled Zoro.

“I’ve seen him do his ‘Greatest Swordsman in the World’ thing with a bokken, Zoro. He’s the best
because he’s the best, and for the best… it doesn’t really matter what they use. They’re still the best.”

“Damn. I’ve got a long way to go.” said Zoro.

“Knowing how the magic actually works doesn’t make it not magic, guys. Chin up!” I chirp.

I pour Vanilla Extract and Cinnamon Extract and Mint Extract into their storage bottles. Orangeat
next; toast those almonds, Mab.

Shaka-shaka-shaka-shaka.
Gotta finish off the last of this bottle, too—so. We always have honey syrup too, thanks to the honeyjackets… hmmm.

“Mab-? Are… Are you making… mixed drinks?” says Nami, very hopefully.

“I could.”

“…Can I have a whiskey sour?” says Nami quick, as if she thinks if she says it fast enough, I won’t remember she’s pregnant until it’s too late and the drink’s in her hand. Not a chance in hell, friendo.

“You can have one whiskey sour, Nami. I’ll make you a Monte Carlo.”

“…Yeah, okay. No one makes ’em like you do, not even Sanji.” sighs Nami.

“Mm. He tries to use shortcuts- and bartending really isn’t cooking, it’s got more in common with waiting tables and baking, neither of which are exactly his forte.”

“…?” “Um…”

“He’s best with the artistry of cooking- sauces, soups, grilled things. You know. The fun parts.”

“Ah.” says Zoro.

“I, personally, like fermentation as a cooking method- cheese, yoghurt, alcohol-”

“Yog-hurt, Mab?” says Sanji, leaning on the kitchen counter pass-through; and grinning at me, the fart.

“Oh god, this is like the brioche thing, isn’t it-”

“Mab, you’re still calling them brooshes-” smiles Sanji.

“-that’s how they’re spelled-!”


“Hmmph. Stuuuupid. …I suppose you want a Muscovy Mule?”

“If you don’t mind terribly, yeah.” smirks Sanji.

Hmhmhm. He knows I like mixing drinks.

“Neh- do you think Surume would like a drink?” says Luffy.

“Captain, you made a new friend?”

“Yeah! Surume was in the Kraken, and I think actually is a Kraken-” says Luffy.

“-Oh god-”

“-but she’s just a baby one. We’re on her head, actually.” says Luffy.
“Oh. Well, alright. I- why are we on her head?”

“She’s navigating us to Fishman Island, she knows exactly where it is. Nice to be out of that bubble, too, and she’s really good at punching-” says Luffy.

“...Surume?”

“Yeah, she punched that Umebozu thing.” says Luffy.

I pause. I think that one over.

“Sea urchin...?”

“Umi bozu, Luffy.” says Zoro.

“Oh, that makes much more sense.” I say, handing Nami her Monte Carlo.

A Monte Carlo is a simple drink, cousin to the Manhattan. Also similar to a Vieux Carre (“-Cah-rey, Mab-” “-One day I’ll learn to speak Nearnort-”) or a Brainstorm. Definitely it’s own character, though.

It uses Rye Whiskey, Benedictine, Aromatic Bitters and a twist of lemon peel for garnish. It’s a tight jazz quartet, whereas the Vieux Carre is a full orchestra. Different, but delightful in its own way.

Chill a rocks glass and set it aside; put two ounces of Rye, half an ounce of Benedictine, two dashes of Aromatic Bitters into a mixing glass with ice and give it a stir, to chill it out and add some dilution. Pour your mixed drink into the glass, express the oils of the lemon peel onto the drink, set the peel in so it looks nice, and you’re done. Nami loves them. And, in a choice between a Monte Carlo and a piece of white toast slathered in honey and butter, I’d rather Nami have the Monte Carlo.

I’d also like it if she drank this entire glass of water- thank you.

“I- urgh. Huh. I actually want the water more than the booze- I think I just wanted to be included.” sighed Nami.

“If you don’t want it, don’t drink it, Nami. Zoro, you want a Muscovy too, or-”

“I’d like a Mezcal Mule, actually- since you’ve already got all the stuff out...” said Zoro. It never fails to amuse, how very similar Zoro and Sanji are; it’s why they clash so violently. Those little differences are very sharp.

Two ounces Mezcal, three quarters ounce Lime Juice, three quarters ounce Syrup of Ginger, half ounce Demerara Sugar Syrup, and Zoro likes six dashes of Peychaud’s Bitters.

Shake mezcal, lime, ginger, and Demerara with a little crushed ice; pour into Julep Cup. Top with more crushed ice and bitters. Serve with a metal straw; and only hand the drink over when it’s frosty
“Thank you, Mab.” says Zoro.

“Mm.”

And Zoro’s pretty much right- a Muscovy Mule is very similar to a Mezcal Mule. Like most things with the flavorless spirit, Muscovy, it’s all about perception. Change the name from a Muscovy Buck to Muscovy Mule; a little alliteration makes the allure of the drink ever so slightly more potent.

It’s a simple cocktail, but like all simple things, the devil’s in the details. It was originally made to offload Norten Muscovy and Skuan Gingerbeer to the unsuspecting masses in a marketing ploy, but propaganda never tasted so good. Hiball with gingerbeer and lime; and I serve it in a copper mug because that aesthetic though.

Main player, in a lot of the drinks I’m making, is Ginger. Ginger’s a root, and as far as taste goes, it’s supposed to grab your taste by the horns and suplex it to the ground. That’s why they call them ‘Mules’ y’see- the ginger’s supposed to hit like a kick to the head. I like using ginger syrup on a four to three ratio- four ginger, three syrup. Gives the ginger a nice bite, with enough muscle to back it up. A lot of times, the Muscovy Mule becomes a diving board to play with the spirit and call it “Something” Mule (even though it should be the “Something” Buck), Dutchy Mule, Mezcal Mule, and so on- but there’s a crisp sincere simplicity to the Ginger and Lime combination that when spiked with Muscovy remains really… mmm. The marketing used to push Muscovy as unobtrusive; in this drink, that’s exactly right. It’s powerful, but hidden in the concoction so well- you may not realize quite what you’re drinking.

Two ounces of Muscovy, the juice of half a lime (approximately three quarters ounce lime juice); five or six ounces of Ginger Beer, and a Splash of Ginger Syrup.

Build it in the glass over ice; let the condensation build up a bit. Sanji takes his drink with a smile. God he’s pretty.

-I’ll make Advocaat when it’s closer to Imbolc, we’ve got a good two weeks yet and it only lasts about five days.

“ADVOCaat!” cheers Chopper.

“Two more weeks, Young Buck. -and he’s gone.”

“Heh. Kid’s got a hankering for that holiday buzz, eh?” says Franky.

“Mm. Pina Colada?”

“Pin-ya Col-AH-da” says Sanji.
“Nah, I’ll have a Muscovy-” says Franky.

“Alright.”

The next few hours are a flurry of drinks. Mostly Mai Tais, actually- somehow, it always devolves to Mai Tais, punch, and bar snacks on our drinking nights. Oh yeah, and apparently Taffy ended up sailing us almost directly into an active volcano or something? No, Luffy gave Surume a bucket of Mai Tai and things got a bit- I mean.

I would have had a stronger reaction to that, but- Mai Tais. Also, either we’d live through that, or we wouldn’t. Can’t be getting all jumped up over every little thing, y’know.

Mm. Mai Tai.
It’s Let’s talk about Goats.

The domestic, or Civil, goat is a subspecies of goat that was domesticated from the Wild Goat of Soutwes Est and Estern Nort. The goat is a member of the family Bovidae, and is closely related to the sheep- as both are in the goat-antelope subfamily Caprinae. There are over five hundred distinct breeds in the World, though only three hundred are recognized internationally, and only one hundred fifty breeds can be shown at the Statement Fair.

Goats are one of the oldest domesticated species, maybe second or third after dogs and cereal grains. They are used for their milk, meat, hair, skins, and company over much of the world. As far as the records show, there were over nine hundred twenty four million live goats around the World in 011, the Eleventh Year; and this number has ebbed and flowed over the intervening centuries, according to the United Food and Agriculture Organization.

A female goat is referred to as a ‘doe’ or a ‘nanny’; does have not had kids, while nannies have. Intact males are called ‘bucks’ or ‘billies’; bucks have not mated a doe, while billies have. And finally, the juveniles of both sexes are called ‘kids’- as an aside, the reason one may sometimes call a group of children ‘kids’ is because the only thing that climbs things and screams all the times like a child is a kid, and vice-versa. Small children are wild animals, and don’t you forget it.

Goat meat from the younger animal is called “kid meat” or cabrito in the Sout, while meat from older animals is known simply as “goat” or sometimes called chevon in the Nort; back in Skua, it’d be either goat or mutton. Yes, mutton more often refers to adult sheep meat, but- I never said it made sense.

According to the Anthropological record, although various domestications were going on basically congruently across the World, Goats were first domesticated in Nort. During the Neolithic period (which is the last Stone Age before we started using metal), Norten farmers began herding wild goats primarily for easy access to milk and meat, as well as for their dung, which was used as fuel, fertilizer, and I want to say scent marking, but I’m not sure. They also used their bones, hair, and sinew for clothing, building, and tools. The earliest remnants of domesticated goats dates to about ten thousand years before the first calendar, and were found in Dashleen, Micqueot. Historically, goat hide is used for water and wine bottles in both traveling and transporting wine for sale. It’s also been used for the production of parchment.

Also historically, the worst thing you could call a Nortener was a goatfucker. Nothing pisses someone from the Nort off quite so fast or so badly.

Nothing.

Goats are small livestock animals, as compared to cattle, camels, lionbirds, and horses; but they are larger than microlivestock such as poultry and game birds, rabbits, cavies, and bees. Each recognized breed, international or otherwise, has a specific weight range. Within each breed, different strains or bloodlines- Lines, you see- have different recognized sizes and horn arrangements.

Goats have between two and ten horns, always in an even distribution, and varying in shape or size depending on the breed. Goats always have horns unless they have been ‘polled’, meaning they are either genetically hornless, or the horns have been removed, typically soon after birth. Typically, the horns are removed in commercial herds- dairy, leather, meat, hair, and so on- to reduce injuries to the goat and the product. Unlike cattle, goats have not been successfully bred to be reliably polled, as the
determining factors for gender and horns are nearly the same. Breeding together two genetically polled goats results in a high number of intersex individuals among the offspring, which, while not sterile, are significantly less likely to be able to breed successfully. Male-favoring intersexed individuals are much less virile, while female-favoring intersexed individuals tend to not survive the birthing process.

Goat horns- and Sanji’s horns- are made of living bone surrounded by keratin and other proteins. They are used for defence, dominance, and territoriality. Sanji’s horn velvet is- as far as I can tell- a product of his Demonic Lineage. It’s also starting to soften; it’s less like boar bristles and more like velveteen, now. Apparently, for Sanji, his horns are going to grow in stages , with each stage marked by sensitivity in the velvet, immediately followed by a lowering of that sensitivity and a rise in… He likes it when I rub them. They’re about as thick as two of my fingers, put together, and startlingly hot to the touch- not burning, but hot like his cock when he’s aroused. So, um- a motorboat is when one person sticks their face into someone else’s tits and goes ‘bpbpbpbpbpbp’ in them, possibly shaking their head back and forth and nuzzling into the soft titty meats as they go. I don’t quite have enough bosom to make motorboating really fun, but Sanji does like nuzzling right against my sternum, so. It’ll be different when the velvet comes off, I know that much...

Goats are ruminants. They have a four-chambered stomach consisting of the rumen, the reticulum, the omasum, and the abomasum. As with other mammalian ruminants, they are even toed ungulates. The females have an udder consisting of two teats, in contrast to cattle which have four, and lionbirds, which have eight.

Goats have a horizontal, slit-shaped pupil; it’s the same shape as Sanji’s Norten Stripe. After all, before he was Lord of the Smoking Vine, Udoroth was the Lord of Goats. Ah, right- cattle, deer, most horses, and many sheep have the same kind of pupil; but, because the irises of a goat are usually pale, it’s much more visible. Both male and female goats have beards, and most dairy goats have wattles, one on each side of the neck. As for telling a goat from a sheep when they look basically the same: a goat tail is short and points up, while a sheep tail is long and hangs down.

Goats reach puberty between three and fifteen months of age, depending on breed and nutrition. In temperate climates, which Sabaody is in, breeding season commences during or after the autumn equinox, and ends a little before Yule; in tropical regions, goats breed year round. Successful breeding in any region depends more on nutrition than on day length or enthusiasm. Does of any breed or region come into estrus, or heat, every twenty one days for two to forty eight hours- during the breeding season. A doe in heat will flag her tail often, stay near the buck if one is present, become more vocal, and may also show a decrease in appetite and milk production for the duration of the heat. Bucks of the Norten breeds come into rut in the autumn, tending to synchronise with the does’ heat cycles, regardless of the breed of the does. Bucks of tropical breeds tend to have seasonally reduced fertility, but, much like the does, are capable of breeding at all times. So- you’ll get more goats from tropical females and Norten males, but you’ll actually get a happier herd of goats overall with Norten females and equatorial males. Unless I’ve gotten that reversed, which I might have.

Sanji doesn’t quite have a rut cycle- for one thing, I don’t exactly have an estrus cycle, I have an estrus cultural cycle which is entirely different- but he does have a powerful manstank. It is for this reason, among others, that I do not allow Sanji in the Dairy. He can churn butter just fine- he’s actually fairly good with the hand churn- but he, his manstank, and his man dust, are not allowed in my nice clean Dairy, and that’s the end of it. Similarly, I’m not allowed in his Smokehouse.

All this to say- Sanji’s smell is very nice, to me. Robin hates it. Nami says it’s okay, but Zoro’s is better- and the general consensus among the crew is that Sanji is a smelly man, and it’s not a bad smell, but they’d like it if the butter, milk, cheese, and eggs didn’t taste like him. So.
Sanji is Not Allowed in the Dairy anymore. They also don’t want cured meats that taste like flowers, so I’m Not Allowed in the Smokehouse anymore.

Thus becomes the division of labor.

Oh, right- we have a Dairy and a Smokehouse, and a Barn, too. Mark actually finished the Barn, which Franky had planned out and laid the foundations for; and the Dairy and Smokehouse ended up in the original plans I think because of how Sanji wanted his kitchen laid out? But basically- there’s the kitchen, and then the mast; and then, across from Chopper’s Infirmary there’s the Dairy, which has an inner door to the Galley and Kitchen, and an outer door to the Barnyard area. Unlike the Infirmary, the Dairy is not for passing through; the outer door stays shut unless I’m bringing in milk or eggs, and since Mark and Sanji are men, I’m the one who keeps our milk, washes our eggs, and makes our cheese, soap, and candles. I’m also in charge of our honey supplies, our bees, our poultry, milking- there’s a list of things I handle that Mark does not. Mark feeds the animals, and keeps them in good health and spirits. He mucks out their stalls and pens, turns the compost, makes sure the dogs are exercised, and when the time comes, he is the one who slaughters our animals for the table; Sanji does the butchering, mostly, although he does sometimes let Taffy or I do it if he’s in need of a lot of meat- but Mark does the actual killing of the animals.

So. What’s my day like?

Well, let’s start at the beginning. Sanji and I only need five hours of sleep in one unbroken stretch to be getting on with the day; however, we both like having a total of eight hours unbroken to rest in. Therefore, while we do actually go to sleep at midnight, we retire to our bed at nine of the clock. That’s certainly when our daily duties are finished with.

We aren’t asleep by then, of course- but we are usually abed by eleven at the latest, and sleeping by midnight. Those hours between when we retire for the evening and when we sleep are usually reserved for our lovemaking, and while we can be interrupted during our practice of the conjugal arts, it’s not a healthsome idea. Luffy knows that, while he can sneak into the kitchen for food during our sexy-times, it’s likely to get him fucked up. He tries, every now and again- but he’s not dumb. And we are not weak.

Five hours after we fall into slumber, we wake again for the day. The day starts with about ten to twenty minutes of cuddling, kissing, and mutual masturbation; an orgasm is a very nice way to start the day, as it loosens all the muscles that may have tensed up during the night, and the shot of adrenaline clears the sinuses and raises the blood pressure. It also provides a handy excuse to get out of bed, because you can’t just lay around in your own love juices, and after I orgasm in the morning I usually realize that I very desperately need to piss-

Then, Sanji and I take our showers, brush our teeth, use the head if necessary, and begin our days, right around five-forty to six. Breakfast service is promptly at nine of the clock, and lasts until the food is gone- on our crew, that’s about an hour. Mark is about an hour ahead of us; his schedule is a little wobbly, but Sanji’s figured out some way of feeding him at the very first of the day that both of them can accept. I gather it involves oatmeal, and a Norten-press for coffee, but not much more than that.

I strip our bed first, exchange the loads of laundry, make our bed, and begin the gathering of dirty laundry. This takes me about half an hour to do. The first thing Sanji makes in the morning is coffee and tea; thus, the first up for the day are Robin, Nami, Franky, Taffy, Bryony, Gurry, and Brook. I strip their beds next, make them again, and gather their dirty laundry- that’s another half hour gone. The next to go into the Galley are Usopp, Mark- after a shower- and Chopper, which is when I go strip their beds.
Usopp, Mark, and Luffy share a bed now, but sometimes, one or all of them need their own space; thus, their room actually has three different beds. Luffy will sleep through anything except a mealtime; it's actually easiest for me to change his sheets with him still abed, then change the other two. Takes about fifteen minutes all total, and then another fifteen for the dirty clothing.

You might be wondering why I gather dirty clothing every day. It’s nothing to do with my washing- I really only wash at the end of the week. It’s to do with stains. Nami, Robin, Chopper, Bryony, and Gurry all have very heavy stains on their clothing-- ink, mostly, though Bryony has oil and Gurry has paints. Mark, of course, comes back with his shirts positively filthy- and, as he only wears white shirts, I have, on occasion, had to beat the filth and stains out with paddles. Zoro, Sanji, Usopp, Luffy, Franky, and Taffeta have the more usual problem of work-dirt; Zoro’s clothing ends up sweat-stained, as does Sanji’s with the addition of volatile oils. Usopp needs his washing done fairly regularly, or he’s in very real danger of combustion; Luffy is actually a fairly neat eater, he’s just... lively, is the word. He’s so lively, the World around him more often than not ends up smeared all over his clothing. I’ve turned live frogs out of Luffy’s pockets.

I’m not talking about Franky’s speedos, but his shirts need tender loving care because he really loves bright colors and he gets oil and lubricants and who knows what else all over him-- sawdust, metal shavings, weird shop dirt- all over him all the time. Taffeta’s clothing is usually dusty or covered in lint by the end of her day; the woman likes weird places, the nooks and crannies, and weird places like that gather dirt like nothing else.

Of us all, it’s me and Brook who stay cleanest through the day; me because after training and working, I usually change my clothing. I take having clothes for the occasion very seriously.

And Brook, because he’s an undead skeleton musician that mostly plays music and spars. He can’t sweat or secrete anything anymore- which raises uncomfortable questions about if he can eat or not… I mean, he uses the toilet, so I’d say he can, I just… Hm.

How undead is Brook, anyway?

Well, never mind that; the first two hours of my work day are spent attending to the laundry. I gather up dirty washing, treat stains, check ongoing stain treatments, and sort laundry. The third hour is farmwork; by then, Mark’s finished feeding the animals, turning them out for the day, mucking stalls, turning compost, and so on.

Here’s where my Devil Fruit starts coming in handy; around this time is when Sanji takes his first smoking break of the day. He’s actually cut down to just two daily; he’s working with myself and Chopper to lower it to nothing. Smoke is not good for babies, and Sanji does want to be around them.

So.

He knows I don’t like the taste of smoke. I know he likes kissing a hell of a lot more than he likes cigarettes. He knows I know. I know he knows. We know.

So. Sanji takes about half an hour for a smoke break in the morning, and again in the evening, around sunset; and, at his request- not that it’s a hard thing to do- I give him a tongue fucking style kiss during most of those half hours, hard enough to make him forget all about his cigarettes.

What, you ask, is a tongue fucking kiss?
Well.

It’s like this- there are four doors through the Galley, not counting the trapdoor. So; front door, which opens onto the lawn deck; side door, which goes to the dairy; side door, which goes through Chopper’s Infirmary, and back door, which goes to the Smokehouse and Pantry. There’s actually an antechamber to the Smokehouse, meant for overflow- it’s got a fairly comfortable padded bench long enough to lay down on, strong ventilation, and a working bench where Sanji mixes his dry-rubs. It’s also a good spot for us to make out.

I have a quick wipe off after my first two hours of work for the day; then I go find Sanji. He always stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray when I come into the not-quite smokehouse; blows a last long breath of smoke out through his nose and mouth, watches me with glimmering blue eyes. I sit myself next to him, shoulder to shoulder.

Let myself adjust to the stinking, smoky air.

Urgh.

And then I can smell Sanji, under it all- man musk and seafood and brine and cigarette ash and his mouth is hot, hot hot hot, hot- dry, the taste of ashes. But warmer and wetter and then a sudden gush of saliva and the taste of mouth, Sanji’s mouth tastes like mouth.

I feel along his teeth with my tongue; they’re sharp, and the sharpest are his incisors, his canid teeth; they’re like fangs. I find his tongue, curling and flicking in his jaws.

Stroke up the slippery sides, where the pebbly rasp of the top gives way to the smooth slippery fun of the bottom; stroke back down and again, again, again until he sighs with pleasure. Breathe, and then wrap my tongue around his, rasp to rasp and squirm and he squeaks. Swirl the tip of my tongue only just against his, and then the sudden surge of my tongue into his mouth, raspy scrape of meat against the roof of his mouth and-

When did I climb onto his lap? Nmmm, he knows I like it when he digs his fingers into the meat of my ass. fffuck - I surge forwards until his back is to the wall and I plunder his mouth for its sweetness. My tongue dances in and out of his lips, again and again until our hips are rolling together and- shift back, away.

A long string of rapidly cooling saliva connects our mouths. Sanji’s pupils aren’t quite dilated. My wings aren’t quite relaxed.

But it’s been half an hour, and we have work to do.

“Sorry, My Love. After lunch, we’ll finish this?”

“We’d better, pchelka.”

“Hmhmhm. Mmm- one more, then I’ve gotta go.”

“Only the one-?”

“Mm. One or two, maybe- mmmMMMPH♥! HMHMHMHMHMH♥!”
In the hour before breakfast, for half an hour my actual physical body takes a rest and kisses my husband. **Dairy Doll** milks our goats, of which we have six, now; twice what we started with. **Poultry Doll** gathers the eggs of our doves and our quail, which averages about two eggs per bird per day; factoring in the number of birds we actually have in the cote and the run- it’s something like two dozen egg doves and forty-something quail eggs. Sanji usually needs most of the eggs for breakfast- there are often two or three left over, and with Imbolc imminent, it’s about time for me to start keeping the quail eggs in reserve… oh, um. Quail eggs are safer to eat raw than chicken or dove; as for preserving eggs… since they’re for an alcoholic beverage which is going to be spiced, I do believe that keeping them in quick limed water should suffice.

Let’s see… **Dairy Doll** milks the goats, **Poultry Doll** gathers eggs- aha, one of me gathers produce, that’s **Gardening Doll**.

We have nothing in the forage section- January and February are the Starving Gap, remember? Well, actually, that’s not true- out near our midden, we have Velvet Shank mushrooms, the first tips of nettles springing up, wild garlic to keep the goats away- they don’t like the taste and remember the smell; no sweet violets yet, but I do take a moment to send myself off to my House- not Tiffanny, but Thuletima. Being the eldest daughter of Morgan, Thuletima is mine, now. I’ve set it up to run basically without me? It’s more a farm, really, and I’ve decided to defer rent for a while- I’ll still repair things, but I want my people to save their money or get things they actually need… is that weird? I don’t know if that’s weird.

I mean. I don’t think it’s weird to decide that for just a little less money, I can have people living and working on my land for living wages that they are encouraged to spend on things they’d like, not on rent I don’t need just yet. I still collect taxes, but that’s because I’d like our government to pay for the roads being cleared and so on.

Anyway, Thuletima is a Birch Tree, so- getting at the birch sap is a matter of checking the spigots. None yet, but we’ll see tomorrow- it only lasts for two weeks, after all. Easy’s making wine with last year’s supply.

Where was I- no sweet violets, no birch sap yet, dandelions are in and taste lovely in salad, wintercress is also in and also tastes good- adds a bit of a nip to tired flavors, which is nice; wood avens or herb bennet is harvestable year round, and we want the root for the most flavor- tastes good in mince pie or mulled wine, and the leaves are edible too so grab some of those, taking care not to harvest too much from any one plant lest they die… Hairy bittercress, s’like rocket or basil in pesto, has a peppery flavor; graveweed, or ground elder, best eaten before it flowers- so, now- and has a mild lemony parsley flavor, which goes well with fish; and alexanders, because the celery isn’t in yet; mint, the last of the parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme. (Parsley did save Rosemary in Time). Ah- Parsley for Comfort, Sage for Strength, Rosemary for Love, and Thyme for Courage. A posey of those under your pillow will bring sweet dreams to lovers, or so I’ve heard- herb magic isn’t really my forte. Chopper and Gurry would know better- after all, medicine is poison, and poison is medicine. It all depends on the amount you administer, in the end.

That’s a full gathering basket of herbs, and another- several loads, really, of produce. We have garlic, leeks, arugula, chervil, chicory, cress- the mescluns, not time for peas just yet, not time for potatoes, Norten chard, bok choy, spinach, and kale; carrots, parsnips, pears, apples, cherries, and lots of winter squash. Everything gets gathered- one of me brings in the milk, strains it for straw and things, and sets it in the settling tank, while another of me brings in the eggs and sets to washing them, sorting them, and preparing them for Sanji’s use- mostly, that’s just putting them in the egg-thing, clean and dry and ready to go. And the last one of me brings in the fresh herbs and produce, washes it, and hands it off to Sanji- he uses different things in breakfast and lunch and dinner and supper; breakfast usually sees use of the herbs, while later meals have more prep and so get graced with the
various produces.

This initial gathering process takes about an hour; three of me are gathering, while three more of me are attending the washing duties that may not have been finished, and another trio are working in the dairy. I usually end each day by checking over our stores of milk, eggs, cheese, and butter, so I know for the next day what to pull out of storage for Sanji. Thus, in the Dairy- at the top of the hour, I bring Sanji the necessary goods to replenish his stocks, which he appreciates, and we usually manage at least one or two exchanges of kisses in the morning while the coffee brews, then it’s right back to work for us- he, to lay out coffee and start prepping for breakfast, me to finish work in the dairy.

I comb the curds, put cheeses in presses, consider what we’re going to do with the whey- we need a pig, honestly- and put the cream into the auto-churn for butter. Franky rigged a churn to a sort of piston and wheel arrangement, and it’s a damn wonder is what it is. Praise mechanization. The butter that comes out is nice, honestly- press it into shape, take the buttermilk and the unsalted butter and the salted butter out to Sanji, because he usually feeds us the leftover bread from yesterday and fresh pastries from today, and it’s some arcane management of supplies to make that happen, don’t ask me how he does it… The sweet whey gets saved as juice for switchel, which is fine, but the sour… some of it gets used for breadmaking, sure, but most of it goes on the compost. We need a pig.

Then I salt the new butter which churned in the night, set the milk in it’s settling jars for grading after breakfast- and by then, breakfast service is ready, so I stop work for the full hour and spend time with my crewmates.

“We need a pig.”

“Oh?” said Mark, chewing on a bit of toast.

“Mnhm. The way we go through butter, and the amount of food-bits Sanji just can’t use- he does amazingly well in not wasting, really he does, but- we need a pig.”

“Hm. Will there be pigs at Fishman Island?” said Mark.

“There should be…? I can’t really think of a reason why there wouldn’t be pigs at Fishman Island, they’re staple animals and really excellent garbage disposals, so… yeah. When we get there, you and Franky can build a sty for the pig, aye?”

“Aye.” said Mark.

“No problem, Mab.” said Franky.

“Mab, I need you to teach me how to wrap a haramaki- I know it’s different for pregnant women than it is just because you want a haramaki, so.” said Nami.

“Sure, after breakfast.”

Breakfast is a large spread of eggs, toast, sliced cold smoked meats, sausages, cheese, green vegetables, and some kind of drink- not just milk, usually melomel, tea, and juice during the warmer parts of the year. After about an hour, maybe there’s bread left? And some of the drinks- depending on what we did yesterday… honestly Sanji knows more about this. Hm.

After breakfast, I finish my work in the Dairy- I need a name for the various ‘one of me’ that do
work… hmm… no, best just stick with Dollperganger, Dolls, or Doll, for short. Dollperganger refers to all of my copies at once; Dolls for when I need to be quick about it; Something Doll is a specific, singular one of me; and Doll Something is an attack. So. Using my Doll, I finish working in the Dairy; another Doll goes to the Laundry and checks everything over for repairs, finishes work on repairs that were started yesterday, and considers what else needs to be mended.

After breakfast, it's usually policy that we all scatter- I gather up the table linens, bus the table, and wash because it's not a big deal for me to do that, I don't mind doing it and Sanji does, so- and I'm going to the Studio and Laundry anyway, so, might as well take the rest. Down we go~!

Sort everything, stain treat, and- switch wet clothing to the dryer, spin cycle ran during Breakfast and put in the next new load.

That's Nami.

"Come in, Nami- there are a multitude of wrapping styles, but if none suit, you can, of course, wear Zoro's one piece tube style haramaki. I can even make you some like Zoro's specifically for you- but, I suppose you don't like them…? Tell me what you need, Nami."

"I've actually been wearing them for a while, now- I just… I feel like I need more support? They're nice looking, but- not mine."

"Ah. That's fine, of course- do you want a style that has knots, or a style that has a sort of buckle?"

"Um… Nothing conductive, so- knots."

"Alright. Do you want a specific style, or-?"

"Um. Something flattering? Supports my hips and breasts, too-"

"Aha. Alright- so, that's a matter of size and wrapping style; I think these sarees should be perfect, actually."

"Eh?"

"Well, firstly- these are all silk, so they retain heat and strength, even after very hard use; secondly, it's the length I'm after- see, the smallest one is four point five meters, and the longest is eight, and the width varies from sixty centimeters to one hundred twenty-"

"Oh wow, that's a lot of fabric."

"Yeah. Um- feel them, smell them, I- pick whichever ones make you happy- no, really, they need to feel right, go ahead."

"Alright."

I leave Nami to it, and focus very hard on what I'm feeling, right now. I- I know this feeling, it's a terrible feeling- oh god, what-

It starts at my ankles, like I'm wading through a powerful current. A sudden rush of tiredness, exhaustion- that's sadness, that's what it's like when I feel sad- then, heat, the urge to move, to- fight.
Anger? Dizzy, lost- helpless. A rush of snot down the back of my throat makes me swallow and swallow again against the itch of it.

Just a thought just a thought just a thought. It's okay it's okay it's okay. Nothing nothing nothing to fear.

I'm here.

I'm here.

I'm here.

Take a moment to find the source- Nami is having a baby. Probably more than one, considering how quickly she's getting bigger. I want that. I want what she has.

What does she have that I don’t?

Pregnancy.

I remember being pregnant, and how awful it was- ah. I want children, to love and care for and raise. I see.

So that’s what it is.

Envy comes in many forms, and can be the kind of dragon that kills the World, if you let it. Your world, I mean.

It's an emotion you hold in reserve, secreted inside yourself like salamanders under stones in the seep; it’s very rare indeed that a person wants it known to another of their acquaintances or friendship that they are envious of them. I don’t want Nami to know that I feel like this. I don’t ever want to speak badly of my friends, denigrate or deride them- excepting in jest, when I know with certainty that they are in on the joke and laughing just as hard as I am. I can’t be that person, I won’t.

Envy always arises in response to a social comparison or competition- who gets married first, and to whom, and happily or not, and who has children first, how good is your job, where do you live- and it’s totally normal. You compete and compare to measure yourself; self-evaluation is a constant, ever-flowing stream. Envy is triggered when you come up short- that’s why it’s considered one of the ‘ugly’ emotions. In truth, it’s no more or less ugly than any of the other emotions.

It’s painful- being envious of someone, what they have, who they are… it makes you work hard. To neutralize your envy, you have to diminish the source of it, or elevate yourself, or do both. It’s a painful, transformative emotion- and no one really likes to change. Change is agonizing- necessary- but agonizing.

Take a step back, Mab.

Emotions- all emotions- exist to help us, we have them because we need them. Thus, the purpose of envy: as an emotion that enables the survival of the species, envy is related to competition and social comparison between the self and the other that is a part of your self-evaluation. ‘Am I good enough?’ Envy is part of how one must necessarily answer that question.
I’m sitting on my chair, with my face pressed into my hands. Nami is sitting on- oh, footstool, I keep it here so- not important-

“S-sorry. Ah, I’m- I’m having a moment.”

“I can see that. Can you talk to me about it, Mab?”

“I- yes. I think so. No point in hiding it, I don’t think- I want what you have, Nami.”

“...You want to be pregnant?”

“Yeah.”

“...”

“It’s stupid, I know- being pregnant is really awful and uncomfortable and you can’t eat a bunch of your favorite foods and you can’t- can’t fight and-”

“And it’s your Dream, isn’t it.”

“...”

“You said to me, once, a long time ago- something like… something like how a person can have the Dream of a Lifetime, and that’s okay- but there are smaller, easier Dreams, little things that anyone could have if they wanted. You never did say what your small Dreams were, Mab. I think I can guess a few, though.”

“I- I can say. Some of them. I’ll say some of them- no need to guess. I Dreamed of marrying someone who loved me; and I did, I am. Sanji’s- really, he’s wonderful, and I love him, too.”

Nami’s hand is very warm, in mine. I can’t bear to look, and see what she must think of me- the expression in her eyes, I can’t- look-

“I Dreamed of having friends; n-not people who were stuck with me due to some, some quirk of fate and scheduling. I wanted people who picked me and I picked back, people who appreciated my company and skill and- loved me. And the crew does, some more than others but that’s the way of things, I’ve found.”

I’ve closed my eyes again. I- I can’t say it. If she says it, I won’t deny it- but- I can’t say it.

“You want children, more than anything- the Greatest Sewing Professional in the World… you’ll get there if anyone can, I know you will. But… it seems to me, Mab, that Dreams like the one you’ll devote your life to… that kind of Dream needs someone to share it with, otherwise it’s...”

“Empty.”

I take a deep breath. I let it out slow.

I look up, and see that Nami is crying, too. I reach beside me, open a drawer- it’s full of plain handkerchiefs, dozens of colors. I pull out one, and hand it to Nami, and take another for myself.
“My self-worth is not bound up in- in if I have a baby or not. I know it isn’t, I know that- but oh god, it hurts. I’m- I’m so sorry, Nami.”

“No, no- don’t be! I’m sorry that you feel like this! Gah- I… you and Sanji are so in love, why haven’t you...?”

“We still haven’t really talked about it, honestly.”

“Mab, it’s been three years-”

“Ah. The first year is mostly courting; second year is being together; and the third year we pushed each other- tested limits. That’s how it’s… how it’s supposed to be. Now that we’ve gotten through all that, now is the year we ought to talk about it, as we’ve only kind of talked about it before-”

“Only kind of?”

“A single conversation as we danced together isn’t really...”

“No, I see what you mean.”

“I- ah. I remember, now. Part of this isn’t really my envy- this comes from my mothers, Mom and Aunt Zippy. They wanted babies of their own, but… with how things went, they never really… well, they might have, and it just didn’t work out. I don’t know.”

“...You could ask?”

“Yeah. I think I’ll have to. And, I mean- I know, I remember, I’m pregnant. I’ve looked after babies and small children before- it’s not fun, or easy, or anything I’d want to be paid to do, have a duty towards doing. But...”

“It’s because I’m doing it of my own free will, and you’ve never gotten that chance.”

“-Yes. That’s it exactly, Nami.”

Nami wipes her face, and squeezes my hand. I squeeze back.

“I have a husband, who loves me, and friends who care about me-”

“-yeah, you do-”

I smile, and squeeze Nami’s hand, and she smiles, and squeezes back.

“I am a master of the spear and needle, and I have skills and talents no one else in the World quite shares. The life I have now; the way I’m living now- I have countless reasons to be grateful and content, as I am. That I strive for more is a reflection of my character, not a reflection of any dissatisfactory element in my World; I want to be better because I want to be better, not because I am bad.
“There is no one that has everything. Comparing my life to another’s is always a losing proposition; I will always come short, I will always miss out. There are always going to be people who appear to be- for better or worse- more than I am. I must remember that one always compares the worst of themselves against the best assumptions one makes about another. The truth is, everyone I will ever meet experiences problems, trials, and weaknesses- just like I do. We are, all of us- of every tribe- human. That is what makes us human.

“Life is not a competition to be won; what I gain in life cannot be taken with me in death, except in the immaterial. Nami?”

“Yes, Mab?”

“I am so, so happy for you, and Zoro. I am so happy you’re going to have children.”

“Thank you, Mab.”

We only remember living the once. Do it right, and that once is enough.

“Ah. I still- it still hurts, but like… like a dagger in my side has been pulled free, and the mess around it cleared away. It’s not a grinding sort of pain, but the pain of a muscle stretching out a cramp, now. But for my feelings.”

“Ah. I know exactly what you mean. Arlong.”

“Arlong?”

“Arlong.”

“Hmm. So- before I crumbled like a wet graham cracker, did you manage to pick out anything you liked?”

“Heh- yeah. The orange ones.”

“The… blue, and the aqua?”

“Mm.”

“Alright. Let me just- these, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’ve got several like this- or was it the texture you liked?”

“Texture.”

“Hmmm… try this. I want you to start out with three- one to wear, one to wash, one to let rest. If you find you need more, we’ll pull more for you- not that one?”

“Nope.”

“Try this one- really, you wear these however makes you feel best. Before birth, they help keep your pudge supported- that one?”
“This one.”

“**The teal**, then. Alright. So- you wanted support for your breasts and hips, aye?”

“I mean, maybe?”

“I’ll teach you a few styles of wrapping, then. First, though- best double check each saree has a marker for where the middle of the rail is on the wrong side...”

“Um...?”

“Okay, so- the edge of the fabric, when you’re using it as a wrap or just describing it, is called a rail. The long side, I mean- the long side is the rail. The wrong side is the underside- see how the colors are much more intense, on this side?”

“Oh, okay.”

“Right. The teal has a label, but the other two don’t- just a second- d’you want “Made With Love By Mab” or “Mab Is Keeping You In Stitches”, or... oh, hey, I’ve got little kittens and ducklings in here, too-”

“Heh. ‘Made With Love By Mab’ is fine, Mab.”

“Alright- won’t take a moment, these are just a few quick stitches- so, familiarize yourself with the teal saree while you wait. Flick it around, really feel it up, wrap it around yourself-”

“Um. Okay...?”

And, while I sew on the label to the blue saree, Nami plays around with the teal-rail saree.

“Huh. I see why you had me do that- this has more uses than just as a belly wrap, doesn’t it.”

“It’s about seven meters of one hundred twenty centimeter wide silk, Nami; it absolutely has more than one use. Ah, done; first things first Nami- the label, on your saree-wrap, is always going to be in the middle of the top rail. Straighten out your fabric, and find the label for me.”

“Okay... got it.”

“So. The size of all three Saree is about the same, and these in particular are very long and wide, so you can wrap from your hips all the way up to your breasts and around the pudge all through your pregnancy and beyond without much trouble. Do you want to see me wrap first, then have me talk you through it, or...?”

“Show me.”

“Okay- like **this.**”

I stand, and quietly wrap myself- not as quickly as I can, but not slowly, either. Adjust for the wings, make sure all my folds are nice- done.
Nami hums.

“So- firstly, I sort of like that style, but...”

“Not on you?”

“Yeah.”

“I can just go through until there’s one that really jumps out at you.”

“Um- Yeah, do that.”

“Alright.”

And so, for the next forty five minutes, I show Nami a plethora of belly wrapping techniques.

“Alright. So- I like the ones that are very flat.”

“Honestly, I do too- when I was pregnant, the flattest wraps were the most versatile; do it at the start of the day, and just wear it until you have to bathe again.”

“Mm. The one with the ring-slings was also very nice- I like the simple ones best, it seems.”

“That’s fine. So- sling rings, I know I have some... aha, here we are. D’you want wood, bone, or metal?”

“Wood, please.”

“Here- those are rated for teething, just so you know.”

“Cool! -They fit over my hands nicely too...”

“Yeah, that’s a good set. Anyway- these saree are long for a normal ring sling arrangement, but the theory is still sound; and, since the first two layers are doing the major holding, the rest are supporting layers. Or other things.”

“Mm. Rings go in the middle, right?”

“Yup.”

“Okay- oh, that already feels good, holy crap-”

“Yeah, I remember that too; don’t forget your tails, now.”

“Ah, right. Well- put this between my legs- this one I’ll match the rails up and fold around for back support- oh god yes- tight, tight and flat-”

“Shall I leave you to it, then?”

“Um- yeah, yeah.”
“Okay. If you forget your sarees here, I’ll have them to you with the next batch of laundry. Cool?”

“Super cool.”

“If you need a refresher on how to tie your belly wraps, just ask, okay?”

“Okay- and done! Secret pockets, back support, warmth for the pudge, and stylish to boot! This feels so good - ah, thank you so much Mab!”

“You’re welcome, Nami!”

And then we hug. Nami’s belly is very round and firm against my own; not hard, but firm. There’s an egg, in there; soft shelled, but definitely there. I’m- hmm!?

“You felt that too?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, damn- Zoro wanted to be the one who...”

“I won’t tell him if you don’t. Besides, unless you start taking naps with him on the deck-”

“-M’gonna have to do a hard pass on that-”

“-Yeah. Do they get jumpy before or after meals?”

“Um, usually after; right about now, actua-ah! Wow, okay, calm down. Oof.”

“Yes. If you simply must let him feel the little thumpies, have a honey-ginger fountain soda and let Zoro feel you up. The beansprout will have a hell of a dance party, but... that should do it. Or about an hour after your next meal; either way.”

“Um. Maybe next week? I mean. They’ll be way bigger, then.”

“True.”

“...Mab?”

“Hm?”

“...Thank you for being my midwife. I mean- I know you trained Taffy, and all, but... thank you. Thank you for being my friend.”

“Thank you, Nami.”

“For what?”

“For letting me.”

And she’s crying again. Pregnancy hormones will do that to a person- c’mere, it’s okay, it’s okay.
Eventually, Nami goes to have a nap and I continue my work in the studio.

Because of the time of year and what we do- we are pirates, but we’re \textit{sailors}, too, and it’s best not to forget that- it’s about the right time for all our boots and leather to be polished and waterproofed.

Let’s see- the simple recipe will do fine for the brown and pale leather, but we need other colors too; henna and beetroot will get the red color Mark will need, and the black is two large oak galls, vinegar, and rust- that’s Zoro, Sanji, and Taffy.

I set the dyes to boil and thicken several days ago, intensifying the color and allowing for the drying process- don’t want water in the conditioner. Then, when it was a wet paste, I spread them on wax paper and left them to dry out. All that’s left now is to powder them, and since I’ve been planning to make leather conditioner and waterproof for days, that’s a fairly simple job, just tedious; after about an hour, hour and a half, the dyes are ready to go- I just need to reconstitute them in the polish oils.

\textbf{Laundry Doll} puts two hundred milliliters of coconut oil, the red dye powder, and fifty grams of beeswax into one of the Laundry’s clean double boilers, then sets the whole thing to bubble together- adds about ten drops of rose oil when everything’s been melted together. She does the same for the black dye powder, and the same again but with no dye powder at all; then, when it’s all melted together, she pours each mixture into it’s own jar, sets the jars by a fan to cool, and goes on to the next bit.

Sort out the mending into fairly distinct batches; do this now, do that later, do this before washing, do that after washing; set the first load of actual washing in the washing machine, set other things to soak, retire one or two items people may keep trying to sneak back out of the rag pile but I’ve a plan for \textit{that} nonsense- I’ll announce it at lunch- and, yes, the sacks that held flour and other foodstuffs are clean, now. So.

Rag rugs, mending, and knitting are the order of the day, along with some sketching for what all I’m going to make for Imbolc, various bits of new gear, and my watch’s entertainment. I think- probably something very portable. Hm. Rag rugs, probably.

Let’s see- on the list of mending, pillows, sheets, shirts, a few pairs of pants, socks, and a pair of opera gloves…? Mine is not to question why, I know this, but- Opera Gloves, really?

\textbf{So- Mending Doll} takes the big laundry basket of mending, a small kit-box of mending tools- needles, thread, scissors, another basket for scraps or if there’s just no saving it- and goes to sit out in the bright sunlight. Or she would, if there were sunlight; this time, she goes to sit on the couch.

I take my sketchbook, my pens and pencils, ink and brushes and colored inks too- and sit at the Galley table, which is clean, now. \textbf{Dairy Doll} has finished her work- she’s brought Sanji the cheeses that were ready, salted the butter that Sanji didn’t need for baking, cleaned everything, and washed the floor to maintain temperature. \textbf{Gardening Doll} is planting peas, shallots, and other things it’s the appropriate time to plant.

Over the separation, I figured out the layout of my \textbf{Dolls}; the strongest ones are the \textbf{Golden Memories}, who are the first tiny fairy dolls I made, adorned with some kind of gold- paint of gold, gold leaf, something. They are the strongest of my \textbf{Dollpergangers}, and are identical to me in every way, except for the gold khol around the eyes. I use them in battle, mainly- although, Sanji does have a fetish for hareem situations, so- I mean. I can be in several physical places at once, and split my full
attention far more than that; thus, if my husband wants to have some fun with all of me, okay. I can do that.

Silver Screens are little pewter fairy charms I electroplated with sterling silver. They are next strongest of my Dolls, and are more… faded, than I am. It’s hard to explain from the inside, but- each Silver Screen Doll has about half the strength of the Gold, and each Gold has half the strength of myself, the origin. Thus, as I go further on the Line, even my least interesting copies become more than strong enough to deal with the majority of foes. Dairy Doll is a Silver Screen. So is Laundry Doll. Mending Doll is actually a Bronze Bitch; Bronze Bitch Dolls are meant for drudgery or very simple tasks indeed- dishwashing, spinning, laundry folding… things I need to do but it doesn’t have to be my physical body doing them, you see. Beating the filth and stains out of clothing. Mending clothing on the couch.

There are also the Paper Dolls, but those are very specifically disposable, so… if I’m about to get hit with something I know I can’t take, I’ll switch with a Paper Doll. I have thousands of them- literally just bits of paper in a more or less ‘Fae’ shape. They only need to last half a second, is the thing, so… Hmm.

Oh, and while I’ve been thinking of this, I’ve also sketched out several interesting things. Mending Doll has done her job, declared two of the sheets unsalvageable, and begun to cut the flannel sheets into one by two inch strips of cloth. Rag rug rug rug rug- I’ll have to dye the rag to suit, and both pre and post stitch the rag, for ease of use. I’ll stitch each article’s worth of rag into one unbroken strip of rag, trim it up and so on; the leavings and bits make good pile for re-stuffing pillows. Then, it’s a wash, a jump in the dye pots for most of the rest of the day, and I’ve got second watch today so- that’s what I’ll be doing with my hands so I don’t fall asleep and zone out.

Let me see; I started the day in the working overalls that get washed with soap once a week and hosed off every day after I’m done doing messy work. It’s not quite time to move up to the summer weight versions, but- soon. Soon. Oh, yeah, and the undershirt - which gets rinsed and dried after each use, and then washed at the end of the week before the funk sets in. Of course, it’s healthiest to just… not wear underwear for heavy exertion, but I have a standing quickie with Sanji every afternoon, usually right after sparring, so… Anyway, after the second shower I put on a pair of underwear, which stays on until the third rinse of the day.

I don’t actually soak in the tub but once a week or so;

After Gardening Doll finished her work, I Put My Dolls Away and had a quick shower, more of a rinse, really; then, I put on my actual clothing for the day. Today, I’m wearing a pair of taupe Toms shoes- really, they’re a warm-toned grey color, but it’s marketed as taupe; and a pair of socks meant for wearing with flats like this, covers the bottom, the heel, and the toes of my foot, in cooler grey for a little contrast. Greased my legs during the shower, and then my jumpsuit; today’s is a slightly wintery-spring stripe print halter top. Wide leg, tight waist, and pockets.

Oh, yeah- and in deference to the weather, a style of sweater I’ve always liked, with the simple lace around the back. It’s thin, mostly there for another layer to trap air with; it doesn’t actually do much to keep me warm, per say, it’s just… very, very comfortable. Really, my hands and wrists are kept warm with fingerless gloves. They’re knitted, with decorative buttons below my wrist in a column.

Urgh- hair’s in the way. Bleh. Part of me wants to cut it shorter than before; but… honestly, it seems to want to be long? So, while it’s still pretty short, I’ve been putting it up in sideways french twists. They’re kinda messy- I guess, if it grows out another inch or so, I’ll start doing the classic version.
Anyway, it’s time for a tea break; I pull on a heavy piano shawl, which serves to keep me warm on the quick dash from this area of the ship up to the galley; I have to go in from the out of doors at some point, and it is cold on the lawn deck.

Oh, and best to carry up all the sacking for the rag rugs so I can measure things out before hand… I like using sacking for backing (rhyme time~!) because it adds another point of stability to the rug, and helps keep it from curling more than it should. I roll up the sacking, and tie it with twine; then, it’s off to tea~!

Ah, best take this sewing basket- it’s a Prop really, I just- I like having mnemonic devices standing by. My memory is… not terribly good, honestly.

The everyday afternoon tea service is familiar to everyone; there is no real difference between Blues in its content, whether that be the more savory fare preferred in Nort and Wes, or the sweets preferred Est and Sout. Along the Line, Tea is the prefered name for the afternoon snack period between when a child gets out of compulsory education and enjoys their dinner, or between luncheon and supper. (Midmorning is called elevensies; most of the men on the crew take elevensies, but not all of them. For elevensies, I usually put out a fruit basket or something like that; with Chopper’s approval.)

There is honestly no difference in content of the tea-time service, whether in a tiny farmhouse in the country, the bandbox house of the newest bride, or in the drawing-room of my lovely wife; excepting perhaps that in the small houses, the tea tray would be brought in by one of the ladies of the house, usually an elder daughter. In the larger houses, this would be the job of the butler with one or two footmen in his wake.

In either case, a table is required. A tea-table is usually of the drop-leaf variety because it is more easily moved than a solid one; however, in areas where floor space is at a premium, like on a ship, a solid table is fine. There are really no “correct” dimensions for a tea-table; however, it is assumed that a tea is a small party, no more than eight or so barring formal occasions.

A cloth must always be first placed on the table, before putting down the tray. The tea cloth may be a half a meter, a meter, or a meter and a half square. Our tea cloth is a combination of machine made lace and burlap; Mab, my beloved wife, says that with our crew, for anything less than ceremonial articles which live in their own boxes when not in use, something easy to replace and hard to wear out is best. Honestly, I agree; there’s a reason all of our dishes are either wooden or metal. Excepting for a very, very few things- wood. Or metal. The tea cloths burlap covers the entire Galley table, and the lace hangs down about a quarter of a meter from the edge of the table.

It’s nice.

On the tea cloth is put a tray big enough to hold everything except the plates of food- or, if space is a concern, all the tea articles. The tray may be a massive silver one that requires a strong pair of arms to lift it, or it may be tin; in our case, it’s stainless steel, which cleans well and is fairly sturdy. Our actual set consists of the tray, a sugar bowl, a milk or cream pitcher, and a pair of teapots. Our strainer is plated with sterling silver and has it’s own stand; our slop bowl came from a thrift shop and is definitely a copper Wano-style kensui, which is a little weird. Our kettle is from Skypiea, one
of those fill and flick models that works with an internal heating element. Our tea caddy is actually a **set of tins** full of different teas. The tins are from the general supply- Chopper keeps drugs in the ones in the Infirmary, I keep spices and spice mixes in them in the kitchen, as well as dried herbs; they are deadly useful. Our **lemon dish** is glass, but it’s properly a **Great Low Tide** cake serving dish. The handle is nice, though; makes it very easy to pass around the table. Ah, and when I serve layer cake, the stand I use is a **minimal pedestal** that Franky made in a bit less than half an hour with a lathe and some food-safe finishing varnish.

In more formal settings, on the tray should be: a kettle which ought to be already boiling, with a spirit lamp or sterno lamp underneath it; an empty teapot, or two, depending on the preferences of the party; a caddy of tea; a tea strainer and slop bowl; a cream pitcher and sugar bowl; and, on a glass dish, lemon in slices. If lemon is not available, lime or fingerlime are also appropriate. A number of cups and saucers- exceeding the number of tea partiers by no more than two apiece- and a stack of tea plates, all to match, with a napkin approximately twelve inches or thirty centimeters square, hem-stitched or edged to match the tea cloth, which my **pchelka** did in about an afternoon’s work. Apparently getting matching lace was the hard part, not the actual stitching.

Anyway.

A pile of cups and saucers, and a stack of little tea plates, all to match, with a napkin folded on each of the plates like the filling of a layer cake, complete the paraphernalia of the tea-service. Our **cups**, **saucers**, and **tea plates** all match in that they are made of approximately the same quality of porcelain. Otherwise, nope. Mix and match tea service.

Each plate is lifted off the stack with its own napkin. Further, on the tea-table itself is the ‘curate’; a stand made of three small shelves, each just big enough for one good-sized plate. On these plates are always two, usually three, varieties of small snack; be it dumpling, fruit, candy, cake, or hot bread. Our **curate** is of the folding variety, and holds the large plates quite well. The top dish on the curate should be a covered one, and holds hot bread of some sort.

We alternate between **anpan** and **pao de queijo** as our hot breads. When I serve the cheese bread for tea, Luffy’s about two-thirds more likely to show up. I mean, they are a Goa specialty, so… Nostalgic taste? The hot breads get made about half an hour before tea, which… Okay. Mab runs like clockwork; if this, then that. Her schedule is very nearly iron-clad, with very little variation due to season or place. Tea time for Mab is, during the warm parts of the year, late in the afternoon- around four, with dinner at six, seven, or eight, depending on the watch schedule; during the cool parts of the year, it’s closer to two, with dinner again at six, seven, or eight. Mab is also usually the hostess of tea; she takes tea because I think she just likes spending time with me? And she’s trying to not overwork herself, I worry about that…

Anyway; after Mab comes Bryony, either fresh from her daily “nap” or about to go down for it. Tea is the last meal of Bryony’s day, and Dinner is the first; she gets through the night with an assortment of teas and juices I prepare for her during the day. Taffy and Gurry aren’t quite attached at the hip; but, with Taffy now working as our acting Navigator, she’s often in a position to bring Gurry in for mealtimes. Gurry, if we let him, will completely ignore that he’s hungry in favor of his art- tunnel vision like that isn’t uncommon on our crew, but… well, it’s a good thing we’ve got people who don’t focus like that too. Robin usually appears sometime after Taffy and Gurry; she prefers coffee, but that’s why we have two teapots, really. The tea is a seasonal variety, and the other pot is for coffee. Brook always shows up right about when the curate comes out, which is fashionably late, and has been for centuries. If Luffy, or any of the others, are to appear at tea, this is usually when it happens. And, of course, I take my second rest of the day here; I need three breaks through the day, and the first comes in the morning. The second one, the middle of the day- my day, here, when I’ve prepared everything I can in advance, and now everything is cooking and only needs an occasional
check. Bread has to proof and rise; pottage has to boil; and so on. After tea, I take a nap with Mab, train, and have shower sex with her. S’nice.

The two lower dishes of the curate may be covered or not, according to whether the additional food is hot or cold; the second dish usually holds sandwiches, and the third cake. In my opinion, this ought to be predicated on the contents of the covered dish: if your hot bread is sweet, your second and third dishes ought to be savory, and if your hot bread is savory, your second and third dishes ought to be sweet. The sweetest food on the curate should always be the cake; I don’t agree with the idea of a whole curate full of sweets, not at an everyday tea. For a birthday, perhaps- but not everyday. I’ll ask Gurry if he wants his birthday like that; he might, he might just want a cake and that’s it.

I honestly prefer a simpler diet- as does my crew; we have bread and butter, tea cakes, and plain hard cookies or digestive biscuits. Bread is usually soda bread, and butter is the salted variety; tea cakes can be anything between sweet buns with dried fruit in them, small cupcakes or muffins, or even sliced sponge cake. Depends on the day, and my mood, really. Usually ginger snaps and biscotti, honestly- as far as cookies go, I mean. Fikabröds, really, which Robin and I appreciate- I actually don’t like tea all that much, it’s too… grassy. Sometimes there’s marmalade, or jam, or honey for the bread; buttered toast, muffins, and so on. Some people will pile the curate until it literally staggers under the weight of pastries, cream cakes, and sandwiches of pâté de foie gras or mayonnaise. I do not.

All of this necessitates butter knives, a dish for the butter, and a dish for jam; forks need not apply, and spoons should only be for the stirring of tea or coffee, if present at all.

Selection of tea service foods is entirely up to my whim, and what I’m willing to do. I, personally, prefer to ignore the various food-fads that sweep the international waters; currently, the fad is for bacon and toast sandwiches, fresh hot gingerbread, and scones. I say fuck that bullshit, all of those things need to be cooked hot that very day, I’ve got better things to do- and the fad’s change every two months or so. You start chasing fads, you end up with malnourishment; the Old Man said it, and I agree.

Sandwiches for tea service are made by buttering the end of the loaf- or mayonaising it, or what have you- spreading on the filling, and then cutting off the prepared slice as thin as possible. If I’m serving sandwiches, I’m serving Norten Gravlax on rye, or some other open-faced sandwich, because I simply cannot be bothered with all the frippery of a tea sandwich every day. Special occasions- weddings, funerals, birthdays, initiations- those, I’ll break out the fancy sandwiches for. Otherwise, no.

Oh, yes- and there are some days when it’s only Mab who sits with me for tea. It’s funny- she actually really likes traditional Farnorten foods, with a bit of Nearmorten for variety. She grew up with traditional Skuan foods, with a bit of Old Esten for variety; but she likes the food I grew up with, and I like the foods she grew up with. We really are a love-match, it’s the damndest thing. Neither of us really cares for more than one or two light snacks at tea; it’s to get us through to dinner, not… Ah, but if it’s a small party- most often consisting of Mab, Bryony, Taffy, Gurry, Robin, Brook, and myself, I do the whole service.

On a very few occasions, the entire crew has appeared for tea service- usually when we’re in harbor, or it’s someone’s birthday, or it’s a holiday. Then, I serve two plates of hot food; the aforementioned anpan or pao de queijo, and an additional something- usually, I just serve both of them and call it a day. There are two plates of the cookies or fancy cakes; and on the very special occasions, mostly the
High Holidays and the younger member’s birthdays, a layer cake. During the hottest weather, in place of one of the hot dishes, I serve a pâté or lettuce sandwiches, and there’s a choice of hot or iced tea, or hot or iced coffee. Rarely anything else, though.

Tea is a meal of intimate conversation- not that the other meals aren’t intimate, but the entire purpose of tea service is, aside from providing a snack and break time between luncheon and dinner, to provide a forum for the airing of intimate conversation. Thus, unless one is joining the tea service, one may only enter for a small snack- if Luffy wants some pao de queijo to eat, he can have a whole plate- but he cannot eat it in the galley with the rest of us unless he’s sitting for tea, too. Bryony made that rule. When the tray and curate are brought in, everyone takes their plate and napkin. The hostess, Mab, makes the tea and pours it. Then, those who want tea pass her their cups and saucers in an orderly fashion, which she then fills and returns. Brook, being the gentleman present who isn’t a butterfingers like Gurry is with everything except poison and paint, or the cook- me- passes the curate, afterward returning it to where it belongs and resuming his seat.

Since I almost never serve cake, especially not very soft and sticky or cream filled cake, I almost never lay out small forks. However, Chopper loves those things, and for his birthday, I do- so then, I do. Otherwise, almost never. And as I said before: if jam is to be eaten, or butter spread, there must be little butter knives to use. Each member of the party, in taking their plate, helps themselves to toast and jam, and a knife, too. Then, in the fullness of time, they take their turn with the butter.

Finally, and most importantly- the atmosphere of hospitality. It’s something intangible, and yet nothing about any kind of service- especially food service- is more felt or missed. There are certain houses- and eventually, restaurants- which simply radiate warmth, akin to an open wood fire. And there are others that suggest an express arrival of the coldest depths of winter. The size of the fire, and the fineness of the dishes and the napkins, the expense of the tablecloth and the tea- the rarity and preparation of the food does not define the measure of hospitality present.

Some people, like Mab and myself, (and Luffy, if we’re being honest), have the gift of hospitality. They have the skill and the natural talent to make anyone feel welcome, comforted, cozy; Mab’s gets a little overbearing at times, but it’s always clear that she genuinely wants you to be at ease, to have what you need, and so can be forgiven. It’s also very important to note that Mab’s hospitality is in her area of expertise- that is, in the use of fabrics.

Mab tells me my hospitality can be a little grim or brusque, but- as my sincerity is as strong as hers-those with thicker skin tend to enjoy it. No one complains about my food, and meals are always lively; and most of everything always gets eaten, and what doesn’t get eaten is what I already know won’t get all the way eaten.

(And at least we’re not Luffy. Luffy’s hospitality is the kind that makes you follow a dumb kid in a straw hat to the End of the World and beyond.)

Others, whose intentions are just as kind and whose houses and so on are perfection in luxury, petrify every approach. Such people appearing at a party color the entire scene with the blue haze of their austerity. Ichiji is like that, and Niji too, actually- he’s not a master, but a slave, of etiquette. People like that, their chiefest concern is whether ‘this is correct’, or ‘that is properly done’, or ‘this and that persons are such a one as they care to know’. Always asking themselves, a little anxiously, “Have I failed today, or have I not?”

The answer, more often than not, is “Yes, I have failed. And tomorrow, I shall get up, and try again.” That is courage too, y’see; doesn’t have to be big, and loud. Courage, boldness, chivalry- they don’t have to be big, and loud. Courage is not just doing things that scare you; courage is strength in the
face of pain, failure, and grief. Boldness isn’t just taking the risk that the cliff you jump onto will hold your weight; it’s flirting with a girl, stealing a kiss or two under the eaves of the old oak tree, and dancing the twilight hours away. Chivalry is not just being a courteous man, but a *good* man, a virtuous man. There are seven virtues on which the whole of the World agrees a person ought to have; Joy, Honesty, Loyalty, Generosity, Kindness, Friendship, and Hope. (Joy is sometimes translated as Contentment, or Peace- really, it’s the kind of restful happiness of knowing your life is worth the struggle, and enjoying the company of yourself, your family, and your friends.)

People who are fearful of others, and fearful of themselves, are never successfully popular hosts or hostesses. If one is *really and truly* afraid of knowing someone who might one day prove to be unpleasant company; if you are such a snob that you can’t stand even the slightest deviation from ‘propriety’; if you cannot bear to go to where people don’t mind seeing you cry, because they cry too- then perhaps one should no longer make the effort of bothering with people at all. If all of that is far, far too much for one to handle, it might be best to shut the door tight and blind the windows; sit before a mirror in your own drawing room or kitchen, and have tea for two.

Of course, that’s none of my business, what one does- what my business is what *we* do, in this crew, with our food.

“Mmm, this is good- we’re on the spring mix, now?” I said.

“It’s about the right time of year for it, yeah. Ah, Gurry-” said Sanji.

“-and that’s why it doesn’t matter if you’re making terrible art, you’re still- Oh, yeah Sanji?” said Gurry, turning away from Robin.

“Do you want cake for your birthday? It’s coming up soon- the twenty-eighth of January, right?” said Sanji.

“Uh- oh! Yeah, um- we celebrate birthdays in the crew?” said Gurry.

“Captain’s orders; we sure do. It can be as small as something like a cake at tea, or we can have a full on party for it- Usopp, Franky, Brook, and Luffy like parties. Also, we give gifts.” said Sanji.

“Um.” said Gurry.

“You get more gifts if you’re younger- Chopper usually gets the most gifts, actually, although I suppose Nami and Zoro’s kid’s gonna get the most for a while…” hums Sanji.

“Ah. I actually like fruit tarts the most, so… um, but with that face- uh, th-those cookies with the, uh, the thumb-print in them? And the jam? I like those best, too. Um- raspberry caves?” said Gurry.

“Calm it down, Sanji. You’ve got that tendon jumping at your throat- d’you need a cool hand on a hot head, or nay?” I said.

“Aye- sorry, woo, cold- sorry, Gurry. I didn’t mean to scare you like that; I just really hate not being able to make a food someone wants, and we just don’t have any fresh fruit that will be palatable in a tart right now- plenty of vegetables, and I suppose there might be flowers soon, but neither of those are *fruit*. I mean, I can make lemon meringue tarts, but…” said Sanji, wincing. He’s really gotten much nicer- and Gurry… was not treated kindly. I won’t say what I think he was until he says it
himself, but yelling at Gurry is the fastest way to get his capitulation.

It’s also the cruelest- sends him shivering for hours and hours. Nami was very upset for days after that one time, and it took a while for her to realize that yes, that was her that did that- and no, that wasn’t her at all. Then I got to explain that anyone can be abused, or harmed- and it doesn’t matter, the genders involved, or the ages. People can hurt people, no matter the circumstances.

“I like those too, um- but, uh...” said Gurry.

“Raspberry caves, lemon meringue tarts, and… what kind of hot bread do you want? Or pastry, I do pastries for birthdays...” said Sanji, a little grumpy but quite nice, really.

“Uh. Well... strudel, knishes, chouquette, savory galette, taiyaki, chorley cake, homity pie... I used to have a lot of free time and an empty house, and uh. I baked. A lot.” said Gurry, musingly.

My eyebrows went up as Sanji’s furrowed. No sigh, though- that’d be if he was genuinely not looking forward to the work... I gently run the fingers of my free hand through the hair at the nape of Sanji’s neck, right where his dorsal ridge fur begins; little scritches help him relax. Calm down, love.

“Raspberry caves, lemon meringue tarts, and knishes- sweet with breakfast, and savory for tea. It’ll be a knish day. Okay- yeah, that’s... yeah. That’s your menu for your birthday, Gurry.” said Sanji, nodding to himself.

“Um. Thank you, Sanji.” said Gurry.

“Ah- of course.” said Sanji.

“At least it’s not like you and Franky; your birthdays are literally a day apart, and considering the kinds of things he likes... Ah, and you always get so huffy when I do the baking on your birthday-” I said.

“-because I know you don’t like baking, Mab-” said Sanji.

“-yes, but you hate making filo dough, and I don’t, so. There’s that.” I said.

Sanji puffs up like a frog, which is cute as hell, so I have to turn his head just a little and kiss him firm on the mouth. Mmm. Mouth. He smiles and kisses me back and relaxes a hell of a lot- bleh, smoke breath, he always smokes during tea, bleeeeh-

“Sorry. I’m working on it.” said Sanji.

“I know; you’re doing great, really-” I said.

“I’m sorry, there’s an entire museum of Bad Art? Did I hear that correctly?” said Robin.
“MOBA- yeah, the Museum of Bad Art. They’ve got branches all over the World, and the one at Amazon Lily’s really nice. Right between the sewage plant and the pig farms-” said Gurry.

“Oh my god-”

“For the ambiance, y’know?”

“Hnng-”

“The best piece at MOBA: AL, is, hands down, ‘A L’INTERIEUR DE L’OEUF (INSIDE THE EGG) ; I have the poster version with me, hang on-’”

“...You carry posters of-?”

“Of course! It’s inspirational, and I have more than just- this-”

“Wha- Pffd- DERESHISHISHISH! DERESHISHISHISHISHISHI-! Wha-ha-hat the hee-hee-hell is tha-ha-ha-hat-shishishi?”

“That, my friend, is the power of a Really Awful Piece of Art-”

“I’ve tried for some time now to get into your style of singing, and I’m sorry Bryony- I just can’t stand it. I’ve tried to get into your style; to dance to your beat. I believe it’s something I should enjoy; I certainly enjoy the rest of your work. I love the way you mix the electronic and acoustic instrumentals in your music- and there are certain songs of yours that, regardless of your singing on them, I love quite fiercely for their exquisite symphonic layering. Frankly speaking, of your work, I think it’s the pure instrumentations I’ve enjoyed the most- what I can’t seem to enjoy is your preferred way of singing.”

“Well… I mean, for one, you don’t have to like everything I do, Brook. Um, there’s also this new single I’ve been working on, it’s really stripped down-”

“I know, I’ve heard you working on it- and it’s marvelous , Bryony. But it’s... it’s also very clear to me, at least, that you’re just playing around; that’s not who you are, and it’s not how you want to sing. How you sing when it’s just for yourself… Bryony, it’s a very dominating element in almost all of your work, and I just can’t get past it. It’s very puzzling for me, because I’ve seen your name floating around in the music-zines, and- darling, they love you, just as much as they love me. From very different directions, but the both of us are beloved.”

“...Honestly, I wish they’d stop comparing me to Jackie Flashday ; I can sing like her, of course, but my voice… now that I know more of who I am, I know that I don’t swing, not at all.”

“Indeed; although you can comport yourself in the swinging manner, that’s not who you are. Thus, making that kind of comparison between yourself and the Lovely Lady Day is laughable. You’re certainly contemporaries; and you are called Sweet Lady Bry, but… you’re not the same at all.”

“Yeah- comparing us, I’m immediately struck by the thought that… if someone had never heard my work, and came to listen to me because they thought I was like Lady Day…”

“...Well, you do have a very different sense of rhythm. You take far more from the operatic tradition than you ever have from Pop, Jazz, R&B, or even Soul; I honestly like the pure drama you can put into your voice. Not everyone has that skill.”
“And- it’s not that I don’t have an ear for melodies, and how to phrase them in a naturally pleasing way, I just find it… boring. I like asymmetry, and I like being… not normal. Is that weird, d’you think?”

“No, not at all- and it’s not like your asymmetry and oddity are accidental. When I go to break down what your music is actually doing on a mechanical level, there’s very little indeed that’s purely accidental. Considering how beautiful your music is, even when I don’t like it… I find myself listening again and again, simply because a particular intonation of your voice, or a specific turn of phrase when taken in it’s context is just… so intriguing.”

“…I guess… I guess when I heard you make music for the first time, I became very envious? Because, well, you’re an amazing musician, Brook, and at that time… I really wasn’t.”

“Bryony...”

“I can admit it- I had no idea what I was doing, I just… I cherry picked bits and pieces of songs I liked and stuck them together without much rhyme or reason, and called that music. It wasn’t until I sat in on you composing that night- remember-?”

“I remember you were crying at the end, and you wouldn’t say why, yes-”

“-Ah. Well… I realized, then, that I would never be able to stand beside you as an equally strong artist if I continued doing what I did. What I was doing was just… collage. You might have been doing that too, then, but from the outside… I guess all art at some point can be broken down to collage, or just starts there, but… I was collaging and that’s it , I didn’t take it further, I didn’t try to make it my own.”

“Aha. So there is something about your music I’ve missed- stop me if I’m wrong, but… when you heard me composing, and there was some arranging in there too- when you heard that, watched my process, you became inspired to do the same, somehow. But also, you realized that you’d never be able to do what I did, hmm?”

“Well- Brook, you’re an amazing musician, the Soul King; and I’m… not. That’s not a bad thing- but… a purpleheart is a beautiful tree, and so is a koa, but the qualities of their wood are not at all the same. Different doesn’t mean bad; it means not the same. My specialty isn’t music that comforts the soul- and that’s okay. I think my real specialty is making experimental dance music; or at the very least, songs you can move to. Or that move you to places you’ve never been before, not consciously.”

“I suppose it’s also a product of where we are in life; I want nothing more than to comfort, and be comforted, to know that I’m not alone. And you, quite frankly, wouldn’t know the joy of stillness if it did an injury to your person.”

“It’s blunt, but true.”

“I really do want to like your music, Bryony- all of it, not just part of it.”

“…we could collaborate?”

“Oh?”

“Well-”
And tea continued more or less as it always does until Sanji had to take the bread loaves out of the oven and check the pottage for lunch. We’d polished off the tea snacks, and as a natural extension of service, we helped him set the table for luncheon and- with a whirling I’ve gotten used to- resettled to enjoy lunch. After the first violent crush of devouring food, led as always by Luffy, the second wave opens up for a more relaxed, conversational tone.

“Neh, Mab- what’s with all th’flour sacks?” said Luffy.

“...Maybe swallow next time, before asking me a question, Luffy?”

“Oh-? Oh, sorry.” said Luffy, gulping down way more food than should fit down his throat don’t think about it don’t think about it-

“The sacking is for rag rugs.” I said.

“Oh!” said Nami.

“Yeah, cold floors can fuck right off.” I said.

“Here, here.” said Robin, holding her mug of switchel high before drinking deep of it.

“Oh! Cool! Are you gonna put th’grippy things on the bottoms so we don’t slide ‘em around when we step on ‘em?” said Luffy.

“Now that you’ve said that, yes, absolutely.” I said.

“Woo!” said Luffy.

“Ah- can you make Taffy a jacket or a coat or something? She keeps not wearing anything except legwarmers and armwarmers and a scarf, and that’s just not enough...” said Gurry.

“I wear a hat too, Gurry! And you’re one to talk with your shivering and huddling near warm walls-” yips Taffy.

“Still not enough, Taffy! And I am adapting, okay-” chirrups Gurry.

“I’ll put it on my list; be glad I hadn’t done much for sketching today, I’ve been needing a new project or two- and since I’m making lovely new clothing, does anyone else want anything?” I said.

“I’d like a shawl, actually- the feathery angora ones are nice, but I want something… I dunno, lace? Silk? Lighter, I mean to say. Good in and out of the water, and slippery, too.” said Mark.

“The fluffy feathery yis good, but- I get too hot too quickly, so I don’t like wearing any of them, not even the shrug or the shawl.” said Taffy.

“Um. I like flowers.” said Gurry.

I nodded.

“We’re going to end up on another winter island eventually; I need some kind of jumper or jacket or tunic that closes completely over my body, and it doesn’t matter if I’m wearing my compressor or not, it still needs to fit- the jackets we have now are okay, but... I want a custom jacket, if that’s alright? And um. I guess I need boots, too...” said Bryony, cringing at the look I give her at that last because I told her years ago to get boots dammit- fine. Fine.
“So. I’m not a cordwainer or a shoe maker. I’m a cobbler. I can mend shoes; I can mend damn near anything. But I’m not a maker of shoes- not hard shoes, at least. With that said, I also can’t let Bryony get frostbite. So. They won’t be hard boots like Sanji’s, Zoro’s, Usopp’s, and Mark’s; they won’t even be hard shoes like Taffy’s. But you won’t get frostbite. That’s all I can promise.” I said, scowling.

“I’ll take it.” said Bryony, cringing.

I finish my lunch pottage, my slices of bread, and my veggies; I focus very hard on enjoying my lunch and letting go of my rage because rage is poisonous, anger is the spurring emotion but rage will burn you inside and out- haaaaaaah, it’s okay, Bryony doesn’t like shoes and that’s fine. I know how to make Mukluks and their cousins from the Kush Mountains, so- it’s not like she won’t have adequate foot coverings. I had just hoped I wouldn’t have to.

Rrrgh.

Breathe it in and let it out slow, Mab. Breathe it in, and let it out slow.

Honestly, the best parts of my day come around when I’m waiting, which… back when I was training at the Baratie, or even on Momoiro, waiting was the absolute worst. There are some things, most every delicious fermented something, in fact, that absolutely cannot be rushed.

There’s no rushing good shoyu, or fish sauce, or worcestershire, or anything else like that. Beer, booze, wine, cheese- all these things move at their own pace. Bread; yoghurt; jam.

There’s no rushing good taste.

Similarly, there’s no rushing a good kiss.

Step back, and look from the outside. Mab’s hips are pinned under my own, her legs spread wide in their striped pants and her warm center rocking up against my own. Her stomach heaves but slowly against my own, steady bellows pushing in and out.

The soft smell of her- honeysuckle, soap, and her own female musk. Different from man-stank, but really not that different; and we both decided to skip training today, to get used to the cold. Neither of us wants a chest infection, and training outside like we normally do is a surefire way of getting one.

She likes it when I tease the careful pins out of her hair; gently curved brass coils that keep her wavy red hair up and back, away from her face. It takes practice to undo all her hair, each pin in one hand; set them in a little in-built dish in the side table, usually meant for drinks or something- but then her hair falls down, longer now, past her shoulders. It’s fun to tease my fingers through it, too- her hair is soft, softer than rabbit’s fur, and smells like her sweat and soap and coconut oil and just a little bit like heaven, when I breathe her in from the crown. Sometimes, after lunch but before we train- there’s two kissing sessions in the middle of the day, the light one before training, and the heavy one after. Sometimes, the light one is as light as holding each other on the Galley couch, and one of us breathing the other. Oftentimes, it’s me breathing her, but sometimes she needs to breathe me- it’s
usually around April, when she needs to breathe me. Most of her- Lost Ones- died in April. Puck
died in April.

I get it.

Trace the curve of her ear with kisses, and gently rub on the back side of her earrings, which she
never takes off- the big oval ones got lighter, over the years. I know she’s thinking about getting
more piercings; or even more tattoos, that don’t mean much of anything other than she liked the look
of them. I’m all for it- she’d look good in anything. Mab’s… really, very beautiful.

This time, I’m going to try something new-

“No, leave them on.”

“Ah? But- they’ll fog up, and-”

“Leave them on, Mab.”

“Ah… O-okay, if you want…”

And then I just look at her. I look into her eyes; warm, dark brown, the darkest brown you can get
before it turns black, like… light, through the edge of a cup of black coffee. No, no- Mab isn’t food,
describe her some other way, Sanji; really think about her, don’t just assume, take the time to look.

Like… opals. Her eyes are like opals. In the low light, it looks like she’s got flecks of rainbow, or…
or of some kind of metal, silver in this light, around the edge of her iris. There’s flecks of gold around
the pupil, not quite to the reddish rim but close; closer to the sclera, the metal flakes turn to silver. In
the light of day, they all turn gold; but here, it’s gold and silver and iridescence.

It’s beautiful, is what it is.

Her glasses are cute! They’re big, and square and so lovely on her oval face, ah- and she’s so fierce
when she has them on, too! With them off, her face seems to be set in a permanent glare, but I know
that’s not true; it’s because she literally cannot see beyond a few centimeters from the tip of her nose
without her glasses. Normally, with her glasses off, it’s a very quick segue into feeling up her tonsils
with my tongue, and her, mine, with hers; but this time, I want to do something… different. These
past few days… how to describe it.

Her smell is changing, and I want to- I want to smell her. I sincerely hope this doesn’t weird her out-
or if it does, it’s the kind of weird she can laugh at.

I look at her nose. It’s a sharp, narrow thing, strong like the prow of the ship; and for how thick and
bold her eyebrows are, anything less than a strong, elegant nose would make her whole face
unbalanced. The tone of her skin is akin to… she’s pale, still, from the winter; her skin goes from
beige in the winter to brown in the summer, a rich sepia brown that has flashes of bright red and gold
where sunlight skims across her skin. In the winter, she’s brown still, but a fawn’s brown, tawny at
the points and joints and high-places: her forehead, the tip of her nose, across her cheekbones, on her
chin, her shoulders, her clavicles… and the undertone of her skin is gold, it’s always gold.

Ah, hell. And that mouth-!
Kiss the lipstick off, and it’s always something with a bit of a purple tone to it, which pops like nothing else against her skin- but kiss that lipstick off, and her lips are about the color of a reddish pinecone. And kissing them is… good. Indescribably good.

I’m doing it right now, if you couldn’t tell.

This time- slow jams. When she goes to deepen the kiss, I back away- she moves back again, I move back. Again, again, again, until she’s softly squeaking and panting in my arms. There’s no training today, so I pull this out for hours; her in my arms, under me, our lips locking, breaking apart, back together like magnets from different poles- Tacky wetness, like the damp inside a pair of underwear at the end of a hot day- not wet, not soaked through, but damp and clinging to your skin where it’s warmest. As for the reason I wanted her to wear her glasses this time- when I look at her, back away and just- behold my beloved wife… I want her to see me looking, and to look back. And she does.

We kiss for about two hours, this time- and then, in the time we’d normally be winding down from training, we talk.

“Sanji?”

“Mab?”

“I want to have kids.”

“I- yeah. I know. I want them, too.”

“...After Nami and Zoro have theirs, d’you wanna start trying?”

“Not- not seriously, but… if we both stopped using birth control maybe…?”

“Mm. I think that’ll work.”

“We might be terrible parents.”

“Mm, perhaps- we certainly won’t be the parents we want to be, it’s not possible. We’ll only ever be the parents we are; hopefully, we’re better than our own were, which isn’t a terribly high bar to set, but...”

“Yeah. Better than ours were, huh? That’s what we’re reaching for.”

“A grim reminder of what we’re fighting for, even. And, with any luck, our children will turn out to be better than we ever were- more, and better, and more better.”

“More better’s not a phrase, Mab.”

“Course it is, I just used it.”

“Mmpffft-”

And I kissed her again, right through the cackles. Smelled like heaven on earth, in the nuzzling runnel between her breasts; smelled like the love of god, between her legs.

And she did giggle about it, so I didn’t weird her out too badly.
After lunch, I reshuffle my **Dolls** and go to work again; this time, a multitude of **Sewing Dolls** and myself in the Studio and Laundry.

The cable stitch, resembling a rope, represents safety at sea or the fisherman’s life itself, the shark teeth are symbols of the vicious nature of duty, the lattice or basket stitch represents a bountiful catch, and the diamond pattern is a symbol of wealth. Taffy, for obvious reasons- seriously, she almost knocked herself off the ship after calling for a change in the boom, the girl needs prayers- needs all the help she can get. I’ve actually been working on her coat for weeks; it’s only now that I’ve the kick in the ass I needed to finish the damn thing.

And- **There**. All that’s left is finishing up the fluffy lining layer, adding the buttons, and double checking the integrity of the seams. The front of the coat has more in common with a cardigan pattern I had in the Tome; toggle buttons, that Wano-style collar I know Taffy likes because she is Zoro’s first student, after all, and that sort of thing leaves marks… And add the last few stitches on the button loops- done.

“Taffy, could you come to the Studio, please?” I say into the intercom.

“Yis, right away.” chirruped the intercom snail in Taffy’s voice.

I put Taffy’s coat on a dress-form with arms so that it hangs good- final checks go, all that’s left is for her to put the damn thing on and to see if it suits.

While I wait, let’s consider Gurry, Bryony, and Mark. I’ll leave Bryony for last so I don’t get Enraged again.

Gurry has the classic artist’s style- smocks, smock-like things, clothing that he can wear the hell out of without worry, usually in grey. It’s in direct contradiction of his actual preferences, which is always for beads, lace, frills, ribbon, and color. The man’s from Amazon Lily and it shows. For him, I think I’ll pull out one of the old-fashioned Fae Magic Garments- in this case, it’s a lace pattern meant to create discrete air pockets all along the fabric. If you wear something made primarily out of this lace next to your skin, there will be a distinct layer of air bubbles, a bit like that new bubble-wrapping plastic. Unlike bubble-wrapping plastic, the lace is movable like a very fine muslin, and can be shaped to any form. The jacket- this one, I suppose, it’ll fit his fighting style and float around his body like seafoam. He’ll like it, I think.

I’m making my new swimsuit out of the same lace, so it’s not like I wasn’t going to go through all the trouble of lacemaking anyway, and once you’ve committed to that, you might as well make all the lace you could need in one go because hell’s bells if I’m winding lace bobbins again without need.

As for Mark… a **pashmina shawl** in red should do him fine.

I’m still too angry to do Bryony, let me just- let’s rip some fabric for rag rugs, that always makes me
As far as rag rugs go, I’m making two kinds. The first has fabric piling up out of sacking, like your Alabastan rugs; they’re good for catching dirt, dust, mud, and thick slush before it gets into your nice clean house. The second kind is a crochet rag rug, made with rags alone. These are for your areas of lower traffic, but higher required comfort; you put these next to beds, in front of sinks and couches, under tables and in area seating. It’s much easier to make a crochet rag rug pretty, because there’s more control over the eventual pattern. And since I want a rug for in front of the couch… that one’s best done with a traditional loom-rug structure, only the wefts will be rags instead of thread. S’how I learned to weave, actually…

Any kind of fabric can be used in a rag rug- the only fly in that ointment is that the entire rug needs to be of the same type of material. Old shirts? So long as they’re all cotton or linen, go for it. Old suits? They better be all wool or all silk. Old sheets? Flannel or cotton, my friend. Different fabrics, at the end of their lives as clothing and articles, make for different rugs; cotton and linen rugs, for example, aren’t all that durable, but they do wick away water, if made correctly. Wool makes very strong and long lasting rugs that are soft and warm on your feet.

And even as rags, silk is beautiful.

Sometimes, beauty is it’s own reason and it’s own reward.

I start by tearing our old sheets, and other things- one pile of cotton no-goods, and one pile of flannel, and a bit of silk and so on- into one to two inch strips. Old sheets are best for this because they make very nice, very long, strips of fabric, and mirabile dictu, we have a whole stack of them because my crew has sticky fingers and packed the damn sheets and not in my house will they sleep in substandard bedding dammit.

If you have cats, a Zoro, a Nami, playful dogs, a husband, excitable crewmates, a Luffy, or a Taffeta, consider keeping them out of the room while you do this; they will want to play with your long strips of fabric and I need those for rugmaking, play with these soft toys instead! Thank you!

“-Yis this my coat?” says Taffy, a length of fabric tangled around her neck.

“Yep. Give me that fabric strip and try it on; really feel the movement. If it suits, it’s yours to wear; if it doesn’t, I’ll fix what I can.”

“Yis!” says Taffy, holding very still as I untangle and unwind the fabric strip from her neck.

She tries on the jacket I’ve made for her; it does have snaps so if she needs to push her wings out and fly, she can, and the hem hits just above her knees, like I wanted. The side splits allow her the freedom of movement, and it all seems to fit well. Taffy wiggles and stretches her body out in her new jacket, then smiles widely and hugs me. I hug her back, and help her resituate her various things- her compass is easily pulled out of her collar, and I made her jacket as short in the front as Zoro’s- or rather, the buttons don’t go that far, so if she wants to- and she has, with the inner buttons I knew she’d probably need. Her jacket’s more like a dressage coat with tails, now.

And off she goes again.
More beetroot chopped thin, this time add a little dried blackberry crushed fine and get a thick red-purple dye going. Saved powdered onion skin and orange and lemon peel for a yellow color; powdered spinach for green. The ratio is 1:2, one part dye, two parts water; bring all to a boil and simmer for an hour, or do the same and let sit overnight for very intense colors. I need pale colors, really, so I only do the boil and simmer. Salt and vinegar fixatives, salt for the berries and vinegar for the vegetables. Salt ratio is $\frac{1}{2}:8$; half a cup of salt to eight cups of water. Vinegar ratio is 1:4; one cup of vinegar to four cups of water. For these dyes, and this amount of fabric, I need- hmmm- two cups of vinegar, one cup of salt, sixteen cups of water, all in a cauldron and set to boil. I'll use a two stage preparation process- all the rags will be boiled in the mordants for at least an hour, then rinsed in cold water.

Wring them out with the mangle, then put each batch of rag- still separated into its type, one hopes- into the dye vats and let sit for as long as it takes for the desired colors. Three hours should get the job done. I’ve also got a large batch of t-shirts to rag, so that’s another hour’s worth of anger just-Poof! Gone!

To make sure I still know how to do this, I half double crochet a set of trivets- six, in total- for Sanji out of old t-shirts. They’re multicolored and homely, and they only need a little bit of stitching because I forgot to add the hanging loops until it was nearly too late. Still, there are now a set of six rag-trivets- which are also flexible enough to be used as grabby-things- and my anger is gone.

Alright.

Bryony needs an insulated split-side tunic, with a hood; mukluks with rubber soles, for city and country use, and Kush mukluks, for on the ship. She can wear the Kush mukluk off ship, of course, but the knitted vamps make field trips a bit of a hassle.

Of all of her things, the tunic is easiest to make; I have all the fabric already, and lining it with turquoise satin is easy as dreaming. Add in a tag that says “Made with Love from Mab” to the neck, which is new, but I’m putting it in all my clothing now- Taffy’s jacket has one, and I’ll sneak it into Gurry’s somehow- and we’re done. Then, it’s quality time with my leather cutting tool and a pile of seal skins- spotted seals, if you’re wondering.

The mukluk is a boot native to the people's of the Trufarnort, and also Nort. They’re traditionally made of reindeer, caribou, sealskin, frost drake, or Sea King leather. Mukluk is often used for any soft boot designed for cold weather and modern designs are often similar to high-top athletic shoes. Mukluk comes from the Yupik (who are from… Lyneel, maybe?), maklak, meaning the bearded seal. Sometimes, they are called kamik boots; this is the Nort heritage coming through, as the people of Chillage- or is it Chillaga, I don’t remember- called seals kamik.

Mukluks don’t weigh very much at all, and allow hunters to move very quietly over ice, snow, and frozen natural terrain. They can be adorned with pompoms and beads; and lined with furs like rabbit, fox, or raccoon. The key component of the mukluk as a winter boot is it’s ability to breathe; it’s construction and material allows for air exchange. This is advantageous in extremely cold conditions, as perspiration may cause frostbite on one’s feet. However, due to their bulk and poor performance in slushy conditions, they are less ideal for a warmer winter.

Enter the Kush Mukluk.

First, a bit about the Kush.
The Kush is a range of mountains in the Red Line. Sanji would know them as the Caucasus Fae; either way, it's an 800 kilometer long mountain range that starts in the Khanganate Plains on the Trunort Continue, and goes to about Lvneel, where Maenad’s Point becomes The Spine.

The Kush range has lots of very high snow-capped peaks, with the highest point being Tirich Mir- or Dark King Mountain. To the Trusout, near the point where Lvneel’s international waters, Maenad’s Point, and The Spine all intersect, the Kush butts against the Paneer Mountains.

The Kush is the spiritual home of my friend Lamia’s religion, Wu Tang Fang Zen Buddhism. Dojos, temples, monasteries, and monumental buddhas litter that mountain range like kernels in a corn-crib. It has Lamia’s home monastery- Calm Tiger Monastery- somewhere in it, and important trade networks and travelers roads and communities- city states, and so on- are all settled between the Trunort Continent and The Spine.

Kush Mukluks are what happens when you need to keep your feet warm, but you only need leather bottoms to keep the rocks out, not the snow; they do better in slushy conditions, as the woolen vamps retain their heat when wet. Thus, the Kush Mukluk- some people call them slipper socks, but those are something else entirely. Kush Mukluks are quicker to make, too; knit the vamp, stitch on the soles, and you’re done. Bryony gets this stripy pair; Taffy’s gonna want a white pair she can put her loose socks over.

It’s cool.

The most important thing, though, is that I lanolize the Kush Mukluk before I put on the first leather sole— the soles are replaceable, but you can’t lanolize the wool if you’ve already put on the leather. Glad I got that tub of lanolin— s’good in skin creams, and also to protect nipples when breastfeeding. I’ve decanted some into a much smaller tub for Nami’s sake already, and I’ve made a multitude of duplicates because they are small and useful. I keep one in my purse, as it’s always the right time to cut down on skin cracklin’s. Always.

Anyway.

Dissolve lanolin in very hot water until it won’t dissolve no more; pull a big bucket of cool water, and pour in about two ladles full of wool-wax solution into the soaking bucket, mix well, and add the woolen garments, letting them soak through in the lanolizing solution for at least three hours, but overnight is better. Since I’m doing this, I might as well lanolize everything else that needs it- mostly last year’s jumpers, as this year’s I’ve already lanolized. Waterproofing, antifungal, self-cleaning, and antimicrobial; putting the natural wool wax back on the wool makes the whole thing last much longer than it normally would.

And I’m finally calm enough to weave lace. First things first; I am only going to be hand making the trim for whatever lace goods I decide to make.

Lace is a fairly delicate fabric made of fine yarn or finer thread in an open, weblike, pattern; it can be made by machine or by hand. I was called Miss Spider because one of my chief pastimes, when I wasn’t doing paperwork, was making lace. I’m one of the best lacemakers of my generation- the very best was Teacher Easeelie, but I was second only to her. And she’s dead- thus, I am the best.

Traditionally, lace is made of linen, silk, gold, or silver threads. In this more modern era, cotton thread is seeing use as well- but I’m not sure how to feel about that. On the one hand, cotton lace makes it very easy for machine lace to become available to everyone, not just those who can afford to pay for the time someone spent hand making it; on the other, until the mechanization of cotton
really becomes effective, slavery is the only reliable way to get large cash crops like that out of the field and turn a reasonable profit. Or rather, slavery is the only way most of the World seems to be able to manage their food supply. Spadille’s Working On It.

Ahem. The world ‘lace’ is from Middle Brecht, which itself is derived from Old Maul (which became Gaul which became Near Nort or French, you see) las, meaning noose, string; or from the Vulgaric Albastrian, laceum, from Albastrian laqueus, noose; probably akin to lacere, to entice or ensnare.

Fae and lace go- not quite hand in hand, but something like it.

There are many types of lace, each classified by the method of their production. Needle lace is made using a needle, thread, and something to cut the thread with. It’s the most flexible of the lace-making arts. Some types of needle lace can be made more quickly than the finest of bobbin laces, others take months or years to complete fully. Some purists- Easeelie, mainly- regard needle lace as the very height of lace-making. While it is true that the finest of laces from antiquity still surviving today were made from a thread only the Royal Fae still know how to make, this particular kind of lace is very… if I make needle lace, it’s for either a tablecloth or my own use. I will never, ever put my needle lace onto another person. Not ever. Too much of my haki leeches into the fabric as I make it; it might, maybe, be useful as bunting, but even then I would hesitate using my own needle lace in that way. My roommates described wearing my needle lace as “wearing fabric that wants to stab me with a needle”. It’s too- much.

Cutwork, or whitework, is lace constructed by removing threads from a woven background, and the remaining threads wrapped or filled with embroidery. This is used in the finishing of the Fae Magic Air Cloth, which I will use as the basis for Gurry’s new coat.

Bobbin lace, or bone-lace, is made with bobbins and a pillow of some kind. The bobbins, usually turned from wood or bone, or more recently, plastic, hold threads which are woven together and held in place with pins stuck in a paper pattern on the pillow (which usually contains some kind of straw). You think of a woman making lace, this is usually what you imagine; an old woman, usually, with pins stuck into a pillow and a very complicated design being knotted by her fingers tossing bobbins over each other in a pattern you can’t quite catch. Entire layers of panels get made in this style, for Air Cloth; thankfully, I know how to automate this, too.

Tape lace makes the tape in the lace as it is worked, or uses a machine or hand-made textile strip formed into a design, then joined and embellished with needle or bobbin lace. I hate making this, now, and this design doesn’t require it, so- next! (It’s for babies, okay? I learned to make this as a very young child and it’s all I was allowed to do for years. This lace is boring.)

Knotted lace includes macrame and tatting. Literally everyone on the ship can do macrame, although they might not call it that; and tatting… Robin might know how to tatt lace. Tatted lace is made with a shuttle or a tatting needle. This might come up in the seaming portion of making the Air Cloth Coat, or possibly in the notions- otherwise, I don’t expect it to.

Crocheted lace includes Siren crochet, pineapple crochet, and filet crochet. Siren crochet is very dense, and good for laying in further Enchantments- which I don’t necessarily need to do. However, leaving the drawer open for such developments is only good sense. Pineapple crochet is good for any kind of radial symmetry or curving; a fairly stretchy weaving pattern on it’s own, and lends itself easily to repetition. Filet crochet is what you do when you need a picture, but don’t have a camera; very accurate maps have been made with colored thread and filet crochet. It’s one of the simplest styles of crochet, too, having only the two stitches. If you’ve ever seen a piece of graph paper with a
picture on it, marked out in black and white squares… filet crochet is where that comes from.

Knitted lace includes Fairy lace, such as the wedding ring shawl- a lace shawl so fine that it can be pulled through a wedding ring. I’m only married- if Sanji and I were having a wedding, you bet your ass I’d make myself a wedding ring shawl, and him a wedding ring pocket square. Sanji, of course, would have to procure the jewelry- the rings- but… that’s how things get divided, y’see. Knitted lace is also very popular in Nort, because of how much air you can stuff in those little holes. Creates a good barrier to the weather, y’see.

Chemical lace is made by stitching the stitching area with embroidery threads that form a continuous motif. Afterwards, the stitching areas are removed and only the embroidery remains. The stitching ground is made of a water-soluble or non-heat-resistant material. For this one, you stitch the lace, put it in the wash, and pull out your ever so slightly fuzzy piece- or pieces. Depends how you make your cards. Further, you can do things with chemical lace that you can’t quite manage any other way- not with any speed, I mean. Most of the lace I’m going to be using to bulk up Gurry’s coat is going to be chemical lace made in a few distinctive patterns, simply because they’ll be the between layers, and no one’s going to be looking at them too closely.

Machine-made lace is any style of lace created or replicated using mechanical means. My personal preference is to use a Jacquard Loom- which, once I re-thread it and set up the Jack, my loom actually is.

The Jacquard machine is a device fitted to a power loom that simplifies the process of textile manufacture with such complex patterns as brocade, damask, matelasse, and lace. The loom, being a power loom, is controlled not my hand or a very simple loop-no loop pattern, but by a chain of cards; a number of punched cards, laced together into a specific continuous sequence. Multiple rows of holes are punched on each cards, with one complete card corresponding to one row of the design. This particular mechanism is probably one of the most important mechanized weaving inventions as Jacquard shedding makes possible the automatic production of unlimited varieties of pattern weaving. Both process and loom attachment are named after their inventor.

Thus, the term “Jacquard” is not specific or limited to any particular loom, but rather refers to the added control mechanism that automates the patterning. A Jacquard card-chain, or a chain-jack, refers to a number of punched cards laced together into a specific continuous sequence. One punch card is a link; an inch of fabric requires something like- it’s a complicated bit of math. Suffice to say, Bryony read my manual for production of repeat-print textiles and got ideas.

And so we come to chains, and the breaking of them. A chain is what we, in the textile world, call it when a series of links are used to connect one chain-jack, or chain to a completely different chain in an operation called linking. Breaking the Chain means that, for whatever reason, you, the operator of the loom has removed the chain, and neglected to prepare the next chain in the time allotted you by the intermediary links.

If your business with the power loom is the production of fine textiles with distinctive, repetitive patterns that nonetheless change over the length of the fabric, you must never, but never, break the chain.

Chaining the loom is also useful for making patterned knitwear and machine-knitted textiles, such as jersey. I know my crew thinks the big thing on one wall in the Studio is just weird laundry things they don’t know how to use, but it’s not. That’s my loom; I have to engage the shaft if I want it to be a power loom. Once I thread the loom for use with the Jacquard, I won’t be threading it again for a good long time; I’ll tie new warps on as needed individually, but… this is a large loom, with tens of thousands of warp ends. If I tried to do this by hand, by myself, the process would take weeks.
Praise the gods for Devil Fruit Bullshit.

Oh, my rag’s dry again- some of it was actually set aside for menstrual pads, Robin likes hers to be black or brown and extra-absorbent. With that done, I find it best to make the yarn all of a piece from the start; a bit of stitching in the appropriate color, as colored thread is fairly simple to come by, and I’ve got lengths of unbroken rag yarn to double half crochet into rugs for the various rooms in the Sunny. Wind them into dry yarn shapes, and put them in my squishy quilted knitting bag, along with my folding case of needles, hooks, and cords, and my case of crochet hooks because I like being prepared.

I don’t crochet all that often; single needle fabrics are something I moved beyond as a young teenager. Still, it’s nice to go back to your roots, every now and again. Stitch stitch stitch stitch- that’s the rug I noticed Sanji needed for in front of the kitchen sink done, in double squishy wool. I hope it works out for him, and if not I’ll put it in front of my studio sink, or maybe the laundry sink… although people will definitely have sex on it if it’s in the laundry… ah well.

Time for dinner, anyway- the loom’s been threaded and is set to weave the pattern through the night; I’ll have all the lace I need come morning. I’ll take Bryony’s things with me- the shoes, anyway, she might want sleeves and I neglected to ask...

Dinner is pottage, which is what dinner almost always is- and although that might sound quite boring, it’s really not. Ah, for those that don’t know- pottage is somewhere between a soup and a stew, and older than both, and is usually kept on the stove for days and days. Most of the ingredients of pottage are added on a daily, seasonal basis, and it’s only the stock and the major spices- salt, pepper, and so on- that don’t really change. Vegetables, grains, meat, fish, and whatever else Sanji’s feeling like go in the pot- and our dinner comes out again and again.

Food.

Food for days, y’all.

After dinner, which is much quieter as most of the crew is either very tired, or just waking up, it’s time for my watch.

Ah, before I go- 

“Franky, Bryony, wait a moment. Bryony- the boots you wanted-”

“Yaaaagh- oh, oh! Thank you, Mab- these are really nice!”

“Maybe put them on your feet before you say things like that?”

“Sorry.”

“Mm- and come by my studio tomorrow so I can fit your tunic. Franky- you don’t need to set them up, but… we need guest beds.”

“…You’re expecting guests, Mab?”
"No, but we’ll have them eventually- and I’ve always found it’s better to have things before you need them, y’see. And with Usopp varnishing the- things-"

"...Is there a reason you won’t call the baby-stuff by name?"

"I was taught it’s presumptuous to call baby-things by their proper names until there’s an actual baby present to use them.”

"Presuming on who?"

"On God, Franky."

"...?"

"-Bryony, where’s Nami, right now?"

"Uh-"

"Duty before Discretion."

"Right. She’s in the shower with Zoro."

"Shower’s on?"

"Yep."

"Okay. Franky, babies can be born dead. Mothers do not always survive childbirth. With Taffy, Chopper, and myself together, Nami and her baby have a very good chance- nine out of ten, if you like. But there’s still that one to worry about- so. Don’t tell her I said this- don’t even hint about it, either of you- but. Until there’s a baby spitting egg-yuck on Nami’s chest, I won’t be calling any of what you, or Usopp, or I make by anything that could link it to an as-of-yet non-existent baby.”

"Superstitious- but also, super kind of you, I think.”

"Oh?"

"Well- if you’re not in the habit of calling the- stuff- by it’s associated names until after there’s a live critter to use them, then if things go wrong, you won’t...”

"Ah. Yeah. That, too. Bryony, breathe- Nami’s going to be fine, breathe, breathe, come on-”

"Come on, Bry-girlie, over to the couch- atta girl, go ahead and hold onto me, you won’t hurt me-”

"Hhhuhhhhhgk-!"

And, after getting a nod from Franky, I left Bryony and him on the couch. Bryony isn’t prone to anxiety attacks, normally- so this whole ‘small humans imminent’ thing must be really weighing on her.

She’s in good hands; and I’ll remind her to come to the studio tomorrow.

On my watch, I take my knitting, and my tactical belt. It’s changed a bit since mom first outfitted me
with it; I replaced the belt and buckle first, as it’s now the wide strap I prefer and the lotus-buckle-badge of my Office. For flight maneuvers, I wear my bag as a fanny pack- or a bum bag, whichever you prefer- because there’s a dead space right over the small of my back. Thus, if I put my bag there, I won’t mess up my flight pattern or my aerodynamics. Otherwise, I prefer the thigh-holster, like my brother, Ace. Of course, my bag is much nicer than his, being made of heavier leather and actually matching my visual aesthetic, but we can’t all be fashionable.

At least he wears shirts, now. Even if they are see through.

Anyway.

Up in the Crow’s Nest, there’s the gym area, where we all train in various ways- Sanji and I mostly do yoga, weighted isometrics, and balance training there, and there are punching bags for Bryony, too- and up a level, between the ladder to the Observatory, and the ladder down to the Gym, there’s the Observation Deck, which is where watches in the Crow’s Nest are actually held. Bryony, Franky, Nami, and Usopp all got together to build it; it’s a… screen, of some sort, through which the horizontal plane around the ship can be viewed from one fixed position on the Observation Deck. To that end, watches in the Crow’s Nest are taken by sitting on a fairly comfortable- but not too comfortable- chair, with the console nearby.

Bryony, who does not sleep at night but in the middle of the afternoon, stays up with whoever’s on watch and just… talks to them, I think.

Anyway- I was wondering where they got off to- Pearblossom and Bubbler are behind the aquarium, sleeping in a pile of slippery fur and dorsal fins. Buttercream is laying on my feet, the lazy swenk.

Over the course of our being a family, the dogs have reached their full growth; they went from being maybe a meter long from shoulder to buttocks to a good two meters for ‘Blossom and Bubbler. Buttercream is not like our other two dogs.

Buttercream is… well, I was wrong. Buttercream is not a dog at all. Buttercream is a wolf, actually- specifically, she’s a Skuan Wolf Shark, making her shyer and gentler than her oceanic cousins. How big is that?

Well. The largest recorded Skuan Wolvark was twenty four meters, from shoulder to buttocks- and that’s not counting her head, or tail. Buttercream is somewhere between sixteen and eighteen meters, which is nearly sixty feet long- shoulder to butt. Her head’s a full meter on it’s own. Buttercream is not a dog; dogs don’t get that big. Thinking on it now, of course we’re not going through the Sea of Monsters yet, it’s infested with wolvarks that aren’t like Buttercream at all.

Her fur’s very soft, though- slippery, like silk. There’s a big warm stripe under her skin, full of very hot blood; it feels nice, against my shins. Captain likes napping all curled up against her side, and she’s fairly comfortable with him there- she doesn’t like too many people doing that at once, it brings up bad memories, but one or two people is fine.

Nothing approaches; all is well.

Imbolc is a holiday marking the beginning of spring. Most commonly, if one is not following the astrological calendar, Imbolc is held on the First of February; otherwise, it falls halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. This is the time when the udders of our goats will engorge
with milk instead of wax, in preparation for the birth of their new kids; this is the time when farmers
prepare their fields for the first sowing of seeds; this is the time when fishermen prepare to return to
the sea. This is when the Goddess returns to the places of beginnings- fires, smithies, wells, springs,
healing fountains, and poets. In the time when the Maiden Goddess returns to us, the Goddess Crone
begins to take her leave- and, if one is weak or sickly, the Goddess Crone will take that one with her
on her exeunt.

Therefore, as soon as we have enough rushes, straws, or even sticks and twine, we’ll be
making crosses. They’re good for all sorts of things- warding off evil spirits, aiding in conception,
blessing seed-stock…

As for the actual observance of Imbolc… We are at one of two cruxes, places in the year where all
the World turns. This moment is the turning of the Earth to return the Sun; and so, to remind the Sun
of us, and us of the Sun, we light fires. Usually, we light candles during the dark of the night, but
bonfires are also appropriate, as are oil lamps. Before the Eve of Imbolc, we- meaning the entire
crew- will clean winter out of this ship! Beat the dirt out of carpets, wash winter’s dust out of
windows and cracks and crevices; clear away spiderwebs and beat mattresses back into shape.

Wash everything.

If possible, air out your house- if you can bear the cold, open those windows and get some fresh air
in! It’s a holiday, so it’s a good time to get rid of things you don’t need, don’t use, and don’t want;
new beginnings!

Get really fucking drunk on custard mix spiked with way more hard alcohol than you usually drink,
it's Traditional!

And finally, on the day of Imbolc itself, we ought to visit a local holy shrine- preferably, one that
enshrines a river, lake, stream, spring, or well. Bathing, on Imbolc, is especially important. After all,
the Goddess Maiden is returning from the Otherworld; and soon will grow and change into a
Youthful Woman, and go into the Forest. She will go into the woods and the Wilds and learn the
essential facts of life; she will meet with the Gods, and learn what they have to teach- or not- and
when it comes time to die again, discover the life she has lived, through the year.

This tradition is very, very old- it’s the marking of time for when you’ve finished preparing all your
fields and forests for growing again, you’ve fixed the fences and wattled the hedgerows, you’ve dug
drainage ditches and made all ready for the melting of the snow and the ice and the return of the sun.

It’s hard, backbreaking work; and for two years, Mark more or less did it all on his own. Mark
actually undertook the hardest parts of the work on our ship; the farm work, when that work has no
reward that you can see just yet- that’s hard.

Summer season in a circus is winter everywhere else; go home, little acrobat, and muck out the
pigsty.

Aye- let no one say that Mark doesn’t know how to work.

Nothing approaches; all is well.

Advocaat is a traditional Dutchy alcoholic beverage made from eggs, sugar, and brandy (or
sometimes muscovy). The rich and creamy liqueur has a smooth, custardy flavor and is typically
between fourteen and twenty percent alcohol by volume. In content, it is usually a blend of egg yolks, aromatic spirits, sugar or honey, brandy or muscovy, vanilla, and sometimes cream (or evaporated milk).

Thick advocaat is sold mainly in Dutchy proper, and almost never exported- although it has been naturalized in Sakura Kingdom, so Chopper’s excitement at the prospect of having some is understandable. The thick version is often eaten over powder-snow or powder-shave ice, with a small spoon made of wood or bone. The thick version is the basis for a Skuan Shave Ice, the jim jim, and the tam tam- all of which are technically speaking, Imbolc treats served over snow.

Thick advocaat contains egg yolks only, and is used as a waffle or poffertjes topping- when it’s not Imbolc, I mean. And of course, it’s also served as an aperitive or digestive in a wide glass with whipped cream and cocoa powder sifted on top.

In the drink I will be making, only the yolks will be used- thus, the consideration of how to make enough Advocaat for the crew to enjoy.

The receipt I have for Advocaat makes six servings, meaning I need to at least double it- knowing our crew, it would be best to quadruple it.

So.

Eight egg yolks of the medium to large variety, means- in quail eggs- thirty two; times four is sixteen, eight- one hundred sixty eight double check, no, messed up the order of operations I do believe, no, read it as forty two- double check your maths, y’all. One hundred twenty eight quail eggs.

Our flock of laying quail numbers approximately fifteen; each hennie lays two eggs per day. I will need to save all the quail eggs for the next… five, four and a quarter days doesn’t work with live animals, not for this; five days. Or rather, I need to save the eggs for the five days preceding Imbolc Eve.

All the rest is fairly simple: two hundred grams of caster sugar becomes eight hundred grams of caster sugar; seeds of one vanilla pod becomes seeds of four vanilla pods; three hundred fifty milliliters of brandy (or muscovy) becomes one thousand four hundred milliliters of brandy (or muscovy); and one teaspoon of vanilla extract becomes four teaspoons of vanilla extract.

Let me just write this down on my notepad, so I don’t have all these numbers jumping ‘round my brains- here we are.

**ADVOCAAT**

*Serves twenty-four people, or twelve pirates*

128 Quail Egg Yolks
800g caster sugar
Seeds from 4 vanilla pods

1400ml brandy (or muscovy, or other appropriate spirit)

4 tsp vanilla extract

Whisk together egg yolks and sugar with vanilla seeds until very pale and thick. Slowly add the spirit, while whisking, until completely combined. In a double boiler (or double boiling rig), heat the egg mixture, whisking until thickened and coats the back of a spoon. This can be done in a simple pan over very low heat, but be careful not to overheat or the mixture will break- or worse, the alcohol will cook off. Stir in the vanilla extract and allow to cool. Store in a sealed container in cold (next to a bank of snow on the porch away from the door), or refrigerated, area.

Served in: Straight over Snow, Skuan Shave Ice, Fluffy Duck (both the mixed drink and the highball), Far West, Class Act, Casablanca, Brigid’s Dash (made with Creme de Fraise), BAM, Estern Exotic, and the classic itself, the Dutchie (made with Creme de Banane).

Due to it's high fat and sugar content, Advocaat is one of the alcohols that I only drink during the Winter or when I’m going into a long, dangerous fight- otherwise, I’d just get fat and slow drinking it. And I don’t want that.

Nothing approaches; all is well.

Hm.

I’ve been considering the ecology of our aquarium- our transient residents are, of course, transient. However, the sheer size of our aquarium… we could honestly have a Ryugu horse or two in the aquarium, if they’re of Fastblood stock.

Horses are special- be they called Lion Birds, like in Skua, or Big Dogs, like in Nort and Est; horses are special, of all the animals, because they don’t lie about their intentions. Most animals don’t, of course- but the horse is different because, of all the animals, it is the horse that will not lie about their intentions, even when it would serve them better if they did.

Fairies and Horses are said to have come from the same, ancient, cradle- that being seafoam. Horses were seafoam, once, but the God of the Sea bade the seafoam run onto the shore, and it did- and in doing, it was changed from bubbles to flesh. Some of the foam had four legs, long necks, wide chests and the longing to run, and run, and never stop running- and some of the foam had two legs, and two arms, and wings like a bugs and the urge to fly and never again let their feet touch the ground.

And the God was pleased; and the foam did run.
Thus were horses and fairies both created.

The king’s horse is white; and on a white horse rides the hero, the warrior, the one-who-draws-the-sun; the white horse brings the fertile field, be it mare or stallion. Rhiannon, who no man could catch, rode a white horse; Epona is a white horse; white horses run across the tops of chalk hills, their ancient bones cut bare for all to see. Pegasus, and all his children are white; Sleipnir, and his son, Grani, are white; the horse of the rain is white, as is the horse that Buddha rode before he was the Buddha. Coming out of the mythic, it is not an exaggeration to say that all horses embody some measure of power, grace, beauty, freedom, nobility, and strength.

There is no such thing as a bad horse; just as there is no such thing as a bad dog. It’s humans, teaching animals to be human, that wreck them. Being vital to everyday life, survival, and battle… to hold the horse in high esteem is only natural. It’s the horse that plows the field; it’s the horse that farrows it. Horses carry wood and berries and cherries and stones; horses pull barges. Horses turn mill wheels.

We, being pirates, don’t need horses. But we can have them.

And it would make Mark very happy.

Specifically, the horses I’m thinking of are Ryugu horses, or Hippocampi if you want to be fancy. A Hippocampus, or Ryugu Horse, is the common name for about five distinct bloodlines of horseflesh, native to the aqueous parts of the world. They have four legs, which look very much like fins- don’t be fooled, though, they can run just as fast on land as they can swim in water. If a Ryugu Horse doesn’t want to be caught, you aren’t catching them.

In the general sense, horses are odd-toed ungulates, belonging to the taxonomic family Equidae. All true horses share the common ancestor of Eohippus, but modern varieties- like the Tribes of humans- appear very, very different from each other. However, as all the known breeds of horses can interbreed and bear live, fertile young, they must all be the same kind of animal, under the skin. Somewhere deeper, where we can't see...

Humans began to domesticate horses around four thousand years before the oldest calendar, according to the archaeological record. Domestication was widespread about a thousand years after the start of the process; thus, in the distinction between wild and domesticated horses, all the horses used or living near humans today are, more than likely, Caballus horses. Some domesticated populations live ferally- however, when I use the term “Wild” in relation to any domesticated animal, what I mean is “a subspecies of this family that has never been domesticated”.

Because of our long history together, there is an extensive, specialized vocabulary used to describe equine-related concepts; everything from anatomy, to life stages, to size, colors, markings, breeds, locomotion, and behavior. I know some of them; Mark knows all of them, because- as far as I could read between the lines of his letters to me- Mark has the Horse Magic. Horses love him; he loves them back. And he’s lucky enough to find people willing to talk about horses with him; even people you wouldn’t expect to love such honest creatures.

The anatomy of the horse enables them to make use of speed to escape predators. They have a well-developed sense of balance and a strong fight-or-flight response. A horse, when faced with something that wants to kill it, does not freeze up. The horse will fight, if cornered- but if there is any possible way to run, the horse will run. Related to this need to run is an unusual trait: horses are able to sleep both standing up and lying down. If a horse sleeps lying down, it is because, in that place, they have never felt scared or about to come to harm.

Female horses, called mares, carry their babies for about eleven months, and a young horse is called
a foal until they've been weaned for about a year, when they become yearlings. After that first year, the young horse is either called by the number of years it’s been alive, or as a mare or stallion and so on. Foals can stand (or float upright) and run (or swim in pace with their mother) shortly after birth. The fastest I know of is about three and a half minutes, but that's just anecdotal stories from biologists in the field...

Most domesticated horses begin training under saddle or in harness between the ages of two and four; yearlings can be trained to the saddle, but it is a very careful process requiring significant expertise to be walked through. A horse reaches their adult size in about five years after birth, and their adult temperament after eight. Their lifespan averages about twenty-five to thirty years. A horse is not a toy; it's a lifetime commitment. A friend, a brother, a child- you get a horse, you get another member of your family.

Holy shit, I do want kids.

Hm.

Well, anyway- breeds of horses are divided, loosely, thusly: Hot Bloods, spirited, speedy, enduring; Cold Bloods, steady, slow, hard working; and Warm Bloods, a cross between the Hot and the Cold meant for very specific riding purposes, especially along the Red Line.

Mark worked with Hot and Warm Bloods exclusively during his time in the circus; Cold Bloods too, if he did anything at all in the process of setting up and breaking down.

All is not well; something comes.

“Bryony, something’s coming- I can’t see through the silt, but I can feel it, I can hear it. You feel that?”

“Yeah- and we’re being followed, too. Surume, you’re doing great- see if you can’t get us away from- oh my god it’s a volcano- TAFFETAAAAAAAAA-!”

“I’M ON IT, HANG ON- MARK, FIFTEEN BY THIRTY, STARBOARD, THEN PORT; ZORO USOPP LUFFY GET ON THE LINES AND GET READY TO SWITCH THEM ON MY COMMAND MOVE YOUR ASSES- MAB GET ON THE LINES TOO, HURRY THE FUCK UP-”

“On it!”

I leave my crochet and my shawl and the dog behind, dive out the open trap-door and up into the spars of our rigging and sails, my wings churning through the air with- speed- got you, little bastard, come here-

“WIND HARD TO PORT, TACK THE SAILS-”

“GO, GO, GOT IT- LUFFY, WATCH THE BOOM-”
And then the volcano exploded.

After a moment, the sound became merely the loudest thing I’d ever heard; fumes and smoke and silt whirled away from torrents of burning liquid earth, magma become lava as it sprayed out into the cold black waters. The shockwave is still making my ears ring.

Gabby would love this.

A rolling wave of liquid heat pours in fiery waves over pale sea-bottom stone; in the distance, I see a ship tied to a... a Sea Giant and an Angler Fish I think, being blasted away. Our Surume must be outswimming the shockwave- I can still hear it, but we’re not feeling the effects of it. Small stones and bits of coral bounce off the surface of our bubble with screaming pings-

And then the volcano explodes again and a boulder-

Strikes Surume unconscious-

And we-

Fall-

Into darkness, through which I cannot see.

It’s quite interesting; most of the time, my life and Mab’s don’t intersect. If I want to spend time with her, or she with me, we have to pre-arrange time during a meal, or something like that. Tea is when we usually interact, barring previous arrangements; and, more often than not, if Mab isn’t shopping for something specific, or training in a certain way, she enjoys just... sitting quietly, in the same room as someone.

She’s always fairly game for going on adventures, though; and, honestly, she’s one of the best archaeological partners one could have. My main focus is in archaeology; Mab’s main focus, when she’s out with me, is anthropology. Oddly enough- or perhaps not- her insights into the functional uses of some of the things I’ve found, or even what people use a very similar object for now... it lends a certain excitement and flair to my work that doesn’t often come naturally to me.

I’m very good at discerning the patterns of a person’s death; how they died, where, when- the burial practices. What the bones can tell me after death... Mab is very good at discerning the patterns of a person’s life; the clothing they wear tells a story of it’s own, she says, and things that can’t be figured out from the record of broken things might be figured from the remains of what once was made.
I never expected to stumble across not merely a group of friends, in my crew; but a best friend, the kind of stalwart companion I saw in many an adventure book during years past. Mab draws me back from my excesses, and helps to remind me that the fine line between archaeology and grave robbery is permission. If there are people who are living, and breathing, and still using the areas I wish to study in their daily lives, I must have their permission to study. I cannot just take part of their lives with me when I leave; it isn’t right.

Mab believes very firmly in treating people with respect. She also believes very firmly in fairness; which, being a Fairy, is perhaps not all that surprising. Honestly, I’m not sure if she knew of my love of birds before; I know she doesn’t know now.

Birds have been symbols of power and freedom throughout the Ages. It’s fairly telling that Gol D. Spadille chose the bird as his symbol, both for himself and his followers- and it’s quite interesting that Mab chose to tattoo a series of birds on her brother’s back. Spadey, she calls him- Gol D. Spadille, the rest of the World knows him as. Mab claims that her brother, Spadey, is Up To Something; considering the uproar of the past two years, I’m inclined to agree with her.

In many myths and legends, birds link the world of the humans to the world of the supernatural, or divine, or other- they act as physio-spiritual links to all the Worlds, and all Creation.

Birds assume a variety of roles; often, they are messengers of the deities. They can also be the carriers of souls, after death; or tricksters, or oracles. Ravens, and their smaller cousins, crows, are known the World over as symbols of death, decay, misfortune, and war. Other birds represent strength, love, and wisdom.

Myths from several regions associate birds with the creation of the World. One of several creation stories native to Alabasta says that “when Land rose out of the waters of Chaos, the first God to appear was a bird perching on that land.” The Ancient Alabastans, or Sandians, called the god Benu, which is the root of many words meaning ‘good’; beneficial, bountiful, and so on, can trace their lineage to Benu, the first god of the Sandia. It is most often depicted as a long-legged, wading heron, usually either facing the rising or setting sun in the temple. The Sandians believed that the Benu bird created the World, and then made the deities and the humans to live in the World.

Most creation myths from Est feature birds. On the island of Goa dwell the Columbo people, who tell of Ara and Irik, two bird spirits floating above an endless expanse of water at the beginning of time. Seizing two eggs from the water, Ara made the sky from one, while Irik made the earth from the other. As Irik squeezed the earth into its proper size, mountains and rivers appeared on its surface. Then the two creator birds shaped bits of earth into the first people and woke them to life with bird cries.

Mab, of course, tells the story of the Egg from which all Darkness came- or rather, a cosmic egg, from which the World was born.

There are other stories too; it’s common, in Nort and Sout, for birds in myths to be portrayed as earth divers. An earth diver is an animal that plunged to the bottom of the primeval Sea and brought up mud from which the Earth was formed. Legends of the Thuled and Urimaesh people of Flevnce feature birds as earth divers- usually gannets, murres, or diving petrels. Water birds such as ducks or swans play this role in the creation myths of many Farnorten people, including the Germa and the Jervan.

In many myths involving the Great Flood, when the people flee to an upper World, they leave everything behind. It is then up to the compassion of the birds to return to the lower World, now
flooded, to retrieve those things which will help the people live- food, seeds, medicine, tools, weapons, and so on.

I’m thinking about birds because I’m not entirely sure if my spine is or isn’t broken. If it’s broken- it doesn’t feel broken, but I can’t be sure- I’d best not move. I’m not in any danger, as far as I can see; just somewhere… odd. I can’t- Mab! My snail just registered a connection to her snail, oh my goodness- let me just- got it!

“Mab! Mab, wake up!”

“Mab! Please, wake up! I can’t reach that far, you’re going to have to- that’s it! That’s it, come on- open your eyes, Mab!”

“r-Robin-?”

“Yes, Mab- oh thank goodness. Are you hurt?”

“Um- no, no, I’m fine. Where are you-?”

“I’m speaking through your snail, and… I’m not sure.”

“Describe what you can see, then.”

“I can see moss, mostly; over a grey colored stone, some kind of… concrete, I think. If I look to my left, I can see some kind of building complex, but I don’t know what kind-”

“Can you see a roof?”

“Yes, it’s very sharply curved, in the Old Est style- but no, no it’s not, that’s what it reminds me of though-”

“Do you see any birds? Robin, this is very important. Do you see any kind of bird or bird like creature- in the statuary, I mean.”

“Y-yes, I think so- ow-”

“Crap, okay, you’re near the Ryugu tombs- Robin, are you hurt?”

“I’m… not sure. I don’t think my spine is broken, but I can’t really tell, and… I know you can repair it, if it is, but- I’d rather not exacerbate a wound, if you catch my drift.”

“I do. I’ll come find you, okay- don’t move, I’ll be right there.”

“Thank you.”

I close my eyes, and focus on the connection between myself, my phone snail, Robin’s phone snail,
and Robin.

And then, I **Blink**, and when I open my eyes again- Robin!

“Oh *my* god, it’s a good thing you didn’t move- let me just- there.”

“Hey Mab- oooooh, oh ow, oh I can feel my feet now-”

“Yeah, that was a lucky fall- hasn’t been parted for too long… you’ll have some cramps, maybe, but you should be good as before in about half an hour. We need to change clothing and compare notes anyway, so-”

“We need to change clothing? **Really**, Mab?”

“We’re in the Ryugu Tomb Complex, which is only semi-aerated. We need to be wearing clothing that protects us from Sea Water, as we both have Devil Fates. So. Yes, Robin, we need a little change.”

“Heh.”

I smile at my friend, and do my best not to dwell on what could have happened oh my god my best friend almost died argh argh argh deep breaths Mab, deep breaths. Her spine is unbroken now, you fixed it, she’s *fine*. She needs a rest and then she’ll be good as new, breathe.

Consider the clothing, Mab.

Firstly, I need to be wearing my long-sleeve leotard style swimsuit; protect my arms, aye. Then-pants, to protect my legs; Robin, as well. I’ve still got- stop skipping steps, Mab. Inventory first.

I have my charnellements, and it’s a good thing I decided to get the adventurers clips when I had them lightened- nothing short of getting them forcibly torn from my ears is going to take them away from me. I have Bite, and Scratch, my hold-out hairclips; and, considering the circumstances, it’s for the best I put those on. Just gotta- there, and my hair’s pulled back out of my face again. It’s interesting how they turned blue - Mom didn’t mention oxidation, but that is the kind of thing she likes to sneak in… I have Kaladanda, my spear; best pull it out and have it near, just in case.

Okay.

I have three pouches on my tactical belt; my **purse pouch**, **camping pouch**, and **adventure pouch**.

In my purse pouch, I have: my **money clip** and **coin purse**, my **nail kit**, my box of plain **hair pins and hair ties**, my **menstruation kit** with extras in case someone else needs some, **condoms**, which have more than just the obvious use in a **case**, **lube** because same also in a **case**, **extra coin purse**, favorite **lipstick**, **small notebook with a pen** that works underwater or upside down, **calling cards** in their own case, **snail treats**, precious **photographic memories** of my crew and my siblings and my moms and my husband, my **swimsuit**, a **good luck charm** bracelet, Ace and Spadey’s and Old Ray’s **Vivre Cards** with their names written on, a **small hand mirror** with clamshell case and comb; a **Tone Dial** with my **Favorite Song** on a **lanyard**, a **romance novel** that always makes me feel good about
life, an extra pair of flats, and my spare glasses and glasses chain in a case, and my regular glasses case.

In my camping pouch, I have: a small bottle of water, a bedroll that’s wide enough for two if needed, a bell, a double-hook, a quilted winter blanket, several square yards of canvas in a single sheet, ten feet of chain, a small box of chalk, a crowbar, a fire starting kit, fishhooks in a case, twenty five square feet of fishing net, a climbing hammer and axe, pitons, a ten foot collapsible pole, camp cooking gear, trail rations (which I’ll explain momentarily), trail spice kit in tin (Sanji has one too), food safe spoils bag, sewing kit, soap, a tent big enough for four people (eight if they double up), a waterskin, and a whetstone.

And finally, in my adventure pouch, I have: caltrops, a candle, a flask with lanyard, a grappling hook with cord, a set of small clay bottles, a rope ladder, a Seastone Choker with a Key (from Enies Lobby), a small brass tankard, a collapsible bucket rated potion-safe, five-hundred pound paracord in a bracelet (which I put on immediately), beeswax in a wooden box (which is tedious to mold but worth it for ease of use later), my rebreather, an ocarina on a string, a spyglass, and a timer-light.

Okay. Okay, breathe. Breathe. It’s going to be okay.

I’ll wear my grey long-sleeve swimsuit, and the rest of my clothing will have to be okay. I can hear my sister Yuki giggling at me now, jeeze- I’m cut off from my normal supplies, so I’ll just have to… make… do- there. That should be everything. No shoes, so I’ll have to make do with my socks; bandaging and rope complete the look, and… that- an Opening! Chance- Take! Got… Robin’s adventure bag? Well, she’d know better than me what’s in it- another Opening! Chance- Take! Got her specialized gear. It’s- yeah, an all-weather jumpsuit, with runes for everything; temperature control, sound-proofing, and so on.

Okay- you can try sitting up now, Robin. Here- I got your adventure gear and your work-suit, just-”

“Ah, thank you- skirts are nice, but it is quite chilly and damp here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“You- hm, swimsuit up top, and then you folded your jumpsuit over into a pair of pants, reconfigured your belt and put a pair of thick stirrup leg warmers onto your legs- do you really think it’s going to be that dangerous?”

“Yes. These aren’t… these are tombs still in active use, Robin. The ancient places you tend to go find, those have laid fallow for- Ages. Active Tombs are an entirely different fish.”

“…I’d best prepare myself, then. Hup-!”

“-Armor, joint-pads, yep, good. Looking good, Robin- sorry about the cape, though…”

“Nah, it’s alright- now, you said something about trail rations? We might as well talk about that-”

“Actually, shouldn’t I go over where we-”

“-Not while you’re still so panicked, dearest. Trail Rations. Explain.”

“-Y-yeah, okay. Um, well- firstly, each major Tribe, as we know them today, didn’t exist as we
know them now, or… they had different names, is the easiest way to say it.

“My Tribe is descended from what were once called Dwarves; thus, the trail rations I would make are based on the ancient tribal records of my people. Garlic Chicken Liver and Pork spiced smoked sausages, hard tack, dried vegetables, dried wild mushrooms, groat-rye berry-and-buckwheat porridge mix in a stay-dry sack; if the journey was at it’s start, there might’ve been oatcakes with honey, and on long journeys- like, months or years long- there’d be kasha, because my tribe’s always had a habit of bringing small farm animals with them on their journeys. Um, small loaves- buns, really- of dense, dark rye bread, and there are accounts of delaying a trip for a day or two to bake the rye berries into ruisreikäleipä. And of course, there’s kvass, which only takes about forty-eight hours to brew…

“There’d be things preserved with salt, as well; Dwarves, and eventually the Fae, are… possibly known for their expertise in preserving food with salt?”

“Yes, they are. They’re also known for eating carrion, but-”

“-oh, Surströmming, right- it’s really not that bad, though.”

“…”

“-U-um, so, before the Dwarves and the Orcs really began to, um…”

“Intertwine.”

“Sure, let’s call it that. Before then, our most valuable commodity- outside of ores, gems, and the various ochers- was salt. It was in demand by every race and culture, and has been for a long time- there are certain foods that just don’t taste good without salt. So, in addition to the sausages, there’d be salt pork, ham, and bacon.”

“Okay- but… orcs.”

“Right; so, before the First Conquest, the ruling tribes of Nort were the Orcs. They weren’t known for their great cuisines; according to my people’s historical records, which may not be correct, Orcs preferred foods that were readily available, usually by raiding. They also liked their food to be portable and edible with little preparation- with that said, there were a few delicacies that took quite a bit of preparation. Those delicacies are the basis for all French cuisine.”

“Aha.”

“Right- mostly, Orc cuisine was all about portability, longevity- how much work d’you have to do to eat? Answer: not much. Strips of dried lean meat that can be chopped down finer for soup stock, if needed, is pretty common; seared bones, and dark coarse breads made up the bulk of recorded orc rations. Marrow’s a rare treat, too… There are Dwarven accounts of Orcish peasantry- women, children, elderly, youths, and so on- foraging for nuts, or burying jars of peppers mixed with pungent spices and bitter herbs while their Orcish soldiers guarded them…”

“And I suppose these cached jars of peppers would be dug up again by the next group of orcs?”

“Or that group, on their return trip. Anyway- my field rations, and yours, are a reflection of my own and Sanji’s ancient heritage-”

“And Luffy’s appetites.”

“Well, I never said it wasn’t. Whoo. I needed that. Right, okay- the Ryugu Tombs.”
I take a deep breath, and carefully pace over to the crack in the wall; through it, I can see the Ryugu Tomb Complex.

“So… the Royalty of the Sea have two tombs. There’s the public tomb, that the people of the realm can visit, if they like; and there’s the private tomb, where their bodies are actually interred.”

“Oh dear.”

“We are currently in the private tomb complex of the Ryugu, who have- in one fashion or another- ruled Fishman Island since it first came to be.”

“...and they really don’t like it when ‘grave robbers’ show up in their tombs, I take it?”

“Most teachers have a policy about mistakes; the Ryugu policy is no mistakes, just die.”

“Great. So, how do we get out?”

“Well. Some of it, we need to figure out how to disarm or avoid death traps- that’ll be in the aerated sections. Some of it, we need to go through ocean water, which-”

“Oh no.”

“Yeah- I did some checking… the reaction Devil Fate holders have to Sea-water is half psychosomatic, and half a product of the ratios of salt to water. Movement also matters- it’s the Devil Fate holder’s instinct to freeze up in water, which is what kills them. Moving water doesn’t have the same effect as still water- and the ocean, even in the Calm Belts, is never still, Robin.”

“...Pfff. Okay. You were right about the clothing- very little of my body will be exposed to the water, aye?”

“Aye. We also have rebreathers, so- even if one of us does get stuck, the other can- hopefully- figure out a way to rescue them.”

“Right. Right. -Ah, here it is- let me just… there. Ready when you are- and it’s best to pull them on right when we go into the water, right?”

“Right. Okay- we need to go… that way.”

“Why that way?”

“Older art style the other way- I recognize it, it’s the Aulding Merrow Style, about six thousand years old. We’re going towards the Est Revival period, which was a mere three hundred years ago. In this place, the farther back in time you go, the nastier the traps become.”

“Ah. Sensible.”

We walk, and we walk. Robin, every now and again, pauses and admires the stones- a few times, I have to pull her away from standing directly on a pressure plate, but otherwise, I let her.

And then we come to a wall, and narrow clerestory slits high above us. Shit.
“Ah, that’s an outside wall- see the lack of windows? It’s all clerestories to let the light in-”

“Oh! Yes, I see what you mean- you did say this place is a Tomb Complex, didn’t you...”

“Robin, stop- shit!” I yelp, leaping into the air.

My wings flutter and flap, and then I hover, as the floor beneath Robin’s feet crumbles down a level-spikes! Gotta- got her!

“Got you!”

“Ow- rgh- guh, that’s a better- grip- oh my goodness, that’s a lot of corpses.”

The spikes are covered in the skeletal remains of fish, and people, and land animals- pigs, and so on. I wrap my arms a little tighter around Robin’s ribs, and carefully drift us over to a ledge on the outside facing wall. The ledge is crumbling, it’s underside made of- ah, drift sand over an air pocket.

Weird geological phenomenon- and that sound- water’s trickling into this area now, I can hear it.

"Shit, we need to get out of here."

“Oh dear- um, there’s a tunnel- right there, up the wall- see it?”

“Yes! It’s wide enough for us to go, one at a time; and it opens out somewhere I can feel with my Shadow, but- we have to hurry, Robin, the water’s coming fast-”

“-and with how high those water lines are- quite right, we need to move.”

I give Robin a boost onto the lip of the clerestory window, and then she turns her body and squirms into an opening in the wall. I fly up after her, and hover at the entrance, not much more than a slit in the pale grey stone. In length, it’s maybe the height of my knees; and I can see bits of Robin’s feet, as she crawls on her belly through the tunnel.

There’s water on the bottom of the spike pit now. I can’t see Robin’s feet anymore, but I can hear her grunting and squirming through the stone.

I follow her in. On my stomach, in the narrow place, I can see that there’s quartz crystals growing like coral on the ceiling. When the light from some far off place hits them just so, a spray of rainbows refracts down from above, like the promises of god.

Every time I take a breath, I can feel the quartz crystals digging into my back, and the unyielding floor pushing against my stomach. I swallow, to try and wet my mouth but it doesn’t help; and it’s not in my head, the tunnel is actually getting narrower as we go forwards. I hear Robin, ahead of me, let out a particularly foul curse as she gets stuck for a moment- but then she frees herself, and with a
short bark of exertion- and then there is more light, in the tunnel.

Robin’s out; I’m a bit less than halfway through; and I can hear water lapping at the ledge over the spike pit.

Over to my left, I can see a tiny, narrow hole- and inside, I can feel a small… something. No trap; just a small rock, and I’d need to put eyes on it to see what kind. My Shadow only tells me so much. I reach my hand out as I pass, put my fingertips on the rock, and tease it out of that little hole, through tiny stalagmites and stalactites of sediment. I put the rock in between my tits, and wriggle on. The most important thing to know about Tomb Exploration- and eventually, Dungeon Crawling- is this. Don’t Give Up; and Take the Loot. Believe me- I’m Fae. I’d know if that rock was a grave good. It wasn’t.

I can feel water on my toes. Shit- three quarters of the way there, come on, Mab. Hustle those muscles! It’s only a trickle- but, oh no, the only way for this water to drain is out the clerestory windows which can’t handle it all so this must be- oh no, oh no, this is the overflow drain, hurry up, Mab.

It’s- it’s just a trickle, against my feet, but it’s starting to pool up around my toes, and I can only just keep moving forwards- no, it’s too tight. My shoulders are broader than Robin’s, it’s too tight, I have to- I wiggle back, back, back far enough my legs are in the water up to my ankles but I’ve got just enough room to put my hands in front of me like I’m diving and I shove myself forwards and I wiggle and squirm and then- my fingertips are just barely at the edge of the opening out and- I’m stuck.

The water is licking my toes again.

My ribs are stuck.

The water’s licking my toes and starting to creep up my feet.

My ribs are stuck.

Oh no.

Taffy has a pretty mouth. It’s warm, and sweet, and tastes a bit like anise. Stop- go back and block out the scene. Don’t skip the steps in between.

So, I have this box. Mab and Sanji refer to it as a pochade box- but I have a sketchbook, and I use the box to paint, so I’m not sure how it’s a sketch box… anyway, I can fit my paints and my turpentine and other stuff I don’t know much about- not with words, I mean, I know what it does to the paints I just don’t quite have the language for it all- all of it goes into that box, and my brushes, and my canvas, too. I have brushes from Amazon Lily, also- feathers, horse hair… all kinds of things.

Of all our crewmates, it’s Taffeta and Mab I like to sketch the most- and not their fronts, but their wings. Of the two of them, Taffy’s the one who’ll consent to sit long enough for me to sketch out her particulars; Mab says she won’t, so long as I refuse to paint her portrait. I’m not good enough to
Taffy will not quite sit still for a pose- but she will let me sit behind her and fill my eyes with her wings. There’s a thin black line of dark hair that goes just about to the middle of her back, right between the base of each wing. Then, there’s the joint itself, covered in thick, strong muscle; the black hairs become broken up with white, and it’s hard to say for sure where the pattern begins but it does begin at the base.

It was actually very hard to make visual sense of Taffy’s wings, or even sketch them as more than just gestures and shapes, until I did some study on the actual anatomy of her wings. In terms of bones, a wing (if it has bones, and Mab’s don’t but more on those later) is laid out much the same way an arm or a leg is. Therefore, in terms of movement and how to consider it, the wing can be divided on a structural level into thirds; the first third is the portion that connects the body to the wing, and is made of one fairly thick, fairly strong bone, like the humerus; then, there is the ulna and radius, for the second third. This is the part of the limb that has definite curvature to it, and can be tricky to get right. Finally, the last third, the phalanges- fingers, toes, thumbs, or in the case of Taffy’s wings, claws. Effectively speaking, Taffy has two sets of hands; she can write with either hand, or either set of wing-claws, among other things.

Going up a layer is the muscles- and just like legs, there’s a cone-shaped range of movement the wing can undertake, the smallest movements being at the main joint, and the largest being at the phalangeal tips. The middle third of her wing actually only moves in specific ways- that is, the muscles only pull on one axis of direction. It’s the joint and phalangeal muscles that are responsible for the great complexities of shape her wings can undertake- not to mention the more surface, epidermoid muscles that control her feathers.

Feathers are funny- just like the underlying structure, the feathers of a wing can be subdivided into three distinct layers. Indeed, for the purposes of art, it’s often better to do so; the process of creating a still image that bears the seeming of a living wing is quite complicated, so properly simplifying the subject is of paramount importance. However, unlike the structural form of the wing, which runs vertically in sections, the feathers are separated into horizontal thirds; thus, if I’m not careful, Taffy’s wings can come out in my sketches as curious grid forms that are almost impossible to understand.

I had to learn a lot of things, to get to the point of considering how to approach the pattern of Taffy’s feathers; mostly, I had to learn to not press so hard with my sketching pencils, and not leave such dark marks where I didn’t need them. I had to learn to move faster, too; glance between my working surface and my subject, flick flick flick so that my eyes could see both at once.

I learned more than just what her wings look like. I’ve felt them, too- she doesn’t ask for me to do it, but I’ve noticed that she likes it if I go slow- sorry, block it out, sorry.

It’s important that my hands are very clean, when I touch Taffy’s wings. They have to be clean of all residues; I have to have clean nails, and to have cleaned under my nails, and to have dried my skin of all extra oils and suchlike. She doesn’t like her scapular, marginal coverts, or alulal feathers being touched outside of bathing; those are the feathers that touch the wind first, and it’s a bit of a process to get them all lying flat after they’ve been mussed. Taffy gets too much sensation from her primary and secondary feathers to like anything more than a grazing touch along them.

We both like it when I dig my fingers into her wings; thus, the only place I can really do that is in her coverts. It’s a stripe of feathers between the leading and trailing edge of her wing, and- for her, at
least- it feels very nice to have that area scritched, stroked, and kneaded.

Flat on her back, shirtless, no brassiere; her nipples are a dusty pink color, like a white-pink rose. When I stroke just so, the muscles of her chest ripple and flex with her gasps; when I smooth her feathers back down, her upper body goes limp.

I’m in my panties, and so is she, and we’re somewhere on the Sunny- a little cranny only the two of us really want to bother with reaching, just the light of a Dial to see by and the scent of desire almost cloying in its intensity in the tight warm space between two bulkheads. Her clothing is all folded up neat under her head, and mine is beneath her body, protecting her from cold. When I bow down and take another sweet kiss from her mouth, it’s warm and hot and tastes like anise-flavored mouth.

Her skin smells like skin and sweat and musk, at her armpits and between her legs, and when I mouth gently between her legs the sound that comes out of her makes gooseflesh dance over my skin. On the posterior side- back side- of her wings, it’s just gyrfalcon coloring, but on the anterior-front side- it’s not. It’s different. Bright red, eye-shaped; like trails of blood, colored feathers all along that stripe of just right on her wings, and when I kiss the center red wet beading point the expression on Taffy’s face is- shy, longing, intensity and giddy relief.

Somewhere between slippery kisses and giggling we come together, me inside her and her soft gasps and the chalky dusty smell of dry feathers and- warm- and- tight- and- bright-

Eventually, I can’t stand sitting in the mess anymore. I prepared a bucket just for this before hand; and installed a hook here, too, and now- I carefully clean myself, and then I wipe the slimy whiteness leaking from Taffy’s warmest parts, and then- I realize her bright yellow eyes are staring at me, hovering over the reddest blush.

She always gets so embarrassed when I do things like finger her, or give her oral pleasure, or even tell her what I like about her body; it’s cute as hell, but… I dunno. I mean, she hasn’t- no, breathe, ask her about it, Gurry.

“Um.”

“R-rr?”

“I- when I do this for you, do you… do you like it? When I do stuff like this for you?” I say, giving an extra firm rub against her just to be sure she knows what I mean and that she’s definitely clean.

“I-I, ah, mhm.” she squeaks, blushing and blinking then shuddering in pleasure as I rub little circles into her thighs.

“Okay. Um-”

“Gurry?”

“Y-yes, Taffy?”

“I like you. And I like what you do to me, and for me, and- if ever you doubt you’re liked, that you’re… loved- please, I… I will tell you that I love you, until you believe me, until you stop…
doubting. M-maybe that day will never come but… that doesn’t mean I can’t just… keep telling you. It’s okay, Gurry. I love you- it’s okay, come here-” says Taffy.

She sits up, her warm arms wrapping around me and- oh, I’m- I’m crying. We hold each other, and I- cry. Is it weird to feel sad and happy, because things are so much better now- but they weren’t bad before, either, they just… love is not enough on it’s own. Love doesn’t mean shit if there’s no respect, too.

I loved and respected my ex-wife. She only loved me.

It’s not enough- GAH!

“Shit, that- that was Surume, where are my panties fuck it- pants-”

“Here, I’ll fix your shirt and vest-”

“Thank you, brassiere is- there we go, ungh- fucking eye-hooks-”

“Sleeve- sleeve- fix your hair I’ve got the buttons-”

“Thank you-”

“Love you-”

“Love you too-”

“Here’s Kusanagi and Banana-”

“Marzipan, let go of Banana- thank you-”

And then she’s gone, off to see what the problem is. I clean up, dress myself, and follow her out, Marzipan around my neck, pochade box over one shoulder and my Bouquets at my hips. I pause, and grab a little taffin of my special ‘Sproutella’ mixed poisons- each one is a cartridge, and… it’s a complicated combination of botany, poisons, mechanical know how, and weapons, but I load my war fans and every wound I put on a man bleeds flower petals. Leave it untreated long enough, and only plants remain.

Of the two of us, Taffy really is the more traditionally minded. Urgh- that was a lurch like we’re falling, I need to get out there-

Fishman Island is surrounded by an enormous bubble, and it’s aglow with the lights of thousands- millions of people, I need to take a pictogram- er, photograph- and- GATCHA! Oh that’s going to be an amazing painting-

Oh no.

Surume just ran off- some guy, fishman guy is talking some shit- like hell we’ll join some other crew!
“Nah, the future King of the Pirates can’t join someone else’s crew. FRANKY DO THE THING!”

“AYE, CAPTAIN, DOIN’ THE THING! COUP DE BUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUURST-!”

And then we blast forwards towards Fishman Island, hurtling like nothing I’ve ever felt before I see out of the corner of my eye Robin and Mab falling from the Crow’s Nest and Mab getting hit in the head with a rock and then- we reach the island’s bubble and our ship-bubble bursts and-

Everything-

Goes-

Strange-

And then I’m in a corn crib. Wait, this is seaweed- no, it’s corn. Cornweed?

Fuck, what the hell just happened?
Alphabet Soup

So my ribs are stuck and have been for a while and I can only just reach back and pull my breathing rig up over my nose and now my face is covered with water but I can still breathe and Robin is still panicky but- yes!

The force of the water coming past my body might be just the thing I need! If I exhale with everything I have- dig my fingertips into the stone and pull-

Just-

A little-

More-

And with a shocking suddenness, I’ve got just enough room to pull myself the rest of the way out. I squirm my way out of a square hole, and flop a little bonelessly into a panicky Robin’s arms; she carefully walks us over to a higher level of a… terrace fountain basin, I think, and the water soon comes down in a trickling stream, then a lovely waterfall. Missed it by that much.

I wrap my arms around Robin, and hold her while she shakes. Behind us, the water soon fills the basin from the overflow point, and flows down into another basin; again, again, again, until an entire water garden made of tiles and gold floats under ankle deep water. The water flows out of the room in hidden drains, and through some magic of plumbing, comes out again in faint sprays and through whistling pipes shaped a bit like birds- and suddenly, I realize what new danger we’re in.

“Robin, we need to keep moving-”

“But- Mab, it’s so peaceful here, surely we can take a rest-”

“No, Robin- Robin, stay awake-”

Shit, it’s getting to her- maybe if I- sorry about this, Robin. It needs to throb- ah, there’s my lighter, let me just-

As the combination of music, humidity, heat, and sedative herbal miasma swirls around us both, I flick my lighter until it catches with a bright sharp blue flame and shove Robin’s sleeve up and press it’s heat against the bare skin of Robin’s arm until I hear it sizzle and- shit, she’s not reacting, gotta- I smack her burn with the flat of my hand so hard my own hand stings and a whole piece of skin pulls away with my hand and she shrieks, then gasps and shudders.
“Ow- ow, fucking- wha- what the, Mab, what the hell??”

“This is an old, old Fairy trap, Robin; you’d have fallen asleep and not woken for anything if I hadn’t done something. Mother used these all the time, in Thuletima, to keep us in line.”

“Ah. Which explains why you know how to escape this kind of trap? Nngh-”

“Yeah. There might be more dangers in this room but I doubt it- now that you’ve got an anchor, we can take a short rest if you need. At the very least, we can put something on that burn-”

“No, I’m alright- what is that?”

“Where?”

“That- cage? On the balcony-”

“I see the cage you mean, but- oh, what the hell-”

It’s a long hank of blue colored… something. I look at Robin, who looks back at me and nods; then, I fly up and over to the balcony, and- careful of those pressure plates in the walls, but-

It’s a child? They aren’t dead- but they are a bit grimy, and there are tear tracks on their face, and- they’re too short to get out of the cage area, and they tried so hard, there’s blood under their broken fingernails- I see.

There’s no way to know for sure what happened without asking, Mab.

-there’s a flue for a trap-door system above them, which… is the only available exit to this room, because those are wolvarks, shit shit shit-

I Blink back to Robin, wrap my arms around her, and Blink us into the cage with the sleeping child-right as the wolvark’s jaws crash over where her swaying body was standing. Robin jerks and wheezes when she sees that happen; I sigh.

“We need to go up.”

“-I expect you’re quite right. What about- a child? Here!?!?”

“I’m taking them with us-”

“No, best if I carry them; your wings and top speed are our best assets, right now.”

“A-alright. Here, let’s get them tied fast to you-”

And so I take my paracord and carefully secure the sleeping child to Robin. The high water mark in this room is chest high on us, and nearly the entire cage area- if we hadn’t gotten here, the child would have been eaten alive.

When I’m done securing the child, Robin is listing sleepily to one side. I slap her sharply across the face, which snaps her out of it and puts a flare of irritation and gratitude in her eyes. I nod, grimly,
and cup my hands for her to climb up into the flume. The child, being secured to her chest, shouldn’t be too much of a bother- and I’m right, as Robin starts climbing the flume, using her shoulders to push herself higher and her Devil Fruit to give herself a hand.

“Okay- I can only see the shape of the flume with my Shadow, not the details. Anything of note?”

“I passed a side-pipe on my way up, too small for either of us to fit but just large enough for this child to slide through if they were unconscious, and there’s a bit of their hair caught on a sharp edge of it... A-and there’s a grate, up at the top; it looks to be held shut with some kind of locking mechanism, but I can’t make heads or tails of it-”

“-Alright, then I’m coming up. Standby.”

“Aye.”

I hover as the water begins to lap at my toes, keeping careful watch of where the wolvarks are, and then I Blink up above Robin, still hovering. I get a firm grip on the walls, and examine the mechanism- oh! So that’s what that rock is for! I take it out, to confirm my suspicions- and I knew it felt weird!

It’s not stone at all, but a clay talisman - and, considering where I found it- this is great! I hold the talisman up to the mechanism, which flares for just a second with a rainbow light, and then the entire locking mechanism coils back and away. I push up on the grate, and it opens wide, and I wedge it open with my spear- catch a glimpse of a courtyard, I know exactly what kind of place we are now-

And then I help Robin and the child on her chest up, and out of the drain-pipe. I take back my spear and close the grate again, and listen to it lock again. I take another look around- rather than some artistic wonder, I’m greeted with plain stone walls, an awkwardly shaped courtyard with a limpid blue fountain shoved into the narrow corner. A bench rail- just a railing at just about the right height for sitting on- is against both the awkward walls, and doors with numerical runes on them wrap all around us.

“This is different.”

“This is a maintenance node; my sister Yuki- you know, the Tomb Raider- told me about these. In really big tomb complexes, the various traps and dangers require maintenance by... there’s usually a family of grave diggers kept on retainer by the family of the tomb, and it’s their job to maintain the death traps and so on.”

“I see. So- where were we?”

“We were in- I think- the Career’s Training Area, which is where the young members of the grave digger family would train-”

“-in the family business, I see. Well, that does explain some of the dimensions of those tombs- and I remember you saying once that the tombs of children are always the most viciously protected-”

“Yeah. However- this area has been abandoned for a long time. Look around- what don’t you see?”
“...Footprints, garbage, and the smell is all... humid concrete, nothing else.”

“This is a hub area, meant for fairly steady traffic- a bit like a break room. But... I think we might be the only people who’ve been here in a good four hundred years- that’s what it feels like to me.”

“Why is that, d’you suppose?”

“Mm. At a guess? This particular branch of the Tomb-family died out, or there aren’t enough of the Grave Digging family left to care for it properly- so, rather than waste resources, they just... turned all the defenses on high, and there’s always a setting that requires the least amount of checking, and then they sealed it off.”

“Mm. I suppose this is a good place to rest, then?”

“Yeah- the water in that fountain should be potable, but let me check, first- and that child needs to be woken up and cared for, and your burn- yeah, we’ll rest here for a while.”

“Sounds good to me- ow! Um- can you help me untie this-?”

“Of course, sorry- let me just-”

There are two main paths in my style. The whole thing is called Asura, named for... Ah, might as well, while Nami’s still asleep in the haystack. We’re safe enough in this barn, and- as the only other crewmates here are Gurry and Taffy, who are examining the barn for anything of use and scouting, respectively- it’s best if I don’t go anywhere, but also don’t fall asleep.

Taffy says that Nami’s fine, just resting- not unconscious, but asleep. And I thought I was the heavy sleeper in our relationship...

Fucking hell, I’m worried about her.

Don’t think about it, Zoro.

Long ago, so long that no one who remembers it is still alive to do the telling, there was a great war between the Asuras and the Devatas. The Devatas were routed in the war, and so went to Lord Brahma to seek his help.

Brahma told them to churn the ocean; and if they did, they would be able to obtain Amrit, which would make them immortal and all powerful. After consuming Amrit, they would be able to defeat the Asuras which they were warring with.

When this story is told to children, they are told simply that the Asuras were warring with the Devatas; but this is not true.

All the gods of the Kaamadhaatu (of which this World is a part) are subject to the passions; and the Asuras, above all others, must bow to their passionate whims: especially the passions of Wrath, Pride, Envy, Insincerity, Falseness, Boasting, and Belicosity. Because of their inherent passion, rebirth as an Asura is considered by some to be one of the four unhappy births, together with rebirth as an animal, a preta, or a being in Naraka (sometimes called the Sixteen Hells).
The state of an Asura can be described as the state of a human being obsessed with ego, force and violence; one who is always looking for an excuse to get into a fight; one who is always angry with everyone, and cannot maintain a calm disposition or solve their problems peacefully. In our crew’s Monster Quartet, each of us has a specific moment where we become like an Asura- Luffy, if someone challenges his Dream. Sanji, if someone hurts a female. Mab, if someone hurts a child.

As for me- if someone proclaims themselves a sword fighter, I can’t stop myself from challenging them. From… hurting them. Knowing that, it’s not surprising that Taffeta flatly refuses to answer to the title of ‘Sword Fighter’; she doesn’t want to fight me seriously, and honestly, I don’t want to fight her; the two of us are too good at using our swords to ever fight as anything other than seriously.

One may go to the realm of the Asura because in human form they had good intentions, but committed bad actions such as harming others.

Concerning Asuras, the Great Calm-Observation by Zhiyi says: ‘Always desiring to be superior to others, having no patience for inferiors and belittling strangers; like a hawk, flying high above and looking down on others, and yet outwardly displaying justice, worship, wisdom, and faith- this is raising up the lowest order of good and walking the way of the Asura.’

Asura are said to experience a much more pleasurable life than simple humans, but in turn are plagued by envy for the devas, whom they can see just as animals perceive humans. However, in certain inferior or opposing realms- the translations from past to present aren’t entirely clear- the Asura are malevolent (like the corruptor, Mara) and can be referred to as demons. These are called Rakshasas.

In terms of power, Asuras rank above humans but below most of the other deities. The leaders of the Asura are called Asurendra; there are several Asura-lords, as the Asura are broken into different tribes, much like humans are. The principal leaders are Vemacitrin, Rāhu, and Pahārāda.

The Asuras formerly lived in the Trāyastriṃśa on the peak of Sumeru with the other gods of that place. When Śakra became the ruler of that world, the Asuras celebrated by drinking a lot of Gandapāna wine, a liquor so strong that Śakra forbade the other gods to drink it. Weakened by their drunkenness, the Asuras could not resist when Śakra had the whole lot of them thrown over the edge of Trāyastriṃśa into what would become the Asura-world at the base of Sumeru. A tree grows there called Cittapātali; when the Asuras saw it blossom, they saw that it was different from the Pāricchattaka tree which had grown in their old home, and they knew that they were dispossessed. They now meditated on war.

In armor and weapons, they climbed up the steep slopes of Sumeru like ants. Śakra set out to meet them, but was forced to retreat because of their numbers. Passing through the forest where the garudās live on his flying chariot, Śakra saw that his passage was destroying the nests of the garuḍas and ordered his charioteer Mātali to turn back. When the pursuing Asuras saw Śakra turn about, they felt certain that he must be coming back with an even larger army, and they fled, ceding all the ground they had gained.

Despite their many wars, there was eventually a partial concord between the Trāyastriṃśa gods and the Asuras. This came about because Śakra fell in love with Sujā, daughter of the Asura chief Vemacitrin. Vemacitrin had given Suji the right to choose her own husband at an assembly of the Asuras, and she chose Śakra, who had attended disguised as an aged Asura. Vemacitrin thus became Śakra's father-in-law.
But this story is about how Rāhu and Ketu came to be. So, I shall begin again; with the truth, this time.

Long ago, so long that no one who remembers it is still alive to do the telling, there was a great war between the Rakshasas and the Devatas. The Devatas were routed in the war, and so went to Lord Brahma to seek his help.

Brahma told them to churn the ocean; and if they did, they would be able to obtain Amrit, which would make them immortal and all powerful. After consuming Amrit, they would be able to defeat the Rakshasas which they were warring with.

Churning the ocean was a very big job, and so the Devatas sought the help of the Asuras. The King of Serpents, Vasuki, was to become the rope; while a hill named Mandrachal offered to become the pivot. Lord Vishnu, in the form of a tortoise, became the base and the churning began.

The Devatas held the tail of Vasuki and the Asuras held the head. Various things came out, during this churning of the ocean. There was a pot of Vish, which created havoc in all three worlds; but Lord Shiva drank the poison and saved the world. He did not let the poison go beyond his neck, which became blue in color- thus, the Blue Neck Tortoise came to be, and Lord Shiva’s body turned blue from the neck down forever more.

At last, Dhavantari came out of the churning ocean- or was born from it, awkward translations strike again- with a pot of Amrit. Immediately, there was a mad scramble for it among the Devatas and Asuras. Seeing this, Lord Vishnu took the form of Mohini, a very beautiful dancer, and offered her services in distributing the Amrit equally to both the Asuras and the Devatas.

Mohini made the two groups sit in two different rows, but gave the Amrit to the Devatas only. Towards the end, when almost all the Amrit was gone, one of the Asuras saw through Mohini’s trick.

He went, and sat among the Devatas- for in those days, the Devatas and the Asuras looked quite alike- and drank the Amrit. However, Chandra and Surya, the nine and one who kept watch over all, knew him in an instant, and informed Mohini of who she had given the Amrit to.

Lord Vishnu took his real form then, and let out the Sudarshan Chakra at the Asura. The Asura’s neck was separated from their body, but he did not die- he could not, as he had drunk the Amrit.

His head was called Rahu, and his torso, Ketu. While it would have been fair if the Asura who was Two had tried to have revenge on Lord Vishnu, who cut them into their two pieces, Rahu and Ketu did not. Instead, they sought revenge on Chandra and Surya, who had betrayed their presence to Lord Vishnu as Mohini.

Thus, every time there is an eclipse, it is Rahu swallowing one or all of Chandra’s bodies; and when Ketu swallows Surya, it is the sun that is hidden behind shadow. However, because Rahu and Ketu are only halves of one whole, they cannot keep Chandra or Surya imprisoned for long; thus, the moons and sun return.

My sword style can thus be split into two different kinds of movesets; Asura style, for defense, and Rakshasa style, for offence.
The Asura style is better for working with my crewmates, defending a set point, and is the honorable side of Santoryu. Rakshasa style is what I developed while I was teaching Taffy. Taffy is a Ninja, before she’s anything else; and while no one on our crew is weak, Taffy’s not at her strongest in a direct conflict.

I am; Luffy is; Sanji is; Mab is, although she does just as well outside of physical conflict; Nami, Usopp, Robin, Taffy, and Gurry? Are not. While they can comport themselves admirably in the field of battle, their best use is as knives in the dark. You can fight an assassin as you would an honorable warrior- but they cheat, and have no problem cheating.

Taffy has thrown dirt in my eyes, tripped me, kicked and punched me in the groin, set traps, run away, and all kinds of other things; I have to think very quickly and carefully to get her cornered, and when I have her cornered, she fights like a wild thing. Sparring with Taffy is hard, but rewarding; once she got her own style pinned down, and the both of us became comfortable with the realization that she would never be the kind of sword fighter I am (and her older brother, Mihawk, is), it became very clear that no one else on the crew could challenge me in quite the same way.

I actually spar against everyone.

About once a month or so, there’s a round-robin tournament of sparring, with the winner getting either a bye on one of the chores we all hate- and it depends on the season for which one- or a choice of what to have at Tea the next day (excepting birthdays, which are rare enough that we all forget about that rule until it’s happened again).

Each of my crewmates has taught me something different of battle, fighting, and war.

Luffy has taught me about determination. More often than not, when Luffy decides to join the Round Robin, he wins- not because he’s stronger or faster, but because he won’t give up, not ever.

Sanji has taught me about flexibility. If Sanji doesn’t want to be hit, he will not be hit- his body will become fluid, and he’ll bend and twist away from every obstacle and attack on his person.

Mab has taught me about speed. Of us all, Mab thinks, sees, and moves the fastest; the reason she calls her Shadow-teleport ‘Blink’ is because if you blink, you will miss her movements- similarly, if you blink at the wrong time during a spar, you’ll see her standing in front of you, and then you’ll see her punching you in the gut, and whatever in between movements she used existed in the space of your closed eyes.

Usopp has taught me about strategy. When Usopp wins the Round Robin, it’s not because of who he fought- it’s because, somehow, he’s arranged the bracket so that, whoever he’s fought has had to fight everyone else- possibly several times- before they ever get to him.

Nami has taught me about strength. She’s not to participate in the physical fighting now, and all of her sparring is light- even so, if you try to touch Nami when she doesn’t want to be touched, you take your life into your own hands.

Robin has taught me about subtlety. I can’t count the number of times Robin has beaten me on a technicality; usually, Robin wins by maneuvering her opponent into a ring-out.

Chopper has taught me precision. Being a doctor, he not only knows how to put someone back together- he knows the fastest way to take someone apart. It only takes three tags from him, and then you can’t feel anything below a certain part on your body. It wears off, for us, but- Chopper is
dangerous.

Franky has taught me style. Occasionally, I lose to Franky- not because he’s stronger than me, but because I’m struck by the sheer… coolness, of what he’s doing. Or the weirdness- and then his attack puts me out of the ring.

Brook has taught me about spirit. It’s not enough to know your movements in your head and your body; the attitude you use to fight with is important too.

Mark has taught me about ferocity. No one and nothing is as fierce and relentless as Mark during sparring; no one. Maybe the ocean, but the Sea doesn’t play around, and Mark does.

Bryony has taught me about movement. Some of Bryony’s moves look deceptively gentle; but if you get even lightly tapped by her, you will feel that hit in your bones for days. The best way to fight Bryony is to not get hit at all.

Gurry has taught me about observation. Where Bry’s movements always look purposeful and forthright, Gurry’s… they don’t. He can look like he’s fidgeting when he’s actually readying- well, he uses poisons, but for sparring it’s colored dyes- with itching powder, if it’s a hard contact spar. I learned to watch very carefully, if I want to be ready for whatever Gurry’s about to do.

Finally, Taffy. My first student, the reason I started mastering Santoryu at all…

Taffy taught me about honor. It’s funny- before I taught her, I had always assumed that honor was in how you did something. When I started training Taffy, I realized that it wasn’t as simple as that… how to explain this…

I know.

Sanji talks about hospitality, sometimes- likens it to the feeling of a warm air in a room that looks cold, or a cold air in a room that looks warm. It’s the difference between being welcomed or not. It’s not a tangible difference- but it is there.

Honor is like that. For Taffy, dishonor wouldn’t come from stabbing someone in the back- not if it was to protect her crewmates, or to get her job done. Similarly, dishonor has nothing to do with winning a fight- in a fight, if you’re fighting fair, you’re on your last ropes.

Thinking about it now- gah, I don’t remember what I was thinking. The baby just kicked against my side, and I got distracted- oh, there they go again. Fuck, Nami’s so beautiful like this, I want- gnnngh. Think unsexy thoughts, Zoro, think unsexy thoughts- aha! Our Crew layout!

Right now we have the Command and Core Crew- Luffy, Sanji, Nami, me, Usopp, and Mab; we have the Squints, Usopp, Franky, Gurry, Mab, Nami, and Bryony. We have the Sneaks, Robin, Taffy, Mark, Gurry, Nami, and Brook. And we have the Medics, which is really just Chopper. He gets support from Taffy, Gurry, and Mab- but he needs his own clique.

Gurry will probably always be a squint, which isn’t bad- research and development are important. But Chopper could probably use the help of someone who either has a completely different focus in medicine, or chose a different path from his focus of medicine.
Mab and Taffy are both nurses and midwives— but their other duties take them far from the medical world.

Of us all, Chopper gets left alone with his own company a lot— he’s never complained, but… I know now, that I’ve had people around me that are willing to talk about the things I love the most… It’s not good, being unable to share a part of yourself with your friends because you know they won’t understand, and with how much you’ll have to explain to them so they do understand, it’s just not worth it. Chopper needs nurses who can help him, and maybe a junior doctor he can teach or work with. I’m not entirely sure.

But, with how tired he gets after the round robins, because we don’t really hold back… he needs help, even if he never says it out loud.

I’ll talk to Luffy about it; his snail’s registering with mine, and it’s got that little blink that says the other end is conscious. Yeah, I’ll just call him— who knows, with his luck he’s probably met someone who’d fit the bill.

When I open my eyes, it’s to see my medical backpack hanging from a hook on the wall. I roll onto my back, and sit up. I’m on a large— bed? I think? Luffy, Sanji, and Usopp are here too… The room smells very strongly of brine, but also of- ah, mermaid, like Keimi. There’s a low wall, or is it a couch? An oven? Looks like an oven.

There’s a person lying on it— no, lounging, lounging on it— and they— she’s got a broom looking thing, or is it a fish? She keeps glancing at me— what the hell’s going on?

“Ey! You’re awake, deer-guy!” says the girl on the… that’s a warming oven!

“Oh- um- yeah, hi. Who are you?”

“Oh, sorry— Call me G, everyone does. You and those three—” said G, gesturing at- Luffy, Sanji, and Usopp, okay; where’s the rest of the crew— “nearly drowned when the channel current washed through. Luckily, me an’ some of Kei’s girls picked you up. You’re in the dorm of the International Post Office, in the Coral Heights area of Mermaid Cove, which is a cliff-side area under Fishman Island. It’s about- eh, early afternoon? Not quite sunset yet, but close; you’ve been asleep for about two hours. I changed you and those three’s clothing, and stuck it in the dryer vent- except for Horn Guy’s suit, that got salad-spun and hung to air out. Um— there should be warm seaweed soup soon— yeah, there’s Kei, and the Medaka Five.”

“Hey Nurse G— hey, Chopper! You’re awake!”

“Hey Keimi! Nice to see you again; glad you’re okay, after everything.”

“Haha, yeah— ah, Nursie, two incoming for you—”

“Um, Keimi, is that soup for us?”
“Haha, yeah, made it myself-”

“Um. Isn’t it supposed to be warm?”

“Wha- FUCK-!”

“-Fuckin’ hell, I told those bastards not to push it so hard- M5, front an’ center!”

“Front and center.”

“Front and center!”

“Not front and center.”

“Might be front and center.”

“So what if I’m front and center?”

“Girls, pay attention- this is your final exam. When the two injured come in, you’re to attend to the second patient. Then, when you’re done, you’re to check over Chopper, who just woke up and-”

“Chopper’s a Doctor-”

“Really Kei?”

“Yep, one of the best in the World-” says Keimi, before turning back to her pot of seaweed soup that’s steadily heating on the stove.

“Aw, shaddup-!” I yelp, blushing.

“Even better! M5- after you attend your first patient, you are to check Doctor Chopper over for any remaining signs of near-drowning. You know the procedures; and, even though he’s a doctor, it’s your job to care for him right now, not his.”

“Yes Teacher Nursie G.”

“Yes Teacher Nursie G!”

“No Teacher Nursie G.”

“Maybe Teacher Nursie G.”

“So what if I do, Teacher Nursie G?”

“Exactly what I like to hear- YOU BASTARDS BETTER GET IN HERE, HIDING YOUR INJURIES JUST MEANS I USE THE TRIPLE STRENGTH STINGING WOUND CLEANSER-”

A pair of mermen shove each other out of the way, trying to be the first into the- I guess nurse’s office. Huh. They’re covered in lacerations, hematomas, and puncture wounds- what the hell happened?

“What the hell happened, idiot boys?”
“We were doin’ the run out through the Boondocks—”
“-and those assholes from the Gyojo came after us again-”
“-you know, the New Generation-”
“-sayin’ shit about not being real mermen-”
“-we’re more manly than they’ll ever be-”
“-like treating people in Goblin City like people isn’t something real mermen actually do-”
“-like they don’t have people they want to send letters to-”
“-like their money isn’t as good-”
“Boys.”
“Sorry, Nurse G.” “Sorry, Nurse G.”
“Well?”
“So, a’cuz a what happened last time-”
“-we got E an’ F to help us out-”
“-and instead of getting our mail bags back from them-”
“-we drew the attention of the Gyojo Scaleslimes-”
“-and told the girls to come here. They ain’t been by yet?”

Nurse G’s eyes narrow- she looks sharp at Keimi, who shakes her head no, then at the M-Five, who also shake their heads.

“So. You boys made the best of a bad situation; but you still left your mail-bags with my baby sisters, who- while scrappy and tough as riptides- are also obviously from… there, are half the size of the current crop of average shodan from the Gyojo, and with bags just on the edge of being too heavy for them to lift. Have I got that right?”

“Yes.” “Yep.”

“Outstanding.”

“Nurse G, you know we don’t care-”

“-we’re not country bumpkins from the Seaweed Glades, so why would we care-”

“-about you and your sisters bein’.-”

“-that’s quite enough. I’d call this… a double strength stinging wound cleanser. Not bad, boys, not bad at all; do better, next time.”
"Easy for you to say- gnnngh!"

"-your skin rips aren’t bubbling like- yaaagh!"

"Hmph. You’re fine, Red; keep those punches in your tail-fin sealed with eggskin, and keep out of any real fights until at least your bruises and small cuts have gone. I also don’t like the way your scales feel- have you been sleeping right lately, or is it still…?"

“It’s still. I tried what you recommended, but- it worked for a while, then-”

“Wrapped and done. Keep the ones on your stomach covered as best you can-”

"-and eat lots of dark greens to replenish your blood!"

"It’s okay to go fluming until your bandaging comes off-"

"-maybe go fluming after your bandaging comes off-"

"We can’t fill your prescriptions if you don’t have your ID with you, you know?"

"Yeah, I got it- next time, really, I’ll-"

“No.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“Hm.”

“No? We’re doing this now, while we’ve got you here- the chart’s on the wall by the kitchen, look at it carefully and tell us what you see, starting with Row One.”

“…”

“Yellow, we only do this because we care about you and want you to be able to see-”

“-because we love you and want you to be able to see clearly!”

“We want you to see like you do now.”

“Maybe we want you to see better.”

“Eye exams aren’t scary, right?”

“Heh. You Five really have become good nurses- right, um, Row One-”

“Red, did you do it, and then you felt better, and then you stopped?”

“…yes?”

“Red, you have to do your meditation every day, twice a day, for the rest of your life. That’s the only thing we’ve found that helps your insomnia; if you don’t, I’ll recommend Kei bench you, and I know
you don’t want that."

“...Fine, I’ll do my meditation-”

Nurse G is a very good nurse, but... she seems... hm. Ah, Captain, Usopp, and Sanji are awake- and here come the M-Five, better-

“Ah, Nurses M-Five; I feel fine, but my crewmates have woken too-”

“We’ll handle it.”

“We’re professionals!”

“We’re not good nurses.”

“Maybe we’re great nurses.”

“Can you hold your back real straight while I listen to your chest, Doctor?”

“Ah, of course-”

And then I’m being swarmed by Guppy-sized Mermaid Nurses. They check my blood pressure, my heart rate, the sounds of my lungs; they check my eyes, and in my ears, and ask if my limbs have any aches or pains to them, to which I replied no. Anything important happen health wise lately? I started budding my horns, I guess- antlers soon! I’ll have a whole new set of tips this year, I’m excited.

Ow, leg cramp. And my fingers feel tingly- I’m forgetting something important, fuck-

“Sorry, say that again?”

“Are the lumps on your head normal?”

“Are your head lumps tumors!?!?”

“They’re simple warts.”

“Maybe they’re bruises.”

“Are the lumps on your head tumors?”

“No, those lumps aren’t tumors, those are my antlers- they drop each year, and then I grow new ones-”

“That must take a lot of calcium.”

“That’s really calcium intensive!”

“You don’t want a glass of milk.”
“Maybe you need a fortified calcium supplement.”

“I’ll write you a prescription, which you can fill at any conbini World-wide- it’s not a rare problem coming out of Winter, to be hypocalcemic, especially if you’re dropping a large bone from your body once a year. This is for a combination Calcium and Vitamin D supplement, to be taken once daily- which should suit you fine?”

“Shit, I knew I forgot something- yeah, that’d be great. Thank you.”

Then, after a brief huddle, they checked over my hooves, and finally declared me fighting fit- except for the calcium deficiency, which one of the M-Five treat immediately with a tall glass of fortified whole milk- mare’s milk, huh; oh, very sweet. I drink the whole thing under their watchful eyes, and shoot them a thumbs up.

After another careful look-over, they let me get off the bed; then they checked over Captain, Usopp, and Sanji. It’s strange- two years ago I would have said that putting Sanji in the same room as a bunch of tiny, beautiful mermaid women who wanted to take care of him would be a surefire way of making him bleed all his blood out through his nose. Now?

Mostly, he complements their beauty, does what they ask of him, answers their questions- and goes right back to worrying about Mab. Everyone’s fine- but everyone isn’t here. So I don’t know if that’s true or not.

Sanji really loves Mab; it’s not new, or anything, just… wow, he’s changed a lot.

“Well. That’s the M5 trained; and considering what your contract entails… I’m sorry, G. I’ve stretched it as much as I can without breaking contract- and we’ve talked about this, too. You’re a great Nurse, and you fly really fast- and you can’t work here, not while you’re still… I know this is one of the only jobs that you can get that aren’t on your back- believe me, I get it. But… at least in this city, everyone who sees you move at top speed knows in a hot second exactly where you come from; and then they don’t treat you like they should. What with us being so new- in five years, we could hire you no problem- but that doesn’t help you now. You deserve better than that- and while I’m working to change it, just like Captain… that doesn’t help you now. I’m- I’m sorry.”

“What’m I supposed to do, Kei? You’re an only child- and all of your cousins are older than you. I’m the only person in my family who isn’t sick or dying or doesn’t care, and… this was kinda my last option before… that.”

“G…”

“I mean. I’m not joining the New Fishman Pirates, Hody Jones is-”

“-urgh-”

“-exactly. But… that’s also the only group I know of that would take a nurse, and her sisters, too. I can’t join your crew, either, I’m…”

“…Not suited to our crew, I know; not your sisters, either. Believe me, not everyone is; I understand. Still, there has to be something…”
“Hey Zoro; what’s the haps?”

“Captain! Me, Nami, Gurry, and Taffy are in a barn somewhere- and we picked up a girl who swears up and down she’s a member of our crew, or about to be, she’s got that thing Mab has sometimes-”

“Future vision?”

“Yes. Anyway, I think it’s the royal barn we’re in, otherwise the fineness of the horse-tack makes no sense at all- ah shit, guards-”

“Roronoa Zoro-?”

“Yeah-?”

“--...--”

“....-----.....-----.....”

“---..-----”

“Oh, okay, let me tell my Captain.”

“Zoro?”

“Captain, we’re being invited to a feast at the Royal Palace; apparently we saved Princess Shirahoshi’s pet shark or something? Anyway, that’s where we are- oh, and, we need at least one nurse.”

“Eh?”

“Think about it- we have a guy who researches drugs like Chopper does, and we have a pair of midwives and nurses; but none of those people’s primary job is just medicine. Chopper’s a great doctor, but he’s only one man.”

“Hmmm… he does get really tired after th’round robins…”

“Mm. Anyway, see you when you get to the Palace; Nami’s hungry again and Gurry wants to paint Taffy in the palace rock garden- I guess they’re calling it that, now?”

“Shishishishishi! Look after them, Zoro.”

“Of course, Captain.”

GATCHA!

Luffy looks over at me. I look at him. Luffy glances at Nurse G, then back at me. I nod; she’d be a good fit, I think- we only need to know what her Dream is.
“-I mean, I know you want to keep your sisters safe, and get them better lives than your mother’s- but, I mean. What are you going to do after that?”

“Oh, that’s easy, Kei- I’m going to become one of the World’s Best Nurses, obviously.”

“Ah! WAIT, THAT’S BEEN YOUR DREAM THIS WHOLE TIME-?”

“Yes? Keimi, you’re very pale- are you alright?”

“Um, Luffy-chin, I-”

“Shishishishi. I got this, Keimi.”

“-Uh-?”

“Hey! Nurse-Witch G!”

“Eh? Yeah, Straw Hat?”

“Join my crew!”

“...Only if my sisters can too, Straw Hat.”

“That’s fine! The Pirate King needs the Best Nurse! -and we need more cabin kids, anyway.”

“Fine; guess I’m a pirate now- my sisters, too. They’ll be so pleased. Well, it’s better than… that.”

My new nurse is sarcastic. That’s going to be fun.

And Sanji doesn’t say a word after the Nursing Five get through with him; just sits quietly, and observes, and chews on his damp cigarette. When we get up to leave- Keimi has a part-time job at the Mermaid Cafe I think? Or some kind of deal with the owner- and invited us to take up one of her tables while we waited for the rest of our crew to check in; Sanji tucked the front of his hair back behind his horns, and kept it like that.

Oh dear, he’s worried as hell. Otherwise, he’d never uncover both of his eyes like that; he’s worried, and feels- threatened? Oh no...

Ah, Keimi’s saying something-

“-Yeah, Uncle Hachiman’s got a whole franchise of Takoyaki stands all across the island; he’s really happy now. Ah, Pappug is in the Gyoverly Hills, over near Gyoncorde Plaza and the Palace; we drifted apart a while back, and now I mostly deliver clam curry for old times sake. He’s a fashion designer now, though, and he’s very popular- I’m wearing his stuff now, actually.”

“Ah, cool- hey, is this th’ferry?”

“Oh- yeah, this is it. It’s free today- see the hat on the turtle’s head?”

“Heh, it’s a fez-”

“Yep. Anyway, taxis are fedoras, but the black and yellow checkered ones are a fuckin’ price gouge-
don’t use those, use the blue and whites. Oh, and stay seated- this is the express sea-turtle ferry, not the daily-”

“Woah!”

“I told you to sit down- your buns alright, or do you need someone to kiss’em better?”

“If I needed kissing better, I wouldn’t ask you, Keimi-”

“Hah!” barks Usopp.

“Shishishishishi!” sniggers Luffy.

“Oh my god.” wheezes Keimi through her giggles.

Sanji doesn’t say anything at all; and he continues to be almost still and silent, even when we get to the Cafe where Keimi works part time. Even when the multitude of beautiful mermaids come out and cajole him to join them in a game of tag, he just sighs, and shakes his head ‘No’ while smiling apologetically at them, and nurses a mug of- Aw fuck, it’s a mug of jasmine tea, which is Mab’s favorite. Wait, Sanji’s a Demon- he’s probably not dwining, but I should check. This is the Grand Line, and he’s a passionate man; and, considering… oh fuck.

He could be getting Joyditch Fever.

It’s a metamorphologic dwam that is caused by a combination of deep, unshakeable love; withdrawal of sex; and an overabundance of salt water in the eyes. Early symptoms are a certain melancholy air, followed by seeking out favorite things and pastimes of the significant other, and a disinterest in what would normally titillate. If allowed to progress, it can result in wearing dishallible black clothing, listening to soppy love songs in the dark, drinking excessive amounts of alcoholic beverages, and writing awful poetry.

It’s often worst and most pronounced in people with extremely technical masteries- weavers, engineers, and cooks, especially, are prone to Joyditch Fever. You’ll know a cook especially has it because all their food will come out over salted, under salted, burnt, or soggy.

Sanji would be so upset if he did that- the symptoms or the cooking!

There is only one way to cure it that I know of. I have dried Rose Petals with me right now; the only other thing I need is- Jukebox! The song I need might be in it- yes! Okay, it’s… Going to play in about half an hour. Okay, fine- considering the rate of progression, we should only get minor meteoromorphic symptoms; maybe some dark clouds, maybe some fog. Thank god it’s not Nami with this, we’d be in danger of electrocution…

I go up to the counter, keeping a gimlet eye on Sanji, whose melancholy is starting to coalesce into a dim grey haze above his head, holy fuck this is a fast one.

“Yeah- I need a tea pot full of boiling water, my friend is… he’s got the Lovesickness, and-”

“Oh god, it’s the demon with the cloud over his head isn’t it-”
“Yeah, I’m really sorry about this—”

“No, no, it’s fine— I just. Wow, I haven’t seen that since highschool— did his girl break up with him, or something?”

“No, he’s happily married, he just misses his wife.”

“...is she dead or something?”

“No. No, he just hasn’t seen her in about three—? Yeah, three hours. They have a very strict schedule, and it’s—”

“Throwing him off, right. His wife’s a demon too?”

“No, a Fairy- ah, thank you. Um- can you make the jukebox louder?”

“Wow, I didn’t realize that was a thing outside love stories- oh! Right, we have that Shins song...”

“Yeah.”

“You’re a doctor?”

“Yep.”

“Cool- yeah, gimme a second...”

As the music steadily gets louder, I carry the boiling hot teapot of water over to our table, and pour in- shit, there are chunks of ice bouncing off the table- three whole handfuls of dried rose petals, plus one for the pot. Steep. Steep. Steep. Steep.

I take Sanji’s cold mug from weak fingers, pour it out into the nearest plant- sorry plant, emergency- and pour him a cup of rose petal tea as the song I need starts to play.

I shove the tea into his hands and wait.

You know, I sincerely hope Mab’s okay; the only other song in that Jukebox that might work is ‘I Hate Myself For Loving You’ and I really don’t think that’ll do it…”

When the girl with blue hair wakes up, it’s after I’ve cleaned her bloody fingertips and bandaged them, and it’s after I’ve cleaned Robin’s burn and salved it and wrapped it just so; it’s after I’ve made a stew, and it’s after Robin’s deciphered the “you are here” map in the Tomb Hub.

It’s after I’ve wiped her face, and combed her hair, and coiled the paracord into a handy loop.

It’s after I’ve looked her clothing over; brown capri pants under a pair of thick canvass and leather mukluks, a fancy red kimono that’s been hemmed and patched a few too many times to be anything
other than- but no, not everyone’s rich, Mab, don’t be elitist. White chemise that she wears under the kimono; linen, the best piece of fabric she’s wearing. Man’s obi.

She smells like… hm, the cheap kind of soap that’s scented with mint leaves, and small human with a hint of seawater. Not a bad smell; maybe a little unwashed, actually, there was a lot of dirt in her fingers. Her eyebrows are rounded at the edge, near her nose, which is cute like a button; her eyes are a sort of dark, intense blue, like… black, shimmering with flecks of blue color.

Oh, she’s awake.

“Chairete.”

“…h’llo.”

“I cleaned your hands up; and we’re in a place of safety. Still in the Tombs, but- safer, than before.”

“…”

“Hungry?”

The girl sits up, and nods. Blinks a little- rubs her face, then winces and looks at her hands; her palms were shredded, like she’d tried to stop herself on rough concrete, and there were bruises all up and down her back, and her sides, and her arms; like she was trying to protect something while taking a beating. I bandaged her up, and salved her, and breathed through the Rage that overtook me.

That’s not helpful right now.

Robin is tending to her portable cooker from Skypiea; it’s a Dial set rigged up like a little camp stove, and on it- stew. Not quite pottage, we don’t have enough veggies; soup maybe? It’s hot, and wet, and you eat it with a spoon, how’s that? I let the girl go at her own pace; she looks around the Tomb Hub, eyebrows furrowed in thought, before she smells the food and fixes her attention on Robin.

I watch her carefully walk up to Robin, who doesn’t look directly at her; just ladles soup into a mug and sets it far enough from her she’d have to stand up and take a few steps to get at it- which the child takes, and creeps back away from the warmth of the cook-stove. I calmly walk to Robin, taking care to make my footsteps loud enough to be heard, and fold myself down beside her.

The soup is nice; and it came from the one pot. Robin and I eat, and I see from the corner of my eye the child eating her soup as well- not quite wolfing it down, but not eating tentatively either. And she doesn’t take her eyes off of either of us. Eventually, her spoon scrapes the bottom of the bowl.

I glance her way, and wait until I can feel her attention on me, and then I say-

“Do you want some more?”

“…” they say, and then they nod.

“Come here, then.”
They hold still for a long moment, and then creep closer; the girl holds her body hunched down, like she’s expecting a kick. When she gets just near enough to be on the very edge of Robin’s reach, she holds out the bowl. Robin takes it, fills it with the last of the soup, and carefully hands it back.

The girl takes it, and crouches where she is- doesn’t back away this time. Curiosity, quiet, gentleness- let the critter go at their own pace, y’all. I wait until they’re done eating, and- ah, Robin hands me her bowl and spoon and the now cooled pot and ladle, which I take and look attentively at the girl- yep. Routine; the great civilizer. Of course we wash our dishes after we eat, that’s what we do.

She hands me her bowl, and the spoon, but takes care not to touch my fingers; Robin puts the kettle on so we can have tea, and I go to wash the dishes. When I return, the girl has relaxed quite a bit in the warmth of the cookstove; the kettle is rattling with bubbling water; and Robin has pulled out a canister of tea, sweetened with stevia leaves. It’s really for the girl’s sake, not ours- there are very few children indeed who aren’t soothed by sweet tastes.

I hand back our bowls- mugs, really- and Robin pours hot water into each mug, drops a sachet of tea into the pot. Steep, steep, steep, steep. Pours the now warm water into a drainage channel- it’s why we set up the cookstove over here, after all- and carefully ladled the hot tea into the hot mugs. We each get a mug- and-

“Be careful; it’s very hot.”

“...okay.” says the girl.

Now that I’ve heard her voice for the second time, I can say with certainty- it’s a fairly soft, raspy voice, and… well, best let her drink her tea. No sense borrowing trouble- she could have been screaming trying to get out of the cage she was in, you don’t know.

Breathe, Mab.

She almost trusts us now. Not with anything big, mind- but that vague, unassuming trust you have waiting at the bus stop, that the other people there are just trying to catch a bus too, and you’re not that interesting, really. Or maybe the kind of trust you have for the first group project members you get- you trust them to do their share of the work. They haven’t betrayed you yet.

We drink our tea; we relax in the heat of the campstove. Finally, it’s time to discuss the particulars; there’s a method, to these things.

“First things first- are you cold, or hurting anywhere? Robin, Miss?”

“I’m quite well, Mab, thank you.”

“...I’m alright, yeah. A little cold still, maybe? Um-”

“Ah. I had wondered- just a moment.”
I get up again, and grab my blanket from my camp pouch; and then I carefully approach the girl, and, after shaking it out a bit, wrap it around her. And then I walk back to my spot, and sit again. I drink some more of my tea.

“Better?”

“Mm.”

“Right. Well, I’m Mab-”

“I’m Robin-”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“Um. Bea- B. Just B. Ch-charmed, I’m sure.”

“Hmhmhm. Well; as I’m sure you’ve noticed, we’re all in a bit of a death trap.”

“Yeah. It’s a maze, too; I’ve been lost in this place for at least half a day, probably more.”

“…” Robin says, watching quietly.

“How’d you get here, anyway?”

“I- I go to Night School at the Gyojo- the Gyojin Dojo? It’s near the Fisherman Meeting Hall, um- all of my sisters do, even though we’re not as good as Adelai- Ah! Ah, uh, a-anyway, uh, my seniors from Day School don’t like me or any of my sisters because we’re- um- we’re from Goblin Town.”

“Red, or Black?”

“…red.”

“Oh. Assholes.”

“-!?! Y-yeah, um. They really are. A-anyway, um; I’ve been trying to make friends with them, because I don’t want to fight my schoolmates, and… I guess they really do hate me.”

“…B, what happened?”

“…They said if I brought back a, a treasure from the Empty Tombs in Ryugu Morte, I could be friends with them. So, um. I tried? But the only things here are death traps and wall art, and neither of those fit in a pocket.”

“I see. Did you have a time limit, or any other kind of win condition for this… task, of yours?”

“Um. They said I had until their next class, which is… the day after tomorrow, I think. A-and I still haven’t found anything. I’m not really sure I want to, honestly…”

“Hm. Well; would you like some help getting out of here?”

“Oh god, yes, please.”

“Alright. Robin, any luck scouting?”
“I’ve checked behind each door; it appears that the nearest possible exit is through door number seven, on the third tier. I saw an empty stone… basket-like shape, and a small archway, and beyond it, a rolling field full of small hillocks. I think that’s our best bet.”

“Hm. What do you think, B?”

“...I guess that should be okay? Um- hang on, what color was the field? If it’s yellow, it’s a wheat field and that should be fine…”

“No, it was green- and full of little hills, as I said.”

“Oh. That means it’s on the Mer side of the island; outside of the bubble-cave, everything is underwater. I can breathe water fine, I have gills- but...”

“That’s not a problem.” “We’ll be fine.”

“...Okay…?”

I smile. I stretch.

“Well. We’ve got time for naps, if you want- or we can just keep going. Robin, B?”

“Mmm- I’d like to get out of here, frankly.”

“I’d like to not be here, yeah.”

“Alrighty then- let’s pack up, and head out.”

Robin and I break camp; I pack away my camp cookery, Robin lets cool and stows her camp stove, and B helpfully folds up the blanket I wrapped around her. She even smacks the dust off of it, the little wonder.

It’s a quick climb up a ladder, and then a swipe of the talisman to open the door; we’re let out into a stable area, I think- there’s horse tack still in working order with a bit of oil, and horse blankets only just starting to go moth eaten.

Beyond the arch, there are indeed small hills; something about them is making me uneasy, but damned if I know what. Ah, and fresh sunlight- feels good, even through the bubble and the water. It’s fascinatingly beautiful, down here-

“Oh- as I recall, each member of the Royal Family had their tomb started a bit before birth, and finished maybe half a month after death. For the ones that live long enough, each tomb is decorated according to their own personal taste.”

“Ah. That would explain why the Romantic Rococo three galleries back abruptly shifted into Art Deco, and then Revival Sandian, here.”
“Is that what this is?”

“Yes, I can tell because of all the peacock feathers.”

“Ah. Well- I’m going to take a look at some of this horse stuff, I think these bridles are still good-”

“-I do want to write down some quick notes-”

“-and then we’ll go on.”

B looks at us both, then shrugs, and crouches by the arch. I examine the bridles- I was quite right, they are still good, just a bit dusty; them magic runes sure do come in handy. Robin finishes her note-taking right about when I’ve got the bridles stored into my purse pouch. I found a bunch of spurs, too, and stuck those in as well- never know when a good pair of spurs is waiting under all that grime, and I have a feeling about them. I know those shapes, I’ve seen them before- later, Mab. Later.

“I’ll go first, then you, B, then Robin. Ready?”

“Um!”

“-Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Here goes.”

I pull up my rebreather half-mask, and step out through the rubbery membrane of the bubble, and into the surprisingly warm water. My instinct is to freeze, but the water is moving- it’s like there’s a soft breeze, and then I muscle my instincts down and keep going. I stop but not still- I’m gently twitching and wiggling my wings- and I look around carefully. It’s a low valley full of little green hills, and over in the far distance I see what looks like the fence made of living coral. It seems higher off the ground over there too; maybe if we get closer, we’ll be able to see more of where we are?

I turn around and make a beckoning motion; B soon flicks out, her tentative steps transforming into graceful swimming motions. She comes to a soft float near me, and expectantly looks behind- Robin, in her mask, shudders when the water covers her over, and then trudges down the hill towards us.

I smile at her, and she smiles back.

‘We need to go that way- there’s a fence, and it’s on higher ground.’

‘Understood; lead the way.’

I wave my hand at B, gesture her to stay with us, and then start walking- marching- towards the coral fence, Robin right behind me. B races around with a bit of youthful abandon, but eventually lazily swims beside us. Eventually, we come to a path going in more or less the right direction- and seeing no reason not to, I begin following it. Robin trudges on behind me; and B darts between us, a quicksilver of red and blue fluttering through the water.
We walk, and we walk; through steadily rising hillocks, until they’re- not hills, wrong shape, what are these? It’s got my spine bristling something fierce, which is a bad sign; and B’s sticking between Robin and me, she’s not playing like before. The light is fading too; and I hadn’t realized it, but I can barely hear anything other than the water around us.

Gnnk- oh, it’s just B. She’s scared. And she’s holding my hand.

Hm.

I hold her hand back, and glance down at her- the expression on her face is pale, but determined. I look back at Robin, who shrugs, and I carefully tug B up in front of me. Then, I pull her to my chest, and wrap my arms around her, so I’m holding her like the child she is. She all but burrows into me, and tucks her face into my neck.

She’s really scared- something is wrong.

We’re almost to the fence; just gotta go up these stairs- and there’s a balcony, so- here we are. I rub a hand between the sharp points of B’s shoulders, and gaze out over what we just walked through. Shit.

I know why she was scared now.

Robin, when she looks, stands straight up in shock.

We were walking through a barrow-downs; and with the way B reacted, and the distinctive lack of fish, or any other kind of animal… these aren’t the nice kind of barrow down, where quiet dead take their rest ‘neath stone and plants, where children might play hiding and seeking and chasing games in the warmth of the sun, and dare each other to visit at night- these are haunted by wights, at the very least. As the light pours away, like thick syrup flowing away from wispy ink, pale blue and green lights start appearing in little nubbins, little spirit-sparks flaring into flickering, winsome shapes- and then, with a rattling crash, a battle commences.

We bury the dead; or rather, we perform funeral rites on the ground they have fallen, so things like this don’t happen.

Willow Wisps dance from mound to mound, their pale light flaring across ghastly figures in armor made of what must be rope and leather. Some are simply skeletal, dressed in what they must have died in; and some are more flaring shape than man, rotten bones and patchworked flesh flaring with strange light.

There are spots that look empty, no more interesting than silt shimmering in the water; and then the silt collapses on itself into a form that is ever so slightly out of focus. The jumping willow wisps catch on these dusty figures, and set them to flaring with unlife- now a pile of dust, now a man, and armed, and armored, his hair made of strange blue light and eyes blazing and his mouth opened wide in his dying scream, a spear as long as three men piercing through his chest but he draws his sword and charges into the approaching line anyway-

Robin taps my arm, and points to where a thin curl of smoke rises from the other side of the hill. I nod, and follow her away from the ghostly battlefield; I leave them to their murky waters, those two armies dueling in frantic, jerking motion, like pictures of a puppet show that someone meant to take in series but only got five of the required eight frames- jerk, and the battalion sweeps left, jerk, and
the battalion is routed by artillery-

And then I’m over the side of the hill, and the battle is beyond my sight. B is still shaking in my arms, and I pull her closer so she feels- she wraps her ropey arms around my chest and shivers. Her little chest jerks and huffs and- oh, oh no, oh she’s crying- shhh, shh, it’s alright. I’m here, it’s alright-

The house behind the hill is a narrow little house, curled around itself like it’s got something worth protecting within. It’s covered in slippery algae, long vines of kelp and dancing bits of seaweed, a little like hair. Two enormous legs, like the legs of a frog, bracket the house, it’s webbed goose-feet gently digging into the silty layer of muck the house rests in. A fence of bones- whale ribs, if I’m seeing right- surrounds the house, with a gate made of two spars locked together with friction and barred with a chunk of spiny coral.

I look at Robin; she looks at me, and shrugs.

We look back at the odd little house; a light, yellow and inviting after the ghostly willow wisp flames, eyes us from the little house’s windows. Robin starts walking again, after another moment of looking; as I get closer, I notice little things, here and there. Tiny little crabs scuttle under rocks that hold the fence fast; little fish dart in and out of the gaps between the bones. Anemones and little fish-orange and yellow with little black stripes- eye us carefully as we pass through, then pretend they didn’t, really.

I look above us, to notice a black-tip wolvark swimming above us, before deciding we’re not worth the hassle, and swimming on- pointedly away from the ghost battle we’re leaving behind. As we get closer to the house, schools of little fish dart past here and there, in the very last of the day’s light. Their colors are striped and speckled, brilliant and strange in this cold blue world; and then, they pass into the shadows, and vanish. I see- because their colors are not fish-shaped, when they go into the shade, their bodies become moving patches of could-be-anything, certainly not fish. Certainly not.

And then, we’re at the spiny gate of the house; a small knob is installed in one of the gateposts, and there’s a thick line of crushed seashells right in front of the coral. Robin examines everything, and then with little more than a jerk to keep herself moving, she reaches out and pulls the knob. It pulls quite back, then returns- and in the distance, I hear a faint chime.

We wait for quite a while, and then I’m cognizant of being- examined- before there’s a faint gasp, and the coral fence is pulled up and back and away, revealing- well. Well now, that’s quite interesting-

It’s an Eel Mermaid, and I’m not sure what kind other than ‘oceanic’, and a Stingray Merman. They look at us, and at the way I’m holding B, and then they look at each other, and then they bid us follow them- their voices quite clear in the water.

“This way- come in, come in, this is no kind of night for sleeping out of doors-”

We enter; carefully step over and past the threshold, and neither Robin or myself object when the merman puts the spiny coral back. It’s really a fence, after all- on this side, there’s a wooden handle and everything.

The merfolk lead us through their garden, which I’m sure would be more lovely during the day- and then into their mud-room, where they bid Robin leave her pack, and all three of us our boots, up on a
rack well clear of the water.

The merman slips into a haramaki, which he presses a chunk of bubbly coral to. It inflates, and then with a ripple, he’s into the air and flying into the house proper. The mermaid catches the coral he drops to her, pulling on a haramaki and inflating it as well, then pulling on a lovely house dress that reminds me, somehow, of lemons. Before she goes up into the rest of the house, she offers Robin and I the use of her bubbly coral.

I gently rub my hand down B’s back, and gently decline; Robin does as well. With a shrug, the mermaid puts the coral back on a shelf in the mudroom, and goes to join her male companion. I look at Robin, and point to myself, then to her, and then up at the inviting doorway. Robin shakes her head, points to herself, then to me, looks pointedly at B, and then points at the doorway.

I get it; I nod.

She nods back, and goes to the wall. There’s a ladder, built into the stone of the house- it’s really more a boulder that someone built a house around, or a lava vent someone took advantage of- and then Robin climbs, and vanishes into the warm doorway. I look around the room- but no, nothing important. B isn’t shaking so hard now, but she hasn’t let go of me at all.

I keep my arm around her and hold onto her- ah, that’s Robin’s hand, and she’s giving me a thumbs up. Okay, up I go.

I walk to the ladder, and climb up with one hand around B at all times; until, finally, I breach the water, and sit on the lip of the room. I pull my rebreather down, and breath in surprisingly warm air; not all that dry, but not bad. Woo.

Made it. Feels like there’s a draft somewhere in this room, but I can’t say for sure where- which is a bit odd, usually I can…

I climb the rest of the way into the room, my bare feet dripping and then drying on a cotton rag rug. B is still clinging with all her might to my chest, and I can hear her little whimpers now too, oh sweetheart- I notice Robin talking to our hosts, but- there, the fireplace, and right near it is a wingback chair, which is empty, and there’s a throw-blanket made of- doesn’t matter, it’s soft to the touch and dry enough to warm. I sit in the chair, and wrap us both in the blanket, and gently rock B, back and forth. I stroke her wet blue hair, and tuck her head under my chin, and when all of that only seems to make her crying more… not frantic, not desperate, but deeper, like she’s crying not just because of what we just saw, but for more than that-

Oh sweetheart.

I’ve held small people before while they cried; this is somehow the worst of them all, because this is a child in my arms and I’m a grown woman, and I can’t fix it. B can’t tell me what’s wrong, and I can’t fix it. I can feel- sadness, relief, longing, sharp envy- no, sweetheart. This is for you.

Eventually, B is left in a miserable hiccupy state, tears and snot still leaking from her eyes and her heavy little head still pillowed on my chest. Her ear is almost flat against my sternum- I suppose she can hear my heartbeat like that, which hasn’t changed at all since we got out of the tombs. I tuck my feet underneath me, and cuddle her closer, which makes her start crying again.

Ach, she’s so downhearted and overwhelmed- the only thing I can do for her that’s more than this is send her to sleep.
So… I wrap her more firmly in the blanket and my arms, and tuck her more securely into me, and then… I take a deep breath, and then… I **sing**. Well, first I hum, so it’s not a surprise- and slowly, slowly enough I can only really hope I’m reaching her- but no, she’s calming down.

*If I could begin to be- half of what you think of me,*

*I could do about anything, I could even learn how to love.*

Her breathing steadies, and her face which had gone blotchy with anguish slowly evens out. She starts leaning her full weight into me, body relaxing in increments; first her feet, then her legs, then her hips and her torso. Her arms and shoulders take a long moment to ease, but when they do- I glance down, and see her eyes fluttering open and shut. Open, shut, open, shut, open-

*I always thought I might be bad, now I'm sure that it's true-*

'*cause I think you're so good, and I'm nothing like you.*

*Look at you go, I just adore you, I wish that I knew-*

*What makes you think I'm so special.*

I hum some more, and her eyes flutter shut. Her breathing eases and deepens, hiccups fading to nothing and breath becoming the hot stickiness of a small child peacefully asleep. I settle in, and hold her, and nevermind how bad my back’s going to hurt tomorrow. That’s for tomorrow’s Mab to deal with; right now, a small child in pain needs help, and I am here and can give it.

*If I could begin to do*

*Something that does right by you,*

*I would do about anything,*

*I would even learn how to love.*

One more verse ought to do it; then, she’ll be asleep enough I can put her on a couch or a bed. Right now, she’s in that black space, right above sleep- you can still hear things from outside of yourself, in that place, but you don’t know them for what they are. Sleep, B. Sleep, and if perchance you Dream, they shall be peaceful and quick forgotten in the light of the sun.

*When I see the way you look- shaken by how long it took-*

*I could do about anything, I could even learn how to love- like you.*
Love, like you.

I’d love me like you...

And then she’s asleep- the deep, dreamless sleep in which wounds heal, and children grow, and things that seemed so awful before are made small and weak. You can face quite a lot, if you’ve got a good sleep under your skin.

I carefully adjust myself under B, and stand again- I look over at the… oh, um. There there? The merfolk are crying, and Robin has a hand pressed to her mouth and is wiping away tears, but she’s smiling too- was my singing really that good?

Oh, there’s a trundle bed- I think?

“that’s a trundle bed, right?”

“-” nods the merman, his face wet with tears and his smile almost- soppy.

“…i’ll put a plate by for her, in case she wakes up hungry.” says the mermaid, sniffling through her small smile.

Robin comes over, still smiling but softer, now. She pulls the trundle bed out, and pulls back the counterpane, and helps me lay B down on the reasonably soft bedding. I tuck the counterpane over her, and press a kiss to her forehead, and she gives not much more than a gentle sigh and snuggles into the bed. It’s clean and warm and still and quiet, just what she needs.

The exhaustion from using a spell like that hits right about then- urgh, and of course, even needing to use a spell at all… deep breaths.

“-ah. i had forgotten.”

“-rob?”

“untie that, it’s a curtain- yeah, perfect, let me just- there. she can still see us, but it’s a little quieter and dimmer over here, no?”

“Mm.”

“And I meant to say- I’d forgotten that you can’t feel the effects your spells have on other people. You can barely feel the effects it might be having on your target, and that’s only if you focus.”

“Oh. Yeah- yeah, it’s always been like that. Why, was- was the song good, or something?”

“...It reminded me of the very best things about my mother, Mab. I remembered her warmth, and the way she smiled; the smell of her, and the cadence of her voice.”
“...And I suppose you two had much the same happen?”

“Oh yes.” sighs the merman. I hadn’t realized he’s wearing pants- with weird square pockets on them, odd.

“Mm. I remembered what my mother’s laughter was like, and how she’d hug me every day before she left for work- god, haven’t thought of that in years. Missus Fairy, your magic is very powerful; I’ve felt no other like it.” said the mermaid, carefully doling out a seaweed salad, some salt-brined fish with herbs sticking to their silvery-grey skins, and a small handful of whole clams and whelks-oh, sweetmeats, I got it- onto a plate which she covers with another and wraps in a towel.

“I remembered my mother, and how she told me not to let that drifter in the house, but of course I was fifteen and knew ever’thing, and did it anyway,” rasps the ghost.

I freeze- that explains the draft I couldn’t place- turn, and stare at the Hag; and she sighs, gloomily, her fairly see-through countenance somehow more homely and gentle than any Hag I’ve ever seen. Oh, she’s a- Lamprey Fishwoman, I think, it’s hard to tell what with half of her body reduced to murk and nothing.

“You’re a Queen of Fairies, I can tell by your wings. Hallo, and well met, young one; I am Sidre, and those two lovebirds are Gilly and Faldorean. I keep telling them to have children of their own, but they won’t-” glooms Sidre the Ghost.

“Aunt Sid, you know how you get- I don’t want to give you any... any bad ideas.” says Gilly, her fingers gone white over the covered plate. Ah. One of those; I get it.

“Chairete, Elder One; I thank you and yours for their hospitality. Pray- could you tell me, of this drifter, and what he stole from you?”

“I’ll trade you Fair, Queenie- one story begets another. How’s that?”

“Fair’s Fair; let’s have us a cuppa tea, and a few stories to trade. Who knows? It may be that your story has a happy ending after all...” I say softly.

“Neh, Keimi- d’you know where Jinbe is? He helped me break outta prison once, and I’d like to see him again...”

“Ah, no, sorry Luffy-chin; Jinbe left the island with the Freebird Pirates after quittin’ the post of Shichibukai. A lot has changed since then, but- then again, not much has changed at all.”

“BOSS KEI, BOSS KEI-”
“A royal gondola is approaching!”

“They want to throw the Straw Hats a party.”

“Maybe they want to arrest them.”

“We should help them hide, d’you think?”

“Fuckin-” Keimi snarls, before her face smooths out and a sharp flare of calculation darts across like fish in a pond. Then, with a sharp whistle, every mermaid in the cafe suddenly has their full attention on her.

I’m sure, at any other time, I’d be very excited about all the soft mermaid skin rubbing against me, the smell of the mermaid carrying me in my limp state- but. Mab. Mab, where are you?

I’d know if she was dead- but normally, the part of my shadow that intertwines with hers points in one direction or another, and by that pointing I have a heading for where my wife is. It’s reassuring, knowing that no matter what happens, my wife can find me and I can find her. Except I can’t.

Chopper broke me out of Joyditch; my belly’s full of hot rose-petal tea and anxiety. I let out a deep sigh, and let the mermaid hold me. I really do hope that Mab’s okay. I can’t go into the spiral like I was before, not with all that tea and the melancholy love song rattling around my head, but I just- hang on.

I’m being held by a very familiar mermaid- a Little Tunny mermaid, with freckles on her cheeks and glasses and MAB-!

“Hi, Sanji. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Mab!” I sigh with wild joy, and then- fucking-

“Sanji, you’ve had sex with me like this-”

“That was just some heavy petting, fuck- thank you, let me just-”

“...You carry the nitrate stick around in your jacket now?”

“Well. You know how I get around mermaids, Mab, I didn’t want to- wait a second, why are you a mermaid?”

“Funny story-”

“Oh no-”

I brace myself for Mab’s idea of a funny story. There’s usually nothing amusing about them. Out in the rest of the Cafe, Luffy, Chopper, Nurse G, and- a pair of girls?- talk to the sons of House Neptune. Their names are… Fukaboshi, Ryuboshi, and Manboshi, but hell if I can remember which is which-

“What do you mean you defeated a ghost army and rode here on the back of a horse? Mab!”
“Well when you say it like that it sounds silly-”

“MAB!” shouts my crewmates, before diving on her and right, she did get hit in the head-

“I’m fine, really, I just got a little displaced in time again- just a few hours this time, nothing to worry about-”

“WE WERE WORRIED ANYWAY!” wails Chopper, who is very attached to my wife.

“Neh, what’s all this about a ghost army, Mab?”

“Well. So, what had happened was- wait wait wait, are we under arrest or not?”

“Nah, they just want us to come up to the castle- remember that shark we saved from Surume?”

“Uh. Maybe?”

“It was the princess’ shark, actually, so- we’re being invited to a feast.”

“Oh, neat.”

“Right?!?”

“Explain about this ghost army though, I want to hear about this-” says Usopp.

“Well-”

A proper story’s supposed to start at the beginning, but it ain’t so simple with this one. Suppose you ought to know the where, and the when- a witch’s house on the legs of a sea-frog, in a little yard fenced with whale’s bones; at night, when all stories such as this tend to happen.

It was just after sunset, when our tale begins.

Suppose I ought to say- a witch and a hag and a fairy are all alike, inasmuch as such things are, by simple virtue of the fact that all three can be bargained with, for favors of a mystical nature. While she might not say so aloud, Robin is as much a witch as Nami is; but while Nami calls the Weather, Robin speaks with the Dead. I am, of course, the Queen of Shadows, an ancient Royal title of the Fairies, first, and then the wider Fae. As for the hag… well.

Now, concerning the child- her story is her story, and I will not tell it for her; however, I will say that the matter of her accompanying Robin and myself was possibly inevitable, or perhaps a stroke of pure dumb luck. I can’t say for sure- I can say, however, that she is a brave girl, with good manners. In the course of Robin and I’s escape from the Ryugu Tombs, we rescued the girl B; and, journeying farther, it was B who alerted me to the danger of lingering in the Haunted Barrow-downs. And finally, it was for B’s sake that the rest of the events of last night came to pass; as, if not for her, I would have had no reason to become involved at all. Think of me whatever you like- but I am not so compassionate as all that, not without reason.
The challenge, as it was, was fairly simple; convince the ghostly madame of the house to part with the story of her remaining grudge against the living on this earth, and in return give her stories of our own, that she might find some kind of solace in them, and, eventually, depart. Failing that, it would be nice if the young couple of the house had some peace from the old haint.

After a short, stifling dinner of seaweed salad and slivered salted sardines, we adjourned to the seating 'round the fireplace and after-dinner tea with whelks and cherrystone clams- ash roasted, of course.

Robin, being the least invested in the whole of the exchange, opened the tale-telling with this.

“There is an ancient legend about two Dragon brothers; the Dragon of the North Wind, and the Dragon of the South Wind. Together, they upheld balance and harmony in the heavens, as Lords.

“But, the two brothers argued over who could better rule their land. Their quarrel turned to rage, and their violent struggle darkened the once clear skies. Until, at last, the Dragon of the North Wind was struck down by his brother, the Dragon of the South Wind. The North Wind fell to the earth, and shattered the land, scattering men, women, children, family, and friend alike, into unceasing chaos.

“The Dragon of the South Wind had triumphed, but as time passed he realized his solitude. The sweetness of victory turned to ash; and the once beautiful lands he had shared with his brother were ruined now, their people scattered forever. For years after that black day, the bereft Dragon’s grief threw the World into discord, and he knew only bitterness and sorrow.

“One day, a stranger called up to the dragon and asked ‘O Dragon-lord, why are you so distraught?’

“The Dragon told him, ‘Seeking power, I killed my brother. But, without him, I am lost.’

“The stranger replied, ‘You have inflicted wounds upon yourself- but now, you must heal. Walk the earth on two feet, as I do; find value in humility. Then, you will find peace.’

The Dragon knelt upon the ground. For the first time in ages, he was able to clearly see the World around him, and he became a man once more. The stranger revealed himself as the South Wind’s former brother. Reunited at last, the two set out to rebuild what they had once destroyed.

“The Elder Brother, the Dragon of the North Wind, was called Mer; the Younger Brother, the Dragon of the South Wind, was called Gyo. And from then to now, all who call themselves Merfolk or Gyojin can trace their lines back to those two brothers, who once were dragons.

“Of course, that’s the children’s story- the real story is much less interesting. Just two princes, fighting over what could have been shared- and the battle over the hill outside is the last gasp of that ancient grudge. I find it fairly interesting that, of all the battles, it’s that one that remains- because, if you look closely, you won’t see horses in it. Horses, and those who ride them, are just a touch too smart to stick around in a battle that won’t end.” said Robin.

“Where, then, Miss Witch, did the horses and their riders go?” said the Ghost of Sidre the Lamprey Mermaid.

“- over hill and under dell, to the forest where coral fish dwell; on the cliff overlooking war’s ancient
strife, there you will find the horses, live. ” I said, before sneezing.

“Crickhollow Sandbar? That’s half an hour to the west, right Gilly?” said Faldo, before yelping as the Ghost scowled at him.

Before Faldo could dig himself deeper into the depths of the Ghost’s ire, I began my story.

“All over the pavement of the temple spread the exaggerated cross-hatching of the old pews’ oak, a Goblin’s market of intersecting lines such as children made with cards in the old days when kings and knaves had fat legs bulging above their serviceable feet, and queens had skirts to their gowns and were not cut across their royal middles by mirrors reflecting only the bedizened torso of them and the charge -heart, stave, spade, diamond, tear, clover, moon, coin- in the right-hand top corner of that which framed them.

“The pews had qualities: tall fat hassocks, red cushions, a comparative seclusion, and, in the case of the affluent, red curtains drawn at sermon-time. The child, wearied by the spectacle of a plump divine, in black gown and Goldenville beads, thumping the pulpit-cushions in the madness of incomprehensible oratory, surrendered her ears to the noise of intonations which, in her own treble, would have earned the reprimand, ’Naughty temper.’

“Her eyes, however, were, through some oversight of the gods of this universe, still her own.

“They found their own pasture: not, to be sure, the argent and sable of gown and bands, still less the gules of flushed denunciatory gills. There is fair pasture in an old church which, when Northman work was broken down, men loved and built again as from the heart, with pillars and arches, which, to their rude time, symbolized all that the heart desires to materialize, in symbolic stone. The fretted tombs where the effigies of warrior and priest lay life-like in dead marble, the fretted canopies that brooded above their rest. Tall pillars like the trunks of the pine woods that smelled so sweet, the marvel of the timbered roof- turned upside down it would be like a ship.

“And what could be easier than to turn it upside down?

“Imagination shrank bashfully from the pulpit already tightly tenanted, but the triforium was plainly and beautifully empty; there one could walk, squeezing happily through the deep thin arches and treading carefully by the unguarded narrow ledge.

“Only- if one played too long in the roof aunts nudged, and urgent whispers insisted that one must not look about like that in temple. When this moment came it came always as a crisis foreseen, half dreaded, half longed-for.

“After that the child kept her eyes lowered, and looked only at the faded red hassocks from which the straw bulged, and in brief, guarded, intimate moments, at the other child. The other child was kneeling, always, whether the congregation knelt or stood or sat. Its hands were clasped. Its face was raised, but its back bowed under a weight- the weight of the font, for the other child was of marble and knelt always in the church, Sunsdays and weekdays. There had been once three marble figures holding up the shallow basin, but two had crumbled or been broken away, and now it seemed that the whole weight of the superimposed marble rested on those slender shoulders.

“The child who was not marble was sorry for the other. They must be very tired.

“The child who was not marble- her name was Una- that child of weary eyes and bored brain, pitied
the marble one while she envied them.

‘I suppose they don't really feel, if they're stone,' she said. 'That's what they mean by the stony-hearted tyrant. But if they do feel- How jolly it would be if they could come out and sit in my pew, or if I could creep under the font beside them. If they would move a little there would be just enough room for me.'

I took a sip of my tea, and smiled. This is a children’s story too, after all- but we were none of us children, at that table. And everyone knows the story of how the Morrigan took up her duty with the Ravens and the Crows- but this is the children’s story, to make it all seem more… inevitable. It wasn’t, of course- but yet, it was.

“The first time that Una ever saw the marble child move was on the hottest Sunday in the year. The walk across the fields had been a breathless penance; the ground burned the soles of Una’s feet as red-hot ploughshares the feet of saints. The corn was cut, then, and stood in stiff yellow stooks, and the shadows were very black.

“The sky was light, except in the west beyond the pine trees, where blue-black clouds were piled. 'Like war-witches' feather-beds,' said Aunt Harrietta, shaking out the folds of her lace shawl. 'Not before the child, dear,' whispered Aunt Emmeline.

“Una heard her, of course. It was always like that: as soon as anyone spoke about anything interesting, Aunt Emmeline intervened. Una walked along very melancholy in her starched frills.

“The dust had whitened her strapped shoes, and there was a wrinkle in one of her white socks. 'Pull it up, Unahame, pull it up,' said Aunt Jessie; and shielded from the world by the vast silk-veiled crinolines of three full-sized aunts, she pulled it up.

“Crinolines, for those that don’t know- yes, you, Luffy, and you, Usopp- look like this.”

“Oh.”

“Huh.”

“-wait, is that where ‘belle’ comes from?”

“That’s where it became a joking term, sure, Sanji. I mean- this is what it would be like if you were next to someone in a crinoline.”

“Oh!”

“...You could hide a full grown man under there.”

“Yes, you could. -not bloody likely, Sanji.”

“I didn’t say anything!”
“You didn’t need to.”

“Mab, Mab- what happened to Unahame?!?”

“Ah, Chopper- do forgive me, I shall resume my story.”

“On the way to temple, and indeed, in all walks abroad, you held the hand of an aunt; the circumferent crinolines made the holding of an arm's-length, that whole business, very tiring. Una was always glad when, on the porch, the hand was dropped.

“It was just as the porch was reached that the first lonely roll of thunder broke over the hills. 'I knew it,' said Aunt Jessie, in triumph; 'but you would wear your blue linen.' There was no more thunder till after the second lesson, which was hardly ever as interesting as the first, Una thought. The marble child looked more tired than usual, and Una lost herself in a dream-game where both of them got out from prison and played hide-and-seek among the tombstones. Then the thunder cracked deafeningly right over the temple.

“Una forgot to stand up, and even the clergyman waited till it died away. It was a most exciting service, well worth coming to temple for, and afterwards people crowded in the wide porch and wondered whether it would clear, and wished they had brought their umbrellas. Some went back and sat in their pews till the servants should have had time to go home and return with umbrellas and cloaks. The more impetuous made clumsy rushes between the showers, bonnets bent, skirts held well up. Many a Sunday dress was ruined that day, many a bonnet fell from best to second-best.

“And it was when Aunt Jessie whispered to her to sit still and be a good girl and learn a hymn, that she looked to the marble child with, 'Isn't it a shame?' in her heart and her eyes, and the marble child looked back, 'Never mind, it will soon be over,' and held out its marble hands.

“Una saw them come toward her, reaching well beyond the rim of the basin under which they had always, till now, stayed. 'Oh!' said Una, quite out loud; and, dropping the hymn-book, held out her hands, or began to hold them out. For, before she had done more than sketch the gesture, she remembered that marble does not move and that one must not be silly. All the same, marble had moved.

“Also, Una had spoken aloud in temple. Unspeakable disgrace! She was taken home in conscious ignominy, treading in all the puddles to distract her mind from her condition. She was put to bed early, as a punishment, instead of sitting up and learning her catechism under the charge of one of the maids while the aunts went to evening church. This, while it was terrible to Una, was in the nature of a reprieve to the housemaid, who found means to modify her own consequent loneliness.

“Far away, whispers and laughs from the back or kitchen windows assured Una that the front or polite side of the house was unguarded. She got up, simulated the appearance of the completely dressed, and went down the quiet, servant’s stairs, through the hidden servant’s door and through rosewood furnished drawing-room, rose-scented and still as a deathbed, and so out through the French windows to the lawn, where already the beginnings of dew lay softly.
“Her going out had no definite aim. It was simply an act of rebellion such as, secure from observation, the timid may achieve; a demonstration akin to putting the tongue out behind people's backs. Having got herself out on the lawn, she made haste to hide in the shrubbery, disheartened by a baffling consciousness of the futility of safe revenges. What is the tongue put out behind the back of the enemy without the applause of some admirer?

“The red rays of the setting sun made splendor in the dripping shrubbery. 'I wish I hadn't gone at all,' said Una. But it seemed silly to go back now, just to go out and to go back in again, having done nothing much at all. So she went farther into the shrubbery and got out at the other side where the shrubbery slopes down into the wood, and it was nearly dark there- so nearly that the child felt more alone than ever. And then quite suddenly she was not alone.

“Hands parted the hazels and a face she knew looked out from between them. She knew the face, and yet the child she saw was not any of the children she knew. 'Well,' said the child with the face she knew; 'I've been watching you. What did you come out for?'

“I was put to bed.'

“Do you not like it?'

“Not when it's for punishment.'

“If you'll go back now,' said the strange child, 'I'll come and play with you after you're asleep.' “You daren't. Suppose the aunts catch you?'

“'They won't,' said the child, shaking its head and laughing. 'I'll race you to the house!'

“Una ran; and she won the race. For, quite simply- the other child was not there at all when she reached the house.

“How odd!' she said. But she was tired and there was thunder again and it was beginning to rain, large spots as big as pennies on the step of the French window. So she went back to bed, too sleepy to worry about the question of where she had seen the child before, and only a little disappointed because her revenge had been so brief and inadequate.

“Then, she fell asleep and dreamed that the marble child had crept out from under the font, and that she and it were playing hide-and-seek among the pews in the gallery at temple. It was a delightful dream and lasted all night, and when she woke she knew that the child she had seen in the wood in yesterday's last light was the marble child from the temple. This did not surprise her as much as it would surprise you: the world where children live is full of amazing and incredible-looking things that turn out to be quite real, no matter if they forget what they have known or not.

“And, if a rag-rabbit could be turned into a real rabbit, why should not a marble child turn into a real child?

“It was all quite plain to Una, but she did not tell anyone: because she had a feeling that it might not be easy to make it plain to them.
“Unahame doesn't look quite the thing,’ said Aunt Emmeline at breakfast. 'A dose of physic, I think, at eleven.'

“Una's morning was blighted.

“-Did you ever have to take a physic? It’s worse than quinine, worse than senna, worse than anything- except, perhaps, castor oil; or, for those of an older set of parents, cod liver oil. But Una had to take it- in raspberry cordial, which she considered, quite rightly, to be a waste of perfectly good raspberry cordial. 'And don't make such faces,’ said Aunt Emmeline, rinsing the spoon at the pantry sink. 'You know it's all for your own good.'

“As if the thought that it is for one's own good ever kept anyone from making faces!

“To be quite fair, the aunts were kind to Una, in their grown-up and crinolined way. But, an aunt, no matter how kind, is not quite the one to play child’s games with, and Una wanted someone to play with.

“Thus, every night in her dreams, she played with the marble child. And, indeed, at temple on Sunday the marble child still held out its hands, farther than before.

“Come along then,’ Una said to it, in that voice with which heart speaks to heart; 'come and sit with me behind the red curtains. Come!’ The marble child did not look at her.

“It’s head seemed to be bent farther forward than ever before. When it came to the second hymn Una had an inspiration. All the rest of the temful, sleepy and suitable, were singing- 'The roseate hues of early dawn, the brightness of the day, the crimson of the sunset sky, how fast they fade away.'

“Una turned her head towards the marble child and softly mouthed- you could hardly call it singing- 'The rosy tews of early dawn, the brightness of the day; Oh won’t you please come out, come out, come out with me and play?’ And she pictured the rapture of that moment when the marble child should respond to this appeal, creep out from under the font, and come and sit beside her on the red cushions beyond the red curtains. The aunts would not see, of course. They never saw the things that mattered.

“No one would see except Una.

“She looked hard at the marble child. 'You must come out,' she said; and again, 'You must come, you must.’

“And the marble child did come.

“It crept out and came to sit by her, holding her hand. It was a cold hand certainly, but it did not feel like marble. And the next thing she knew, an aunt was shaking her and whispering with fierceness tempered by reverence for the sacred edifice- 'Wake up, Unahame! How can you be so naughty?' And the marble child was back in its place under the font again.

“When Una looked back on that summer it seems to have thundered every time she went to temple. But of course this cannot really have been the case. It was certainly a very lowering purple-skied day which saw her stealthily start on the adventure of her little life; the kind of adventure children have, before they grow and forget such things.

“She was weary of aunts- they were kind yet just; they told her so and she believed them. But their justice was exactly like other people's nagging, and their kindness she did not want at all.
“She wanted someone to play with.

“May we walk up to the temple?’ was a request at first received graciously as showing a serious spirit. But its reiteration was considered morbid, and her walks took the more dusty direction of the County Asylum. Her longing for the only child she knew, the marble child, exacerbated by denial, drove her to rebellion.

“She would run away, Una decided. She would live with the marble child in the big temple porch; they would eat berries from the wood near by, just as children did in books, and hide there when people came to temple. So she watched for her opportunity and went quietly out through the French window, skirted the side of the house where all the windows were blank because of the old window-tax, took the narrow strip of lawn at a breathless run, and found safe cover among the rhododendrons.

“The temple-door was locked, of course, but she knew where there was a broken pane in the vestry window, and her eye had marked the lop-sided tombstone underneath it. By climbing upon that and getting a knee in the carved water-spout- she did it, got her hand through, turned the catch of the window, and fell through upon the dusty table of the vestry. The door was thus ajar and she passed into the empty church. It seemed very large and gray now that she had it to herself. Her feet made a loud echoing noise that was disconcerting.

“She had meant to call out, 'Here I am!' but in the face of these echoes she could not. She found the marble child, its head bent more than ever, its hands reaching out quite beyond the edge of the font; and when she was quite close she whispered- 'Here I am- Come and play!'

“But her voice trembled a little. The marble child was so plainly marble; and yet, it had not always been marble. She was not sure. Yet-

“I am sure,' she said. 'You did talk to me in the shrubbery, didn't you?' But the marble child did not move or speak. 'You did come and hold my hand last Sunday,' she said, a little louder. And only the empty echoes answered her. 'Come out,' she said then, almost afraid now of the church's insistent silence. 'I've come to live with you altogether. Come out of your marble, do come out!'

“She reached up to stroke the marble cheek. A sound thrilled her, a loud everyday sound- the big key turning in the lock of the south door. The aunts!

“Now they'll take me back,' said Una; 'you might have come.' But it was not the aunts. It was the old pew-opener, come to scrub the chancel. She came slowly in with pail and brush; the pail slopped a little water on to the floor close to Una as she passed her, not seeing. Then the marble child moved, turned toward Una with speaking lips and eyes that saw.

“You can stay with me forever if you like,' it said, 'but you'll have to see things happen. I have seen things happen.'

“What sort of things?' Una asked.

“Terrible things.'

“What things shall I have to see?'

“Her,- the marble child moved a free arm to point to the old woman on the chancel steps- 'and your
aunt who will be here presently, looking for you. Do you hear the thunder? Presently the lightning will strike the church. It won't hurt us, but it will fall on them.'

"Una remembered in a flash how kind Aunt Emmeline had been when she was ill, how she sat with her and read her stories and put cool cloths on her sweating brow; how Aunt Jessie had given her the chessmen who could while the grim hours of Winter away, and helped her make sense of the accursed fractions, and would let her have some of the uncooked cake batter if she was quiet about it; and Aunt Harrietta had taught her how to stitch rosettes of ribbon and all the summer flowers in silken thread for tea-cloths, and made her lovely new socks and mittens and scarves every winter, and had let her keep one of the kittens the cat had, for her very own. The warmth of their gazes; the firmness of their grasps, which had, on more than one occasion, kept her from walking out into the cart-filled streets, surely towards disaster; even the handkerchiefs, which, while slightly rough, were always ready to wrap a scrape or dry a tearstained cheek.

"I must go and tell them,' she said.

"If you go, you'll not see me again, not until you are a woman grown and quite beyond childish things,' said the marble child, and put its arms round her neck.

"Can't I come back to you when I've told them?' Una asked, returning the embrace.

"There will be no coming back,' said the marble child.

"But I want you. I love you best of everybody in the world,' Una said.

"I know.'

"I'll stay with you,' said Una.

"The marble child said nothing.

"But if I don't tell them I shall be the same as a murderer,' Una whispered. 'Oh! let me go, and come back to you.'

"I shall not be here.'

"But I must go. I must,' said Una, torn between love and duty.

"Yes.'

"And I shan't have you any more?' the living child urged.

"You'll have me in your heart, for a time,' said the marble child- 'and then, in the passing of Ages, we shall be united again; but you will not love me, nor I you. Not as we do now.' And, having said it’s peace, they- Unahame and the marble child- embraced each other again.

"It was certainly a direct Providence,' Aunt Emmeline used to say in later years to really sympathetic friends- and eventually, quietly shivering children of the house, struck cold with terror in the listless heat of summer- 'that I thought of going up to the temple when I did. Otherwise nothing could have saved dear Unahame. She was terrified, quite crazy with fright, poor child, and she rushed out at me
from behind our pew shouting, "Come away, come away, auntie, come away!" and dragged me out. Mrs. Meadows providentially followed, to see what it was all about, and the next thing was the catastrophe.'

"The church was struck by a thunder bolt, was it not?" the sympathetic friend asks- or the oldest child murmurs, having heard this tale before.

"It was indeed- a deafening crash, my dear- and then the church slowly crumbled before our eyes. The south wall broke like a slice of cake when you break it across- and the noise and the dust! Mrs. Meadows never had her hearing again, poor thing, and her mind was a little affected too. I became unconscious, and Unahame- well, it was altogether too much for the child. She lay between life and death for weeks. Shock to the system, the physician said. She had been rather run down before... We had to get a little cousin to come and live with us afterwards, young Elphame. The physicians said that she required young society, and Elphe was the only cousin who quite fit the bill...'"

"...It must indeed have been a shock,' says the sympathetic friend- or the eldest child- who knows there is more to come.

"Her intellect was quite changed, my dear,' Aunt Emmeline resumes; 'On regaining consciousness she demanded the marble child! Cried and raved, my dear, always about the marble child. It appeared she had entertained fancies about one of the little Golems that supported the old font, not the present font, my dear. We presented that as a token of gratitude to Providence for our escape. Of course we checked her fancifulness as well as we could, but it lasted quite a long time.'

"What became of the little marble golem?' the friend inquires as in friendship bound; and the child, in morbid anticipation.

"Crushed to powder and broken pieces, dear, in the awful wreck of the temple. Not a trace of it could be found intact. And poor Mrs. Meadows! So dreadful, those delusions.'

"What form did her delusions take?' the friend, anxious to be done with the old story, hastily asks; and the child questions with mock innocence, ready to hear the terrible secret.

"Well, she always declared that two children ran out to warn me and that one of them was very unusual looking. 'It wasn't no flesh and blood, ma'am,' she used to say; 'it was a little Golem taking care of Memsell Unhame. It had hold of her hand. And I say it was her garden friend, and its face was as bright as a lily in the sun.'

"The friend- and, in later years, wary children and grandchildren and great grandchildren- glance at the curio cabinet, and (Great) Aunt Emmeline Morgan rises and unlocks it.

"Una must have been behaving in a very naughty way in the temple- but the physician said she was not quite herself probably, for when they got her home and undressed her they found this in her hand.' Then the sympathizing friend- or wary half-believing child- polishes her glasses and looks, not for the first time, at the relic from the drawer of the cabinet. It is a white finger, it's inner parts all exposed, the silver chrome of the joints open to the air as they never were in life.

"Eventually, the girl Unahame grew up, and forgot her love of the marble child; and, when they met again, Unahame was a woman grown: Morrigan was her name, then, and she was set to wed Udoroth. And her marble child was a child no more- but Chrona, the White; and so the tale for children is ended.”
There was a long, quiet pause, as the room chewed over what I had revealed.

Finally, the Ghost sighed, and spoke. Her story was this:

“I suppose my story is simple enough- there was a man I’d have married, if he’d bothered to return. I gave him my good brass chalice, as sign of my favor- and he gave me Gilly’s mother, as sign of his. But, that damn war, over the hill, broke out- and, things being as they are, he did not return.

“He was never a good man, but he was my man, and honorable enough to set a favor on; but he did not return. And his… friends,” she spat, her pallid and wispy form darkening to something monstrous- “Those foolish men loved him so, but spared not a thought to the ones he left behind!” she snarled- and then her ancient rage left her, and she withered again, going from blackened monster to washed out ghost in a sigh several hundred years in the making.

“Well. All that’s done and over with- and I suppose, now, the only regret I do have is giving away that chalice at all. It weren’t mine to give, not really- and I’d have it back in the possession of this house, and the last of my blood, before I do pass on. I gave my love to my child, but- it was not enough… no, not enough at all…” said the Ghost.

“And you are sure that he’s dead, aye?” I said.

“Oh, aye- his friends drank themselves to death ere his passing in a single night; and they hung him, besides. He’s dead as earth, Queenie.” said the Ghost.

“And when he left, so long ago, what direction and manner was his leaving?” I said.

“Tcha- ‘t’were long ago, aye, I barely remember his face… but I remember his horse, an ugly thing; like all the worst bits of a handful of poorly nags rolled together into one singularly unfortunate beast; fast, though, I’ll give it that- I never did see a faster horse, not then or now… and in those days, he was a messenger for one of th’armies, and heading west, he said. Said the war would be over soon enough, on his return- and did he? No!” hissed the Ghost.

I sighed, and then turned to face Robin.

“Robin- you’re the only witch here. I need you to stay and keep watch over B while she sleeps; what I need to do isn’t the kind of adventure she should come on.”

“…”

“Do you really want to walk through the out of doors on this night, Rob?”

“-Ah. No, I’ll- I’ll stay with the girl.”

I smiled at Robin, who inclined her head with little more than a flicking of her fingers to give sign that she had noticed what I had. And then I turned and regarded the Ghost.
It is not often that I need to do it, but sometimes- not often, but sometimes- I need to be more than just myself. There are moments when, in the course of my life, I have needed to be all that I am, whether I wear a crown or not.

I had allowed the Ghost the minor liberty of calling me by a diminutive title- ‘Queenie’- but in that moment, as I assumed the full Mantle of the Queen of Shadows, I could see her regret it. And when I spoke, it was the Queen of Shadows who made the oath; and her subject, who agreed to the terms.

“Stories are like swords. Even if one borrows a sword, even if one does not forge it from ore and fire and their own sweat and tears, it is still the strength of one’s own body and the veracity of one’s own skill that makes proper- or improper- use of it.

“A sword, even dulled with age, can still draw blood. It can still strike down that which attacks; it can still defend that which is held dear.

“It is true that the sword made by one’s own hand is powerful; it is true, that the sword of one’s own hands is Known down to it’s very essences. One is intimate with its heft and its reach. Indeed, a sword made with one’s own two hands is merely another part of one’s arm.

“That very familiarity breeds hesitation; for it is also true that a reckless swing will notch even the strongest of blades. ‘Is it strong enough, one thinks. Will it withstand this? I worked so hard to make it-’

“A blade one snatches up because one needs a weapon in hand is not prey to such fears. One uses that blade to beat against their foes until the sword either saves- or shatters.

“But whether one makes that sword or takes it up from someone who fell on the field, the battles fought with it are always won by the wielder, not the blade.

“And so, I say this; I, the Queen of All Shadows, shall take the three blades drawn forth on this night, and venture out into the darkness. I shall find three things, which are needed- I shall find the treasure of this Shade, who has lingered this many years. I shall find the last to witness this treasure, wherever they may lurk. And I shall return, with the treasure I seek- and more, if circumstances are favorable. Upon my return, this Shade, who has lingered far longer than necessary, will leave this place- and this World- forever.” I said.

“Yes ma’am!” said the Ghost, shivering.

I smiled, and glanced at the two merfolk who had been very quiet-

“-Sorry, what?” I said.

“Rrrgh- I am very interested in where this story’s going to go next, but the New Fishman Pirates are looking for us and th’ Ryugu Princes just told us they’d help us out so we- nnnrgh-”
“Ah. It’s alright, Captain- ROBIN, WE GOTTA GO NOW-”

“-coming-!”

“-girls, time to saddle up-”

“-yes Mab-” “Um!”

My crewmates- Luffy, Usopp, Chopper, and Sanji- pause, as does the new nurse? Dunno her name- she does share a startling resemblance… and age… with B and C, so that might be it- ah well, I’ll figure it out eventually.

“Mab… you still have the horses, don’t you.” sighed Sanji, grinning at me through half-lidded eyes.

“Well. They did like the sound of pirate adventures, and having horses to take care of would make Mark a very happy man- and they’re quite pretty, except for Spare Parts, and she’s not all that bad, really-”

“…This I’ve gotta see.” smirked Sanji.

The rest of my crewmates blink.

I smile at my husband, and, when Robin comes out of the back room of the Cafe, it’s with several clean and dry saddle blankets in hand. C quickly waddles behind her, carrying a stack of sheep skins, while B is nearly swallowed in horse tack- bridles, mainly, though I do see a bit of rope there that normally wouldn’t be. Finally, Mark and Bryony come walking out, each of them carrying two saddles apiece, and I follow them with the fifth.

Sanji looks at me- ah, yes-

“B’s legs are too short for the stirrups, and C’s too hard on the reins. And they’re both so small, and Steady’s very gentle-”

“-Okay, yeah, I still have to see this- a box, really?”

“They are short, Sanji.” I say, before letting my husband stand on his own two feet, and calmly striding out of the Cafe to where my Leading Doll has led our picket of horses to stand. They are, in order, Spare Parts, Steady Walker, Turnip, Pumpkin, and Whiskers.

The girls take the empty box from me, and, after passing out and retrieving the appropriate parcels of gear, begin saddling Steady with saddle blanket, fleece, and saddle. B, who is the shorter of the two, takes the box over to Steady’s head and puts all the various bridle and rein bits on, which she’s a knack for; and C, who has long legs and arms like Taffy does (or possibly a long jumper) attends the saddle blanket, fleece-as-pad, and saddle with stirrups. And then, without much discussion between the two girls, they’re on the horse.

In that moment, it suddenly becomes very clear how very gentle Steady is, and how small those girls are. Small girls on a great big cold-blood mare- I say cold-blood because of the sheer size of Steady.
She looks, in conformation and coloration, to be a cross between a Fjord and one of the native hippocampi—probably a warmblood, given her actual speed and stamina; but her size is around fourteen hands, I’d say. And just the most lovely gills, and the way she moves—saa, all of these horses move beautifully, nevermind their conformation—and as I said, they’re actually quite beautiful, really, I just… I always forget how weird looking Ryugu horses are when compared to other breeds…

“Neh, Mab?”

“Yes Captain?”

“I got lotsa questions—firstly, what kind of horses are these? They’re huge!”

“Hmhm, yeah—these are cold-bloods, maybe with a little warmblood? Draught horses, Lu.”

“Uh…?”

“Plough-horses, cart-horses, trawlers—”

“Oh! So, these are what trawling horses look like? For the shrimps, I mean.”

“Mm- yeah, these are the kind of horses I’d expect doing that job. Of all the ones here… hmm… *Pumpkin* would be best for that, I think.”

“Eh?”

“She’s got the thickest fat layer, so she’d withstand the cold longest—”

“Ah- the one Mark’s saddling, right?”

“Yep.”

“’kay. Why’re their ears so curvy?”

“They’ve got a lot of Ryugu blood in ‘em, and that’s one of the few things that stick through generation after generation— the only thing that sticks around longer is coat color, and disposition.”

“Mm. So, how do you tell a good horse from a bad one?”

“Hm… Depends on what you mean. If you want a horse that’ll do a job well, the first thing I look at is it’s ears, and where th’horse’s attention’s at. A smart, curious horse—if they’re wild, I mean—is of more use to me than one with a pretty coat. Mm- I want one that’s balanced, squared up in the joints, with an even neck, back, and hip, legs of an equal length… condition and muscle don’t matter as much as good bones do.”

“Oh, like in a ship.”

“Ah- the shape of the hull and arrangement of the sails does more to choose how fast the ship can go than anything else; and on a horse, it’s the overall structural soundness that chooses how well it can move. Look at our horses again, Luffy.”

“…They’re all symmetrical, and… huh, even Spare Parts; she’s got that squared up shape you were talking about—”
"-exactly. On a horse, about the last thing I want is for it to be super muscular- that’s actually not a
good thing, too many muscles just get in the way."

"Cool- shishishi, those kids are so small on that horse, it’s really cute-"

"Hmhmhm, yes, they are."

"What else do you look for- oh wow, Mark’s pretty on a horse."

"Yeah, he is. -Ah, I look at the head, they gotta have a pretty face- clean, small ears, broad between
the eyes. Right there, where the jaw curves back into th’throat- that’s called the throat latch, and I
want that to be nice and slender so they can flex real good and work with their head at the right
angle."

"Huh- I see what you mean, it’s that pipe-lookin’ bit at the base of the head in the front-"

"Mm. Then, I check the shoulders; the shoulders and back are what really determine the actual
quality of a horse, more than anything else. You can have a horse with an ugly face- but a horse with
a bad back… well, there’s one other thing I look for, but I’ll get to that shortly-"

"-Bryony’s not riding? No, she is, she’s just- wow, she’s like a sack of potatoes!"

"Hmhmhmhmhm. Yeah, Bry prefers to move under her own power or on a boat, and she’s actually
very heavy- and she’s hardly ever seen a horse. That said, she can take directions real good, and
when I told her the best thing to do was sit on Whiskers like a sack of potatoes, well…"

"Shishishishishishishishis! -Neh, you were saying about backs?"

"Right- the slope, or angle, uh- pitch? Of a horse’s shoulder is what determines the length of their
necks and backs, and also the way their front legs are set onto the body. Those things together help
you figure out what a horse’s stride and balance are like, without makin’ ‘em walk. The back of a
horse is the hub, and a short strong back is absolutely essential for a horse to be sound. Distinct
withers- which is what Robin’s grabbing onto while she tries to mount up-"

"-it’s taking her a few tries, on… which one is that-"

"She’s not good at mounting, no, but Turnip’s really patient so it works out. Ah, distinct withers of a
medium height relative to the horse is what helps keep the saddles in place. From there, I work back
and down- I like a croup without too much angle, as steep croups can mean weak hips and incorrect
set- er, angulation- to the horse’s hocks. -The front legs have knees that bend forwards, and the back
legs have knees that bend back, and they’re called hocks on the back legs, Luffy. We’ve got books
about this, I know we do- Mark would also probably really like telling you more about this, I just
know the very basics."

"...Yeah. Are there… any good horse stories?"

"Oh, yeah- while we go to the palace, I’ll tell you one if you want?"

"Yes!

"Hmhmhmhm, alright. I like to see long, strong hips with adequate muscle and low hocks; those
things usually mean a horse that can stop well and will work naturally off their hind ends. S’better.
Uh- oh, yeah, and if the shoulders and hips are equal in angulation, it means the horse’ll be able to
collect themselves well and move real good."
“Huh, Mark’s off again- he’s… checking the legs?”

“Mm- Pumpkin’s hooves catch stones like the lint-trap in the dryer catches lint. Ah, yes, and I want clean, well defined, straight legs that aren’t too finely boned. Small bones in a horse is more likely to cause issues in soundness. Right- that’s everyone on a horse except me- Sanji, it’s okay to laugh, the girls know they look silly-”

“-pffffft-”

I shake my head, and cluck to Spare Parts. She waits for Turnip and Robin to move out of the way, and then takes off into a beautiful canter. Party might be an ugly horse at a standstill, but she moves like the most beautiful of show-mares; and then she’s cantering past me, and I’ve vaulted into the Skuan-style cavalry saddle, and we’re good to go. Spear- check; group- check. Our line is me, then Robin, then Bryony, then the girls, then Mark. Robin’s actually the slowest rider, so she’d be first- she was first, when we were trail-riding, but- in the city, it’s better she have an example to follow.

All my Dolls go back in my pockets; I connect my snail phone to Luffy’s; and then, after everyone’s in the carriage, we’re off again.

“So, Captain- I assume you want to hear that horse story now?”

“Yeah! Wait, first- what’s the last thing you look for in a horse? and... when we meet back up with everyone, will you start from the beginning of how you got the horses?”

“Ah, sure? If you want, sure. -I look for attitude, Luffy; a pretty horse with a nasty disposition ain’t worth the bullet to kill it. I can work with an ugly horse; I can work with a stupid horse; but a mean horse is a danger to themselves and others. ...I actually have two horse stories- do you want to hear the one about the cart horse, or the race horse?”

“Um… well. The race horse story is probably more fun… but we have cart horses, don’t we.”

“Yep.”

“Tell me the story of the cart horse, Mab.”

“Alright, Luffy. Mm- Bryony, please make sure everyone can hear us-”

“Yes, Mab-”

“Mm. The first place that I can well remember was a large pleasant meadow with a pond of clear water in it. Some shady trees leaned over it, and rushes and water-lilies grew at the deep end. Over the hedge on one side we looked into a plowed field, and on the other we looked over a gate at our master's house, which stood by the roadside; at the top of the meadow was a grove of fir trees, and at the bottom a running brook overhung by a steep bank... ”

And as we ride on, I tell them of Black Beauty, the cart horse.

I also take in Fishman Island- or rather, the proper name of this actual country is Ryugu Mergyo; we’re in Mermaid Cove, a smaller city on the Coral side of the country. Hmm- there’s a distinctive,
deeply frenzied energy to every city in Ryugu Merygo- but as soon as you step outside the city limits, you’re back in time a good thousand, ten thousand years. It’s like the very best and the very worst parts of Skua, washed through with an underwater flair.

The carriage actually isn’t big enough for everyone to sit together comfortably- thus, we ride. Ah well; not like it’ll hurt any of us riding, to ride a ways more.

Aha, so that’s what it is- most of Mermaid Cove is built in the new style, but with the old red stones from the Gyoli quarries; and Gaudí, the most famous architect to ever come from Mermaid Cove, rubbed his influential hands all over the bones of this kingdom. Most every official building- post offices, which are new, wat temples, which are not, schools, subsidised apartments- everything, nearly, is in that curving style of his. It makes the edifices of these buildings look almost- alive, like coral that just decided to grow apartments in it’s inner workings.

Oh, wow, that’s a pretty apartment building.

We get out of city limits, and the pace increases; rolling fields and kelp forests whirl past us, below us, above us- as we follow a path of streaming water. My legs are soaked up to my thighs, and Party is all but dancing with the joy of moving. We pass small towns, their children and youths cheering the passage of the Royal Carriage; we pass farmers and their horses, working their fields.

We pass a herd of wild sea cows, delicately grazing on kelp; and a small pod of sea turtles, nesting in floating seaweeds.

Finally, we come around a bend and I can see, in the far, far distance, a great wheel- a water wheel, cool- and on my other side, a stretch of dense, crackling coral, red and spiny. That’s Goblin Town, on the other side, I guarantee it.

Finally, we begin approaching the Capital, Royal city of Accorde Plaza- called Gyoncorde, by the locals.

We slow, again, and ride through the city center; in the summer months, Gyoncorde swelters under a cerulean blue dome. From sun-kissed and begonia blossomed streets the people stream to the southwest, heading for the sugar-sand beaches this city is famed for. The surfing is good, too, a bit more to the south along the coast; big swells hit deep sandbars, and the waves curl like candle-curls on a pretty girl’s head. The classic dish of this city- and country, with few exceptions- is garlicked ameijoas- clams- washed down with a brain-freeze cold glass of beer.

Against the ever present backdrop of the Line, this dainty sun-blessed city lives a nearly charmed life; you could almost forget it’s peace relies on the reputation and strength of a dangerous pirate.

There are seven very steep hill on which this city lies; the seventh, and tallest, has the road up to the Palatial Bubble. Century-old Adam Wood barges are dragged past with heavy horsepower; iron funiculars lurch and rumble up steep and nearly sheer cliff-sides.

Down one street, I can see the edge of the Baixa district, where herbalists, haberdashers, tailors, and acupuncturists rub shoulders with snake oil sellers, cart drovers, cordwainers, and young Karate-ka toughs looking for a fight to win.

We ride on through increasingly ornate streets, curving lanes giving way to almost dazzling splendor.

Finally, we begin to meander up the highest hill to the old Fae Falada neighbourhood, where sunset-amber walls and sandy lanes orbit the Royal Gyomer Gate, past which the Palace of the Ryugu
Gyomer Jinnu hovers, an omnipresent shining white sword ever suspended above the terracotta rooftops of the city below. Just before the waterfront that leads to the gate, there is a lavish wat, and a series of dazzling water-facing statues, each a monumental form of the Goddess- in the Sea style, so she’s a mermaid.

The Goddess Crone - an adult mermaid, I can tell because of her hair and her legs- and she gazes out at sea, her face melancholy yet wise, sad and happy, too. It’s said, in certain circles of the Skuan arts, that this particular statue of the Goddess Crone was more than a little bit based off of Ariel, the Ryugu King Triton’s Seventh, and youngest, daughter. That particular Ariel is also said to be the ancient Queen of the Fae- yes, that Ariel. We don’t know for sure- it was several calendar systems ago, and the written records read more like Eddas than actual historical accounts. But.

It does mean, more often than not, that I- and other Skuan Royals- can claim familial ties with the Ryugu Royalty, if we need or want to. They usually don’t protest, as the precedent of this claiming is usually in response to threats they aren’t equipped to deal with, but we- the Fae, I mean- are. The Kingdoms of the Fae- or rather, House Morgan- and the kingdom of the Ryugu- which has always been led, one way or another, by House Neptune- have always been allies, if not always friends.

The Goddess Child - little more than a babe in arms, opening a shell and face pointed towards the sea. This is the one I know the very least about; I do know that there is a strange cult of sorts that professes every Seer of the World is descended- or somehow beholden- to this child incarnation of the Goddess-who-is-three. I don’t know about that- I do know that being a Seer is, and isn’t, something one grows out of… maybe that has something to do with it?

The Goddess Mother - a mermaid queen, with a babe at her side and a stern countenance to behold. As we pass, I see a pregnant mermaid stroke the shining bronze side of the Goddess’s tail, before turning and gracefully swimming away- leaving behind an offering, one of many. Each statue of the Goddess has a bronze patch that shines so, and piles of offerings- ah, Ages of mermaids, and fishwomen too, I reckon, have come here to ask for blessings.

I might myself, if we have time.

And then, without much more than a clatter of hooves and a rattling of chains, we’re over the bridge, and through the gate, and riding higher and higher, towards the Palace.

I haven’t stopped my story once- not even when my friends began to weep, to hear it.

“... Willie always speaks to me when he can, and treats me as his special friend. My ladies have promised that I shall never be sold, and so I have nothing to fear; and here my story ends. My troubles are all over, and I am at home; and often before I am quite awake, I fancy I am still in the orchard at Birtwick, standing with my old friends under the apple-trees. An’ the wheel bends, an’ the story ends- for here it does end, as far as I can tell it. ”

“...”

“Luffy-?”

“-gnnk!”

“Aw, Luffy- we’re almost there, then you can have a good cry and kiss, alright?”
Luffy doesn’t quite say anything coherently, but the snail on my saddle nods while tears run down it’s little face.

“M-mab?”

“Yes, Chopper?”

“Do- do people still treat horses like that?”

“Mm- not in Skua, and not in Ryugu Mergyo, as far as I know- but that’s not everywhere.”

“...Mab.”

“Yes, Robin?”

“Would you mind terribly reciting that story for dictation?”

“Uh- no, why?”

“I think it’d be good published, really.”

“Mm- alright, I guess.”

Conversation tapers off, as we ride into the coach yard of the palace. I lead our horses to the proper place, and dismount after Spare Parts has come to a full and complete stop, then give her a grateful pat and rub. She’s a good girl, and alright with people around her- so I feel no fear in leaving her to the palace livery to take care of, although-

“Ah, excuse me- Stable Master, until about a day past, these horses were wild. Be careful of them.”

“Yes, Your Majesty; I’ll have my older grooms look after them.”

“Very good. Mister Butler, for how long is this feast to last?”

“Ah, Your Majesty- the Log for Fishman Island takes two weeks to set; the feast is scheduled for a mere seven days, as is proper when hosting royalty such as yourself and your good husband.”

“I do thank you- if it would not be an imposition, could a farrier be sent for? Our horses have not been shod, and I would not want to take them further on our journey without such particulars being seen to by a professional...”

“Of course, Ma’am.”

“Good, good- and I assume that we are to be lodged here, or...?”

“The Fae Lodgings are available for your use at any time, ma’am; we’ll have your crewmates who are here already escorted thence...?”

“Yes, I suppose that is for the best. Ah, pray- my husband and I are quite vigorous in our marriage; is
there a suite that might best prevent-?”

“Yes ma’am; we remember the Ravens quite well, here.”

“Ah. My thanks.”

The Butler bows to me, and I incline my head back; I am a full Queen, I don’t bow to anyone other than Queens or Kings, and he’s just a butler. I highly ranked one, certainly- but a servant does not merit a full bow from a queen, at least not for fulfilling their duties.

Point of fact, my husband is still just a prince- although of a higher rank than any other prince, as he’s a prince consort. Unless I’ve gotten that wrong, and he’s technically a king- I suppose I should talk to him about it. Hm. -And we kneel to each other, but that’s private and I don’t think it really counts. I suppose it might... Yeah, pretty sure he’s a king, then. Huh. Does he know that? I don’t think he knows that. I’ll tell him- later.

Uuugh. Tired. Hm, it’s almost sunset- sure does come early in the winter months, but eesh, it’s barely half-six. Let’s see now- girls, B, C, oh her name’s... G- huh. They’re sisters. Okay- meaning we’re still missing A, D, E, and F. I do love a full set- and I’d know if one of them was dead. No, really- I’d Know.

Anyway- I’ve unsaddled Spare Parts, and all the other horses have been unsaddled as well- the stable hands take our tack, and the horses, and lead them off to- a lovely pasture, nice. Ah, there’s Zoro, Nami, Taffy, and Gurry- and a small frog-girl? No- half-fishwoman, okay-

“EEEEHHHHHHFFFF!” shouts B, before charging forwards.

“BEEEEEEEEEE-!” screams the frog girl, so that’s F- and now they’re hugging. C and G also ran forwards, and there is now a group hug of small humans who were very worried about each other. They are, in fact, still worried about each other- no A, D, or E after all, that’s three out of seven.

Now, let me see if I remember the correct codes of address... Sanji was declared dead, but that doesn’t mean he’s not still His Royal Highness Prince Rasputin Symo Ottar Tristan Vinsmoke Jaji, Prince of the Smoking Vine, Earl of Morgan, Duke of Lyneel, Duke of Flevnce, Duke of Miqueot, Earl of Kapal, Baron of Diamont, Lord of the Fields and Prince and Good Steward of the Sacred Realm. But he’s called Sanji usually...

His older brothers would be... Ichiji is actually His Royal Highness Crown Prince “Anatoly” Vladimir Bacher Vinsmoke Jaji, Prince of the Burning Heath, Earl of Forgshe, Duke of Miqueot, Duke of Ihla Sem Nome, Earl of Chillaga, Baron of Flevnce, Lord of the Forest and Prince and Lord Protector of the Orashki, the Germa, and the Sven. Technically, his first name is Quasimodo, but exactly none of the Fae in position to know that would call him something so cruel, so we gave him the name Anatoly. He wasn’t born disfigured, or anything- he’s just... different.

Then, Niji, who is actually His Royal Highness Prince Dmitry Ioannes Actoris Vinsmoke Jaji, Prince of the Palm Protectorate, Duke of Kuru, Earl of the Outback, Baron of Lyneel, and Lord of the Mountains and Prince and Lord Judgement of the Court of Owls.
His younger brother, Yonji is… oh god, I had to drill on this so many times- His Royal Highness Prince Yury Illya Timofei Vinsmoke Jaji, Prince of the Gimlet Harbor, Duke of Tiny Square, Earl of Battle, Baron of Orange Pie, Lord of the Song and Prince and Lord Conveyor of the Ship.

And, because men come before women in Nort, which is weird as hell because they’re equal but whatever- Reiju, who is Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Vasilisa Oksana Gwennythea Vinsmoke Jaji, Princess of the Golden Harvest, Marchioness of Lvneel, Duchess of Xerfas, Baroness of Goblin Desert, Lady of Flowers and Princess of the Bones. She’s also Yonji’s twin, which is why I always get confused…

Ichiji, Niji, Sanji; Yonji, and Reiju. I mean- if Sanji was okay with it, I’d totally call him my Rasberry, but mostly I call him my love and that’s the end of it.

Unless Sanji says specifically otherwise, he’s to be addressed in mixed company as ‘Germa the Third’. I don’t know how he’ll want to be addressed. Hm. We’re not quite private enough, and I’m still soaked through with salt water, so I can’t- I mean, I can try but… I can’t feel his Shadow connecting to mine, so. Hm.

Oh, yeah- and I am, in the formal style, Mab the Third, by the Grace of Herself that Sits on the Edge of Time, Crown Royal of the Shadows, Defender of the Fae. Unless I say specifically otherwise, or am addressed by my immediate family, I’m to be addressed as ‘Ultima Thule’ in mixed company. The Fae have set kingdoms, but if your lands are shifting beneath your feet, you find ways other than geography to get yourself across.

In the old languages, Ultima Thule was the farthest Trunort you could go before there just wasn’t anything left; and in that far northern place, there is a palace laid in the boughs and trunk and branches of a mighty birch tree. Thuletima is the name of the city- Ultima Thule is the name of the palace.

And I am that palace’s Queen.

Hm… Head Count; Luffy Zoro Nami Usopp Sanji me Chopper Robin Mark Bryony Taffy- No Franky, No Brook- Gurry. Huh.

Where’s Franky and Brook?

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So, here’s the thing- back before I was head of the Franky Family, I was… I’d call myself a scamp, honestly.

These two kids? These are scamps. The tall one’s got a long, black dress over her eight bright red legs, and a puff of hair I’d more commonly associate with a bell. There’s a soft blue-green tint to her skin, and a fairly dazed expression on her face- she did just fall flat on her belly into a room she probably thought was empty, so it’s not that surprising. And her sister, or maybe partner in crime, did just fall on her too…

The other one’s shorter, and is currently trying to shove herself into the junk and- huh. Y’know, if I hadn’t seen her do it, I’d be hard pressed to say if she was really there or not; her legs just changed colors to match the bits of junk on the ground, and her body’s all flopped over like one of the mannequins. Unfortunately for her, the large duffle bag- one per girl, odd- really spoils the illusion.
And then the tall one stands, and kicks her duffle over to the short one, and squares up so quick and steady I’ve squared up myself without realizing it- and as I watch the shorter one cover the duffles with junk and herself, a gang of toughs- not wearing any uniforms I can see, just fancy lookin’ kimono…

Oh fuck, those girls are Akasenko, I’d bet my ass on it.

Which means I know exactly what this is.

Back when I was the headman of my district of Water 7, I had to rebuild and clean up one of the nastier red light districts in the city as one of my first jobs, as voted by my constituents. Here’s the thing- some asshole had decided a good fifty or sixty year’s before my time that the best thing to do with poor people was shove them all into these fucking death-trap apartments that would catch fire if you sneezed at them wrong, and then- of fucking course- they didn’t bother building in any kind of infrastructure.

What the hell kind of community can exist in a place where literally nothing but shitty apartments are? Especially shitty apartments on the wrong side of town, right near the rougher docks and ringed with dive bars and cheap hotels?

I’ll tell you.

They call it the Wall, back in Water 7; that’s the name of my old district. It was built on the wrong side of the last outer wall before you hit the ocean, back in the days when Water 7 was still inside the bounds of Gemini Island. There are eighteen different licensed brothels in Wall district, and thousands of unlicensed brothels. The main difference between a licensed brothel and an unlicensed brothel isn’t just price- it’s cleanliness, and… really, it’s more like staying at a hotel than a whorehouse for the night.

In an unlicensed brothel, walking away with something like the Clap or a missing wallet is the least of your worries- I’ve heard stories, and seen evidence of, people missing organs, straight up murders, and worse. Unlicensed brothels will sell anything they can get away with and call it sex: sex with children, sex with animals… even sex with corpses, if it comes to that.

I’d see Akasenko all the time, on the Wall; scrappy kids, if they’re kids, or bitter by too much life too soon, or angry at the world for being the world and them too small to see it- more than half of the Franky Family ended up being Akasenko who found their way to me before the Madames of the brothels could.

Those two are Akasenko- children who grew up behind red doors. It’s not all bad- Brook’s an Akasenko, and he’s alright; once you muscle past the old-man crazy, I mean. But part of the reason I always hired them… here’s the thing. No one wants to sell their body; not for sex, not for viewing, not for anything. They’ll do it, and pretty it up in a thousand and one different ways- but at the end of the day, people don’t want to be viewed as disposable objects, and when the body is the saleable item, the person it belongs to becomes disposable.

I’ve never, ever met a prostitute who was absolutely overjoyed about their life and their job. Ever.

The reality of life as a prostitute is this- most of them, nearly all of them, in fact: you rent a room, only just big enough to put a mattress in, maybe, a sink, a chair, and a lightbulb or lantern. There’s a clock on the wall the prostitutes watch, keeping track of what you paid for- and in most cases, it’s for access to her body for a certain amount of time. They charge extra for pretending to enjoy what’s
happening; and they charge extra for pretending to be the client’s friend.

Prostitutes, male or female, are there to make money. Rents come due at the beginning or end of the month; and if you can’t pay, you’re out. And if you’re already renting a room, and you’ve got kids…

Anyway.

I used to see this a lot too, before I got some help from the monastery nuns for the community; there’s always lingering… animosity? I dunno how to say it, but you’ll always find people who look down on poor people for having the audacity to be poor. Those girls? They’re poor- those are the only clothes they own, those shitty dresses that only share a passing glance at kimono… Maybe a kimono touched those dresses once or something- and whatever they’re doing with those duffles, it’s probably the only job they can get.

The gang of toughs, making trouble for them? Either rivals in the underworld- or, and this is looking more likely, a gang of cocky martial artists who don’t know how to look at the world with compassion yet. What makes me say ‘martial artists’ before ‘rival gang-babies’?

It’s the fact that they’re throwing water-punches at each other.

The girl’s good, I’ll give her that; flexible, mastered the basics of her style, incredibly skilled at controlling the area of attack and defence. But- six on one would try even the best of fighters; quantity has a quality of its own. And, what’s worse- they’re better than her. Their moves are just a touch more polished; their hits are harder; they can shrug off her sporadic hits better, break through her guard easier… I was looking for Den, Old Tom’s little brother, but this…

What kind of man watches idly as six teenage boys beat up a small girl? Not the kind of man I am, that’s what.

How to do this- I know.

I creep around the building, until I’m at the other end of the alley they’re fighting in, and then I walk down it. My shoulders are so broad, I almost can’t pass through standing square. As I go through, the alley widens, until I’m at the pile of junk the little Mimic’s hidden under; I see her eyes roll in terror as I pass, and give her a wink, which makes her blink her fear away and her brows furrow in confusion.

The toughs weren’t idle as I moved into position; Red takes a hit to the jaw, and a knee to the gut, and falls with the kick to her head to save herself a concussion. She rolls with each kick they send at her, laughing- and then I casually step over her, stooping down to catch the foot aimed at her scuffed red leg in a stomp, and haul it and myself up to my full height.

The gang of tough guys freeze.

I’m not a small man- and by what I can feel on my face, I’m not making the kind of face you really want to see in a back alley when you’ve been beating up on a girl. I stare the kids down, making sure to meet each one of their eyes and convey my deep displeasure at the sight of this… dickery.

I let go of the kid’s ankle, and give him a little push as I do- he stumbles backwards into his asshole friends, and all of them are shaking. I crack all the knuckles of my left fist, then again on the right- took ages to figure out how to make that work, what with my hands being mechanical and all, but it’s worth it just for the look on these little shitstain’s faces.
“Leave.” is all I have to say.

They bolt like they cowards they are. What, you think taking on one person with seven of your friends makes you brave? I should hope you win that fight, otherwise not only are you a fucking coward, you’re a weakling, too.

Red’s unconscious; and Mimic’s still not moving. I keep waiting, until I’m absolutely sure they’re gone.

I’m no nurse, like Taffy or Mab, and I’m no doctor, like Chopper- but I’ve been in enough fights, and seen the after of enough fights, to know a thing or two.

I turn, and crouch- feel for Red’s heartbeat and so on. She’s cracked at least one or two ribs, I can tell by the little wince every time she breathes; and her face is going to have a hell of a sunrise on it this time tomorrow. Still, for all that, she put up a good fight; her unconsciousness now, I’d put down to a lack of food and sleep, and being tired before the fight.

She was pretty obviously on the end of her rope, when I saw her fall into the alley- and having her… sister, now that I can see Mimic and her face up close- having her sister land on her didn’t do her no favors.

Mimic creeps out with the duffles, and I can finally get a closer look at them. They’re mail bags, making these- no, they can’t be, Post Office doesn’t accept people under the age of fourteen, they’re too young to be Post Runners. Then again…”

“So. Where’re you two headed?”

“…”

“If you were strong enough to carry both duffles, you would have been. If you were strong enough to fight those shits off, you would have. If you were strong enough to carry your sister, even, you would. But you’re not.”

“…” she says, but her face is red and ashamed.

“Right. So- where are we going?”

“…Post Office in Mermaid Cove. Coral Hills is closer, but they won’t let us through the door.”

“Huh. That’s, what, four hours southwest?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. Gimme the duffles.”

She slides them over, and with a shrug I put them both on my back- they’re not heavy for me, but they’d be very heavy for a pair of underfed, probably underpaid akasenko. I pick up Red, and lay her fluffy head on my shoulder. She’s bony, in my arms; I can feel the bones of her legs and knobs of
her spine; her shoulders are sharp, like daggers. Too thin. Entirely too thin.

My other hand, I hold out to Mimic. She hesitates for a long, painful moment- and then she takes my hand. We walk out into the open street, and she directs me to the bus stop without much trouble.

The bus is one of those old fashioned perambulatory affairs, drawn by a team of four horses- draft horses, I guess. I pay what I see the other people standing ahead of us pay; the exact same price as one of the women with two kids like me did, in fact. And when the ticket inspector makes to overcharge me, I play up my ‘stupid tourist’ image and completely ignore their bigotry.

Nothing a bigot hates more than being ignored outright.

When the ticket inspector tries to make something of it, I take a moment and… I don’t exactly flex my muscles. But- either he thought I was smaller than I am, or really no one’s challenged him for a long time, because I’m big enough to look down on the slimy little fraction of a man, and he was not prepared to be glared at by someone my size.

He makes a sound like ‘mimblewimble’, and scurries back to his seat on the cart; the driver calls out to the horses, and we move on- because the driver and the inspector are on different schedules entirely, really. Driver moves on when it’s his time to move on, with some co-ordination from the other buses in his cohort; the inspector’s just there to make sure everyone pays fair fare.

I sit on the bus with Mimic huddled into my side and Red whimpering in pain- still mercifully unconscious, but hurting all the same; and when Mimic reaches up and pulls the rope to let us off at a much larger bus depot, we all get off the bus to carefully averted eyes from the other riders, and frustrated anger from the inspector. The driver though? He nods to me, and I to him.

Mimic leads us to the next bus-stop, and I hand over my ticket stub, because the way it works is you get your ticket and then you can transfer however many times you want so long as the ticket’s still good. The inspector almost ‘forgets’ to give the ticket back; I hold her wrist until she swallows, then reaches with her free hand behind the little checker kiosk and hands me back my ticket. Mmhm.

I know all the tricks.

Mimic spends the ride huddled against my side again, but lets go of my hand when I tug. I use my free hand to rub at Red’s narrow back, and her whimpers don’t exactly quiet; but her face does smooth out a little. A little care goes a long way.

We stay on this bus for the better part of three hours, before finally Mimic pulls the cord again, and we exit onto a dusty bus stop almost in the middle of nowhere. I hitch the duffles higher on my back, and gently rock Red a little, which seems to help. She’s starting to get noticeably hot, in my arms; and her colorful legs are starting to turn a dull, bloodless pink. Shit, she’s punctured or ripped something important inside of her, I’m almost certain of it.

“There doctors, where we’re going?”

“-the Nurses can handle almost anything, yeah. Why?”

“Hm. Good.”

Mimic looks up at me, then catches sight of her poorly sister and flinches. I look back at her,
understanding- but there’s nothing either of us can do except wait. Finally, when Red’s whimpers have tapered off into a sweaty shivering quiet, the exact opposite of restful, the bus comes. I hand over the ticket, and this time the Inspector catches sight of the girl in my arms and forgets to be a prejudiced asshole. He almost remembers when he sees Mimic at my side, but catches sight of Red again when she lets out a pained whimper, and swallows, and hands me back my ticket without having done anything other than his job.

I sit on the bench, and wrap an arm around Mimic’s bony shoulder. When she presses her face into my side and shakes, I tighten my hold on her a bit. I know what the sign for a Post Office looks like, and I can read the road signs in this part of the kingdom; when we get to the right place, I let go of Mimic and pull the rope.

The bus stops; we get off; and I put Mimic up on my other shoulder so she can keep a better eye on her sister while I walk to the Post Office. A Post Office can be anything; a brothel, a warehouse, a bar, a salon- in this case, it’s a cafe. Mermaids dart in and out, and- although Mimic squeaks and presses herself close to me when we pass the group of fishman pirates, they don’t take a second look at me. There are perks to having a terrible bounty poster, I guess- I’m hard to recognize as myself.

When I get into the Cafe, I’m almost immediately swarmed by a pair of eel mermen and a group of guppy sized mermaids. The mermaids chatter amongst themselves for a bit, then direct me to lay Red down in the Sanitary Room in the back; while Mimic talks to the eel-men, thanking them for helping her and her sister, and- ah, these are their mailbags, gotcha.

I shrug off the duffles, and shrug off any thanks, and carry Red back to the San with the guppy nurses. I lay her down in a soft bed, and take one of two seats next to her- back out of the way, but observing. There’s a third on the other side, but- no, this one’s good.

It’s as I feared. She’s punctured something inside herself, and she’s bleeding out. What’s worse is, her blood type is super rare, S- ; the only other person I’ve ever met to have that particular blood type is Sanji, and Sanji isn’t here. The nurses can only give her basic saline, pain meds, blood-thinner, and S- blood; but without a real doctor who can perform surgery, her odds of making it are looking grim. What’s more, they don’t have enough S- blood for her to last through the night with.

“I need to use your phone.” I say.

“-Sorry, what?” one of the nurses say.

“I need to use your phone- my crew has a person with the same blood type, and a doctor who can definitely perform the surgery she needs, but I need to call them and tell them where I am so they can-”

“One sec- YELLOW, BRING THE PHONE IN HERE PLEASE!! NOW, THANK YOU?!?” shouts the guppy nurse, and goddamn if a voice three times my size doesn’t come out of a body smaller than my pinky finger.

The yellow eel-man brings me a phone. I remember the number to Bryony’s switchboard; hopefully, Mab’s near Sanji and Chopper, otherwise this would never work.
The last time I saw anyone take such a beating, I was in the army.

Captain Yorki had caught one of our squaddies trying to desert, and in those days we had suffered a series of reversals so fierce… well, the new ‘normal’ punishment for desertion was execution.

Captain was a kind man, though- and, rather than kill a boy, and he was a boy, sixteen at most- he decided to give him a trial by gauntlet. Each man of the squad was given his choice of weapon- mine was the cane- and then the boy had to run past each of us in a line and take the hits we doled out.

Captain decided that the boy had to make it through to the end- and if he screamed, or fell, before getting to the last man, he’d have to run again.

God in heaven, but that boy had a pair of lungs on him. He’d get to old- old- mustache, fairly kind man, but he could peel flesh from bone with a whip and snap bones with a crop, and that day he had both- and the whip would snap out and touch the boy and another red rend in his flesh would open. And then he would fall, moaning, and another bubble of shame would gurgle through my stomach, and he’d rise again, and I’d have to hit him again with my cane because I was first in line and I hardly had the heart to hurt him by the end-

Little Blue, down in the courtyard of the Gyojo, is getting a beating like that- but rather than her having done some wrong to pay penance for, the hard-headed fool just won’t stay down. She’s got a mastery of the basics, that’s undeniable; and her battle instinct is superb. But superior quality means nothing in the face of such overwhelming force. It doesn’t seem to matter how hard she hits, or where, or with what kind of blow- she’s just not strong enough to break her opponent’s momentum.

What’s worse is, I can see the divide in the Gyojo; on the one side, every time she gets up again, again, again- the older, grizzled members of the Gyojo look at her with deep pride and dismay, because she’s going to kill herself. The youngest members of the Gyojo, who are obviously her juniors, look at her with awe, hero-worship, and fear- because she’s going to kill herself, or get herself killed, and she won’t give up, not for anything.

I can only liken it to when Zoro drove off Kuma, when we left Floria; he would not fall, no matter what Kuma struck him with, and it was only when his opponent quit the field having come to respect his resolve that he allowed himself to fall. I was on watch; and he made me swear to keep silent. Bryony wasn’t conscious at the time- and to my eternal shame, I did not wake Chopper to look after Zoro. I could barely make myself… move.

Seeing all that blood, around my new friend- I am ashamed to say, it took me back to when I lost my old crew, in the battle that stranded us inside the Florian Triangle. I was lost inside my head for hours and hours, until sunlight, and Mark’s scream of horror, brought me back.

On the other side of the Gyojo, every time she falls, the New Blood- the next generation- they smirk, they sneer, they laugh at her. She falls, and her blood splatters across the ground, and they smile.

And every time she stands again, face bloodied, eyes nearly swollen shut, hair falling from it’s tight, ribbon wrapped braids, knuckles scraped bloody and legs quivering with exhaustion- every time, they jeer at her and cheer their fighter on, and in their eyes burns a fury because- ah. They can see what I can see, and what the elders can see as well.

Her body cannot handle the strain of fighting; but her spirit refuses to break.
“Give up, little red-fish- you can’t hope to beat Jinnou!”

“You’ll never win!”

“Haha, look at her, she can barely stand-”

“Weakling-!”

“Whore-!”

These and worse things are what rain down on her; but she does not bow, and she does not bend, and she will not break. She stands again, and again, and again- even when her left eye swells shut, she stands. Even as blood from a cut near her hairline makes her close her right eye, she stands. Even when she can barely make a fist with either hand, she stands. Sweat pours off her body in rivulets, then pools beneath her feet- and she stands.

Her face points unerringly at her opponent, Jinnou I suppose. Eventually, when she simply cannot form a fist anymore, she stops using fists at all and opens her hands. When she does this, I can see a sudden awe race across the elders faces- and the cackling and jeering of the new-blood crowd only grows wilder. She sets her stance again; her open palms beckon.

Jinnou races forwards to strike- and I must say, it’s only because I’m watching so closely that I see it at all. Little Blue dodges a strike that would have struck her down before, and her feet twist, and then- one kick, two kick and stomp, three punch, four knee to the gut, five joint lock and Jinnou’s on the ground, six she follows him down and seven he’s whining and bucking but she will not be removed, and then on the seventh beat he starts screaming and the girl will not stop until he taps out, which is when she takes her hand away, stands, and walks backwards to her starting place, on the side of the elders. She sways, as she stands, and then she draws upon yet another well of inner strength.

The swelling of her left eye has receded; and one of her juniors has just run up with a small basket of medical supplies and a water bottle. They wash her face, and seal her cut, and help her rinse out her mouth of the blood- and Jinnou has only just now stopped blubbery.

The Blue Girl drinks a small blue potion, and takes a long draw of water; swallows it all down and her bruises and cuts and stiffness fades away, but her tiredness doesn’t.

And yet- and yet- from beneath her furrowed brows a pair of cerise eyes dares the New Bloods to send out another for her to defeat.

Over the next four hours, she thrashes no less than one hundred and twenty different people, each over the span of about two minutes- because, I realize, that first fight I watched was only two minutes long. At the end, when each member of the New Bloods are wheezing through broken ribs, moaning on the ground, and oozing blood out of cuts in their skin, the Blue is standing tall, her strawberry blond hair in a raggamuffin mop on her head and the old masters of the Gyojo gazing at her with pride.

It’s when she’s finally still, and standing tall with weary pride, that I realize the difference between her and the ones she has defeated. She’s wearing what must be a yukata cut short- no. No, that’s a whore’s yukata; you can tell because of how short it’s cut. It’s threadbare; patched and stitched and clean enough, but obviously made of thin fabric, far too thin for this time of year. Her pants are the patched and oversized pants of a construction worker, and god only knows where she got them, or
how she managed to find a pair that match her yukata. I can see through her yukata because it is truly
that thin, underneath a layer of sarashi wrapping- which may be the only reason she didn't break a
rib, she took so many hits to the chest- bits of twine, which must be keeping her pants held up. I
think, now, having seen her move, the only thing keeping her even close to warm in this weather is
her obi- not the belt she’s exchanging for a black one, that she uses as an obijime, I’m certain of it-
no, the only thing keeping her warm is a **chuyo obi**. Beautiful, extensively embroidered- it’s
probably the only thing worth any kind of money she’s wearing, not that she’d get a fair price for it.

Holy shit, I know the real difference- Blue’s wearing a kimono! It’s a cheap kimono, in a plain, even
ugly, style; but her dojo mates are wearing judogi. She’s one of the only people in this room that
practices in kimono- more than that, the kimono she’s wearing is her normal, everyday clothing. No
socks, just a pair of geta- plain, unlacquered, with black thongs to keep them on her feet. And- an
**obidome**, carved coral and cute as hell, and- she is just a young woman, a child, really. Her **obiage**
is bright pink, and the knot she uses is a… ah. Kid doesn’t fuck around- that’s a **kai no kuchi musubi**,
I’m certain of it. And I’d wager she ties her money pouch into her musubi; if anyone tries to rob her,
it’ll look like something else entirely, thus justifying her more than likely violent reaction.

Why do I know so much about kimono specifically? Well. Penny Jones was a kimono enthusiast,
and I loved her so- and, to have something to talk to her about, because god I wanted to talk to her, I
learned more than I should have about Kimono. She would smile so brightly when I made an
informed comment about what she was wearing, I could forget for a moment that she was the baker’s
daughter and I was the whore’s son, and we’d never in a lifetime be together- such is the power of a
beautiful woman over a man.

Finally, her black belt- she’s a shodan, now, and her head sensei is so proud- and so sad. Oh no; I
remember this too.

I learned to fight with a sword, not in the army, but in my home village, from the blacksmith’s
husband. He was a swordsman of some renown in his youth, but fell in love with our blacksmith
after taking an injury in battle against the World’s Greatest Swordsman of the time- and rather than
chase a Dream he’d lost taste for, he decided to stay, and live, and have a life of his own, beyond the
World of swordfighting. He was old enough to know that he’d never be as good as he was before
that injury- and he decided that rather than die in the pursuit of something that could never exist
again, he’d live for something that could.

In time, he became our village’s headman; and, though he was not a perfect man, he was a good
man. He taught me to the shodan level of his style of swordsmanship, which is when his wife put her
foot down and refused to have me around her house any more. I’ve no proof of who my father is- I
never have. But I have my suspicions; no other man in our village, nor any trader, nor even the
indigent drifters were his height, and eventually mine. No other man had his face, or his hair- except
for me.

I can’t say where it started- but I can say what it is. The ancient Tradition is thus: upon the
completion of the basic mastery of the Art- any art- the student (if they be of foul blood- begat of
whores, traitor’s blood, and so on) is turned out into the World, to seek their fortune and destiny and
further training there.

Blue’s mastered the basics- ah, they’re actually giving her… good god, she’s a sandan, those are
three bars of embroidered gold on her black belt. When her sensei indicates she kneel, she does so
with a pure, magnificent grace; I’ve seen one other person move with such power, and that’s Bryony
at her most joyful.
Her sensei tugs her obi away, and replaces it with… no, reties it, into an ayame musubi, suitable for both her age, and the obi she’s wearing- it’s actually a very beautiful obi, if perhaps a little too vibrant of a print for that particular knot… then again, I am an inveterate old-timer, and I’m a bit of a stick in the mud when it comes to style. Her obidome, I realize now, must be made of coral- which in this area, and for that particular color, means it’s a piece of coral from Goblin Town, probably one she carved herself.

Coral, in this part of the World, is very cheap. Poor people wear it- pearls, too.

And then her sensei- a woman, that makes more sense- the steel haired woman ties Blue’s sandan belt into a koma musubi, after sliding on her obidame and making sure it rests in the middle of her body in the front. And finally, the steel haired woman undoes Blue’s hair; six flat corn-row braids that were somehow wrapped with ribbon, and I see now that Blue’s hair is long, almost as long as a lady’s would be, and strawberry blonde, a scattering of copper hairs were flung through wheat straw yellow. A pair of bobby pins go into her hair, after a quick brushing, and then- the braid. Strawberry blonde and a dark blue ribbon that turns magenta at the ends, in a Dutchy Fishtail and tied at the bottom with another koma musubi.

Blue is a very beautiful girl.

And then, her sensei speaks.

“Firstly, I should like to express my immense pride and gratitude to have had you, Adelaide of Goblin Town, as my student. I thank you, Adelaide, for being the best- and worst- student I have ever had the pleasure, honor, and horror of teaching. Stubborn, willful, proud- disciplined, conscious, indomitable; you remind me exactly of myself, when I was your age. It is said that the greatest of all gifts- and curses- is to be given a child to raise that is exactly like one’s own self. I can say, without hesitation, that you are exactly like me- and yet wholly yourself.

“Being the next generation, new blood with new eyes and new brains to use them; you are also an improvement upon me- and now, alas, we must be parted.

“...There are those in this dojo who think, that since I no longer spar with my students, I must have lost my skills. There are those who think, because I have refused to teach them certain moves of our style of karate, that I do not know them.

“The truth is, as Grand Master of this Dojo, and hanshi of the wider realm of Gyojin Karate, it is my own choice whom to spar with, and whom to tutor. The Newest Generation to attain shodan- those whom you, Adelaide, have defeated here today- have begged me time and time again to teach them the secrets of the Coral Palm Technique, the most advanced form of our style.

“You never did; always, it was ‘am I correct, sensei?’ and ‘did I do it right, sensei?’- and when I finally said ‘Yes, my student, you are correct’, you would not ask for something new. No, you would train and train your correct form, until it became reflexive; you would train until your feet bled, until your bones cracked, until I would find you passed out cold on the tatami and carry you to a spare bed I began to keep, just for you.

“The New Generation, for all their braggadocio, never showed a sliver of your devotion.

“Three days from now, I shall, after eighty years of devotion to the Art, lay down my yoke of Office
as, in the solemn and necessary tradition of our school, the authority of Grand Master of the Gyojin Karate Dojo is vested in my appropriate successor. The Court has already chosen this person, and in three days, they shall be raised up in the proper manner and the School shall continue on. The New Age needs new eyes, and new blood; everything is always changing, growing, becoming more than it ever was. Gyojin Karate is no different; it changes, just as those who use it change.

“Eighty years ago, I was a young girl, much like you, Adelaide; and in that time, it was unheard of for any Lanjin to have even heard of Gyojin Karate, much less learn it. Now? We count among our rokudan a young woman named Koala; a Lanjin. In my mother’s time, women would never learn Gyojin Karate; in my grandmother’s time, Gyojin Karate was a new fad; and in my great-grandmother’s time, Karate was not something a proper Gyojin would ever learn. How quickly we forget the way things were; how quickly we accept what is new.

“How easy, to forget where we have come from, and what we have been.

“This day, upon your leave-taking and farewell, I come to you as your teacher- but also, I hope, as your friend. As such, I shall do my last act as Grand Master of this Dojo, here and now; Adelaide of Goblin Town, I name you my personal successor.”

A gasp rustles through the Dojo. Adelaide the Blue’s eyes widen dramatically, and her jaw drops open in shock. The New Generation are dumbfounded, so shocked by this turn of events that they can hardly move.

The Old Master, who is smiling a smile full of fangs- she’s an anglerfish fishwoman, old and sagging and crumpled and- if I’m reading this right- strong enough to thrash everyone in this room at least twice before dawn tomorrow. At the same time.

The Old Master continues her speech.

“Like every Grand Master before me, I labored long and hard with my decision. It is not merely the one who has most advanced on the path who ought to succeed oneself. You have made three steps this day along the path- but there are many others who are older, and further, than you. Nor is it a matter of status; one’s place at birth is an accident of fate, and has no true bearing on who a person truly is, or what they can become. We define ourselves, every day; and the things that mattered so fiercely to me as a young woman are barely trifles, here and now.

“You, Adelaide, have the spirit of the one who ought succeed me. You have the very bearing and spirit of my own child; and though you are a child of my heart only, I would bequeath to you all that I have left on this earth, that it may serve as some bulwark to you in the storm of uncertainty to come.

“Our Dojo is much like a family, and the wider world of Karate like a nation; and our people expect the hanshi and their court of renshi and kyoshi to find essential agreements on issues of great moment; the wise resolution of which will better shape the future of our Art. My own relations with the Court, which began on a remote and fractious basis when, long ago, a nearly disgraced and discarded Master accepted me into his school, have since seen me through a great many changes, calamities, and wonders. In our final years together, regardless of our personal opinions, all of us, together, have cooperated to serve our people as best we can, and to ensure the future of our Art.

“I do not name you my personal successor, Adelaide, with the expectation of your eventual ascendancy to my place. I do not expect you to go to such lengths. I know, with or without your
presence, the business of our Dojo will continue.

“But business and soul are not equal. I know the New Generation will continue the Dojo, and keep it solvent, and secure; in good standing, and in high spirits. But our Dojo is more than just business; our Art is more than just a hobby.

“I am grateful for the time we have spent together, Adelaide; you are the closest to a grand-daughter I’ve ever had. Thus, upon your departure, I would embrace you as family does, and give to you what you never once asked for- I will give to you the whole of our Karate, and my blessing to use it as you see fit. It is my great shame that I will not be there to see you master it, and I will have no part in polishing your skills. I am too old, and too tired; and, as the younger masters of this Dojo insist, not suitable for instruction in such matters- certainly not after achieving shodan.

“How satisfying for them, then, that you have achieved sandan- with their help, no less- and are now set to receive, if not the reflexive knowledge in your body, the instinctive knowledge in your mind, of the secrets and mysteries of our style. Come here, Adelaide; my sweet granddaughter. “Come.”

And here the Old Master holds out her arms, and Adelaide the Blue goes to her, and embraces her grandmother-teacher for the first, last, and only time. The Old Master presses her forehead to Adelaide’s; I can feel a ripple of Haki centered around the two of them, but I can’t tell what the Old Master is doing. Then, the Haki fades away, and the Old Master and Adelaide the Blue embrace again, before they release each other, and Adelaide returns to her seat.

Tears and snot are running down the faces of her juniors; the elders of the dojo weep into their arms and sleeves. The New Generation is silent; almost profoundly so. Jinnou, who fought her first, seems deeply moved by what he has heard- and of the younger members of the New Generation, he is not the only one.

I rub tears away from my eyes- or I would if I had eyes, yohohohoho, oh this is bittersweet.

“There- it is done. You are my personal successor, now; my Art lives on in you. Whether any other than the two of us recognize it or not, you are my successor, Adelaide the Blue. You are the only one who can succeed me in our style of Gyojin Karate; you are the only one who can go into the World with it, and use it as you see fit, for good or ill.

“You have my blessing, and my love.

“Farewell, then, forevermore.”

And with that, the Old Master bows. Adelaide bows back and surreptitiously wipes her eyes. And then she rises from her bow, and walks from the tatami; at the doorway, she pauses to put on her shoes and take up her small bag; and then, she glances at me beside the door, and I rise from my seat, and we leave that place together.

The story of how we met? I was wandering the city, when I came across little Blue in a terrible hurry; we ended up on the same bus, and, seeking to perhaps relieve her of some of her distress, I asked after her story.

She told me that a group of bullies from her dojo had been making the lives of her younger sisters
hell for years, now, and she was finally ready to make them all pay - and she’d be doing that today, if I’d like to come and watch.

Normally, I’d have wished her luck. But, I suppose I recognized something of myself in her - not me as I am, but me before I joined the army, an angry boy with something to prove to himself and a whole mountain’s worth of disappointed rage on his shoulder.

The rage hasn’t gone, or anything; that is the rage that wrote a triple-platinum album, after all. Soul King Brook has the rage of mountains behind him; and Adelaide the Blue has the rage of oceans behind her.

I follow Adelaide for quite a ways, before we end up in a pub; in the pub’s shrug, Adelaide sits at a small table, puts her kinchaku kago on a low shelf next to the table meant for just that purpose, and puts her head in her hands. I tug out a handkerchief as her shoulders begin to shake, and hand it to her when she begins to weep - and then, when her weeping does not abate, I go to her side, and hold her.

I am a skeleton of a man - or rather, the skeleton of a man, yohohohoho - and so my hugs are perhaps not the most… comforting. But. It’s better than no hug at all. I know this to be true, because Little Adelaide wrapped her arms around me and sobbed into my crushed velvet suit jacket and orange feather boa. I rubbed a boney hand between her shoulders, and thanked the barmaid for bringing us two glasses of cool spring-water to drink.

Eventually, Adelaide calmed enough to drink the water, and wipe her eyes again, and blow her nose.

And then, of all things, a phone rang. Adelaide was a sudden flurry of motion - she opened her purse, pulled out a baby den den mushi, and answered the call.

Puru-puru-puru! GATCHA!

“Moshi moshi?”

“A, it’s the M-Five; we’ve got D here, and she’s in a real bad way -”

“Do I need to come on?”

“It would be better if you stayed away - ouch! COME TO THE POST SANITARY IMMEDIATELY, A, YOUR SISTER IS IN DANGER OF HER LIFE - OUCH! Please get here as soon as you can, A. This doesn’t look good.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Good- get some more S- into her, for fuck’s sake -!”

GATCHA!

Adelaide - A, I suppose, for short - looked at me, and then at her drink. She drank most of it down, poured a trickle of it onto her grateful snail, and then packed it away again. I put down some small
change I had—every little bit helps—before darting quickly after Adelaide, who nearly ran for the busstop before I grabbed her by the scruff of her kimono in one hand and let loose a piercing whistle with the other held to my teeth.

That whistle has caught the attention of men clear across battlefields in the flush of war; calling a simple taxi is no trouble at all. It’s a sea-turtle with a rick-shaw’s seat on the back, and a black fez with blue and white checks around the rim and a large pink tassel.

“Where are we going, A?”

“M-mermaid Cafe, at Mermaid Cove! As fast as you can, please!”

The turtle looks at us and nods; we nod back, I help A onto the turtle, and then leap aboard myself.

“YOSH! IKUSEI!” shouts Adelaide, as the turtle moves.

The world hurtles past us so quickly I feel a deep and unrelenting nausea gurgling through my stomach— or I would, if I still had a stomach. Yohohohohoho—oooh nooooo, urk—thankfully, I keep it in until we get to where A said we needed to be, and I’d managed to pay the speedy turtle. Hurp!

Ugh. That was terrible— but, I’m better now. I follow A into the cafe, past beautiful mermaids— and I’d take a moment to oogle and ogle them, but that was the most frightened I’ve ever seen anyone, and— oh no.

Back behind the counter of the cafe, through a small hallway, there’s a back room done up a bit like an apartment; the Sanitary Room. On the bed, there lies a small girl with pale pink octopus tentacles, and a furrow of pain on her pallid, sweaty face. Franky sits in a chair near her, his massive bulk somehow small and frightened. On his lap is curled another octopus mermaid— no, there’s a name for them, cecealia I think is the word— another girl is curled on his lap, her fingers white at the knuckles where she’s clenching onto his arm.

A is listening to what one of the tiny nurses is telling her, and glances at Franky before looking back at the nurse. I pick my way through the room, and sit next to Franky— there are three chairs in the room total, and Franky and I take one each, as the other is on the wrong side of the bed. A, after listening to what the nurse has to say, steps over to me— and, after looking at me for a moment, walks off. She returns with two pillows, pulled from a cupboard out of my sight, and I nod and shoot her a thumbs up. She smiles, shallowly, a thin grimace; and then she puts the pillows on my old bones, and climbs into my lap.

And there I sit for what feels like eternity; but really, it’s only as long as it took Bryony to pry apart Sanji and Mab and wake Chopper from his bed.

So… Long enough, when you’re scared for someone’s life.
Okay. I’ve read a lot of porn- there wasn’t much else I could do during my younger years at the Baratie, because I was a horny little shit, pornographic magazines were cheap and easy to get through the mail, and women were Too Exciting for several years.

So.

It turns out that shower sex is about the worst goddamn sex you can possibly have. Mab and I have tried several different permutations of shower sex, in several different kinds of showers, and, uh. Yeah, no.

Shower sex is fucking awful. I fucking hate shower sex. I consider myself a sexually adventurous man, and there are plenty of atypical things I am willing to do between the sheets; fucking hell, I’m working up to letting Mab use a dildo on me, and considering what I used to deal with… but no. Shower sex can fuck right off.

Which is not to say that, if you want to try it, you shouldn’t- really, two consenting adults can have whatever kind of sex they want, so long as it’s safe- as in, no one’s going to die, or get permanently injured, or catch a sex infection, or get pregnant (if they don’t want to) from having sex like that. That’s one of the best parts of sex, to me; just like cooking, there’s a nearly endless spectrum of positions, tactics, and styles to use to get it on. However- and I’m kinda embarrassed it took me this long to figure it out- porn mags are basically carefully collected and collated lies when it comes to representing actual sex. For one thing, I’ve met maybe two women, ever, in my life, who orgasmed while having sex for the first time. And I mean sex of any kind- it turns out, it’s actually a lot easier to orgasm by, say, mutual masturbation, or straight up making out, than it is by having sex.

However, above all the non-truths perpetuated in skin-rags and folklore about sex, I have to say- the gospel of shower sex is literally the worst, most lie-laden one of all. Shower sex sucks a bag of horse dicks. It’s terrible, and difficult, and dangerous, and not worth it. There are better ways- and I say that because I’ve tried it, okay. I mean it- Mab and I have dedicated serious effort to trying to perfect this lie we both bought into, but after I nearly broke my leg and she cut open her scalp trying to do this, we decided that it’s just not worth the effort for something so much less than mediocre.

The worst part is, I can understand why it looks so good; when Mab steps into the shower, the steam rises up and cups her naked body. Her nipples pebble under the water, and then smooth as her skin warms. Her body relaxes, and her hair becomes this voluminous cloud of Mab-scented fluff. Shower Mab is a stunningly beautiful version of Mab.

Further, in most every skin-rag I’ve seen shower sex in, it’s shown to be passionate, intrepid, titillating, clean- all of which are lies. The lies you buy into because you want, quite desperately, for them to be true: ‘In the shower with them, and it’s all hot and wet and slippery; the water is a magical, perfect warm temperature and you’re taking turns lathering each other up amongst thick, white clouds of steam and it’s all so effortless and sensual.’

Yeah, no.

Firstly, it only sort of works if you have an Est style bath-house bathing room, where your showers are actually sprayers and you can sit on stools, one behind the other. Even then… not really, not the way Mab and I like to do it. I know Taffy and Gurry have sex in the showers, but that’s because they have a kink for hard surfaces, and not really to do with the shower at all.
On the physical level, shower sex doesn’t work because of the properties of water. Water is a very effective surfactant, as is soap; due to the… shape? I think? Of the… I know there’s a word for it, I learned it, but I can’t remember the translation right now. The smallest portion of water that can still be called water is very, very good at attaching to the smallest portions of other things that can still be called those other things- metal, stone, wood… skin. It’s for this reason that water-canyons exist; the water literally carved the stone away with the simple movement of itself over thousands of years. Where once was a plain of stone, now a furrow in the earth sits; and water is to blame.

Don’t believe me? Go get the back of your hands wet and rub them together. Right now. I’ll wait. You did it? Good- feel that sort of jerky motion, when you rub? Yeah, that’s fine if you’re rubbing your hands together- and that’s absolutely the worst possible thing if you’re trying to have sex. That kind of motion is not good when you’re having sex. And nothing- goddamn nothing- makes Mab’s pussy dry up faster than the Sandora during the Dry Monsoon, than shower water. Fucking nothing.

Ah, and- Mab’s taller than me, she has been for a year and a half, now. It’s not, like, crazy taller than me- but she’s got a good six centimeters. Normally, that’s fine; not when it comes to shower sex. No, because, see, almost all of Mab’s height is in her legs; and six centimeters is just far enough that I can’t quite thrust up into her the way we both like me to, not if we’re in the goddamn shower.

Going down on each other becomes a new, horrible kind of hybrid monstrosity- the worst cross between penance prayer and water torture, because you’re kneeling on fucking porcelain or whatever, and there’s water coming down on your face, getting in your mouth, going up your nose- no. No.

And we like different temperatures of shower, so one of us is always too hot or too cold. Mab likes hot showers; and by hot, I mean fucking water from the depths of hell, heated over Satan’s own sweaty asscrack and sprinkled over her head like piss from demons. Which she immediately follows with an icy cold rinse, like taking a dive into the Danube during midwinter buck naked. I alternate cold, warm, cold, which Mab hates ; and we have very different bathing styles, too. It’s awful, actually, trying to shower together normally- because one of us will always be unsatisfied, and one of us will always smack the other with a flailing elbow, wing, knee, or horn. And I can’t wash my tail in front of Mab, I always ejaculate violently and Mab gets very excited when she sees that and I’m so tired at that point it’s all I can do to wash myself off and get out of the shower without breaking my damn neck- ugh.

And! And even when we somehow stumble across the fucking magic temperature- which Mab wrote down one day after a bit of thinking, because she is a goofy squint, or rather- the Queen Alphanumerical Squint, Queen of Squinty Eyed Nerds in the Nerd Herd- even then! Even then! It sucks because the shower spray is not big enough for both of us, one of us is going to be cold.

The tub’s never the right size- or if it is, it’s not placed correctly, or it’s not sturdy enough.

Soap in places you never intended soap to go! The suds! They burn!

Mab and I have very different time tables for showering. Mostly because we do fairly different skincare routines, and while she’s starting to get me onboard with some things, other things… I kinda ignore? Until Mab can’t stand it, and then she grabs me and does stuff, and uh… hm. Hm.

Ah, yeah, and the worst fucking thing- it’s basically impossible for us to remain standing and go all the way to Orgasm-land together. Mab’s legs go limp when she orgasms; my whole body goes limp and a bit numb when I ejaculate. We have had our closest fucking brushes with death by trying to have shower sex.

Shower. Sex.

Really, the only thing worse than shower sex is sex on the beach. Beaches have sand—filthy sand. You know how it is when you go swimming in the ocean, and you’re playing in the water, and you come back, there’s a nice breeze or whatever- and then you go back to the hotel and you’ve got sand in places you didn’t even know you had. Three showers, I took; and still didn’t get all the fucking sand. It’s worse than fucking body glitter, because it chafes.

With all that said, shower foreplay is a lot of clean, wet fun- wink wink nudge nudge say no more. Except I’m gonna say a hell of a lot more.

Mab’s breasts are still small- they did get a little bit bigger, but that’s like saying a honeydew’s a little bit bigger than a cantaloupe. Mab went from large mangoes, to large grapefruits. Not all that much bigger, but- bigger. They still fit entirely in my hands, one for each hand, and… I mean. They’re wonderfully soft, almost as soft as lung meat, which is the goddamn velvet of organ meats- but they’re small. If I put the base of my palm on the outside of her breast, my fingertips can just about touch her sternum.

On the one hand, she doesn’t really care if I play with them- mostly, she likes that I like her breasts; it’s not a good or bad feeling, when I touch them, it’s an indifferent feeling. On the other hand, pinching her nipples is an entirely different thing; she does not like that, but sucking on them… it’s okay in short bursts, but weirds her out if I go too long with it. On the gripping hand, covering her tits with soap-suds and playing with them like slippery bags of pudding is fun as hell and always makes her giggle and squirm, especially if I take the time to wash under her breasts and beneath her arms.

Her skin is so smooth and soft, it’s amazing- smooth, too, and cool to my touch. If we’re just showering together, I always end up taking a moment to just rub my hands over the flat planes of her belly, press my thumbs over her hips, rub my scruffy cheek into her smooth neck which makes her squeak and giggle, every time- which, of course, is why I do it.

I have to say, of all Mab’s smells, I think fresh washed vagina’s right up there with two day old hair and after-sex glow sweats on my list of “mmm yes, give me more of that”. It’s not objectively even a particularly nice smell- it’s kinda yeasty, actually, with an undertcurrent of wetness that doesn’t fade, and the female musk-stank, and her fur is very thick and- I almost can’t get enough of her smell. Mmm. Mab smell good.

What was I thinking about? Right, foreplay.

Honestly, it’s not really foreplay, it’s… care. Affection. About six months ago, Mab started letting me wash her hair- which is a big deal, for us. Hair is… there’s a lot of sensory information you get from your hair, and a lot of magic is bound up in those strands. Mab letting me wash her hair- not just after a fight, when she can’t wash herself, but just because I want to and I can and she let me- that’s… big. Trusting.

Mab trusts me- and I trust her. So, I let her wash my hair. I also let her shave my face, which she’s actually very good at; different stroke order than me, but a very clean, very good shave. Didn’t even get my chin hairs, which I know she thinks are a little silly looking but men have beards and this is how mine grows.

I’ve conditioned her hair, combed it; pinned it up in the twisty bun styles she prefers. I’ve washed her wings, too, and oh god was that more work than I realized. It was also such a massive turn on that as
soon as we were reasonably dry, she fucked me into the floorboards of her little houseboat.

Mab’s hair, before she pulls it up and back again, or braids it for sleeping, is a wave of thick, curly, warm blackness that smells like honeysuckle and coconut oil. It’s her shampoo that smells like that flower; and the oil’s what she uses to condition her hair and her skin.

It’s also soft as hell, and shiny like the finest of horse hair; she’ll let my run my fingers through it a little, but she always has to wet comb her hair after that because it messes up the lay of the fibers. Similarly, she’ll let me rub my hands all over her wings- and honestly? If she’s relaxed, her wings feel like satin. Very smooth, very soft; but as more of her protective powder layer rubs away, they start feeling more… glass like. And if I rub right across the glass, she’ll giggle herself right out of the sex mood.

Right now, I’m using her wings more as… hm. Handles?

I’ve got a handful of her hair, not too close to her scalp so I can’t pull too much, not so it hurts- but, and this surprised the hell out of me… My wife? She likes it a bit rougher than I do.

As in, when I teased her about ripping the crotch of her swimsuit to have her before we bathed, her whole face flushed bright red and her wings scrubbed themselves together in what I recognize now as her version of the ‘hearts and noodles dance’. On her, it’s the ‘sexy shimmy’ and it’s cute as hell. Her wings make this very faint squeaking noise, and she rises up onto her tippy-toes and I just- woo.

From the back, it’s another story, but from the front it’s cute as hell.

So.

I undressed her; and when it came to her swimsuit, I poked a hole in the crotch and tore it through. She shuddered, and moaned, and when I touched her pussy it was slippery and soaking wet and we’d hardly even kissed. I let myself get rougher with her- not harsh, but rougher.

Pushed her up against the unyielding wall with a firm thump, instead of a gentle push; dragged her up along the wall and shoved her this way and that, making sure the stone scraped along her wings, until her pussy was in just the right spot. She shuddered and whined and sighed with pleasure- and then...

Normally, there’s quite a bit of foreplay, and we’re usually in equal states of undress by the time we make love. This time, I only paused long enough to undo my belt and drop my trousers down.

I jammed myself into her heaving wet pussy with a snap of my hips, and without giving her a chance to recover, I snapped into her again. Again, again, again- letting go of my self control, setting a pace I’d normally take while masturbating. Pap-pap-pap-pap was the sound of my hips against her; that was the same beat of my balls, smacking into her ass. Her belly jolted with each thrust, and her tits began to sway and jounce to the rhythm; pap-pap-pap-pap and her eyes started to go hot and liquid, which is how I know I’m doing right by her.

When I felt the cool grip of her hands, clinging to my horns, I all but lost my mind. I know I thrust harder than I have before- harder even than when I accidentally make her piss the bed, harder than ever. I know her eyes went huge in her head, a pair of brown eyes surrounded by pure white and a hot flushed face. I remember her tits bouncing in restraining taffeta; I remember her letting go for just long enough to undo the button of her swimsuit, the way the top fell down and her chest heaved in air and the sharp points of her nipples. Pale pink on tawny skin, because her breasts hardly ever see sunlight; the only part of her body that has softer skin is her inner thigh, right near the cleft of her ass. I’ve checked.
I remember biting and suckling along her neck, marking the meat of her shoulder above the clavicle; how every time I’d bite down her hips would roll up to meet mine and her hands would tighten to the edge of pain on my horns. I remember how when I kissed her mouth she was like a wild thing, lips and tongue and teeth all a wild, wet, slippery mash of mouth-flavored moaning incoherently.

I remember a deep, possessive growl coming from my chest, and the way it drove her wild.

I remember when she lost control of herself. It started slow enough- I started grinding into her, the base of my penis rolling into her clitoris and her legs wrapping around my waist, the soles of her feet digging into my ass, her heels especially. I remember shaking away her hands from my horns, and kissing her with all the fire and passion I could muster; I remember her arms, snaking under mine and then her cold hands clasping onto my shoulders, the sharp touch of her claws just gripping-

And then I found her sweetest spots, and the grip turned to hot white agony, as pleasure thundered through my veins. When the light of god receded, I beheld my own wife, shuddering underneath me. I had collapsed against the wall, pinning us both in place, and she had been unable to do anything other than let her pussy swallow every drop of my seed. Her hands… how to say this.

Fae are bird people- they always have been, even when they were Dwarves, or Elves, or what have you. Rouse a Fae, and you’ll see they have claws- some have them more prominently on the feet, like Bryony. Mab has a claw for each finger of her hand, and another set on her feet, and they are sharp enough- and her grip strong enough- to puncture through steel and sliver bits of adam wood down to size. When she orgasms, she can’t control her claws; so, normally, she finds something inanimate to hold onto. This time, she had my shoulders.

It burned like hellfire, later. Right then? I’d be hard pressed to remember my own name, much less the fact that Mab is a dangerous woman.

Usually, I’d let that be the end of it. Usually, my wife doesn’t grab my horns. My tail lashed and curled behind me as I turned her over, mashing her chest and face into the wall and presenting her pretty dragonfly wings with their bright red eye spots to my rapacious eye. I worry at her wing-joint with my teeth just to hear her squeal, and I can feel the sudden almost tortuously tight grip her pussy has over my cock; a pain so good I nearly bite down for true, which would end things on a note I’m not interested in playing.

When I harden inside her, I can feel her anticipation swell as well.

Ah, hell- I haven’t even talked about her ass! She’s got a flat butt when she’s relaxed, but when her muscles tense it’s like magic- gah, and she’s always covered up during the winter, I hardly get to see it except for when we’re like this. During the summer, she always wears short shorts, but- they’re high waisted short shorts, because she has a pair of flapjacks. And yes- they’re soft and tasty, like all flapjacks should be. Her very favorite thing is for me to dig my fingers into the muscles of her ass; makes her horny as hell and it’s not like it’s hard to do-

Gggnnnngh! Fuck I- I forgot that when I’m going from behind, her orgasm clamps down around me in a completely different way, which feels very nice but I’m not going to last like this, I need- I know!

I pull out, to her sharp whine; then, I lift her and… I don’t throw her to the ground, it’s too careful for that, but- one moment, she’s smooshed against the wall face-first, the next she’s upside down. Her back’s being supported by the wall, and her legs I’ve pushed apart and I’m standing over her. Her eyes widen in disbelief because we’ve tried this one many times, but it never goes quite right but I
think I’ve got it this time- I pull on her hips and push her around until most of the actual combined weight is in the frictional pressure of her lower back against the wall, not her neck.

I stroke her thighs, and look deep into her eyes until she’s blushing and panting and whining from anticipation- and then, after carefully putting myself in, I start to churn her butter. The movement’s really weird, and this isn’t my favorite position, but… for her, at least, it all comes down to geography. She explained it to me once, while I was fingering her gently: a woman’s clitoris is not just the nubby bit over both the holes. The clitoris actually surrounds the vagina proper, and goes pretty far into the vaginal canal; what usually gets referred to as ‘vagina’ is the labia majora and pubis mons, sometimes referred to as the vulva. The vagina is the hole and everything in it that leads up to the cervix and uterus. Or that’s what I remember, I could be wrong.

The reason some of my rougher treatment makes Mab piss herself isn’t because I’m doing anything wrong, actually- it’s because her clitoral nerves and the nerves that control her urethra are in just the right position, when she’s on her back, to get crossed and cause problems.

In the butter churn position, everything is lined up just right so that won’t happen- and if I can just-get-enough-traction- ah, got it. Mab starts making a squealing, squawking yelpy whiny whimper with each forward thrust; her legs flail around in the air for a moment, then tilt towards her head, but no that’ll make it hard for her to breathe which she really doesn’t like- come here-

I hook her ankles around my neck and carefully lean down, press her legs into the diamond-shape- and got her, got her, there it is! Mab’s eyes have started rolling with pleasure, and it’s only a bit of teasing- before- nnnnnng! Her orgasms, when I do it like this, hit with all the subtlety of a pipe-bomb.

I thrust deeper and deeper, chasing my own pleasure to Mab’s vocal delight, but- no. No, not in this position, damn it all to hell- well. While I make her feel good, I might as well get comfortable. I undo my tie and toss it aside, kick my lacy panties and trousers and belt and shoes off until I’m in socks and and shirt and undershirt; pop the button on my shirt collar and undo it enough to entice Mab with a view of my clavicles- not right now, she’s orgasming again but- in a moment. The belt that keeps my shirts tucked when I kneel or crouch or bend over much at all and the shirt, those stay on; and my garters too because it actually takes a bit more than just some pulling and tugging to get all that off, and I have a plan.

No really, I’ve been mulling this over for a while- and she’s okay with all the individual parts, so… let’s put this dish together. We’ve talked about me being rougher, and Mab being more spontaneous, and she likes it when I’m… commanding.

I’ve got my safeword; she’s got hers.

Here we go.

I buck, and then start grinding, which I know makes her orgasms more intense- I grind, roll my hips, grind, grind, like I’m making pepper powder with my dick and her clit, grind it down- and then, when I can feel the sharp short shivers that precede her really spectacular orgasms, I stop, and pull out, and hold her hips tight and still with my hands.

I watch as Mab almost loses her sexually frustrated mind, tightening my not inconsiderable grip on her hips and digging my fingers into her ass until her squirms and shakes die down- she didn’t orgasm, after all; she almost orgasmed.
“Sa-ah-sahnji, what-?”

“I am going to make you mine.”

“-sanji?”

“Ueltima Thule, this Germa is going to make you his-”

“-oh holy fuck-”

“-and unless you want a punishment, you’ll do as he says.”

“...ah, ah- s-sir, what- aaah!- what shall th-this one d-do for y-you?”

“Hold it in, Thule.”

“S-sir?”

“Every drop of seed I pour into you this eve- hold it in your womb until I say it is well, and you may release it.”

“A-ah, s-s-sir, that-”

“Of course, if you can’t manage a small thing such as that, I shall have to give you a punishment training.”

“S-sir?”

“If you can’t manage to hold it all in, Thule, I’ll have to fill you up again- then plug you shut with one of our toys, perhaps the wind-up-”

“-oh god-”

“-or the extra large. Of course, since it’s a punishment, I’ll have you wear… mm, perhaps the short pants? And a belt, and a waist-trainer; your distorted figure is for my eyes alone-”

“-aaah-”

“-would you like that, Thule? Would you like to be punished?”

“Ah- aaah- n-no sir, I can- I can do as you c-comma-aaaaah-ah-and, I-”

“-Excellent! Let’s get started, then.”

I say, smiling down at her and blushing hard enough I’m half afraid of fainting. I have no idea why she likes it when I talk to her like that, but she does. Although… hearing her call me ‘Sir’, seeing her whine and pant and squirm as I tell her such filthy things… it’s like a bolt of pure pleasure-fire straight through my dick and balls, tightening my guts, pushing my chest out and snapping my spine straight. My horns tingle with pleasure, and my tail bristles with excitement.

However, humiliation- or rather, humiliating my partner- isn’t my thing. Thus, we exit from the wall nearby the bed, opposite the door to our more public chamber in this guest suite of the palace, to the
secondary door of the bathroom, and through it.

Beyond is a lovely bathroom that we’re probably going to wreck- or at least damage. If I was Mab, I’d have something to say about the bathroom- but I’m me, so all I can say is the tub’s clean, the toilet works, and the bench thing built into the tub is a gift from the gods.

I pull Mab’s thoroughly ruined swimsuit off of her body, throwing it to the ground. Mab gasps as the cum inside her body suddenly has room to expand in, and does; her belly bulges and settles into a squishy, churning lump. The entire ridge of fur along my back is buzzing with need- I need- I need to-

“You are a beautiful woman, Thule.”

“Ah? Th-thank you, Sir.”

“The way your belly curves to allow my child the space to grow-”

“-kyaaaaaaah♥-”

“-is truly magnificent.”

Mab is blushing so hard I’m actually a little nervous, but her legs are spreading wide open around me and her heels are digging into my- yep, she likes dirty talk. I’ve got about an hour and nowhere to be until after sunset, when the feast is happening- and Luffy’s mowing down teatime, so- I put Mab on the counter of the sink.

I look her over. And then I turn away and take a piss.

I wash my hands.

I undress fully, taking the time to pick up and sort our discarded clothing.

I gather our bathing supplies, our combs and brushes and so on, and set out our dinner clothing; and then I return to my lovely wife, stewing in a combination of lust and love juices. Sweat has turned her hair limp and ragged, and her wings are squirming against each other, just as her legs are pressing together.

The bathroom nearly reeks of desperation and desire.

I could go on from here, explain what I know must have happened based on the pattern of scratches Mab put across my shoulders and down my back. I could talk about exactly what it looks and sounds like when Mab squeezes everything I’ve put into her back out again.

But what’s most important is this.
“...Mab?”

“...yes sanji...?”

“One day, I’m going to get you pregnant. You’ll look like that for real; I swear it.”

“...promise?”

“Promise.”

“...Okay, Sanji. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

And this, too- Mab is startlingly shy about physical affection. Not giving it; receiving it. Having it demonstrated to her that I genuinely care about her turns her shy, and soft, delicate like the finest spun sugar-glass. It’s… bittersweet. What must have happened to her, to make the most affectionate woman I’ve ever had the pleasure of being with so careful with accepting- ach. Breathe, Sanji.

Time to dry off, and get ready for a fancy dinner party.

Oh my god that was amazing. Oh my god. Oh my god.

Kyaaaaah♥, my husband is amazing and I love him so much!

Ahem.

So fucking much oh my gods and goddesses aaaaaah!

Before we- ah, well- before that♥, I wiped myself down in the common room and Continuity Errored everyone’s fancy clothing into their rooms for them to change into.

I also explained- for those who cared- what exactly a feast entails, and what I- and Sanji, because he married me, not the other way around- would have to more than likely get up to, tonight at least. I also told the girls my job, and- after it was explained to me that they are members of the crew- asked if they would mind terribly going to a fancy dinner party with us.

They said yes, they’d go, after a bit of deliberation; I said, wonderful; now, if it’s alright, and since there are four of you and you’re all filthy with the day’s dirt, could Taffy and Bry help you wash up for the night?

To which, after Taffy and Bryony made themselves apparent, they agreed.

I said: Oh good. I’ll help you get dressed for the party, if that’s alright- and we’ll wash your clothing, too, alright?
This was met with a general chorus of nods from the girls.

After we- ahem- and bathed, my Shadow powers returned to me in full force, rather than the patchy nonsense I had this past- two days, it’s felt like, but it might have only been one. Like I said- it’s a combination of salt and water and instinct and culture that stops a Devil Fated in the ocean; if proper steps are taken, there is no reason why one might not do what needs doing, regardless.

The girls aren’t done bathing yet- Taffy is drawing on deep wells of patience and brushing F’s hair, while Bryony is wrangling B and C into towels. G… got very upset, but seems much better now. Hm.

Tonight, I shall be wearing one of my very few fully formal gowns. Normally, a simple dress or even a skirt is quite enough to be getting on with, but, as I am expected to dine with peers of the realm and am, in fact, also a peer of an entirely different realm, I have to get all fancy and shit.

Thus, the most traditional of traditional Skuan garments; not the saree, as that’s a particularly summer garment, in the Skuan tradition, and it’s still January. No, for this event, I’ll have to wear a kaftan.

A kaftan is a variant of the robe or tunic, from the old Faerie “kap ton”, meaning “covering garment”; a variety of which has been worn by several entirely disparate cultures around the World for thousands of years. The kaftan in it’s most ancient form is worn as a coat or overdress, usually reaching to the ankles, with long sleeves. It can be made of wool, cashmere, silk, or cotton, and may be worn with a sash or veil.

Through the rolling tides of history, the kaftan has acquired different names, styles, purposes, and uses depending on the culture. In regions with a warm climate, the kaftan is worn as a light-weight, loose-fitting garment; in colder regions, the kaftan is a heavy, fur-lined affair. In Skua especially, the kaftan has always been a symbol of royalty- be it personage, or favor, or otherwise.

Kaftans have increased in popularity among the people, largely in part to their marketing as ‘sack-dresses’; and, to be fair, there’s no reason they shouldn’t. A kaftan is appropriate for casual and formal wearing. I should say- traditionally, and as I’ll be wearing, a kaftan is a loose, ankle length garment with long, flowing sleeves. Impractical for most of my work- but, perfectly reasonable otherwise. There is a rather spectacular collection of the Royal kaftans that I was allowed to study much closer than any other student of my class, due to my Line; they’re kept on rotating display in a number of locations, one of which is the Lure. It’s a very big museum.

Some of those garments are so incredibly valuable, even at the time of their creation, that they were presented to generals who were successful in battle, and to important officials of the Realm during religious festivals.

They were also historically- and, I suppose, presently- worn by men in Nort Blue, where they are more like a long jacket with tight sleeves. Kaftans are still very popular traditional wear in Fiddler’s Green, where they’re more often seen on women, rather than men, and they can be bought in a wide range of fabrics, colors, and prints. They are suitable for weddings, engagement parties, feasts, blessing ceremonies, and a thousand and one other occasions.

Most importantly of all, however, is the sheer ease of wearing a kaftan. There’s no special
undergarments required; you don’t need any kind of training to put it on. For the most part, if it has buttons, just do up the buttons- they always go in front; and if it doesn’t have buttons, it slips over one’s head. The kaftan is an undemanding and comfortable garment to wear.

More importantly- to me, at least- is that they tend to suit any person, of almost any shape or size.

Now, a kaftan is usually made of flowy fabrics, but one must pay attention to this aspect; keeping in mind when it is to be worn, above all. A light fabric, like cotton or sheer silk, is better for hot days, beach picnics, or other casual outings. On the other hand, for an evening party, fabric like satin, georgette, rayon, heavy silk, and so on are best.

A kaftan can be short or long; for a day of office work, a shorter tunic length variety, or even shorter, is perfect. A medium-length printed kaftan, something akin to a day-dress, is perfect for all-day, everyday wear- add a pair of leggings to extend the wearability from season to season. For a formal occasion- which this is, even though we’re pirates- a full length or longer kaftan is appropriate. It ought to be ankle to floor length, with the longer variety being worn by married women.

A kaftan may look quite oversized because of its loose fit; this is best remedied in two ways. Firstly, the appropriate bag, as a kaftan is so loose and flowing any kind of pockets or such-like would be instantly noticed. A small purse or clutch is most appropriate, although a pocketbook or folding wallet-clutch could also be used- it is of the utmost importance that the clutch in some way matches the kaftan, be it in primary, secondary, or even tertiary colors- or, more rarely, in the detail work. Secondly, for sophistication, accessorising with jewellery is paramount.

An embellished kaftan is already almost entirely complete; however, a few carefully chosen pieces can really pull a look together. It is advisable to leave the architectural neckpieces behind, at least for a sophisticated evening look- on an embellished kaftan, at least; heavy earrings and beautiful maang tikka are much more the thing. On a plain or printed kaftan, one wears a necklace without hesitation.

There’s also the option of a few subtle bangles or a bracelet to complete the entire look, which I might do.

The caftan seduces the body and the eye- it’s an unlikely garment of sex appeal. It turns yards of fabric into near nudity with the right breeze, and it’s loose and unfitted form has been irresistible all over the world for thousands of years. Ah, but I will blather on about clothing forever- I need to actually pick my damn jewellry out, put on makeup…

Order. Order is important- it goes hair, then makeup, then underthings aside from underwear, then the battle attire, then the fine garment of choice, perfume, shoes, jewellery, and- let’s transfer everything into the clutch… Okay.

Let’s get started.

Hair first; a simple enough, old style; every Fae girl knows the basics of at least one of them, and this one is held in place by a series of pins that resolve into a crown of laurel leaves around the side and back of my head, done in silver. I sprayed my hair through with parfum of rose before combing it out after it dried; and now that’s that.

Next, makeup- I already take care of my skin with rigor, no blemishes, discolorations, or spots- a lotion and a primer base, to reduce the size of my pores; then tinted moisturizer, to keep things even-toned; finish with soft powder in my color to help everything settle. Eyeshadow, in a soft fawn brown and a darker shade- neither of which are out of place on my skin; the sharp, original cat eye,
as provided by kohl powder. White tear drop liner, under the eyes- give an appropriate pop, correct for the season as well. The barest tint in my dewy lipstain, not really a gloss at all- it does shine and pink up my lips a bit, but you wouldn’t notice unless you stare at my mouth all the time. Finally, my glasses- not my normal frames, but a rimless pair I almost never wear because they feel very fragile on my face. I know they aren’t, intellectually- but they don’t feel right. Then again, I do use the thick frames of my regular glasses as a bit of an emotional crutch- dammit, Sanji-

“Sanji, you have to wear more than just garters and shirt-stays to dinner.”

“-Sorry, sorry- I, uh- sorry.”

“Mmmhm.”

Where was I? Hair, check, Makeup, check; underthings. In this case, it’s a simple slip- my underwear is actually the same color as my skin, creating a lovely nude effect, but to avoid scandalizing anyone- the slip. Smooth silk lace, nothing terribly exciting- one chain on the jack and an evening’s work got it done, in this color, even. Brown, of course, to match my kaftan.

“Put your pants on, Sanji; all the way on, there’s a love.”

“...’kay.”

Hair, makeup, underthings; battle attire. A chiton, with re-enforced silk threads along the warp; goes over all my underthings and is just light enough that it won’t show under my kaftan. Tie it in the hanbok style, which means low across my breasts above the nipples, and- there. Done.

Hair, makeup, underthings, battle attire; dress. A brown kaftan, almost serenely beautiful. Silk chiffon, delicate, tiny pleats; silver embellishments that chime softly as I pull it on, over my head. Spend a moment adjusting everything, making sure nothing is caught or twisted- but no, it’s on correctly. Fits right too, all my curves and angles rendered moot under the soft drape of the fabric.

I hear Sanji swallow.

“Deep breath, then put your tie on.”

“-yes. Yes.”

Hair, makeup, underthings, dress; perfume rolls on behind the ears and at the nape of my neck, smells of honeysuckle. Oh, why not- a quick swipe under each tit, and again between my thighs. I do it with my eyes closed to ensure my Shadow’s working again- and it is, it’s working fine. Ah, I remember now- perfume’s supposed to go on with the underthings, damn. I’ll get it next time.

Then, shoes- this pair of flat jewelled gladiator style sandals in gold go nicely with the dress- and the stones are cool toned, to balance out the heat of the sandal. Dammit, no, not if I want to wear toe
rings- what else, what else… Ah. A **plain leather pair**, exactly the color of my winter skin- perfect. Oh, yes, and- I paint my fingernails and toenails with clear gloss about once every week and a half? It’s just a protective coating, really, nothing fancy- it does look nice and shiny, I guess… No need to repaint them just yet, I think.

Hair, makeup, underthings, perfume, dress, shoes; jewelry. Hell’s bells, I need to get my ears pierced again, otherwise I’ll never be able to wear the full set- rrgh! Ah well; and this *maang tikka* just isn’t right for this outfit, no matter how pretty- balls!

Too old for arm rings, wrong dress for bangles, already wearing my rings, none of the headbands I have are quite right for this occasion. I… hm.

“Sanji- ah, you look nice. Wait, don’t put on your jacket yet- I need your help, actually.”

“Ah, alright- how can I help, *pchelka*?”

“I need you to put on these toe rings for me- and probably help with some of my head-pieces…”

“Ah.”

Sanji breathes out a sigh of excitement, longing, pride- something warm and smokey passes between his lips before he joins me in front of the vanity and gazes at me through the mirror. Sanji’s eyes glitter with- something. Love, I think is the best way to describe it.

Toe rings are worn in Skua, and have been worn in the wider Fae culture, since before the Age of Heroes; Sita, whom Ravana stole, threw her toe ring on the path so that her Lord Husband, Rama, could find her. Thus, since then until now, toe rings are a part of a married woman’s jewellry box. Although it is common for a husband to put the toe rings on the second toe of both feet during the wedding ceremony itself- in essence, during the signing of the contract, it’s not necessary.

Still. A Fae woman with rings on the second toe of both feet is married; if one or the other is missing, it indicates some manner of separation… right is separation due to duty, as in her husband has gone to war, or to sea, and is- one hopes- is, quite rightly, going to return. Left is divorce, or death, or some other misfortune- and she has been left behind.

The Syreene word for it is *bichiya*, *minji* in Faerie, *jodavi* in Cherubim; and the Djinn have three words for it, *Mettelu*, *Kanaiyazhi*, and *Kaalungura*. If I’m remembering rightly, the Djinn make a distinction between a pair of toe rings, a single right toe ring, and a single left toe ring- and thus, each has it’s own specific name and connotation.

Fae toe rings are usually made of silver and worn in pairs, on the second toe of both feet. Traditionally, they are quite ornate; however, more contemporary designs exist, for the more modern bride. Some sets may have pairs for three of the five toes- excluding the biggest and smallest, for the sake of being able to walk reasonably well. They ought not be made of gold, as gold still holds a ‘respected’ or even ‘revered’ status and is not worn below the waist until one is scrimshawn; however, this isn’t a strict rule or law, and toe rings of gold and diamonds are fairly popular.

Like the charnel earrings in my ears, these toe rings, once put into place, are not removed. However, unlike the charnellements of the Fae, a woman’s toe rings could reasonably be sold in dire
circumstance- as a new pair of toe rings is a simple matter, requiring only a husband to put them on one’s feet, whereas a new set of charnellements requires disturbing the dead from their well-earned rest.

Exchanging rings is a tradition World wide for a number of reasons, marriage being one that appears more often than not. It’s the Fae tradition, however, that such rings be put on the toes, if possible. I’m not entirely sure why- nor am I entirely sure of the medical benefits of wearing toe rings to regulate various bodily processes. I’m not entirely sure virility and fertility can be controlled with rings on one’s toes, but then again, every little bit does help...

“So… ah, I always forget how pretty your jewelry is, you hardly ever wear it-”

“Well, yes, most of it is dangly and would get caught or tarnished in my day to day life.”

“…I like it, when you wear jewelry.”

“…You do?”

“Mm. Not sure why- I just. Hm. Does something for me.”

“Hm. Well. I’ll keep that in mind; I’m sure I have a few pieces lying around somewhere that would tickle your fancy...”

“I’m sure you do. -Right! Which of these go where-?”

“This set of six, and the anklets, too-”

“Ah. Pretty!”

“Hmhmhm, yes. Ah- anklet first, I think.”

“Alright- shall I just take the whole tray, or-?”

“Yeah, just take the tray.”

Sanji takes a knee, and looks up at me patiently. Whoops, stop staring at his horns, Mab- I shift to my left foot, and then raise my kaftans skirt to about the middle of my calf, maybe a little higher, and then I give him my sandaled foot.

“Anklet over the sandal?”

“That’s how that set’s designed to be worn, so- yeah.”

“Okay.”

Sanji’s fingers are very strong and callused, yet very delicate as he puts the loop of the anklet’s chain over my second toe and clasps the shining silver leaves over my ankle. I can feel a hot pink blush stealing over my cheeks; I can feel the delicate pressure of Sanji’s fingers on my calf as he ‘adjusts’
the anklet. His other hand cups my heel, and holds me steady.

I swallow, and only catch about half of what he’s saying, but-

“Th-the, ah, the- the ring with the, the cocktail ring- the big one, y-yes.”

“Ah. On the second toe?”

“Mhm.”

I squeak, a little, as he rubs between my toes and carefully puts on the cocktail ring.

“That’s not for every day, is it?”

“What-? Oh, no, no- the other two are more for every day, but that’s a special occasion ring.”

“Ah. So… after the party, you’re going to move which one to your second toe?”

“Uhm… well. E-either the half eternity, or the little hearts… I, ah. I hadn’t decided, yet.”

“I see.”

The second ring is the half eternity, which goes on my third toe; and the third is the little hearts toe ring, which has a gap in the back so it can be adjusted to fit almost any of my toes or fingers. He lets go of my foot, and gently guides it back down; I shift my weight again, and raise my other foot. He catches it, and the whole process repeats.

Throughout it all, the expression on his face is so- gentle- warm and soft and sweetly smiling. And then he’s done, and placing my foot back onto the floor. He kisses the tips of his fingers, and looks up at me with glimmering eyes as I let my skirt back down.

He stands still kissing the tips of his fingers, then brushes those kisses against the underside of my jaw, soft fingertips trailing over sensitive skin. Gnngh.

“You need help with your hair jewelry?”


“Command me, then, beautiful Mab; I am yours.”

“O-oh, Sanji- ”

My eyes fly open at his pronouncement, and catch on his burning blue eyes, aglow with love for me. My heart does a soft somersault, then settles into a steady beat, like the fluttering of a bird in the grass.
“How am I to help you, Mab?”

“R-right- um, this is the tikka I will wear-”

“-lovely-”

“Hmhm… I want it to be here, on my forehead, so- the main chain has a clasp at the end, like a hook, aye?”

“Aye.”

“Pull that open- ah, I left it open, nevermind- and hook it into the big pin at the back of my head. I’m going to bow forwards a bit, to help-”

“Ah. Right- and… there.”

“Good. Take these bobby pins, just two, and cross them over the clasp, open ends down, please.”

“Ah, so it won’t let go, I see.”

“Mm. …Having trouble?”

“No, I got it.”

“Give it a little tug to make sure it’s really in- nn, that’s got it. Good job- and up I go.”

“Thank you. So-”

“Ah, right- so, d’you see how each strand has an individual hook-clasp at the end?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Pull those open- not, like, flat, but open. There’s good-”

“-okay-”

“Take one half of the strands in one hand, with the big pendant in the middle-”

“-okay-”

“-and stand at my side on that side. Yes, just like that. My laurel pins are arranged in a bit of a line up and down on the side, yes?”

“Yes. -ah, the leaves pop out like a wreath, but the actual pins all go in more or less the same place.”

“Exactly. Starting from the top-most strand, hook each clasp into the base of where the laurel pins end- towards the back of my head, please- and go down until you run out. Don’t worry about doing it quickly, and be sure to give a little tug to each strand when you’re done- they need to be fairly firmly attached.”

“Alright- and… should I use two bobby pins on these, or just the one?”

“Just the one should be fine.”

“‘Kay.”
Ah. My husband is a kind and gentle man. When he is done, he presses a soft, chaste kiss to my mouth and stands back, to take me in. I preen, just a little, under his gaze, and the smile that lights his face is so… hmmm.

“Well. That’s me dressed- d’you want a pair of cufflinks, or are you going to wear your normal set?”

“I really do love these cufflinks - but… this is a formal occasion.”

“Mhm.”

“…you got me new cufflinks?”

“Well. Yes.”

“Mab, you didn’t have to get me anything-”

“Well, I actually made them-”

“-ngh-”

“-and you don’t have to wear them at all, I just… I like making jewelry, Sanji, and… cufflinks are kind of the only thing you wear. I could make you a ring or two, I suppose, but it’d end up on a chain or something around your neck, and…”

“-hnnng-”

“...So. I also have jewelry you could wear, if you wanted.”

“...really?”

“Mmhm.”

“Oh. Uh- c-cufflinks.”

“Mm. Here.”

“Oh, these are- these are our colors, Mab-”

“Mmmmmph♥! Hmmhhmmhmhmhm! Sa-hahahaha-sanji- Sanji, stop, you’ll muss my hair-”

“Fff. I think these might be my new favorite.”

“You can have favorites for different occasions, Sanji.”

“Oh. ...Really?”

“Mmh.”

And my husband fairly beams as he- hold it right there, mister!
“Sanji, can I put them on for you?”

He squeaks and it’s the most adorable sound I’ve heard him make in hours.

“O-okay. Uh. Sure.”

I smile, and gently take his arm; the cufflink pops out easy enough, and I set it on the vanity in an empty little dish. I can feel my soft fond feelings for my husband welling up in me, the way my Shadow slowly entwines with his and the soft gasping sigh that comes out of him- I carefully button his shirt with the cufflink, making sure his shirt-sleeve is tidy and his sleeves are neat. He likes the kissing cuff style, which is fairly common, and- done. One two three four buttons in the tuxedo shirt, and the cufflink is a yellow and brown striped spot at his wrist, just as it should be. I rub my fingers over his hands, catch his fingers with mine and- cha, I can’t help but smile, and blush a little bit. Then, the other cuff, the other hand, such beautiful hands my husband has.

There’s a small cut, at the base of his left thumb- he always gets distracted when he uses a food mill, it’s the strangest thing; the flattened fingertips from where he’s touched hot pans, the pointer a little numb to temperature because of how many times he’s run the tip through something cooking to taste; the corrugated side of the forefinger, from where the peeler slips, and the ripple of muscle underneath- meant to grip, to probe, so sensitive to differences in texture; the ball of his thumb is ploughed like a field, awash with cuts that have not gone through his tough skin.

A brown scar in a thin line, over the back of his right hand, from where he brushed against a baking sheet and cursed most foully in my houseboat’s kitchen, and another small brown spot on the back of his left where a bit of frying-grease popped and caught him and he cursed even more foully- that was a very sweary day, I swear. Still, even when held in my own… my hands, I think, carry an aura of precision, of delicate repetitive motions perfected- but Sanji’s hands are graceful, even with their oddly pointed fingers and strange smells.

He’s patient, organized and detail oriented, like me; but where I do best doing several ‘leave it to it’ jobs at once, he’s more of a hand’s on worker, and he does so many things at once. Part of the reason I’m so glad, sometimes, that he likes to cook is- ah, nevermind. It’s strange… the fondest memories I have of Sanji are of him doing things like reducing a stock so it can be stored for later more efficiently… just him constantly stirring the pot, skimming scum off the top, transferring the thicker and thicker liquid to smaller and smaller pots… and me, at the table or on the couch, spinning thread and just being in his company.

I must say… I don’t really notice the purity of reduced stock, compared to regular stock- but Sanji does, and Sanji cares very much. We cook curry with exactly the same ingredients, now- but his comes out better because he cuts the vegetables just a little more evenly, and he measures the spices with a defter hand, and he makes the rice perfectly every time, which I still haven’t managed except on accident. He’s got a better sense of food balance than I do; I can balance a single dish, but he can balance a full meal with several compliments of dishes, each one harmonious with the whole and itself harmonious, too.

My husband is lean, not thin; there’s a whole wall of muscle that makes up his body, and his bones are heavy and thick and strong, underneath. And there’s a spark of… deep contentment, burning in him; especially when he cooks, or right after we make love.
“I do need to put on my vest and jacket.”

“Mm. Let me put your tie on, at least-”

“Alright.”

He walks away from me, and I am suddenly bereft of his warmth, the smell of him; and then he returns, bearing his vest and jacket in one hand, which get tossed across the still freshly made bed, and his tie in the other. It’s plain black, formal occasion- nothing he wouldn’t wear normally, honestly, although he does like flashy patterns…

Sanji’s face is actually fairly round for an oval, meaning the collars of nearly every shirt he has falls within ninety degrees in angle at the collar points; some are narrower than that, but those are fairly rare, and he has… three shirts with oblique angles at the collar.

The tuxedo shirt he’s wearing now is no different, with the pointed collar and everything- sharp ninety degree angle. Sanji usually ties his tie with a four-in-hand, the most casual knot you can use for such things. Today… hm. Formal occasion. Face shape…

Half Windsor knot.

I tie Sanji’s tie, and clip it with his favorite tie clip. Smooth my hands over his chest and call his vest to my hands and step back, hold it open and up for him and help it settle on his shoulders, he doesn’t wear vests very often but this is as formal a dinner as it gets excepting perhaps a coronation. I stroke up and down his back and measure the breadth of his shoulders with my hands as Sanji buttons up his vest, and then I stroke across his stomach and over his smooth chest because I need to touch him. I stare at him in the mirror, over his shoulder, and breath deeply of his smell; fresh from the shower- sandalwood, from his soap; a touch of his own natural musk from watching me get ready for the night, and his cologne is… hm. Citrusy- bergamot! Notes of cinnamon and cardamom, at the nape of his neck, I need to breath him in. He’ll probably add cigarette smoke to his overall odor at some point, which… yeah, alright. Still not my favorite, but… still not my favorite.

Jacket next, which I help him into because he’s still not comfortable with the vest, it’s okay, love- he buttons it, and then- pocket square. Because his tie is solid black, his pocket square is printed with an interesting, and fairly busy, black and white print; the cotton folds up sharp, and tucks into his jacket pocket on the outside left in a thin straight line, and on the inside right goes his cigarette case which I got for him, and the lighter, too, because- if he’s going to smoke, he’s going to smoke well, dammit.

I step away to make sure I have what I need for the girls- and when I turn back, Sanji is fully dressed and making sure his hair falls just right. I take a moment to catch my breath; my husband’s radiance nearly knocked me out, just then. Sanji wears pretty much what he always wears; double breasted suit.

It’s just a little fancier, what with the tuxedo elements.

And I’m in a fancy dress, too.

We gaze at each other for a long, warm moment- and gods help me, I remember what I needed to ask.
“How do you want to be addressed?”

“How?”

“At the dinner party, the other Royalty is going to address me as ‘Ultima Thule’; how do you want them to call you?”

“Ah.”

“We’ve got about two hours before you have to make a decision- so. Think it over.”

“Heh. Not giving me time to mope?”

“Not a goddamn second.”

“...Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Last kiss- and now, into the fray!

Now then: pretty much everyone except the girls are all in kimono, even Mark, Taffy, and Bryony-oh, right, I remember now. So… while we were separated, I just kinda… kept making kimono. Uh. So now everyone’s wearing kimono- except for me and Sanji, because we’re actual, genuine Royalty and that has rules, okay.

Look, a tan is a standard size for fabric- they sell jacks in that size, for god’s sake, and the chain-cards, too. One damask pattern begets another; iromuji kimono are not terribly complicated to make, nor are awase iromuji. And, with the leftover silk, I made tsumugi and awase tsumugi because what’s the point of a lovely robe if you can’t wear it any time-

Oh.

Excuse me.

The kimono is the most internationally recognized traditional Ryugu Mergyo garment in the World. The word ‘kimono’ actually means ‘thing to wear’ (ki ‘wear’ and mono ‘thing’); but in the wider World, it has come to denote the full-length, one piece garment. With that said, kimono are always worn for important festivals or formal occasions. It is a formal style of garment associated World-wide with politeness and good manners; Izo, the Sixteenth Commander of the Whitebeard Pirates, wears kimono, as does Jinbe, Knight of the Sea, and both are known for their polite manners. Ace is polite company, but he really doesn’t like wearing fabric on his upper body and half nudity is considered rude in Ryugu Mergyo- if the garment only covers below the waist, I mean. I think.

It’s been a long time, I could be wrong.

Kimono are T-shaped, straight-lined robes worn so that the hem falls to the ankle, with attached collars and long, wide sleeves. Kimono are to be wrapped around the body, always with the left side over the right- excepting for corpses, in which the wrapping is reversed- and are secured by a sash called an obi, which is tied at the back in most of society. They are generally worn with traditional Ryugu footwear- zori, geta, and tabi, usually.
Up until the fifth century, kimono were made of hemp or linen, and they were made with multiple layers of materials. Today, ‘proper’ kimono tend to be made of silk, silk brocade, silk crepe, and satin weaves. The most modern kimono are made with less expensive, easy to care for fabrics like rayon, cotton sateen, cotton, and synthetic fibers (of which I do not approve), and are mostly worn in Goblin Town in Ryugu Mergyo. However, silk is still considered the ideal standard for kimono, and most international makers of kimono make their garments out of some kind of silk.

I, personally, use spider silk.

There are ten major parts to a kimono, and quite a few more minor bits and bobbles- but we’ll start with the basics. B, C, F, and G are wearing nagajuban and tabi. This under-robe is worn to keep the need to launder a kimono low, because, quite simply: kimono are not easy to clean. Most kimono are completely unstitched before being laundered; and having it done by a professional launderer is expensive. The tabi go on because it’s not fun standing around in thin robes with no socks on, and anything other than plain white would look strange.

The nagajuban is a simple robe of cotton or silk that goes under one’s kimono; the girls are wearing one each, with collars that don’t match their datejime at all, but that’s fine. No one should ever see their datejime- at least, not until they’re well through the first rush of puberty.

Then, on goes the kimono- B likes the purple and C likes the yellow plaid; F picks the yellow one; and G goes a bit less traditional. I’ve also got kimono for the rest of the girls, and for Brook and Franky, but they aren’t here so it’s currently moot.

Following the kimono, the obi- and, although I designed the kimono to go on with sashes, the obi are part of the garment. It’s important to realize that you can’t actually cross too many colors and prints in kimono- it’s not actually possible. In fact, I’d go so far as to say the more eye-watering color the better; and the girls do not disappoint, as they choose obi they like and completely ignore the colors and prints of their kimono. Then, obijime- B wears one, but not C, and F chooses one to tie her whole outfit together, a surprisingly conservative move. G’s more modern look eschews the obi entirely, which is very, very radical- and I like her bursting confidence, too.

And of course, since everyone excepting Sanji and me are wearing tabi, the only shoe is zori. I have them in everyone’s size, even the girls, because I just do. Some things are best accepted and I couldn’t stop myself making children’s clothing before it was needed, but it was needed, so. So!

We’re all dressed; we’re all peckish. Let’s do this thing.

We end up at the table and halfway through the first course before I realize that Ace and his father, Whitebeard, are also at the table- also in kimono. It’s all well and good except for one thing-

“Chairete, Ace.”

“Chairete, Mab.”

“Still not wearing shirts?”

“Well, you don’t wear brassieres, so-”
“Yeah, okay. How’ve you been?”

“Ah, alright- hey, Lu-”

“Hi Ace-!”

“So. Anyway- I have some questions-”

“Chairete, **granfaun** Whitebeard-”

“Hello, Mab-”

“Wassup, Ace?”

“So… I was talking to Aunt Zippy-”

“-uh huh-”

“-and I visited Aunt Emmeline-”

“Uh oh.”

“-and uh. Three questions.”

“Shoot.”

“Firstly; in Aunt Emmeline’s house, there’s a curio cabinet full of various charnel bits- not full skeletons or jewelry, but… bits. In the topmost section of that cabinet, there’s a weird statue…?”

“Yeah, the blue one, right?”

“Right. When I saw it, I felt… why did I feel so…?”

“Because, Ace- that’s Oberon.”

“What.”

“…We don’t have enough hard liquor on hand for me to tell you the whole story; even the barest details are going to take two full glasses of strong wine for each of us.”

“Lay it on me, Mab; it’s been bothering me for months.”

“Right. Well. You remember how I buried him?”

“Aye.”

“That was the manner in which orphans are buried, and in that location… there are some animals in Skua that dig up shallow graves, eat the bones, and cough the gold and gems back out. Pecker-birds, they’re called- not really birds exactly, but not *not* birds, if you catch my meaning.”

I stop, and drain my glass of wine. Ace does the same. The various conversations around the table have gone almost silent- right, I remember why I hate dinner parties: I’m a terrible conversationalist. I mean it, I can’t make light conversation for shit!
“So… our Oberon was eaten by a bird?”

“Everything except his skull, which Yuki recovered.”

“…?”

“Okay, so you know that bird skull she wears in her hair sometimes-?”

“Oh! Oh eeeew-”

“Yeah, not really dinner conversation but you asked, and I’m not the one who’d lie to make it better. Lies usually don’t make it better, not if you’re grown…”

“Ugh. Right. Wine?”

“Wine.”

And we drink another cup of strong, red wine. Mm. Alcohol.

“Second question- Moda was telling me about her school days-”

“Ah, hell-”

“...and she mentioned something about you, someone named Penny, and the sweetest petty vengeance she ever did see-”

“-aha, okay-”

“-so. What the hell is she talking about, Mab.”

“Ah… -Mab’s Petty Penny Revenge goes like this. To start with, you remember I went to boarding school; due to various… well, anyway, I had part time jobs around the holidays. Not the big summer one, the other ones- except for Spring break.”

“Okay…?”

“So. Usually, I’d work as a stocker, at the same place Moda worked as a cashier- I was the person who puts stuff on the shelves; Moda worked the register? Right, because I was strong and tall enough not to need a ladder-”

“-sure-”

“...and Moda’s always been a stacked babe. She was the only mermaid who worked at that particular store- not nearly the only mermaid in town, but probably the prettiest. Excepting for this one time, she worked the register and I stocked the shelves. However, during the events of this story, Moda was sick with a flux that had been going around, and I had to work the register in her place.”

“...okay.”

“Okay. So. Before I go any further, I need to explain about Dola. One Dola is about one hundred Beri. The main difference between Dola and Beri is that one Beri and one hundred Beri are still called Beri; but if you split a Dola into pieces you could get four Quarters, ten Dena, twenty Fingers,
“...Okay. And I guess each coin’s a different size?”

“Yep- I don’t remember the exact sizes, but… a quarter’s like the size of your thumb-pad, a dena’s the size of your middle finger tip, a finger’s the distance between your first and second finger-knuckle and oval shaped-”

“-what, why?”

“Hell if I know- and a penny is the size of the very fingertip of your pinky. Pennies are very small coins. ”

“So… what does that matter?”

“Well. Moda’s register was the one that had all the tobacco and alcohol behind it, and as she was sick, I was on the register that day. It was just past ten in the evening, and two young men- like, early twenties I think?- came up to the counter. They had three random novelty items- a rubber duck, a grab-bag of marbles, and a double pack of stroop waffle flavored bubble gum, if that matters to you. The strange thing was, that late at night, most people were there for food, necessities, or stuff you could only get after paying for it at my register- smokes and booze, naturally.

“They might have been upperclassmen, now that I think about it- we were in a school town so we got weird student customers a lot. Anyway, I rang up their purchase and told them the total price… I think it was twenty two Dola, which is...”

“Twenty two hundred Beri.”

“Yeah- it always takes me a while to do the conversions. Anyway, I rang them up, told them the price for purchase- and they grinned at each other, reached into their jackets and slapped down two gallon size draw bags full of only pennies.”

Ace’s eyebrows go straight up. Sanji leans past Whitebeard and squeaks at me. I look at my husband and nod- because he too, has worked in service hell, and knows exactly what I’m talking about.

“Right. So- hang on, I need to-”

“-glasses?”

“I didn’t wear my glasses unless I was actively studying; I was in so many different atmospheres every day, it was more hassle than I wanted to deal with. So. This is what I look like when I’m not wearing glasses- I’m not glaring, I’m actually legally blind in most countries-”

“-oh no-”

“And I’ve always sounded like this. I’m not so blind as I can’t tell where someone’s eyes are when they’re across a counter from me, though. I stared them in the eyes, but they were too busy snickering over their assholery to take notice.
“Those two kids knew what they were doing, but they didn’t know me; and I was quite prepared to get paid for making someone else suffer. I still am, honestly.”

“Mab. Mab, what did you do?”

I glance over at my husband, who is… possibly wide eyed and grinning in anticipation, but I can’t actually tell.

“Well. As the other customers groaned and went to the other registers, this conversation occurred between myself, the Spokesman- as the other man was silent and awkward- and a friendly coworker of mine who prefers to remain nameless in the stories where they appear.”

“Oh, Nameless-”

“Yes. So-

“Is this Đ22?

“...

“Did you count it?

“Nope.

“Are you going to?

“Nope.

“Is it at least Đ22?

“Dunno.

“Lovely.

“Nameless said: Hey! You guys can use the self checkout; it has the Automatic Coin Counter.

“I said: Oh, don’t worry about it, Namele-

“Nope, don’t trust them Nameless. (The Partner laughed.)

“Nameless said: What? Why?!

“They don’t count all your change right.

“Nameless was speechless with outrage; petty shit like that was really really rare in our town, and Nameless is a very liberal person anyway.

“I said: Don’t worry, Nameless. I’ve got this well in hand.”
I pause. I let the servant clear away my plate and politely decline the roast beef; I don’t even eat much roasted lanimal when Sanji cooks it, and he’s amazing. While my place is empty, I put both of my elbows on the table and let my sleeves slide down. This part always goes best if there’s some kind of evocative gesture to go with it.

“I untied the bags and poured all the pennies onto the counter. It was one of those counters with the raised edge, so I wasn’t worried about dropping any coins. Even so, it was a beautiful, massive, loud shitstorm of a mess; less than two thousand coins shifting over each other on a black counter in a motion I can only describe as when sand blows into a dune, and with a noise like heavy rainfall on a tin roof.”

Ace has caught what I said, but he’s invested in the story. Sanji already knows where this is going because he Knows me; but.

“I dug right in. The two boys, still avoiding my stare, start chuckling like it’s my dignity they’re taking away. They whispered things like ‘haha this is funny’ ‘yeah’ ‘she’s way funnier than the fish-ball’ ‘oh my god yeah’.”

Ace’s whole body doesn’t quite shift into fight and flight mode. Not quite.

“Things became clear. Moda… heaves and seethes, when she’s angry or frustrated. Right?”

“Yah.”

“Mm. They’d been taking advantage- and Moda… unless you point it out to her, she’s not going to notice that kind of thing. I definitely notice that kind of thing. So, as I counted each penny, one by one, Nameless came up to me.

“Nameless said: Guess I’ll help count these.

“I said: Don’t worry about it.

“Nameless looked at me with confusion, then put on her determined face and said: I’ve got your back.

“I said: Okay.”

Here come the rest of the gestures.
“We worked up a system where we counted ten, put them in a stack, then with ten stacks of ten we’d separate them, making one Dola piles. Progress was slow, but sure; some customers came to my line, but I advised them to go to another line. Some of them were confused, but as soon as they saw the counter covered in pennies, they understood. We got about twelve Dola total in ten minutes- and that’s when I knocked the piles over.

“Nameless said: Sugar! (Nameless doesn’t swear; she took a Vow of some kind, I think.)

“I said: Oopsie Daisy. And then I grinned at Nameless, and tilted my head like this-”

Ace sniggers.

“-and motioned for them to leave.

“So, as the idiot boys were staring at the fallen pennies in horror, Nameless said: You know what, I think you’d be faster without me.

“I said: Sure, probably.

“Nameless said: I’ll leave you to it, then.

“I said: Cool. Cool cool cool cool cool.”

Ace snorts because that’s the onomatopoeia for a very specific kind of laugh; specifically, the laugh of a Fairy right before they trick a person with their own bullshit logic. Sanji is snickering outright.

“I said: I’m so sorry, I’m going to have to count all of this again.

“Spokesman said: ...Ok.

“So, I started over, counting slower than before, and made my way back up again. The idiot duo is entirely silent, right up until I got to about seven Dola, when I suddenly gasp and say:

“Whoopsie daisy. I’ve lost count. I’ll have to start all over again.

“Seriously?

“Yep.

“Why!?

“I lost count, honored customer. It would be dishonorable for my register to have the incorrect total, and I would never steal from you.

“Spokesman didn’t say anything at all, because there’s some things you just can’t argue about and be
“Anyway, about half an hour after that, the Manager walked past and looked at me. I smiled at them, and they looked at the counter; and then the Manager walked away without a word. By then, I’ve had to restart maybe five or six times, and I can actually see the idiot duo’s souls starting to leave their bodies because this went in directions they were not anticipating.

“So, another half hour after that- I’ve counted all their coins, which only confirmed what I already knew.”

“They didn’t have enough to start with, did they.”

“Nope. They had maybe eighteen Dola. Which I told them- and they had been dead silent and steadily less amused as the night progressed. Here’s the thing- I might exude an aura of delightful sex appeal now, but at that time, in that place…? Yeah, I had all the sex appeal of a wet, dead rat in a shit-filled gutter-”

Ace wheezes with laughter-

“-and they’d come to be titillated, which I wasn’t doing for them. In fact, I was doing the exact opposite, and. Well.

“I said: I think that this is D18.

“The duo has been dead silent and they’ve been looking pretty done in for the night. So. I looked them dead in the eyes, and I brought up my hand like this-”

-and I drag my hand over my empty place because we’re still on the heavy meat courses, which I don’t eat-

“And the coins went crashing down again.

“I said: I’ll recount them to be sure.”

Ace is shaking with laughter, and Sanji hasn’t stopped laughing yet.

“You bet your fucking ass I recounted that shit. I made it take… ah, about twenty minutes I think?”

“And this whole time you could have done it in a bit less than a minute and a half, right?”

“Of course.”
Ace sniggers, then gestures for me to go on.

“Right. So, I finished counting them, and then I said: I think this is actually Đ19.36. Without saying a word, the Spokesman whipped out a Đ5.”

“...Dola folding money comes in...?”

“Ones, fives, tens, twenties, hundreds, and- rarely, but they’re legal tender- thousands.”

“...”

“Anyway- I said: Seriously? You had cash this whole time?

“Spokesman said: Needed to get rid of my change.

“I said: No problem; I’ll just recount this again-”

Sanji cackles with laughter-

“-since I want to be perfectly sure that this is Đ19.36. I counted Đ18 last time, you see-”

“Spokesman said: Are you fucking kidding me?

“I said: I don’t joke about money, honored customer.

“He took out a Đ20 bill from his pocket and threw it down onto the coin covered counter. My coworkers- Nameless, and the Automated Checkout, who had been watching this whole time in barely hidden glee- were stunned. I mean, this guy had his hand on his folding money in his pocket the entire time, and could have stopped me from wasting his time like that at any moment. But he didn’t.

“I took the folding money, did the transaction, gave him his change and his receipt, bagged his purchase and handed it to him; I even thanked him for shopping with us and wished him a fine evening. Then, I watched, like this-”

And I let my bone deep satisfaction exude from every pore of my body, without letting my face change even a little-

“-as the two started to put their pennies back in the drawstring bags, I didn’t help them at all. I watched them just like they’d watched me. Lots of pennies fell to the floor, and Nameless and the Automated Checkout were laughing outright at this point, but- I guess they didn’t care to stoop down and pick up their loose change.

“That was also the first, last, and only time I ever heard the Manager laugh.
“Anyway, they left after that, about five Dola in pennies on the ground and laughter chasing them away. I clocked out way past midnight after cleaning up the pennies, doing all the things I was supposed to have done like, two hours ago- because that was when my shift ended, of course. All my coworkers had given me thumbs up or smiles when they had clocked out before, and Nameless and the Automated Checkout stayed behind- they were actually roommates and everyone knew about us students and not going into the woods at night- anyway.

“Manager told me ‘Good Job’, which was the only words they’d ever actually said to me. I crashed out on Nameless’ couch for the night, and went home to the dorms the next morning.

“And that, my brother, is Mab’s Petty Penny Revenge. In short: I counted Đ19.36 about five times. Whoopsy-daisy; it might have been five times- I’d have to count again. I just can’t be sure...”

At which point, everyone starts howling with laughter. I smile, faintly.

But Ace isn’t quite laughing- he knows, same as I do, that I would have told Moda what happened during her shift. Everything. And he Knows, same as I do, exactly what she’d have done in response.

“That wasn’t the end, was it.”

“Of me being a cashier? Yah, that was it; of Moda’s harassment? -You’ll have to ask Moda about the Mud-dragon Vendetta, because my only role was buying the peanut butter and washing her dress afterwards-”

“...Moda’s Mud-dragon Vendetta?”

“...Yeah, that’s her story to tell; I... hm. Plausible deniability is my friend, and so is Moda. Ask her- I wasn’t there, and I didn’t ask for details afterwards. I don’t know.”

“Ah. They didn’t actually stop harassing her after that, did they.”

“Mmm. Not really, no- they didn’t show their faces at that store for about three months, but… they did return eventually. And as you know, Ace- sometimes, men will chase a beast into the deep woods and not come back.”

“...They surely do. -You actually know exactly what happened, don’t you.”

I smile at my brother. But- it’s not a nice smile. And I don’t say anything at all.

If anyone asks, I don’t know what Moda did. I don’t want to know what she did. I don’t even want to know what the hell all that peanut butter was for.

There are some dogs best left to lay as they are.

I have suspicions- but I wasn’t there, and I’ve never asked Moda what happened. Exactly. But there’s only so much blood that can get washed out of a pretty brown dress before you start to have ideas about how it got there- and of course, Moda wasn’t injured at all. But I don’t know what happened. Nope.
I don’t know.

Ooh, Confit Biyaldi, yes please- thank you.

Mmm. Vegetables!

“So. Last question.”

“Mmkay…?”

“Who are the Jolly Ranchers, and how are we related to them.”

“Ah. Okay, that story’s gotta wait until the whole fish- yeah, here we go. Could I have the head, please? Yes, the whole fish-head, thank you.”

“Mab…?”

“You asked, Ace. And I’m going to tell you.”

“Oh no.”

“Too late now. After all- everything happens for a reason. It’s just... sometimes, that reason is you’re stupid and make bad decisions.

“So. Aunt Zippy, seeking to educate me and the Littles about her family history, which is fairly interesting; fenna Ravelle, Aunt Zippy, the Littles who were all maybe… four or so, making me fourteen- we took a trip to the Inner Sky. The Inner Sky, Ace, is the agricultural center of Skua; and Aunt Zippy is from a county-kingdom in the Inner Sky called Enharmac Intervali. We were going, I was told, to visit Aunt Zippy’s family and take family pictures of all the places Aunt Zippy grew up. Which resulted, at one point, in all of us- including the littles on ostrich back-”

“-pfft-”

“-hiking out to a cement slab in the middle of a cornfield and Aunt Zippy saying, and I quote: ‘Well, the jukejoint used to be here.’ Which is why that picture of us all standing in front of the corn on the mantle in the-”

“-I know the one-”

“Yeah. That’s the jukejoint that fenna Ravelle and Aunt Zippy met at. Or what’s left of it.”

“Okay. That- wait. Wait wait wait- you went on a family journey through somewhere with cornfields?”

“Yep. Now, the whole trip is pretty hazy for several reasons; firstly, the summer was when I usually got sick because that’s when I’d relax enough to get sick. Secondly, we only stayed at Tiffanyan for about a week and a half, which was just enough time for me to get either flea fever or cholera- and I don’t actually remember, I was very sick but we were all going, so we went.”

“Holy shit.”

“Mm. Anyway, when I wasn’t sick because of the season, I was motion sick. The only forms of
transportation I can use without getting nauseous are my own limbs, boats of any kind, and on the back of an animal. However, because I had flea fever, cholera, and at one point, dysentery—"

Ace doesn’t have intimate knowledge of any of those; his Pops, however, does. His eyebrows have gone all the way up to his headwrapping, and he’s staring at me in… something like horrified awe.

“-excuse me, but; are you implying that at one point you had all three of those at the same time?”

“I know I did, granfaun; we had to stop in… Elegy City so I could get treatment at the Doctor Springs, which fixed me right up. The rest of the summer was much nicer after that- all twelve weeks of it.”

“…” says granfaun Whitebeard, horrified.

“So. Of the trip, I remember this: our Great-Great Aunts, Emmeline, Jessicaarat (called Jessie), and Harrietta, who sat in the back of the vanwain with me while I was so sick- and then for the rest of the trip, as I recovered, and then just because that’s where they liked to be while traveling. I mostly rode a horse, for that trip.”

“…”

“Yeah, my advice about that? Don’t ride a horse directly after having dysentery, you will regret that forever. Anyway, our Aunts were working on the humongous cathedral window quilt - the big one that’s on the back of the settee in Aunt Jessie’s house, you know the one?”

“...The map-blanket?”

“Mm.”

“Oh.”

“Right, they were still working on that during this trip- anyway, it’s entirely hand stitched and all the cloth in it is hand woven, and I still don’t entirely know how they made it so warm. It’s about...”

“Three by three and a half meters square.”

“Yep. Very comfortable to sleep under.”

“-oh my god, yes-”

“-and it was like that even half finished.

“The other thing I remember most clearly is the ungodly amount of corn.

“Everyone who has ever been to Inner Skua says that about the corn- sorry, maize, although there’s other stuff there too- but it’s one of the very few things I recall in Vivid detail. There was a musty but alive smell of it growing under the sun, and the texture of the leaves would scratch and cut my bare arms and legs if I rode the horse too close to the edges of the fields- and they’d stay scratched to hell from when I went out before dawn to breakfast, and again in the evening. The smell before rain is petrichor, and that’s from plants releasing oils into the air- and when it rained, and it did rain, the
petrichor would be so thick you could almost drown in it, and your skin and your clothes and anything wooden that wasn’t sealed and all the bridles and saddles would stink of petrichor every time they got hot after that trip. For months, in some cases.

“I remember the violence of the geometry, how straight and ordered the rows of corn would be- and then, in the blink of an eye, everything would snap into non-euclidian madness. I could never- and still can’t- get to where I intended to go if I tried to cut across the fields; I’d always end up on the wrong side of what I was aiming for, or too far past where I wanted to be- and on one occasion, on the entirely wrong property.

“Those fields are never empty, either- or you never feel like you’re alone, in them. There’s a distinct sense of the Otherworld in that place, in those fields; and there’s something deeply unnerving about being less than two meters tall in the midst of seven-meter corn. The closeness, with gaps where you can see the edge of forever, like when you’re on the open sea and can espy the curving rim of the world. The constant rustling, like you’re being pursued.

“Some things must have been paranoia; but other things… at that time, there was a Wolvark of Tiffanyan who had decided I was hers to look after. Her name was Crabapple, and… for some things, Abby had better senses than I did. More importantly, I knew that if Abby was growling at something, she meant serious business. She growled in those fields more than she did in the rest of her life, and to this day, I don’t know what at.

“Oh, yes, and this is also when I became convinced that Swans and Geese are from hell, or at the very least, are not to be trusted.”

Ace shudders.

“Oddly enough, that swan was the only thing other than corn, beans, and ground-growing gourd fruit that I ever found while walking through the fields. It was just relaxing, sitting in one of the troughs between the corn-rows; along with a flock of geese, hiding in the shade from the midday heat.

“The swan let me get within arm’s length before lifting it’s snakey neck and glaring at me dead in the eyes from it’s seat. It began a low, continuous buzzing, like bagpipes right before they scream or a swarm of honeyjackets chasing a man down to sting him to death and devour his flesh. Abby warned it- and me- with a low ‘urf’ sound- like Buttercream does when she’s noticed a Sea King getting too close, Luffy-”

“-Ah-”

“-right. The swan stared us both down for a long minute or two, before it decided it wasn’t worth bothering with, and allowed me to stay. That’s also when Abbey turned to stare deep into the rustling corn and started growling the worst she ever had.

“I noped the fuck out.

“Anyway, I also found a small ceramic otter, half buried in the furrow’s dirt- that field was a lake, before it was a field.”

“Oh, the really ugly one in Aunt Ravelle’s forge- inset in the dousing trough?”
“Yep. That’s the one. What else… Oh yeah; before then, I’d never seen lightning bugs, and didn’t believe in them until one of the Inner Skua cousins caught one for me and showed me that it was, in truth, a beetle and not the glenn about to explode from swamp gas.

“I know you remember what I traded for the lives of our Littles-”

“Aye.”

“Right. That just meant that I could never ride with any of Asteria-sama’s children, or Asteria-sama herself— I could still speak with them, and their kin, and… for reasons that are best left unsaid, I still had their eternal respect and loyalty.”

“…Is this like the thing with me and cats?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah. Say no more, I understand.”

“Right. Anyway, I really liked the lightning bugs, and they liked me— told me all kinds of things, which are mine to know alone. I also ended up following them back to what they said was an old palace of the Fae— deep through the woods, deep enough I couldn’t see the stars or the smell the smoke of the house-fires anymore. I came upon a half-rotted fence of bones and wood, covered in blackberries and snake-vines. Beyond it, I could see an abandoned troupple orchard, and smell squid berries rotting under the water. I was about to go further when an entire flock of turkeys came boiling over the fence in near complete silence— just the clacking clattering flap of their wings and the smell of musty chalk-dirt in their passing, and then they vanished in the underbrush.

“I took their lack of words as an Omen, and went back to the house we were staying at, and we left in the morning. I never have returned to that place— but, anyway, that’s enough context for the weirdest part of this trip.”

“Okay...”

“So, we’d been making our way around the county-kingdom Enharmac Intervali, and Aunt Zippy has been driving the entire time, and she turns down what I’d assumed was another dirt road when fenna Ravelle starts asking about ‘Aah, Zippy, do you actually know the people who live here?’ and Aunt Zippy said ‘Oh, Ravi, have some damn faith in people why don’t you—’ and I realized we were actually in some backwoods Inskuan’s driveway, pulling up to a house, right about when The Bull charged the vanwain.

‘TZIPPORAH THERE’S A BULL,’ shrieked fenna Ravelle, grabbing for her war-hammer and heroically yanking all the Littles, who were having lunch from the middle row of the van to the back, with the Aunts, behind the quilt— presumably in hopes it would protect us from potential impalement and trampling.

“Aunt Zippy, god love her, stopped the fucking vanwain and leaned out to look at The Bull.

“Aren’t you a handsome boy!’ she laughed, and the half-ton of angry, snorting pot roast stopped up short, blinking through it’s stupid gooey eyes, before cautiously trotting up the rest of the way and attempting to stick his head through the look-out port in the side of the vanwain for scritches and pets. He was stopped by the fact that his horns didn’t fit through the window.

“Aunt Zippy proceeded to drive the rest of the way up to the house, the bull following us all the way, before casually… getting out of the van, walking right up to the front door, and pulling the bell. A pair of the most Skuan Gothic people I’ve ever seen, ever, answered, looking fairly bewildered at the
vibrantly tattooed, curvaceous, swan-feather caped and grinning woman in front of them, offering them a long fingered hand to shake.

“My name’s Tzipporah, and I grew up on this farm- did you ever meet the Steinwain’s? I was hoping I could show my family around where I was a girl.’

“Oh my gods and goddesses,’ said Aunt Ravelle, hand over her eyes in horror because Aunt Zippy is rude as hell and always has been, “She’s going to be shot.”

“OH WELL COME ON IN!’ the Gothic Skuans shout, apparently thrilled to pieces by this development in their morning. “WE’VE GOT PIE AND LEMONADE AND AIR CONDITIONING FROM THE BASEMENT.’

“...Or not.’ fenna Ravelle shrugs, relieved. For the moment.

“So, everyone piled out of the van and into the house, which, while rustic and charming in that Skuan farmhouse way, is also crammed to bursting with more fucking memento mori than a Dutchy painting museum that got invaded by a Dia De Los Muertos parade.”

Robin, who was eating her fish steak, stops chewing and turns her entire body towards me. I look her in the face, and nod; I know how she feels about Memento Mori.

“There were taxidermy animals tucked into every conceivable corner, including places one would never assume a taxidermied animal to go. More importantly, they weren’t the tame naturalistic taxidermy of today- the highlights I can remember off the top of my head were, in order, a pair of chipmunks in a boxing ring, a small set of kittens playing indoor croquet, a group of squirrels enjoying an evening’s entertainment of cards and each other’s company, a pair of frogs in a sword fight, a group of frogs drinking and smoking- one of which was drunk, by the gods; there was a lamb with two muzzles, which was quite odd to see; there was a two headed Jabberwock cub, which was even odder; and there were, taking up two entire shelves by their own selves, a wedding procession of kittens, and a tea party of kittens.

“They had an abundance of kittens.

“I know I said that none of the taxidermy was naturalistic, but this isn’t quite correct- there were two taxidermied animals that had been posed in more or less realistic ways. The first was Lorna, the Boar’s Head, who was the door guardian and had the honor of snarling at the entrance to the mudroom. Some master of taxidermy had made her; the full fury of her fearsome scowl, the glistening slobber of her jaws, the maddened gleam in her piggy eyes- it was all still intact, and gazing at us furiously.

“We met her first- and she was so vividly realistic, her fury so potent, that Aunt Jessie- who had done quite a lot of boar-hunting in her younger years- gave a screech of affront, lowered her boar spear, and braced for a strike that would never come. The other naturalistic taxidermy was the mountain lion eating the mule deer, which was in the living room.

“There were portraits of entire groups of people that were actually their skeletons- photographic portraits, I should say. There were painted portraits of people that were- my hand to the gods- oil on crushed velvet, and studded with rhinestones. Oh, yes, and also skeletons.

“There were mannequins and dress forms covered in costumes from the hurly-burly, and flowing
cloaks as well. There were a multitude of insects pinned to glass fronted frames, and pressed flowers behind glass. There were tiny skeleton dolls peeping out of awkward corners, and much larger skeleton dolls creating visual interest in a literal wall of scythes. There was an entire hall of livestock skulls- horses, ostriches, lionbirds, dogs, cows, sheep, deer, and so on.

“And, sitting on the mantle, in pride of place and in full view, was an actual human skull-unadorned- under a removable bell-jar cover.

“I, fourteen and still high on medications, fall immediately and desperately in love with everything I see. So did Yuki, after a fashion.

“That’s Gruncle Ratham,’ the lady of the house said, fondly. ‘He’s the one that your Ma’s family sold the farm to! Of course, after he died he asked that his skull be used in all local productions of Hamlet.”

Zoro starts cackling.

“-and no one had the heart to put his skull in the tomb after the theatre two towns over burned to the ground.’

“COOL!” I say, as fenna Ravelle starts a litany of prayer with one hand firmly wrapped around the handle of her cold-iron knife and the other returned to over her eyes.

“COME ON IN FOR SOME PIE, Y’ALL.’ hollers the lord of the house from the kitchen. We all go in and there is not one, not two, but twenty pies on the table- all different kinds- and fresh milk in a pitcher and another of lemonade a third of black tea and a whole bottle of bourbon and it’s all very idyllic except for the part where the kitchen is Not Immune to the rest of the house’s theme because there’s a centerpiece of mice having tea in the center of the table. I am fucking Delighted; fenna Ravelle prayed harder.

“Aunt Zippy has decided that she’s going to enjoy this encounter, and sits down to have herself a Long Island iced tea, while Aunt Harriet and Aunt Emmaline corralled the Littles into something approaching order, and Aunt Jessie gently told Yuki not to lick the skeletons. She had a licking phase that lasted for four years-”

“Ah. I was wondering if Dosie’d ever grow out of that…”

“...She’s licking things now?”

“Mostly forge stuff, yeah.”

“…”

“Aunt Ravelle already said she’s got a place at her forge if she wants when she’s bigger.”

“Ah. Good. Anyway, we all had a grand time sitting around the table with these people, Ludo and Barbriarella, talking about the history of the farm and long-past relations and crop yeilds and so on. Except for fenna Ravelle, who is entirely Done With This; thus, when my twitchy ass gets bored and asks to go look around outside, says she’ll go with me, despite hating going on such adventures. This is due to things always going either weird or wrong.”
“...Auntie’s a homebody.”

“She really, really is. Anyway, we got outside and found Abby lounging in the water trough, because being a Wolvark that far inland during the summer is hard, and sometimes one needs to submerge in water up to the neck to cope. The Bull is displeased by the appearance of a Strange Dog lounging in his water trough, but Abby leveled him out with a look and low noise that was more thundering grumble than growl. -Just to remind him she was decidedly not Canis Lupis Familiaris, but Canis Lupis Selachimorpha, and she ate things like him and his elder cousins- Aurochs, Mark- for breakfast every day. The Bull decided he had important Bull Business on the other side of the barn.

“So, we got into the barn where there were about twenty dairy cattle having a nap in the shade that afternoon before milking, and I pointed up and shouted ‘LOOK MOM IT’S JUST LIKE TEMPLE’. Growing up mostly at school meant that, while I was- and am- thoroughly educated on the intricacies of the major World religions, my actual faith is something much more agnostic. Thus, I was fairly fuzzy on certain religious matters, and- in that moment- I naturally assumed that the gaunt, rather tortured looking figure hanging from the rafters was a saint of some kind.

“It was not.

“It was, I would later learn, a sculpture of Graunt Magretti, wife of Ratham-on-the-mantle, who had a wild sense of humor and had left instructions that she wanted to be strung up to watch over her beloved herd of cattle and also to terrify any would-be rustlers. Her family, one supposes, had the good sense to not leave an actual corpse hanging from the rafters, but whoever made that sculpture did a Damn Fine Job in capturing the pants-shitting terror Magretti had been after.”

I’ve had the fish head ready on a long fork for just this moment. I hold it up, having removed the eyes, and turn it so that it gets a good, empty socketed look at the entire table, before it leers at me in cooked fishy disdain.

“Mom tried to haul me out of there but I was much more interested in the cows, and their peaceful eyes, and I merrily fed them scattered bits of hay and alfalfa through the bars of the queuing area, just before the milking stall- some of those cows were friendly enough to let me give them scratches, which was nice. And all of this was under the watchful, sepulchral, eyeless sockets of Graunt Magretti.”

And then I waggle the fish head.

Ace is crying, he’s laughing so hard- and it’s the real, soulful kind of laughter that comes from a deep and healthsome place. When I did the thing with the fish-head, his pops started laughing too, like he just couldn’t help himself anymore.

Robin is wheezing with laughter, and Zoro hasn’t stopped cackling this whole time. Nami is giggling; Usopp is trying very hard not to choke; Chopper is losing his shit.

Sanji has covered his eyes with his hand as he laughs because this story is rude as hell but it’s also really fucking hilarious, which is why I don’t mind telling it. Luffy and Mark are leaning on each other and crying with laughter, and so are Taffy and Gurry. Bryony is laughing, but also getting a
call- ah, good girl, duty before discretion, and off she trots.

I put down the fish-head.

“I also found a nest of pitch-black kittens, a white and very arthritic hound that managed to get up and follow me around the ranch anyway, and a fat, green-black rooster that came up to my knees and wanted shoulder scratches.

“There were various other odd decorations scattered around the property- the large, wrought-iron sculpture in the middle of the duck pond was particularly choice. Mom actually liked that, of all things- it was constructed of several arches and a few curled spikes, so that when viewed all together with a reflection on a still day, it formed an eye.

“I had a splendid afternoon; Mom did not, excepting the iron statue.

“When I got back to the vanwain, the Aunts had added another seventeen cathedral windows to the quilt out of spite. The littles were napping underneath it, exhausted from the sudden weird excitement of the day. And, after hauling Abby out of the water trough, we patted The Bull Goodbye and left with some lovely family history, cool new friends, and a fenna Ravelle that was spitting mad.”

“...uh?”

“She got chiggers, which always leave really awful welts on her skin, and she got them all over her body. Anyway, Ludo and Barbriarella died a while back; still, them and Aunt Zippy kept a correspondence going for as long as they knew each other. I’m still friends with their grand-daughter, Thalia. She’s turned the farm into a horse-ranch for retired and abused race-horses, and to that end, gifted me the entire contents of the house and environs- memento mori kitsch, yard art, and barn watcher. Everything.”

“...I’ve been to the Attic at Tiffanian, and that’s-”

“Okay, so. Harry Morgan hated taxidermy. Couldn’t stand it; nor skeletons, or any of the other amazing things from that farm. So. It all went to my rooms at Ultima Thule, where it’s remained ever since. And now that the entire palace is mine, I’ve been renovating. We have some really cool shit in storage, and it’s nice to see it back in it’s ancestral home.”

“...so, what you’re saying is that after pissing off your abusive mother in a thousand and one little ways, just because you could; and after she died... you’ve now got a really big, really haunted house full of dead things that stare at you all the time, and your yard is full of creepy shit?”

“Mhm. Oh, and to answer your question- those were the Jolly Ranchers, and we aren’t actually related in any way, except that we liked each other and kept in touch.”

And then I smile at my brother, and eat the rest of my fish. Mm. Fish cheeks; so good. So tender.

Duty before Discretion; sorry, everyone.
“Chopper, finish that and get ready- we’ve got a ruptured spleen in a patient with S- blood-”

“Ah hell- goddamnit, I was- yeah, I’m- snarf-!”

“Taffy, you’re the one with the most surgical expertise besides Chopper-”

“Yis, on it- snarf-!”

“Gurry, you’re on anaesthetics-”

“Um, right-”

“Sanji, Mab- you’ve got the only appropriate blood type and are the only one who can possibly transport everyone and everything fast enough-”

“On it- pass me the spinach dip, please-”

“Right; my sincere apologies, everyone-” I say before gesturing sharply at the servant to get out of my way and standing.

“-is someone dying?” I hear Ace ask as I stride towards an open area of the dining hall.

“Yes, one of our cabin crew- Captain, you need to stay here, this is like a Captain’s meeting-” starts Bryony.

“-My crew is more important than-” starts Captain.

“-and you’ll just be in the way if you go, D needs surgery, not people punched; A already did the punching for her.” finishes Bryony, to Luffy’s suddenly considering frown.

“-D’s hurt!!?” cry the girls in terror.

“Girls, if you’re coming, you need to come over here with me right now.” I call out. B, C, F, and G come piling all around me, skidding across the floor and thoroughly breaking the illusion of their propriety- no one runs quite like an akasenko; it’s a fairly obvious darting stride that, once you see and know for what it is, can never be unseen. I click my tongue like Teacher Easeelie taught me, back in school- and the girls immediately silence themselves.

“Take a firm grasp of my skirts, please; go ahead and crowd in close, I usually do this with boats and cargo and just myself- right, who’s going?” I call out to Bryony.

“Myself; Sanji, Taffy, Gurry, Chopper, and- great, you’ve got the girls. Chopper, you ready?”

“Yeah- ready.”

“Okay- Captain, take the snail- I’ll call as soon as we get there, and keep you updated on things as they develop. Yes?”
Captain takes a long deep breath, then says “Yes. I trust you guys. See you when you get back.”

Bryony nods, passes out more snails, then looks at me.

I look at her, and nod.

“Ride or die.” I say.

And then I close my eyes and Blink us to the dining room of the Mermaid Cafe, right as the Owner of the Cafe, Madame Shyarly, starts berating- hello, Keimi.

“We’re here to help D, Kei.”

“Yeah, great, get the hell down already-”

“No, it draws more attention if we act shady- everyone, just stay calm and move quickly but calmly towards where Chopper’s already going- Taffy, Gurry, go right after him, you too Sanji-”

“Yis!”

“Uh, yeah-”

“Love you, see you soon.”

“Mm. Keimi, please take Bryony, myself, and the girls to a nice Shrug; I know you have one available, even if it hasn’t been cleaned yet-”

“-Uh, y-yes, sure- right over here, please sit down. Um, a server will be by with menus, but i-is there anything I need to know?”

“Yes. There are probably going to be four more people added to our party proper- and for those in the Sanitary, at least one is going to need blood replenishing food.”

“Ah- who, if I may ask?”

“Sanji; he’s got the right blood type for the mermaid girl who needs surgery, and they’ve used up all the S- they had just keeping her alive until Chopper could get here-”

“-S-sorry, sorry- Sanji, your husband, the Lanjin, is giving blood to a mermaid? Have I got that right?”

“Yes…? What else would he do?”

Keimi blinks at me, wide eyed, then she really looks at the girls, and gasps. I blink at her some more.

Wait a second- fuck! I forgot my glasses on the dining room table!
Fuck!

I won’t be able to read the menu at all!
Skullcracking Good

As a child, my greatest fear was “to fail”.

That’s deeply Skuan. It’s because that’s the great expectation- to be Skuan, to be Fae at all- is to fail. To fail when you need to succeed; to fail in your duty, to fail in upholding your honor… to fail to die. These things are more Fae than any other; it’s bound deep in our blood and our Lines, and it doesn’t let go.

If you’re Fae, you’re going to be less - if you’re Skuan, you’re going to fail more. It’s old, and deep, a certainty sunk into the marrow of your bones- it’s in you, it’s part of who you are. In everything you do, in everything you leave behind- Fae, and Skuans, fail.

We don’t get what we want; we don’t do what we needed to do- we fail.

I did.

Spadey did.

Ace did too.

That’s what it means to be Fae. To be a Fairy, of the Fae- that’s no different. There’s a bit added to it, though- how to say it…

When I fly through the air, I know that when the Wind comes- and the Wind always comes- it’s going to take me down to bones and marrow. It’ll strike through my skin and my muscles, pluck on every sinew and nerve, right down to the bones and marrow- and the Wind will just keep coming, until I break because it will not.

I’ve got to lift my wings and put my back to the Wind, let it push me forwards- because that’s what you do when the World starts to howl. You rise, and turn your back to the Wind.

That’s the zone where you learn to make fear your very best friend. You learn to hold that fear really close and tight to yourself, press it to the backside of your heart; and in doing so, you learn to break your own soul open to the belief, the adamant faith, that you can make it. That you can do it.

The first thing a Fairy learns when they learn to fly is the fear of failure- because, if a Fairy fails to fly, they Fall. In Skua, that means you die- because to Fall is to fall all the way down, beyond the clouds- to the place where you can’t come back from. The second thing is to believe in themselves, if they’re to fly at all.

For a long time, Skuans were thought to be somehow less sophisticated and knowledgeable than the other Blue-dwellers. We ended up in the Sky because of some disaster, and were too stupid to find a way back down. The truth is, there was a terrible disaster; but my ancestors left the lower Blues intentionally, and they found many ways to stay alive in Sky Blue.

The only challenge our people have never had problems overcoming is “staying alive”; everything else is just a part of that. For example- the Fae preoccupation with ‘beauty treatments’ is actually what happens when your people leave their homelands with nothing, no tools, no food, not even the clothes on their backs in some cases; and then it takes thirty or forty generations of people to figure
out how to grow food in the sky, much less clothing. Or any kind of weapon.

It took more than a thousand years for my people to remember how to make clothing, after the Giants Came. In that time, it was discovered that if care was taken with one’s skin, and hair, and nails, then one had a way to stay warm, or cool; one had something to carry and hold things with, that wasn’t one’s hands. One had deadly weapons that could not be taken from them.

There’s a reason the rudest gestures of my people require all the fingers- or all the toes, depending on where you are. It took another five hundred years for there to be enough food to regulate the consumption of our dead into ceremony- we only really eat corpse-meat now for funerals, and even that’s slowly being left behind in favor of… not scapegoats… sacrifices! It’s being altered, those ceremonies- instead of killing the dancer at High Summer, they bleed them instead, with leeches; and so on.

To be Skuan means you have a deep and unshakeable connection to place, and time; to stories passed down through generations; to music, and food, and the business of life; and to the endless Turning of the Wheel. There’s a sense of responsibility, too; to your place, to your time, to the people who are yours, to your life; to the Wheel, and it’s Turning. To blood.

Honor is another way of saying honesty- a contract you bind yourself to. Honoring a place, and what you love- being honest to a place, and honest about what you love. It’s about what you value- glory? No, not me. I value people, and relationships, and… children. Babies. Friends. Those are my treasures.

It’s a Wind that’s constantly shifting under your wings; and you, flying on it, with it, in it, are constantly checking and rechecking what you Know, becoming more and more informed- more… present. For me, sometimes I don’t know how to be fully honest, or honorable, because I just don’t Know enough.

What I love- sewing, the Sea, my husband and friends- that’s my path. I go out to Sea to seek that sense of… of Truth, of Reality.

I have to Know.

I have to Know who I am, beyond the World of the Sky.

My burn’s going to scar. On the one hand, having a friend who’s perfectly willing to permanently scar you, all to keep you from dying- that’s amazing. I’m really glad I have a friend like that.

On the other hand, my burn is throbbing exactly in time with my heartbeat.

On the gripping hand, I’ll certainly never forget to be wary in a tomb again, so- a light punishment for my own overconfidence, I think.

Luffy, Usopp, and Mark are all talking with Bryony over the phone. Ace and his father, Whitebeard, are trying- and failing- to pretend they aren’t interested.
The Princes and the King are all having a very quiet, very fast conversation in Merrow, the language of the Sea; I can only catch about one in every four or five words, but the general gist is disbelief that a Lanjin would give his blood to a mermaid- particularly an akasenko.

They don't know Sanji at all, do they?

This dinner party is… fairly boring, honestly; now that the interesting players have departed. This last course is the dessert course; sweet meats from clams and whelks, fish eggs, fruit, and hard crunchy pastries that are bright, lurid colors.

I ate some fruit to be polite, but this really isn’t to my taste.

Birds, then.

Some cultures associate birds with birth, claiming that a person’s soul arrives in the World in the form of a bird. Skuans believe that a person’s soul is brought into and out of this World on the Wind- thus, the first and last breath. However, the belief in birds being souls of those not yet born is oldest; thus, the traditional answer to a child’s question of “Where do babies come from?” is “The Stork brings them,” although sometimes it’s a goose or swan.

Birds are also linked, almost inextricably, with death. Carrion birds such as vultures, crows, and ravens, have always been connected to hunting, death, battle, disaster, and war. The Fae have always been bird people; thus, their highest rulers- the Royals- have been bird-like as well. ‘The Queen of Ravens’, ‘The Queen of Swans’; even Mab’s title, ‘Queen of Wrens’, is a reference to the avian.

Symbolically, the phoenix is the combined image of birth and death; thus, it is a symbol of eternity. In actuality, regular phoenixes are fairly well studied animals, closely related to pheasants and peacocks. Phoenix Feather Ash does have powerful curative properties, and is part of a Witch’s potionering supplies- but they’re birds. There’s far more than just one of the things, and they aren’t born in fire.

Still, there is an enduring idea of souls and birds together- especially after death. Some birds act as guides in the afterlife. In Alabasta, near Erumalu, figures of eagles on tombs represent the guides that lead souls to heaven. In Automatic tradition, the soul guiding bird is a dove.

In some cultures, it was thought that the soul, once freed from the body, took the form of a bird. The Ancient Sandorans believed that the soul, or ba, could leave the dead body in the form of a bird, often a hawk. They built their graves and tombs with narrow shafts leading to the open air so that these birds could fly in and out, keeping watch on the body.

The feather cloaks that most Sirens wear are actually representations of their soul’s place in the hierarchy of their community, while their feathered earrings and hair-ornaments are representations of themselves.

Because of their great size and strength, eagles have been associated with royal or imperial souls. Some ancient peoples, including the Germa, would release an eagle at a ruler's funeral. As it rose into the sky the mighty bird was seen as the ruler's spirit taking its place in the heavens.

The Djinn and Faerie thought that the dead could reappear as birds. The Goans of ancient Est
believed that the dead existed as birds in the underworld. Birds also appear in Cherubic mythology as symbols of the soul or as forms taken by the soul between earthly lives. The connection between birds and souls is sometimes reflected in language. A Skuan saying describes somebody's death as "flown away," although the more common phrase is “they’ve fallen”.

Under certain conditions, the living can be transformed into birds. In some cultures, it was believed that druids, witches, shamans, priests, and prophets could change themselves into birds during trances or other mystical states. In Faerie mythology- legend, really- both deities and the supernatural beings called the Fay were said to have the power to transform themselves into birds- among other things.

Some legends involve birds that change into or inhabit the bodies of humans. The god Quetzalcoatl, from Shandia, is a combination of bird and serpent- and appears as a culture hero or a god in human form in Birka, Shandia, and Angeli myths. Among certain people's in northern Est and Nort, the spirits of birds such as eagles, owls, and crows are said to enter the bodies of witches and shamans, giving them great power.

Sometimes, humans and other beings acquire the ability to fly like birds. Such supernatural flight, like many mythological powers, can be either good or evil. Orc tales told that the goddess Freya's feather cloak enabled the wearer to fly. Norten tradition portrayed angels with wings like those of birds, but devils often had bat wings- in truth, either tribe can have either kind of wing.

Shimotsuki mythology includes a group of winged deities known as tengu. Part bird and part human, they live in forests and occasionally use their powers to play tricks on people.

Birds in mythology sometimes have the ability to speak. These talking birds, often sources of wisdom, may be deities in bird form or simply messengers of the deities. Either way, their advice is generally sound, and humans ignore it at their peril. Birds warn of dangers ahead, reveal secrets, and guide heroes and travelers on their way. Birds do not always speak in human languages; many stories tell of people who gain the power to understand the language of birds. In Djinn mythology, a snake licked the ears of the prophet Cassandra, who could then understand what the birds were saying. After tasting the magical blood of a slain dragon, the Germa hero Siegfried knew what the forest birds were saying.

Some birds are believed to have special powers of telling the future or revealing the will of the gods. Magpies, ravens, and doves appear in myth as oracles. Avesta are bird-shaped clay oracle bones, generally blessed in some manner and used by Seers. The Hottentot people of Sout believe that the hammerhead, a wading bird, can see reflections of the future in pools of water. When the bird learns that someone is about to die, it flies to the person's home and gives three cries of warning.

Certain birds appear over and over again in the world's myths and legends, although not always in the same roles. The crow and its close relative the raven, for example, have a number of different meanings. In some cultures, they are oracles and symbols of death. In Orc mythology, Odin was always accompanied by two wise ravens that told him everything that happened on earth. According to Djinn mythology, the feathers of crows and ravens were originally white, but the god Apollo punished the birds—either for telling secrets or for failing in their duty as guardians—by turning them black.
For some cultures, such as the Tsimshian people of the Pacific Wes, Raven is both a trickster and a culture hero. Sometimes his antics shake up the gods and the established order of the universe, and sometimes they backfire and get him into trouble. Often, though, Raven's deeds benefit humankind, as in the legend of how Raven brought light into the world. After finding the hiding place where the Creator kept the moon, the stars, and daylight, Raven released them so that they could shine on the world.

The majestic eagle, sometimes called the king of birds, usually has divine or royal associations in myth. Images from the ancient Est and Sandora show the sun with an eagle's wings, a sign that the bird was linked to the sun god. The eagle was also a symbol of Jupiter, the supreme Souten deity, and a sign of strength and courage. By adopting the eagle as their symbol, kings from ancient to recent times have tried to suggest that they, too, had some divine or heroic qualities.

Stories of eagles fighting snakes or dragons represent the tension between light and darkness, heavenly and underworld forces. In the myths of various peoples, the eagle is a culture hero, a hunter or a tornado transformed into a bird, and the spirit of war and hunting. The eagle was also the great culture hero of Orc mythology.

In ancient Est and to the Djinn, the dove is a symbol of love and fertility, often associated with goddesses of love such as the Djinn Aphrodite. In Goa, doves represent tranquility and faithfulness in marriage, while in Skua they symbolize the soul.

When owls appear in mythology, their meaning is often uncertain and complex, neither all good nor all bad. Owls are symbols of wisdom, patience, and learning, yet because they hunt at night, they are associated with secrecy and darkness. In Goa they are seen as signs of coming misfortune. According to many cultures, the hooting of an owl in the day is an omen of death.

Early cultures in Sout regarded owls as sacred to the rain god, but later the Birkans of the same region viewed them as evil night demons. Some legends portray owls as destructive and malicious; others show them as helpful beings who warn people of dangers.

The stories may include a person who is transformed into an owl. In the creation myth of the Longarms, an owl resolves a bitter quarrel between men and women, allowing the creation of the human race.

Bats also symbolize both good and evil in mythology. Est legends link the bat with good fortune. A group of five bats represents five causes of happiness: wealth, health, long life, virtue, and a natural death. In various other cultures, however, bats are often connected with witches or evil spirits, and demons are pictured with bat wings. Of course, once one knows only female demons are supposed to have bat wings, things start to take on a very different slant...

As for why I remember so much about the legends and myths surrounding birds… It all comes back to the Deathless Hoyl Bird. Unlike the phoenix, which is fairly common if hard to pick out from the tern or gannet- a hoyl is a truly mythical creature, possibly something that has gone extinct since it was made into a legend.

After Adam and Eve- who were only distant kin to Galatea, Our Mother- ate of the forbidden fruit of Knowing, the Apple Tree, Adam offered the fruit to all of the animals in the garden, called Eden. The hoyl bird was the only one that refused to eat the fruit that the God of that place had said must never be eaten. As a reward, two things happened- the first was that the child of the bird was turned into a man named Ohara, and Ohara was given leave to eat of the Apple Tree. The second was that the bird received a kind of immortality. The hoyl bird never dies; only sleeps, after which a fire may
destroy it.

However, it’s egg remains, and from that egg a full-grown hoyl hatches anew.

So too is it with knowledge, and the knowing of things—so long as someone, somewhere, wants to tell someone they might never meet how a thing is to be done, then so too will books exist.

Other birds have special meanings in myths. Swans, with their white feathers and graceful appearance, often serve as symbols of purity and feminine beauty. Both Celtic and Norse mythology included tales of women who turned into swans. Male peacocks, endowed with splendid tail feathers, can suggest either foolish vanity or divine glory. In legends from India, they often appear being ridden by one of the gods.

Sss! My burn just throbbed but sharp—why—?

BOOOM!

“That’s the Hard Shell Tower—”

“Sir, he’s at it again—no real damage, but the dampening slates are starting to wear—”

“Fukaboshi, handle it.”

“Yes, Father.”

And off the prince swims.

Mab gave me the Tomb Talisman to hold on to, said that as our Archaeologist, I would be the one best suited to the care of artefacts. I think she just wanted one less thing in her pockets, but it is a curious little artefact.

The main body of it is made of clay, pressed into a flattened, angled loop shape. There are seven distinct Keystones, and the whole thing looks very much like a goddess-talisman. It bears a distinctive vulva shape, as well as a clitoral imagining in a light colored clay.

It was a female oriented device, much like a skeleton key, or one of Mab’s master chains for her loom; it was meant to be…a master key, or a master-copy. I’m fairly certain that it can open any door bearing the Royal style locks I saw in the Tomb, and again during the wait for this dinner party. If I were a spy, assassin, or infiltrator, this little loop of clay would be positively invaluable.

Mab gave it to me to care for and look after.

I swear to the gods, if we weren’t already friends, this would make us be friends.
It’s- chiming?

“Where did you get that!?!?” snarls the Minister of the Left, before cutting off any reply I might have made with “That’s private property of the Mortimer family, who did you steal that from you filthy pirate scum.”

“Faldorean gave it to me, after Queen Mab freed his grandam, Sidre, from this earthly plain.”

“what. What. -mother- What’s happened to mother’s ghost?”

“Well-”

August of our first summer in the Backcountry of Germa was spent in La Teste sur Mer, a tiny oyster village mostly inhabited by Gyojin and Merfolk, out on the Bassin d’Arcachon in the Gironde. We stayed with my grandmother, Grand-mere Lily, and my uncle, Oncle Vahn, in the same white stuccoed house where my- He had spent his boyhood. Grand-mere Lily was a frumpy, bespectacled, chain-smoking old woman who could pin your hand to the table with a throwing knife through your shirtsleeve; Oncle Vahn, with hair like a dandelion and a permanent hunch whenever He was in the room, in coveralls and moth-eaten t-shirts, smoking hand-rolled cigars until they disappeared into chunks of char in between his puckered lips, was the one who made sure we kept our education up and had a good understanding of where everything in the village was.

I always liked Oncle Vahn.

Little had ever actually changed in La Teste in the years since He had grown up there; the neighbors are still all oyster fishermen, or pearl divers. Everyone still raises rabbits and grows vine apples in their backyards. Houses there have two kitchens, one for indoors and one outside just for fish. There’s always a hand pump for drinking water from a well, and an outhouse by the rear of the garden.

I remember it clearly, because of all of us, I was the happiest to be there. After Mother died, He was- inconsolable. So, after a few days where he didn’t get out of bed, Reiju called Grand-mere, and she came up in her creaking van drawn by rhylisks, and she went into that dark and stinking room. I heard- something. My- Him- my father, crying, maybe. He came out in clothing that more or less fit him, and Grand-mere said something to our Majordomo, and- I guess before I knew it, me, my brothers, my sister, and Father were in the van, and our most needed things were to arrive a few days after we did.

And then we stayed that whole year- two, really- in La Teste, for grief’s sake.

I was reasonably happy there. Without Father’s attention, our training- testing- was allowed to lapse, which allowed all of us to just… be. The beaches were warm, with soft white sand and stony patches. There were tide pools filled with life, and seashells for the collecting. Niji learned to tumble that summer, and how to juggle, and began to harbor a secret ambition to join the circus. Yonji learned all about the joys of racing lizards, and eventually other creatures. Reiju took up… I think watercolors? It might have been ink drawings with watercolor washes, it’s been a long time. And no one cared that Ichiji had wings and a tail, or that his eyes were mismatched. He smiled, there; he
smiled, then.

He decided he was a 'he', and everyone went with it.

We used to have what we’d call ‘wizard battles’ with pétards, firecrackers, which would fire even when wet and could be bought in a pack of thirty for a bit less than five hundred beri. Niji has *exceptional* aim; and even then, I was basically immune to burns.

There was a forest within walking distance of the town where an actual hermit lived, and Ichiji and I spent hours there; me as his lookout, and him talking with the learned man at the entrance to his cave.

Until that point, I’d only ever read *Opk*, but by the third week or so at Grand-mères, I could read French. A whole world of books and ideas had opened to me, and suddenly some of Mab’s letters made much more sense. And, of course, I was eating—really eating, not just… refueling.

Murky brown soupe de poisson that hasn’t changed since the first inkeeper’s wife made it, not in three hundred years; pineapple salad, the pineapple picked fresh from the garden and chopped under the benevolent supervision of Oncle Vahn. Moules Marinières, poulet basquaise, because we were only a few miles from the Basque country.

It was the first time I had real Fairy food; old fashioned stuff Mab hardly ever lets me make, oyster chowder in murky brown broth, boiled bone stew, pottage—well, no, I make pottage every day.

We made day trips to Cap Ferret, a wild, deserted and breathtakingly magnificent northern beach with big rolling waves, taking along baguettes and saucissons and wheels of cheese, wine and corked bottles of spring water. A few miles west was Lac Cazeaux, a freshwater lake where my brothers and my sister and I could rent pédalo watercraft. We ate gaufres, delicious hot waffles, covered in whipped cream and powdered sugar. The two hot songs of that summer on the Cazeaux jukebox were *Whiter Shade Of Pale* by Procol Harum and *These Boots Were Made For Walkin’* by Nancy Sinatra. The villagers played those two songs over and over again, the music punctuated by the sonic booms from FaME undergraduates that would swoop over the lake on their way to a nearby bombing range.

When our neighbour, Monsieur Saint-Jour, the oyster fisherman, invited my siblings and I out on his penas (oyster boat), I was enthusiastic.

At six in the morning, we boarded Monsieur Saint-Jour's small wooden vessel with our picnic baskets and our sensible footwear. He was a crusty old bastard, dressed like my uncle in ancient denim overalls, espadrilles and worn out shirt. He had a leathery, tanned and windblown face, hollow cheeks, and the tiny broken blood vessels on his nose and cheeks that everyone seemed to have from drinking so much of the local Bordeaux. A ridge of spines across his ears and brow marked his ancestry as maybe a little more oceanic than polite society preferred; but we weren’t in polite society, out there, and nothing was said of it.

We puttered out to a buoy marking his underwater oyster parc, a fenced-off section of the bay bottom, and we sat... and sat... and sat, in the blazing September sun, waiting for the tide to go out. The idea was to float the boat over the stockaded fence walls, then sit there as the boat slowly sank with the water level, until it rested on the basin floor. At this point, Monsieur Saint-Jour would rake the oysters, collect a few good specimens for sale in port, and remove any parasites that might be endangering his crop.
There was, I recall, still about two feet of water left to go before the hull of the boat settled on dry ground and we could walk about the parc. We'd already polished off the Brie and baguettes, but I was still hungry, and characteristically said so.

Monsieur Saint-Jour, on hearing this - as if challenging his Noble-born passengers - inquired in his thick Girondais accent if any of us would care to try an oyster.

My siblings hesitated. I doubt they'd realised they might have actually to eat one of the raw, slimy things we were currently floating over. My little brother Yonji recoiled in horror.

But I, in the proudest moment of my young life, stood up smartly, grinning with defiance, and volunteered to be the first.

And in that unforgettably sweet moment, that one moment still more alive for me than so many of the other "firsts" that followed - first sex, first smoke, first day in the kitchen as a chef - I attained glory. Monsieur Saint-Jour beckoned me over to the gunwale, where he leaned over, reached down until his head nearly disappeared underwater, and emerged holding a single silt-encrusted oyster, huge and irregularly shaped, in his rough, clawlike fist. I mean, he had actual claws, but-

With a snubby, rust-covered oyster knife, he popped the thing open and handed it to me, everyone watching now, my little brother shrinking away from this glistening, vaguely sexual-looking object, still dripping and nearly alive.

I took it in my hand, tilted the shell back into my mouth as instructed by the by now beaming Monsieur Saint-Jour, and with one bite and a slurp wolfed it down. It tasted of seawater - of brine and flesh - and, somehow... of the future.

Everything was different now.

Everything.

I'd not only survived - I'd enjoyed.

This, I knew, was the magic I had until now been only dimly and spitefully- longingly- aware of. I was hooked. My siblings' shudders, my little brother's expression of unrestrained revulsion and amazement only reinforced the sense that I had, somehow, become a man. I'd had an adventure, tasted forbidden fruit, and everything that followed in my life - the food, the long and often stupid and self-destructive chase for the next best thing, whether it was drugs or sex or some other new sensation - would all stem from this moment.

I'd learned something.

Viscerally, instinctively, spiritually - even in some small, precursive way, sexually - and there was no turning back. The genie was out of the bottle. My life as a cook, and as a chef, had begun.

Ow. That's a really big needle, and it's- in my vein now, and the blood is pumping out of me. I'll leave the doctoring to Chopper, but as I understand it... due to how quickly I, in particular, can replace the blood in my body, it's better if I act as a blood-bag for this surgery than anything else. I'm eating liver and onions, chopped spinach and kale, and enough tea to drown in for basically this entire evening. I'm also to lounge insouciantly on this warming stove's top for the rest of the night, barring other complications.
So, I’ve been thinking about things I remember, things my dad Zeff told me… just. Stuff.

So, in 1681 (which was a bit more than forty years ago), Zeff’s good friend from culinary school, Banban, became the chef de cuisine of a restaurant named Work in Progress. A once-trendy restaurant on the Water Main Canal in Water 7, the place had fallen on hard times and needed new blood to kick things back in shape. Banban- one of us! as Zeff would say- was in charge of finding that new blood. He said it was what a lot of his contemporaries had been waiting for, their own thing; and so the call went out to all Zeff’s old cronies. From Capetown, Nuevo Pariso, where dad had his first job as a dishwasher came Enrique, enticed by excited promises of culinary history in the making. From Wall district saloons, bars, bordellos, and hurly-burlies, they recruited every young, pot-smoking, skull-cracking chav they’d ever worked with or punched out, filling their heads with dreams of glory.

They fancied themselves the most knowledgeable and experienced young Orcs in town, and their hearts were filled with hope and the promise of magnificence. They thought they were the only cooks in Water 7 who could quote from the Larousse Gastronomique and Répertoire de la Cuisine, who knew who Vatel, Carme and Escoffier were, what Bocuse, Vergé and Guérard were doing across the World, and they were determined to replicate their successes and their fame. There was no one on the horizon they could see who could touch them.

Dad Zeff never really tried to hide the fact that when he was a young teen, he did a stupendous amount of heroin. I’ve tried basically everything you can get in Est, which is surprisingly light, as far as drugs go- mostly what Mab and Brook call stink-weed, better known as Mary Jane or Marijuana. Tried it. Got very hungry, a little more relaxed than normal, and that’s about it. Fun in small doses. Opium is a bit of a different beast. I- honestly, I don’t recommend it. After my first few hits, the soothing rush kinda… tapered off, and I never really felt the need to chase that high, so. Eh. Not my thing.

Anyway, the new owners of Work in Progress, Zeff and the gang’s putative masters, were a textbook example of People Who Should Never Own A Restaurant. There were two brothers - one half-smart, the other genuinely dumb - who'd gotten a few bucks from Mommy and Daddy, along with their partner, a slightly more cognizant college friend who could actually read a P and L sheet and crunch a few numbers. Their principal business was investing in off-Tinpan Alley stars. As this, apparently, wasn't unprofitable enough, they'd chosen the restaurant business as a way to lose their money more quickly and assuredly.

From the get-go, Banban, Enrique and Zeff managed to intimidate the partner's right out of their own restaurant. At every suggestion from this novice triumvirate, we'd snort with contempt, roll our eyes with world-weary derision and shoot down whatever outrage- be it tablecloths, flatware or menu items- they'd come up with. They fought all the time, Banban, Enrique, and Zeff. Waving our cookbooks at each other, we'd squabble endlessly over the "correct" way to prepare certain dishes. They teased, poked, prodded, sulked, conspired and competed. They wanted to be the best, they wanted to be different but, at the same time, correct. They came up with the looniest, most ambitious menu our endorphin-overloaded brains could agree on, a sort of 'Greatest Hits Of Our Checkered Careers So Far' collection.

French classics sat side-by-side with Far-Est squid stew, dishes they'd lifted out of cookbooks, stolen from other chefs, remembered seeing in the papers and reading about in pulpies. There were Wellfleet oysters on the halfshell, there was a pasta dish from Mario's - a sort of taglierini with trail-mix and anchovies, as Zeff would tell me, but, having actually been to Mario's I think that was a haze of drugs talking, not an actual menu item- scallops in sorrel sauce (from Bocuse, maybe?),
calves' liver with raspberry-vinegar sauce, swordfish with black beans and white rice, pompano en papillote…

They were high all the time, sneaking off to the walk-in at every opportunity to "conceptualise". Hardly a decision was made without drugs. They worked long hours and took considerable pride in their efforts - the drugs, they thought, having little effect on the end-product. That was what the life they were in was about, they believed. They might’ve been tripping out on blotter acid, sleepless for three days and halfway through a bottle of Stoli, but they were professionals, goddammit! They didn’t let it affect their line work- ...and they were happy, truly happy, like Henry V’s lucky few, a band of brothers, ragged, slightly debauched warriors, who anticipated nothing less than total victory - an Agincourt of the mind and stomach.

That’s not what happened, not really, but- that’s what they believed.

They were pretty busy initially and, along with the young protégés who held them in something like awe, Banban, Enrique and Zeff would work all day and late into the night. When the restaurant closed, they’d take over the bar, drinking Champagne- which they’d buy at cost- and running fat rails of coke from one end of the bar to the other, then crawling along on all-fours to snort them. Zeff, who worried about burning out his nose, switched at some point to shooting up with heroin. The cuter and more degenerate members of the floor staff would hang with them, so there was a lot of humping in the dry-goods area and on the banquettes, 50-pound flour sacks being popular staging areas for after-work copulation.

A squadron of hard rocker junkie guitar heroes ate for free at Work in Progress - so they got free tickets and backstage passes to the Mudd Club, CBGB, Tier Three, Hurrah, Club 57 and so on. And when the clubs closed it was off to after-hours, where they’d drink and do more drugs until, weather permitting, they’d hit the seven o’clock ferry to Sweet Beach. They’d finish the last of their smack on the train, then pass out on the beach. Whichever one of them woke from the nod would roll the others over to avoid an uneven burn. When they finally arrived back at work, sand in their hair, they looked tanned, rested and ready.

They considered themselves a tribe, all their own. As such, they had a number of unusual customs and rituals all their own. If you cut yourself in the Work in Progress kitchen, tradition called for maximum spillage and spray on the jackets and aprons of comrades. As Zeff told me, one would squeeze the wound until it ran freely, then hurl great gouts of red spray on everyone in the vicinity. They loved blood in their kitchen; more than half the staff was Backcountry Fae.

If one was dented badly, it was no disgrace; they’d stencil a little cut-out shape of a chef knife under one’s station to commemorate the event. After a while, one would have a little row of those knives, like a prize fighter. The house cat- a champion mouser- got her own stencil of a small mouse shape sprayed on the wall by her water bowl, signifying confirmed kills.

Apparently, she brought a baby rabbit and several squirrels back too, which got their own stencils. She was also responsible for the occasional trail of blood smeared over the floor.

They cared little for managers or owners- or customers, for that matter.

Unsurprisingly, their restaurant was rapidly failing. Zeff began to see, for the very first time, what he’d describe to me as ‘Failing Restaurant Syndrome’, an affliction that causes owners to flail around looking for a quick fix, a masterstroke that will ‘turn things around’ and reverse the already irreversible trend toward insolvency. They tried New World Brunch- complete with Merrow band. They tried a prix fixe menu, a Sunday night buffet, they advertised and they hired a publicist. Each
successive brainstorm from the idea Fairy was more counterproductive than the one before it.

When the paychecks started bouncing, and the vendors started to put them on COD (cash on delivery), the owners called in the restaurant consultants. Even then, they knew what that meant: the consultants usually arrive just ahead of the repo men and the marshals. It was the death knell. They’d tried. They’d failed. Naturally, they held the owners responsible. It was a tough spot, the ambiance was no good, the music in the dining room sucked, the waiters weren’t well trained… But the truth was, they just weren’t good enough. Their food, while charming to some, was unappealing to most. They did not commit seppuku. Banban and Enrique stayed on, determined to go down with the ship.

But Zeff’s cousin had hooked him up with his very first chef job, at a spanking-new but already troubled bote in the theatre district, and he jumped at the offer. He told me that he felt bad about leaving his friends behind; and that he had the beginnings of a very nasty little heroin habit from all the dope he’d been shooting - but hey! He was about to become a chef!

It’s one of the central ironies of my dad’s career that as soon as he got off heroin, things started getting really bad. High on dope, he was at least a chef, well paid, much liked by crew and floor and owners alike. Stabilised on methadone, he became nearly unemployable by polite society: a shiftless, untrustworthy junkie, sneak thief and corner-cutting hack, toiling in the culinary backwaters.

Things really only improved for him once he went to sea, and… Well, I know the rest.

I’m actually fairly glad that there’s a curtain separating my field of view from the operating theater. I… I’m not squeamish, or anything, but I don’t think it’s strange that I don’t want to see the insides of a living person, especially the insides of a child.

Chopper called the operation ‘laparoscopic’, I think.

Anyway, in my career, there was a stretch of time from when I was fifteen to when I was sixteen when I didn’t work at the Baratie, I worked… elsewhere. I came back for holidays and long weekends, but- well. I worked in Loguetown, for that year. I worked in a seedy hotel on Upper Garden Street, a place so slow that one waiter would have to come downstairs and wake me up when customers came in. I worked a lunch counter on Amscray Avenue, flipping pancakes and doing short-order eggs for politicians and their yesmen. I worked a bizarre yet functional combination theater/diner on Columbine Way, just me and a rabidly-unfriendly bartender- a typically destructive symbiotic arrangement, for that time in my life. I realize now that she was a lesbian, or at the very least not interested in me… Ah, well.

I worked a deserted crab house on Second Street. I cooked brunches in Little Goblin; I slopped out steam-table garbage at a bar on Eighth Street to a bunch of drunks. The same drunks, actually, four times a week- and with their wives and children and families, on the weekends.

I was a sous chef at a very fine two-star place on Tenth Street, where I recall preparing a four-course meal for Mrs. Rose and Mrs. Lavender; they thanked me in a combination of Merrow and Faesh, and I only understood three out of the thirty words. The tone was good, though. And they both pinched my ass, so- maybe they were saying something else? I choose to be flattered at the attention, even now.

Hell, I took another chef’s job- of sorts- at a moment of desperate need at a place called Bailey’s, a combined sit down and take-away upscale fried chicken stand on Fleet Street. It was an operation
that was to be the flagship of another planned empire, a chain of fried chicken that would stretch across the globe.

At this point in my year away from home, I didn’t give two shits if the place succeeded or not. I needed the money. My boss was an older Automaton, fresh out of prison, who’d named the place after his youngest son, Bailey, a feckless malingerer who never did amount to much more than a pauper’s grave. He had been- my boss, I mean- in an earlier life, the head of the counting room at a Gran Tesoro casino and, after being caught skimming off millions for the ‘boys back in Loguetown and Alabasta’, had been offered a friendly deal should he co-operate with the prosecution. He had, admirably, declined, and as a result spent the last five years eating prisoner’s slop.

When he got out, a near-broken man, his old buddies in Loguetown, being Men of Honor, set him up with this restaurant as a sign of gratitude for services rendered. Unfortunately, while in prison, the man had completely lost his goddamn mind. He might have been a stand-up guy, an Automaton in the finest form, but he was also stone cold nutbars.

Now, understand, this wasn’t a classic laundry operation, where the… real owners deliberately run a place into the ground, using a straw owner to run up bills, then pillage after foreclosure for merchandise and credit. I think those wiseguys really did want that rickety clicker to make money and be a success. I mean, they certainly made earnest efforts to be of help at every new turn and reversal, and endured much more nonsense from their visibly deranged partner than I ever would have. Or did, when it came right down to it.

I’d seen Honorable Men around before, of course- hell, it might be said that I grew up in a house full of them- but I’d never worked in a place that was outright Honorable, where I came to know on a personal basis real Honorable types, whose names I recognized from the local papers. Everyone was astonishingly up-front about their connections. My boss was fond of yelling into the phone when discussing prices with a purveyor, "You know who I am? You know who I'm with ?!"

We did things differently at Bailey's.

My cooks, for one: every one of them came from the Fortune Society, guys who spent their off-hours in halfway houses, allowed out only to work. I was used to working with a fairly rough bunch, a lot of whom, at one time or another, had had problems with the law - but at Bailey's every single one of my cooks was still basically a convict. I can't say that it was an unhappy arrangement, either; for once, I knew my cooks were going to show up at work every day - if they didn't, they went back to prison.

And credit was easily obtained. I knew, from Dad's stories, how difficult it is to set up terms for a new restaurant; even getting a week's credit with some of these companies was usually a lengthy process, involving credit applications, a long wait, initial periods of cash on delivery. At Bailey's, no sooner was I off the phone than the stuff was arriving, often on 60-day terms.

My boss spent a lot of time on the phone, investigating the serious business of horses and their bloodlines, and how well they ran in mud or on grass. Bailey himself, at 18, was happy to drive his sporty cart around and chase girls. So my day-to-day was spent mostly with some genial gentlemen from an Honorable Fraternal Organisation. They helpfully told me where to buy my meat and poultry, and how to meet the folks who would be supplying my linen, bread, paper goods and so on. I had a lot of meetings in vanwains.

"The bread guy is here," I'd be told, and a late-model Buick vanwain would pull up out front. An old guy in a mashed-down bowler hat would beckon me from the driver's seat and then get out of the van. The older guy in the passenger seat would slide over, indicating he wanted me to get in, sit next to him and talk. We'd sit there in the idling cart, talking cryptically about bread, before he brought me
around to examine some product. It was a strange business.

My boss only got more insane as time passed.

When we finally opened, we were packed from the first minute. Orders flooded in over the phone and at the counter and at the tables. We were unprepared and understaffed, so the Honorable contingent - including various visiting dignitaries, all with oddly alphabetized names ("This is Mr D, Sanji, and meet a friend, Mr B... This is Mr E-"), all of them overweight, cigar-chomping, middle-aged guys with bodyguards and 10,000-dollar watches- pitched in to help out. Guys I'd read about later in the papers as running construction in the outer boroughs, purported killers, made men, who lived in concrete piles on Statement Beach and Long Lake and security-fenced estates in Swallows, carried brown paper bags of chicken sandwiches up three flights of stairs to Greenditch Village walk-up apartments to make deliveries; they slathered mayo and avocado slices on pitta bread behind the counter, and bussed tables in the dining room.

I have to say I liked them for that.

But when my boss, inexplicably, showed up one day and told me to fire everyone with a tattoo on my staff, I was faced with a dilemma. Every one of my cooks was festooned with prison tats: screaming skulls, saints on hypodermic crosses, bound in barbed wire, gang tats, flaming dice, sixty-kas, pirate flash, Born to Lose, Born Dead, Love-Hate, Mom, portraits of the Madonna, wives, girlfriends, The Queen of Hell.

I tried to put him off, explaining that we couldn't do without these guys, that the hardest-working, most indispensable guy we had - the guy who right now was loading trash cans with hundreds of marinating chicken parts in the cramped, stifling unrefrigerated cellar on his 22nd consecutive double shift - he was a goddamn Sistine Chapel of skin art. And where am I going to find a convict without a tattoo? The Watergate burglars weren't, to my knowledge, available.

Things only got worse.

He came in the next day, obsessing about gold chains and jewellery. My grill man had the usual genie adornments of the day. "Where do you think that pistachio fritter got all that gold?" he raved, spraying food and saliva as he talked. "Selling drugs. That shit is poison! Mugging old ladies! I don't want that in my restaurant! Get him out!"

This was clearly impossible, and I sought counsel with one of the silent partners who, as my boss had become increasingly unpredictable, had grown noticeably less silent. "You hear what he wants me to do?" I asked.

The man just nodded and rolled his eyes, sympathetically, I thought.

"Do nothing," he said, and then, with truly dangerous intonation, added, "Aspetta," meaning "Wait" in that dialect of Automatic.

I didn't like the sound of that.

He smiled at me, and I couldn't help picturing my boss, slumped over a dashboard after one of those meetings in a cart they were all so fond of. When things came to a head a few days later, my boss openly screaming in the middle of a crowded dining room that he wanted all the tattooed guys and gold chain-wearers "Out! Now!" I told him to pay me what he owed - I was leaving for good.

He refused.

The silent partner came over, peeled off my pay and an extra hundred thousand from a fat roll in his
suit pocket, and gave me a warm smile as he bade me goodbye.

I don't know what happened to Bailey's, exactly. It certainly never developed into a Worldwide chain as my crazy boss had envisioned- or even a second store. The next time I was in the neighbourhood, a picture framer occupied the space where the restaurant had been. What happened to the old man and his dreams of a poultry empire for his son? I can only guess.

After that, I went back home to Dad Zeff; became a sous chef at a six star restaurant and never looked back until now.

Anyway. I suppose I’m thinking all this because… I don’t know, really. I mean- god, I can remember when I wrote to Mab about wanting to cook, and Mab writing back that if that’s what I wanted to do, she’d find some recipes for me to puzzle out.

Of course, having actually learned to cook by now, some of those old recipes suddenly make a whole lot of sense. Especially after rewriting the cookbook she gave to my keeping.

Here’s a recipe for Eel and Oyster pie, from Mab’s family cookbook.

To make a Pye with eeles and oysters, take the oysters from their liquor and put them to the eeles, and season them with pepper, salt and mace, raisons and currants, then put them in a pye with good store of butter and fruit on the top and bake until done.

All of the recipes in Mab’s family cookbook are like that.

Every.

Last.

One.

Here’s my recipe for Eel and Oyster Pie.

Take two potatoes and dice; chop one stalk of celery; slice one carrot; grind salt and pepper; prepare one pint of oysters in a cleaning bath; have fresh unsalted butter; half a cup of warm milk or cream; prepare an egg wash and a brush suitable for cooking; and an eight inch disc of pie pastry.

Parboil potatoes, celery and carrot until fork-tender. Drain and season with salt and pepper. Layer vegetables and oysters in baking pan. Dot top with butter; pour heated milk over. Cover with pastry. Paint with egg wash. Make a few small slashes in the pastry for the steam to escape. Bake in a preheated 375 degree oven- which means you can hold your hand to the open door for about five to seven seconds- for 35 minutes or until crust is golden brown.

See? Much more sensible. Although… Those recipes Mab sent me all those year's ago… it’s funny. I don’t think I’d have ever experimented quite the way I learned to do if I didn’t have such vague instructions. Mab’s recipes all assume that the one making them already knows the proper methods
of doing things. I didn’t- about the only thing I knew how to do was make potions, because He had decided that each of his children would learn at least one of the Vinsmoke Arts.

All of us had to learn potions- but I, of course, was the worst at it. Not because I couldn’t follow a receipt- but because… I wanted to *cook*, not brew. I don’t actually want to work in the Dairy, or the Stillroom. I just tease Mab and Chopper about it because the arguments are funny, and I know they know I’m not actually serious.

Having friends to fool around with is fun.

Hm. Forgot what I was going to think of next. This tea is nice, but- ach. Might as well take an actual nap.

“It’s against the rules to share blood with lanjin, Shyarly! You know it, and I know it. Any Gyojin or Merjin that does so will be silenced by a judgement in the dark.”

“Mister Hammond, no Gyo or Mer in this establishment would ever *dream* of sharing blood with a Lanjin. You know as well as I that after Fisher Tiger’s death-”

“-all he needed was *one* shitty human to step up and offer to help-”

“- *After that*, Hammond, no Gyo or Mer would ever, *ever* consider helping a Lanjin by giving their blood.”

I, listening to the owner of this establishment argue furiously with the New Fishman Pirate, look very carefully at Keimi, who looks back at me, wide eyed. I blink at her, batting my eyelashes, and Keimi doesn’t quite smile, but she doesn’t grimace either.

I smile.

Franky and Brook glance at each other uneasily, while the girls nudge each other and clamp hands over their mouths to stifle giggles. It’s very lucky we’re in a shrug, otherwise we’d never get away with this.

“Done with the menu, girls?” Best thing to do in this situation is Don’t Think About it.

“Yes, Mab,” they chorus, stifling giggles and snickers.

I take back the clipboard and hand it to Keimi-

“Mark down a pot of mint tea- just keep refilling it as we empty it- and an order of curry buns for me,
please. It’s going to be a long night.”

“-Yes Ma’am.”

“Captain wants to know- are you dating anyone?”

“...Hody Jones actually *likes* my fiance? That’s unexpected-”

“It’s so that he can oppose your marriage! You need to get married for him to start hating your husband in peace. He won’t accept it, even if he dies. He’ll throw stones and gems at you both during the ceremony, instead of rice!”

“Hmmph. Then we’ll dodge the stones quickly, and catch the gems with accuracy. You’ve no business here, Hammond. -Thank you, for bringing your Captain’s message. My reply is this-”

And then there’s a loud, wet sounding thump, and a yelp as all the breath in a man’s body is driven out of him in one hit.

“Be sure to give him that from me, won’t you?” says Madam Shyarly, before she snaps her fingers and-

Huh. I think she just gave Hammond the boot. Nice.

While we wait, I might as well go over the history of Coral Hills. Technically speaking, it’s really two or three distinct towns- Corallia, Hillsdun, and Gobdark.

Corallia is a resort town on Fishman Island’s Coral Shelf, which divides the island by a third. It’s primary industry is tourism. It’s located about thirty nine miles south of Waterwheel Town, the country’s main power plant.

The name comes from the fact that literally everything here is built out of some kind of coral- big, marble-like coral makes up the buildings, while dainty, delicate porcelain corals make things like dishwares. It was known as Ondine Pariso during the Age of Heroes, and Merrow’s Cave during the Age of Exploration; Corallia is known today as Coral Hill.

This particular area has been a center of art and culture since some of the earliest recorded history, and has been settled by many civilizations since being founded by the Lonlegs people. Later settlers include the Aevians in the 1st century, and Giants in the 9th. Originally, seafarers and traders built a number of settlements all along the coastline, with Coral Hill being the crown jewel of them; considering it’s relative closeness to the palace, I can understand why.

As Fae, Norten, and Estern shippers began to trade along the Line, the port was refounded, a garrison was placed in nearby Gyoverly hills, and the town center shifted from the hills themselves to the valley where we are now. With that shift came the rise of Hillsdun, which is where most of the people in Corallia actually live; the working people, I mean.

Goblin Town is different.

The history of Goblin Town- properly called the Walled City, or the City of Darkness; Kowloon, in
the Merrow, and locally known as Gobdark- can be traced back to the Triton period of Ryugu Mergyo, when an outpost was set up to manage the trade of salt and brine. For hundreds of year's after that, little of interest took place, aside from a small coastal fort being established during 810. In 842, during the reign of Mer the Sixth, the hills of Ryuma were ceded to the Austrics, of which Moda was a part. As as result, the Mer6 authorities felt it necessary to improve the fort in order to rule the area and check further influence.

Things get murky after that, but as far as I know, the wall was half demolished in order to expand some of the older parts of Coral Hill; yet the Walled City remained. And then, of course, the Fae decided that since there was already a nice slum town, we might as well get into the thick of it. Thus, there’s an entire micro-city called Goblin Town, surrounded by a rare spiny coral that- as far as anyone is willing to say- only grows there. Thus, it can never, ever be wholly demolished, as that would harm the coral.

What’s Gobdark like? Well.

Prostitutes install themselves on one side of the narrow corridors while priests and nuns preach and hand out powdered milk to the poorest on the other; social workers give guidance while drug addicts squat under the stairways getting high. What are children’s gaming centres by day become strip-show venues by night. It’s a complex, fluid place, difficult to generalize about. Coral Hill is a freshly scrubbed child compared to the seedy filth of fetid Goblin Town. But, as is true of every place people live long enough- no matter how squalid or strange, people just live their normal lives.

Yes, Gobdark is notorious for brothels, casinos, cocaine and opium parlours; it’s famous for food courts where you can get dog meat, horse meat, even human fetuses if you pay the right person; yes, you can go to an unlicensed barber who will do anything to your teeth. It might be a pit, crawling with rats and dripping with sewage- but it’s their pit to hell, dammit.

As for what it actually is - it’s a densely populated warren of more than thirty five thousand people crammed into a few tiny apartment blocks and more than three hundred interconnected high-rise buildings, all constructed without contributions from a single architect.

“Mab… how in the hell do you know all that?” says- C. Interesting.

“I’m a Queen of the Fae- I know all kinds of things. For example, I know that tonight’s going to go like a game of Spangle I once played in…”

“Eh?” everyone at the table chorused.

“Ah. Well. It’s called The Play.

“The Play was a last-second kickoff return during a school Spangle game between the FaME Golden Years, and the SOL Rockstars about… six years ago. Given the circumstances and rivalry, the wild game that preceded it, the very unusual way in which The Play unfolded, and its lingering aftermath on players and fans, it is recognized as one of the most memorable plays in the history of Spangle and among the most memorable in Skuan sports.

“The Rivalry between the Fairisle Military Engineering corps and the Skuan Office of Law is legendary. It’s existed since before Skua has existed, and no one really remembers all the reasons why. Due to various… upsets, the game of Spangle was eventually devised as a substitute for war, with the hope that by having the two rivals play in such a game, they would stop murdering each other.
“Spangle is the slang for the game; it’s really called Sixth Degree. It’s called Spangle because of the way the Fox glimmers and gleams- if you’re a hunter or just spectating, you can hardly take your eyes off of it. Whatever it’s called, Spangle is a brutal game, but no one has died in years, as far as I know. The object of the game is to score more points than your opponents. Each goal is worth ten points and catching the Fox is worth three hundred points. The game ends when the Fox is caught or an agreement is reached between the captains of both teams. Some games can go on for days if the Fox isn’t caught; the record, as far as I know, is three months.

“It’s played on an ovular pitch, with ten goals on the opposite ends. There’s a specific zone near each goal called a… lane? I think? And each goal is called a degree, numbered one through five.

“There are four different balls. There’s the Pig, the Slams, and the Fox. The Pig is what’s usually used to score goals; you throw it through any of the degrees, and you score ten points. It’s made of leather, and very easy to throw and catch, once you learn the proper way to do it.

“Slams target the nearest player and do their best to break bones and crack skulls. They’re basically cannon-balls wrapped in wood and leather, and they hurt to get hit with. They only stop attacking if the player falls unconscious.

“The Fox- smallest of the three, it’s about the size of a walnut or the skull of a kitten; is worth three hundred points, and ends the game as soon as it’s caught. It’s also self-motivated to stay within bounds, and dart around the pitch like a rabbit under the shadow of a hawk. Thus, a proper game of Spangle is actually two very different games- the game of Offence and Defence, run by the Tender and the Sliders and the Batters, of both sides; and the Duel between the two Hunters, over possession of the Fox.

“The game is played by two teams of seven people, with substitutions allowed. It’s three Sliders, two Batters, one Tender, and one Hunter- and teams actually average around thirty to forty people. The Tender guards the degrees, while the three Sliders score goals with the Pig by tossing it through one of the opposing team's degrees. The two Batters keep the Slams away from their team and hit them towards the opposing team, and the Hunter catches the Fox to end the game.

“I was a Hunter.

“The game starts with the referee releasing all four balls from the central circle. The Slams and Fox are enchanted to fly off of their own accord, but the Pig is thrown into the air by the referee to signal the start of play. Since the lengths of Spangle games aren’t set, with some games going on for days if the Fox is not caught, the game is not played in periods, although captains can call for a time out. Teams continue using the same goal posts to score throughout the game.

“Sliders are not the only players who can touch the Pig- but they are the only players who can score for their teams. They score by sending the Pig through any of the five goal hoops. Each goal scored is worth ten points. After a goal is scored, the opposing team's Tender throws the Pig back into play.

“The game only ends when the Fox’s caught, or at the agreement of both team Captains. Catching the Fox is worth three hundred points to the team whose Hunter made the catch. The Fox is bewitched to respond to the first player to make contact with it, in case there is any dispute regarding which Hunter touched it first. Despite this, there have been several instances in which the Fox has been fumbled.

“The winner of the game is the team with the most points, regardless of who caught the Fox. As a result, it is possible, although difficult, to win the game even though the opposing team caught the Fox, if your team is three hundred ten or more points ahead. In the event of a tie, the winner is decided in a Captain’s duel, weapons to be decided by the winner of a coin-flip.
“In 750, the Fae Office of Games set down official rules for the game of Spangle.

“Firstly, players must not stray over the boundary lines of the pitch, although they may fly- or swim, I suppose, I can see you taking notes, B- as high as desired. The Pig must be surrendered to the opposition if any offence player leaves the boundary. Defence players may leave the bounds as they like.

“Secondly, ‘Time Out’ may be called at any time by the Captain of a team. Time out may be extended to two hours if a game has already lasted for more than twelve hours. Failure to return to the pitch after this time will lead to the team being disqualified.

“Thirdly, penalties can be awarded to teams by the referee. A single Slider may take the penalty by flying from the central circle towards the scoring area. The opposing team's Tender may attempt to stop the shot being scored, but all other players must not interfere. The Hunter may hunt at this time.

“Fourthly, Contact is allowed, but a player may not seize hold of another player’s wings, or any part of their anatomy otherwise.

“Fifthly, no substitution of players is allowed during the game, even if a player is too injured or tired to continue to play. A Captain must call for time out, before any substitutions can be made.

“Sixthly, players may take their mystic fetishes- wands, staffs, prayer beads, weapons, etcetera- onto the pitch, but they must not be used on or against any players, any game officials, any of the four balls, or the spectators.

“Seventhly, and most importantly, a game of Spangle only ends with the successful capture of the Fox.

“There are seven hundred eighty four recorded fouls listed in the SOG records, though the entire list has never been made public as it was certain Office members’ view that some players might get ideas. Six hundred of those fouls are banned anyway, due to the ban on using any kind of magic in game. The remaining hundred are too dirty for even the worst player to contemplate using- however, there are eleven common fouls, which tend to happen in every game regardless. There’s blagging, seizing the opponent's wing, fin, or tail to slow or hinder their movement. Blocking, deliberately putting oneself in the way of the opposing team’s Hunter, with the intention of obstructing their way towards the Fox. Cobbing, excessive use of elbows towards opponents. Flacking, pushing any portion of anatomy through the goal hoop in an attempt to push the Pig out- the Tender must defend from the front, not the rear. Foxing, any player other than the Hunter touching or catching the Fox. Blatching- flying, or swimming, with the intent to collide. Blurting, locking limbs together with the intent to steer an opponent off course. Blumping, hitting Slams towards spectators. Haversacking, hand still on the Pig as it goes through the goal hoop- the Pig must be thrown through the goal. Pig-poking, tampering with the Pig- as in puncturing it so that it falls more quickly or zig-zags, or covering it in grease so it’s harder to catch, hold, and throw. And, finally, Staggering, which is more than one Slider entering the scoring lane.

“Staggering is really hard to catch, actually.

“During the final of the 1473 Spangle World Cup, all seven hundred fouls were committed, as well as several new fouls that only appeared in that particular game. These naturally included all eleven fouls I mentioned before, as well as: Transforming a Slider into a skunk. Attempted decapitation of a Tender with a broadsword. The release of one hundred blood-sucking vampireels from under the FaME Captain's skirts during the game. Setting fire to an opponent's ponytail. Attacking an opponent with a club. Attacking an opponent with an axe. Use of surface to air ballistic ferrets. Public Nudity. Indecent Behavior with two Cherubim and a Goat. Use of vaporized liquor as an intoxicant on the
referee. Declaration of undying love to the Slam, which blushed mightily and was extra violent for
the rest of the game. An ungodly number of flying vampire frogs, released into the spectators to
foment chaos. Two Batters smote with lightning. A small, localized Tormato. Double necrophilia on
a group of ferrets.

“That game was historic.”

I pause, and take a long sip of my tea. The Girls are grinning with glittering eyes, because they
weren’t aware that all those things could be done in the course of one game of Spangle. Franky is
just about crying with laughter, as is Brook- because they’ve actually seen games of Spangle, I’d say,
and they know exactly how crazy these things can get.

Mm. Minty.

“...In Spangle, if you do something cool enough, you get it named after you. Bludger’s Crackerjack;
one Batter uses a Slam to defend another player with the other Slam. It takes precise timing, extreme
skill, and a hell of an arm to swing that. Chelonia’s Charge; a Slider catches a Slam and uses it to
batter through the opposition’s formation, stealing the Pig in the process. Selachii’s Leap; a Slider
leaps off their teammate’s back, catching the Pig mid-pass. Double Troupple; both Batters strike a
Slam at the same time, to double to force behind a swing. Crazy Eights; a Tender moves in front of
the goals at high speed to block the Pig. Finney’s Flick; a Slider uses their wings, their tail, or their
fins to hit a Pig mid-pass and into a goal. Arrey’s Attack Formation; the three Sliders move in a
triangle shape to force other Sliders aside. Hawkin’s Vise; two Sliders trap an opposing Slider, while
the third Slider fouls the trapped one. Plumpers’ Ruse; hiding the Fox in the Hunter’s clothing to
confuse the opponents. Delilah’s Drop; one Slider moves directly vertically, and then throws the Pig
down to another Slider directly below them. Loris Reversal; a Slider throws the Pig over their
shoulder or otherwise behind them, without looking. Jerry Roll; a player moves in a progressively
tighter spiral to draw the attention of a Slam, before darting away- leading the Slam to down another
player entirely. Jellyfish Smother; the Tender spreads their body out to protect the maximum amount
of goal as the Slider approaches. That’s a risky one, you have to have very good Batters to do that.
Sucker Punch; a fake punch to the nose to confuse the opponent, and so long as no actual contact is
made, it’s not a foul. Woolgathering; Sliders move in erratic, slow ways to confuse their opposition.
The most important of all of these to me, however, is the Morgan Feint; in which a Hunter from on
high dives down, sharply, as if to catch the Fox. This causes the opposing Hunter to chase after
them, only for the first Hunter to pull up at the last second, causing the opposition to crash into the
ground of the pitch.

“The game in which I played, in which The Play was played, was our two team’s 85th Big Game,
and was played on SOL’s home field. Although SOL was guaranteed a winning record, with cup
eligibility, for the season, no cup game was looking to invite them. The implications of that game
were far more important to FaME, led by Captain John Elway, playing in his last regular season
game before heading off to become a future Sky Blue Spangle League star enshrined in the SOG
hall of Fame. The Golden Years team was in the midst of an exciting season- we were 5-5 but had
victories over the highly ranked Floria Snapplegators and Thuletima’s Snowruins- and we needed a
win to be eligible to play in a cup game. Representatives of the SOG Fame Classic committee were
in attendance, apparently to extend an invitation to FaME, if the Goldens won.

“Also at stake was possession of the FaME Abacus and the SOL Sword, a pair of trophies that
together represented our scholastic honor and integrity. They originate back to the Age of Heroes,
but in 933, after years of increasingly more elaborate thefts of the trophies by students from one or the other school, the two schools agreed that the winner of the Big Game would take possession. The plaque upon which they are mounted carries the scores of previous Big Games, and is ceremoniously awarded to the captain of the winning team by the losing team’s Captain.

“With SOL leading 590-570 late on the fourth day, Elway and the Goldens overcame a spiral picket on their own third-degree goal with a twenty-nine second completion, then managed to get the Pig within fielding range for Slider Mark Harmony. Elway called a timeout with eight seconds left on the clock before sundown. Had Elway let the clock run down to four seconds before calling time, the ensuing play would not have taken place since the clock would have run out on the goal. But, Elway was under instruction from Coach to call timeout on the Eight to allow time for a second goal try in case FaME drew a penalty on the first attempt. Harmony’s flying was good, putting FaME ahead 600-590. However, our celebrations drew a fifteen-second unsportsmanlike conduct penalty, enforced on the ensuing Pig-punt by the Ref. This was crucial, as FaME had to hold position for fifteen seconds while our opposition, SOL, was allowed freedom of movement.

“At that point, SOL announcer Josie Stark praised FaME and Elway for their efforts, and added, “Only a miracle can save the Goldens now!”

“With four seconds left on the sunset clock, FaME special teams coach Frederich von Becken called for a squab kick on the Pig. Due to confusion, SOL took the pitch with only six men, one short of the regulation seven, but still legal in scholastic Spangle.

“What followed became one of the most debated and dissected plays in scholastic Spangle history.”

I pause again, and devour two of my slightly cool curry buns. Mm. Veggie Curry.

“Right. Harmon squabbed the kick and SOL’s Kevvy Moey received the Pig afront the SOL fourth degree near the left scoring lane. After some ineffective scrambling, Moey lateraled the Pig leftwards to Buckaroo Banzai. Banzai was very quickly surrounded, gaining only two goals before being caught from behind by a slam- but not before reversing the Pig to his teammate, Dole Kale. Kale flew straight for the five degree lane which was closest to him, but was immediately fouled by two of the FaME Sliders. However, while being fouled, he managed to pitch the Pig through the fifth and back to Banzai, scoring again.

“It was at this moment, believing that Kale was actually his twin brother- the Hunter, Dale Kale- had caught the Fox and the game was over, that several FaME players and the entire FaME band, which had been waiting at the south end of out of bounds, ran onto the field in celebration.

“Banzai dodged another FaME player and took the Pig to his right, toward the middle of the pitch, where at least one of the SOL Sliders was ready for the next pitch. Around the FaME fourth degree, Banzai scored a goal and- still having possession of the Pig due to Tender Mulaney being stuck behind a rowdy SOL Batter and the FaME flautists- pitched the ball to Mariette Ford, the other Batter on his team, who caught it in stride and flew hell for leather.

“Meanwhile, the FaME band, all one hundred forty four of them, had run out past the south goals, which the SOL sliders were trying to get to- and had advanced as far as the second degree goal post midfield. The scrum of players was moving towards them.

“Ford avoided a FaME player and hurtled uphill while moving to the right scoring lane, and into the
band, which was scattered all over the south end of the pitch. Around the FaME third degree, three FaME players smothered Ford—two Sliders and a Batter—but while flailing she threw a blind reversal over her right shoulder.

“Moey caught it at about the third degree in the third scoring lane, and charged towards the goal. One FaME-struck Slam missed him, and the other could not catch him from behind. Moey flew through the scattering FaME band members for the goal, which he famously completed by headbutting the unaware trombone player Garryana Quercus.

“The SOL players celebrated wildly—but the officials had not signaled the capture of the Fox. FaME coach Wiggin and his players on the bench argued with the Refs on the ground that the SOL’s goals couldn’t be legal, citing a thousand and one things that had happened during the play. Meanwhile, the officials huddled. The chaos at the end of The Play made the officials’ task very challenging. In particular, the questionable fifth lateral took place in the midst of the Stanford band, greatly reducing visibility. After determining that Cal had scored and no one had ruled any of the laterals illegal, Ref Moffett signaled the touchdown, rendering the illegal participation penalty on Stanford irrelevant and ending the offence-defence game for that moment, as the SOL called for a time out.

“All that was left now was for the Hunters to catch the damn Fox.

“Which I did—and Dale never did forgive me for Morganing him into the ground. The final score, unfortunately, was SOL 650, FaME 600. The Rockstars won the Abacus and Sword.

“The officials’ ruling of the SOL series of goals was highly controversial at the time, and The Play has remained a source of often intense disagreement throughout the intervening years, particularly between ardent FaME and SOL fans. The controversy centers on the legality of two of the five laterals as well as on the chaos that ensued when the FaME team and band entered the playing field while the ball was still live.

“Many Stanford players and coaches objected immediately to the third lateral, from Dole Kale to Buckaroo Banzai, asserting that Garner’s knee was down moments beforehand. Trafalgar Lamia, a FaME Batter who was in on the foul, maintains that Kale’s knee had hit the turf of the pitch while he was still in possession of the ball; Kale and Banzai themselves, however, assert the opposite. Video replays are inconclusive; due to the distance from the camera and the swarm, one cannot see the exact moment Kale’s knee may have touched.

“Afterward, upon viewing the game footage, some suggested that the fifth lateral, from Mariette Ford to Kevvy Moey, could have been an illegal forward pass. Ford was being tackled at about the second degree when she released her blind, over-the-shoulder heave, which Moey appeared to catch while crossing the goal lane. Because both players were in full stride, and because the lateral traveled some distance, some thought the ball had gone forward. Under the rules of Spangle, the direction of a pass is judged relative to the field. Complicating this was the fact that Ford was falling forward upon releasing the ball, while Moen reached backwards to catch it, thus making it quite possible that the ball itself traveled sideways or backward. However, to be a forward pass, the ball must actually travel forward; a ball that travels laterally only is a backward pass and in this situation, legal.

“Finally, while the replays of the tackle of Kale and the fifth lateral are inconclusive, FaME was clearly guilty of illegal participation, both from too many players on the field and the band. At least two game officials immediately threw penalty flags on us for having too many on the field. A Spangle game cannot end on a defensive penalty (unless it is declined), so had any of the SOL ball-carriers been fouled short of the goal lane from this point on, SOL would have been granted at least one unclocked play from scrimmage, and perhaps a goal outright for outside interference. The head game referee, Charles Moffett, noted this as a likely outcome in a subsequent interview.”
The Girls blink at me, then B hesitantly asks “-But, Mab, if you were there… can’t you say for sure what happened?”

“Nope. At that point, Dale had managed to concuss me, and I was so focused on catching the Fox and dueling with him I paid no attention at all to the pitch until maybe the last second of the Morgan Feint, which is when I actually saw and caught the Fox.”

“Oh.” said B, before continuing to scribble in her notebook.

“Sorry- you’re saying that tonight is going to be as chaotic as that game you played in school, Mab?” said Brook.

“Yeah. I’ve got that funny feeling running up and down my spine- felt something like it before Enies Lobby, but I thought it was just was just worry for Robin, not an actual Premonition.”

“...Oh dear,” said F, before shoving back from the table- “I feel what you mean, now. I need to go and pack, then, we won’t have time later.”

“Mm. If you can hold off for a few hours, you’ll have a much better time of it- for one thing, I’ll be able to go with you to Gobdark.”

“Um.” said F.

“For another, there’s the small matter of you learning to See through Crystal that ought to be handled while we’re all still here-”

“Oh. Really? I thought… I have a glass crystal that I’ve been practicing on, but,” and F scoots back to the table, “It’s a murky sphere, I can hardly get anything from it.”

“From glass? I’m not surprised.” said Madam Shyarly, her long body oozing into the seat next to me.

“Glass is a terrible medium to learn with- you’d do best to start with a natural crystal, or even stone. - I heard you fought with Three Swords yesterday, Queen Mab. I’d love to hear that story; and in exchange, I’ll let the little Frog have a go at my Crystal Ball. It’s quartz, which is fairly easy to use- better than glass, anyway. Someone ought to get some use out of the damn thing...” she said, huffing at what I suppose could be taken as a table ornament, but is actually a very plain orbuculum.

“I think that can be arranged, Madam Shyarly. The story goes like this-”

Right. We’ve stabilized the patient’s blood pressure as best we can; Taffy and Gurry are both scrubbed in, and ready for surgery. The patient has been administered a general anesthetic, via injection, which Gurry administered as the anesthetist. The new school of surgery considers using anesthetics both during and after the surgery to be of use in managing pain, which I agree with.

Gurry is also monitoring the patient’s blood pressure with a cuff around the patient’s left arm, and a heart monitor on same. The Medaka Nurses are tending to the secondary patient, who is acting as a blood-replenishment transfuser, as both patients have the exceedingly rare S- bloodtype.
Nurse Taffy has already begun draining the abdomen, allowing for surgery to proceed with minimal mess and contamination. I will be using the laparoscopic method to inspect, repair, or remove the patient’s ruptured spleen. After making four small incisions in the patient’s abdomen, I will insert a tube with a tiny video snail into the abdomen through one of the incisions. Paying close attention to the video monitor, I will repair or remove the spleen with surgical tools that are inserted in the other three incisions. Then, once all the repairs have been effected and all the broken spleen is removed, I will close the incision.

I choose this method for two reasons. Firstly, the size of my patient; she is a small child, between the ages of eight and ten, with a fairly narrow chest and abdomen. Secondly, the recovery speed post-surgery; a laparoscopic splenectomy has a recovery rate of about two weeks, while a traditional splenectomy requires six or more. The patient shows signs of serious dedication to physical activity. Medicine is not just about fixing a problem; it’s about making sure more problems don’t pop up having fixed the first one.

This isn’t about me- while it would be easier to do an open surgery, I have decided, after some deliberation with the Nurses, that it would not be easier for the patient. More importantly, if there is a need to move the patient, a laparoscopic surgerys aftercare will be more easily tended to.

“Okay. Ready, Nurse?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Right- as you have marked the appropriate places on the sterilized abdomen of the patient, Nurse Taffy, I will begin incisions- now.”

And I cut.

“A surgery such as this is recommended in these instances: splenic trauma with hemorrhage, which our patient showed; splenic cysts or splenic mass; splenic abscess; Hematologic disorders, such as idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura, hemolytic anemia, hereditary spherocytosis, and other hereditary or autoimmune anemias; severe hypersplenism; perisplenic malignancy; splenic artery aneurysm; splenic vein thrombosis with left-sided portal hypertension; and portal hypertension due to liver disease.”

“What about if the patient presents with thrombocytopenia?”

“No, thrombocytopenia is not a contraindication of splenectomy.”

“Preoperative transfusion?”

“Not recommended in most cases- however, in this case, without it the patient would have been dead within minutes. A major blood vessel must have been damaged quite severely- I’ll do my best to repair it, as soon as we get the- tube-”

“Here, Doctor-”

“Thank you, Nurse- and- there! Suction-“
“Yes-”

“Damn. Her spleen’s irreparable- I’ll have to remove it entirely.”

“Yes sir.”

“Clamp.”

“Sir. -Risks?”

“The spleen is an organ that cleans the blood of bacteria and viruses; she’ll be more likely to get sick, but I can’t fix this- maybe Trafalgar Law could, but he’s not here-”

“-Doctor, is that a secondary spleen?”

“-My gods, it is. Good catch, Nurse Taffy. If I can repair the vein there, that secondary spleen can be left as is, meaning she won’t be entirely without -oh, now that’s interesting.”

“Doctor?”

“Her primary spleen and her secondary are the same size- clamp- meaning if all goes well, her spleen will expand in size with her growing as she ages. Curious indeed.”

“Sir.”

“Scalpel.”

“Sir. Other risks?”

“Mm- right. Post-splenectomy sepsis; hemorrhage; infection in the incision site or an intra-abdominal abscess; pancreatitis or pancreatic leak; damage to surrounding structures (stomach, diaphragm, colon, etc) which I see no signs of; harmonic scalpel.”

“Sir.”

“Our patient was vaccinated immediately upon diagnosis of splenic trauma for encapsulated organisms- pneumococcus, menigococcus, haemophilus influenzae-”

“-Pneumonia, Meningitis, Bloodlove Flu-”

“Exactly right; and laparoscopic splenectomy is preferentially performed in the right lateral decubitus position but unfortunately that’s not possible. Thankfully, it can also be performed with the patient supine, as ours is. Suction.”

“Sir.”

“-The gastrosplenic ligament contains the short gastric vessels and must be divided to obtain access to the splenic vessels, whereas the splenophrenic and splenorenal ligaments are relatively avascular. The gastrosplenic ligament is transected using bipolar cautery- cauter-”

“Sir-”

“-or harmonic scalpel to ensure hemostasis of the short gastric vessels, thereby obtaining access to the splenic vessels. Next, the relatively avascular- cauter-”

“Sir-”
“Not this time, hah, avascular splenocolic and splenorenal ligaments are divided along with the other
attachments, freeing the spleen. A vascular stapler-stapler-”

“Sir-”

“Is used to divide the splenic artery and vein. The artery is always divided before the vein. Ring
forceps, please-”

“Sir.”

“And- just gotta- got ya, little bastard. Bag it, tag it.”

“Yes sir.”

“Let me stitch this up, then; and we’re done, here.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

That’s part one done; now, for part two.

Bleah. I think I got poisoned.

I don’t really get sick, is the thing; I got sick when I was really young, but after I got m’Devil Fruit, I
hardly get sick at all. I mean, I get the flu, but everyone gets the flu, even Mab, and Mab doesn’t get
sick at all- or if she does, it doesn’t stop her much.

She took me out to a place called Chalkwhite, in her country; showed me a funny cut in the ground
called the Horse. Said ‘T’ain’t what a horse looks like, Luffy; it’s what a horse be.’ And when I
looked again, I realized she was right, and that was the end of her lessons that day.

Mab tutored me a lot; an’ I’m pure grateful for it.

But right now, my stomach’s churning like I ate something really foul; there’s a cold sweat on my
back and sides, and it feels like there’s a hot pillow mushin’ on my face.

Hm. Thinkin’ back, it was when we were shoutin’ down the invite to the Fishman Pirates I think- eh,
doesn’t matter when. What happened is more important; I attacked that yellow guy and got blocked
by a swordsman, an octopus merman. He looked a hell of a lot like Moda- Ace’s wife, y’know-
around the nose. Had the same kind of blue rings, too, but Missus Moda’s only pop out when she’s
real angry or scared- saw it happen once when m’neice, Theodosia, fell off the balcony and landed
plop inta Ace’s arms.

Heh.

But damn if she wasn’t terrified and furious that it happened at all. Still though- I was blocked from
punchin’ that yellow guy by the octoman, and- there it is! There’s a nick on my arm; thin like, with a
weird purpling edge to it and it smells- foul.

He poisoned me. Huh.
Chopper said that because I fought the poison-guy in prison and got treated by Iva-chan, I’m immune to almost every poison now. The only person on our crew who’s poison resistance is stronger is Sanji, and Sanji… Sanji’s different. Saa- that octoman must have some skill with a sword; Zoro’s gonna want to fight him, I think. Although it’s kinda dirty to use poison on a sword…

Ace and his pops are being weird, and so’s the Neptune-guy and his sons. They keep avoiding talking about Ace’s wife, Moda, and it’s really obvious if I’m picking up on it. They’re half embarrassed that she exists, I think, and half grateful to her for not making an issue of it- huh.

Dunno what the hell that’s supposed to mean.

Moda won’t have nothin’ to do with the Crown of the Sea; she went all the way to the Calm Belt and built her own country, rather than come here. The Octoman looks too much like her to be unrelated; and… I got a weird feelin’ about tonight.

Something’s gonna happen. Jinbe’ll have to wait- message or no message.

There’s something real ugly at the bottom of this barrel; I know it. So do Usopp an’ Mark, it’s why they ain’t said nothin’ so far; mostly, they’ve been listening to Mab talk about nothing much at all. I ain’t been saying much either; I been listening, and eating, too.

Mostly, I been listening.

“-And really, that’s what happened.”

“Oh my. So Old Sidre’s finally shuffled on; how impressive. She’s been harassing generations of the Left family for centuries; one wonders what will become of them, now that they’ve no more obligations to look after.”

“Doesn’t one just.”

“Hehnhehnhehn. Now- I’ve seen you six around the Cafe- usually with one more lurking around- but I don’t suppose I caught any names. Do introduce yourselves, if you don’t mind me askin’.”

“Ah- Adelaide, the Blue-”

“Beatrice, the Indigo-”

“Cecelia, the Violet-”

“Deborah’s in the San, and she’s Red; I’m Eleanor, the Orange-”

“Fernanda, the Yellow-”

“-And I’m Genevieve, the Green.”

“Rainbow Seven, Come to See;
Lucky Seven, Lucky me- achoo!”
“Hmmph, you’ve got some interference there-”

“Ah, yeah- it’s always been like that, sadly. I can do a… that one with the live thing and the crap in your pockets and a tangle, that- s’like a multitool but for witchery-”

“Oh, that thing! I know exactly what you mean, but the name’s escaped me- I want to say tangle, but that’s not right I don’t think…”

“…mangle, bramble- Shamble! It’s a shamble!”

Fernanda makes a funny little interrogative chirruping noise. I pause, and look at Madam Shyarly-who smiles, and graciously waves me on. Right.

“A shamble, also called a shambles, is a handmade device used by witches to detect or amplify magic. It can even be used for protection or to send a spell. The device itself is not magical; a shamble is like a pair of glasses: they help you see, but they don't see for you.

“A conversant witch can assemble a shamble in a matter of seconds using stuff like strings or thread, twigs, leaves, feathers, beads, coloured paper, an egg or even a beetle. The whole thing looks like a "cat's cradle", or some sort of nest made of trash. The ingredients are not really important, although the centre should contain a live ingredient- or, interestingly, the most powerful representation of a living thing. Thus, in certain desperate moments, I’ve used royal seals, and place markers. Even a map or two.

“The magic lies in its assembly and use, which is to catch the moment. It’s in… oh, the way you tie the knots, and the way the string runs - the freshness of the egg or the liveliness of the beetle, perhaps, and the moisture in the air- the tension of the twigs and the kind of things that you just happen to have in your pocket at that moment - even the way the wind is blowing. All these things make a kind of picture of the here-and-now when you move them right.

“The most effective shamble is the shamble assembled when the witch- or mage- really needs one. My granny, though- she could never make one at all. Couldn't get the hang of them. They got in the way, for her.

“Some witches assemble extra shambles or even buy some just to hang around for decoration; these shambles are generally not very useful, but some of these still seem to react to strong magic. When the ambient magic is really too strong, the shamble explodes. And it’s for that very reason that unless things are really and truly dire, I won’t be making one here and now- much too dangerous.”

“Oh.” said Fernanda.

“Of course, that’s because you’re a mage, and your magic field is very, very strong- I’m just a seer, and I can show you a shamble if you’d like.” smiles Madam Shyarly.

“Uh- yeah! Please, show me.” said Fernanda.

Madam Shyarly smiles, and tugs from a pocket of her hoodie a coil of fine fishing line; and then, it begins. A quick little profusion of knots goes around a tiny glass bottle with a marimo bobbing around on the bottom. Then, one thread loops around a stick, and another a pencil. They almost seem
to go through each other as feathery scales get tied in, then hot peppers, bits of shell and coral, broken jewelry, a hank of cat-fur and a vial of ink- a pen- and then, dangling from her index finger, a **Shamble**.

Madam Shyarly tucks a disposable chopstick through the loop where her finger is, and then gently sets the whole thing on a little pair of hooks above the crystal ball. Fernanda- I’m calling her Fern- Fern can’t take her eyes off of it. Honestly, neither can I.

The Shamble vibrates softly, then settles, scale-feathers fluttering in a breeze that doesn’t exist. The ink in the bottle bubbles and turns bright blue, with thick black bubbles drifting through it. I smell, ever so faintly, the scent of oysters and rice.

“According to most Wizards, a shamble is just a crude way to ensure thaumic cusping in phase-space, but they’re a bit... loquacious. In fact, the shamble is a practical tool compared to the more academic thaumometer-”

“Which is both rare, fragile, and expensive-” sighed Madam Shyarly.

“Mhm. Quite. Still... It’s a good skill for any young caster to have- especially if they’ve got magical powers, which all of you girls do. Mages use them less often than witches do, as their well of magic is usually much too strong for the fairly delicate device to handle. -Ah, Madam Shyarly; if it’s at all possible, could you keep out of the Sanitary? My husband, Sanji, is acting as a blood transfusion right now, and he’s also a giant pervert-”

“Sorry, what?” she said.

“My husband’s a giant pervert? He’ll lose all the blood in his body if you go in there, and Chopper needs that blood for Deborah right now-”

“-and so the past is rhymed... Heh. I’ll stay out of the San, sure. -Your sister is Attwell the Florist, yes?” she said.

“-ah, yes. She runs a tea house now, in Faeland.”

“I’ll just bet she does... Hmph. I can’t believe my young rival is following the path I laid so... easily.” she said.

“So, Atty got kicked in the head by an ostrich as a child and now when she makes too many future predictions, she sort of... it’s basically a mind-bomb.”

“Oh. I- I’m so sorry, I didn’t know. Why- why’s she running a fortune telling business, then?” she said.

“Because she can’t do anything else. Not, and be happy too.”

“...ah. I- that makes sense. K-keimi, bring an order of Clam Curry for the table, would you?” she said.

“Yes Madam.” Keimi said.

“Mm. Put it on my personal tab, there’s a love.” she said.
And Keimi darts away. The shamble gently undulates above us. The fine fishing line vibrates with *faint music* I can only just hear… shells gently murmur with voices that do not speak in words; coral beads are suddenly flower shaped, then they are larger stones tangled into the threads.

The magic’s getting stronger.

A hot pepper bursts into spiritual flame, then chars to fine white ash and drifts gently over the orbuculum; and Fern, following the ash with her eyes- a tiny glass bottle with a marimo all but bursting from the strain of it’s sudden growth; a pencil burning like incense, the thick smell of rotting milk. Threads twist and writhe through each other as feathery scales become tiny fish; hot pepper number two bursts into another gout of flames, but pepper number three sprouts into a tangling vine. Snail shells bubble over with squid ink and saltwater, and coral beads turned to stone dissolve into dark white flower petals, velvety where they fall and smelling- reeking- of orange. Broken jewelry with a horse-that-be running on a line of chain, a hank of cat-fur yowling and a vial of ink now an entire squid, tangled into the shambling thing- a penknife- knapped stone knife spinning like a whirlwind and turning from black to red to white and smoking-

The chopstick creaks.

Bryony is *bulging* with tension; her muscles ripple with restrained movement.

On the other side of the phone, perhaps sensing the strange tension, the dinner guests are very quiet.

The orbuculum shimmers clearly with splatters of ink being washed away with salt water; a thick slurry of ash and flower petals cakes the depression in the table where it rests. Fern’s eyes go massive and shining and she’s- oh no, sweetheart, don’t cry-

She’s biting her lower lip and tears are running down her face and then she- her eyes are fixed on the center of the orbuculum, somewhere beyond this world- the future of this world, maybe- and then she flinches and closes her eyes, thick gobbets of tears rolling down her cheeks. She swallows, and gasps, and something in her spine snaps straight and tall.

And then- I think for the first time ever- she makes a Prophecy. Or rather, a prophetic statement; it doesn’t quite have the same ring as a full Prophecy.

“Alright, Quasimodo- we’ll leave you alone. Alright, Quasimodo- we’ll trouble you no longer. You’re right, Quasimodo- we’re only made of stone- *we just thought that you were made of something- stronger!!!*” Fern sings.

Her voice is a chorus, entirely unlike her normal sardonic rasp; the stone knife shatters and gouts of boiling steam billow up from the slurry. Fern coughs, and wheezes; I stir honey into my pot of mint tea, and pour her a warm cup.

“Drink that, Fern, and stop looking in the orbuculum- lost your voice?”

Fern nods miserably.

“I’m not surprised; singing takes practice, and you did a prophetic revelation on top of that. Not something to just dive into head first. Congratulations on Seeing something in the Orb, though. It’s my turn to look, I suppose-”
“After we eat, if you please.” said Madam Shyarly.

Oh, I know what this is! In the Merrow, it’s a- paella? I think? It smells amazing- and no one else is eating with such verve as me. I suppose the tension in the atmosphere is a bit overwhelming, but I spent my entire childhood under something quite like this, and-

“Girls, eat. I can feel it same as you can, but you’ll find that at your level, there’s not going to be an enemy who’ll be so polite as to let you take a snack break.”

“Quite right.” murmurs Brook, before beginning to eat the really very good paella.

Franky hasn’t actually stopped eating while we’ve been here- and, with our examples to follow, the girls start eating their portions, listlessly.

Bryony all but bolts her share- easy, now, don’t hurt yourself.

Brook is a phenomenally quick eater, a remnant of his time in the army, I’d wager; and so, as Madam Shyarly begins to devour her second helping of paella, and Fern gulps down another glass of hot sweet tea, he speaks.

“If you’ll pardon my vulgarity- who in the fuck is Vander Decken, and why is everyone so infuriated with him?” said Brook.

“Oh, I can answer that- Pappug, fashion desginer-” said Pappug; good gods he’s gotten sleazy.

“Pappug, I told you, if you want a Clam Curry you have to order it-” said an exasperated Keimi.

“-I’m just checking the quality, I have very high standards-” Pappug sniped back.

“- Pappug -” said Keimi, about to loose her spleen on the small starfish.

“-Mah, it’s fine, Keimi. Pappug, why don’t you join us? There’s more than enough to share.” smirked Madam Shyarly.

“Thank you, Madam, I’d be delighted.” said Pappug with slithering dignity.

“I’ll just- get another place setting, then. One moment.” said Keimi through a grit-toothed grin, before swimming away through the air.

Service is hell; chin-up, Miss Kei.

“Now, you asked about Vander Decken, right? The most recent one’s a notorious bandit, and he’s been here for about thirty- forty?” said Pappug through a mouthful of paella.
“Thirty five.” said Madam Shyarly, eyes narrowed on a past only she can see.

“Thirty five years. That’s bad enough, but he’s also- or he claims to be- in love with our Dearest Princess, Shirahoshi.” said Pappug, slurping up tea.

“As I recall, it started with love letters, then packages, and then threats of marriage.” sighs Madam Shyarly.

“Yeah, and she was- what, twelve?” said Pappug, wincing as he glances at Madam Shyarly.

“Twelve.” said Madam Shyarly, dark eyes flat and gleaming like buttons.

“She was twelve, when the threats started, and by fourteen it’d escalated to death threats. The problem is, even with King Neptune and the Good Princes each leading a branch of the army to find and kill Vander Decken 9-” said Pappug.

“-Because he actually had the audacity to cut her, and what a mess that was-” mutters Madam Shyarly.

“-they still haven’t managed it. At this point, people are starting to think it can’t be done at all.” sighs Pappug.

“What about the legend of Vander Decken and his ship, the Flying Dutchman? I would have thought that it would be more useful to find a witch or a mage to handle things-” murmurs Brook.

Madam Shyarly shakes her head ‘no no no’ with a grimace.

“No, that wouldn’t work. Chiefly because, Vander Decken 9- the one trying to hurt our Beloved Princess- is a descendant of the legendary man. The first Vander Decken died on the island, an old man weary of battle; this asshole running around is his… ninth-degree namesake, Vander Decken 9.” said Madam Shyarly.

“And he’s got a weird protection, too- it’s not like living people can’t be cursed, gods know the people of our kingdom have been cursing Vander Decken 9 for years now, but- nothing seems to work.” said Pappug, finishing his paella and looking- mournful.

I hum. I sigh.

Fuck it.

“I can curse him, and make it stick- or rather… I’ll lay a death curse on him.”

“Oh? And what makes you different from literally every other person on this island?” snarls Madam Shyarly.

“I’m the Queen of Wrens. If anyone can do something to Vander Decken 9 from a distance, it’s me.”
Madam Shyarly blinks.

“May I use your orbuculum?”

“Uh- sure? Go ahead.” said Madam Shyarly, wide eyed, but slowly- almost unwillingly, beginning to grin.

I smiled.

Above us, the shamble shivered and shook and vibrated on it’s chopstick. The stick itself was almost smoking- it won’t be much longer, now.

“I’ll explain, I think. For lots of people, it’s very easy to equate magic to merely the mumblings of young girls in search of a husband, or children’s games on May Day. That is magic, true- simple things, magic that really hardly works for most people.

“However, I am not a child, or unskilled in the mystic arts. There are those who claim that white, or light, magic can be used to curse a man to death. That’s not exactly right; in essence… light and dark magic are reversals- or maybe reflections- of yin and yang. Light magic is cold, ordered, and very precise. You can build something that will last forever, with light magic; it’s why very nearly every spell you can put into a child’s toy is classed as light magic. Dark magic is the opposite; hot, random, and very chaotic. Spells you use to change your temperament- the spell for releasing hot yellow bile, for example- are classed as dark magic.

“A death curse is something entirely different from both light and dark magic. A curse is a solemn utterance intended to invoke a supernatural power to inflict harm or punishment on someone or something. A death curse is a malediction; an order of power above a mere curse, it’s a magical word or phrase uttered with the intention of bringing about evil or destruction. Luffy, when we were separated by Bartholomew Kuma, Mark set a curse on him- a bit stronger than a bad luck curse, and more than a simple Oroborus Curse.

“When a curse is cast on someone with a strong energy, who might have become a mage or witch themselves- or might be a mage or witch themselves- the curse will affect their health. It will manifest as ailments, attacks of pain; or, in my case, temporary mental instability. For these people, the curse will never be able to take full control of them; rather, it will torture that person all their life, which may be otherwise long and happy.

“Some people don’t know they carry a curse. It’s relatively safe for those who can discharge negative, or destructive, energy accumulated by the curse to simply live their lives. However, in this discharge- which, while not accumulated and used to later kill its victim in one stroke- process, the people around the cursed individual fall ill, get in accidents, and die. The energy of a curse also doesn’t just clear away; for some curses, and due to the nature of the curse and the various powers involved, it can be diluted. Zoro, for example, has a fairly nasty curse in his blood that destroys his ability to reorient himself on Land or Sea; due to the marks in the curse, and some traits he has, I’d say that comes all the way from… not from Buck L’ollonais, but maybe a son or grandson.

“With a death curse, it’s just the opposite; successive generations bearing a death curse strengthen it. Even if the person cursed, the victim, is able to discharge the foul energy into the world around them,
the power of a death curse only grows. With each discharge of destructive power, the cursed one casts a powerful curse on their friends and family, with continuous exposure always leading to death.”

I wave my Shadow over the table, clearing away detritus and dirt from our meal and long wait; and when I draw my Shadow back, there’s a few items on the table. A simple black sheet of fabric, and a shaker full of salt. A wooden plate made of cypress, a bowl of incense- or rather, a vase of oil: pomegranate oil, or maybe grapefruit? A crummy paring knife - Sanji scowls every time he sees it in my drawer of tools- and a small chalice, plated with gold. It’s actually fairly dark, now, as sunset was quite a while ago; thus, a few dribble candles, for ambiance.

“Most mages or witches will tell you that you need lots and lots of things to make a good, strong curse. That’s, more often than not, entirely true. A lot of things need to happen in a good curse, and the more paraphernalia you have in the ritual, the less likely you are to incur rebounds. For a death curse, however, because you’re working with so much more power, the paraphernalia is really just Boffo.”

Across the island, Ace spits out his tea, and Whitebeard squawks.

“Really, all a person needs for a proper death curse is a few drops of blood, the proper sigils drawn in either salt or sand- charcoal, also works- the right incantation, and enough power to get the job done. All the rest is just ambiance, and to keep the people watching- or casting- at ease.

“Death curses also don’t always work, is the thing. A real, proper death curse only works on people who are already set on ruining their own lives on purpose or actively doing evil. To become a victim of a death curse, one need not be a sadist, a serial killer, a horrible person, or even a hooligan; done correctly, even the lightest curse can become a death curse, as they embed themselves into a person’s subtle bodies and eventually- by inches, in some cases- kill their victim.

“People who ruin their own lives are addicts, people who don’t take ‘No’ for an answer, people who fight for no reason, unhealthily overweight people, people who do things in excess… actually, most pirates fit the bill. Less than you’d think, but enough. And Vander Decken 9 definitely fits the bill.

“With that said, a death curse is not a gun. It can take months, or even years, for a curse to come to full fruition. No curse kills instantly; that’s a fiction of the pulpies. The only people who can make Maledictions instant are people with Devil Fates; and even then, it doesn’t always work out like that.

“It is also important to note that a death curse cast on a person may only make them harder to kill at all. Some people’s energies are defensive in nature, and rouse when threatened; thus, the cursed one may come to reason, and give up their destructive habits. It won’t actually break their curse, but it will put their curse in remission; and, so long as they keep away from their destructive habits, the curse will not reactivate, leading to a longer life.”

I carefully begin drawing the sigils with the salt. The girls are riveted to me and my explanation.
Pappug has decided that discretion is the better part of valor, and has fled for parts unknown. Madam Shyarly is taking notes, as are B and F.

“Most importantly of all, though, is that a death curse depends heavily on the power and resolve of the caster performing the ritual. The less power the caster can bring to bear, the slower the curse is to work. Curses do not stack; they cannot bind together and grow stronger. Dark magic just doesn’t work like that—light magic, such as benedictions, does. It’s why successive generations of pregnant women visit the Statue of the Goddess Mother in front of the gates to the Palace. Light magic builds up and stacks into something greater than it’s parts; dark magic does not.

“This is why, even though nearly every citizen of Ryugu Mergyo has been cursing Vander Decken 9 for thirty five years, little has come of it. He might have insignificant problems, a thousand and one irritations to make his life miserable; he might be bald and toothless, or even impotent—but for the most part, all those curses haven’t touched him at all.

“To bring someone into their grave, one needs more than just a single death curse. While curses don’t stack, or flow together, they can be layered—thus, a combination of curses can kill a man where a single death curse cannot. Curses can also empower each other—thus, when I cast my death curse, the other active curses on him will become much, much stronger.

“Curses work better the worse the victim is and the more evil things they do; and, as far as I know, Vander Decken 9 is not a good man. He’s not even an okay kind of guy.”

“Of all the people I’ve ever met, Vander Decken 9 is the one I most wish would get smote by lightning and die.” Madam Shyarly sighs.

“Indeed. Although a cursed person can avoid death if they seek help from a professional immediately, Vander Decken 9 has managed to alienate the head of the Coven and Tower here in Ryugu Mergyo; Shyarly.”

“Hallo.” she said; to a general reply of common greeting.

“There will be no stopping my curse. No witch or mage on this island, or trained on this island, or visiting this island, or even living in quietude on this island, will even hear a request from him; he’s blacklisted. If my curse works- and my curses always work- then his death will be worse than what ultimately killed Fisher Tiger, because Vander Decken 9 will have brought it on himself.

“Girls- a spell or ritual is not black or white, dark or light- not even foul or fair; sometimes, it’s not even entirely magical. It has more in common with a jack on a loom- or rather, the chain inside the jack on the loom- than it does with, say, a painting. Spells and rituals are more like a sewing pattern, or a recipe than anything else. What is always true, however, no matter what kind of magic you’re using, or even how the magic itself works- it must be paid for. Magic is never free.

“Magic has a price.

“For things like potions or enchantments, that price is in the exactness of your method, procuring ingredients, the time it takes to make. For cantrips, charms, hexes, and jinxes- more often than not, it’s an emotional or mental toll. Jinxing someone to trip requires you to want to trip someone. Laying a charm- or a series of charms- on a broom so it can fly requires you to understand the mechanics of flight, and how your spellwork is abiding by them. If you sing your spells, you have to be able to
sing, and for some spells, sing very well indeed.

“If you want to curse someone to death, well… Unscrupulous or inexperienced casters might curse someone to death without thinking about their future wellbeing, or the future wellbeing of the one who paid them to do so. Any action taken is balanced with your fate on one end of the scales, and the fate of the one you cursed on the other. To kill anyone, you have to be willing to expose yourself to- and accept the possibility of- mortality. You have to be accepting of the fact that to kill that one you wish dead… it may very well require the sacrifice of your own life.

“There are easier, and faster ways. Guns, knives, spears, swords- even staves, if you must. Death is not a game. It’s an ending, and a finality. And, unless you are born warped in a very specific way-which very, very few people are- killing someone will mark your soul, just a little.

“Unaware of that basic law, inexperienced casters will try to cast a death curse, and end up dying themselves, killing their clients, killing innocent people… or worse.

“Well, why wouldn’t they, right? It’s not their life- usually- it’s their clients’ life that they’re risking. All one needs to take care of is to secure the money for services rendered. And, of course, there are spell casters who redirect the magic kickback to a third party.

“That’s how it happens, you see- a death curse is cast and paid for; the spell caster casts a curse of fatal death; when kickback comes, the spell caster redirects it to a third party, some innocent man who isn’t involved at all. However, even with all that, one is still not secured against punishment. Firstly, that third party may be protected by Higher Powers which will redirect the kickback to the caster. Secondly, that one may have some spell caster remove all the negative energies from them, and they will go back to the one who initially wanted to curse someone to death, meaning you. Either way, you’ll be the one to pay.

“There are spell casters who ensure that the victim of the curse of death they are casting is the only one to suffer. Such spell casters redirect the kickback to inanimate objects or to where death belongs- the world of the dead. This gives them the right to claim that they practice safe magic. You cannot claim such without passing a series of trials, proof of which is conferred in a title. Every coven leader, or tower keeper- or, in the old ways, Judge- is kept aware of those ones who have earned their titles.

“My title, in such matters, is Queen of Wrens.

“Girls- Adelaide, Beatrice, Cecelia, Eleanor, Fernanda, Genevieve- it doesn’t matter what your blood is, or where you come from. All of you- Deborah included- have magic. Everyone in the World does. Some of you have already turned your magic towards certain Arts; others have not. That’s just fine. It may be you are suited to one thing, and one thing only- it may be that a thousand tasks suit your hands.

“The important thing to remember is that- aside from the title, which must be earned- you can learn anything you want, and be anyone you want. If they will not give you what you seek, take it for your own- excepting, as I said, the titles. As for understanding why that is… you’ll have to go all that way yourself, and I cannot say more than that.

“Now. Titled casters are extremely rare and they will never cast a curse of fatal death without a prior study of their potential victim, and a very tight contract. It is well known that some people are protected by Higher Powers or have very pure karma which works like a shield, meaning any curse of death will bounce back at the caster. I am no different- however, my contractual obligations are a bit… broader. Air-tight and Adam-wood strong- but not quite what most other Titles would require.
“Still, it should be understood that it is incredibly difficult to curse someone to death only because they are not liked, are hated for some reason, or the envy of all. Yes, it can be done for a price, but usually in exchange for service to dark forces and ruinous powers for eternity. Moreover, after the purchaser dies, it may spread over to their children and grandchildren, forming a real family curse.”

I take a long sip of my tea. The girls are all staring at me, listening to my lecture, except for Beatrice and Fernanda, who are taking notes. Hm. -Actually, so is Eleanor. Interesting.

“Now. As far as cursing someone goes, you should know for sure that the one who you want to cast a curse on actually deserves to be cursed. For instance, they can be a rapist or murderer who has escaped punishment, a sadist or pedophile, a man who abuses power as a high-level official or employer, who ruins and breaks other people’s lives. As a rule, such people have a very heavy karma and literally sentence themselves to a curse- a caster almost doesn’t need to use their own power, merely direct the power surrounding that person. Moreover, if you curse someone to death deservedly, Higher Powers may not punish the caster for their revenge.

“It is for this reason that magic diagnostics are vital if you’re going to cast a curse of fatal death. It’s important to understand what’s going to happen after you curse someone to death and if it’s safe at all. Fortunetelling, Scrying, and their larger parent schools of magic, Divination, are the tools used most often for such things.

“Ah, but I was speaking of death curses. There is one thing you must not do under any circumstances- girls, I mean this very much. Until you have gained accreditation at a reputable tower or coven, you absolutely must not try to cast a curse on your own, and you especially must not attempt a death curse until after you’ve turned fourteen.”

“Fourteen’s a bit-” winces Madam Shyarly.

“If you can become a man’s apprentice at fourteen, and all that entails, you can cast a death curse. Cabin boys are taken on at fourteen; in Skua, you can start the process of getting a formal apprenticeship when you’re fourteen, but it won’t actually stick until you’re fifteen. Soldier is a profession; so is assassin.”

“Ah. Broadside rules; if it hits one, it hits?” she said.

“Aye. More practically- fourteen’s about when the first tier of mystic nodes settles in any person, regardless of tribe. Before then, it’s much more likely for a person to outright die, rather than cast a curse successfully. Just like mensis, or ejaculation- fourteen is the very earliest I can expect either of those to be viable prospects.

“Titles will only cast a death curse after they have completed all their mystical studies; only if they have no other contracts; and only if they personally feel it is both necessary and correct to do so. This comes only after years of study and experience, which none of you girls have in enough quantity. I am the most senior witch in our crew; and you are all my juniors, and my crewmates. There will be no casting of curses by any of you, until I am convinced you know what you’re doing, can do it correctly, are prepared for the price such things incur, and can handle the power you will invoke. Do you understand me?”

“Yes Ma’am!” chorus the girls.
“Good. Captain?”

“Mm. Go on, I’m listening.”

“Right. -I can see that you’re not convinced of my reasoning. Fair enough- we are new to each other, and trust is earned, not given. However, you are my crewmates now. I am your officer, if such a phrase makes sense. Each member of our crew has skills that they may, in the fullness of time, deign to teach you; I have skills and knowledge that I must teach you, as the oaths I swore upon gaining my Title demand such of me. If one with a Title meets one with magic, who is not trained, it is their responsibility to see that one trained; thus, until either you lot can control your magic adequately, discover what you want to do with it, or find a better teacher, I am yours.

“Girls, there are those who tried to curse someone without having the required knowledge and skills. They are warnings in your textbooks- which, yes, I will be giving to you and teaching you from, and expecting you to learn from and take to heart. Those people who got overconfident and bit more than they could chew and swallow down? They choked; they uniformly met bizarre and gristly fates, are very permanently dead and long gone, or are suffering from severe diseases (often mental ones) and are unable to practice magic.

“You little ladies are my little ladies now; and no lady of mine will ever meet such a fate. Not if I can help it.”

I finish the spell circle, light the candles, and consider where I’m going to cut myself. The girls are blinking back tears.

“Now. As I said before- for a death curse to work, you need a few drops of blood, a proper spell circle with the correct sigils, the right incantation, and enough power to make it stick.

“Mouse blood is fine if you can’t use your own. Standard spell circles work best. You need to use your own specific incantation- and at this level of casting, the incantation is there to marshal your powers and keep your concentration, not actually do anything. If you don’t have the actual skill and power to cast a death curse, you’ll realize it almost immediately- and, because you’re doing a very simple, easily modified ritual, you can turn it into a regular curse which you do have the power to cast.

“As for the actual cursing process? It takes as long as it takes to sing your song of choice. This is mine.”

And then I drip the blood in the right- rite- spots, close my eyes, and sing.

Between my hands, where my voice and my power and the salt and the blood and the magic converge, a curse starts building. I dig deep into the warp of the Kingdom, tug a thread of the fury towards the one who would hurt these people’s beloved princess- there. I spin it fine, the heavy weight of fate pulling the disparate threads of disgust into a fine strand of hatred. I wind it tight around Vander Decken 9- tighter, tighter, attaching it to the fate he’s drawn around himself. He’s the worst kind of person, exactly the kind of man a curse would bite down on and never let go again- and then-
And then-

It's done. I stop. I look up at the shamble.

It’s stabilized again; I used a hell of a lot of the ambient magic in the backbeats of my song.

“It’s done, now. He’s death cursed; ain’t no getting out of it. I have cursed him with the Terrible Fates; he could be raped, or murdered, or eaten by wild animals; could be tricked by liars, or naked, or poor; could be cold, or sick, or hungry; could be trapped with no way out, or lost and not know how to get home, or alone with no one to turn to. And all that’s before he actually dies- and all men must die.”

“Thank you, Queen Wren.”

“Of course. Now- to restore equilibrium, it's time for some completely normal horoscopes. I will be using an orbuculum and guidance from the stars for the following readings.

“Aries:

“Aries, you will die due to a critical mass of glitter. Try to make lots of small mistakes, as they cost you less and tell you more. Did I say glitter? I meant body glitter, which is not at all the same as crafts glitter; do not get the two confused, you will never get that stain out of your skin...

“Aries, the boomerang you bought is cursed. The stars suggest giving it to someone you don’t like, but I’m not so sure just that will transfer the curse. Talk to a witch.

“Aries, everything actually is better said in song, especially if you’re trying to study for an exam.

“Aries, keep still, it saw you.

“Aries, the night has a thousand eyes; please take care to not poke any of them. What has the night ever done to you?

“Aries, what’s the point of going places if you can’t make an entrance? Through the window is the best you can do? No, I will not be paying for that, and I resent the implication that I would.

“Aries, your future brings bees; bees, and honey. Sort of a double edged sword; but it’s better than honeyjackets, which eat flesh this time of year.

“Aries, be sure to get enough protein; crack open the bones and eat the marrow. It’s very tasty, even when poorly cooked.

“Aries, you did not surrender amicably, or violently, or ignitably. You did not surrender, even when you were thrown out the window.

“Aries, at the museum, you will maximize your arts per second by sprinting through the exhibits.

“Aries, the angry pants are coming off. It’s been a very long day of clothed rage, and you deserve some rest. Consider putting lotion on after you shave next time, the stars say it reduces chafing- I agree. I also recommend using an exfoliant on your legs, that ashy color is a buildup of dead skin.

“No, actually; it wasn’t your fault this time, Aries. She’s lying to you. You know you’ll never please
her; you’ve known for years. Your old friends told you and told you that she’s no good, but you never listened. It’s not too late, though— it doesn’t matter how many children you have together, or what kind of debt you’re in. It’s not too late. The nuns will help you, but you have to be honest, and answer all their questions. All of them.

“Taurus:

“Taurus, you will die when you accidentally create a clone. You will loose an old-Wes style gunfight with them. I’m sorry; your speed’s good, but not that good. And you really shouldn’t leave crossbows just lying around.

“Taurus, replace your socks with sand. Best do it now, before fate does it for you.

“Cryptomicrobiology.

“Taurus, nothing brings people closer together than being stuck together with maple syrup. You can’t eat all of it in time; get your good brush and a hot bucket and go play matchmaker. A moist towel in a waterproof bag with a hot rock should keep it off your fingers, the stars know how you feel about that.

“Taurus, trace the coils in the air: they shall lead to what you seek.

“Taurus, keep a lookout for something that looks like it’s made of driftwood and light. The stars say it trades bad memories for coupons; I can clarify that to mean ‘coupons for the next nearest sale’. You’ll have to decide for yourself what constitutes a bad memory.

“Taurus, in the museum, you will be staring hungrily at the still-lives. This is the still-life museum, they will be here later; go get something to eat already!

“Taurus did not surrender; all it took was a few honeyed words in the right ear. An allergy to honey is rare, but not uncommon— not the way you did it— and it’s cruel and gruesome effects show your resolve.

“Taurus, if you want something done right, create several clones of yourself and make them fight. If we could make friends out of clay they wouldn’t necessarily be worth less than normal friends, but please; come outside. We miss you.

“Taurus, you don’t have to fight the Sea King; you get to fight the Sea King! Don’t worry about the poison spines, or the teeth!

“The stars say today is the day for hella dunking, Taurus; go style some losers.

“Taurus; the stars don’t have anything else to say about you today, so- do what you want.

“Gemini:

“Gemini, it is entirely possible to suck at relaxing. Exhaust yourself until all you can do is rest. I recommend masturbation.

“Gemini, please remember: just because it looks like food doesn’t mean it is. The past haunts us all; you’re not special in that regard. Just because your haunting is a bit more lively than ours does not mean we are not haunted. The stars say why bother with ghosts? Haunt your own ship! Scream and
cry and stalk your own halls in a towering fury. I say you’re an adult now, and you get to decide what that means.

“Gemini, at the museum you are contributing, with crayons.

“Gemini did not surrender; you did your best. This time, it was actually enough. You’ll definitely make an impression at your next job interview when you slam into it at terminal velocity, though.

“Gemini, you can hide from a lack of something. Fear of empty spaces is unfortunately common.

“Gemini, you will die when the fish is accidentally dropped on your spine. You die nearly instantly; your last memory will be of the smell of river water and the sensation of slimy skin on your own.

“Gemini, the moons are right; you ought to give it a try. The stars and I both recommend you get condoms and lube from the conbini first and use them, though. Fluid transfer of disease is real; it’s much bigger than you think, your own natural lube is not enough. Protect ya neck; wu tang.

“Gemini, if you come across a library of forbidden knowledge tended by the dead, please don’t try to check anything out. It is a lending library, but you can only get a card if you’re a legal citizen of an afterlife plane; it’d be very embarrassing if you weren’t. Getting married to a ghost would make you a legal citizen of an afterlife plane, but please don’t rush into marriage for the sake of knowledge. They deserve better than that and you know it.

“Gemini, you know what they meant. You always knew what they meant.

“Gemini, the stars mixed up ‘power vacuum’ with ‘cleaning vacuum’. I’m sorry; your carpet will never be the same.

“Cancer:

“Cancer, at the museum, you will spend most of your time staring thoughtfully at the succulent on the reception desk. You will realize there is more museum about half an hour before it closes. Plan your trip accordingly.

“Cancer, you did not surrender- but I didn’t think it would happen. I’m so sorry. It wasn’t your fault, I swear it. The stars couldn’t have helped you either, but- I know you would have preferred to hear this from them. You are not broken; you are not tainted. -I am so sorry. Please, keep moving.

“Cancer, your destiny is covered in sticky residue. They found the marshmallows again- thankfully, it’s on the shiny leather so it’ll wipe right off with a wet cloth.

“Cancer, people who say that neon colored things are artificial have never eaten a posy of flowers. It’s seasonal, and tasty.

“Cancer, you will die due to a move of desperation. You snapped off your own rib and fashioned it into a knife- but you got the other guy too, so don’t worry too much about it. At that point, there was hardly any blood left in you at all.

“Cancer, be careful today; all headphone cords have been temporarily transformed into snakes. It should wear off by tomorrow, but that doesn’t help you today.

“Cancer, it’s leaking again but not where it was before- you’ll have to sniff it out this time.
“Cancer, having a good time is a personal choice, not an obligation.

“Cancer, smoke two cigarettes at once so you can put both of them out in that asshole’s eyes. Plus, if you miss one, you have a second chance.

“Cancer, not every day will be one of triumph. You will fail, you will be lost, you will be scared. Fertilizer is made from plants whose time has passed.

“Cancer, the stars say to eat. It’s very satisfying, even if everything tastes like mashed potatoes. Then, go wipe the mirror clean, it’s filthy and hard to see. When you get the urge to keep going, keep going. Doing tasks you mastered as a child is the fastest way to shake the Sadness off; and, as a bonus, you get clean rooms, too.

“Cancer... whoopsy-daisy, no more fortune for you today. The stars just handed me a skull with some writhing darkness inside it, so- I mean, it’s probably fine. Maybe try stop thinking about it?”

The skull chatters ominously, before glorpimg onto the wooden plate and oozing menacingly. Don’t Think About It.

“Leo:

“Leo, in the museum, you will be confused as to the plot of this weird comic book building.

“Leo did not surrender because they never felt the need to.

“Leo, the connections are many. Some of them should absolutely die, but others will bring you comfort if they stay. Be very sure about which is which before you start culling.

“Leo, improperly formed curses can go haywire, bounding off and smacking into things with no real rhyme or reason. It’s not your fault. It is your fault that things have gotten to this point, though- you should have found a better witch as soon as the curse went wrong, not tried to deal with it yourself. The stars say it’ll wear off- or break apart- by the equinox, but I’m not sure you can hold out that long.

“Leo, you will die in love, at extreme velocities.

“Leo, you’ve probably been cursed a couple times. It happens to everyone. Hell, you can draw someone poorly and accidentally curse them, if you’re mad enough about it. Pretty sure that’s what happened with your last wardrobe. Best just burn it, or throw it in the sea. Passing on curses is worse than bedbugs.

“Leo, move to the river and drink deep of it’s black and murky waters. It’ll all be over, soon enough. Their teeth are sharp, and you only have so much blood to spill.

“Leo, you must be brave enough to produce terrible things. The key to your Art is discipline; fuck standards. Fearsome is the man who has practiced one kick ten thousand times.

“For Leo, today is an excellent day to attach hooks to your hands and feet and scale a building. Bring rope and carabiners and pitons if you’re trying to bring a friend with you, their skill is not as great as yours. There’s a sale at the feed store; the coffee lady will give you a bunch of coupons if you buy two scones this time. You might also get enough funds by breakdancing today, but the stars are less
“Leo, the stars say you should look through your old board games. Not too quickly, don’t want to startle it; the defensive acid will melt right through your skin. Chalk dust and baking soda will help neutralize any previous incidents, but- really, maybe find a nice glass shield to hide behind? Glass isn’t reactive, usually…

“Leo, a rock got stuck in the great loom of your fate, fucking up the warp and weft of your future for at least the next week. All further predictions are suspect. The Fates and the stars formally apologize, and offer one free twist of fate to be redeemed at the nearest backwoods shitty marina of your choice. Take someone you trust as backup and a gun.

“Virgo:

“Virgo, you went to the museum buck naked. You assumed that was just what one does. You weren’t exactly wrong, but- next time, maybe putting all your piercings in could be saved for a different naked occasion? The stars are just sayin’.

“Virgo did not surrender; Virgo turned off all the lights. No reason for it, everyone was willing to let you go; but you did it, and you smashed all the plates in the house and you whispered your name with triumph into everyone’s ears. It took thirteen minutes exactly for you to leave that place, and fifteen more for you to begin to weep. The truth is, it wasn’t always awful, and you miss those not-awful parts intensely. None of your friends would ever understand that, though.

“Virgo, be wary of those you have bested time and time again. People, and animals, learn from defeat.

“Virgo, there is the person you pretend you are, and the person you pretend you are not. Bash their heads together to knock them out simultaneously. Steal their wallets and buy the damn burrito. No, you’re not fat.

:Modernity has made it possible to be scared to talk to people that are thousands of kilometers away. Call her back, Virgo. You don’t have enough friends to be blowing this one off.

“Virgo, you will die after you see something so racist it causes your liver to fail. The stars are faintly apologetic about this, but remind you that they reminded you to stop drinking so heavily years ago but you didn’t and now- well. It’s not quite too late. But.

“Virgo, if it does not come from a place of love and respect, it’s all a lie.

“Virgo, the Djinn soap vendor is lying. Check your horse’s droppings and liquidate all your cash.

“Virgo, your answer brandishes a pool cue. Your answer has had too much to drink. You need to fight back to back with your answer and make out with them in a grungy alley. That’s not the stars, that’s me. Kiss them. You kiss them right now, their lips are soft and warm and sticky from the beer. Do it. Do it. Do it.

“Virgo, the stars call it a lost cause. I call it excellent practice. Both of us agree that it’s not the real deal.

“Virgo, so many things are growing inside of you. You contain multitudes. You are a breeding ground for legions of tiny children and you shall conquer.
“Virgo, the stars said to tell you ‘something about fat chickens’.

“Libra:

“Libra, in the museum you will be followed through the exhibits by a small herd of cats. Stop feeding them.

“Libra did not surrender; with great adversity within, and many scorpions without. Sorry, without many scorpions. It was mostly a mental thing, and thank goodness there were comparatively few scorpions, that would have been such a mess.

“Libra, the stars are sorry to tell you this but something is actually eating your socks. It’s not the dryer. Call an exterminator.

“Libra, it’s just a fucking sandwich and some soup. You knew going in that the sex was meaningless; wishing for more from them isn’t going to change the fact that they can’t give it to you.

“Libra will die after years of study on the location of a lost kingdom. Upon finding the ancient tomb which will lead to your next clue, and opening it, you will realize the person within was buried with their ceremonial flamethrower- in full working order, and primed to flare when you open the casket.

“Libra, what are you protecting them from?

“Libra, the moons are looking for you. Stay inside tonight, away from their gazes. You know who you are, and you know what you did, and you know what will happen if they catch you. Do not let them catch you.

“Libra, please stop clapping along. You have no sense of rhythm or unity.

“Libra, get up and get ready. You’re needed; bring the rain.

“Libra, use your skills at swing dance to confuse the authorities long enough for your friends to escape. Then, switch to can-can, and knock ‘em dead.

“Libra, self cleaning dream catchers do not exist. Make sure you empty your dream catcher into a wastebasket every couple of days. Otherwise, you might attract things that try to eat the dreams stuck there, and it’s a short wriggle from eating dreamcatcher dreams to eating brains.

“Libra, the world will continue when you’re gone. Life goes on. It just- does. You can’t stop it. Here it comes- are you ready? No? Neither is anyone else. No, not even the stars.

“Scorpio:

“Scorpion in the museum is pretending to be an art. It’s working.

“Scorpio did not surrender unhappily. Scorpio did not surrender inexorably. Yet when it was done, you smiled.

“Scorpio, what else are you gonna do with your time? Not make dick jokes? Pfft.

“Scorpio, the elastic of your underwear can make an excellent slingshot in an emergency.
“Scorpio, there is no forward. The World is round. It’s not actually a race, it’s a journey. You’ll get there in your own time.


“Scorpio, moon pies do not come from any of the moons. The stars lied to me. Don’t make my mistakes.

“Scorpio, the more precarious the perch, the more meaningful every second spent there is. You really shouldn’t have it tied so tightly though, that’s bad for your circulation.

“Scorpio, someone snuck into your locker and stole a page from one of your many books. Not permanently; the put it right back, after. But. Nah, don’t worry about it, they’ll tell you when they’re ready.

“Scorpio, the lights are hotter than they look, and prone to blinding the unwary. Dress lightly; bring sunglasses; wear antiperspirant. And try not to touch any of them.

“Scorpio, if you’re gonna break the rules, for the love of god, do it with some style.

“Scorpio, nobody haunts the hangman; people haunt the shit out of cops, though.

“Scorpio, the stars say if you haven’t run by now, it’s too late.

“Ophiuchus:

“Ophiuchus at the museum feels the floor is wasted space here and continues to carve their own arts into the concrete.

“Ophiuchus did not surrender; you undid the moments in time where you gave up. It hurts, giving up the failures within and the hard-won lessons. It’s your growth, a better you, and you have traded that self away. But this is too important to lose.

“Ophiuchus, please be sure to have a good firm grip on the obvious before you move on to the hard stuff.

“Ophiuchus will die, like a fucking dumbass. You tried to kill Miyamoto Musashi with a sword. You really should have known better. What the hell were you smoking?

“Ophiuchus, paper towels are not only for paper messes.

“Ophiuchus, search the property for an old log. Burn it. It won’t bring your coat back but it will kill the thing that ate it.

“Ophiuchus, cover yourself in Mentholated Vaporub and stand outside in the Wind. It cured every disease and illness I had while at school; I should have died at least thirty times in the first year alone. You know why I didn’t? Mentholated Vaporub and the Wind.

“Ophiuchus, ignore the rocking chair.

“Ophiuchus, every second you spend worrying could be spent creating dangerous chemical explosives in your kitchen. Now who looks silly?

“Ophiuchus, hiding under the covers actually works with some things. It is technically a threshold
and so some things do actually have to be invited.

“Ophiuchus, demanding the conversation go your way is a good way to be disappointed. Balance cares little for assholes.

“Ophiuchus, the stars and I are sorry to say, your intense desire to hunt down and kill the seventh king of the Germa is doomed. He’s dead, Ophiuchus. Ophiuchus, he’s been dead for forty years.”

The Girls chorus a “Woah~!” at exactly the right moment.

“Sagittarius:

“In the museum, Sagittarius looks the orderlies in the eye while appreciating the art to establish power.

“Sagittarius did not surrender. When you needed patience, you thought of those who loved you. When you needed fury, you thought of those who hurt you. When you needed strength, you thought of yourself. When you needed just one more chance to get it right, you thought of that fucking cat.

“Sagittarius, it cares little if you ignore it. It’s not looking for attention. It doesn’t have eyes.

“Sagittarius will die by a game winning home run. Your skull will be completely caved in. Your last memory will be the sound of people cheering as you fade away.

“Sagittarius, the past leaks. Get better pads.

“Sagittarius, someone will throw a javelin at you today. It will miss by about half an arm’s length. Try to be polite in the face of their insincerity.

“Sagittarius, leave it for now. Recompense is coming. Know that they understand.

“Sagittarius, libraries are free and open to the public. Ambulatory Librarians will keep your secrets. Do the research before you commit. Leather and ivory and fur are pieces of those who are dead. Accept no substitutes.

“Sagittarius, ‘two birds with one stone’ is a misleading proverb. Meteorites hit pretty hard, and no one knows a meteorwrong from a meteorite until after they’ve hit the ground.

“Sagittarius, the revolution is here, right now; and it is meaty, dishy, tasty, and very fit. And if you don’t get him a bigger towel, he’s going to drip all over your nice carpet. And it’s a very chilly day, the stars know you’d hate for him to get a chill. The bed’s right there, won’t take a moment. You’ll need much more than a moment. Wink. Wink. Wink.”

Madam Shyarly lets out a wolf whistle, as does Brook. Franky- left at some point. Hm. Well, he’s a grown man, I’m sure he’ll be fine.

“Sagittarius, this is the swamp of your discontent. This is the estuary of your confusion. These are the mud and leeches of your dismay.
“Sagittarius, the stars say to lie on your back. You’ll have a better view of the clouds, that way.”

I take a sip of hot tea. Mm. Minty fresh; Keimi replaced the pot, at around the same moment Pappug left.

“Capricorn:

“At the museum, Capricorn was so moved by a cubist sculpture that they slid sideways out of the museum and into a gambling den. Please don’t spend all your money in one place.

“Capricorn did not surrender. No one else was hurt, after all. This was a simple warning. You have the power to do much, much more. They will remember that this time.

“Capricorn died, but only a little bit. Stop arguing about The Play, the stars have been bored of this argument for years.

“Capricorn, doors are only locked for idiots that don’t carry sledgehammers with them all the time.

“Capricorn, everything you suspect is happening. However, the clown suit is unnecessary. The bucket of eel’s blood is not.

“Capricorn, lingerie does wonders.

“Capricorn, connecting enough extension cables to each other does absolutely nothing. The sense of completion is nice, though. Bungee cords are another story- nothing happens when you do it, it’s what you use it for that’s interesting.

“Capricorn, most armor is not resistant to funk based weaponry. That’s music and stench, if you’re wondering.

“Capricorn, it’s great that you know what all of those words mean, but you neglected to see if anyone actually, you know, cared.

“Capricorn, build so many bridges it becomes impossible to see the sun. You are the spider to this web of infrastructure; catch you some damn flies already.

“Capricorn, be prepared for a big change; you’ll need a new arm hole in your shirts but I am not sure where. No, neither are the stars- opinions are split between your shoulders and your ribs. Prepare yourself.

“Capricorn, the only other thing I’ve got for you today from the stars is a pile of burning backpacks. In like, twenty minutes, to the… left? of the hoses, whatever that means. Maybe you can figure out some use for them?

“Aquarius:

“In the museum, Aquarius is eating paint as a show of solidarity. In the Library, Aquarius is eating paper as a show of solidarity. Aquarius has the spirit; they’re a little confused to the whole point of it all, but they’ve got the spirit.
“Aquarius did not surrender. Don’t let anybody tell you differently; there’s nothing actually wrong with conjuring forest creatures from the ether and belting out your favorite show-tunes to feel better. Whatever gives you strength.

“Aquarius, try something new. Don’t break the skin, though. You have enough tattoos.

“Aquarius will die after being hit by a train. In your living room, actually, don’t feel bad- the Sadness did not defeat you, faulty maintenance practices did.

“Aquarius, we all know when heartbeats are a bad sign.

“Aquarius, play close to the chest. You are being watched, actually.

“Aquarius, someone loafs you. They are collecting the dead skins from your bed and clothing and constructing fine pastries from it. It’s a horrific thing to do to pastry, but the baking process completely destroys all your skin’s use in any kind of spell, benign or dastardly. Still gross, though.

“Aquarius, harvest from the rich and give to the poor. They won’t need the blood and organs for much longer anyway. Waste not, want not.

“Aquarius, heaven and hell are the same place; it’s located roughly six days walk outside of Paris, Germa Kingdom.”

The entire table lets fly with a resounding “oooooooh! Snap!”

I said it, I meant it, and I’m not taking it back.

Kiss my liver’s ass.

“Aquarius, a new opportunity comes your way! It will be big, and heavy, possibly with fins.

“Aquarius, you’ll be cooler if you stop carrying that wooden sword everywhere. Just use a bamboo pole with some cord for a handle-wrap, that’s what I did when I was your age. The stars say you should just carry a real sword, if you’re wanting a blade- but I say don’t do that, because then you’ll use it.

“Aquarius, no more fortunes today. The stars just handed me a drift wood carving of you, though. It’s quite pretty, and there’s sea glass for your eyes.

I put it near the slightly oozing skull, and the plate starts looking more settled by the second.

“Pisces:

“In the museum, Pisces is being escorted out as the orderlies were not lonely and did not appreciate the hugs and kisses.

“Pisces did not surrender. You took someone else’s job for a bit. A few handkerchiefs held under noses and wiped across cheeks; a sharp knife and gentle hands; kindness works wonders.
Eventually, everyone needs to go back to being themselves, whatever those selves have become. Bon chance.

“Pisces, get in your own way. Only you can stop yourself. Ask him, or don’t ask him. You know who you are, and what you can do.

“Pisces, as long as golf continues to exist you will be plagued with nightmares.

“Pisces will die in a tragic yet really fucking cool billiards accident. You’ll also win your bet, so, heyoo.

“Pisces, yes, it is amazing that you made a thinking engine that runs on live wasps, but next time you should ask permission first. Permission of the wasps, they’re the ones running the engine.

“Pisces, at noon on Midsummer of this year, the light through the Rose Window of Notre Dame will be the most romantic anywhere. Anywhen. Ask her then.

“Pisces, you love deeply; but who are you? And what do you want?

“Pisces, algebra will come in handy today when you are assaulted by a mathemagician on ketamine. Bring peanuts.

“Pisces, the next answer lies within the ground beef. Wash your hands. The eggs have already given their answer.

“Pisces, make up your own constellations, pray to your own gods, command unknown forces of your own divination. Steal from everything. This is real magic.

“Pisces, it is completely possible to just lock your doors and slowly rot away. The stars and I would not recommend this. Nice job on not doing it!”

I take another long sip of mint tea, and return my gaze to somewhere beyond the center of the orbuculum.

“Don’t do drugs; you’ll ruin your life and make yourself very susceptible to curses. Especially don’t do them Energy Steroids, those’ll make you short-lived and miserable, and sterile, too.

“And now, a series of words from our sponsors.

“Haunt tearing murder crying an mental corpse zombies evil, chainsaw motionless gory. Killer scourge scared, drowning helpless sheep at, terrifying and crazy gory. Dark mutilation rotten, Blood hair raising or, blood in eyeball. In willow trees, killer dolls are rotten teeth bite, shee.

interior design. Gruesome, a disembowel unknown. Cat at decapitated guns. Mental hospital sliced
drowning. chainsaw dread full moon, pushed at alley bruises, children is knife. Menacing nightmare
zombie deranged in stabbing. Witch ashes eyeball bruises, in bury burn hell flames. Creep cold
graves, shadow non fear a, psychotic ashes ghost. Gore at chainsaw knife crazed choking helpless.
Haunt suicide silent, gory as demonic alarming, buried in fallen angel. Undead obsession. Tear
horrifying, a devil fiendish tense in. Death bruises moon torture demons devil or vampire werewolf
wind. Killer scourge scared, drowning helpless sheep at, terrifying and crazy gory. Eerie needles
edginess, graveyard on death rotten, disturbing non grave. Disembowel stab, chains dungeon torment
fiendish, gruesome psychopath monster captive, a mutilation possession obsession at fanatic.
Captivation by moonlight. Agony deteriorated, fatal or chilling is, grotesque Halloween exorcism.
Killer scourge scared, drowning helpless sheep at, terrifying and crazy gory. Tearing eyeballs zombie

Moon torture demons devil or vampire werewolf wind. In horrifying, fear is gnarled murder,
ominous eerie Serial killer sinister, with sick chilling agony shaking. Heart pumping. Edginess
anxiety tension, claw at deteriorated in, creep a tear. Bloodcurdling motionless murder, disturbing
ominous running at, murderer ooze-”

I take another sip of my tea, and then to finish things off, I snort and glurgle my throat clear of
prophecy slime, and go right to the Proceedings. I don’t actually remember all the things I said. On
reflection, neither did Madam Shyarly.

I just remember ending it with “-IT’S MIDNITE, BABY!”

“MIDNIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGHT-!” whooped Madam Shyarly.

Don’t do crystal balls, kids. Dice, you can manage, even pendants if you have to- but crystal balls
will pull things out of you best left buried. It’ll overturn rocks you didn’t never want overturned.
Eech. I was such a hooligan, goddamn.

The follies of youth do not wash away.

“Madam Shyarly- whoops, there goes the Shamble- when’s the last time you cleansed this crystal
ball?”

“Um… aw, shit! Well, Brigid’s Day is just around the wall, I’ll do it then.”

“-I suppose. Although, if you really have no further use for it…”

“-Honestly, I’ve always been better at scrying. Doable with an Orb, but-”

“Ugh, that’s so finicky - one misstep and you’re lookin’ at a migraine for a week and a half.”

“Right. So. Yeah- you want it? Take it.”

“Thank you.”
I wrap the Orbuculum in a silk handkerchief, and tuck it into my clutch. And then, of course, the Narcolepsy got me.

Fuckin’ Narcolepsy.

I slept, and I dreamed, and I heard a man Lie, and I spoke in my sleep. History doesn’t repeat; it rhymes. I will not abide Lies spoken in my presence.

“I am proud of my Kingdom, because here we have solved the Merjin problem. We have taken him out of politics and have thereby secured good government under any party and laid foundations for the future development of both races. We have secured peace, and rendered prosperity a certainty.

“I am inclined to give to you my solution of this problem. It is, first, as far as possible under the Fifteenth Article to disfranchise him; after that let him alone, quit writing about him; quite talking about him, quite making him ‘the fish man’s burden,’ let him ‘haul his own net’; quit coddling him, let him learn that no man, no race, ever got anything worth having that he did not himself earn; that character is the outcome of sacrifice and worth is the result of toil; that whatever his future may be, the present has in it for him nothing that is not the product of industry, thrift, obedience to law, and uprightness; that he cannot, by resolution of council or league, accomplish anything; that he can do much by work; that violence may gratify his passions but it cannot accomplish his ambitions; that he may eat rarely of the cooking of equality, but he will always find when he does that ‘there is poison in the broth’.

“Let the merjin learn once and for always that there is unending separation of the races, that the two peoples may develop side by side to the fullest but that they cannot intermingle; let the fish man determine that no man shall by act or thought or speech cross this line, and the race problem will be at an end.

“These things are not said in enmity to the merjin but in regard for him. He constitutes one half of the population of my Kingdom. He has always been my personal friend; as a Judge I have often defended him, and as Prince I have frequently protected him. But there flows in my veins the blood of the dominant race; that race that has conquered the Sea and seeks out the mysteries of the heights and shores. If manifest destiny leads to the seizure of Aos Sidhe, it is certain that it likewise leads to the dominance of the Merrow. When the merjin recognizes this fact we shall have peace and good will between the races.

“But I would not have the fish people forget their duty to the merjin. We must seek the truth and pursue it. We owe an obligation to ‘the man in scales’; we made him; we brought him to our cities, our towns, our work-gangs and service; he has served us well; he is patient and teachable. We owe him gratitude; above all we owe him justice. We cannot forget his fidelity and we ought not to magnify his faults; we cannot change his skin; neither can we ignore his service. One does not rise on waves of the dead to higher things, and no people can do so and flourish. We must rise by ourselves, we must execute judgement in righteousness; we must educate not only ourselves but see to it that the merjin has an opportunity for education.

“As a fish man I am afraid of but one thing for my race and that is that we shall become afraid to give the merjin a fair chance. The first duty of every man is to develop himself to the uttermost and the only limitation upon his duty is that he shall take pains to see that in his own development he does no injustice to those beneath him. This is true of races as well as of individuals. Considered properly it is not a limitation but a condition of development.

“The fish man in the South can never attain to his fullest growth until he does absolute justice to the
Merjin race. If he is doing that now, it is well for him. If he is not doing it, he must seek to know the ways of truth and pursue them. My own opinion is, that so far we have done well, and that the future holds no menace for us if we do the duty which lies next to us, training, developing the coming generations; so that the problems which seem so difficult to us shall be easy to them.”

I peel my eyes open, and look down at the snail. Staring back at me is- someone. Not the Royalty, at the table; not my crew, or my kinsmen. A Sinister Lord; the one whom Sidre’s ancient grudge burrowed deep inside, and nevermind the fact that she herself was- hate is poisonous.

I have had quite enough of it.

“Those are the words of Prince Triton, who would become King of the Neptune Throne; King Triton Neptune, who barred all merjin from any position of responsibility in their own kingdom-”

“-King Neptune, who stole Aos Sidhe from the Fae, and destroyed the palace of Tir Na Oge-” murmurs Ace, almost without tone.

“-King Triton, who ferried the Giants to our hills and allowed them to desecrate our sacred tombs-”

“-King Neptune, who Ariel, his youngest sister-” sighs Ace, because he got his entire inheritance. Esterners call it han, sometimes. We call it Wailing.

“-Our Beloved, Ariel, our greatest Queen-”

“-did flee, and her people with her.” said Ace, wailing roiling through him like blood and eels and tongues of fire.

“She fled.”

“She flew.” he said.

“And she did not return.” we said together, Wailing making our voices synergize into something… something almost awful.

Fae don’t forget; and we don’t really… forgive. We let it lie; we leave it be. But it doesn’t really go away.

I take a deep breath, and let it out from my toes. Don’t cut a man for having opinions, Mab. Not yet; and you do not say these things for him. We don’t fight oppressors because we can change the oppressor- we fight to give hope and courage to the oppressed.

“Minister of the Left, King Triton’s views were not uncommon even a century ago among your people. The belief that only fish men- or, excuse me, the more polite Gyojin- should be in positions of power, and that gyojin should use their power to ‘float’ other tribes, was an ideology promoted by gyojin World-wide. Now, when official policy has changed, we see what scum bubbles to the surface.

“Hody Jones, even fifty years ago, would not have been so aberrant. Extreme, certainly- but not
disallowed in polite company. Gyojin supremacy isn’t actually gone, you see; it’s just renamed itself as, mm. Cultural pride?”

“Appreciation of Tradition.” growls Madam Shyarly.

“People like Hody Jones believe that all people who are not like him- are not gyojin, or related to gyojin within some ridiculous degree- are less intelligent than gyojin and naturally inferior. Paradoxically, he also believes that those inferiors can be educated- or forced, or what have you- into a certain mould, and raised to ‘a certain level’. He believes, or pays lip service to the idea that gyojin have a responsibility as the superior race to help those inferiors achieve their potential- even if they could never be equal to a ‘proper gyojin.’

“By this logic, allowing merjin- in the Kingdom or otherwise- and, as time rolled onwards, allowing anyone considered inferior, impure, unclean, or less intelligent to govern themselves or others was not only dangerous to the pure, but to the impure themselves. It is for this reason that, even though Madam Shyarly is the actual leader of the three cities of Coralia, Hillsdon, and Gobdark, she does not carry a noble title of any kind- which, by your own country’s law, she is entitled to. Nor, it must be said, does she draw a noble’s salary; nor does she garner a noble’s respect among what can only be considered her peers.

“She is much like Mister Iceberg of Water 7, or your kinswoman, Lady Gilly; but unlike them, she is a mermaid, and she came from poor people, and- more often than not- her concerns and her constituents are swept aside.

“Minister of the Left- Lord Sinister; when was the last time the headwaters of Gobdark were cycled? Why are the caves of Hillsdon home to naught but robbers, thieves, and vagabonds? Whom does it serve that the people who work in the city of Coralia cannot afford to live there? Who, aside from the Lady Shyarly, cares for these people? Who, sir? For, by the fluttering of my Fair wings, it is not you, sir!”

The Minister of the Left cannot answer me.

“Your Majesty; Hody Jones is a symptom of something much more insidious, and Vander Decken 9 is an opportunist, who will be dealt with one way or another. My crewmate, Robin, by comparison, is clean as snow, fresh-fallen.”

There was something odd about my hearing, just then- Bryony did something unusual, I think, but I’m not sure why… ah, mystic static. Makes sense; she must be boosting her signal somehow.

Keimi swims in, and looks at Madam Shyarly and then at me with shining eyes and a grim expression.

“Excuse me, but- was all that true?” said Keimi.

“All what?”
“All that about- about mermaids, and fishmen, and- and everything. Madam- I always knew Madam Shyarly was in charge, of course, everyone does, but- _really?_”

“...If I were a fishwoman, I’d be called Lady Shyarly. But I’m a mermaid; and so, I am not.”

Keimi looks stricken.

Genevieve looks- furious.

“Is that why our mother is dying?” she said.

“Genevieve, what’s wrong with your mother?”

“Every time we’d take her to a doctor, they’d say ‘it’s just a cold’, and she’s strong, of hardy merjin stock, she’ll be- fine.

“Colds don’t last for months and months, and they don’t make you piss blood or cough up blood and chunks. They don’t make you loose almost all of your weight, until the bones stand out under your skin; and they certainly don’t make you too tired to do anything but wheeze most days.

“But still- every doctor I can coerce into seeing her says ‘it’s just a cold’ and she’ll overcome it, surely.” she said.

Genevieve wiped her eyes, and scowled.

“-our Mother taught us everything she could about magic; each of us a different skill, because that’s all she had strength for and we couldn’t all stay together with her. Sometimes, her muscles cramp so badly that only Poppy Milk can make her comfortable enough to sleep- it doesn’t stop her hurting, it just makes it so she can sleep. So. Is this- thing, where fishpeople think they’re better than other fishpeople, excepting that they’re somehow the wrong kind of fishpeople- is that why my mother is dying?” she said.

I won’t lie to her. It never works out, lying to children.

“I think so, Genevieve. I’m sorry.”

Genevieve nods, and huffs softly- and then she’s being wrapped between her sisters, Beatrice and Cecelia and Eleanor, and all of them are burrowing into Brook’s side. And Fernanda; Fern fixes us with a bleak look, and says, simply:

“The way I learned I’m a Seer, among other things, is that I Saw how my mother was to die- or rather, I saw how she would be found, After. Apparently, mermaid prostitutes die of tuberculosis so often, it gets marked down as ‘a chest infection’ or something like that. All the doctors in the Three cities know that the Hospital won’t take a merjin with tuberculosis, especially if they’re from
Gobdark, and... well. There’s a lot of people I grew up seeing that I saw and then I saw, I saw them taken away in the white sheets and... Mab?” said Fernanda.

“Yes, Fern?”

“Please don’t let me go to Gobdark alone. I don’t think... I don’t think I can handle it all by myself.” said Fern.

“Of course.”

What else am I supposed to say? I mean- other than going around and hugging her, which I am- wow, she has a tight grip- there’s not much else I can do until after there’s a corpse.

Goddamn. I always forget that Mab’s really highly educated and was trained to do a very specific job; she hardly ever lets on, but... When she calls herself a Queen, she’s not fucking around. Hm. ’Witch Queen’ Mab has a certain ring to it...

Oh gods, King Neptune looks... so old. He looks old, and sad, and like he’s trying desperately not to cry. I-

I have to help him, I can’t just leave him like that.

I'm not the kind of person who just leaves someone to suffer and die- not anymore. I can't be that person anymore- I won't.

“Your Majesty; we’re so far from the surface of the ocean... how is there day and night, down here? We’re in the aphotic zone, or perhaps lower; it should be pitch black, or close enough. How, then, can there be sunlight?” I said.

The king blinks, then latches onto my conversational lifeline with a fair amount of desperate nerve. He’s old, is the thing- his hair is only sort of red, curly but shot through with silvery white. His skin is thin, and sallow, and his hands are wizened and covered in liverspots. He’s much the same as Whitebeard; old, but not weak, or withered. There’s still a power to him, a force he could bring to bear.

Unlike Whitebeard, however, King Neptune is... tired. He’s been fighting a war on two or three fronts, it seems; and he can’t quite give the reigns over to one of his children, not with the problems of his time as they are.

“Ah, that’s Eve. The Sunlight Tree Eve is a colossal-class mangrove tree gifted to the Kingdom by Queen Ariel in accordance with the Neptunian Accords-jamon. It absorbs sunlight up in Sabaody, and transfers what it doesn’t use in the daily business of living to it’s roots-jamon. It’s also how the bubble-walls around various parts of the island are maintained-jamon.” said King Neptune.
“Amazing! I wonder—"

And so I engage the old king in long conversation, letting him lead. He seems incredibly grateful to have a moment to speak with a pretty young woman about inconsequential things. Everyone knows that Fishman Island is lit by their Tree, Eve. But— it’s interesting, getting a local’s take on this island’s weather phenomena.

Zoro went off to the toilet a while ago, a bit after the dessert course. Knowing him, he’s gotten completely lost in this palace— and, considering my condition…

I wait for a good lull in the conversation, turn the subjects gently this way and that— ask about his children, and so on. Eventually, I hit on just the right combination of phrasing to excuse myself from the room, and do so.

I don’t quite waddle when I walk, not yet, but there’s a very distinctive way of moving when you’re pregnant— and the King’s seen it at least twice. He smiled at me, nostalgically— and then graciously waved away all of Lord Sinister’s protests of “allowing a filthy pirate to roam freely in the Royal Palace”.

I stop at the bathroom, because actually I do need to pee; and Zoro, of course, isn’t there.

Gods damn it all, where the hell has that man gotten to now? Best I go and find him, then— considering everything I learned at the Weather Coven, finding a single man in a closed building, especially the man who has put babies in my belly, is a small matter.

He’s wearing the thing with the frills for this, I swear it.

Where the hell am I now? Fuck it— I’m opening one of these doors and staying put, I’ve been lost for at least half an hour now. The hallways fucking move.

Nami’s going to make me wear the thing with the frills, I can feel it. Then again, she’s the only person I know of other than Mab and Robin who can find me when I get turned around like this. Ugh.

I guess one door is as good as any— and I’m hungry again, fucking— I knew those weird tiny meals wouldn’t be the right kind of filling, but Nami said I had to be polite, and… maybe this is the kitchen? Palace is too big for there not to be a kitchen near the dining room, not and have all the food still be warm or cold or whatever— and as for the palace…

So. Preface this by saying that when I left Shimotsuki, and— everything— I ended up doing a lot of odd jobs. Being a bit less than fifteen, it’s amazing worse didn’t happen to me. Bounty hunting isn’t actually all that profitable— even if you’re good at it.

Especially after I turned down that offer from the former Baroque Works— yeah, there was a good
eight months of no-bounties to be found, anywhere.

However, I ended up working for a reef fisherman, so it wasn’t totally awful. Learned a lot of odd things. I think he was… a marine biologist, but not like, a Marine biologist. He studied life in the ocean- or he had, before something happened that made him scream in his sleep. Then again, marine biology could be a euphemism for Seafolk.

**His eyes were green.** Of all the things I remember about him, that’s the most important. Brown, flecked with green- hazel, I guess.

**His house** was orange, with purple edges, and the flowers were pink and purple. I had my own room, at his house, and was paid a rather impressive wage. My job was to cut up fish; gut them, chop them into pieces and put them into glass boxes by weight. Everyday; four hours of this. Then, I got to feed his animals. There were otters, dolphins, carnivorous fish- sharks, too, that followed the boat.

He cut his wrists in the bathtub, and that’s how I found him. Took the time to write out a will; told me to scuttle his boat, and sell his shit that I didn’t want, and to bury him in a meadow by a red maple tree. Said that he was sorry to do this to me, but- it hurt, he said. Wrote. It hurt for him to breathe.

Said he couldn’t live with what he’d done; so, he wouldn’t.

There’s a graveyard in Toad Holler, on Kanna Island; it’s called potter’s field, because it’s mostly pottery there, cremated ashes in fine brown pots painted with the life stories of whoever’s inside them. The pots aren’t fired, just dried- and then carefully painted over with a fine ochre and other ground minerals for color.

After the Fisherman died- he never did tell me his name, or much of his story, but I figured a few things out- I ended up on Kanna with his ashes in a brass vase. Then, I scuttled his ship on the rocky shore of that island, and walked into the woods up the cliff, and- I guess I got sick. Woke up in a woman’s house. She was a potter, and her name was Moira; I lived with her until I could finally bury the Fisherman.

She taught me to throw pots, and how to keep her kiln, and her many recipes for colors on pottery; she even taught me the clay mix for putting hamon on swords. Made me memorize every color she’d ever made- I… damn, I need another journal to put all her knowledge in.

I mean.

The reason I left her wasn’t because I learned everything she had to teach; I left because when I buried the Fisherman, I had to bury the Potter, too.

Nami says I have haunted eyes.

My body feels strange, like there’s something going wrong with it. Nah.

I'm- fine. I'm fine.

The palace of the Neptune Family is… like a coral reef, honestly. Each portion of the palace rests on
tiers, with towers rising up like plumes of lava from the bottom of the ocean. It’s colorful, each section blazing with pigment unseen in the surface world. Everything in the palace shimmers, like it’s been burnished; but it glows, too, as if lit from within.

Except for here.

There was one tower that didn’t quite fit the aesthetics of the palace; a tall, black tower at the edge of the palace complex. Just looking at it reminded me of Water 7, in that it would be almost impossible to attack and hold that tower.

I think I’m in that tower- maybe the tower’s kitchen, it smells like food in here.

It’s. Very dark in here for a kitchen.

I think a guard just walked out of this room, too?

Odd.

But it smells like the dinner we just had; maybe a little stronger, I guess, because the room is smaller. Oh- there; there’s food on the other side of this room, okay.

I start walking towards the food, carefully navigating the dark room. It’s not entirely dark; thin shafts of light spray across curdled stones, shining grays and blues and greens lending a faint air of disease. It smells, underneath the smell of good fresh food, almost overwhelmingly of fear-sweat and old blood.

**Something about this room is… off.**

The ground underneath my feet feels- strange. Almost soft, in some places- certainly softer than I would expect a floor to feel, if it were made of stone. It’s almost rubbery, under my feet, and has a very odd texture- I can’t quite say without feeling with my hand, my boots aren’t thin, and… Hm. I can’t say for sure.

The floor is breathing.

Oh no.

I stop moving so carelessly, and begin carefully stepping, trying to find a way off of whatever creature I’m standing on top of. My foot snagged on- something- and my hand smacked against something with the texture of pudding so hard I felt my fingers sting.

The smack of my palm against- flesh?- echoes through the darkened room.

Whatever I’m standing on, it’s breathing just stiffened, and- gah!

I stumble a little as I land on the ground, and then roll out of the way of- massive, moving through the air like the boom on the ship- *dodge!*

A crack like a whip, and a massive glowing tail slams into the place I was standing.
A low snarling growl-

I dart out of the way of a limb, glowing with its own spots and stripes, similar pattern to the massive tail.

A cloud of hair-thin weeds drifts through the air, and glows in steadily moving stripes, like- like- neon?-

And then, a strange face. It glows, and blue white teeth so sharp and eyes that flick red blue red blue on skin so black it seeps in and out of form flashing flashing

something

is
wrong
Is this the first time you’ve felt like this?
no
Are you having a panic attack?

yes
Do you have any medical conditions?
What is your name?
Roronoa Zoro
May I use your name?
yes
Zoro, may I touch you?
yes

Zoro, please take one breath.
You're doing great, Zoro.
Can you sit down on my hand, please?
What is your favorite color, Zoro?
How old are you, Zoro?
twenty one
Can you take a breath with every other number I say, Zoro?
yes
1-2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. You’re doing very good, Zoro. Can you do it again?
Good job, Zoro. Can you do it again?
yes
1-2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Can you lay down, Zoro?
yes
Can you take a breath for me, Zoro?
One breath at a time.
Just one breath.
Please, just a breath.
Just one more, Zoro.
I believe in you, Zoro.
Please, keep breathing, Zoro- one breath at a time.
You're doing great, Zoro.
Just one more breath, Zoro.
I'm right here, and I won't leave you.
It's okay.
Just one breath.
When I wake up again, I’m hugging a giant… finger? Finger.

I’m in the palm of someone’s hand.

It’s a big hand, slightly flickering with blue and purple spots, and held just in the path of warm-soft breath. I can feel my heart beating in my chest, and a soft voice-
“Please, just take a breath.”

I can’t.

“Just one breath.”

I- I gasp, shaking, and squeeze the thumb I’m holding close to me hard enough I can see the giant wince out of the side of my eye.

“You’re in my bedroom, in the Palace of Neptune in Ryugu Mergyo on Fishman Island; it’s past midnight. You’ve been panicking for a bit less than twenty minutes.”

I nod.

“S-sorry for smacking your tit.” I shudder out through chattering teeth.

“I’m sorry for frightening you so badly.” she said.

I loosen my grip, and try very hard to pull my soul back into my body. Breathe. Breathe. My name is Roronoa Zoro. The Greatest Swordsmen don’t have panic attacks and draw their weapons; and I didn’t. I didn’t hurt anyone.

Breathe.

I slowly let go of her thumb, and roll onto my flat back. I keep one hand pressed flat against her
palm. I cross the other arm over my eyes and face, and let my heaving gasps recede into steady breaths. Eventually, I feel steady enough to sit up; but slowly.

I think I was fourteen, the last time I had a panic attack.

“Thank you, miss.” I said.

There’s light, in the room now. I’m in the cupped palms of a Giant mermaid.

“Of course. May I tell you my name?” she said.

I nod.

“My name is Shirahoshi Neptune.” she said. And then her long, waving black hair flashed bright pink, and one of her hands lashed out and stopped an axe hurtling through the air with a heavy smacking noise.

I take a deep breath, past the atavistic terror of her snarl. In doing so, I can suddenly see that she’s actually missing one of her fingers, right at the knuckle; her arms and shoulders, across her stomach and tail. In the light, the marks that so frightened me are pale, underlaid by black. I can hardly see the colors at all.

Princess Shirahoshi lets out a snarl of defiance, before slamming the axe into the ground. Curiously, her hand never bobbles or drops underneath me; it’s like being on the solid ground in the middle of a sunlit glade, warm and firm and giving underneath me.

Someone comes.

A contingent of guards; small squad, elite. An officer- no, similar marks of rank to Lord Sinister, but somehow reversed. And behind both groups- a slightly wobbly Nami.

I roll onto my feet, and then leap off of Princess Shirahoshi’s hand. I glide through the air, and land gently, about a meter away from Nami.

“I do not need guards-”

“-No, Highness; in a real battle, your skill will not be able to save you-”
“Yes, Captain Baroque, it will!”

“Princess- you *can’t* know that-”

“Yes, I can! If Vander Decken 9 wishes me harm, I will defend myself! If he seeks a fight with me, I will defeat him!”

“You shouldn’t be anywhere *near* the battlefield, Princess. You’re too important!”

“I am Not!”

“YES, YOU ARE.”

“NO!!!”

“WHY WON’T YOU JUST LET ME DO THIS FOR YOU PRINCESS OTOHIME!?!?!!!?”

The Princess gasps, and flinches. The Captain of the squad of guards claps a hand over his mouth. The Minister of the Right- I’m almost certain of it- shakes his…? Head, and says-

“Guard Captain Baroque, take a swim. Guards, secure the perimeter.”

“Yes sir!”

“Princess, a word; if I may…?”

“C-certainly, Lord Desterous.”

And the Captain shudders, and nods, and swims away. I carefully pretend to have not heard anything, and gently stop Nami from involving herself. She’s a very empathetic, caring person; she hates seeing anyone in pain, especially young women. However, this- this isn’t something I think she can help all that much with.

Further, she needs to sit down, that’s what it means when she’s swaying like that. I gently wrap an arm around her waist, and she leans into me with a bit of a huff. I carefully walk her towards a low bench, probably meant for… for I don’t know. It’s very plain, I suppose.

“She’s under a lot of pressure.” said Nami.

“Yeah, probably.”

“We should help her, if we can.” said Nami.

I looked at her, and she looked back at me with burning eyes. Saa, I can’t say ‘no’ to her determined face. Fucking hell.

Guess we’re helping a princess.
“Princess Shirahoshi… this ritual of yours, this habit, of dismissing your guards and defending yourself, even injuring yourself in your own defence… I will not say that you do not have the right to do so. It is the right of any being to defend itself from harm; however, you are beloved by everyone in this castle, and a great many in our kingdom.”

“Tch. They loved my mother, the Great Queen Otohime; I’m not even a pale shadow of her.”

“Perhaps. I suppose it is easy to forget that you never did meet the Honored Queen, not in a way that matters; and, now that you are sixteen… Your father would have you wrapped in secrecy, and the intricacies of court made oblique to you. He would have your elder brothers take up your defence, and solve every problem in the World- to give you a life as free from worry as he could. As if life will be so kind as to wait until you are an adult, to face the problems of an adult. As if it isn’t so, that some problems can only be solved by the next generation.

“I say this is nonsense, or at the least, wishful thinking.

“Your Honored Mother changed our Kingdom, Princess. Your Honored Mother taught Captain Baroque what it actually means to love someone- to really love someone.”

“...I know. I know he’s only trying to do what’s best for me- but I’m so… I can’t stand it. I cannot, Lord Desterous; I will not run, and I cannot bear to hide away for much longer. My people need me, they deserve to know me, to see me; and I them! What kind of Princess- what kind of Queen- doesn’t know her own people?”

“Princess… Your Honored Mother changed my life. I came to Court thinking this was just another position for my House to gain glory. Make another maneuver against House Sinister; build another office building for people to work in; lobby for more laws no one would really read or care about; build another tower that would defend what was held within it; design yet more buildings that would never be built; …and then I met your Mother. Just one of the younger princesses, not even particularly favored to inherit; one of a thousand- but she was different. She was different because she decided to be.”

Lord Desterous smiles up at the Princess.

“She asked me- she asked me what I wanted to build, and I’d never heard that before. It has taken me until now to realize that, in our Court, the children and the youth never hear that they can be anything other than what came before them. Certainly then, we never heard that we could be more than what we were- but your Honored Mother, Queen Otohime- Highness, she opened our eyes.”

“Always, I have heard of the grace of my Honored Mother; how wonderful and special she was. I cannot hope to measure up to such majesty.”

“Tseheh-heh-heh; I can’t believe it. I’m the one giving this speech to Queen Otohime’s daughter… Princess Shirahoshi, you are different! That’s what so exciting and wonderful- you don’t have to be like Queen Otohime! You can be someone even better; you can be… you.

“I remember your Grandmother, Princess; I remember my parents speaking of her, and her policy. Your Honored Mother was nothing like her mother, and she eventually accepted that; and you are
nothing like your Mother. You must learn to accept that too- and gain the fortitude to swim wherever it may lead you. You can be the Princess your Father and Brothers see you as; or you could be the person you know you are.

“In this, my advice is- you must choose for yourself.”

“Perimeter clear, sir.”

“I see. Dismissed. Princess; my leave?”

“Granted, Lord Desterous.”

The Princess smiles, softly. And then, she starts crying.

Shit. I guess I’m helping a Princess, or whatever.

Fuck, I'm tired.
Ready, Set

The Princess holds it together for long enough that I almost believe she’s going to make it through without- and then, like a crack in a window breaking open during a squall, her face crumples into itself and tears roll down her face.

I clamp an arm around Nami and tuck her firmly to my side. She squirms against me, then huffs when I prove immovable- or at the very least, more of an obstacle than she’s willing to seriously circumvent right now. This is Shirahoshi’s fight, not ours-

“Can’t we help her?”

“No, we can’t.”

“Why not!?!?”

“Nami, it’s her fight- and it’s not something that can be won with fists or words. It’s the kind of thing she has to decide for herself.”

“Hmph.”

“Nami… feelings have to be felt before they can be resolved. We won’t be helping her, if we interrupt her feeling her feelings.”

“Zoro, it’s not right to let someone convince themselves that they’re alone; that they’re the only one in the world who has ever felt the way they do.”

“Even so- we aren’t the pair of people who can talk about what she’s going through with her. Nami, my Aunt and Uncle were always supportive of me, and what I wanted to do with my life; and so was your family. It sounds to me like Shirahoshi’s family… isn’t.”

“…Sanji and Mab?”

“Yeah. And they aren’t here. The best we can do is just… let her cry.”

And so, though it honestly pains us both- we let the young woman cry over the unfairness of it all. We let her cry about not being who she wants to be; we let her cry about not being who her mother was. We let her alone- but, crucially, we don’t actually leave.

Shirahoshi gasps and forces herself to breath through her tears- until, finally, somehow anticlimactically, they just… stop. She gasps, and then breathes slower and slower, until at last she is something approaching calm again. Then, she pours water into a basin, and washes her face; pours water into a glass, and drinks deeply of it. She glances at herself in the mirror behind her toilette, and pins several white floral pins into her hair, sweeping it up and back away from her face. It falls down her back in a long black river, shining in the pale light of her room. She glances over the table full of food, and goes a little green, actually- and then she looks away, sharply, and espies Nami and me.

She glides over, careful and dainty despite being huge- and she says, with a careful modulation to her
tone, “Would either of you like something to eat?”

“I’d love something to eat, actually,” said Nami.

“I’m not hungry-” I said, still a little shaky from before.

“Neither am I, that’s why I asked- here, I’ll move you two to the table, so we don’t have to be on
such different levels- if that’s alright…?” said Shirahoshi.

“Oh, yes please.” said Nami.

“Sure.” I said.

I watch, smilingly, as Nami more or less gorges herself on much larger portions of what we had at
dinner- and, when my stomach perks up, I eat my fair share of food as well. Eventually, I notice
Shirahoshi glancing at me guiltily, and steadily gaze at her until she can’t help but apologize again.

“I’m so sorry for frightening you.”

“You’ve said that already- and I understand. I scared you, too. Besides, it wasn’t really your fault at
all.”

“-but I was the one who-”

“No, Princess. I have some pretty nasty things in my past, and they sometimes creep up on me; I
should have paid more attention to myself and how I was feeling. Your actions just tipped the
balance; it wouldn’t have happened at all if I wasn’t already wobbling.”

“...If you’re sure, I suppose. Oh- are you the Straw Hat Pirates?”

“We’re members of that crew, yes.”

“I must thank you, then- it is because of your crew’s actions that my beloved pet, Megalo, returned to
me.”

“I suppose… Saa- I noticed on your hands- you use a polearm, of some kind?”

“Aa, I use naginata.”

Oho!

“...Eeh? Those swords- are you perhaps a swordsman?”

“I am; of some skill.”

“Is that so? Perhaps we can spar.”
Nami rolls her eyes, but- this is definitely what I needed.

A moment, then- before I get into it with Shirahoshi, let me remember what I can of naginata. It’s a pole-weapon, not like Mab’s yari- although she’s always been very specific in saying that she uses spears, I know a yari when I see one… The difference between a naginata and a yari is subtle but important. A naginata is more like a very short sword on a very long pole; while a yari is more like a particularly large and sharp needle. You can pierce with a sword; and you can cut with a needle- but each weapon is suited to a particular task before it turns to another.

In essence, a naginata is a wooden or metal pole with a curved single-edged blade on the end; fairly similar to the guan dao or the glaive. Like a katana, naginata often have a round tsuba between the blade and shaft, when mounted in a koshirae. The blade of a naginata is between thirty and sixty centimeters long, and it is forged in the same manner as traditional Wano swords; however, it tends to have a much longer tang, which is inserted into the shaft of the weapon.

The blade of a naginata is removable; it’s secured by means of a wooden peg called mekugi that passes through a mekugi-ana in both the tang and the shaft. Sometimes, there are more than one set of these- but that’s for very specific kinds of naginata, which are almost never for anything other than outright war or ceremonial use. The shaft of a naginata is oval shaped, and ranges from one hundred twenty to two hundred forty centimeters in length. The area of the shaft where the tang sits is the tachiuke; the tachiuke would be reinforced with semegane, and possibly sakawa, then wrapped in san-dan maki. The end of the shaft has a heavy metal hirumaki. When not in use, the blade would be covered with a wooden sheath.

Mab’s spear is not a naginata. Mab’s spear is a Fae qiang.

Spears have existed for as long as people have been using tools to kill things- a sharp rock stuck in a straight-enough stick, and hey, it’s a spear. This is why- and how- a young child can make a spear with nothing more than some string, a long straight stick, and a pocket knife. Spears are deceptively simple weapons.

Why, then, is it so often referred to- in many, many schools of martial arts- as the King of Weapons?

Frankly, it the age of the weapon. A spear is a predominantly pre-modern weapon; and, unlike say, a sword or a gun, a spear has a much higher utility than almost anything other than a staff. Truthfully, I’d go so far as to say that a spear is more useful than a staff, by simple addition of a sharp, cutting point on one end.

The first big thing one needs to know about a spear? A spear is big. Short spears start at two hundred forty seven centimeters; and they can go all the way to three hundred sixty six centimeters. The shaft of a spear is made of oak, or elm, or some other wood which is known to grow straight and strong.

Mab showed me, a few times- she makes a very small movement with her wrists and fingers, and because of the sheer length of her weapon, the tip moves a very great deal. Spears are precise in ways swords simply aren’t- not because of any lack of skill in the wielder, but because of the very nature of the weapons themselves. If I swipe left to right, it’s a simple swipe, maybe half a meter to a meter out from my fingers. If Mab makes a swipe right to left, it’s a giant sweeping motion, a full three meters or more from the tip of her fingers.
The blade of a spear is normally leaf-shaped, making it suitable for small knife-like cuts—usually when Mab snaps her wrists; and quick slashing motions, which come from her arms. The thrusting power of the weapon is it’s most potent attribute, and when Mab puts her whole weight behind a thrust, nothing can stop her.

Finally, between the blade and the shaft is a tubular section, which is what is affixed to the end of the spear’s shaft. The tube is hollow, with a hole in it, and a small ball bearing. This particular arrangement shows the devious and vicious nature of the Fae the most, I think; the hole, when the spear is swung at high speeds, creates a whistling sound. This can be used by its wielder in any number of ways—from simple distractions, to the basis of spells.

There’s an old stereotype about fairies needing magic wands. Truthfully, a fairy with a spear is magic all on their own.

Anyway.

Just below the blade and tube is the tassel— and this is where Mab (and Taffy) differ the most.

Until she sat down and explained it to me, I didn’t understand why it was such a big deal for Taffy to change the tassel on her sword. I thought of it as decoration, and nothing more. In fact, it is more than that; on Taffy’s sword, the tassel is part lanyard, and part claim of ownership. No one else on our crew will ever, ever use that particular shade of green for anything—Mab made sure of it. On a spear, however, I can say that it’s not at all a simple decoration— the tassel of a qiang is a part of its overall functionality. When the spear moves quickly, the addition of the tassel blurs the vision of the enemy, making it much more difficult to grab the shaft of the spear behind the head or tip. The tassel also serves to stop the flow of blood from the blade getting to the wooden shaft, thus preserving an optimal grip.

The other big difference I can think of between a naginata and a qiang is this. A naginata became a weapon in response to cavalry. A spear became a weapon due to it’s use as a missile.

Naginata are excellent tools for dismounting cavalry, killing horses, and disabling riders. Indeed, it was the adoption of the naginata— or, in other places, the guan dao, or the pike— that saw greaves becoming part of the standard armor set. It was only the introduction of guns and other firearms that decreased the appearance of the naginata on the field of battle in Wano. When the naginata waxed useful again, it also became a social status symbol for women. A functional naginata was a traditional part of a samurai daughter’s dowry. A woman who was submissive as a wife but stalwart in defense of the home was very desirable; and a woman who could use a naginata was at least one of the two. Naginata eventually became women’s weapons exclusively, because it allows a woman to keep any opponent at a distance— where advantages in height, weight, and strength are lessened; and is absolutely deadly indoors, where the defender’s positive attributes can be easily maximized.

Naginata is the weapon with which the enemy is literally swept away. The more combative forms of naginajutsu are mostly reserved for the military now, and— while some ‘civil’ schools of combat remain, the general feeling is that modern naginata is for the purification and beautification of the soul, not… battle. In this form of naginatajutsu, it is not simply appearance that denotes beauty of form— it is the harmonious joining of sensitivity and reason that creates beauty. A well executed series of movements therefore can become more beautiful than a perfected form.

Still, some things remain unchanged— the naginata is not a throwing weapon.

The spear, simply put, is. How to say this… Mab fights with her spear in two distinctive positions. If
her arm is down by her side, or even in front of her, the spear is being used much like a sword or a staff. When her arm goes up above her head, however, she’s using the spear like a spear. In an instant, her weapon can change from a stabbing, thrusting weapon, to a deadly missile aimed at my anatomy- my arm, my leg, my chest or gut. The speed at which Mab throws her spear… if I don’t use Observation Haki to feel her out, I’m not going to win.

Hell, for some of our spars, if I hadn’t been using Observation, I wouldn’t have come away with bruises and light cuts- like cat scratches. I’d have come away with wounds. Spears are fast - about the only thing faster is an arrow, and arrows are precursors to bullets.

And, most importantly… the spear is a weapon that is still very much defined by it’s use in infantry tactics. Mab’s overhead stance is very, very useful if she’s in, say, a group of spear fighters, all of them doing the same thing at the same time.

For the purposes of sparring- ah, yes, Shirahoshi is pulling out a shiai-yo. It’s an oaken shaft with a bamboo habu; used for practice, training, and sparring. It should be the same size as her actual weapon- which is right there, on the rack- and ought to be at least three times the weight of her actual weapon. The ‘blade’ is replaceable; and, as they get broken or otherwise damaged during sparring, they’re only attached to the shaft with tape. Shirahoshi’s tape is a pretty floral satin ribbon, and is tied in one of the more interesting knots I’ve yet seen.

A naginata can be used to batter, bash, stab, slash, hook, and sweep an enemy; due to their relatively balanced center of mass, a naginata can be spun and turned to proscribe a large radius of reach. The curved blade also provides a longer cutting surface, optimized for quick slashes, without increasing the overall length of the weapon overmuch.

In terms of advantage over a sword; the reach of a naginata is longer, allowing the wielder to stay out of range of their enemy. The long shaft offers greater leverage than that of a sword’s hilt, enabling a more efficient cut. The weight of the weapon gives power to strikes and cuts; and the weighted end of the shaft, and of course the shaft itself, can be used offensively and defensively.

Shirahoshi is wearing a yukata- silk, that’s what that shimmer means- with a big komon on her back, right between her shoulder blades. The sleeves of the kimono are fairly short- oh, I see, it’s not actually a woman’s yukata specifically, it’s just a yukata- specifically, it’s a very short yukata, as it stops above the big bend I consider to be the ‘knee’ area of her tail. At least, that’s where it bends most naturally when she kneels.

The yukata itself is a very reserved grey, with not much pattern on it to speak of- maybe some dots, or a subtle gradation in the way it shifts from the middle of her body to the cuffs of her sleeves? I don’t know, I’d have to ask Mab.

The obi is thick, and very… scaly? Bright, and almost creamy colors. Instead of calling for a lady in waiting, Shirahoshi ties the bow of her obi in the front and slides the whole thing around to the back, with some careful adjusting for fit. It’s a bit taller than I would expect, coming much closer to the bottom of her breasts than normally- oh, right. Hakama.

Merjin hakama are different from other hakama really in only one respect- they aren’t, technically speaking, trousers. That’s it. They go on the same way, and get worn for the same things- but Mab was very loud about how merjin hakama aren’t actually pants, they’re pleated tube skirts.
My friends are weird.

Anyway. Shirahoshi steps into her hakama, and carefully ties it on- the long front ties cross over the back-bow, then around the front again with the little fold, and tied under the back-bow; then the back goes all the way over the bow, like a little… shelf, I guess, and ties it with a simple square knot just a little off center, to the left. The last of the ties go into a flat bow; with tails that very nearly equal the length of the ears of the bow, it’s a very… functional knot.

And then, she pulls herself straight, and quietly looks at me. I smile, and calmly stand from where I was resting against a bowl of fruit. Then, I leap- up, over the table, and down, onto the floor of Shirahoshi’s room.

It’s a very empty room, with a bed area inset into the wall, a cubicle is the word, I think- the rest of the room is all spread out along the perimeter. The center of the room, where my leap took me, is empty, save for myself, and Shirahoshi waiting with her glaive.

I’m good enough now, I can spar with live blades and never once cut my opponent or their weapon. This will be an excellent round of training for us both, I think.

We bow to each other with careful respect; and then, it begins.

A quick test of the waters; I slash at her, to see where she reacts. She knocks my strike aside, and I casually lean away from a retaliatory slash at my head.

We slowly trade places, never taking our eyes off each other.

She moves first this time. Her naginata slashes at me, and I knock her strike aside; she leans away from the retaliatory slash, and the whistle of my sword’s passing only serves to highlight her grin.

I grin back.

The next blow sneaks in from the side- or it tries.

I see it and I dodge.

I throw a slash, a cut, a stab.

She dodges, pushes aside and brings the heavy shaft in for a slam.

I duck, roll into her guard.

She backs away quickly, trying to catch me in her blade.

I roll to the side and bound forwards.
I see her falter before I can pull the force of my strike— the best I can really do is ensure it will only bruise, not cut. The crack of my sword’s flat against her skin echoes through the room. I dart away, and stare at her, aghast.

“What the hell was that, Shirahoshi.”

“I- I’m sorry- I was just-”

“No. You faltered. All that talk of fighting for yourself— was that a lie?”

“No! I just- I can’t-”

“Sparring is an integral part of training, especially at your level. What do you mean, you can’t-”

“I CAN’T FIGHT SOMEONE WHO DOESN’T COME AT ME WITH MALICIOUS INTENT!”

I stop, and stare at her, horrified.

Shirahoshi dashes a tear from her cheek, then glares me down, defiant.

“…Vander Decken 9 has a curse called Mato-Mato. It lets him target anything, from any location— so long as he’s touched it. When I was six, my mother died— and at her funeral, he… he touched me. Ever since then, he’s been sending things— letters begging for my love, then death threats, then… well, you saw the axe.

“Ten years is a long time— and I can feel it, when something he’s sent after me is coming close. But… somehow, that’s all I can feel. It’s like I’ve been blocked from seeing anything other than that stupid, shitty man, and I know there’s more out there— but… no one believes me when I say ‘I can feel Vander Decken 9’s attacks before they happen’.

“I haven’t been let outside this tower in ten years.

“N-none of these scars are from Vander Decken 9. All of these are from trying to prove that I can handle myself… but none of Lord Desterous’ men believe me, and- Father says that a hard lesson learned now is better than one learned later, when one cannot grow past such things.

“I just… I want to go outside.”

I blink. I wonder…

“Why do you want to go outside?”

“I should be able to go outside if I want to! A-and… but- I, I promised my mother, so… I haven’t.”

“…What, exactly, did you promise your mother?”
“I promised her that I would be nice, and gentle, and- **abide.** ”

“Ah. Aside from paying your respects, you want to go to her grave because...?”

“...It’s kinda hard to beg forgiveness from a person who has been so thoroughly eradicated from the house. Lord Desterous said it was unseemly for young women to keep altars to their mothers for so long, and Father did not disagree.”

“Ah.”

I look at her again.

“Nami?”

“Mrf?”

“I need you to do something for the Princess.”

“Rf uu mrrp?”

“I need you to Widen her Gaze.”

Nami swallows whatever she was chewing, and leaps down next to me.

“Zoro...”

“You heard what it’s been like for her; just widen it a touch, that’s all. Then, I can give her the building blocks for what proper escalation and de-escalation should look like, among other things.”

“...You really are a kind and gentle man.”

I snort at Nami, who giggles. Minx.

Then, Nami leaps up, to be caught, deftly, by Shirahoshi. They talk, quietly, and then Shirahoshi bows over her palm, where Nami stands.

Nami reaches up and touches the very center of Shirahoshi’s forehead. The thick, twisting feeling of her magic brushes over the room, and something inside Shirahoshi shifts forever.

It’s as if her eyes were caked with dust- not blinded, but caked. Some dust she’s managed to knock away on her own; and the rest, in this moment, has been lifted and enticed to fall away.

Now, to make sure it actually **does** fall away.

Nami, sensing my intent, leaps back away to the table.
Shirahoshi, also sensing my intent— for the first time, perhaps— stares straight at me, then smiles, and bows again.

I bow back.

A quick test of the waters; I slash at her, to see where she reacts. She knocks my strike aside, and I casually lean away from a retaliatory slash at my head.

We slowly trade places, never taking our eyes off each other.

She moves first this time. Her naginata slashes at me, and I knock her strike aside; she leans away from the retaliatory slash, and the whistle of my sword’s passing only serves to highlight her grin.

I grin back.

The next blow sneaks in from the side— or it tries.

I see it, and I dodge.

I throw a slash, a cut, a stab.

She dodges, pushes aside, and brings the heavy shaft in for a slam.

I duck and roll into her guard.

She backs away quickly, trying to catch me in her blade.

I roll to the side and bound forwards.

The shaft catches and locks against my arms.

I can feel the titanic weight of her fury, trying to shove me back.

I break away, and dance around to stab at her ribs.

She whisks her naginata, and slices at my legs.

I dodge, and throw a Sanjuroku Pound Ho.

She strikes it aside and slams the butt of her weapon where I stood.

I leap high and Hiryu: Kaen at her upper arm.

She lunges to the side; droplets of watery sweat flash off her furrowed brow.

She brings the huge force of her naginata around on me.

I draw my second sword, and catch the great weight of her strike on my crossed blades.

I stomp and throw her back.

Her tail scrapes across the ground as she slides.

Her back straightens, and her wavering resolve snaps firm.

She whirls her naginata and uses her first named attack.
**Yogore Kumo!** echoes through the room from her throat.

A thick white haze spreads from where the base of her tail rests to about halfway up her waist. I see; an obscuring move, meant to hide the movements of her tail and cloud her intentions. Interesting.

But not good enough to beat me.

I sweep **Taka Nami** forwards.

The silt is cut apart in a sweeping wave.

I wasn’t fast enough.

I catch the very tip of her strike on my crossed blades and fling myself to one side.

I lunge forwards and ready **Nigiri: Toro**.

I fling the twin strikes up towards her chest.

She takes one hand off of her naginata and catches me in the palm of her sweaty hand.

She slides out of the way of my strikes and spins on the butt of her weapon.

She flings me from her hand; a shout of **Nen’eki Hada** follows me away.

My skin is wet and sticky and slippery. Snot-?

I’m at the wrong angle for **Nigiri: Otoro**; and when I try to land on the ground and regroup, I slide, like I’m on ice. I see now; a constant effect move, meant to foul the footing and grip of the opponent.

I’m also noticing that as her technique settles on me, the mucus is becoming sticky; there’s a moment of resistance when I move my feet- not enough to stop me, exactly, but just enough to slow me down, just a little bit. It makes it slightly more possibly for me to misstep, or trip.

I have something of the measure of my opponent now. She’s a strategic fighter, using moves that change the battlefield or her opponent in ways advantageous to her. She sets her stage far in advance, and adapts as her opponent uses new moves. That silt cloud I blew away hasn’t actually gone, it’s just… hovering, undulating with mild menace around me.

**Yogore Kiri!** she shouts.

The silt rises and rushes back into our battle; it thins and swirls around and between us both, just thin enough to see through and just thick enough to see at all.
The mist is too thin and amorphous to clear with a Taka Nami.

I tried at Kuraigana- doesn’t work.

We circle each other, sending teasing strikes and wiggles at each other.

I open an obvious hole in my guard.

She doesn’t take the bait.

Her naginata sweeps around and around in a figure eight, the narrowest point in the middle of her body.

The mist becomes cool and clammy, clinging and sticking to everything.

The only reason her next attack misses me is the fact that I had leapt high for a Nigiri: Otoro.

Reito Ha! she shouts.

Where I stood just moments ago, and crawling up through the mist- tendrils of frost, so cold I can feel the heat leaching from my bones.

In that singular moment, I weigh my options. I see now, my initial assessment of Nen’eki Hada was wrong; it’s not just something that affects the opponent. The primary purpose of that move is to protect Shirahoshi from her elemental attacks; fouling her opponent’s footing and grip is secondary.

I can see the misty silt freezing into spiny stalagmites and whirling scales of sharp flickering white- so sharp they cut through the thickening mist. The mist is becoming something more like a wall, and- and-

Maybe it’s time to take a page from Nami’s battle book.

Nigiri: Maguma Kagero! I shout.

The frozen scales shatter apart in contrails of heat.

Shirahoshi’s body rolls out of the way of my attack in a slithering ‘S’.

The residual heat of my attack turns some of the slime on her clothing into a solid leather-looking surface.

Her mouth lifts into a smirk and her eyes flash with triumph.

I land and focus and draw my third sword.

DAI BAKUHATSU! she roars.
The heat and the cold spin together- Nami, who was just watching quietly, gives a little shriek. A **whirling storm of cutting force** bears down on me.

I brace myself for the hit.

I can’t dodge; I can’t throw something back in time to cut it apart.

The attack and I clash.

The sound of steel ringing against pure force echoes back against the walls.

My outer kimono is slightly ripped.

There’s a small cut on my left- left?- left cheek. She’s about where I was a year ago; not at my level, but very respectable for someone her age and in her circumstances.

Even though she’s bearing down on me, her naginata’s bamboo blade gleaming black with her Power; even though against probably any other opponent, her battle scream would break resolve…

I aim to be the Greatest in the World.

She is not strong enough to defeat me.

I end the fight with Wado at her jugular.

She gasps, and heaves her breath back.

The bamboo blade of her practice naginata is broken where I stood, a slash across the grain of the wood the only indication of how I moved.

“Do you yield, Shirahoshi?” I say.

“Yes,” she says, after a moment to catch her breath.

I take my sword away from her throat, and sheath them all. Then, I leap from her shoulder and bound to where I can bow in respect to her.

Then, of course, I bow. That was a good fight.

Princess Shirahoshi bows back, the shattered tip of her practice naginata pointed down towards the ground. The silt and ice and hot air dissolve back into nothing by the time we’re done paying our proper respects to each other.
“You have a great deal of skill- but your lack of appropriate sparring partners shows. However, that’s not something that can be fixed in a single spar... How do you feel?”

“Amazing! But also, a bit disappointed- even though I lost, I feel like I learned more in those… oh wow, four minutes- than I have in the past five years. I just… it could have all been like that, I could have been- I could have been doing that this whole time!”

And she’s crying again.

“...I don’t think it’s your fault, Shirahoshi. Decken’s been harassing you for about as long as you can remember, right? Anyone would get tunnel vision in such circumstances. And… really, you don’t have to cry-”

“O-oh, no- no, anytime my blood-pressure gets a bit high, I start crying. It’s mechanical.”

“So… you can’t actually help being a crybaby?”

“Sadly, no.”

“Well. You might be a crybaby, but you’re very brave- Oi! Don’t poke her stomach, she’s pregnant, not fat-”

“O-oh, oh, I’m so sorry- sorry, sorry- ow!”

“Nami- Nami, she didn’t mean it-”

“HANDS OFF THE PUDGE, DAMMIT-”

“Nami-”

“I just wanted to see where all that food was going, I’m so sorry-”

“Nami, she was just curious, you heard how sheltered she is-”

“I DON’T LIKE STRANGERS TOUCHING MY PUDGE- I’m fine Zoro-”

“Nami, every time you say you’re fine, you’re actually really not-”

As the two pirates fight, I’m suddenly privy to their feelings. When Nami-san opened my eye, she washed away years of frustration like a cleansing rain. Fighting with Zoro was like… was like being caught in a current, dancing through a maelstrom, years of silt and muck yanked away in the whirling of water.

This was… something else.
I can feel that Zoro is much shakier from his previous panic attack than he shows in his body or his face- his darker emotions are much closer to the surface of his emotive waters than they’d normally be. Residual panic was burnt away in the comforting normality, but a oily slip of disquiet blankets him. He’s stiff where he should bend; he shakes where he should be firm.

Nami is all over the place- worried, constantly, about her pregnancy, about her crewmates, about Zoro. Here and now, especially about Zoro. Her emotions cloud and bubble like the scales on a fish, like her… like she’s constantly on edge of a storm, an upset.

They still haven’t really dissolved their egos when it comes to each other- cracked, certainly, but...

Ah, I see. They fight because they love each other- that’s it. Really, that’s all. Zoro loves Nami; Nami loves Zoro. They respect each other on the surface, but it’s deepening into a true and genuine thing only slowly… Angry people are often unwise, and will say things in the heat of their anger that they do not truly mean- they meant it when they said it, sure, but… not when their blood had cooled.

For the both of them, I think it is like this- there are few people whom either of them really and truly love, and still fewer of whom they think well and admire. The more they see of the World, the more they become dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms their belief of the inconsistency of all human character, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of merit, faculty, and sense.

For those two… I doubt either of them marked the hour, or the place, or even the way one or the other looked, or what was said, that laid the foundation of their love for each other. It’s too long ago, and their feelings now too strong to remember such a small beginning. They’re deep in the middle of it all, now; and as I watch them steadily misunderstand and infuriate the other, I can see that they haven’t really understood that it’s begun already.

Being in love doesn’t have to happen before being married; being married doesn’t have to happen before being in love. It’s like vanity and pride- vanity and pride are different things, after all. Though the words are used synonymously, they are not the same. A person can be proud without being vain. Pride relates to our opinions of ourselves; vanity is what we would have the World think of us.

Zoro and Nami are very proud people- but, as they wrap themselves deeper in their love for the other, vanity edges into where it has no business being.

As I watch them snarl and cut at each other- I see into them deeper, deeper than I have before.

Nami’s issue is sudden, explosive anger. Her ego is actually fairly brittle and fragile- and, in effect, requires more admiration and praise from outside herself to survive. For her, it’s very easy to get caught up in fantasies of power, prestige, and wealth. When left unchecked, she becomes impervious to the needs of those around her.

When she is challenged or criticised it leads to sudden and surprising results. The issue here is how she deals with criticism; be it a minor slight or direct attack. Her reactions are almost uniformly violent, either physically or verbally.

The surprise for many is the suddenness and power of the reaction, given the nature of the cause. The slightest remark, even body signal, may be interpreted as personal criticism, mocking, rejection. Rage can even occur if you turn off the tap of constant, profuse (but in many ways false) adulation,
attention and compliments. The ego balloon is pricked, the boil lanced and the reaction... formidable.

She wants credit, glory- approbation, even. Just being in her crew bolsters her ego; she’s thanked and praised constantly for her work, which helps her a lot. What she needs is a round of self-reflection; some help to see why things don’t always work out. Not necessarily confrontation, but definitely true empathy.

And finally, at the bottom, I can see the basis of this whole riptide of emotion- she’s had to feel simultaneously physically vulnerable but emotionally restrained. Protected? I’m not sure how to describe it... At one time, and even a little bit now, she viewed the world as everyone for themselves. She may have enjoyed or needed other people’s company- but she convinced herself just a bit that she never needed other people and that she didn’t want people to need her.

She thought that would make her strong.

And then... her Captain and her crewmates saved her life.

For the first time in her life she could remember, when she felt like she really needed people, people where there for her. Yet... the rest of the realization hasn’t come through.

Zoro’s problem is, he doesn’t use words; he uses actions. There are always challenges that cannot be overcome with doing; simply because they aren’t the kind of challenge that can be done. It’s like deciding to fight for yourself, I think- that’s not a choice you just make once, and it’s over. Fighting for myself is something I have to decide to do, every day.

He isn’t selfish in the small things- he’ll share the last of the booze, let people have his favorite napping spot, take the time to tutor a crewmate in his area of expertise... hell, he even, um, he even goes down on Nami without being asked. It’s, ah, it’s a standard part of their lovemaking.

He is still self-centered when it comes to making decisions. He has incredible difficulty sharing his personal dilemmas and tough choices with anyone- Captain, crewmates, partner; anyone. He can barely let anyone in. He’s likely to remain quiet and mull things over; rather than talking with his friends. Often, he arrives at those kinds of decisions alone, even about things that concern more than just him.

This means that a lot of the choices that should be made together, he makes for the both of them- even when what he assumes would be the best is proven to not be. Really, that’s the best decision for him, defined as the decision where he’s the least vulnerable, and least likely to be hurt in unanticipated ways. Of course, this leads to making a more painful choice, so long as he feels that he’s in control.

He chose the more painful path because he can’t bear to let anyone other than himself choose which harms the World will visit upon him. Those kind of choices can never make a person happy.

I became selfish in a better way, I think. I took up a weapon because I wanted to be more confident with my own powers; becoming able to fight was a fringe benefit. I learned to rule properly for my own peace of mind. It may come to pass that I must take up the crown and throne of my Kingdom- and if such comes to pass, I will be prepared for it. My people deserve no less.

I stopped letting people other than myself dictate how I would appear; it's my body, and my hair, and
I’ll do what I want with it. Amazing, what can happen when you shave your hair completely off.

Now, I feel better about myself; and I take pride in the way I look. Selfishness isn’t a bad thing or a good thing- it’s just an emotion, a state of being. You have to grow as a person, not just in size but in spirit; unfortunately, it’s easy for others to feel threatened by that fact, and to let things go too far.

What matters most, I think, is the type of selfishness. Nami and- to a lesser extent, Zoro- have spent most of their lives knocking down other people to feel good about themselves.

My gaze into the past widens just a touch- I can see that their friend… their friend, yes, Queen Mab, has been gently cajoling the both of them into better places to think and live and be.

I’m not their friend.

I don’t have to be nice.

Favors for favors; let’s do this.

Before they can say anything they’ll really regret, I firmly put my hands down between them both. Then, before they can really react, I scoop both of them up in my hands and gently- carefully- turn them so that they can’t actually see each other anymore. Now that my eyes are Wide Open, I can feel my Haki more clearly than ever before. It’s a simple thing, to wrap them both up in me ; and leave the only avenue for communication with each other as simply… words.

That they have to actually say to each other.

“In return for opening my eyes and helping me find my resolve; I will help the two of you. You two need help with this- this, right here, right now- and although your friend has been doing her best to help you, an outside perspective has shown me that the two of you need a more brutish approach.

“I ask that the two of you to tell each other in two sentences or less what the problem is. I need you to use ‘I’ statements; I want, I need, I feel, and so on. Nami, you start please.”

Zoro stares up at me a bit wild eyed- but as he wriggles and flexes inside my grip, he discovers what everyone smaller than me has. My grip is immovable; I am not a hermit Crab, like Queen Mab. I’m a coconut Crab. Haha, star-sign joke.

He’s not wiggling out of this. Nami is just the same- but even as she stings and shocks my flesh, I am unmoved. Finally, she huffs and snarls and with a face gone red with rage she screeches-

“I WANT ZORO TO TELL ME HIMSELF WHY HE THINKS THIS KEEPS HAPPENING! I- I want to understand- I want to understand what he thinks, and… and why.”

As fast as her rage boiled out of her, it fades, and the note of pure misery in her voice makes my throat catch on words of empty solace. Zoro, in my hand, flinches and shivers, and swallows nervously. He’s not on the road to another panic attack- he just doesn’t want to use his words.
“I want Nami to listen to me when I speak to her. I feel like- when I muster the courage to speak my true feelings, I feel like they’re dismissed as… as nothing of importance at all.”

Nami gasps, and tries to twist around in my hand to look at Zoro, to try and soothe away the near-despair in his voice. She cannot.

“Thank you for being honest with each other. Now; I want you to keep using ‘I’ statements. This time, please focus on what you personally want; out of your relationship, from the future, from each other. Don’t hold back at all. Zoro first, this time.”

Zoro jerks in my hand, and shoots me a look of pure betrayal. I stare back down at him with my calmest Courtly face. He shudders, and sighs, and flinches away from himself. But he can’t leave, and I will not let him escape from this moment. Zoro swallows, and clears his throat. He closes his eyes, blushing furiously- and then he speaks.

“I want to protect you, Nami! I worry that you push yourself too hard; I worry that you’re going to hurt yourself by pushing so hard! I want you to trust me; when I say that I want to care for you, I want you to believe me! I want to care for you when you’re not feeling your best! I want to rub your sore feet, and I want to help you find ways to exercise and train that aren’t exhausting for you!

“I like you! I like spending time with you! I like just being with you! I want to spend time together like we used to, just the two of us. I want to… I want to do stupid datey girlfriend-boyfriend stuff with you. I want to listen to your day, and tell you about mine, even when it’s the same day as yesterday. I want… I want to be sure down to my bones that you respect me.

“I want you to love me the way I love you! I want to be able to tease you; I want jokes just between the two of us, things only you and I share. I want to disagree with you, because sometimes I do disagree with you. I want to disagree without fighting.

“I want to stop being angry and irritated; I want to just… be. I want to be with you, Nami.”

And then, he’s gasping for breath, shaking in my hand. Nami, in my other hand, whimpers; she can hear how upset he is, and me blocking them from each other doesn’t go deep enough to block her Knowing him. How could it? Only death could manage that- and even then, I am not so sure.

“Your turn, Nami.”

Nami jerks to attention, and shudders; and then, she sighs, and begins to speak.
“...I want you to protect me, Zoro. I like being taken care of, but- it’s hard for me to let go of my control. I worry that one day, I won’t be able to find you again when you get lost. I do trust you, Zoro. I want to trust myself.

“I trust you to care for me, but it’s hard for me to let you. I want to be cared for when I feel bad. I like it when you rub my feet, and I like the fact that you know so much about the physical body that you can help me, no matter what my body’s capability is.

“I like you, too. I like spending time with you. I like being with you, and spending time with you. I want to find a way to spend time together like we used to; I want to have times where it’s just us two together. I want to do more silly datey stuff- I like dressing similarly, and I like...

“I like hearing you talk, and I like talking with you, even when we’ve got nothing to talk about at all. I want you to respect me, too- not just as a person, but as a warrior, as someone who can fight and defend, as someone who is strong in their own right.

“I love you so much - but me loving you and you loving me… I don’t know how I can prove that we love each other the same, but we do love each other the same. I think we love each other the same.

“I want in-jokes, and disagreements, and... maybe we could train together, or nap? I think that’s something we could do, maybe.

“I want to be with you. If it came down to it... I would rather we were alone, together; than just me, all by myself.”

Nami gasps, and whimper. I can feel my cold Courtly face being ruined by my tears- but that doesn’t really matter. I carefully turn them, and close the distance between them- still in my hands, but physically and metaphorically closer than before.

I don’t have to prompt anymore.

“When we first met, I thought you were arrogant, and conceited, selfish and disdainful of the feelings of others. I realize now that I couldn’t have been more wrong - your arrogance is a simple matter of self-confidence in the skills you genuinely do have. You do think highly of yourself, but that’s a matter of having high self esteem; you honestly care very little for what the world has to say about you, and so I cannot call you truly vain.

“For a long time, I just didn’t like you- we were crewmates, but... you can be crew with people you don’t actually like. And then... I don’t know, Zoro. Things changed. I stopped wanting to... I don’t know, defeat you? Win at a battle you didn’t know how to fight? I don’t... I wanted to be with you just because I liked being with you. I don’t remember when that became kissing, and dancing- and more, I wouldn’t be like this if I didn’t think you’re sexy-”

“N-nami, you don’t-”

“Zoro. You’re sexy. You’re handsome and kind and good, and I love you. I don’t like it when you doubt those things about yourself, because it feels to me like you’re doubting me, and my judgement.”
“No, no! I don’t doubt you, and I do trust your judgement! I- Nami, I do trust you! And I love you, too. I- I just- I think I have faults enough, but they aren’t- gods, I hope they aren’t of understanding. Of- of faith. I… I can’t say the same for my temper. I don’t tend to yield- certainly not enough to be convenient. I can’t forget foolishness or vices as soon as I ought, nor their offenses against myself- or against you, now; and especially not the crew, and our Captain. I’m not… I’m not moved by many appeals to my softer feelings, and my temper could be called… resentful, I think. My good opinion, once lost, is lost forever.

“But that doesn’t mean I ever thought badly of you- really, Nami, I never did. You were always beautiful; the way light catches on your hair, the depth of your empathy and compassion… and you’re smart, Nami, you’re smarter than I’ll ever be.”

“…Me being smart doesn’t mean you’re dumb, Zoro. A-and… it doesn’t really matter to me, that you’re not comfortable talking about your softer feelings. You show the depth of your care, and your kindness in a thousand little ways, every day. I always know that you’ll be happy to spend time with me, with any of our crewmates… I just wish…”

“Nami…?”

“I worry that you’ll get into a fight, and… and you’ll go somewhere I can’t follow, Zoro. I don’t want you to leave me behind. I know you might have to, to find your Dream- but I don’t want you to, I-

“I can’t help being so… selfish.”

Zoro can’t seem to find the words for a long, long moment.

“…Nami, I don’t think it’s selfish to want to spend time with someone you love. And… I Know I’ll never go anywhere you can’t find me eventually. I Know you, and I know you’ll always find me, if I’m lost. Or Lost.”

“Hmph. Didn’t you swear that you’d never lose again?”

“Losing and being lost are not the same, Nami. And at least with you, I know that I’ll never lose sight of where I need to be, and what I need to do. I will never let myself be defined by how I can die; I will always be defined by how I can live.”

“…I know. The same as I know that, although the future is fast coming for us all, it always flinches first, before settling in as the gentle present. This now; this us- the two of us, together; I think we can cope with that. I think we can make that work.”

I slowly open my palms, and gently push them near each other. My palms make a natural bridge, and without their noticing, they’ve wrapped around each other, embracing, a-and, um, kissing, and- I’ll just- put them on this cushion and- o-oh my goodly gods, I think I have a screen.

S-somewhere-

Ah, here we go. Let me just- and there goes her obi, I’m going to go.
Over here.

Where I can ignore them.

LET ME THINK ABOUT MEGALO, MEGALO IS A GOOD DISTRACTION FROM ALL THE- NOISES-

Oh wow, they are shameless.

AHEM.

Megalo is an actual angel sent from heaven, and I have evidence of this fact. Fact, I say. She’s a Great White Dogshark, and weighs about six hundred eighty kilograms. She’s so gentle I don’t need any special collar or leash or harness to walk or swim her, ever. She was meant to be a service dog but she was too shy, so she became my dog. Can you imagine it? She was trained to do all the service dog things, but- she’s my pet, more than anything else.

And they discovered her shyness before she was old enough to be spayed, so...

Megalo is so well behaved, okay, she waits for me at the top and bottom of stair-slides until I tell her it’s okay to go ahead up or down the next flight. She communicates to the maids how much she loves me, because they tell me every time I return from a long day at Court or in my study that every time I leave and they enter to clean my rooms, Megalo is sad. My baby girl!

She knows that if she gets silty or sandy, she has to wait in the foyer of my tower rooms to be swiped clean with the scraping wand. She’s also trained to scrape herself clean; when we come back from swimmies, I hold out her scraper and she’ll rub her body along it until I do her ears and finds and that’s her signal to go ahead inside.

She hangs out on my tailfins all evening making big impatient huffing noises until I go in the bedroom with her and sit up in bed doing whatever I’m doing so she can sleep by me. She loves pets and attention and scratches but she’s so shy; once she gets that physical affection and even the barest scrap of attention, she basically loses her mind. She rubs her entire face and head all over you while not quite knowing what to do with the rest of her six-hundred eighty kilogram self.

She loves chin scratches, especially on the black patches across her paws and fins and chest. She’ll pretend to be scary at men when they come into my rooms- there are male maids too, and until I reassure her they’re okay, she won’t stop being scary at them. She’s a good dog. Other dogs Love her because she’s so big and so sweet and so relaxed and it’s really fun to go swimmies with the best looking dog who’s also the nicest dog while everyone around you is all like “wow your dog is so cool”. Like, thank you so much, I made her from scratch.

The cutest thing about her is if you ask her “Who’s a good girl?!?” she seems genuinely concerned it might not be her, until you confirm such to be true.

Not only is Megalo a good girl, she’s the best girl.

Megalo!
Lurp lurp lurp!
Megalo, stop licking me, your tongue is too rough!

Lurp lurp lurp NUZZLE!
Hahahaha! I love you too!

Мепмепмепмеп~
Oh, Megalo- your puppies… are you going to show them to me?

Boof.
Ah, really?

Мепмепмепвакваквак!
Oh my god they’re adorable.
I’m crying again.

Lurp lurp lurp.
Hah, thank you Megalo. Hey, um- will you come with me for a swim?

Boof.
I thought so. Um- this time, it’s probably best if you leave your puppies here.

Wurf?
...I’m going to my mom’s grave, this time.

Boof!
Haha, thank you for the encouragement.

I’m doing it, this time. I won’t stop for anything.

“Oh my god, Zoro- we’re running a princess out of her own room!”

“She is very sheltered, so-”

“Zoro, no.”

“Ah. Alright.”

I push away, and shove myself back up, off the pillow. Zoro huffs and shakes his head, shoving his
libido back down into wherever he keeps it when not in use. I tuck my kimono back in tight, and tug my obi back into place; my hair’s a loss, though, I can’t find most of the pins. Let me see- half up and back, I think.

Mm.

Zoro smiles at me with such joy, I can hardly stand it- I reach out, scruff his hair back into something resembling order, but it’s a lost cause- there are glimmering scales so small they look like dandruff, all smooshed into his hair and along his neck. The pillow we’re on is full of something a bit like feathers and a bit like scales, but the scales are tiny, and they’ve stuck to him everywhere.

They’re almost certainly stuck to me, too.

“We should follow her.”

“Nami, she doesn’t have the resolve to do anything-”

“Zoro, she’s sheltered, not a coward. Look- she’s taking her real Naginata, and she’s taking some kind of bag; she’s very… I would feel better about things if we followed her.”

“…Alright. Fine. We’ll follow her.”

I smile at Zoro, who sighs, and smiles back. Then, we both turn, and leap- and catch onto the scruff of Megalo’s neck. One of her ears flicks back, but she senses our intentions, and without stopping-

We’re out the window of the tower, and gone from the palace grounds faster than I thought any animal could move. We go through the bubble, and a massive wall of air forms between Megalo’s skin and the water above us, making a place we can breathe.

I scoot over to where Zoro is resting against the dorsal ridge of fur, and nestle myself into his left side, where the swords aren’t. I make extra sure to rest the side of my pudge against his belly, like he likes.

Zoro pauses for a moment, and then wraps his arm around me. I sigh, and rest my head against his shoulder.

I’m only going to rest my eyes a moment-

Zoro and Nami ain’t come back. I got a feelin’ as to why, an’ so do Usopp and Mark. About damn time those two figured that out.

“Ah, Lu, are they ever coming back?” said Ace.

“Nah, probably not.” I said.
“Uh.” said Ace.

“They’re engaged; and they like each other like Mab and Sanji do.” I said.

“Ah.” said Ace.

“They’ll be back in th’mornin’, I reckon.” said Mark.

“Mm. Maybe around noon?” said Usopp.

“They’ll be back when they’re back; we can’t leave without either of them, so. An’ they got their phones; I ain’t worried.” I said.

Ace blinked, then smiled like he used to when he didn’t quite understand my reasoning. That’s fine; I didn’t always understand his. Hell, I still don’t.

Dunno why we’re still here, really; we ain’t allied with the Whitebeard’s formally, we’re just friends. Hmph.

Oh.

Somethin’s about to happen.

“SIRE-!”

“Lord Desterous, what is the meaning of-”

“Sire, Princess Shirahoshi has vanished! She’s not in her rooms, she’s not in any of the gardens- I have men searching the rest of the palace now, but- sir, she’s gone.”

“Preposterous! She understands as much as the rest of us the danger she’s in- she wouldn’t just leave, and we’d have heard if she was taken-”

“Sir, I don’t doubt she would never have left under her own power, but… considering what almost happened with the Tamatebako… it may very well be that she didn’t leave under her own power.”

“Lord Desterous- Marlie, she would have screamed if someone had tried to take her, we would have noticed-”

“It only takes one moment, Coeurl. -Sir, I know you don’t want to do this, but you must use the Power of Neptune. It may be the only way for us to find her.”

“No! If I do that-if I release that power into the World once more- it could mean the destruction of our entire Kingdom! Of the World! I cannot-”

“…Robin?” I said, listening to the argument between the King of Fishman Island and… that guy I don’t like.

“Captain?” said Robin.
“What’s the power of Neptune?” I said.

The King and the Guy both freeze; so do a bunch of other people, but I don’t really care about them.

“Ah. Let me see if I remember...” said Robin.

Ace and Whitebeard glance at each other, and then sidle- as much as a person can sidle when we’re all sitting in... I think this is a smoking room? Dunno. Also, a man Whitebeard’s size doesn’t really sidle, he more... shuffles. Slides. Like a pile of rocks over the edge of a cliff.

Ace, of course, can sneak if he has to- but I’m better than he ever was. No one expects the ‘stupid’ one to be good at anything, after all.

Dunno what the big secret is, but- chances are, if Robin doesn’t, Mab will. Difference is... Robin knows secrets from the past. Mab knows secrets from right now.

It’s a mystery why Mab’s not an archaeologist, it really is.

“Ah, I remember now- I had wondered why it was in every gallery of the Ryugu Tombs, but if it’s as important as I think it is, it stands to reason that it would be repeated, in every room...” said Robin.

“Robin?” I say.

“As with all things that get remembered with such fervor, it has to do with how the females of the Royal House of the Sea tend to die.

“Considering the facts of the matter, which are publicized- as nobility is ever concerned with matters of the Line- the ruling house of Neptune is actually split in two. King Triton, who conquered this island during the Age of Heroes, took from his conquered people's two wives. Maria, of the Merrow; and Jillian, of the Kappa. These are usually represented as the Left and Right house goddesses in modern times- in the ancient days, it was thought that the two queens personally protected each household of the kingdom, you see.

“Triton, Maria, and Jillian had seven daughters: Aquata, Andrina, Arista, Atina, Adella, Allana- and the youngest, Ariel. Ariel fled the Sea, and her Fate is thus unknown to the scholars of the Sea; there are tales of what became of her, and it is not known how much of those tales are true. Certainly, the Fae maintain that their most beloved goddess-queen, Aryell, came from the Sea; and it was during the Age of Heroes that the Fae fled from their ancient island home to the Sky, from which they did not return.

“But that’s not really important right now. What you asked about was Neptune; and so I shall tell you as best I can. Maria and Jillian each had three favored daughters- Ariel was a favorite of her father, which it may be surmised is why she left. When King Triton died, Maria and Jillian tore the Kingdom apart- because, you see, a marriage to a conquering hero was not enough to absolve the deep enmity they held for each other. Thus, there came to pass the Great War of the Sea, which turned brother against brother and sundered the world, for a time.
During that War, the Ryugu brothers- Mer, and Gyo- eventually came to an agreement, and united their houses into one, called Neptune. It was these two brothers who founded this Kingdom in its current incarnation- that’s why it’s called Ryugu Mergyo.

The uniting of the Ryugu houses into House Neptune was a matter of marriage, as it always ends up being; thus it was that Pleione, the sailor’s goddess, married Mer and Gyo. Pleione, who begat Atlas; Atlas, who begat Calypso.

It was Calypso who first woke Leviathan. During her great battle with the Pirate Court, of which only the King remains, when she tore the Sea asunder and did her best to kill those who had wronged her so… she dug too deeply, and woke something from the Age of Beginnings.

No one knows it’s true name for sure; perhaps it had different names, in elder days. What I can say with certainty, is that the history of House Neptune is the history of Leviathan. They are intertwined, their Fates bound together in ways that cannot be explained as anything other than destiny.

Leviathan- as it is known now- is, above all things, Evil. It is one of the very First Evils to ever exist; along with it’s… siblings? Splittings? The script wasn’t entirely clear, and that particular language was never my area of study. However, Leviathan is matched by two other ancient forces- Behemoth, who roams the Land; and Ziz, who rules the Sky. Thus, into each portion of the World, a pair of Houses rose- for the Sea, those houses were Mer and Gyo, which became Neptune, which you see here now.

Of the Firsts, I can say this- when the World was begun, and all the Evils of the world scattered into it, three portions of Evil rose to match the three Great Goddesses that had made the World. Thus, it is known that each Great Evil is a foul reflection of those great goodnesses; Behemoth, who incites Weakness; Ziz, who incites Cowardice; and Leviathan, who incites Ignorance. It is the sacred, ancient duty of every paired House of the Three Kingdoms to destroy, pacify, and erode the works of these evils, wherever they may lurk.

The Goddess, Hylia, who made Time; it is said that she is the cruelest and most merciful of the ancient ones who begat the World. It was Hylia who gifted- or cursed- the people of the Sea with the power to speak with the creatures of the Sea. And so, as each Great Evil was loosed into the World- so too was the power to hear their cries, and understand their vitriol, and work to pull the poison of their presence away from those who would succumb to it.

In the people of the Sea, the power to defeat Leviathan is called Poseidon. This power is not without it’s price, as no power is; for, though every member of this Kingdom can, by this time, at need- defeat Leviathan… The price is almost always the life of that person, or the lives of those they would protect.

The walls of the tomb were stark, and plain; there are always two people who arise, when Leviathan comes. Leviathan always comes- and the two who arise are the Hero, and the Blood. The hero is a warrior, always, one born with an absolutely unbreakable spirit. The Blood is one who has power, generally passed down through the blood of the Sea Goddess, Calypso; usually the kind of power that allows the Hero to face Leviathan without much in the way. However, if the soul of the warrior is called without cause, or the blood of the Sea is woken without true need; when Leviathan comes- and Leviathan always comes- the Hero and the Blood will not be there to face it.

With the passage of each Age, the great wars between the Hero, the Blood, and the Leviathan have been turned into legends. Here, then, is the ‘legend’ that once came to pass, ten-thousand years ago.

Ryugu Mergyo was then blooming, as a highly advanced civilization. Even the most dreadful- fell-powerful- of monsters posed little threat to the Realm, and those of it. The people thought it wise to
utilize their- magic- technology- mastery over the forces of the universe- to ensure the safety of the Land, should Poseidon ever slip beyond the control of the Realm.

“They, in unity- alliance- agreement- trade for honor?- with the Fae, constructed four mechanical wonders that came to be known as the Great Divine Beasts. Entombed- enshrined- piloting each Beast was an individual of the World- of all corners of the World? -from across the World-, who possessed exceptional skill- power- expertise- vigour- charisma- skill; thus, was the plan to neutralize the threat of Leviathan formed.

“Also built were a legion of autonomous soldiers, who could not drown and would not wither with age, called Automatons. The first of these, and in time, the generals of these great armies, was Galatea, the Sleeping Love; the second was Euanthe, the Blossoming Goodness; the third was Thalia, the Cheerful; the fourth was Euphrosyne, the Mirthful; the fifth was Aglaea, the Splendid; the sixth was Kleta, the Glorious; the seventh was Auxo, the Grower; the eighth was Hegemone, the Bearer- fruitbearer?; the ninth was Peitho, the Seducer; the tenth was Phaenna, the Bright; the eleventh was Pasithea, the Relaxing; the twelfth was Charis, the Grace; and the thirteenth, and last, was Kale, the Beauty.

“Upon Leviathan’s inevitable return, it’s control over all the waters of the World, and the great sundering of the Land- the Hero, the Blood, the Great Divine Beasts, and the Thirteen Armies fought together to defeat this great calamitous evil. The Automatons were tasked with protecting the Hero, as the Great Divine Beasts unleashed terrible attacks of dreadful power on their ancient foe. When the Hero, wielding the Sword that Defeats All Evil- the Blade of Evil’s Bane- delivered the final blow, the Blood used the ancient magic to seal away the Calamitous Evil, the Great Leviathan.

“People more or less assume that the Ryugu are the ones who are descended from Calypso- actually, every living Sea Folk, partial or otherwise- is descended from Calypso. If you’ve got fins, gills, or scales, you bear the ancient blood. No, House Neptune throws heroes; a hero for every age.

“The last great Hero was called Otohime.”

I look over at Robin, because I still don’t understand much of anything. I guess Mark and Usopp do, because Mark is sittin’ bolt upright and Usopp’s got all his body tensed tight. Whitebeard is wideyed, and if Ace’s jaw goes any tighter he’s gonna crack one a his molars again.

“So, in a sentence or two, Robin?” I said.

“Hm. If King Neptune uses his power of Poseidon without being absolutely sure of needing it, he will wake Leviathan. As far as I know, there is no Blood of the Realm that stands ready to defend the World; nor is there a Hero, to do battle. If he uses Poseidon and wakes Leviathan, the entire island will be destroyed- and his daughter will surely perish.” said Robin.

“If he doesn’t use the power to find his daughter, a terrible fate may be hers to bear.” said Usopp.

“The King is old; he needs to know where his children are, simply because at any time, he could die. It would then be their responsibility- th’ protection of the Realm, an’all.” said Mark.

“Ah. Shit.” I said.

“Quite.” said Robin.
“We can’t leave; the coating on Sunny broke when we came here. And we can’t do nothing, either, because that’s not the kind of people we are. Oi, Sinister-” I said.

“-Eh-?” Sinister said.

“-Yeah, you. A friend of mine in Coral Hills told me that you had a message for me, from Jinbei, my other friend. Hand it over, would ya?” I said.

The Sinister guy blinked, and did a funny thing with his hands- that weird pendant thing that Robin came back with, he had it in his hand. Then, he stuck it in a pocket on his belt and pulled out a note.

He handed it to me. I nodded to him, and pulled out my readin’ glasses- and then I read what Jinbe had to say to me.

‘ Do not fight Hody Jones. I’ll be waiting in the Sea Forest until Beltane. -Jinbe ‘

Hm.

It’s about to start.

Then, before I can make a decision with all th’ facts an’ figures- a crash resounds through the air. It sounds something like…

When me ‘n Sanji had to take Nami up the mountain in Drum Kingdom, we crossed up a cliff or somethin’ like that and had to head back down, across a fall line. At the shear point, the entire slope began to move under us.

I don’t remember the next few moments; but I remember the noise. I remember catching Nami in my arms and leaping from rolling stone to broken tree-trunk; I remember watching Sanji get ragdolled down under the stones and the snow and the ice.

That’s what it sounded like, just now.

Here comes a- hm. I see.

It’s starting.

“Sir! Hard Shell Tower has Fallen!” said a breathless soldier; he obviously ran all the way here.

“Sir- sir, what would you have me do?” said the Guy.

“...Is it Hody and his bunch, then? Soldier-?” said the Soldier.

“Yessir! Hody Jones was spotted just before Hard Shell Tower fell; riflemen couldn’t bring him down in time.” said the Soldier.
“...Hmph. Edward, can your boys and girls handle whatever’s been left back to harass my Realm?” said the King.

“Of course, Coeurl. Ace, call Marco-” said Whitebeard.

“Straw Hat.” said the King.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Please find my daughter. She’s one of my four dearest treasures, and I would see to her safety before all else. However, I cannot; and so, I ask of you-” said the King.

Man, nobles sure do talk a lot.

“Yeah, sure; I’ll find her. Robin, Usopp, Bryony- stay here, defend the castle. Mark- let’s go find us a princess.” I said.

“Of course, Captain.” said Robin.

“Sure, Captain,” said Usopp, already stringing his bow and checking his arrow pouch.

“Here’s your phone's; call us when you find her.” said Bryony, tossing me an’ Mark our phones before handing out the last of them to Robin and Usopp.

“Yah, let’s go.” said Mark, tucking his hat back on his head and tossing his long red hair out and back.

My crew’s pretty much the best.


My patient’s surgery went much better than expected; there were no surprises, and I was able to use minimally invasive techniques to remove the damaged organ. Her vitals have already improved much closer to optimum levels for someone her size, weight, and tribe. The only thing left to do is remove her transfusion.

Although it’s no longer necessary, the vitality of Sanji’s blood is incredibly potent, particularly for it’s blood-vessel repairing properties. Therefore, until her vitals have completely recovered to a natural equilibrium, I will be leaving her transfusion as is.

Frankly, due to the incredible vitality of Sanji’s blood, I expect her recovery time to be reduced by a full five days or so, making her total recovery period something closer to nine days, rather than fourteen. Considering her obvious musculature, and the pattern of bruising and scar tissue across her body, my patient is a warrior of some skill. I’d rate her physical skill somewhere around mine, two years ago.

I am marking this patient as female simply because, until puberty actually occurs, there is no way to
tell if a Seafolk with internal presenting genitalia is female or male. Thus, for recording purposes, until such a time as the Seafolk in question actually says for themselves what their gender is, or there are external cues that are more easily assigned to one or the other gender, the individual must be marked as female.

Sanji’s blood smells odd. When we smell blood, it’s not actually the blood we’re smelling. Technically, we’re smelling the reaction of the iron in our blood on our skin; and it’s our skin that produces the characteristic ‘blood’ odor.

According to an extract from a published study from *The Lancet*, a medical journal I read, six test subjects immediately recognized the ‘musty’ metallic odor when their hands came into contact with metallic iron, or a solution containing iron ions with a twofold positive charge. In contrast, solutions of iron with a triple negative charge did not cause the odor.

Gas samples were taken from each subject’s skin, revealing a bouquet of different organic compounds that seemed to form, in totality, the metallic smell of blood.

The key component is called 1-octen-2-one, which smells fungal-metallic even when highly diluted. The precursors to the order molecules are lipid peroxides, which are produced when oils on skin are oxidized by certain enzymes or other processes (e.g. under UV light). These lipid peroxides are then decomposed by the doubly negative iron ions, which are consequently reduced to triply negative iron ions. When touching objects made of iron, the required doubly negative ions are formed when perspiration on the skin corrodes the iron.

Rubbing blood over skin results in a similar metallic smell based on the same scent molecules. Blood also contains iron atoms. That humans can ‘smell’ iron, can therefore be interpreted as a sense for the smell of blood. Early humans were thus probably able to track down wounded prey or tribe members by following the scent of their blood.

Which, I think, explains my concern over Sanji’s strange blood smell. It’s not a strong smell, and it doesn’t register to me as anything poisonous, or otherwise dangerous. It’s just… odd. I’ll ask him if I can study a sample of his blood, to figure out why it smells so strange...

Sanji, during the course of this surgery, gave more than twice his total volume of blood. He also ate more than six times his average volume for a meal. I’ve removed his transfusion line, and have him resting on the bed next to the patient- it’s for her benefit, as having a warm body next to her is having a serious positive effect on the equilibrium of her vitals. It’s also for Sanji’s sake- although he didn’t actually do anything terribly strenuous, losing that much blood is a strain, even for someone with strong Demon-blood.

Honestly, I’m only giving him this sedative to ensure he *stays* in bed; knowing him, at the first sign of trouble, he’d leap into action. Which would be stupid. And, of course, it’s as soon as he’s deeply unconscious that a woman screams, because that is my life.

All it does is raise his heart-rate a little bit; he doesn’t actually wake up.

As Taffy and Gurry let out battle cries and start fighting someone, I take the time to clean up all the spilled blood, throw out used needles into the biohazard trashbin, wash my hands, and remove my
“Oi, you bastards- this is a sanitary medical room. Take it the fuck outside.” I snarl.

“Aye, Doctor!” yelps Taffy, before letting loose a simply bloodcurdling battle cry and-

“IF YOU DON’T LET ME GO, I SWEAR TO GOD, I’LL KILL THE MERMAIDS-!” shouts- oh yeah, that guy we had in the barrel. Shit-! I forgot about the guy in the barrel, shit shit shit-

Gurry spits out a mouthful of blood into the biohazard trash, then snaps open one of his war fans and glares over the edge of it. Taffy rolls to a stop, and stands, Kusanagi bared sharp and green and ready to strike him down.

I roll my neck, and crack all the knuckles on my left hand.

“DO YOU THINK I’M FUCKING KIDDING? I’LL SLASH HER THROAT, RIGHT HERE AND NOW IF YOU DON’T BACK OFF-!” shouts the Barrel guy, eyes wild with fear.

On the bed, Sanji’s brow furrows; I can see it from the corner of my eye.

Taffy glares and her eyes blaze gold and furious. Gurry settles into his most balanced stance; his other war fan *click-click-clicks* open, his vicious poisons glimmering eerily on the metal. I crack all the knuckles on my right hand.

Barrel guy pulls out a switchblade and holds it to the pale, fluttering throat of what has to be one of the mermaids who were working on the other side of the San while we were doing surgery. My eyes narrow.

The room heats to almost unbearable levels, and I glance at the bed and see- Sanji, lying on the bed, the patient snuggled into his side. His eyes burn with a strange baleful fire, and his horns have never looked darker and more sharp.

“I’m going to tell you something once, and then if you die it’s strictly your choice,” Sanji said, lying pleasantly on the bed with the girl curled up against his stomach. “What I’m going to tell you is this: drop your knife and let the mermaids go, and if you do, then I won’t kick seven kinds of shit out of you-” his lip curled with fury- “and you can go back in the barrel, and we’ll leave you to the mercy of the Merjin and Gyojin who call this establishment theirs. And if you choose to fight, well, then you will not escape this place alive.”

“Y-you’re only alive right now because y-you’re on that bed; you don’t even have the strength to stand, much less fight! A-and even if you did, you couldn’t possibly kick seven kinds of anything out of me without hurting these lovely mermaids!” sneered the barrel guy.
Sanji murmured something to the patient, never taking his eyes off the barrel guy. I was close enough to hear him vocalize— but he didn’t actually move his face or mouth, so the Barrel Guy didn’t notice.

“Really?” said Sanji, smiling in a distinctly predatory way, “It well may be that I don’t have the strength to stand and fight. It may be, you worthless dog, that you’ve out-manuvered us and can leave this place with your ugly prizes—” and here, hah, here Sanji swung his legs off the bed, and sat up in one fluidly elegant motion; “—and it may very well be that I not only have the strength to stand, but the strength to do all I have said I would do, and far, far more. So, you degenerate wastrel, you puking shit, you worthless son of a dog and a whore: cease your barking, spit the mermaids out, and drop your knife,” and then Sanji stood.

He stood straight and tall and menacing, and walked— one, two, three— steps forwards, towards the Barrel Guy. The aura of palpable bloodlust surrounding him reminded me of Zoro at his most battle-hungry.

The knife clattered to the floor. The mermaids followed soon after.

A dark patch grew on the man’s crotch; Sanji really is a monster, after all.

“Get in the barrel,” Sanji said, with narrowed eyes.

The barrel man got back into the barrel. Sanji stalked over and slammed the lid back on with a single stomp of his foot.

“If one of you could make sure this barrel is securely shut, I’d be much obliged,” said Sanji, his face grey with strain.

Goddamnit, Sanji—

When I step out onto the balcony, it’s to the view of several hundred terrified looking fishmen, all of them scrabbling through the rubble of the fallen tower. I grew bold, over the Separation; and I might not ever get to say something like this again.

“Oi! Hate to break it to you, but— the princess isn’t here. She’s probably in another castle entirely. Although… are you really sure she existed at all?” I call out to them, my voice cutting through the
sounds of panic and shifting stone.

The scrambling fishmen falter, then stare up at me in horror. I have a handful of arrows ready to go, and I’ve twisted my ring into place on my thumb. However, Robin said she wanted to take out the first wave.

The burn she got earlier has been bothering her all night, and I think she wants to test and see just how much damage she can do— but I don’t like the way she looks. She’s pale, not quite like milk but pale, under her olive-brown skin. A thin sheen of sweat has only gotten more shiny, and she’s holding her arm oddly. Chopper said he’d take a look at her arm after dinner, but… that didn’t happen.

Well. We’ll see how things go.

The ragged bunch of fishmen seem to elect from amongst themselves a spokesman— or maybe bully a spokesman into place is the right way to explain what I just saw. Now— I’d spend a moment sizing him up, but, I know my friend Robin. She’s not the kind of woman who leaves things to chance; as Mab would say, she doesn’t like loose ends.

Robin’s the kind of person to nip a problem in the bud.


“IF WE DON’T FIND IT, WE’LL ALL DIE!”

“SHOW SOME SYMPATHY, DAMMIT!”

Robin, standing next to me, giggles, and crosses her arms so her wrists are over her shoulders. Oh boy, here we go.

“You boys want some sympathy? It’s in the dictionary, right between ‘shit’ and ‘syphilis’. As for all of you dying… well. You’re going to die anyway. Best not drag it out, I think- Cien pétals: Cluth. “

And hundreds of men fall to broken necks.

Robin doesn’t fuck around.

One or two still struggle to stand— and those, I take down with quick headshots. Barely a workout, honestly. I don’t think I really needed the battle stripes— although the hair band that turns into a hat is too helpful to not use, frankly.

Now if only my knees would stop jittering...
Ah fuck. I just broke the scab- shit, that’s exactly what I was afraid of.

“Bryony, it’s bleeding.”

“-Fuck, okay. You’re on comms then, Robin; I’ll take your place on the front-”

“-Neh, Bry, are you sure? You really don’t-”

“Robin’s already hurt herself, Captain. I’m sure. --Usopp, I won’t be able to leave the comms until Robin physically takes my place. Can you handle it by yourself?”

“I’ll have to, I think. Robin, go- you’re bleeding through your bandaging, so. No arguments- go take Bry’s place. I can handle it.”

“...Okay. Ow-”

I will think now, a little, on the magic of horses. There are two great ones who came before me, who were as skilled in the horse magic. Epona, of the Orcish Gauls, was the first one I will think on.

Epona was a Goddess of Horses, who the Orcish Gauls- who became the French- deified during the Age of Heroes. She was also one of the only Orcish deities ever deified by the Fae; there’s still an annual festival on the 18th of December, which celebrates horses.

My people, the Djinn, love horses. Every god and goddess who has ever protected or celebrated horses; my people pray to, and love as well.

So the legend goes, Epona was born to a white mare; and some say she was a mare herself, as white and fine as her mother before her. Others say that no, she was a woman of golden skin and night-black hair; and still more say she could change her form at will, from woman to mare and back again.

Her magic, which was wrought on the World so long ago, is now settled into the bones of every living horse there is- most particularly the skull. There is a story of a bard who was banished from the Kingdom of Germa by King Eirek and Queen Gunhilda. As revenge, the bard created a nithing - post, designed to put a curse upon an enemy. He placed a stake in the ground, stuck a horse’s head on the stake, and turned it to face into the kingdom, sending his curse at the King and Queen.

That’s a very old, very weak sort of curse- I say weak because even the slightest misstep during the casting process, and the curse falls flat. Mab’s right, honestly- the best curses are the ones you can only mess up by being not up to the task of cursing someone at all.
In the lore of the Cherubim, **Rhiannon** is a horse goddess from the *Mabinogion*. She’s similar to the Orcish Epona; but in truth she was a chief, and later a goddess of sovereignty who protected the Line of chiefs from harm. Rhiannon was married to Pwyll, the Lord of Dyfed. When Pwyll first saw her, she appeared as a golden goddess upon a magnificent white horse. Rhiannon managed to outrun Pwyll for three days, and then allowed him to catch up, at which point she told him she'd be happy to marry him, because it would keep her from marrying Gwawl, who had tricked her into an engagement.

Rhiannon and Pwyll conspired together to fool Gwawl in return, and thus Pwyll won her as his bride. Most of the conspiring was likely Rhiannon's, as Pwyll didn't appear to be the cleverest of men. In the Mabinogion, Rhiannon says of her husband, "Never was there a man who made feebluer use of his wits." After Pwyll's death, Rhiannon married Manawyden.

The goddess' name, Rhiannon, derives from a Proto-Faesh root which means "great queen," and by taking a man as her spouse, she grants him sovereignty as king of the land. In addition, Rhiannon possesses a set of magical birds, who can soothe the living into a deep slumber, or wake the dead from their eternal sleep.

Her story features prominently in the Fleetwood Mac hit, although songwriter Stevie Nicks says she didn't know it at the time. Later, Nicks said she "was struck by the story's emotional resonance with that of her song: the goddess, or possibly witch, given her ability with spells, was impossible to catch by horse and was also closely identified with birds -- especially significant since the song claims she "takes to the sky like a bird in flight," "rules her life like a fine skylark," and is ultimately "taken by the wind."

Primarily, though, Rhiannon is associated with the horse, which appears prominently in much of Cherubic and Syreene mythology. Many parts of the Faesh world -- Gaul in particular -- used horses in warfare, and so it is no surprise that these animals turn up in the myths and legends of Floria and Cherrim.

Scholars have learned that horse racing was a popular sport, especially at fairs and gatherings, and for centuries Fiddler's Green has been known as the center of horse breeding and training.

Judith Shaw, at Feminism and Religion, says, "Rhiannon, reminding us of our own divinity, helps us to identify with our sovereign wholeness. She enables us to cast out the role of victim from our lives forever. Her presence calls us to practice patience and forgiveness. She lights our way to the ability to transcend injustice and maintain compassion for our accusers."

Symbols and items that are sacred to Rhiannon in modern religious practice include horses and horseshoes, the moon, birds, and the wind itself.

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*I want to learn in my bones how a centaur can be less myth than dream- where I have spurs at my ears for jewels, my hair and the horse's tail streaking behind in a slipstream of our own furious making.*

**Epona! Make our horses strong and fast!**

**Rhiannon! Let us outrace the very wind!**

**For wrath, and ruin, and the Romance Dawn!**
...I’ve been reading maybe too many romance-pulpies.

We ride for the Sea Forest, a massive tangle of Wild Country; both of us dressed like banditos. We won’t stop for nothing- not water, not battle, not anything. Because- well. Luffy felt it as well as I did.

Zoro and Nami went off with someone, and a dog. And lo and behold- who is it exactly that comes missin’ not five minutes later? Mhm.

So.

We’re going- thataway - towards Nami and Zoro and someone and a dog and the sign says the road we’re on is heading towards the Sea Forest.

Something’s gonna happen tonight. We’re already heading towards the middle of it, here and now.

Damn, I thought they got me for good. I’m somewhere warm and firm and safe- probably a pile of my sisters, that makes the most sense; nothing else is this warm.

Shitty assholes; if they wanted to actually defeat Addy, they should spend more time training and less time beatin’ on the rest of us. Fuckers.

There’s a really big hand on my stomach, this isn’t my sister pile at all. I’ve not yet blossomed, but this hand is far too big for Mother’s hand, and she doesn’t smell like this.

I carefully take the hand in mine.

It’s big, much bigger than mine; with long fingers and old cut-scars healed over. Mine are still bruised, a little, and covered in scars that haven’t healed all the way yet- no burns, Mrs. Seedle won’t let me near the stove until I can cut and chop and prep to her satisfaction, and she will never be satisfied with me. For all the wrong reasons, Addy said, and she’d know that best… The fingertips are flat, and almost… hard, maybe? But the pads are still soft, and so are the edges. The side of the index finger is corrugated, like a tin roof. The ball of the thumb is rough like sharkskin when you stroke it sideways; it feels like lots and lots of little cuts that didn’t draw blood.

And- there’s a callus, right at the base of his index finger, and… it’s like mine! I think- I think he’s a cook!

Gods and goddesses, but I want to be a cook- not the, the fucking garbage boy but an actual cook. It’s been… I’m fourteen, all of us are, and I started… god, five years ago, at Mrs. Seedle’s kitchen. Five years since I walked into the Dreadbelly kitchen in Gobdark with my hair below my shoulders, no idea what I was getting into, a letter of recommendation from Mom’s Madame, and a marginal
desire to maybe do a little work in return for money. I came for the money, really; I stayed because I couldn’t do anything else. I had to learn—more. I had to see them.

The cooks.

How much longer can I stay with people who don’t care about me?

I don’t know.

I love it, is the thing.

I love reducing stock for hours and hours, my legs going numb on a stepstool because I’m still just a bit too short to stir the big pot; skimming scum off the top and moving to a smaller pot, a smaller pot, a smaller pot—hours and hours of work. I love chopping carrots, peeling potatoes, mincing herbs, grinding spices; taking the seeds and veins out of peppers so hot the snot runs down from my eyes, not just my nose. I love making breakfast for my sisters, every day: simmering a pot of water and thrashing the eggs into a yellow-orange fluid, stirring the vortex and cooking them there—so I don’t have a pot to scrub, and the eggs cook so quickly, and I adore scooping up just the right amount of clarified butter with my favorite spoon and pouring it over the eggs in the bowl. I love the look on Mrs. Seedles face when I make Confit Byaldi—the look of sheer delight as she takes the little cuboid pile of perfectly sliced vegetables, the swirled red sauce looking and smelling just right, the tiny green stalk of chive just right, just the way it should be. It’s a gaze of wonderment: it’s the same look I get when I approach a plate of perfect sausages.

I love that look, too— that look you see on small children’s faces when their parents take them into deep water, like, at the beach? It’s always a beautiful thing. For just a moment, a second, the pinched misery of the cynical, World-wary, throat cutting and blood drinking bastards we’ve all become disappears when we’re confronted with something as simple as a plate of food. When we’re invited to eat that food— and the food is good— I think that, above all else, is as close to heaven as anyone could ever hope for.

When I stretch a little, there’s a deep ache right in the left of my chest. That asshole, Jinnou, was kicking me in the gut again; I think he broke something. Fucking ow. Gods wounds, but I ache— I’m too tired to care who I’m in bed with, just that they won’t make me move. Thankfully— whoever I’m abed with… they’re definitely a man, and a cook or a chef at that, but they aren’t… doing anything. I think he’s asleep, honestly.

Saa— I saw a sign the other day for one of those Longarm-Fishman fusion whatevers that are popping up around Coral Hills, advertising ‘Discount Sushi’. I can’t imagine a better fucking example of What Not To Eat than fucking bargain sushi.

I don’t eat meat on Moonsdays, unless I’m eating at a three-star kitchen where I know they’re buying their fish directly from the docks— or if I’ve got it m’self, or maybe one of my sisters got it. I know how old most meat is on Moonsday— four or five fucking days old! And I don’t fucking eat mussels in restaurants unless I know the cooks, or have seen with my own two eyes, how they store and hold their mussels for service.

I fucking love mussels. They’re delicious, cooked right.

Most cooks are less than scrupulous in their handling of them. It only takes one bad mussel to ruin your entire day.
Brunch menus are open season to the cost-cutting chef, the dumping grounds for the odd bits left over from Frogday and Saturday. Hollandaise sauce? Not if I haven’t made it fresh or watched the cook make it. Miasma loves hollandaise, and no one ever makes it to order.

How long has that bacon been festering in the walk-in? Remember, brunch is only served once a week, on the weekends. Cooks, chefs- and ploungers, like me, hate brunch. Brunch is punishment block for the B-side cooks, or where the Baby-cooks learn the ropes.

I don’t eat in a restaurant with filthy bathrooms. Not a hard call to make- I mean, they let you see the fucking bathrooms. If the restaurant can’t be assed to keep their toilets white and clean looking, or keep the sprayer working, or keep the floors clean- or all of the above; then, honestly, can you imagine what their refrigeration and work spaces look like? Nasty, that’s what.

Beef parmentier? Shepherd’s pie? Chilli special? Sounds like leftovers to me.

Swordfish? Uugh. No; I’ve seen too many of those meter-long parasitic worms that riddle the fish flesh. No swordfish.

'Saving for well-done' is a time-honoured tradition dating back to cuisine’s earliest days. What happens when the chef finds a tough, slightly skanky end-cut of sirloin that's been pushed repeatedly to the back of the pile? He can throw it out, but that's a total loss. He can feed it to the family, which is the same as throwing it out. Or he can 'save for well-done': serve it to some rube who prefers his meat or fish incinerated into a flavourless, leathery hunk of carbon.

Vegetarians, and their Hezbollah-like splinter-faction, the vegans, are a persistent irritant to any chef worth a damn. To me, life without veal stock, pork fat, sausage, organ meat, demi-glace or even stinky cheese is a life not worth living. Vegetarians are an affront to all I stand for, the pure enjoyment of food. Oh, I'll accommodate them, I'll rummage around for something to feed them. Fourteen dollars for a few slices of grilled eggplant (aubergine) and zucchini (courgette) suits my food cost fine.

I have one knife, and it is, by the Gods, a fine chef’s knife. One! One good chef’s knife, comfortable to my hand; and nevermind that it was actually meant for a Tallfolk of some kind. I use the tip for small stuff, and go up the knife for larger- and I haven’t actually ever had to use it all the way up to the heel, but I will one day. Sea Kings are edible, right?

I also have a bunch of simple plastic squeeze bottles, like at the okonomiyaki stands for all the sauces.

I want a mandolin so badly- can’t make anything gaufrette or do dauphinois potatoes without one, not fast, anyway. I mean- I can do it with my knife, but it’d be faster with a mandolin.

I also have one very nice cast iron pan- there’s a leaf of copper in the bottom, to help conduct heat better, and… god, it’s wonderful. I fucking love it- and the interior is enamel, to make it easier to clean.

The stuff I try to have at home, all the time? Shallots, which are essential for sauces, dressings, and sautés; butter, because they sauté in a mix of butter and oil in professional kitchen; they finish nearly every sauce with it, too. That’s why restaurant food tastes so much better. Oh, yeah- Margarine? Not actually food.
Garlic is divine. Misuse of garlic is a crime. Old garlic, burnt garlic, garlic cut too long ago, garlic that has been smashed through one of those abominations, the garlic press, are all disgusting. Sliver it for pasta. Smash it with the flat of your knife blade. Roast garlic. It gets mellow and sweeter if you roast it whole, to be squeezed out later when it's soft and brown.

Restaurants garnish their food. Why shouldn't I? Dip the sprigs of parsley in cold water, shake off excess, allow to dry for a few minutes, and slice the stuff, as thinly as I can manage. Lovely!

Stock is the backbone of good cooking. Roast some bones, roast some vegetables, put them in a big pot with water and reduce, reduce, reduce. Make a lot, and freeze it in small containers.

Demi-glace? Simply take your reduced meat stock, add some red wine, toss in some shallots and fresh thyme and a bayleaf and peppercorns, and slowly, slowly simmer it and reduce it again until it coats a spoon. Strain. Freeze this stuff in an ice-cube tray, pop out a cube or two as needed, and you can rule the world.

Fresh herbs? A nice sprig of chervil on your chicken breast? A basil top decorating your pasta? A few artfully scattered chive sticks over your fish? A mint top nestled in a dollop of whipped cream, maybe rubbing up against a single raspberry? Come on! Get in the game!

Good food is often simple food. Some of the best cuisine in the world - whole roasted fish, Gyoverly-style, for instance - is a matter of three or four ingredients. Just make sure they're good ingredients, fresh ingredients, and then garnish them.

He’s not asleep. I ache, but that’s never stopped me before; open your eyes, Deborah. I slowly peel my eyes open, and glance around carefully. Oh, I see- I’m in the San of the Post Office. Been awhile since I was last here- they finally finished the ceiling.

I roll my head over, and am immediately confronted with a broad chest behind… a fancy shirt? Clavicles- horns! A Demon!

A Demon Cook!

Wait, wait, it’s not- he’s not next to me because of sexing, he can’t be. Demons are famous for only liking adults, it’s one of their big… Things, like Gyojin having external gills and Merjin having fishtails- or fishlegs, in my case. And yes, there are people who think that because I’m an octopus-type merjin, I’m not actually a ‘real’ merjin, somehow. But like- I’ve never heard any story, from anyone, about a Demon of any kind going after a kid for sex.

But I don’t know why I’m in bed with him, though- although, I guess this is the Sanitary, and… this particular San is notorious for being out of things like warming blankets… Maybe that’s why he’s here?

The demon’s watching me look at him. He blinks at me, placidly- and then there’s a clattering sound, and a lot of yelling. He looks at what’s going on, and I feel- warmer, like there’s nowhere safer for me to be.

“Stay exactly as you are, Shrimp. I’ve got to handle some shit.”
I blink up at him, but do as he says; it’s the first time anyone’s ever called me… anything close to that. As far as nicknames go, ‘Shrimp’ is actually kinda sweet. I like shrimp; and some of them punch really fucking hard, so.

I ache, and I’m still so tired- I tilt my head over some more and nuzzle into the warm spot the Demon Man left. It smells like… food? Pasta with squid, I think, and the faint smell of woodsmoke maybe, and butter, too, melted into meat.

There’s the sound of a knife clattering to the ground, and then a thump, but the dark of my eyes is so-comfortable-

I wake up again because the Demon Cook is curled up around me again. He’s really- warm. He’s really really warm.

My stomach yowls. I’m really hungry- thirsty, too.

The Demon Cook says something, to someone, and gets some kind of reply- and then he very carefully helps me sit up some. He tucks pillows under me, and when the tray is rolled over… how sick was I?

“-hhhah-”

“Don’t try to talk yet, Shrimp. Have some ice chips first.”

“…”

Ice chips do not quench one’s thirst at all.

“Sorry- I know. -Oi, if any of you can find a small tea pot, that’d be perfect-”

“I’ll go check, Mr. Sanji-” said… Ginny?

“-Shrimp, have some more ice.” said Demon Cook.

I have some more ice. It doesn’t help at all, though- my throat still feels like it’s full of snot, and my mouth still tastes like something badly cooked rolled over and died under my tongue. All the ice chips do is sort of water down the horrible flavor, a pit like pissing on a dumpster fire only slightly dampens the flames.

Then the Demon Cook puts the spout of a small teapot to my lips, and I open my mouth- and then, sweet blessed relief! Cool water! I swallow the thin trickle greedily.

My throat’s cleared up, somehow- and I can finally speak.
“Where in the fuck is my knife?”

Those are the first words that come out of my mouth. Great. Glad I’ve got my priorities straight.

“-um-” said the Demon Cook.

“-Fern’s gonna go back with Ellie and Miss Mab to get all of our things- including your cooking knife, Deb.” said Genny, my sister- the nurse. Right.

“Cool. Who’s Miss Mab?” I said.

“Our crew officer; we’ve joined a pirate crew.” said Genny.

“Have we?” I said.

“Indeed, we have.” said Genny

“Out standing . Who’s the Demon Cook next to me?” I said.

“That’s Mister Sanji, the crew cook.” said Genny.

“Ah. -You’re the cook?” I said.

“I am.” he said.

“Will you teach me to cook?” I said.

“...Yeah, sure. If you want to learn, I’ll teach you everything I can.” he said, a little- oddly? Like there was something in his throat, his voice got all thick for a moment there.

“Fuckin’ righteous.” I said.

“Have some soup.” he said.

“Okay.” I said.

And then I ate the soup. Mm. Rice.

I’m staunching a man’s wounds before I realize I’ve run out of the shrug. It’s Hachi- there’s a spear through his left side, and with how he’s colored- not good- that’s at least one kidney gone. He’s also been shot, there are pockmarks indicative of-
“Ginny, go get Chopper- the doctor, right now; run, Ginny.”

“-Y-yes Ma’am!” yelps Genevieve, before turning away from where she was going- she was going to the shrug, she must have just come from checking on Deborah- before running back to the San.

“They’re c-coming-” rasps Hachi.

“Save your strength-”

“-the attack here is a distraction; they’re going to hurt the princess. Listen to me!” wheezes Hachi.

“I’m listening, Uncle,” gasps Keimi, wrapping her thin hand around one of Hachi’s less bloody hands and bending her head close to Hachi’s bloody lips.

He says something to her, and her face- flexes, I think is the only way to describe it.

And then Chopper is there, along with Gurry and Taffy, and Hachi’s being carried back to the San for treatment. I catch Keimi’s hand, and take her back behind the counter of the Cafe. I wash Keimi’s hands, and carefully wipe her face, and wash my hands and my face- there’s blood on this dress, now, best I just- woosh, and it’s in the sink of my laundry, soaking.

Keimi looks… conflicted.

“What did he say?”

“-! He- my uncle, he said that… Vander Decken 9 can only keep two targets in his memory; his right hand holds the princess’s throat. His left holds the rest of the World. I- they’re coming. I- I need-”

“Keimi. Breath in, then out, then say it.”

“-hah. Right. We’re fighting; Freebird Postals! Prepare for Battle!”

There’s a long moment when I can’t hear anything for the sudden roar of approval; and then things begin to move very quickly indeed.

Keimi’s really grown up.

“No, Bryony- you don’t have to worry about the first wave. I handled it; they aren’t coming.”

Bryony blinks at me, once. It would appear that she has forgotten that I am, in fact, quite dangerous
on my own. I take the snail rig from her loosened grip, and calmly take a seat.

Whitebeard, who is calmly issuing orders to a quietly grinning Haruta, barely glances over at us.

“At least let me rewrap that, before I go.” said Bryony.

“Fine. -Then, you really do need to get out there. Usopp’s good, but you know how he gets.”

And Bryony smiled.

The peroxide stung just a little when Bry poured it over my broken skin, but mostly it just ached; remembered burn and sharp pain when I moved it too quickly. Then, it felt much better for being covered- and then, Bryony was gone.

I calmly flicked through each channel, just as Bryony had trained me to do. I checked in with each member of my crew: Zoro and Nami are fine, and definitely with Princess Shirahoshi; Luffy and Mark are in pursuit of Zoro and Nami; Usopp is holding the line at the Fallen Tower, Bryony en route to reinforce his position. Franky is effecting repairs on the Sunny; Mab-

“Say that again, you’re on speaker.”

“Right. Vander Decken 9 is having his allies, the New Fishman Pirates, attack- with intent to destroy- Madame Shyarly’s Mermaid Cafe, which is also the location of the Local Post Office. Therefore, don’t expect much more than a token aid from the Freebirds; they’re defending their claims here, after all. However, this is a distraction; his actual target, so far as I know, is still the princess. Hody Jones, on the other hand, is presumably after something in the palace- and Hody Jones is as strong as Captain, as far as I know,” said Mab.

“...Bryony and Usopp are at the Front; Nami and Zoro are with the Princess; Luffy and Mark are pursuing Nami and Zoro. What else?”

“Sanji’s out for the night- he gave a lot of blood to save D, and even a small mermaid and a relatively noninvasive surgery require a lot of blood; it doesn’t matter that he’s a demon, he’s out. D as well; Doctor’s Orders.” said Chopper.

“Mm. I see; and the rest of the girls?”

“I don’t really feel good about having them fight, but- they’re full crewmembers, if very junior members. If they want to, they can.” said Captain.

“Girls?”

“I’ll fight. G, you’re better in the San or in the air, I know you don’t have anything ready- F, E, you two need to go get the rest of our stuff- B, C...” said Adelaide.

“I’m fighting.” said Beatrice.

“As am I.” said Cecelia.
“Right. So, that’s me, B, and C on Team Fight, D’s on Team Bedrest with Sanji, E, F, and Mab are on Team Sneaky; G, Chopper, Taffy, and Gurry are on Team Doctor. Team Princess is Nami, Zoro, Princess Shirahoshi, Captain, and Mark; and Team Castle is Usopp, Bryony, -you, Miss Robin- and Mr. Franky’s on his own for Team Ship...” said Adelaide, before trailing off in contemplation.

“She’ll be fighting as well, I do believe,” said Brook.

“Ah, Mr. Brook! If you were any quieter, you’d be dead!” yelped the Girls, to Brook’s cheerful cackling.

“Got that, Robin?” said Mab.

“Yes, I do. Anything else we need to know?”

“Oh, yes- Vander Decken 9 can only keep two targets in his head at any moment in time. His right arm is reserved for the princess; his left is what he uses for the rest of the World.” said Mab.

“Hmm. Everyone got that?”

Everyone choruses their understanding, except for Captain.

“Uh.” said Captain.

“Captain- it means if you’re fighting him, break his right arm before you break his left.” said Zoro.

“Uh.” said Captain.

“His right, Luffy.” said Nami.

“Aha! Got it!” said Luffy.

“Hmhmhm. Anything else, or are we good to go?” said Mab.

“Shishishi- nope. If you guys see Dick-en first, kick his ass. And if I see him first, I’ll kick his ass.” said Luffy.

“Fair enough,” we all chorus.

Ace, standing just near enough to eavesdrop, is grinning with pride.

“Happy hunting, everyone,” said Mab.

“Ah, Mab- do you want to pop back over for your glasses?”

“Nah; I don’t need to see a man to kill him dead.” said Mab.

And that, I expect, is that.
“Right. E, F- come here.”

“Yes Mab!” they chorus.

“Right- you two know where we’re going?”

“Yes, we do.” said Ellie.

“Mm. Everyone else- anything you need before I go?”

“I wouldn’t mind hearing what you think war is, Mab.” said Brook.

I blinked, and then-

“Alright, all of you girls- and you, Brook- come here. I’m going to teach you something of war. Battle is battle, and how hard you go is decided by how hard you’re willing to go- for this one, I will say that any enemy you don’t kill has a chance of getting back up and fighting again. So much for battle.

“There is no glory in war; no heroes, no magic, no joy. It’s cold and bleak and ugly, and it’s not something you should just jump into. War is Not Romantic. So much for romance.

“You girls are going to be grown pirates, one day- and so, your actual crew-wide duties are thus: you’re to fetch and carry for the older members of the crew, do menial chores none of the rest of us like, improve your own skills, and do what we ask of you. The rest of the time, you’re to watch and listen to us, because there’ll be no better education for piracy. Not ever.

“War, when you get past all the battle bits, is about bread and boots and shit. Strategy is not complicated,” I lecture. “It’s little more than an objective: in this case, to defend this fortified position from attackers, while other members of our crew secure a potential hostage and defend the palace. Until the enemy attacks, that’s really all we can do. So much for strategy, then.

“What about tactics? Tactics are a variable, but until you know the battleground and your enemy is upon it, there’s naught much you can do other than keep in mind your capabilities and the ability of your enemy. Important in the moment, but that moment is not now.

“What a war really hinges on, girls, is supplies. Any idiot can raise an army- all you really need is to be born in the right family, or have enough charisma that people follow you. The trick to keeping an army is feeding it, arming it, clothing it- and the real trick is to do all of that, not in a city or a castle where the things you need for battle are right at hand, but in transit, miles and miles from anyone and anywhere. If you can manage that when your opponent can’t, then you have a profound advantage.

“Advantage; that’s what matters, more than anything else. Stack the deck in your favor: position, numbers, training, morale, more and better food, less disease… and then you’re unlikely to lose a battle. The way to get those advantages is to pay close attention to details- for example. Girls- are you absolutely comfortable fighting in those clothes, or do you want something else to wear?”
“...I’d like something else, actually. These are the only clothes I have, right now, and...” said Cecelia.

“Right-” and I shove a basket of loose articles of clothing at them, and another of armor- not heavy armor, it’s mostly boiled leather with some few lacquered pieces too… Franky got bored that time.

“-wear whatever you feel good about moving in. Don’t worry about expense- I make all the clothes for all the crew, and that includes you, now. The second one is full of armor- ask if you need help putting it on.”

There’s a general susurrus of movement from the Girls, and then they’re preparing for battle. I take the moment to wrap the neck piece of my battle chiton around my neck and tie it, just so. I pull the pins from my hair, and the jewelry, and put it back up with my battle gear- Bite goes into my hair, and Scratch goes on my fingers.

All the girls are wearing hakama; only some of them have changed their kimono. As they add armor and adjust themselves for battle, I suddenly realize that we’ve got three little samurai- C, B, and probably D, though I haven’t seen her yet- two little ninjettes, E, and F; a Karate-ka, A; and a Witch, G.

God’s blood, they’ll fit right in.

I look over at Brook, who looks back at me- then, he nods. He knows as well as I do the other reason I’m going to Gobdark instead of routing the enemy here.

We’re not just here for us, really- and this… this is bigger than just me.

“Everyone ready?”

“Yes, Mab.” the girls chorus.

Brook just nods.

“Right- E, F, you need headwraps, or…?”

“Not where we’re going, Mab.” said Ellie.

“Right. Grab on- and here we go.”

Then, I Blink, and we vanish from the Cafe.
People always spell my name wrong. The more modern, popular spelling is ‘Beatrice’, or ‘Beatriz’, but my name is the much older ‘Beatrix’. Mother said once that she would have named me ‘Bellatrix’ or ‘Bellona’, but those names were too combative for her tastes. Mother wasn’t always a prostitute- she’s not really a prostitute now, it’s just… Ginny said it best. She’s dying.

This isn’t the best thing to be thinking of right before a battle, but I can’t seem to turn my mind to anything else. I’m drawn back to other moments in time, other battles I’ve faced down; other moments where living beings in my acquaintance and company were fated to die.

Perhaps it’s best to start at the beginning.

Missus Mab explained it very well indeed; Magic is not free. I suppose she was only giving a grounding sort of lecture before she got into the specifics of curses- but Magic is most definitely not free. At the very basic level, one gives time and mental energy to the working of magic. But- also as Mab said- that’s very basic, very… I hesitate to say weak, because it is also what prayer is and prayer has tangible effects on the world… Mundane, is the best way to describe it, I think. Basic spells and so on, that you only need time and thought to use- a simple prayer, every night before you sleep- even some spells you sing, like lullabies; those are mundy magics. Those kinds of spells, well- there’s no real right or wrong way of casting them, because they’re things like ‘sing a song’, ‘pray’, and so on. Everyone- or most everyone- can figure out how to do those things, and you can find little spells like that in books.

Strong magic isn’t the kind of thing you learn in a book.

Well, one level above the Mundy floor is the world of hedgewitchery. Not quite strong enough to get any use out of a coven, and nowhere near the level of a tower; a hedgewitch is mostly self-taught, with a loose circle of friends and fellows that share tricks and resources. Or at least, that’s how it works in the suburbs and out in the country- villages, and so on.

In the city, hedgewitches aren’t as… hm. It’s like this. In the country, a hedgewitch is able to forage for their own supplies- herbs, animal bits, minerals, spices, and so on. In the city, most hedgewitches actually have day jobs, and so can’t spend time foraging.

That’s where I come in.

Technically speaking, I’m a thaumaturgic naturalist. Witches, wizards, mages, hedgewitches, spell-slingers; and others, with far stranger names, are always needing things like ‘eye of fire salamander’ or ‘boil blossom pus’; ‘strangle vine seeds’, ‘dandelion dander’ or even, on one very odd occasion, ‘sperm of tigerfish’. I’m the one who goes out and gets the damn things; and, because I like having something resembling job security, I do my best to do it in a way that’s least harmful to the animal, plant, mineral, and so on. There are ways to do it; I know there are. Some things, it hasn’t been written down yet, but-

It’s a dangerous, thankless job- but it pays the bills, and I get to see, up close and personal, the real nitty gritty bits of nature you can’t get out of books. Gobdark actually has a really good library- the librarian, Mister Potter, is very good at helping find books for me to read. He actually taught all of us to read, a long time ago- write, too, if that matters. Honestly… I think if he hadn’t taught me how to read, and write, and bind books, and- just, so many book-things, I’d have died by now. It’s from books I learned the best way to approach a needler cactus; it’s from books I learned how to make all my amulets and fetishes, what keeps me from harm.
There are things out in the cold, dark, wild edges of Fishman Island that no one has ever seen excepting me. There’s no book that exists about them, not yet- I haven’t quite written it yet. I suppose I’ve got all the information I’d need; but no actual, like, monograph. Or manuscript. Dunno.

I think this is the first time I’ve ever actually been scared going into battle. Mostly, I go into battle annoyed, my guts still as mirror-water and my mind abuzzin’ with the indignation of having to fight my way out, again. I guess it’s because of how close I came to dying not even a day ago.

I didn’t think nothin’ of going into the Tombs because I’ve done that before; there’s a kind of flower called a Peace Blower, or a Skullflyte, that only grows on undisturbed graves. The Tombs are a great place for them, because of how many noble houses have died out over the years… Is that morbid and distasteful? Well, so is letting a woman die of a treatable disease because she’s ‘not our sort of person’.

I’m bitter and I don’t give a shit who knows it.

Saa- it’s almost time to fight. Best get out my Rending Shears. Each of us Colors has our own specialized weapon. Mine is shears- specifically, a pair of Shrinky-dink scissors that transform into paired swords with a flick of the wrist. They’re indigo, for some reason- not quite blue, not quite violet. Indigo. I mean, bust them apart and they turn blue and red- but they’re not, they’re indigo.

The joint at the center of the scissors clicks open, and they pull apart into individual swords, which I can use pretty well, I reckon. I mean, I’ve been keeping myself alive with my skill for a good five years now- that’s better than most can say.

They aren’t very good shears, though- I mean, they aren’t good swords. They aren’t made of the right kind of metal, exactly. I know them- I know their quirks; I can use them. But. There’s always a chance that they’ll break.

I really hope they don’t break. I mean… They’re good Germa arbeitsgerät, I just… I think I ask more of them than they were ever meant to give. I don’t know any blacksmiths who can work with German weapon-tool magic, though… ugh.

Oh. We’re starting.

I’ll worry about this later- maybe say something to Mab? Hm.

Later.

When I feel that horrible, skin-crawly feeling again, I know I’m going to lose something important this time. Like another bit of finger, or part of my tailfin, or my hair. Then, my skin-crawls transform into full on needle-picks, which mean’s it’s not going to be something important and small.

In the rush of the moment, I forgot about Megalo. She made no sound at all, at the end; just a wet, meaty thump, and then there was a piece of axe head sticking out of the roof of her mouth, and then- we fall. We hit the ground, and she’s so still, so horribly still, like- like-

Mommy-
Do you know what a chatelain is? It’s not just the female head of the household, or even the female head of the household servants; it’s a literal chain of keys, meant to be worn by the oldest woman of the house. When Mommy died, I got her chatelain.

It’s on a **dragon rope of gold**, a cameo in a **round frame** with the **Three Royal Prerogatives** enameled in gold and smaller charms of **my own** and **my mother’s scales** on the back. There are three chains on my chatelain; there’s a **watch** with a representation of the Realm on it, and a **key** that opens every Royal lock in the realm.

And there’s the **scissors**. They’re meant for embroidery, so they’re very sharp indeed, and made of the same steel as my naginata blade.

The chatelain is also all one needs for proof of Royalty; it’s better than any crown, any oath, any weapon- because it is all three.

‘I, Shirahoshi Takara Ryugu Merrow Neptune, do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to the people of the Realm which I have been given the duty of serving, their heirs and successors, according to the rule of good law and the needs of the moment.

In the name of The Three Who Are One; in the name of the Land, the Sea, the Sky; in the name of the Hero; in the name of the Prayer: I assert that I will employ those powers with which I have been blessed in the service of my people alone, rejecting all other usages. In times of peace, I will use them not; in times of war, I will use them not. Only in the moments of necessary defence will my powers, with which I am cursed, be used.

I will guard growth, where it may be guarded; I will ease pain, wherever it festers. I will fight to preserve what grows and lives well in its own way; and I will change no object or creature unless its growth and life, or that of the system of which it is part, are threatened.

To this end, in the practice of my Powers, I will put aside fear for courage; weakness for strength; ignorance for wisdom; stagnation for change; and death for life, when it is right to do so- until the end of all things.

So help me, Gods and Goddesses: I, Shirahoshi Takara Ryugu Merrow Neptune, do so swear.’

That’s the oath every princess of my House has sworn, upon the passing of the chatelain from mother to daughter. I swore it when I was six, and Mommy was- killed. Here and now, upon the death of my friend, Megalo- the last living piece of my mother’s will, as Megalo was trained to be her service dog… Here and now, I remember my oath, and so swear again.

I will have no more of this.

Abide your father, while I am gone- Shirahoshi, abide him!

**Mommy-**

**Promise!**

...I promise, mommy. I’ll abide.
Which oath to obey? The one you swore to your mother, as she lay dying, her hand going cold and pale in yours? Or the one you swore to the gods, to the people who are still living, and need you?

The mother you are nothing like, the mother you don’t remember- the mother whose name rests on laws that bring naught but suffering to your people, the people who are like you *how could she* - No.

I will abide no longer.

What else can I choose- but to live? I must live; my people need me, and so I must live.

I take some string from my obi, and bind my loose hair into pony tails, and one tail that goes in front of my face; and then, I take my naginata, and cut. The pirates watch, wide eyed, as I cut the other pony tails; as I take the scissors and snip away in front of my face. I have no mirror, but… I’m pretty sure it came out alright. *Pretty sure*.

I dust what hair I can off of myself, after putting away my scissors. I look down at the pirates, and then- fuck it.

“You can ride on the back of my neck, between my tits, or in my obi. Pick one.” I said to them.

After glancing at each other for a long, quiet conversation, Nami makes a Face at Zoro, and he sighs.

“We’ll ride on your neck, princess.” said Nami, her voice echoing strangely through the air bubble.

I nodded, and picked them up- carefully, so as not to pop their air bubble. I carefully set them in the collar of my kimono, and then lean forwards, and swim. I swim, and I swim, and I swim; it’s… strange, not having that weight on my head. But- not bad. Just… different.

And then we’re there. I take a piece of bubbly coral from my obi and put a bubble ring around myself, so I can keep going; we’re in the Sea Forest, but the place I need to go is- right- there, there it is.

I stop before I get there- I gently take the pirates from my collar, and set them on a wide flat stone, a natural bench left here for mourners. They blink up at me; and so does the *whale shark fishman* before he espies the cameo on the chatelain and gasps- but I don’t have time for that. I need to-absolve. My sin.

*I’m sorry, mommy.*
It’s a nice grave, I suppose. In the distance, I can hear Jinbe, one of my mother’s knights, telling Nami and Zoro who exactly this grave belongs to. It’s not her tomb- the Tombs and the Palace have a mystical connection, I’ve visited them quite a few times. But her grave… this is the place where her soul resides. A tomb’s a tomb- but a grave is not for the dead. It’s for us, who remain behind, living.

I’m sorry, Mommy. I’m sorry I can’t be who or what you asked me to be. When we meet again, across the Sea of Stars, you can yell at me all you’d like. Until that day… until then, I must be myself.

I swear, I don’t mean to keep falling asleep.

Pregnancy plays hell with your sleep cycle anyway- all this running around and worrying isn’t good for me, I think. I lean against Zoro, and fall into that resting doze you go into while you’re waiting- not quite sleep, but not quite awake, either.

My eyes are certainly closed, because they were starting to ache; but I’m not actually comfortable enough to sleep, and probably not tired enough either. Or at least, that’s what I justify it with.

And the darkness rises-

I open my eyes, and take in the tall red gates of Gobdark. Their bases sit in water so grim and dark it looks like an entirely different ocean; around us, spars of red coral slither and snikt into the air. The girls dart past me, going around the outside edge of the gate, where a worn path lies.

I go under the gate, as is my right.

Somewhere, in the city ahead, a certain bell begins to ring. The girls blink at each other, then at me- and I smile at them, gently.

“Girls, you have- oh, until dawn, I’d say, to get what you need done, done. Best hurry.”

“Yes, Mab!” they yelp, before leaping and swimming off into the darkness.

I take out my air supply, make sure my bubble coating is applied- it is- and then I walk on my own two feet into a Realm of Shadows.
My feet make no sound on the silty road; my passage leaves no trace. I am marked, of course- a Fairy, with brass on her hands and in her hair, wearing gold, with a spear? Wings like a dragonfly? The one I need to speak with- they know I’m here, and they know I have come. The bell ensures it.

Overhead, I hear an announcement from the Border Patrol; they’re warning everyone that dangerous individuals have left the Fishman District, but they don’t know what their purpose is. Beyond that, through the shadows of this island, I can hear- Hody Jones, I think, rallying his people, telling them that by the coming dawn they will be the new rulers of Fishman Island.

Oh dear.

By the crinkling of my nose, someone’s just managed to piss Ace off in the worst possible way. If it’s one thing about being siblings I can admit to being rather nice, it’s that I Know when any of my siblings loose their tempers. It’s… obvious. Nothing quite like the Pyre loosing his temper to make you sit up and pay attention; it happens so rarely, too...

Finally, I come to the place of my Fated Meeting. I take a single taper candle, and light it, and set it at the base of the queen of stars - the Fae’s version of the Three Who Are One, the Goddess, Hylia.

How’d that old hymn go…?

Ah, yes.

When my prayer is done, there is another in the holy clearing with me. We have a talk.

As I run through the halls of the palace, I shed layer after layer of kimono. Finally, I’m in my own battle gear, updated and refined- soft, loose in all the right places, adorned with feathers and cut just right to let my operculum and gill slits open and shut without catching on anything. My lasso is around my shoulders; my happuri and fist-or-foot-ribbons, the only things I really need, are tucked in my lasso.

Oh, right- I suppose it’s not actually talked about all that often. The reason Syreenes are so culturally different from the rest of the Fae comes down to one thing, really- we’re Seafolk, not Skyfolk. As in, when Ariel, the First Queen, conquered the Fae, she needed an army to do it.

That army was made of kappa and merrow- or gyojin and merjin, nowadays. Syreenes are… selkies, puca, water-birds… I’m not a great white shark fishwoman, because I’m not a fishwoman. I’m a Brown Goose Syreene, because I’m a fucking syreene.

And Syreenes? Syreenes have gills, and webbed feet, and feathers. I have webbed feet- just because my webbing is loose enough I can wear sandals doesn’t mean it isn’t there.

As I run, I smell- burning flesh? And soap, I think. Odd, but not important right now. I skid around a
corner and fly through a door, stopping myself on the railing where Usopp is taking cover. I duck down with him just in time for the water bullets to clatter into the wall overhead.

I glance over at Usopp, who huffs. I grin, and shrug my shoulders, catching my lasso in one hand and fishing out my battle gear with the other.

I wrap my hands and wrists, the better to punch with; I wrap my feet and ankles, the better to kick and stomp with. I put on my happuri, so everyone knows who I am- and also because it looks cool as hell. The cheek guards that go in are particularly choice, I think. Finally, it’s important to know this about me- some people are bullet proof because they eat a Devil Fruit, like Captain.

I’m bullet proof because I am bulletproof.

I grin at Usopp, and then I lunge over the balcony railing and charge towards Hody Jones.

For fair play, and fair pay! Wonderous!

After a quick dinner and a show of magic, I realized what I actually needed to go do. I needed to go find my old master’s little brother, Den- for my own peace of mind, really. But more than that, I needed to go find the ship. When we entered Island waters, our bubble coating was ruptured- it well may be that Sunny’s fine. And… he might not be.

I don’t know.

I do, however, have Shipwright Senses. Every member of our crew, once they found their specialization, has an uncanny ability to find, know, or seek that which captivates us. Sanji can always find something to eat- an ingredient, a restaurant… and if he stretches it, he can find utensils, too.

Zoro can always find the weaponsmith, the sword shop, a swordsman- and, on one occasion, Nami, which was a hell of a day.

I’m the crew Shipwright. My job is to care for the ship. Scariba aren’t Fae- but we were, at one point, and some things stick. It makes perfect sense to me that a person’s honor is their job- because a person is what they do, who they are. I’ve seen the horse cut into Chalk, or a drawing of it. I was immediately struck by the fact that someone who knew horses had made it- had dreamed it, had asked it be cut into the hills, just like that.

At this point… It’s not about what the ship looks like. To find what I’m looking for, I have to Know what the ship is.

I don’t know what I’m saying; I do know that I’m on a train, headed for Den’s Junkyard, which is in the Sea Forest, which is what buzzed to my eyes when I looked at the Island Map at the train station.

Technically speaking, the train station isn’t really a station at all, just a stop with a coin-operated ticket vending machine, a payphone with a privacy booth, and a narrow path to the biggest, most
famous bath house in the World. They say it’s run by a witch, of all things- but frankly, heh, that’s none of my business.

...Alright, fine, I admit it. When the kid with the satchel on their back and the harried look on their face showed up to the station and found they didn’t have enough money after making a call in the phone booth, I bought them a ticket. Not a scamp, but… they stand a bit like Nami does, if that makes sense. I’m not sure how to describe it- the way they hold their body, the careful rumpling of their… that’s not a uniform, although it looks a lot like one. It’s too big, for one; for another, that bath house is famous for having all it’s bath attendants wearing salmon-pink, not saffron-orange. They must have gotten their clothing from a nun.

Something’s nudging at me about this kid- have I seen them before?

Anyway, when the train comes, the ticket master almost doesn’t let them get on the train- but, well. I’ve mentioned I’m really big, and hilariously out of place nearly everywhere I go, right? They have their ticket- so do I.

And, as the ticket master was a very small merman, he didn’t push the issue farther than that. I escorted the kid to a seat, and took a seat near enough to intervene if I had to, but… well.

By the second or third glance from the kid, my curiosity got the better of me.

“Running away, kid?”

“…” they said, but nodded.

“Ah. Is there somewhere you’re running to, or…?”


I nodded.

“I’m going to ask a few questions- if that’s okay?”

“…” they nodded.

“Right. Are you keeping that one?”

“-! ...is it that obvious…?” they whispered, wide eyed and pale.

“No, I just live with a pregnant woman and her fiance, so. I know how a person holds themselves when they’re- anyway. Are you keeping that one?”

“...Yes. Yes, I am.”

“Okay. Do you have any skills?”

“-Yes. I can read, and write, and do mathemagic; I can clean very well, and cook passably. Um. I’m also an an advanced practitioner of machigainaku senshin-tekina ugoki, with a focus on the shield and sword. Ah… technically speaking, I suppose I am a druid, although I have very little actual
training in the subject...”

“Hm. Do you know what a secretary is?”

“...Um.”

“Right. So, a secretary or personal assistant is a person whose job is to support their manager. They manage projects, communications, and organization. They also deal with correspondence- meaning letters; they admit and process new members of the company; and they organize the calendar of official meetings and events.”

“Oh- Oh! The person who answers the phone, keeps the files, a-and things like that? I know what a secretary is, I just- all that can be done by one person?”

“Depending on the size of the company, sure. Here’s what I’m going to do for you- when my stop comes up, we’re both going to get out, and I’m going to introduce you to the younger brother of my master. Then, he’s going to give you the job of being his secretary.”

“...Really?”

“Yep.”

“And if it doesn’t work out like that? What then?”

“I’ll talk to my captain, and my crewmates, and we’ll figure something out.”

“...Oh.”

I grin at them, and they, slowly, smile back.

“Oh, yeah, before I forget- m’name’s Franky. Super nice to meet you.”

“...O-oh! Right, right- uh. My name is- um. Uh.”

“Take your time, I’m in no rush.”

“...thank you. I’m- Rei. My name is Rei. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

After that, we don’t talk at all; not in any meaningful way, I mean. Kid’s not telling me the truth, but that’s alright- enough rang true for me to go with it. They really do love graveyards; they aren’t pregnant, but I’m not sure how else to describe how their pudgy belly is moving…

I buy Rei two dinner bento from the trolley; she wolfs them down. I hand over my own, too; I only bought it so that Rei wouldn’t feel guilty about eating so much, but- honestly, pregnant people need food. They’re building brand new beings, and food is the building blocks. And, also, food is what keeps a person going- so.

I give her the food.

Hmm. Why am I- that face, I’ve seen it before.
We ride through a world that flickers and flashes under the light of stars and false-moon. I see Rei writing down a list in a notebook they pulled from her satchel, adding notations after consulting a pocket watch.

As the train goes forwards, I suddenly realize that Rei’s going to join the crew. She’s somehow exactly the kind of person Captain would like, and Luffy will want to help; and that’s that, I’m afraid. Might as well ask before we get to much further-

“Rei?”

“-Yes, Franky?”

“What’s your Dream?”

“...It’s a little morbid and weird, but… my Dream is to visit every state cemetery in the World.”

“...Okay, that’s different. What got you into that, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Well… I’ve always had a strange sense of enjoyment, every time I’m in a cemetery. I’ve always loved reading epitaphs, and learning new languages so I can read really old epitaphs too. I’ve got an entire collection of gravestone rubbings, and a book of photographs- some of which have ghosts- and… I don’t know, exactly, why I love it so much. The art, maybe? Might be the history.

“I don’t think of myself as predatory- I’m not out there for, um, for necromancy or any sort of autograph. When I do go out and look at a cemetery, I usually focus on the way it’s used, not necessarily who’s in it. I enjoy the strange, odd details that can be found in a cemetery- little things like who had taste, and who didn’t, and perhaps an inference as to why.

“I also like to collect items from gravesites- just things that can be purchased legitimately. Mostly marimos, actually, Fishman Island’s… thing is marimos in decorative bottles. I don’t approve of collecting graveyard sculpture, or dirt from the graves of famous people. If that sort of hobby catches fire in the imagination of the public, the damages to the graves is simply… horrific. That kind of thing isn’t ‘harmless’; and entire generations of people can lose their culture, their heritage, their national identity- I can’t stand it.

“Mostly, I take photographs- and, um, I guess since I got good at taking stills of tombstones, I kind of branched out a bit? Now, when I’m not, um, working, i-if I see something interesting, I take a pictograph of it. Sometimes, I’ll find a postcard or two from far off locations- because lots of cemeteries are, or were, tourist destinations. One of my books, in here,” and Kei thumped his bag, before continuing to speak, his eyes and face and whole being aflame with passion and yes, he’s going to be one of us as soon as Captain hears him talk about his Dream, “it’s all postcards from cemeteries around the World, and, well, I’ve been treating it like a sort of… a sort of bounty list of places I must go and see with my own eyes.

“Um. I- I had to sell my collection of calacas, b-but I still have pictures of all of them. I miss those little clowns and caricatures, but- I just. I didn’t have the space for them, anymore. I-I think… I think it’s the best hobby I could h-have found, considering everything that happened.”

“...?” I’m curious, but I don’t want to just ask. That’s- rude. Pirate Etiquette.

“-So my parents got deep into a gambling addiction, and sold everything they could sell to pay off
their losses. We lost our land first, then the house, then bits and pieces of everyday life until finally—finally, they got me to sign the past twenty years of my life away for much less than they ought of. The only debt I’ve ever had was the one I took out to have them buried in a proper ossuary, not in the potter’s fields out near Gobdark; they were my parents, after all.

“I guess… I don’t know. I was so young when they left me, just barely thirteen— and now, I’m thirty three, I suppose. I think I wanted something to be mine— really mine, that couldn’t be bought, or sold, or traded away. I suppose I picked cemeteries because no one else showed an interest, and… well, it made theft much less likely, I think. Over the years, I’ve spoken to all sorts of people— genealogists who want to figure out what the emblems on ancient graves were, writers trying to find distinct details for their stories, students writing essays— and other enthusiasts, like myself.”

I blink. I stare at her. She seems- flustered, now that her outpouring of love is over. Of all my crewmates, Robin’s going to like her the most.

I think I’ve just stumbled on a good deed. Huh.

Oh, yeah- and she’s fourteen if she’s a day. I swear to th’gods, I know her.

“So— as a fellow lover of things, though not necessarily graves— what’s the worst grave you’ve ever seen, and why?”

“Um- what do you make…? Nevermind- that’s easy to answer. My great grandfather, Lord Wyatt ‘Berry Stop’ Earp’s new grave is a goddamn mistake. Grandmother was born on the wrong side of the sheets, so we don’t have the name— but she always knew who her father had to be, considering the Lord’s well known and documented adoration of attractive women in maid uniforms, which my great grandmother was.

“The original stone on his site was a simple black slab with his name and the name of his wife, Josephine, along with the date and a rather tasteful prayer. His last living heirs decided that this was not good enough for him and replaced it with a glossy monstrosity— some poker hand, with a stupid epitaph that doesn’t mean anything at all, upon close inspection. And Josephine’s name isn’t on it, which is really why I hate it so much.”

“Ah. -Oh, I’m a shipwright.”

“Oh wow! Um… what’s the ugliest ship you’ve ever seen, then?”

“The Gran Tesoro.”

“...Whaaaat.”

“*It’s shaped like a lobster* .”

“Mmph!”

“There are no graceful lines on that woman; no curves, no angles. She’s pointy and disappointing in the front, and bulbous in the rear—”

“Mmm-mmmph-”
“-with these two spiraling antenna things, because whoever designed her took one look at a lobster and decided that was the Purest Form of Love.”

“Hnnngk-”

“-so, yeah; the Gran Tesoro is a slow, fat, ugly bucket, and I hate even thinking about her for too long because it’s my firm belief; that bucket scoops out people’s functioning brains and pours them into the aether. Fucking travesty.”

“Kakakakakakakahakakahakaakaka-! Thank you, kakakakaka, I’ve been- oh my goodness, oh my gods, it really does look just like a lobster, doesn’t it? Kakakakaka-”

“It really, really does.”

Nice kid. They’re lying about basically everything- they’re not even pregnant. I recognize their face, too, but… I’ll leave it be, for now. Kid’s not hurting anything, and...

We eventually get to the Junkyard, and then… well. Tom told me about his younger brother, Den. As it happens, Tom was the libertine, and Den was the conservative.

Den, when I finally meet him, is a muscular merman with long, curly hair reaching down below his shoulders. His nose is long and hooked, and his mustache droops into a pointed goatee. His smile, when he sees Rei, turns into a sneer- and that’s when I know that she won’t find work here, no matter what kind of introduction I make. Rei, being no fool, sees what I saw- and so, when I introduce her as a friend of mine, she doesn’t say a word to the contrary.

However, my instinct was right- Den does know where Sunny is, and he can fix him up with a bubble coating. I pay the man, and swallow my disappointment; not every man can be as my old man was.

And I think I recognize where I’ve seen Rei before- which is Interesting. Not a Scamp at all...

“Y’know, I really wouldn’t have known you to be Tom’s brother on first sight...”

“Haha, no, you wouldn’t. Momma was always out at the Toucan Club, and when her last husband left, well, she had Ol’ Tom, and then she had me. Dunno who my father is- and I can’t say as I care, really.”

“It’s a little odd to me that you both aren’t mermen, though.”

“Ah, that. Naw, we wouldn’t be- the tail gets squashed underfoot real easy, y’see, so- Momma must’a swung with a fishman to have Ol’ Tom, and a merman to have me. It don’t really matter much- but then again, it does.”

“It has a funny way of sneaking up on you, yeah.”

“Hah. -I suppose you’re one of them robot folks?”

“Thereabouts, yeah.”
“Right on. Miss Kokoro sent letters about you and that Iceburg kid, and she telegraphed me about what happened to Ol’ Tom at the end. I have to say- thinking back on it, and seein’ what’s become of you now, I dunno what my brother was thinking. A robot for a disciple, I declare-”

“Well. D’you have a problem with me being Automatic, or d’you have a problem with my faith? It’s always one of the two, in my experience.”

“It’s neither of those, really. I- honestly, really, I don’t hate your tribe at all. No, no- I don’t. I’m just a bit… bewildered, by your kind, I think.”

“Oh?”

“Your kind doesn’t die properly. It’s the damndest thing.

“Y’all constitute around one percentum of the entire totality of people in the World. Properly speaking, there ought to be hardly any record of your people, but there is. The Sandoran, the Orcish, and the Vikingr rose, filled the air and the land and the waters with sound and splendors; and then faded to memory and dreams and passed from this place. The Faerie and the Djinn followed, and made their vast noises, and are gone- changed into something else. Other people rose and held their torches high for a time, and watched those torches burn out- watched their great works come to nothing more than dust and broken pieces, like the grounds of my junkyard.

“Your Tribe saw them all, whupped them all, and is now what they always were- exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of your parts or peculiarities, no slowing or stalling of form- all people are mortal but yours, Franky. It’s not obvious, but it’s there, and it’s the root of so much hatred against your people…”

“...Okay, so. My people have been enslaved almost for the entirety of the historical record- not all of them, but enough that it’s a significant portion of our tradition, to pray and work for the breaking of bondage.”

“What.”

“...Den, who cleans this city? Who ensures it works- not on the political level, but the bare-bones mechanics of it all. Who keeps this place going?”

“...”

“They pick up the trash, and wash the streets- they cycle the waters, and trim away the dead growth. And you don’t see them, do you?”

“-those are people?”

“They are. I can admit to being a bit bewildered myself, of my people’s history. Reading it, it almost seems that every detractor of my people has sealed their ultimate doom in persecuting us. Hell, some people were even aware of this ‘fact’, that Automatons are indestructible, and yet- they couldn’t help themselves, as if compelled. Hated, or loved- my people have always been treated as different. We’re judged by different standards; revered, hated, admired, feared- more so than any other Tribe in the World.

“Honestly, I think it comes down to this- my people, the Automatons? Our original creator built us for a very specific purpose, or he built our mother for a purpose. And, in time, our First Mother built the rest of our mothers, and gave them her love- and made them swear to find their own purposes.

“The one thing our creators neglected was to give us a place to go when we die.”
“...Franky-”

“Automatons don’t have a heaven, Den. And we don’t have a hell. It’s still being debated if we have souls- we do, we must, we’re alive and do all the things every other Tribe in the World does, and they have souls- and yet. There’s never been an Automatic Ghost, Den. And we don’t have many burial practices to speak of. In many ways, my people’s culture has yet to be born- and, though a thing unborn can still grow, it’s nothing compared to after.”

“...”

“Heh. You seem to be confused, Den. I’ll explain it for you. When any member of the Tribes die- even if they don’t know they’re a member- their soul, which was marked down at birth by the ancient gods as ‘theirs’, is carried off to whichever keeping place was meant for that Tribe. Talvolk go to their Warrior’s Havens, to battle forever and again come the end of days; Lanfolk are returned to the earth, to cycle anew; Seafolk cross the Sea of Stars, or find Bubbling Dreams to drift in; Minfolk have their Verdant Paradise, with food and fighting and fucking and people to love and share it with; and the Fae are carried on the Wind itself, dancing in and out of all the other places and returning to their own Roof of the World.

“I’m not any of those Tribes; I’m an Automaton. There is no place waiting for me when I die. There is Nothing waiting for me when I die. I’m not going to see any of my lost ones again. That’s the only thing any Automaton can agree on, when it comes to death and what comes after- that person who died has gone, and will not return or be seen again.

“-No, never again.”

Shit. I’ve made a man cry.

“-Take me to my crew’s ship, please. Come along, Rei.”

“-y’s,” sniffles Rei.

“-sure, F-franky. Ah, it’s this way- near Queen Otohime’s grave. We’ll have to go the long way around; I can’t actually enter most of the local towns and villages, as I’m a wanted criminal in these parts.”

“...How in the hell did you manage that, Den?”

“Well. I dunno much for certain about what comes after death, and all- but I do know that the Gods made women in response to the pure stupidity and cruelty of men.”

“Preach it, bro.”

“Of my five closest brushes with Death proper, four of them have been because of a woman, or the love of a woman-”

“-Marlie, what have you done.”
“Isn’t it obvious, Coeurl? I loved her- I always loved her. And she loved you.”

“...Still?”

“OF COURSE ‘STILL’ YOU BLITHERING- no. No, no. I will not be silent now, Coeur; I will not still my furious tongue. Not now.

“That look, on your face- there, that one. I’ve seen it for ten fucking years, on face after face. You all despise me, as if I’m the only Honorless Dog the Old Queen made her pet- bah. I suppose you know what Energy Steroids are?”

“Of course, but what-”

“Your biddable daughter is her mother’s child, through and through. Oh yes, Queen Otohime preached of- of peace, and equality, of mercy and forgiveness- but her mercy was nothing of the kind. Tch, the Queen was obsessed with Energy Steroids. She loved their ability to give even the weakest of men and women a fighting chance against foes much stronger than them; and that damned Neptunian love of aging… She loved watching people age to death in an instant, did you know that?

“Most of her old guards are all gone now- you made sure of that- but I was there, and I remember. She loved to watch people wither- the way their skin wrinkled, thinned, sagged off their bones. She withered those who wouldn’t accept her mercy; she withered Lords and Ladies she didn’t like; she withered servants that disobeyed her; she withered anyone who was against her, because what can withered old ones do in the face of her vitality, her accursed youth, her beauty- and so, because I loved her still, after all I had seen, I devised a plan to save her; or her memory.

“It can never come to light, what she did, Coeur. Her work, her reforms- they’re too important to the Realm. That’s why Hody Jones ever got involved- we needed a scrapefish, you see.”

“...Someone who’d take the fall. And I suppose, my honored Wife’s reforms refer to the ones that tax the very lifeblood from the merjin, making it all but impossible for them to rise above the ancient stigma that has hobbled our Realm?”

“Obviously! And our Realm was never more productive than when those- those- fish - knew their place! ...Hody Jones took the contents of the Tamatebako; I got the queen in place, and then- well, I’m sure you remember. Half the country was against her, Coeur- and she was so paranoid. You laughed it off, but I knew- if it came down to it, she’d wither every person in this castle, you, your sons, your children- everyone- before she’d let herself be dethroned as Queen.

“The day of reckoning came at last- and though Hody Jones killed Queen Otohime, it was on my order that he did so, and my order again that had her not survive.”

“I’m going to kill you for this, Marlintint.”

“You can try, Coeur. By this time, however, your precious treasure is already being slaughtered by Vander Decken.”

“He’s your man as well?”

“Even a blunt instrument has it’s uses.”

“And how, exactly, did you expect to get out of this room alive, Marlie?”

“I didn’t. My plan doesn’t need me alive to continue- and killing me won’t make it stop.”
“You are a traitor, you realize?”

“I do.”

“Good. However, in light of recent revelations- I don’t think Boneshard Reef is your fate. No. A slit throat, as my wife contracted that fateful day; and our kennels are full of dogsharks who are always pleased with fresh meat. -Goodbye, Marlie.”

“...Fuck you, Coeurl. I hope your dogs choke on me.”

I can feel my horror and outrage rising, but swallow it down again- now is not the time to vomit, Robin. Over the comms, I can hear Bryony panting from her run, and the rustle of her limb wraps; the clatter of water bullets on stone. Beyond that, I can just make out Hody Jones and Vander Decken discussing their next move.

It’s garbled, but I get the gist- Jones and Decken were surprised that their surprise attacks didn’t do as much damage as they thought, and that the resistance shown to their attacks has been so effective.

No one knows where Shirahoshi is excepting perhaps Nami and Zoro- neither of whom can be contacted, as something about their location is interfering with the snail’s telepathy. Decken doesn’t have her- but he does still have the power to find her.

As Desterous Marlintin’s life’s blood splatters across the floor, I hear Decken declare that if Shirahoshi is with someone else when he finds her, she’s better off dying in a sea of her own blood. I can hear Hody Jones chuckle at his- comrades- cruel declaration, and then I hear him shout out another attack- something something Bullets, and another wave of water crackles out.

“Damn that man- he only wanted the advisory position for the power and intelligence afforded it! No true love of the Realm- it doesn’t matter what tribe of people hold’s power... God’s blood, a person’s worth is not determined by the content of their body- it’s determined by the content of their character!” said the Minister to the Left, Lord Sinister.

Desterous’ blood is bubbling at the carpet- eating away at it. Shit, he poisoned himself before- and then Ace intervenes, and in a spectacular show of heat and fire, sanitizes the corpse and the blood. Nothing, not even vapors, escapes him.

As Lord Sinister continues to curse the blackened soul of Marlintin Desterous, I notice on the body’s arm- on his right arm, I do believe- there is a tattoo. It’s... familiar. I’ve seen it before, in our Logbook, near the very beginning- not the one Nami writes, but the one Zoro writes. The shape of things begins to become clear.

I find my stomach is full of acidic rage, not horror at all- or rather, the horror is turning to rage, churning all the while.
When I see the Tattoo on Hody’s arm, I become determined. My leap draws the rain-hurtling bullets of water smack and splatter of my body, but they hurt about as much as a hard rain does. Certainly, I feel it but Hody’s so-called Mizu Dangan is really more of a… Hageshi Ame.

I kick off the air, and crash through the wave of bullets he sends at me like a gannet through the sea-and then, I slam a kick down to where he stood. He’s moved, sideways, towards the wall.

Hody Jones just smirks, and then his arm strikes out and digs into the wall. There’s a horrible grinding sound, and then he pulls his arm back- and the water begins to flood into the room.

I narrow my eyes.

He really has no idea what he’s dealing with.

Ohgodsohgodsohgodsohgodsohgod- wait, those are arrows. I can handle arrows-

**Starlight Breaker!**

My arrows arc through the air and strike down every water arrow Hody Jones threw my way-incidentally, I also ended up protecting all the guardsmen who’d crowded around, trying to get a view of the battlefield. The roar of the water is almost deafening.

“**USOPP! GET THEM OUT OF HERE- BACK TO THE FALBACK POINT, GO!”**

“**BRYONY- WHAT ABOUT.”**

“**I’M STRONGER THAN I LOOK, USOPP. GET THEM OUT OF HERE- THIS ISN’T THE KIND OF BATTLEFIELD YOU OR THEY SHOULD BE CAUGHT IN.”**

“**I’LL SEE YOU THERE, MY FRIEND.”**

“**AYE.”**

I take out a Pop Green, a special one- and then, as Hody Jones’ crew of morganeers comes boiling up the stairs, I prepare throw it down. Behind me, the guardsmen have already retreated, back into the hallway- I need to time this just right. I carefully toss the Pop Green down onto the balcony, making extra sure that my feet are on the other side of the lintel, before I turn, and run.

I shove and shout, and the guards turn and run too- but not before I hear a Green Nightmare Thorn sprout behind me, and the dying screams of men impaled on it’s thirsty claws and slavering leaves.
Good riddance to worthless trash.

Kick some ass, Bryony Lovelace.

I have gills. I hardly ever have to use them, but I have them. As the entire room fills with water, I can feel them fluttering under their armored plates of bone. My vision blackens to near darkness for a moment, and then my gaze brightens again, and settles to what I suppose must be normal, under the water- or it would, if they were open. I hate getting salt water in my eyes- it always stings, and then when I blink I can’t quite make myself open them again.

I close my eyes anyway.

I can feel myself starting to grin in that Monkey way. I don’t use the name, you see- but I am related to Captain by blood. Technically speaking, I’m his aunt. I’ve actually got a very similar appetite to Luffy, I just eat more balanced meals; and when it comes down to it, I can throwdown with the best of them.

Hell, I can even feel the Fae Marks starting to draw themselves across my face.

When Hody Jones punches me, I’m surprised more by the fact that it stings at all, than that he punched me. Ow- huh. He split the skin. I’m impressed.

I grin, and snarl my gleeful anticipation up at him. He hits me again, again again- rocking my face left and right, until tiny trickles of blood start to smear over my face, drip onto my chest, float out into the water around us both. I let him, to get a gauge of his strength. Fuck it.

I open my eyes, and grin up at my enemy, blood swirling away through my teeth. He snarls down at me.

And then I punch him in the gut.

Here’s the thing- the guys on the crew? They’re kinda… pussies. They’re great for working out technical details, don’t get me wrong- but actual practice in the kind of knockdown, drag out, hair and nails and fangs and blood in your eyes fighting that I’m actually good at?

Yeah, no.

Sanji taught me how to put bone breaking force behind my kicks; Franky taught me how to punch; Luffy taught me how to brawl.

Mab taught me how to punch a man in the throat with absolutely no remorse.

My actual style of fighting isn’t really kickboxing, it’s mixed martial arts with a heavy focus on Muay Thai, which is native to Goa Kingdom. That’s what Luffy’s actually using, when he fights, y’see- ah, but just like karate and wushu kung fu, there are a thousand and one different styles of Muay Thai. Mine’s the ancient traditional style, meaning it’s meant for nearly bare knuckle boxing
and dark alleys- but there are others, for sure.

In Muay Thai, the hands are usually held open and palms forward. There are a few different reasons for this. As most who really study martial arts know, the limbs need to be loose and relaxed when striking; otherwise, you lose speed. Further, the punching and kicking is just what the style is known around the World for- in reality, there’s a lot of grappling in Muay Thai, which is what I’m really and truly gifted at. The best way to grab and grapple an opponent is to have open hands already waiting for counter attacks; thus, my stance.

I only form a fist about a half second before I hit- and even then, I’m not so sure a closed fist is the best way for my style.

Oh, good, he’s stopped vomiting.

“I’ll tell you something here and now, Hody Jones- if you come at me with anything less than your full strength, you will fail, and I will kill you.”

The snail I left under a sconce by the nightmarish strangle of green thorns listens intently, eyes wide.

“Who the hell are you, girl?”

“Bryony Lovelace-”

“-The First Lady of Song?!?! ”

“...you’ve heard of me?”

“Hell’s bells, woman, you’re a goddamn legend! The most beautiful voice in six generations!”

“Ah, thank you- really, that’s very kind of you to say.”

“...If you survive this, would you mind terribly giving me an autograph for my collection? I have nearly everything you’ve ever recorded, and quite a lot of your appearances in print-”

“-Oh my! Um- tell you what. If you manage to live through this, I’ll give you one of my original mixtapes- from before the record deal, even.”

“Signed?”

“Ye-es, I suppose I’ll even sign it.”

Honestly, my fans are fuckin’ weird as shit. And, as Hody Jones grins at his good fortune, he pops some kind of pill into his mouth and punches me across the room.

I embed into the stone wall.

Thank the gods, I thought he’d never take me seriously. Of course, he’s missed the whole point of
the exchange entirely, but it’d be cruel to tear those scales over his eyes away now...

Kicks are effective in that they create distance, and much more force can be put into your leg than in, say, your arm or your head.

I kick myself free of the wall, and roll out of the way of Jones’ follow up punch. I slam a kick at the side of his knee, but it’s no good, he dodged and crushed another fist through the stone which I ducked and then I got one two three stone cutters into his back, right over a kidney.

Out in the desert, there aren’t many trees that need to be chopped down; or even should be chopped down. But no one cares about the rocks, or the ocean waves. Tree Cutter thus became Stone Cutter, and Wave Cutter too.

I dance back away from his whirling slash of arms and snarling invective, and then dance again as sharpened lances of spinning water strike where I stood not a moment ago.

I need to take out his mobility- target the big muscles of his legs, his shoulders, his gut. If I can break a few ribs, even- ah, I thought so. My kicks are strong enough to cleanly cut stone, much less bruise a body; his shirt’s falling away in tatters where I kicked him, and his skin is turning red-purple and bruised.

We circle each other; me, grinning. Him, snarling- and then we move in towards each other again. No openings near his ribs for a kick, but I can maybe sneak a jab in- he grabs my arm and pops one in my face but I stomp his toes flat and he lets me go, swearing foully. I feint left then swing with the right, putting the full force of one of my Gembreakers into his liver. I feel something go pop under my knuckles, and then I’m spastically jerking away from a series of deceptively delicate jabs. I can see the knife-sharp edging around the flats of his fists- I don’t want any part of that.

He’s starting to walk with a limp- not a bad one, not yet, but I strained something in his foot.

I think the real difference between Luffy and me- because we use the same style of fighting, really- is the difference between being a brawling sort of boxer with some kicks thrown in… and using Muay Thai in a brawling style.

In Muay Thai, punches are really for setting up kicks and knees- maybe even an elbow. There is a style called Muay Maat, which uses punches for knockouts, but- I’m just a bit too strong for that. If I punch someone to knock them out, odds to evens I’m going to break their head open or snap their neck.

Luffy grew up watching kickboxing matches; I grew up watching Muay Thai. In regulated matches, with like, scores and shit- Muay Thai relies on kicks because they’re weighted the heaviest for scores. I like using kicks because my legs are naturally stronger than my arms, and I can be much nastier with them. Luffy also doesn’t really clinch- but me? Oh sweetheart, if you ain’t clinching, you ain’t doin’ Muay Thai.

Clinching is a vital part of Muay Thai- so. Time to step it up.

When Jones comes in to punch me, I clinch his hand and hook my ankle around the back of his, sweeping him to the floor. Follow up with a stomp that I can feel cracking something- and then he sweeps me off my feet and we’re on the floor now. Thank the gods I know more than just Muai
Thai.

My first elbow is just a testing sort of jab, aimed for the throat of course- but then he rolls and I’m underneath him, he’s trying to smash my head into the ground- no. I refuse. I squirm my arm out from underneath myself, and when he yanks me up again I twist in his hand, my hair loose and slippery between his clawed fingers and I lock my arm around his like a python and then I’m slamming knees into his liver again again again again until blood and mucus starts to dribble from his lips.

I brace one arm on the ground and one-two kick him off of me, letting go at just the right second to send him flying, a bruise shaped like my foot blooming under the shredding remains of his shirt, right over his sternum. Silt and chunks of stone drift down- I guess we’re kicking the ground pretty hard? Not my problem, really.

“King Neptune, it would be best to evacuate the palace entirely.”

“Miss Robin, what you are suggesting is a bit-”

We all duck and flinch as another juddering crash shakes the palace to its foundations.

“I was there when Bryony trained, these past two years. Sir, this, right now, is only the surface of her skill. We need to-”

A window shatters outwards, and a shuddery kind of groaning creak echoes through the palace. It’s exactly the kind of sound you don’t want to hear inside a building.

“Sire, it’s just a building; we have copies of everything important, even the small, everyday things. Let it go.”

“Aoxtl, this is where- this was Otohime’s home!”

“Coeurl, Otohime is dead. Let it go!”

“...Aye. Get everyone out- Burst Bubble Protocols. We rendezvous at the Gyoncorde Townhouse; have my sons informed, and no matter what happens to the palace, someone will need to remain behind to inform Shirahoshi-”

“I’ll handle it, sire. -Coeurl, you’re still our King, for as long as you live. You need to go .”

“...Aye, Lord Sinister. Miss Robin, would you accompany me to our next location?”

“-I’d be delighted. Usopp-!”
"I heard the whole thing. I’ll get our other horses, and if you tell Mab—"

"-I heard everything, all of our shit’s back on Sunny already-"

"-Right. Then I’m getting the horses. Go, Robin."

"Right. Lead the way, sir."

"Right- Edward, are you coming?"

"A’course I am, Coeurl. Haruta, tell Izo to scramble his position- we need a cloak for our dagger, aye?"

"Aye, Captain!"

"Ace, go with Miss Robin and the King."

"Aye, Captain."

I stumble just a bit under the weight of the snail rig as the palace shudders again, and Ace pulls me up by my bad arm- quite above and away from the burn, but still, it twinges. Finally, we both barrel after King Neptune, who is opening a hidden doorway and patiently waiting for us to join him.

I glance back and see Lord Aoxtl Sinister quickly and calmly instructing various officers of the Kingsguard in what I assume are emergency evacuation protocols. And that’s the last time I would ever see that man alive; I didn’t know it then, but… well. Some people can give very good advice, and not follow it at all themselves.

We run down a rapidly narrowing passage, following the King’s massive tail- before finally, we come to a doorway, leading to the outside. Ace and I are bundled onto a sledge, right next to the king; and then the entire sledge darts away from the palace, pulled by some of the largest and most muscular eels I’ve ever seen.

I feel I must mention, at this point, that the Palace is out and out swaying, like it had too many shots at the bar and is trying to walk back to it’s place but you know it’s about to fall down into the gutter and sleep it off until morning-

The king is… chortling?

"Oh, this takes me back."

A rumbling of ‘gurararara-!’ echoes through the air, and I see the palace vibrate itself back into place. -O-o-oh my god. Oh my god what the hell.

"Ah, he’s gotten much better at that- it used to be that Edward would make any woman in a five to five hundred kilometer radius orgasm very strongly-"

"-oh my gods-"
“Ah, never mind. Good Old Edward; he’s still got all his old tricks, jamon! Gwahahahahahaha-!”

And, as we ride away from a palace that is being punched apart and vibrated back together, I firmly cross my legs and pray that Bryony finishes her fight soon. I’m not sure I can take much more of- nnnnngh! *Holy fucking shit!*

“*Oh my gods!*”

“Oh my gooooods; Pops, *why* are you *like* this-”

“Gwahahahahahahahahaha-!”

---

I *fling myself out of the way of another punch*, and realize what I have to do. I have to take this outside of the palace, otherwise when I really open up the *Throttle*, I’ll break everything; potentially the entire bubble around Fishman Island, which would be… bad. I’m strong enough to entirely reshape the floodplain of a stone and rock salt-flat desert; I’d rather not find out what happens when someone as strong as me lets loose in a heavily populated area.

This time, when Jones punches through the wall, I lunge out through the opening and bound through the rubble of the Hard Shell Tower. A plume of silt rises from where Jones’ landed, and I twist around to face it.

His snarling face breaks through like a dolphin cresting a wave.

It’s like this. Luffy has *Gears*. *First, Second, Third, Fourth- Fifth*, if it comes down to it.

I do not. I have *Throttle*, and *Full Throttle*.

*Dance of Time* is a *Throttle* move- I didn’t realize it then, but I was too exhausted to fight in the War of the Best, even if I had wanted to- and at that time, I didn’t. I’ve never had to use a *Full Throttle* move in a fight, mostly because most of my actual fighting happens on my snail rig.

Then again- desperate times, and all.

I jam my fist into his upper arm, and dig the claws of my fingers into the meat of his shoulder. I start kicking with the full length of my leg, dewclaw sharp and black and stabbing into him, the smell of blood thick and hot in the water- and then I’m being dragged through the rubble and slapped against every boulder and crumbled bit of load bearing ephemera.

It’s as he’s punching deep on my ribs that my temper finally snaps, and I can let go. Finally, I can let go- we’re already somewhere destroyed.

Time to wreck some shit.
“Throttle: Pinch Clinch Breaker!” is what I bellow into the cold water.

And then I break his leg- or I try to. Unfortunately, he squirms out of my punishing grip before I can snap his leg bones- I did manage to dislocate his kneecap, though. It was even the same leg as the foot I stomped, making him just a little bit more lame. Sadly, it’s not the same side as the kidney kick, but we can’t always be perfect-

“Uchimizu!” is what he shouts as he throws a bullet of water at me, his other hand darting up and putting- more pills? Into his mouth. Huh.

Well. It looks like a bullet- it acts like a bullet. I could catch and return cannon balls without any training at all; catching his bullet is a simple matter. I can tell immediately that the force he put into his bullet is going to make something on my body break if I don’t alter it- I roll the ball of water between my two hands, and carefully twist even more force and spin inside of it. Time to clear some space. I-

Shit-

Duck, gotta- my hands are full, so- stomp his lamed foot again, this time feeling his bones snap and crackle under my heel. He howls with rage, and his teeth dig deep into my shoulder; he can’t break the skin though, even with his Fishman Karate. Just what I wanted- because, see, I swear to the gods, I’m not a fishwoman. I mean it, I’m not. I’m as Syreene as you can get. But if I had a mother, she’d have been a blue shark fishwoman.

And I’m much more flexible than Hody Jones could ever be.

I twist under the bite and put a **Full Throttle Front Teep** into his bruised liver; he squeals, but he doesn’t let go, so I do it again. And again; and then, I shift my weight and **Full Throttle Rear Teep** into his liver- that one, I feel runnels of blood start oozing from his mouth, his nose, snot and tears staining my shoulder and neck-

**FULL THROTTLE REAR TEEP-!**

And this time, I tear his teeth out at the root as I kick his liver into his spine.

I have momentum; don’t lose it now, Bry.

I walk forwards and roll the **Uzumaki** between my fingers, then my claws, and then as I duck a wild haymaker into my talons and my toes. Time to wash some of the salt and vinegar out of this boyo-

**Dance of Storms!**

**FULL THROTTLE UZUMAKI TE TRONG!**
My foot jams into the left side of his face.

The World howls, and I do not.

I don’t swing; and I don’t howl; and I don’t let my enemies live, if I can help it.

Eventually, the sound deigns to change from some cosmic force of rushing waters, to merely the loudest thing I’ve ever heard, to a silence so deafening I almost wonder if I’ve managed to burst my eardrums- and then that silence too fades away. I am stood in a blasted scape of stones and dust, flattened like only truly violent weather formations can manage. A great sweeping pattern of spiralling ripples is dug into the ground, with me at its originating central point. In the far distance, I can see the wall of the palace split in two; thick contrails of dust whirl in cruel spirals, tangled noodles of wind only just beginning to die away.

Hody Jones, my enemy, is well more than three meters away from me.

The left side of his jaw has been set upon by the great forces released by my kick. He rests the whole of his weight on one bended knee- no, on what’s left of his left leg; the other is raised high, his foot braced and stuttering on the cool white dust and stone. His face is a ruin, a curling borehole dug into the glistening redness of where his left eye used to be, curving strands of flesh lifted clean away; the ivory pinkness of his teeth and gums open to the air. I can see the bone of his right arm, gone past the elbow and only the thicker flesh of his shoulder remaining, shredded and torn in deep, ragged, oblique angles.

His face is crushed into a howling anguish of pain, his working right hand pressed into the remains of his lips; I can see his tongue squirming around, passing something down his throat. I can see the remaining muscles of his throat working, the layers of torn skin and fat and muscle clenching and twitching and- I can see his right hand’s fingers digging into the unbroken flesh, trying to keep some anchor to the world through the pain of having half his body torn apart like that. I can see the white-pink-yellow of his skull, the cut through his shoulder, the layers of skin and sinew and fat and muscle and bone my kick tore through like paper.

I can feel my feet, resting on the smooth, leveled ground. I can feel my lasso, the weight of it’s golden Love heavy on my hips- a distraction to my enemy in all the right ways. Behind me, I can hear the palace let out a tortured scream, before something breaks and falls, a resounding crash of stone on stone following, before all is silent again. Beyond the crumbling wall of the palace- it’s almost completely shattered, only a few posts are still standing, and even those are falling now- I can see a ship like a great white whale in a soap-like bubble in the water, swimming by. I can see a small sleigh, being pulled by frankly enormous eels. I can just barely see a pair of horses, one of which has a rider with a bow on it’s back, the smallest of all the circling groups.

I drop my eyes back to Hody Jones.

He’s shoved off his only remaining leg, and is lunging through the water to try and gain a pyrrhic victory over me.

Points for effort; demerits for sense.

The movement of all dance comes from the feet. Keeping fluidity and grace in your body requires a certain looseness in your torso; your hands have to be like this, your arms like so, your legs like that - and you must never, ever, show the strain of it all in your face. The power of my dancing comes from the earth- from beneath the green and the dirt and the stones, to the very burning heart of the
World. This was all a star, once, I think- and then it cooled, but it did not die. No, such things take more than just uncounted ages to die.

**My movement comes from beneath my feet.**

It rises through my legs, sets my hips to shaking and my arms to snaking- and then I’ve pushed my Shuto Uchi through the repeatedly bruised and tormented skin over his liver, then through the pulped and shredded remains of his liver, and then through his guts, up into his ribcage. My claws tear through the soft feathery velvet meat of his lungs and gills.

My palm touches the side of his heart; I can see in his eye an ocean of pure resigned terror. No man is truly ready to die, after all.

My claws slice through the skin-sack holding his heart in place inside his chest; they cut the tubes and strings and sinews holding the pump in place, connecting to it- all that keeps his blood in circulation, severed. I close my finger-claws and grip his slippery, fluttering heart, warm and hard in my hand.

**“Dance of the Heartbreaker.”**

I pull my handful from his chest, and push him aside with my other hand. My feet move in one, two, three-half-and four steps, and my hand crushes the meat to pulp and chunks. My hips shimmy and twist; my body curves in the water. A man won’t get far without his heart; and he’ll get nowhere at all without his liver.

Hody Jones has just enough left in him to twist, and throw some last ditch punch at me, a river of life blood and his guts and chunks of viscera bursting out of the rend in his torso as he does so.

“-murasame!” he rasps, before falling. That doesn’t stop his Will, or the malice of his technique; but it’s too little, too late, and he’s far too weak to ever consider defeating me like that. My hips shake and spin- my hands weave here, then there, then here again, striking shark-shaped bullets into mere gushes of water, and not strong gushes either.

My feet don’t move at all.

The fight’s over; but he’s not quite dead yet. I glide over to him, and flip him on his back. Ain’t right to let anyone die without being able to see the Dreamer’s Bubble, or the Sea of Stars. Not even pieces of shit like him. Or at least- I, personally, am better than that.

Hody Jones’ one remaining eye focuses on me, and a crackle of laughter bursts from broken teeth and a blood-caked throat.

“I meant to have your autograph, you know.”

“Mister Jones, I don’t give autographs.”

“I know, Miss Lovelace. I know. -Tonight, I meant to pay back the man who ruined my life… our
lives. See how well I’ve done.”

“...by killing everyone in the palace, aye?”

“Well. That was just a bonus, really. -Think of it, girlie. To never again walk free through your homeland with a smile on your face and your lover’s hand in your own; to never again know the touch of your lover, to never see their smile or their fury; to know that you would never be free unless you managed to kill what are, in the end, just people? Oh yes, girlie; I’d kill for that!”

“...It seems to me the only thing you’ve left to do is die.”

“Hahahahaha- haaaghahagh- yes, I suppose so. I failed him, after all. I wish there had been another way for us to go. There wasn’t. I can only regret that it came to this; and pray, one day, to find my beloved Marlie somewhere across the Sea, someplace… w a r … a n d   f r e e …”

And so it was that Hody Jones died, much as he had lived: covered in blood, filled with regret, and longing to be free. And, as I would learn later, tragically loyal.

His crew followed their Captain- in life, and when I was done, in death, too.

I don’t remember what happened after that, not in great detail.

I came back to myself surrounded by rapidly decaying bodies, their flesh turning rotten before my eyes and melting into toxic slime. Bones disintegrated into ash; clumps of hair turned brittle and white before my very eyes. The bits and pieces on me cracked and crumbled into foul smelling ash and dust, and even that wasn’t long lasting- the rushing waters of currents still swirling from my earlier kick scoured my body clean.

Eventually, I was stood on a spiraling field of stone, painted black with the remains of the New Fishman Pirates. Their flag was the only thing remaining of that crew- and when I saw that no one living remained, I tore it down and left it forlorn in the dirt.

Hody Jones had disintegrated entirely; not even his clothing remained. His crew, slaughtered; his flag, dishonored; Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair! Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare the lone and level sands stretch far away.

I listen to the grounds of the Palace; there’s no one left alive except for me- and the Sunny’s dogs-oh, and my phone snail. Pearblossom, Bubbler, and Buttercream- I was wondering where they got off to. Buttercream’s massive form glides by, checking on me- before she turns, and swims away, away, away and is gone from my sight.

I calmly walk over to a reasonably comfortable looking rock, up a strangely gentle slope. A bit above the battlefield, washed clean of the gore of my bloodrage; an ammonite, split in twain. The remains of what happened here are ground into the earth; and nothing else but dust and a discarded flag, weapons driven into the dirt and shattered by my hand.

The stone is sort of… couch shaped. Or it is once I give it a few taps with my foot and sweep away the dust with a **Throttle Force** wave of my opened hand. I turn, and carefully sit on the couch, and when nothing protests overmuch, I recline back on it. The dogs come and find me there, and- after I sit up to let Bubbler shove herself underneath my back, and move one of ‘Blossom’s paws so her nails aren’t digging uncomfortably into my pussy- I relax.
I stare up at the fading darkness, the black turning pink and gold near the central pillar of Eve. It has come to this at last; I Bryony Lovelace stand alone to greet the dawn.

Er.

Metaphorically, I mean.

Gods, what a night. I hope my friends are all okay- I just need to- oh, Bubbler has my phone, the one I left under a wall sconce, good. I just need to- to rest my eyes, for a moment.

Just a moment, is all…

I wish I’d never had to remember what it’s like to be on a battlefield.

I remember the first time that I ever saw one of my friends lying dead in the field; I did spend four years at the Front of the War, after all.

During a major push during the War, my unit had been encircled and we were pinned in a very shallow trench, one of many. The enemy started shooting with canons, and those damned minny balls- ah, they were what bullets came from. A minny ball was the latest innovation in bullet technology during the War, and left very different wounds from the normal millet-shot. Minnys were heavier, faster, and went through flesh and bone like shit through a goose.

The only way to safety was to run over a large area without cover, while our gunners and riflemen laid down a screen of fire. We left that trench in twos and threes, and I was one of the very last to go.

When I jumped over the edge of the trench, I saw one of my friends laying face down in the mud; his skin was pale, and he wasn’t moving at all. Just a moment earlier, he’d been running towards safety, just like the rest of us. Then and there, he was face down in the dirt, a wet hole in his back like raspberry jam over clotted cream.

I had no time to feel anything or think about him and I didn’t stop running for a moment. I ran and I ran, until I was back amongst my fellows and hunching down into a much deeper trench. A few meters away, just barely an arm’s length from the trench was another friend- and it pains me now to say it, but I don’t remember his name, or his face. I only remember his hat- he wore top hats, said they were… they were somewhat ordinary, by being quite extraordinary. I never did understand what the hell he was talking about.

The hissing whizzing noise of bullets, the distant crackle of guns- like firecrackers- and the sudden pop of a minny just missing my ear; no, I don’t remember my friend’s name, or his face, or even the color of his hair. Just his top hats. We were caught there for hours, until our cavalry swept the enemy away and we could dig into our position. It was only later, well after that battle, that the true meaning of what I’d seen really sunk in.

I wasn’t going to see or speak to my friends anymore. I’d never see them again, not until I myself had died. It’s around then that I started wearing top hats myself.

Our next big battle was only two weeks later; that’s when I got separated from my unit and met the wakwak who taught me to play violin, before she killed herself. For a long time after that, I wasn’t the same man at all- the great grinding rage that had driven me to join the army was long smothered...
under mud and shit and rat bites; my youthful lightheartedness was gone as well, then. I aged fifty years in just under five hours, all told- and it would only be after the War entirely, out at Sea, that I would regain some of my old vigour.

The girls are fine, I suppose- they’re comporting themselves admirably. The first rush of battle saw a roiling of blood and guts and shit spray over the lovely cafe; merjin and gyojin throwing bullets of water in and out of the broken windows and from behind barricades.

Adelaide is acting very much like a heavy artillery unit; her webbed hands reach out and grip at the air, and then one of her open palms shoves forwards in a punch- and outside, I can hear as men and women die screaming, and I can see thick clouds of smoke and broken bodies flailing in the grip of her powerful Fishman Karate.

Beatrix, and her shearswords, are a deadly and brutal combination. She’s fast, and strong, and the control of her lane of battle is remarkable. Her hair is all but plastered to her head with the blood of her enemies, and her face is a smooth mask of chilling serenity. However, she’s working in a tag team with her sister, Cecelia.

Taffy is an opera clown; most of her actual battle skills, in regard to clowning, revolve around acrobatic skill and actual wushu.

Cecelia is an old fashioned Fightin’ Fool. I have never, ever seen anyone so young with so much technical skill- good lord, fifteen men in a single ladder and thirty more taken out by a bit less than eight custard pies. She’s a marvel.

Whoops- I misstepped, and one of my Hanauta Sancho: Yahazu Giri missed, and flew out into the air. I do hope nothing happens to any innocent in that direction; I’d feel simply terrible about it for ages.

I say, I say, I say.

The College of Clowns at Amazon Lily is one of a chain of such institutions, stretching up and down the Line. There’s the Guild of Fools, in Alabasta; Joculators Junction, on Jaya; the Guild of Minstrels, which is attached to the Gran Tesoro; the Gauntlet of Buffoons, which is attached to a circus based out of Sabaody; and the Mime’s Tower, which is somewhere in Skua. In Amazon Lily, at least, the College was located about half a mile upwind of the sewage treatment plant, and right next to the Iga School of Deportment Training.

Clown College AL stands on a site with gloomy and unnerving history; the entire campus has an aura of deep, endless suffering and misery. The sight was originally home to the Sisters of the Blood Drunk Moon, an order of religious contemplatives. Little remains in the way of facts about these women, other than the fact that they were wiped out in 547 in their entirety by a mysterious fire and a highly localized earthquake. Shortly after the dissolution fo the monastic order, the site and remains of the monastery were bought on the cheap by the College. They saved the most useful buildings-
such as the Chamber of Spikes and the Scorpion Track, and the nun’s cells- and they built up the rest according to archaic hilarity designs. Prior to it’s use by the nuns, some of the oldest records at Amazon Lily note that a building known only as the Plague House stood on the site, and before that, the Petit Ossuary.

All in all, an impeccable past history for a College pledged to bring it’s own unique brand of entertainment to the World, whether the World wants it or not.

The current Dean of the College is Dr. August. Although the reputation of the college is one of fun and games, there’s a lot of discipline involved in becoming an actual Clown. Happy people don’t really become clowns; and at Clown College, the fun is always somehow forced. In public performances, clowns hit each other with sticks or custards or other objects until the audience laughs; the real natural reaction for the audience is horror and unease. During emergencies such as a fire, the clowns continue their supposedly funny assaults on their colleagues, with the less-used props like buckets and stepladders.

Every clown has a ‘face’- the face full of Slap is the only Face any clown will admit to having. Each Fool, upon graduation to the title, will represent their face with a painted egg made to resemble their particular arrangement of make-up. These faces can be passed down through many generations, and the eggs are kept in the Cryptorium. Showing graduated fools an unpainted egg is bad luck, considering it represents someone without a face at all. Clowns in particular come from the Skuan tradition, and as with all Skuans, Makeup is a very important part of daily life. Fool’s makeup is referred to ‘slap’, and it’s common to see it being borrowed across generational lines. However, no fool would ever copy another fool’s makeup outright- that’s Face Stealing.

Clowning is the dark art of cutting men down without ever drawing blood. However, there always comes a point when drawing blood is the only option- thus, we get to battle clowning. It’s a formal martial art where the skills and tools of clowning are used, with a brutal precision, to incapacitate, wound, and even kill an opponent.

It takes the old standard ranking of student Fools as levels in a belt-like system, and the various styles of clowning are the actual styles. The appellation of ‘Fool’ is actually a misnomer in many cases; the repartee of a fool is really wisdom of the highest order. Of our entire crew, it’s myself, Brook, and Franky who actually give out the most sensible advice for the situation at hand. We’re also the silliest members of the crew.

In truth, the martial art practiced by only the hardiest Fools and Clowns is called, amongst my fellows, Slapstick. Anyone doubting its efficacy, or the skill required to use it, should reflect on this-clowning is, at bottom, a carefully modulated and choreographed process of insane violence and vicious insults, wherein (hopefully) nobody is actually injured in any way. Slapstick is clowning without moderation.

It came, as so much of the Clown heritage does, from the Wilds of Skua many Ages ago. In those days, traveling bands of wild Clowns would fight each other for the choice of performing venues. It’s not explicitly said, of course, but anyone travelling in the Wilds of Skua has more than just professional competition to contend with, such as predatory flora, swarms of flying eels, lurching revenants, and gargantuan foe-beasts. Even a group of people traveling through such environs must have some way of defending themselves.

Ages passed, and the original method of Clown Combat became a form of formal duelling among the apprentice and student clowns in the town of Slapp, where the scars of a sloshi fighter were worn with pride. This is also where the first clowning armament came into being- the stick. It was there, in that little town, that the venerable and most ancient form of clown combat came to be: slapstick,
which sees more use in battle than any other Clown Combat Art I know of.

It is in the records of Amazon Lily that the Clown College there has provided at least one full Ship of Fools that have campaigned- quite memorably- to the horror of the reigning Empress, her court, and her military commanders. However, as this was the only way an invading army could be routed, and indeed, was the only way an enemy army was routed…

I can’t say I’m shocked it worked, really. The Fool’s Errand was crewed with that years graduating class, a veritable ‘Who’s Dat’ of Clowns, Fools, Minstrels, Mimes, and Joculators. ‘Grandma’, ‘Marco Polo’, the Marx Brothers, Calamity Jane; and all of them well-versed in slapstick techniques. Captained by the legendary ‘Uncle Bootsie’, a seventh-nose practitioner and slapstick specialist, during their only campaign, the crew of the Fool’s Errand slew seventeen Germa mercenary boats in a single mêlée, armed only with a ladder, two buckets of wallpaper paste, a box of marbles, and five lemon-custard pies. It is said amongst the clowns that when this was first demonstrated on the field of combat, forty-one other mercenary boats were incapacitated by laughter and overpowered by the rest of the Amazonian fleet, who appreciated the joke only in that it allowed them to flank their enemy and offer them a stunning reversal.

Not everyone can get the joke.

As Gurry and I dance through the violent night, I am struck by the pure potential of our new crewmate- I think her name starts with a C? She’s killed fourteen men with nothing more than some string, a small handful of rubber bands, and a purple balloon. She’s also incapacitated several of the enemy riflemen with a large ladder, and their screams and moans of pain as they try to extract themselves from their wooden prison are swiftly silenced by no less than eight custard pies in the air at once. Well, no- those are flans, so she’s really flinging them, but my gods- eight in the air at once!

One of her flans was just knocked off course- ah, I see, Brook tripped and one of his strikes went wide. It’s funny- I’ve got a strange feeling about that wiggly pie-cake-custard on a plate. I mean… reading tea leaves and gazing deep into crystal balls is considered the most sophisticated, witchy form of divination. However, the only kind I can actually get anything out of is either very aggressive belomancy, usually with highly explosive arrows; by reading the shrapnel off of exploded fireworks (though grenades and smoke bombs work as well); or by slam dunking a jar of preserved root vegetables onto pavement.

Sanji does Not Allow foodstuff divination of any kind.

But that Flan! I can feel the whirling infinite suddenly fixing onto that flying bit of flat cake; a strange spoon-full of Fate being drizzled over the caramel top of that creamy goodness even as I gut a man with my sword. Adelaide’s Fishman Karate launches the plate of flan ever higher; a stray arrow gives it lateral spin; a dead woman’s decapitated head knocks into bottom of the plate forehead first, giving it direction.

A flailing mermaid’s cartwheeling gives the flan force- and then I have to focus on the battle. Somewhere, high, high above, I hear the unmistakable howling of a man getting hit full in the face with a Clown Combat Pie to the Face- a Slap in the Face, my gods.

A man with a pair of axes and four legs total slaps into an open space on the ground, chunks of Battle Pie dripping off his head. I can tell how she made her custard cake from here- it’s a caramel base made of brown sugar, transferred to a one-piece pan lined with- no, no lining. Ten egg yolks incorporated and half a cup of cool milk- I’m not close enough to smell what kind. Aha, Skuan Vanilla- only the best vanilla, and nearly three hundred proof at that. Evaporated milk; sweetened
condensed milk- ah, I see. She combined a flan and a cheesecake. Cheesecake flan; it’s probably delicious- I can even tell from the way it’s breaking up on Vander Decken 9’s furious face that she took it out of the oven while it was still ooey-gooey in the middle.

I suppose when it comes down to it, all Clowns and Fools have the psychopathic instinct to kill deep in their soul, and it doesn’t matter if they’re drawing blood or not. A humorist slays, even if they’re no good at all. We’re all descended from our ancient jocular ancestors; and in those days, as it is now- humor is serious business.

Brook and C the Clown come running out of the Cafe. Brook has Solid Soul drawn and brandished; C is following him with a baguette, held in a very respectable Slapstick grip. The stink of chemically altered blood is thick in the air- all the older members of the Karate-ka who fought here are dead or dying, and the smell of drugs in their blood is strong to my nose. As they die, parts of their body begin to wither with rapidly accelerated aging.

It stinks like the bottom layer of the jungle, but not- like… poisoned earth, it’s foul. How could they put that vile putrid poison into themselves-?

“-stay well clear, Cece Clown; a baguette is not enough of a weapon in this fight.”

“But it’s month old yeasteel, Mr. Brook!”

“No, Cece.”

And then Brook is lunging forwards. I have to say I agree with him; a baguette is the snake-iest of the breads, and a fresh piece of yeasteel can take down fifteen strong men in the proper hands, but… Cece is flagging visibly, the strain of her earlier pratfalls more than her narrow little body can handle. Even the additional strength of a month’s aging isn’t enough, in this case.

By the time Gurry and I are in position, Cece gasping her wind back behind Gurry’s protective stance and me with Kusanagi at the ready, Brook is falling in a chiming clatter of broken bones. Ah shit, Brook is all bones though- shit!

I draw blood from Decken’s left arm before his fist can break Brook’s skull.

“GURRY, CECE- GET BROOK OUT OF HERE. I’LL HANDLE THIS.”

“AYE!” shouts Gurry as Cece gathers Brook up in her arms- no you don’t -

I cut the first spear down out of the air. Kusanagi rings with joy in battle.

My older brother, Mihawk, once fought me to ‘see where I was along the path of the Swordfighter’. And then, when it was done, him with a new wound that would scar and me with a deep appreciation for my partnership with Kusanagi- he told me this. If I ever wanted the title of World’s Greatest, he’d lose it to me.
I told him that he’d have to keep the title, as I had no interest in such things- and neither did my sword.

He laughed, and then said- almost musingly- “You move the sword like it’s a ribbon, Taff. And your feet slither over the ground, you hardly step at all. It makes for a marvelous style- to witness and battle against. I’ve seen no other like it.”

“Thank you, Mihawk.”

What he meant was this.

Anyone can get a sword and swing it; however, achieving the true art of my particular style of swordfighting takes practice, precision, and an unconscious and reflexive understanding of rhythm. When I fight, I’m not just fighting for myself- I’m fighting for my crewmates, and further, the honor of my teacher, Zoro; thus, every time I draw my blade, I take up a heavy responsibility. I am up to the task, of course- but it would not do to understate the fact that there’s a task at all.

Similarly, anyone can put a tassel on a sword’s hilt and call it a Fae Blade, but that is not true. You have to understand; the tassel serves more than just one or two functions. It’s true, it acts as a lanyard and an extra bit of length to the blade, useful for certain strikes- the thrusts, I believe. Certainly, one could wrap it around their hand and then take up the blade, thus providing a way to keep blood from fouling their grip. And, of course, my green is my green, and no one else may wear it on our crew- but that’s just… window dressing, really.

There’s a fundamental feature of the tassel that Mab probably doesn’t realize simply because all the tassels for her spear are exactly the same- red horse hair in a plume, same same same every time. For swords, there are two kinds of tassel. There’s the prestige tassel, which is made of silk and expensive gemstones, or figures of exotic wood, or even marble. Some prestige tassels are suitable for slow Kata practice, while the very heavy versions are best for decoration only- for weddings, funerals, or transporting the sword without the wielder.

The wushu tassel is often made from a material called Ice Silk, which cold to the touch, shiny, smooth, soft, light, fluid, and ludicrously durable. Handmade wushu tassels are better than machine made, and they shouldn’t have any stones or weights on them- they’re built to be as light as possible to allow for the fastest movements.

If I’m just practicing my kata- drilling, really- I go at half or quarter my full speed, and work to perfect every single movement I make. During those times, I put a prestige tassel on my Kusanagi. Her balance point is a bit less than two centimeters off the guard, which supports me using her to slash, explosive thrusts, and enhances the power of impact. However, for kata drills I prefer a heavy tassel which puts the balance directly on the guard, or even behind it. Why? It creates the perfect environment for smooth, slow, controlled movements. When I’m working out new movements entirely, I put on the heaviest tassel I have; it puts the balance point in my actual hand, which gives me the most control over the sword, but the least actual ‘fighting power’.

I’m fighting Vander Decken with a wushu tassel. It’s faster, suited for explosive movements; and the way it moves in the air, or rather- the way I can make it move in the air is enough to distract Decken just enough for me to- dart forwards- and-

Cut-

Him-
I fling myself to the side of his first hand full of bearings, and then spin Kusanagi through the air to Cut their connection to Decken.

The sword is the weapon of a gentle person. Every style, even the most brutish, have specific artistry to them, and require ten year's worth of dedicated study to master. By that measurement, I have a long, long way to go- I’m two thirds of a third down the path of mastery, if that makes sense. Which is why I am so insistent on saying, and meaning, that I will never be the Greatest in the World.

I will never be the Greatest Swordswoman in the World. That is not my way. My way is more like dancing- my sword can strike anywhere I wish, but around point six meters is ideal. Within that distance between myself and my enemy, Kusanagi can move between one and a half and three and a half meters in any direction. Kusanagi is actually a bit wider than most jians, being so old; she’s three centimeters wide, from tang to tip.

My style began in Water 7, where Mab taught me to dance. The beat I follow is made of my heart, and my breath; one, two, three, four. The rhythm of a fight is like this- there’s my heart, and my breath, and my enemy’s heart and breath as well. When they clash, the rhythm is slow, and it is time to position myself as best I can. When they synchronize, my blade will meet flesh again.

The pace of the fight is the movement of us two; I use large, flowing movements during the slower parts, and sharp, quick movements that let my blade flutter and flap.

Ah, I see.

I don’t need ghosts to be haunted; I can wander my own home, wailing and crying and throwing things. Similarly, I don’t need to keep cutting his weapons out of the air; I need to take a leaf from Bryony’s tree.

I charge forwards. I let the flat side of the single-headed axe slam into the top of my head. I get close enough to smell him, he smells like- urgh, Swagger by the Spicy Soap Company isn’t a bad cologne, but no cologne should ever be used like body wash! As my vision starts to blur and spark because that was one hell of a hit, Kusanagi rises up- and then I put my all into it- and-

Cut-
Through-
Him-

I can hear his scream as I succumb to my concussion; the last thing I remember of that night was the sight of Vander Decken 9’s left arm flying off of his body in a fantastic spray of arterial blood.

Sente goes to us, fucker-

When my wielder falls, I twist in midair and rise again as a woman, full and flush with battle malice.
We be of one blood, her and I—thus, I will not be wielded in this lifetime by anyone other than Dracule Taffeta.

Our enemy is a fishman, stood upon four legs of uniform length. His right arm is still intact; but his left arm is severed a hand’s width above the elbow. He screams, and gurns, and bawls like a child—and then he gathers himself enough to bind his wound. Pity, that.

Our enemy is smart, for an idiot—he considers the battlefield, and what he has lost, and then he sneers. He takes a double headed axe engraved with a red rose of romance and, with one leg wrapped around it, flings it and himself into the air. The two whirl in a great circle, to the horrified disgust of the Freebird Postals; they glare and jeer at him as he hurtles away, far beyond my sight.

The final wave of enemies approach, but—ah! Cavalry! That stench—those clothes—I see; I know what Queen Mab has done. As the enemy force charges towards us, behind them comes a thronging crowd of furious Umbrae. I suppose in the modern parlance, they would be called goblins—either way, they are making the hammer to the Freebird’s anvil, and between them, the encroaching forces are crushed, utterly.

With the falling of the final foe, I lift my beloved Lady from the mucky dirt, and bear her away from perdition to that place where her wounds might be granted succor. Queen Mab, I see, stays behind and quietly, business-like, thrusts her spear down; here, then there, and thus again. Beneath her strikes, men and women moaning and crying from deathblows are silenced forever.

Queen Mab the Merciful, indeed.

My battle instinct has me up on my feet, all three swords drawn and Asura blurring my figure in three directions before I realize that I won’t actually be fighting this time.

When I stood to guard Nami, she woke up just enough to see what we’d be facing. Then, she settled herself more comfortably on the bench, and used her Weather Ball. A thick haze of cloud surrounded her and the bench, and stroked up and down my back with her loving affection. Saa, I’m so glad she’s here with me.

There’s no-one else I’d rather have at my back—not here, not now. Not with the Princess Shirahoshi still praying at her mother’s grave. Jinbe, who was sitting next to us on a different bench, more of a hill I’d say, has stood as well, and is standing next to me.

In front of us, an array of ugly ready to throw down.

Part of the reason I had such a time of it with Shirahoshi is that, at the very core, her manner of fighting is very much like Nami’s. Behind me, I can feel a thickening soup of mist and cloud growing into a towering storm-wall, thick and black and furious in a way I can only call ‘Maternal’. Every hair on my body prickles with tension.

“Jinbe. When Nami makes her move, go to the Princess.”

“Zoro- sssssSSSS! ...Ah; Nami’s a Weather Mage, isn’t she.”
“Yeah. Yeah, she is.”

“...Should I close my eyes?”

“Eeh. Brace them, at least.”

I can hear the roaring of the enemy pirates now. I puff my cheeks and empty my lungs; reach out deep into the World, and feel the energies Nami is weaving. I can feel moisture, the air going thick and hot and cold, too, as water that was just hovering, that laid sleeping in puddles, is being bade to rise and disperse into the air. I can feel the churning, rolling motion high above, of clouds moving around each other and dust and mist grinding over each other; the rising, unbearable tension in the atmosphere.

I can feel the sky darken, blacken, the stars above us winking out as thick, black clouds turn the World dark. All around us, plants and stones and animals and the people, too, are lit with contrails of light that flutter and spark across my sight.

It’s a strange experience, this Island at night—without starlight, without the soft whisper of waves, without even the soft rustle of a breeze… it feels like some strange, alien place, a place that almost no one is welcome. It’s as if we’ve all been transported backwards in time to a more ancient world; before the Merrow and the Kappa had conquered the darkness beneath the Sea and pierced the hide of the night with fire. Before Goblins and Gremlins poured lightning into jars and bade it serve them. Before Djinn and Fairies tamed the Winds and rode them as they will’d; before Orcs and Elves manicured and combed the forests, and ploughed their fields with iron.

Beheld in the glimmering lights of the World Under the Sea, the bench behind me felt like some ancient cairn I dare not disturb; my beloved Nami had become some ancient chthonic goddess woken from her slumber in a towering fury; the tall cliffs and hills made mighty and unknowable things, the encroaching pirates an army of wholly unnatural figures.

In front, leading the charge was a mounted spectre, a humanoid form adorned with markings so red and oozing as to be blood, freshly drawn from and onto his skin; red rings, shimmering blue and grey at the edge but burning in the center. Beneath him snarled a maw of some kind of fish, horrible and ugly and far to high up in the water to be native. Some kind of angler fish, maybe? Something.

From all around, from every cloud, there arose the sound of Nami’s battle cry.

I could not adequately describe that sound were I as trained in poetry as I am in swordsmanship. It was singular yet multiplied, an exclamation of a rage so deep and black as to be unmistakably-arisen from the very coldest, deepest, densest depths of hell. It was the pure distillation of every snarl, growl, roar—every angry sound one could ever hear, through all the halls of history. It was the rush of fire in the blood at an insult, and the choking back of vile words, and the cranking churn of acid in the belly; the winding tension of every limb held back from striking; and the sick, ugly thrill of knowing that should you move you could not be stopped; it was the pure, unrelenting agony of a storm, unbroken. It was Nami—green in soul, but red in tooth and claw.

Even now, I shudder at the barest echo of that sound.

It’s only Jinbe and my attentiveness to the moment that allows us to brace ourselves in time.
“Storm Tempo: Cloud Flash Chain.”

Funny thing about having lethal amounts of electricity coursing through one’s body with intent.

It overcomes whatever haki you have almost immediately, because unless you’re made out of something non-reactive- like wood, or rubber- you’re conductive. Then, you aren’t blasted away like you might have seen in a pulpy or a comic.

What actually happens is you get very, very stiff as every muscle in your body contracts at the same time. It’s agonizingly painful, too, as every nerve in your body fires off at once, and then just keeps going; but all you feel, beyond the horrible pain, is your body twitching just the littlest bit here and there. You also can’t just let go of whatever’s shocking you, either- thanks to the muscle contractions, of course.

As the current hits higher and stronger, your lungs stop working- because all human breath is controlled by the diaphragm, which is the muscle below your lungs that actually, y’know, makes them work at all. Then, of course, your heart seizes too- because it’s all muscle. Ah, yes- and, because the human body is basically a sack of water with some rocks and lots of salts in it, the person being electrocuted is also being electro-ovened and burned, too. Lightning is awful stuff; and results in a fairly terrible way to die. As I understand from what Nami told me, it’s one of the most excruciatingly painful ways to die.

As I recall, electricity is one of Nami’s main focuses when it comes to physical manifestations of her magic, immediately followed by wind. Wind is her primary, I think. I am the anvil; Nami’s the hammer. I’m the mountain; Nami’s the Wave. When the two of us fight together, nothing at all can stand against us.

We get to th’ place and Nami’s already Happened. Heh- when Nami Happens to someone, they stay Happened. The Wind picks up, an’ it’s a strange, dry thing; the misty cloudy area breaks apart. I can smell the stench of shit and burnt meat, and as me’n Mark’n th’horses round the corner, I can see why.

Nami Happened, and roundabout’s a hundred- hundred fifty or so men, women, and battle-animals died. Painfully, considering the last time I saw marks like that on a person, it was Conis and her wings. She couldn’t really move them without wincing a little.

Mark an’ me ride on, eventually coming to Zoro an’ Nami, resting on a stone bench together. Zoro’s got one a his swords flicked out at the tsuba, the white one, Wado, but the rest of him is very, very still; and Nami’s gotten her whip out, too. The very tip of it is flicking and twitching like the tail of a cat, and between the fingers of her other hand the little bell she wears now flickers gold.

Mark’n me ride over, dismount- Mark settles hisself into a seat near enough Zoro an’ Nami to be helpful if battle comes. The horses snuffle around a bit, before startin’ to eat on the grasses and leaves all around. Mark’s sittin’ just at an angle, a little up a ways from Nami an’ Zoro, his guns big and heavy and ready to shoot in his hands.
I nod to my crewmates, who nod back; and then I hike up the hill to where I can see a giant mermaid murmuring over clasped hands, and… some blue guy? Oh! Oh, that’s Jinbe- I didn’t recognize him at first because he was wearing a different kimono last time, and a different obi too.

I didn’t think I’d get to actually see him, though- even with him being in th’ Sea Forest ‘till Beltane, we usually end up leavin’ before that sort of thing can get worked out…

“Hey, Jinbe- I got your message!”

“Ah, Luffy-san, it’s good to see you again.”

The princess, who was still for a long moment, jerks up and turns- and smiles, tears running down her face.

“Sir Jinbe!”

“-Ah! Princess Shirahoshi, hallo-”

“Princess, what are you doing outside your-?”

“I’m done hiding. I’m going to face him, and kill him- I’ve decided, Jinbe.”

“Princess… that’s not what your Honored Mother would have wanted-”

“Don’t presume to tell me what my Mother would have wanted. No one knows what she wanted- or if they do, they’re certainly not telling me about it! She’s gone, Sir Jinbe; and I am done hiding.”

The Princess, still crying, lets out a low warbling sound and then spins, her massive naginata slicing through the air and bringing a big fuck-off spear crashing to the ground. Her tail slaps the ground near the grave.

Jinbe is pale, and kind of- sad? Proud, but sad.

“No one has the power to force me to hide away, a prisoner of my own home- no one. It isn’t right, and I won’t allow it.”

“That’s exactly what she said...”

“Wha-?”

“That’s exactly what your mother said, when she started using the contents of the Tamatebako to kill her political enemies.”

“Wh- what are you talking about?”
“I had hoped that someone would have explained it to you, but I see that no one has. Very well; Princess, your Mother was not a pacifist. She spoke for equality, and for the end of war between our people and the Surface- but she was no pacifist.

“I was.

“When you were born, I was assigned to be your chief guard, and to appease the tongue-wags at court, I was knighted as well. And then, Lord Marlintin Desterous and Hody Jones got their claws into- or were courted by- Vander Decken 9. I suppose they told you that I just- disappeared, aye?”

“Yes.”

“Hmph. I did not just ‘disappear’, Princess; I was ordered to become a part of the Oka Shichibukai by your Honored Mother, to ‘foment goodwill towards the Seaward Races’. I could not disobey; by knighting me, your Honored Mother had gained a power over me equivalent to my old captain, Fisher Tiger. To keep my honor, I could not disobey her.

“It was right here, that it happened. Your Honored Mother offered me power beyond measure- the content of the Tamatebako itself- and I refused. We fought; and I lost. As the winner of our duel, your Honored Mother told me to leave, and not return- and to never, ever speak to you of what had happened.”

“I’m not my mother, Sir Jinbe. Even now, you have not told me exactly what she did- or didn’t do, as it may happen. Even so; I am not her. I will not do what she did.”

“I don’t know if I can believe that, Princess. Your mother… she spoke of how we Seafolk could take control of our own identities, how we’d been convinced to ignore our own potential. Even now, I’m not sure if she meant that earnestly, or if it was just- talk.

“I wish she would have listened to me. The tools of the oppressor cannot be used to free the oppressed; joining forces with the now defunct World Government only led to ruin and disaster.”

“Would your way have helped, Sir Jinbe?”

“...I don’t know, Princess.”

“...It’s fine. But- Sir Jinbe, this has to stop. Even if we don’t agree on the way forwards, no one deserves to be trapped as I have been; and you do not deserve to be-”

“-I wish your mother had killed me, back then. At least if I were dead, I wouldn’t have to know how little I mattered to her. She didn’t even tell you! She sent me away and she never even told her friends why… she didn’t tell my friends anything at all...”

“I’m going to tell them, Sir Jinbe. I’m going to tell them everything. You were my very first teacher, and you deserve that recognition.”

“Heh. Then you really are better than her. -Saa, I- I’m sorry, Princess. You shouldn’t have to deal with old men’s regrets.”

“Maa- don’t worry about it. I’m a Princess, after all; it’s what we do.”

Ah. So that’s how it is.
I wander off, after that- let Jinbe and Princess Crybaby have their conversation. I climb down the hill, nod once to the grave of the old Queen, and then keep walking around. Hey! It’s the Sunny!

I was wondering where he’d gotten to… Huh. Looks like Franky’s working on it with some guys- and there’s Chopper, and Nursie G… and I think those are her sisters? Interesting.

Ah- something’s coming.

I’m a thief. That’s what I do.

My oldest sister, Adelaide, works at the Gyojo as an instructor and punching-dummy, all in an effort to one day get close to mastery of Fishman Karate Wado-ryu. Beatrix is a thaumaturgic naturalist, and collects powerful mystical reagents to sell- and also for Genevieve. Cecelia’s a professional clown, and a more terrifying force of violence I’ve yet to meet. Deborah is a cook, with a terrible way with recipes- good at innovation, but… not at recipes. Fernanda’s a fortuneteller- she does dice, palmistry, and small prophecies, mostly in the less gentrified parts of Coralia. Genevieve’s a nurse-practitioner; if she has the right doctor backing her up, she can actually act as a doctor on her own.

Then there’s me. I guess there’s one in every family- and I’m the one in ours. The one that doesn’t quite fit in, I mean.

All my sisters have more or less law-abiding jobs. I’m the one who steals things. I’m the only one who fits the stereotype of a ‘Thieving Goblin Brat’, as I’m an actual thief, and if you’re from Gobdark, you’re a Goblin.

When it comes down to it, I don’t really fight if I can help it. I certainly can defend myself, if I have to- but if you’re noticing me at all, I’ve already failed. I started out not really stealing at all; mostly, what happened was my good friend, Darla, and I would go off to find no-funds entertainment. We ended up exploring the nooks and crannies of Gobdark, and eventually the rest of Coralia and Dunshilly. In our explorations, we’d find buildings that weren’t locked, and houses that had been abandoned. One night, we ended up finding a lost and found in an abandoned hotel- and there were still things we could grab, make off with, and sell.

Easy money; the easiest hundred thousand beri I ever made.

Things escalated from there.

As a thief, you’re in retail service: you shift items from low sales venues, to high sales venues; you haggle, bargain, protect, hide, and if you have to, destroy the merchandise. Some objects are so dangerous that you can’t allow them to continue to exist. A contract for a job you didn’t do- because that sort of thing is illegal, for example- is best kept safe with a thousand degrees of lava-flow.

The tools of my trade are pretty basic- a set of lockpicks is the start. I find it’s always better to make the actually suspicious tools of your trade yourself, if you can. Therefore, my lockpicks are actually
made of broken bandsaws from the shop down at the local theater, bits of wire from clothing hangers
the dry cleaning shop had to throw out, a nail I bent with a rock and some time at the train rail, office
supplies, bobby pins… really, you just need a piece of material that’s shapeable to your purpose, yet
rigid enough to hold it’s shape under use. If it comes down to it, I can use a piece of thread and some
horse hair to pick a lock- magic, or haki I guess (they’re really the same thing) can make up for a lot
of deficiencies if you want it to.

Of all my illicit skills, it’s lockpicking that my sisters learned with the least fuss. I suppose it’s not that
strange- each of us has our own specialty, and so each of us taught the others the very basics of our
skill. Addy taught us all the very basics of Fishman Karate, to the point where all of us can at least
dodge our hands in water; Bea taught us all how to identify and recognize dangerous mystical reagents;
Cece taught us all how to fall, roll with a hit, and even how to use the area around us to fight; Deb
taught us all how to cook some very basic foods- scrambled eggs, rice, a simple yeast bread… Fern
actually taught us all how to study at the library; and Genny taught us how to do basic first aid, treat
blisters, boils, cuts, scrapes, splinters- that sort of thing. I taught my sisters how to pick locks, for a
few actually good reasons- especially considering that none of them really want to go out and steal
shit.

For one thing, learning to pick locks clears your eyes of the ‘illusion of security’. Locked doors serve
to keep those we love- things, people, secrets- safe from harm and discovery, and as a reassurance of
security. I picked my first locks within two minutes of getting all the supplies together and following
the directions I cribbed from a book I got from the library. After that, I realized that locks don’t do
much except provide the illusion of security- sort of like a safety blanket. Locks give you the idea of
safety, the feeling of security, but if someone really wants into what’s been locked away, they can
pick the lock. If they don’t know how to do that, they could find another way into your home; thus,
you cannot just rely on a lock to keep yourself safe.

It’s a little scary to realize how little locks actually do- but it’s also kinda heartening. It’s scary
because someone could very easily walk into your world and walk out with a double crapload of
your shit; but it’s heartening because, knowing how easy it actually is… in our neighborhood of
Gobdark, no one’s home has been broken into for a good fifteen years or more. In essence- most
people are good people, who have their own lives to live and generally speaking, don’t covet yours
so much they’re willing to take the trappings of it for their own.

For another thing, it makes a person handy in an emergency. People lose or forget their keys all the
time. It’s such an easy thing to learn, and the supplies for it aren’t hard to find- so, being able to
jimmy a lock is useful. It saves time, money, and gives you a deep sense of satisfaction- for being
able to solve a problem like that on your own. It could even save someone’s life- after all, if you go
to someone’s house to check up on them, and you know they’ve been sick… Genny’s told me that
there have been a few times when she was only able to check on someone because she could open
the door.

Also, it’s just a cool skill to have. Some things are cool, no matter what they’re being used for.

There’s also a common misconception that the only people who can legally own a lock picking set
are first responders or licensed locksmiths. In reality, as long as you’re not trying to illegally enter
someone’s home with your lock picks, you can own, carry, and use the tools. Some cops, however,
consider owning a set of lock picks all the evidence they need for criminal intent- so, it’s best to
make them look like something else. I keep mine in a bike tool roll, which for someone my age is
fairly common- it’s the style to keep your pens and pencils in a bike tool roll, and it’s not strange to
find some younger women carrying them instead of pocket books. Every generation of children is
the same, after all- they want to do something different from their parents.

As for the actual mechanics of lockpicking, it’s fairly simple. The most common kind of lock is the pin tumbler lock, frankly because it’s easy to make absurdly long. The simplest kind of lock is the handcuff lock- and for that, I recommend two things. Buy a handcuff key, for sale at any sex store, and keep a bobby pin handy.

Combination locks are a bit different, and I’ll explain those in a moment.

Honestly, once you learn to pick a tumbler lock, everything else sort of… flows naturally. To start, it helps if you understand how pin tumbler locks actually work. The basic mechanical design of a pin tumbler has been around since before 4000 Before Calendars; it’s gotten more complex over time, but the basic theory hasn’t changed at all. The design that is used in most cylinder locks- like the one on most doors- has been around since 861, and it hasn’t changed much since then. Most of the World is using technology that’s centuries old to keep their prized possessions safe and secure.

Anatomy wise, a pin tumbler consists of an outer cylindrical casing, in which a plug is housed. The small gap between the outer casing and the plug is called the shear line. Remember that; it’s important to know. The plug has an opening, for the key. When the proper key is inserted into the plug, the plug can then rotate; and that’s half of how locks work at all.

On top of the plug, a series of five or six holes are drilled. The holes contain key pins of different lengths. They’re called key pins because they touch the key when you insert it into the plug. Above each key pin is a driver pin that’s spring-loaded.

Because of the different key pin lengths, the driver pins cross the shear line, making it impossible for the plug to rotate. If you put a wrong key into a lock, the notches on the key won’t lift up the key pins at the right height, causing them to protrude through the shear line. In order for the plug to rotate, you need to lift each of the key pins and driver pins to the correct height- until the gap between the key pins and driver pins reaches the shear line. When all of the pins reach this position, the plug can rotate. That’s the second half of how locks work.

Simple, right?

So- when I pick a lock, all I’m actually doing is using tools instead of a key, to line up the gap between the key pins and the driver pins, with the shear line between the outer casing and the plug. That’s it. It’s super easy to get the hang of, too.

Remember, I picked my first lock in two minutes of having all the tools I needed, a lock, and the instructions handy. Two minutes. First try.

This is not a terribly complicated skill; and it doesn’t require complicated tools, either. You need a tension wrench, and pick rakes. You need a tension wrench that fits into the lock, and you can feel through; and it’s better to have several rakes at hand. Different rakes can have different numbers of ridges, which allow you to pick several pins at a time. It’s also a good idea to have a pick that allows you to pick one pin at a time; some locks require that.

Lock picking is more art than science, and not the kind of art you can learn from a book; you have to actually pick locks to get good at it. Over time, you’ll develop a ‘feel’ for it. Each lock is different; but the same basic principles apply. The easiest and fastest way to pick a lock is to scrub it.
Why does this matter at all?

Fern’s already darted off through her sneaky roads back home; I need to do some thieving. I try really, really hard not to shit in my own bed- and so, I almost never steal anything in Gobdark proper. That’s basically asking for trouble. However, in the course of making our mother more comfortable, we’ve all sold and pawned things we’d rather have not. Milk of poppy is expensive, after all.

So, here’s my list:

Adelaide- a set of bridal jewelry, meant for her wedding.

Beatrix- a tiara of gold leaves, meant for her wedding.

Cecelia- a set of bellflower hair combs, meant for her wedding.

Deborah- a set of throwing knives, and a hinged hair comb meant for her wedding.

Eleanor- that’s me, by the way- an antique lace veil, meant for my wedding, along with our mother’s Adam-wood trousseau chest with the contents included. Mostly, I want the ancestral sewing patterns back, which are under the false bottom I know for a fact hasn’t been found, because technically it’s not really a false bottom at all…

Fernanda- a hand-painted yellow silk scarf that our grandmother wore.

Genevieve- a collection of animals that became familiars, who are now staying with Missus Howlen. I’ll go there last, mostly because Omnifarious is a vicious bastard of an osprey; Grumble, Jabber, and Shriek are very sticky and slimy; and the Cats are very cuddly and loud. Well- okay, Inky, Winky, and Blinky are alright in small doses. Goblynn’s a fucking asshole, though, always sticks her cold paws and nose right into the nice warm spot you’ve got going on. Although, Genny's very evasive on if Inky's actually a cat or not. Inky sheds fucking leaves, okay? He- or she, it's not clear-really doesn't act like a cat...

Fern’s using her Terrifying Seer Powers to scare the Madame into tearing up Mother’s contract, thus absolving us of all her debts; she’ll then be going home to sit up with Mother for the last of her time here, see to the funeral arrangements, and pack up our apartment- which means it’s up to me to get all the rest of our shit.

So, I’ve actually been planning this series of thefts since we even sold our shit; thus, my plan’s already ready to go. I’ll go over it one more time before I head out though-

A, B, and C’s things are in the back-partition of Shellworthy’s Pawn Shop, which is protected by a series of alarms and sensory magics connected to every vent-cover, outside door, and outside window. However, there are no alarms on the chimney, presumably because it has a set of bricks blocking the entrance, and is sealed on the other side with a sliding door that hasn’t been opened in forty years. It’s not counted as a door at all; it’s counted as wall.

I’ve handled that.

D, E, and F are a little trickier, as their Treasures are in a Dunshilly Mansion owned by notorious mob boss ‘Red Water’ Dillberry. Their exact location is in two very different parts of the mansion, to
make things a little more challenging; the knives are in the Servant Armory, which is watched even more heavily than the Family Armory- and the fabric goods, and the chest, are in the Lady’s Wing, in her personal quarters, which means that although I’ve already located every item, and found more or less the optimal way to retrieving each of them, the only thing I’ve already stolen and hidden to allay suspicion is the throwing knives.

Finally, Missus Howlen. Funnily enough, Genny put her animals in Missus Howlen’s care to make it easier to save money for us, and put less stress on Mother- meaning, all I need for that is a letter from Genny saying she’s ready to take her animals back, and the boarding fee. I’ve had those ready for two years, now.

So. Save the easy one for last, I say.

In every job, the least secure part of every security system is the human portion. You can have the best goddamn lock system in the world- and I promise you, all it takes to get through it is a picture of the key, and if there's a combination lock… hell, people write that shit on their desks. Moving upwards in the ‘less secure’ world, sometimes it’s the security cameras. Kale only costs about fifty beri a kilo, and feeding it to the security snails will earn you their undying affection. Lettuce is very bland, as far as snail food goes- but it’s cheap, and you can add powdered essential vitamins and minerals to it. That’s what snail food is. Give a security camera snail an obstructive piece of folate they can nomnom, and you’ve got yourself an approach from a blind spot. Get close enough to the snails, and really gain their trust? Then, by th’gods, borrowing that video feed is as easy as stealing phone service; which, in Gobdark, is the sport of choice.

The interior locks in an office suite are low end, and generally aren’t updated except for every fifty years or so. Why change what ain’t broke? File cabinet locking bars are a slightly more serious security measure, but fall short of the mark because they depend on people’s faith in padlocks. People have too much faith in padlocks.

Further than that- and here’s where things can start getting dangerous- theft of identity is really easy. A bank-number, a seal, and an ID to work up a fake that’s doctored to look like the real one is all you need to drain a bank account and with no one the wiser. Further, you can use a fake identity to get into places that would normally shoot you on site. Eleanor the Trash Goblin Brat couldn’t get a legal job for love or money; Anais the Maid works at a Dunshilly Mansion and is grateful for her terrible job, lan’sakes; Katie the Snail Specialist is like, super stoked to be lookin’ after these little guys, y’know; and Ellie, little Genny’s sister who goes to that nice highschool down the way, is such a flake, she’d forget her own head if it wasn’t attached, haha.

I have personas because the easiest way to gain access to, and information about, some places is simply to walk in with confidence and either make small talk with the people who work there- or, for more involved heists, by pretending you belong so hard it actually becomes true. The majority of people aren’t actually all that interested in little oddities, and for the most part are willing to explain away any weird things and slip ups- so long as you don’t call attention to it by being shady. Hell, I’ve even gotten janitors to let me into places because they’d ‘seen me around’. No worries about them saying anything to the cops; in the places I tend to steal from, the janitors are not paid enough to care about every face they see.

If I need a quick and dirty disguise, the best one is a low-ranking chef’s white jacket. No one cares about food service workers, and if you’ve got one of those pushy-pushy food carts, you can go almost anywhere in the building. It’s gross, but true- if you look like you belong, if you look like a fishwoman, or a human, generic dark hair, pale enough skin, dark eyes- people’s eyes just glance
right over you, and no one bothers to remember your name.

My pre-planning was thus; for the pawn shop, Darla and her gang of tiny thieves, the Mouseketeers cleared a hole in the chimney just wide enough for my head to go through- which, with my physiology, is all I need; in exchange for a bit of help moving their massive stash of goods through the pawn shops and opening a bank account. Mostly, they needed me to do the paperwork; Darla and her crew, the Mousketeers, are not very big at all and can have trouble filling out paperwork.

Katie the Snail specialist was given full access to the snail vivariums… which were right in front of the old creaky sliding door. A bit of soap and water, some oil, and a careful application of epoxy and a handle from the hardware store- and a kilo of spinach and cale, to keep the snails quiet.

The Pawn Shop is one of a number of row-houses, and it’s old enough that there's a ladder built right into the chimney. The back-partition of the pawn shop neatly bisects the apartment it’s based out of; the front is the sales floor, the back is where the snail vivariums and various pallets of merchandise are kept. Getting in and out with what I want is easy enough- I just have to wait for my window.

Now, for the Dunshilly Job, I’m going to have to make a window- but for this one, I’ve got to wait for the lights to go out, and then I’ve gotta do some Merjin Parkour.

Parkour might have started in the Kingdom of Science, Germa; or the Kingdom of Lilies, France. But in Ryugu Mergyo, especially in Gobdark, Parkour isn’t just a lifestyle; it’s a do, the same as Bushi or Karate. In many ways, the World was not built for Merjin. It wasn’t designed for people like me to move in. I could- and did, when I was younger- complain about this simple fact, about what was missing all around me. The World was not designed with a Mimic Octopus Merjin Woman in mind. And then… I grew up a bit, and learned to transform that nothing into something. Here’s the reality of parkour, just like the reality of lock picking; you can do everything you see someone do on your first day. Assuming you’re reasonably fit and in good health, all the basic parkour techniques are within your grasp. Doing parkour isn’t about learning new advanced techniques; it’s about mastering the use of very basic techniques. You don’t learn katas, because it’s not that kind of thing. The only combinations in parkour are the ones you make yourself.

I think I started learning about five years ago, and it was just… it was fun. It was fun that I didn’t have to compete with anyone to have, I didn’t have to- win. I’d pick five techniques, just a handful, and drill them for months and months and then I’d pick a different five- years, I spent doing that. I learned to jump, and leap, crawl along the ceiling, squeeze through holes only my head could possibly fit through- and I just… a lot of what I do has nothing to do with strength or magic or haki or whatever. My skills are about fine control.

There’s my window.

I take a long rolling stride and then monkey vault up the side of the building. I grip tight with my suckers, and then I climb up, up, and then I’m on the roof. My gear is fairly simple- lockpicks, as I mentioned, a set of bump keys just in case, and my backpack. Technically speaking, it’s a bag meant for hikers that I got at the camping supply store. Technically speaking, I’m hiking.

There aren’t all that many things specifically made with parkour in mind that are also within my budget. The best I can do is an on-sale runner’s backpack meant for skiing. Remove the water bladder, and you’ve got a nearly perfect bag for parkour- or thieving. They’re compact, hug the body, and do much better at not jostling around than many other packs. They also sit fairly high on the back and have an adjustable suspension system that makes it easy to get a comfortable, secure fit. Further, if i’m trying to avoid pursuit- well, it came with a rain cover. Nothing says ‘this is not the
one you’re looking for, officer’ like a bag that’s entirely the wrong color. Some patterned duct tape to cover the label, and spares for when it inevitably wears out- and hey presto, you’ve got yourself a quick change disguise.

I also use it to hold liquid, as was intended- not water, but ink. I put non-reflective sticking tape in a dark color over the shiny parts of my bag, for extra stealth. I’ve got a second bag stashed near my Dunhilly Job; when I get done with it, I’ll change clothing to avoid complications.

My uniform isn’t a uniform at all- it’s my normal, everyday clothing. My hoodie is reversible; my shoes are really light and get wrapped into my obi when I’m not wearing them; my kimono has a really popular pattern and a really popular color, and tucks up short and thin. Add a pair of dark grey tights, and suddenly- I could be anyone.

The Pawn Job goes as I expect- in, out, done. I even got one of the baby snails that wasn’t sold- something about an oversaturated market, the last time I went there as Katie.

It’s going to take a moment to clear my head; the late night bus from this part of Gobdark to the part of Dunshilly I can get to with the bus’ takes a while… I’ll go over what went right, and what went wrong. I adjust the bag hanging very high up on my stomach- no one really looks at a pregnant woman and thinks ‘that’s a group of thieves’, and yet…

Getting onto the roof of the rowhouses and finding the right one after that was easy enough; I’d marked it weeks ago with a sticker you can’t see from groundlevel. The chimney is what I marked, and Darla installed the access handle where it needed to be for me to get the old pot opened. The ladder, since it hadn’t been used in a good thirty years, was still in good repair; and, as I’d come and cleaned the flue from both ends, and sprayed it down with a special sealant, there was no soot to contend with.

At the bottom of the ladder was my sticker again, over a thin flat rock, just larger than my head. I lifted it away, and saw down into the fireplace proper- and I also realized my first mistake. When I gave Darla the measurements of my head, so she and her gang could make the hole, I forgot to account for my hair; it’s grown out quite a bit since then, and I don’t have time or the tools to cut it.

I do, however, have about a thousand bobby pins and a wig cap. I twist and pin my hair down, and then put the wig cap on. My shoes and pants get folded and left behind; my bag will be carefully pulled through after myself. My head goes through first, with a bit of a wiggle when it comes to my nose- don’t want to touch anything, and leave a scent that could be traced, after all. Then, for the rest of me; it’s a bit like stretching, really. Making my body fluid enough to fit through a hole the size of my head isn’t all that painful- it just took practice to learn to do it as fast as I can, now. The backpack came through easy as well.

The door opens just as I intended- silently. I crept out into the dim back room of the pawn shop, and immediately noticed my second problem- the box with my sister’s things had finally been inventoried properly, and the contents of it moved into the front. I didn’t sigh, or anything so gauche; I glided over to the snail cooler, opened it up, and pulled out four massive Kale leaves.

Like I said earlier; sometimes, you just have to make your own blind-spot.

Interestingly enough, Owner-san has so much confidence in his outside defence, he’s neglected to alarm his cases- or rather, I can see that he has, and I can also see that he turns them off at night, to save money on electricity. Idiot.

The best lock in the World is only good against a thief so long as it’s locked.
The display case with my sister’s jewelry is also full of other things- less expensive things. To allay suspicion about who, exactly, took these things, I need to take everything. Thankfully, I have a second, more sack-like, bag with me. From repeated observation, I know this for a fact- it takes the security snails forty-five minutes exactly to eat enough Kale leaf away to see the area of their guard again; and I only need one minute to break into these safes. Then, I’ll have thirty minutes to steal what I need to steal, five to get back out, and five more to get to the Den- as it takes the police ten minutes to get here, and they’ll be very suspicious of everyone in the area.

Here’s how you actually pick a lock.

Take your tension wrench, and insert it into the bottom of the key hole. Then, apply slight pressure. The tension wrench is the key (pun intended) to successfully picking a lock. Thanks to pulpies and those new Moving Picture Shows, people wrongfully think it’s the pick, because that is the thing that’s actually lifting the key pins to line up with the shear line. Here’s why the tension wrench is so important: as you’re lifting the pin sets with your pick you need to apply tension on the plug. If you’re applying the right amount of torque on the plug, once the driver pin passes the shear line, the plug will rotate slightly. When you pull your pick out, the key pin will drop back down, but the driver pin will catch the edge of the plug, thus staying above the shear line. Keep lifting pins with your pick and applying pressure with your tension wrench, and all the driver pins will have cleared the shear line eventually.

So take your tension wrench and place it in the bottom of the key hole. Apply slight pressure in the direction you would turn the key if you had it. And by slight I mean slight. If you apply too much pressure, you’re just going to cause the driver pins to bind below the shear line. You need to have enough give to let the driver pins rise above the shear line, but have enough torque that when they start dropping down, an edge of the drive pin catches the plug as it starts to rotate.

How much is too much? If your tension wrench is bending a lot, then you’re probably applying too much pressure. So lean on the side of applying less pressure than more. Otherwise- it’s something you have to develop a feel for, and not everyone can.

After you’ve inserted your tension wrench at the bottom, insert the pick at the top. Take your pick- I prefer the Bogota rake that has three ridges. This one has picked every lock that I’ve used it on very easily. You might need to go one at a time. You might even need to start over.

Still, to start, slide the rake all the way to the back.

Keep applying that slight pressure on your tension wrench. I use my left hand for that. With your right hand, scrub or rake the inside of the plug with your pick. As you pull the pick back, simultaneously lift up in order to apply pressure on the pins. It looks sort of like you’re stirring in a circle with your pick.

Keep applying torque on your wrench and scrubbing the pins until they all set. You may need to apply more torque and pressure on the pins with your pick as you get near the last one or two pins that need to set. If you’re not making any progress, you probably applied too much torque with the wrench. Relax, let the pins reset, and start over again, focusing on not using too much pressure.

That’s it! Really. That’s all there is to it. You can successfully pick most pin and tumbler locks using this scrubbing method.

You may run across locks that require a little bit more finesse by picking each pin set one at a time. In these trickier locks, you may need to get more methodical by looking for the pin stack that resists
the most and picking it first and then repeating the process until all the pins are successfully picked. If you know in advance that you’re going to have trouble with a lock, and you’ve got no worries about sound, just bump the lock. It’s easier, faster, and much less likely to leave scarring on the lock.

The case opened in a bit less time than I thought I’d need; and then I had stolen my sister’s bridal things back again, and quickly stowed them in my bag. Then, I pulled out my second bag and carefully, quietly, taking care to wrap each piece in long scarves I got just for this- I cleaned out the rest of the case.

Then, because I still had scarves and room in the bag, I swept the adjacent cases as well. When full, the bag I used is a bit less than the diameter of my head- perfect, in this case. Kind of why I even chose it.

Greed is what gets thieves caught, more often than not- so… Oh, alright, I couldn’t leave the snail when I knew it wouldn’t be cared for. Owner-san already has a house phone, a security system, and a shop phone- he doesn’t need the last one. He’s been trying to sell it for months, but this area has a saturation in the market, and… well. Certain parts of Gobdark will eat anything. So, I took the snail, and the snail rig he was trying to sell with them- an old fashioned model that, thankfully, it’s fairly simple to change the calling-number of, so long as you can pay a fee. Do it at a library or nunnery, and they won’t register you’ve done it at all. Phones go out of service all the time.

Didn’t you know?

Anyway, everything goes out the hole in the chimney easy. I shut the door behind me; put my goods up through the hole; and squeeze through. Then, it’s everything onto my back, and off across the roofs.

For the sake of whoever finds it next, I try not to even think of the route I take to get to our Ken. If you absolutely must know, it’s a weird little spot in a city’s roofing that happens, sometimes; a water tower butts up against an apartment building just enough, and then someone else builds a dovecote, and a third someone puts the retaining wall of their roofgarden just so - and suddenly, you’ve got a room the approximate size of an apartment just… out there. Waiting.

I squeeze into the room in my usual fashion, and quickly start sorting the haul. My bag goes on my hook, and our gang’s etiquette is to leave what’s on another person’s hook untouched- saves a lot of infights, let me tell you.

It’s between a stack of folding knives and a pile of gold rings that Darla appears.

“All good, then?”

“Yeah, all good.”

“Brill. You still braveass’n around?”

“Funk you, Tiny Tina.”

“Hahahaha—“
Darla’s a little shit. Here come the rest of the Mice- ah hell, might as well go down the roll. Oh, wait-
Darla’s doing it for me. I guess we picked up someone new…?

“Quillaby, this is Eleanor- she’s the leader of the Cat and Mouse Crew. She’s a good leader, as far as
leaders go- smart, confident in us and our skills, and she always makes sure that each member of the
crew knows the whole plan, so if something goes wrong, we all know what happened. She’s been
doing this the longest, longer than me- she got me into this business. In our Crew, she’s the one who
does most of our conning work, all long-term acting, and our major manipulation using confidence
Tricks. She’s our roper, our inside man, our distraction.

“I’m her partner- Darla, if you’d forgotten. I assist Boss E in planning and prepwork, and- well, if
she needs someone to herd the rest of us while she’s off doing what she does best, I’ve got the job. If
she tells you to do something, Quill, you do it; if I fuckin’ tell you to do something, you do it. I have
all the same skills Boss does- but where she prefers lockpicking, I prefer safe cracking.

“The Dollamata working on the snail and the old phone rig is Jellybean. She’s our phone phreak;
there’s no snail she can’t confuse eventually. She also builds and repairs all our specialty gear- your
first set of lockpicks will come from her, as well as your other first bits of gear. When we’re on a Job,
Quill, Jelly’s the one who keeps us all on task and in contact with each other.

“That is Maya. Don’t get too close, she has very sticky fingers; she’s our specialist burglar, after all.
She’s the one who caught you picking those pockets with the bubbly coral, by the way- and it’s on
her recommendation that you’ve been invited into the Crew. Don’t make her regret it.

“You’ve already met Hildegard - Hildy is her preference. She’s our wrangler- if we need a getaway,
she’s the one that handles it. She’s actually much stronger than she looks; last I checked, she can kill
a Sea King in one hit. Don’t let her murderface fool you, though- there’s no one more sweet-
tempered than our Hildy, ain’t that right?”

“Rack off, Dar-ling.”

“Hahahaha- ah, yes. Arlinda Rader Haai. She’s the physically largest member of our Crew; and
she’s the one who scrounges those little odds and ends a Crew like us needs to get things done. She
knows a guy, or knows a guy who knows a guy, or has a cousin, or a ‘cousin’- the point is, if we
need a tool, she can get her webbed hands on it, no matter how obscure.”

“I see why you call her Arlinda Rader Haai.”

“Yeah, she’s one of those people you have to say the whole thing for; now. Boss has been planning
the heist we’re all about to go on for years. Your skill with mucus bubbles is invaluable to her very
particular needs, and your other skills… well, I’m sure we’ll find a need for a heavy combat
specialist sooner or later.”

I’ve finished the sorting, and can feel my eyebrows raise at the roundabout explanation Darla just
gave. There’s a term for what Darla’s trying to do, and that term is baiting.

We don’t have time for that.

Or rather, I don’t have time to listen. I carefully re-arrange my thieving bag, stowing a microcamera,
rechecking my tools, and going over the plan one last time.
“So. Everyone here?”

“Yeah, Boss.”

“Brill. Here’s the plan, then- and I’ll be going over the details, as Quillaby is new.

“My younger sister is a Seer, and her first Sight was of the death of our mother. She was able to write down an exact date, time, and cause- which, as it happens, is with the coming dawn. Therefore, tonight is the last chance I have to secure our remaining heirlooms- because, our mother has Fae-blood, and our heirlooms are magical. If their chain of provenance is broken, they loose all their mystic might- more importantly, they’re ours.

“Out in Dunshilly, there’s one of the last old Country Houses from back when the Gobdark side of Dunshilly was still ‘country’. That house is home to ‘Red Water’ Dillberry, his wife, Helena, and their children. Our target is a small bedchamber on the third floor.

“The first obstacle will be getting to Dunshilly. There’s a Red Flyer that runs from Gobdark to a place in Dunshilly that’s about half a minutes swim to the Manor. Following that, we have to get to the third floor undetected. I can go up the side and carry you lot- and I’ve yet to meet a lock I can’t pick. That particular bedchamber is being used as a walk-in closet by Helena; and I’ve already cased it. Darla- that thing you wanted, the tiny necklace?”

“The Silver Stars?”

“Yeah, that. She has it; it looks like she’s been collecting Tontatta treasure for years.”

“That fucking- Damn.”

“Mm. The things I’m after are in a locked cabinet, and the bottom of a large chest, respectively- you’ll have to handle the safe, as that’s where she’s keeping the goods.”

“What kind of safe, and when was it installed?”

“It’s a Synfim Catalish, installed when the house was built.”

“...They didn’t change it?”

“Nope.”

“I love it when a mark makes it easy.”

“Mnhm. Jellybean, your job is the same as it always is- keep the phones from working for as long as you can, and keep us in touch with each other. You’ll also be keeping an eye on the time- I don’t have to be out of the house with the goods, I just have to have them in my possession by sunrise, to keep their enchantments active.”

“Got-ya, Boss.”

“Maya, while Darla and me are doing our things, you’re on lookout- sorry, but there’s nothing at the place you really want.”

“Tch. Can’t win them all, Boss.”

“Hildy, you’re plan B; our fallback point is at The Spot, and our rendezvous is at Missus Howlen’s,
down near the Bath House. If things go wrong, I need all of you to get away with as much as you can on Hildy’s beetles; if I don’t meet up with you all at Missus Howlen’s within the day, I’m dead.”

“Boss, I still don’t like this plan- but I don’t have anything better, so. Here we fucking go.”

“Heh. Arlinda Rader Haai, Quill; the two of you are going with Darla and me. We’re going to need some heavy muscle.”

“Sure, boss.”

“Uuh. Yes, of course- b-boss.”

“Right.”

And now, on the bus, we’re there. I pull the rope, climb off the wagon, and walk into the darkness of the Dunshilly hills. Unfortunately, it’s at my stash point, the Spot where Hildy’s going to wait for us, that I realize things have already gone terribly wrong.

The house was supposed to be quiet, for this heist- but it’s light bright and shining, and there’s a full on jamboree going on inside.

Well, shit.

“Boss.”

“Darla.”

“That part of your plan?”

“Not as such- but it shouldn’t be a problem, either.”

“Boss...”

“See there? Even though it’s lit up, the security cameras still have a blind spot- and so long as I do it right, no one’s going to notice my approach. We’re actually very lucky- thank you, Jelly- as the hosts are about to give some kind of speech.”

“...I don’t like this, Boss.”

“Neither do I, but we can’t wash, either.”

“...Right. Let’s go.”

I tuck my hair up into a ponytail and make sure the dull patchy grey of my hoodie is ready. Then, I open my bag and let Darla, Arlinda Rader Haai, Quillaby, and Maya climb in, before settling it in such a way as to- well.

Jelly is already mounted on a very large foebeetle, the snail ready to go to work; and Hildy’s got all
the other beetles ready to go as well.

When you think of a ninja, you think of someone wearing all black, creeping around in the dead of night. I, personally, think of myself in a maid’s dress with a junior chef’s jacket over it. Change the tail into a fishy arrangement, and no one can say for sure you don’t belong- especially at a party. The easiest way into a house is through a door- specifically, the unlocked side door that the gardener leaves open so he can have fun with one of the scullery maids at the end of the work day. I nip through with no one the wiser, and- affecting an air of harried, ‘don’t fucking talk to me’, haste- I go from the ground floor, up the servant’s hallways, and stop at the third floor which- just as I suspected- is completely deserted, what with the party below. I carefully check before entering any of the rooms proper- houses like this have peepholes for the servants to see if they should come in, or pass on by.

Then, I’m through the tiny servant’s door, which I wedge open with my jacket. Down through the silken skirts of a riot of color clashing low cut ballgowns, and we’re in the closet. I take my bag off and let the Crew out. Maya and Darla go to work immediately; followed by Quillaby and Arlinda Rader Haai. I go over to the Adamwood Chest, and instead of picking the lock, I take out my ring of bump keys. On my ring of thieving keys, I have one actual key. It was my mother’s- and before her, her mother’s, and back and back and back, until the beginning of our family. I don’t need to pick this lock; this is my box.

Inside, of course, is nothing at all- Helena’s been using it as a bench seat. I mean… the keyhole doesn’t look like a keyhole, and if you didn’t know already, it wouldn’t look like a chest. I open it, reach in, and carefully take the little stack of chap books and wrap them in a scarf. And there it is- the Family Grimoire. Some families pass down extra toe joints, or cowlicks, or even a house- my family has Magic.

I close the chest again, and lock it. I can’t carry the chest out without suspicion, is the thing- and of all our heirlooms, a Chest that can’t be opened except if you have the key and the right blood is a simple matter to replace. Hell, Dwarven carpentry apprentices make those for their mastery tests- they aren’t uncommon. It’s just that this one is mine.

I turn, and open a different cabinet- hardly notice I only use one hand to pick the lock. Inside- my veil, and my sister’s silken scarf. I wrap the Grimoire in the veil, and the veil in the silk scarf, and that’s it. I have what I came for.

I pick up my stack of chapbooks, wrap the whole bundle of literature into another silken scarf, and put it in the bottom of my bag. I look over at my Crew, who are studiously looking away from me- oh. I caught sight of my face in the mirror- I was crying.

I scrub my tears away, and-

“Four hours to sunrise, people.”

“Right- all done, then?”

“Yeah, boss. All done. We going?”

“We’re gone.”

My crew piles in with their treasure; they’ve swept the safe clean, and the contents and them just fit
into my bag. It goes back on my chest, over my tits, and I go back out the servants door. A strange feeling overtakes me, as I get to the stairwell.

Something’s wrong- I can’t hear any of the servants, or any of the party goers, and Jellybean would have said if she’d seen them leave, she’s in position to- something’s wrong. I take off my white jacket, and scramble up the wall.

My jacket gets tucked up in the eaves of the servant’s hallway; considering how often it’s cleaned, no one’s going to notice it there for a good forty years. And then, I’m quickly oozing my way back downstairs.

A good person, or even a nosy person, would go investigate the wet, iron smelling rooms beyond the servant’s demense. They’d want to know why the one known as Red Water is laughing and crying- they’d even want to know what the sharp crack was, and why the house is beginning to smell of turpentine, petrol, and smoke.

I am not good, or nosy.

I get out of the house, and back to the Spot, which is inside a particularly nice stand of cherrybomb trees. Up in the boughs of the tree- Hildy, and Jellybean. And, in a rotted out crack in the trunk- the knives. I take up that hidden package, just as I left it, and tuck it into the space between my chest and the bag.

Hildy, Jellybean, the beetles, and the snail are all that’s left. Hildy and Jellybean climb into the bag; the beetles fly off at a command from Hildy; and the Snail fits in my bag fine, after a bit of rearranging.

Behind me, the old Dunshilly mansion burns.

I’ve a bus to catch- and it’s really not my problem, anyway. Everyone knows the Red Waters get the children first. Considering it in hindsight- I would have still been in that building, if it weren’t for my crew. Saa, anyway- the best way to avoid suspicion is to look nothing like yourself at all. I hardly ever wear my hair blond, because I… I hate being compared to my sisters. But, well- Missus Howlen knows me as a blond, and so blond I am.

The Mice are pretending to be toys, if we’re caught out or my bag gets searched- Darla’s explaining it to Quill.

The second bus ride is much more leisurely than the first; it takes me from Dunshilly to Corallia’s edge in about an hour, rather than the ten minutes from Gobdark to Dunshilly. Then, it’s a quick walk down the road a ways from the Bath House, to Missus Howlen. I give her the necessary letter, and the fee’s already in the envelope- and, as I wait in the foyer of her house, I can hear Goblin’s particularly mangled screeching as she’s stuffed into a duffle. There’s also lots of little peeping noises, but- nah, couldn’t be.

Finally, Missus Howlen returns with a duffle bag, and an orange…

“I’m old, missy. Not dumb. Put this on, and pack those away; you’ve not quite managed it yet, I’m afraid.”

“Missus Howlen-”

“You girls, always running about- and your Fern’s a terror with her arguments, but… you know as
well as I do, the contents of those books of yours are dangerous. Put this on.”

“...Yes ma’am.”

Missus Howlen putters off again; and I carefully begin changing, yet again.

“...Boss, what the hell are you mixed up in?”

“Darla, if I tell you, you’ll never be able to walk away safely. None of you will.”

“Miss Boss E, we’re your crew. Even me, and I only joined today- we’re still your crew. We’ll follow you, I think.”

I do up the last button of my outfit, and pull my hair back into a ponytail again. I sigh. I stare at nothing for a long moment, and then I look over at my crew. They’ve all come out of the bag- ah, fuck it. I can’t…

“If any of you have any doubts- about me, about what I’ve done… then you need to go, now. Once I speak the Words, I can’t unsay them, you understand? This isn’t… this isn’t children’s stories, and this is no Fairy Tale. This is real.”

None of them move.

“Fine. I warned you. Missus Howlen-”

“I know them by heard, missy. Go on.”

“Aye.

“Death is nothing at all.

“It does not count.

“I have only slipped away into the next room.

“Nothing has happened.

“Everything remains exactly as it was.

“I am I, and you are you, and the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged.
“Whatever we were to each other, that we are still.

“Call me by the old familiar name.

“Speak of me in the easy way which you always used.

“Put no difference into your tone.

“Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.

“Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes that we enjoyed together.

“Play, smile, think of me, pray for me.

“Let my name be ever the household word that it always was.

“Let it be spoken without an effort, without the ghost of a shadow upon it.

“Life means all that it ever meant.

“It is the same as it ever was.

“There is absolute and unbroken continuity.

“What is this death but a negligible accident?

“Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight?

“I am but waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just round the corner.

“All is well.

“Nothing is hurt; nothing is lost.

“One brief moment and all will be as it was before.

“How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting when we meet again!”

I swallow, once, and the light of false dawn begins to bounce off the overcast sky.

“My mother’s line is from Skua, and she would not say how she came to be here. But she did say this; the name of the one spoken of in the Words I spoke just now… She is our most ancient ancestor, blue of face and with iron claws. Not the Yag, and not the Baba; those were two others,
who worked under that singular wretched name… do I really have to say it?”

“Girly… Eleanor, your mother ran, and became a prostitute to try to keep her magic away. The gods saw fit to give her seven daughters in one fell swoop, and her the seventh of a seventh- and so the magic was multiplied by three. Your mother only has a handful of magic, herself- and yet all of you girls can shake the very world, if you’ve a mind to do so. Did you never wonder why?”

“Missus Howlen… Auntie Whispers, this isn’t the kind of thing one just… says.”

Darla hums, and then says, cheerfully-

“So… you’ve been the heir to a Terrible Fate this entire time?”

“Gods Wounds, Darla- no! I’m- I’m descended from Black Annis. My name is Black Eleanor, alright? Gods and saints preserve us from your crazy fancies-”

Ah. Shit, I said it. Darla is grinning. Goddamnit.

“So. You’re afraid of a witch-hunt, Missus Boss?”

“Yes, Quill. I am. They don’t- discriminate. The World Government, I mean- they never have. Even now, with so much of their power gone, their base in the, the Holy Temple of Sunfire’s… the Burning Legion. They’ll kill me, and they’ll kill you, too, and my sisters, my aunt- everyone who ever… I. I’m going to become a pirate, all of us are- nothing left for us here, really. Sorry, Auntie.”

“Girly, I’ve been waiting on you and your sisters to leave; I’ll be much happier back home, away from the dark and the damp.”

“Heh. -I mean it, guys. You don’t have to go with me, if you don’t want.”

Arlinda Rader Haai, of all people, is the one to say it. She hardly speaks; that’s why it’s so odd and memorable.

“You’re our Boss, Eleanor. You lead us because we follow you, not the other way around. We’re going with you- if we have to be smuggled onto the ship with you, then we’ll be smuggled onto the ship. We’re thieves, right?”

I smiled, and sighed, and- when I left my Auntie Shirrey ‘Whispers’ Howlen’s house, I took my Crew with me; in the clothes my auntie gave me to wear, the robes of any initiate at the Mage’s tower- could also be the robes of a nun, one of the initiates.

Jellybean hasn’t gotten a chance to change the snail number, and I need to tell Mab where I’m at,
now, considering how close it is to dawn… Aha, a payphone.

“Chairete?”

“Missus Mab, hallo- this is E, calling to let you know I’ve finished my business, and- ah, I’m with Franky, actually.”

“Is that right? Well, best go along with him if you’ve done what you needed to do… I’ll be stashing the noncombat members of the crew on Sunny, and knowing Franky, he’s on the way to finding him.”

“Ah. Alright, sure. Bye Mab!”

“Bye, Miss Terry!”

Hehehehe! That’s a new pun!
Three Swords To Kill A Ghost

So… funny story. The first time I ever had to pick a lock, it actually endeared me to the Crew Missus Seedle assembled to cook in her kitchen. The Chef, the cooks, everyone- because I saved the day, I think.

So, what had happened was I was doing prep work, peeling boiled eggs, right, and I hear an argument break out between two of the actual cooks because they both forgot their keys to the fridges. I didn’t miss a beat, is the thing- and, of course, being a very junior member of the kitchen, I don’t even have a pair of keys. Everyone in the kitchen knew this.

Everyone also knew that Missus Seedle’s a racist old bitch whose favorite activity is to, quite loudly, say every vile thing that’s ever been said about people from Gobdark, right in front of me. Her most frequent insult is about my parentage, followed by my lack of cleanliness, and my propensity to steal. None of which, of course, are true.

Everyone knew that, too.

So anyway, I was peeling eggs, I heard the argument, and without missing a beat, I put down my peeled egg in the bowl, wiped my hands on my apron, and said ‘coming through behind’ in just the right tone and cadence to make the two senior cooks move out of the way without looking to see why they’d done it.

By then, I’d taken out a paperclip and a half-bobby pin- which can be explained as pocket garbage, right- and in about ten seconds, I’d picked the lock and opened the refrigerator. Masterlock; hard as steel on the outside, but marshmallow fluff on the inside.

I didn’t say anything while doing this; I picked the lock, opened the fridge, and went immediately back to work, getting through about three more eggs in a minute before I realized that the Pastry Cook was talking to me.

“Oi, Gobshit- you always knew how to do that?”

“Yeah, fuckass- I always knew how to peel fucking eggs.”

And everyone cackled, because they knew that if I admitted to knowing how to pick locks, it’d get back to The Bitch and I’d be fired on the spot- and also, it took me about four eggs to actually learn to peel boiled eggs. We don’t boil eggs, at home.

Y’know, it’s surprising to me how many don’t realize that the boys and girls in the trenches of the kitchen would fit right into the tougher neighborhoods of Gobdark- my home, essentially. All line cooks are space-cadet moral degenerates, smugglers, thieves, sluts, psychopaths, and prison escapees. The business attracts fringe elements, people for whom something has gone terribly wrong. Maybe they didn’t make it through school; maybe they’re running away from their heritage, like me. Although, it must be said- I came to love it there, deep in that hell-pit.
It was in the professional kitchen that I really learned to assume the worst about everybody, after all. I don’t let this poisonous outlook consume my rational mind, of course; I don’t let it affect my job performance, either. I learned to let every insult and nasty look roll off my back. I learned to ignore the petty bullshit. I began to be amused by what I saw and suspected.

I mean, just because Missus Seedle is a miserable treacherous self-serving capricious corrupt skinflint racist cunting daughter of a whore and a dog doesn’t mean I don’t genuinely enjoy her company. I’ll always be grateful for the job she gave me, and the time with all those crazy guys.

I may not know the actual terminology of cooking, but I can do it; I see a thing once, I remember it forever.

Missus Seedle owns a three star kitchen at a joint so high-end you could only get reservations by referral from people in-the-know. No advertisement needed; and no way in hell that miserly bitch would ever pay me enough to actually, y’know, taste what I’d seen cooked.

Then again- cream always rises. Excellence does have its rewards. There is no fresher egg than the one you pull from the dovecote yourself, every morning; there is no sweeter milk than the milk you got from your house-goat. Anyone can learn a skill, dammit- otherwise, no one would. But the kind of character it takes to not be what someone expects; the character to never, ever steal food from your job, even when you can feel your ribs and the head chef makes you sit down for a lunch break and feeds you- he stood there and watched me, to make sure I actually ate. I’ll never forget that- I was so humiliated, and so pathetically grateful…

The only person at my old job who lacked character was Missus Seedle. I know she’s going to fire me- you’re late to work twice, and you’re fired, end of story. I won’t be able to get out of bed for the next three days- I’m done. I do… hmm.

“Sanji?”

“Yes, Deborah?”

“When I can get out of bed again, can we go back to my old job? I need to tell the guys there that I’m okay.”

“Uh. Sure? Where did you work?”

“I was the chore boy in a professional kitchen for the past five years; and if the restaurant ever had a name, I never knew it.”

“Uh.”

“I mean, it is a three star restaurant, so- I guess it was a good one? I just. I won’t be able to get out of bed for the next three days, and Missus Seedle fires people if they’re late twice and I haven’t been late once for five years and- I just. I want to let the guys know that I’m okay.”

“…Not Missus Seedle?”

“Missus Seedle can eat my shit, curl up in a sewer, and die.”

“Ah. One of those, huh?”

“…She didn’t feed us, Sanji.”
“-What.”

“She didn’t feed us; she’d cut our pay for staff meals, but I never saw any of the brigade eating at the restaurant, and she never fed us. She took a cut of the waitstaff’s tips, which is illegal as fuck, I checked; she’d change our work schedules without notice; she’d make the waitstaff pay if the customer skipped the bill; I was the veteran of the junior levels of the kitchen, and I’ve only been working with the food for two years.

“There’s no first aid kit anywhere in the kitchen, and the fire extinguisher is so old it might as well not be there; I think Missus Seedle’s fucking our district’s health inspector, otherwise our kitchen wouldn’t be so… it’s not dirty, and it’s not completely unsafe, but… I think if it wasn’t Shitty Bastard running things, we’d have killed someone by now.

“Missus Seedle might own the restaurant, and have all the awards in the world or whatever, but Missus Seedle doesn’t know what it means to be a cook or a chef at all. She’s got no character to speak of.”

“...Hmhm. Who’s the Chef of the Brigade, then?”

“Oh, Shitty Bastard- sorry, um. I think his name is Enrique?”

“-!”

“...Do you know him?”

“...Maybe. The World isn’t actually that big... -yeah, I’ll accompany you to your old restaurant. I want to see what I’ve got to work with, too; it’ll be interesting to see what habits you need to learn, or unlearn. Oh, and before we get too far- what do you really want to cook?”

“Bread.”

“...Bread?”

“Mm. I can cook almost anything, except for bread- and pastries, I guess.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, my sister Beatrix… her job requires her to hunt down all kinds of plants and animals, and for her it’s not that much harder to gather whatever’s in season- y’know, out in the wild? And we’d have our garden, too- and then she’d bring it back to me, and I’d cook for all of us. I’ve been doing that for about five years, and before that I was watching my mom do basically the same thing. It’s funny- I see highfalutin’ chefs putting things like ‘fresh from the garden, direct to the table’ onto their menus, like it’s special. That’s what I do every day for my siblings, that’s how most everyone in my hometown survives- so it’s really not that special at all.

“Every week of the year, there’s something different- and for certain parts of the year, there’s hardly anything at all. To eat, I mean. The main thing I really did, every day before I went to work, was I’d look at what I already knew how to work with- stuff from the garden, sunchokes, squash blossoms, and so on- and then I’d look at whatever Beatrix brought, most of which I’d never seen before, ever. I had to taste things, and I threw up a bunch- but mostly, I cooked with what I got and made food for my family to live on. I think I started writing what I did down because there might be a combination that really doesn’t work, and there might be a combination that works really well, and the only way I’d ever remember it is if I had written it down. I hope Fern got all my notebooks and binders…

“Anyway, bread. I’ve always really loved bread, but- with how much I had to work, and all… I
never really got a chance to make it. There are really rigid and unbreakable laws that govern bread, and if you break those laws, your bread will come out bad. You’ll have a Baked Bad.

“I’m not sure if it’s the ingredients I use, or if it’s just me not knowing what the hell I’m doing- but… I’ve never, ever been satisfied with any piece of bread I’ve ever made. And when it goes wrong, it goes Wrong.”

“Hm. I can probably help with that. It’s interesting- you’ve already gotten the kind of training I wish had been possible for me, earlier. There’s no better school for creativity than the school of necessity-you learned to really understand ingredients because you had to, it was a genuine matter of life and death, not one of prestige or customer satisfaction.”

“Exactly- but… I didn’t need to make bread in the same way. I just… I wanted to. I want to make the best bread I can, bread I love and want to eat.”

“I understand. When Chopper lets you out of bed again, I’ll have you cook some things in the kitchen, to see where you need improvement- and I’ll have you describe what you’re doing, so I know what I need to teach you outright. Last question, then you can sleep again- what’s your Dream?”

“...promise you won’t laugh?”

“...Promise.”

“I want to find All Blue.”

“...Really?”

“Yeah. I know all the legends say that it’s a mythical sea, where you can find every kind of fish in the World- but I’m not so sure.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. It probably is a very specific area of the World where All Blue exists- but I don’t think it exists all the- aahh- all the timnngh-”

“...It’s my Dream, too. We’ll talk more later, Shrimp. Rest now, alright?”

I smiled, I think, and it felt like I nodded; and then the exhaustion dragged me back down again.

When I peeled open my eyes again, I was lying in a different bed- more comfortable, for one, and Sanji wasn’t there in the bed with me; he was next to me in a chair, quietly reading through one of my documentation journals about- oh, that’s one of the bread ones. It might be one of the ones with pictorial evidence, I don’t really-

And I black out again.

I had the strangest dream- of a man with a gravelly voice and the sound of bones clattering together, my clownish sister Cecelia almost sobbing with overwhelmed emotion as the splashing of some kind of milk allowed for the revival of- someone?
When I stop dreaming and open my eyes again, I see my sister, Eleanor, curled up around a pillow—and I can hear Goblynn mewing, and a dozen or so little voices answering her under my bed… no Sanji though. I do smell something really good cooking, so—well, that’s alright, then.

“Hey, Ellie. Thanks for the—”

“Never again. We’re not ever doing that again, Deb. I got your throwing knives back—please, for the love of all that is good in this World—they took so much blood out of you, and nothing they could do helped much at all, Deb. If Doctor Chopper hadn’t been there, you’d have died too. Never, ever again.”

“…so Mom’s gone, then?”

“-Yeah. Yeah, she’s gone; Fern and Missus Mab took her to be cremated.”

“I’ll be looking after the urn for the Week of Watching, won’t I?”

“…You’re the oldest, so…”

“Heh. Sounds about right. I’d have lost my job either way… Well. Best move on, then; what did I miss?”

“Well… You’ve only been completely unconscious for about a day; Doctor Chopper said you’ll be more awake today, and a bit restless tomorrow, and the day after that you can actually get out of bed, he thinks.”

“Ellie.”

“Right. Um—well. I’d best start with the obvious—”

In the end, I guess the real difference between a warrior like Zoro and a warrior like Nami is that Zoro has pride; he needs to dominate his competition, intimidate and destroy them mentally and spiritually before they ever really cross blades.

Nami just kills her enemy, and is done with it.

Princess Shirahoshi can be said to be much like all other female warriors; when Vander Decken 9 came hurtling through the air, screaming about being destined to be with her, she didn’t hesitate, and she didn’t listen to what he had to say. She brought her naginata up through the air; she shifted her hips and shoulders just so— and then she struck like an ancient predatory creature.

Blood and shit and the end of a man, all in one motion. The axe spun past her and dug deep into the loamy surface of her mother’s grave. She swung her naginata again, and the body fell and broke into two pieces.

Thusly was the end of Vander Decken 9; short, anticlimactic, and not at all the kind of death he would have wanted.

Good.
It was a little annoying that I didn’t get to shoot anyone; but honestly, I’m just glad that’s over.

There’s a lot that happened after that, but in the end, we all ended up at the Royal Townhouse, where Mab was finally able to tell us what the hell happened, concerning… just, everything prior to the War of Gyojin Aggression.

Poison is in everything, and nothing is without poison. Dosage is what makes it either a poison or a remedy. Enlightenment is the crumbling away of untruth; seeing through the facade of pretension. It’s a total eradication of everything you imagine to be true.

I’ve been staring at my cup of coffee for the past six minutes hoping it gives me perspective and sanity and the ability to make sense of it all, but that’s a lot to ask of a cup of coffee at past two in the morning.

Sorry if I’m a little out of sorts- my mother just died, and I’m still a bit confused at what she said to me, before the end. Missus Mab is currently having Words with the Madame; she said she’d handle this part of things, and asked me to sit with Mother’s body and wait for her return.

Honestly, it’s… kind of a relief. I picked a whole fucking bouquet of whoopsie-daisies and I didn’t know how I was going to handle them; however, Missus Mab’s decided that, in short, I’m not going to handle them at all. She is.

Mom said that she’d really definitely died earlier in the night, and all that was left was her festering corpse- but also that she still had things that needed discussion, with each of us. To that end, she informed me that she’d be sending correspondence to each of us, asking to meet up within the Week of Watching.

I told her that if the meeting place was a swamp, a foggy town, or an old mansion, absolutely none of us would be going.

She asked if we’d go if the meeting place was an amusement park.

I told her that, on balance, each of us had either a happy or unhappy childhood. Thusly, if we were invited to an amusement park by her, we’d be assured of learning shattering truths about our childhoods and families, or having to fight unnatural monsters. So no, if the meeting place was an amusement park, we’d be staying home. Deb might try to make pizza again, even.

She asked if a regular park would be okay.

I said that if it’s a regular park in town, it’s Real People Danger, like kidnapping, blackmail, and slavers; and if it’s a regular park in a town we’re just visiting, here comes the fucking fog bank and the Weird Shit. Best just stay home and hang out.

Mom laughed, and asked if a normal diner would be okay- not a Middle of Nowhere diner, just a regular diner in a regular well-lit town.

I said that diners are already liminal spaces, so it’d probably be fine. Then I forgot that Mom was a ghost now, and tried to hug her, and- and-
I’m crying, again. I don’t- I knew for years this was coming, so why… why am I so sad?

When I was younger, I put together a list of traditional songs because I was bored and curious if anyone in my country had ever been unequivocally happy about anything, ever. In short? No, not really.

The classic songs of my people go a bit like this:

Everyone I Love Is Dead
The Merrow Have Stolen All My Sheep
We’re Stealing Our Sheep Back From the Merrow
You Want To Be Mine? First You Must Answer These Riddles Three
Our Swords Are Sleeping Under The Hill Until We Need Them Once Again To Fight The Goddamn Kappa
The Kappa Have Stolen All My Sheep
I Love You A Lot But You’ve Left Me And There Is No Food (emphatic fiddle solo)
The Sea Is Treacherous, Just Like You
One Time Our Queen Punched Me In The Face And It Was Amazing
The Faeries Have Stolen All My Sheep
Everyone I Love Is An Allegorical Representation of the Realm
The Merrow Stole My Farm And Put Sheep On It
You Were Mine But Now You Won’t Even Come To The Window To Look Upon Me And Our Dead Infant Child (In The Mist)
Whack Fol Too La Roo Umptytiddly Good They’ve Stopped Listening Now Let’s Talk About Revolution
Something In Kappash, I Think It’s About Faeries, Or Maybe A Cow

Go a little further towards the Sea Forest, and the songs change a bit. You get the musical classics of:

I Left Everyone I Love Back Home In The Holler To Be With This Guy Who Doesn’t Wear Shoes Or Have Teeth But He Plays A Mean Jug
The Merrow Told Us Not To Move West Yet, We Ignored Them, My Entire Family Was Killed
You Were My Boyfriend But You Tied A Rope Around My Legs And Threw Me In The Fire (And My Baby Too)

Mama Loves All 14 Of Us A Lot But She’s Weary Of Our Shit And Now She’s Dyin’ (Gather Round)

The McCleans Stole A Firewood Log From Our Pile So We Won’t Rest Until The Last Of Their Male Kin Is Laid In The Cold Ground

We Knew The River Would Rise But We Still Didn’t Fix The Levee

The River Rose, The Levee Broke, Everyone Died, It Was Just As We Reckoned (dulcimer twang-a-lang)

When The Merrow Come A-Marchin’ I’m A Southern Man And I Feed Their Horses My Best, When The Kappa Come A-Marchin’ I’m A Northern Man And I Feed Their Horses What The Merrow Left

I Love My Girl, I Want A Horse, I’m Going To Leave

THE MINE OWNS OUR SOULS (FOREVER)

You Can’t Go Back To Your Childhood Home Because It’s Buried Under A Gem Mine Now

The Dunshilly Valley Authority Killed All My Sheep Somehow

Oh, and don’t forget that old standby “The Mine Collapsed and Everyone Died”; classic of the genre, that.

Go into Dunshilly, and it’s a bit different again. You get things like:

I Met a Girl and We Went Hunting (It Was a Metaphor for Sex)
I Met a Girl and We Caught Some Birds (It Was a Metaphor for Sex)
I Met a Girl and We Found Her Lost Pet (It Was a Metaphor for Sex)
I Met a Girl By Staying At Her Parents’ House and She Made My Bed (It Was an Especially Thinly-Veiled Metaphor for Sex)
I Am a Girl and I Regret Engaging In Metaphors for Sex Because Now I’m Pregnant
I Met a Girl and Bribe Her Into Sex But She Stole My Horse and Ran Away With It
I Met a Girl At an Inn and We Had Non-Metaphorical Sex But She Stole My Stuff The Next Morning and Now I Have Syphilis
You have Syphilis and Now So Do I

Hurrah, Hurrah, For Tobacco And Slavery
Hey Nonny Nonny Let’s Hunt Down A Virgin
Drink Yourself To Death In Beautiful Coral Hills
Sod Farming (We’d Rather Get Murdered Abroad)
Reluctant Blessed Burial For the Quarter Whore
I Took To The High Seas And I’m Full Of Regret
That Ol’ Black Death Got The Whole Village Real Dead
Burn The Witches
Burn The Priests
I’ve Had A Beer, Let’s Talk Shit About The Germa
Your Fiance Died Either at Trafalgar or Waterloo, Let’s Get Married, I’m Glad You Said No Because I’m Really Him In Disguise
Our Nelson Sure Was Awesome (And Drunk!)
The Press-Gang Dragged Off All the Important Men in My Life (And Now They Are Dead)
Farm Laborers Are The Salt of the Earth And Are Never Grindingly Poor
Begging Is a Completely Viable Career Option With Flexible Hours and Unlimited Access to Alcohol

Go far enough into Gobdark, and you’ll get to the Fae Quarter, which has an entirely different tradition behind it.

I met a girl and she framed me for theft and got me sent here for it (technically Siren)
I committed various crimes and got sent here for it, and I am sad about losing my various criminal friends (Djinni antecedent)
Unlike the aforementioned convicts I am happy to be on this ship, because I was born here and am going back home. Nyah.
We are shearing and the newly-arrived Fae suck at it.
We are shearing and I am personally the best at it.
We are shearing and this one guy is the acknowledged best at it but a skinny old guy with a skinny old sheep has mysteriously outdone him!
Gundagai. People come from there (some of them are shearers), other people go there, it’s at the end of a long road.
Droving cattle is very lonely, requires more whisky.
Droving cattle is very lonely, you may hallucinate.
Droving cattle is very lonely, but I wouldn’t give it up for city life.
The death of a bushranger makes for a very stirring ballad.
People in the city are miserable, criminals, or otherwise inferior to people in the country.
Man steals sheep, drowns self to avoid arrest, becomes cultural legend and pseudo-cultural-anthem.
I’m a Bushranger and I will Kill Cops
I’m a Cop and I will Kill Bushrangers
I’m a Bushranger and ohshit I’m Dead
Sit by a billabong and Die you homeless shit (then become a ghost and haunt the place)
I’m a Revolutionary and I’m on fire (Oh No)
Convicts weren’t criminals (yes they were)
I dislike authority (on a boat)
Oh No It’s Too Dry
Oh No It’s Too Wet

At that point, I was interested, and I just started collecting them. Germa folk songs go something like this:

I Am A Brawny-Armed Lumberjack Who Loves a Town Girl, Oh No!
Oh Fuck, I Slept With a Fur Trapper, What Shall I Tell Maman?
Hauling Logs, Rolling Logs, Driving Logs, All Day, What Ho!
Like Hell You’re Marrying That Good for Nothing Bambocheur!
Fetch My Gold Ring That Fell Into the Sea! Now!
I Met A Sailor While A-Strolling, And Now We Are In Love!
I Want to Kiss the Sailor I Met A-Strolling, But I’m Afraid My Father Will Find Out!
Oh Fuck, I Kissed the Sailor I Met A-Strolling And Now We Are Doomed!
I Came Over To Join The Fur Trade, And Despite the language barrier, married a Native woman and she bore me three children, but now i must go back to Floria and my Florish Wife and my Florish Children, Whoops
I went up North to find some gold, and we are all freezing to Death
I went up North to find some gold and I am going mad from the never ending daylight and am hallucinating

I went up North to find some gold and all I got was Gonorrhea from a prostitute

I married eight different women in six different towns and I don’t know why they’re all mad at me

All my sheep died on the ice flow

My horse fell in the pond

Seriously, my horse is in the pond

Did I mention the Pond’s Frozen over? Little help here (chorus in french)

I married the Devil’s Sister and he laughs at me at the Yuletide Feast every year

My fishing Dory’s broken

Whoops, dad just died, looks like the Dory’s fixed

From Wes Blue, we get these classics:

A Spider Has Bitten Me And If I Do Not Dance I Will Die, Alas

I Am A Very Fancy Man With A Very Fancy Hat

The Cable Cart Is A Thinly-Veiled Metaphor For Your Feminine Torture, O Woman

Home Is The Very Best Place And Every Other Place Is Just Awful

I Love You, But You Are Married

I Love You, But You Are Fickle (Why Did You Dance With The Baker’s Son, Thou Vixen?)

I Love You, But You Left Me All Alone On This Romantic Wind-Swept Hillside, Which Is Actually Very Pretty, But Not As Pretty As You, Foul Temptress

Home Is Still The Best Place And Every Other Place Can Go Right To Hell

Seriously Once You Have Been Home You Will Just Be Sick At The Thought Of Being Anywhere Else, You Will Pine Away And Die

I Love You, But You Are Dead (Or Maybe You Just Went To Live In A Slightly Prettier Place)

Home, Home, O Home, Ah Home, Home Home Home, Have I Mentioned That I Love Home?

Women Are Like The Ocean: Salty And Full Of Drowned Sailors

Women Are Like The Ocean: I Cannot Figure Them Out At All

I Saw You One Time At A Party And I Have Designs Upon Your Feminine Virtue
I Love You, But You Are Married To The Ocean (For Some Reason)
I Have A Cool Gun, And Now I Have To Go Kill This Man Who Has A Bigger Gun Than Me
My Family Died Of Dysentery While Crossing The Plains
Man I Wish I Was In California
The Sheriff Stole My Girl So Now I Have To Kill Him
I Have A Better Horse Than You
It’s Stupid Hot
Wait, Now It’s Stupid Cold
I Won a Farm/Horse/Ship in a Game of Poker then Lost It The Next Hand
It’s a Big Storm Out There, Dad, Stay Safe
It’s a Big Storm Out There, Dad, Stay Safe (He Died Reprise)
It’s a Big Storm Out There, Dad, Hope You Drown (Stop Beating Mama)
My Man Left Me For The War And Now I Must Raise This Child Alone
My Man Left Me For The Sea And Now I Must Raise This Child Alone
My Man Left Me For The Fur Trade And Now I Must Raise This Child Alone
The Mill Shut Down And Now I Must Raise This Child With No Money
Wash On Monday, Iron On Tuesday, Mend On Wednesday, Kill My Abusive Husband On Thursday, Bake On Friday
My Love, I Must Leave You (For The Sea)
My Love, I Must Leave You (The Priests say you’re a Sinner)
My Love, I Must Leave You (I Am Poor)
Where In God’s Name is the Rum?

Djinni folk songs go like:

I Went Out Riding and Noticed The Wind
We Fought a Bunch of Guys (On Horseback)
Witness My Many Ungulates
(While On a Horse) I Met a Hot Girl Who Reminded Me of a Plant
On Three, Say What That Terrain Feature Looks Like to You (One, Two, Three, A Horse)

Witness My Many Ancestors’ Many Ungulates

I Also Enjoy Heavy Metal, Especially If It’s Made of Horseshoes

Oooorrrweeeeuurrrreeeeuuuuuuwwwwwwrrrrrrrrrrrrrr (Is Djinn for “Horse”)

You Might Not Know This About Me, But I Own a Horse

Est Blue Folk songs are like:

We Must Plant the Crops, Let’s Get Drunk!

We Must Harvest the Crops, Let’s Get Drunk!

There’s No Crops Right Now, Let’s Get Drunk!

Sex On the Beach Is Awesome, War Is Bad

There Are Ghosts in the Trees

The Lords Exploit Us (And the Merchants Do Too)

I Love the Sea, This Island Is Beautiful, War Is Still Bad

Hey, There’s an Old Man, Let’s Get Drunk!

Respect Your Parents Or You Will Be Lost at Sea Forever

Drink! Drink! Drink!

Some Pirate Classics:

We’re Delivering Sake and Also Having Adventures (Everyone Sings Along To This One)

Drink! Drink! Drink!

This Song Was Never Popular Until The Pirates Got Ahold Of It

Fuck The Prairie This Place Fucking Sucks It’s Not Even Good Enough To Die In Let’s Go To Sea

Shit, Let’s Be Pirates

I Was Never Good For Anything (Until I Went To Sea)

I Was Never Good For Anything (And I Never Will Be)
This Song Is Actually Eight Different Songs Used To Push Six Different Political Agendas, With The Same Tune, Because Plagiarism Wasn’t Invented Yet (But You’ll Know If You Should Punch Someone Based On What Name They Give It)

Holy Fuck, We Just Got Our Shit Wrecked By The Marines, This Is So Hype

I’m Supes Dead But It’s K

Fuck The South

Fuck The North

Fuck The West

Fuck The East

Fuck The Sky

Fuck The Sea

Fuck Every Ship That Isn’t Mine

This Song Was Probably Actually A Tune From Somewhere Else, But Fuck You It’s Ours Now

Every Part Of Dying In Battle Is Awesome

I Miss My Friends Who Died In Battle

What The Fuck Even Is Up With This Old Bastard

Fuck Me, Fuck You, Fuck This, I’m Going To Sea

It’s Debatable If This Song Is Racist (If You’re A Dumbass In Denial)

We Stole This Song From The Marines, Who Used It To Make Fun Of Us, But We’re By And Large Too Stupid To Realize That

That Girl Is A Prostitute (But At Least She Goes To Temple)

That Incompetent Sailor Is Actually A Girl, But She Will Have Sex With You If You Don’t Kick Her Off The Boat

Someone Of Any Occupation Is Doing Something, But Unfortunately They Are Now Dead

Fuck You Marines (Haha, We Sunk Your Boat And Stole Your Silver)

Fuck You Government

We Might Be Small, But We Will Fight You

Life Isn’t So Bad, If You Just Go Outside

Fuck You Winter

We Have No Food Because The Cook Is A Goddamn Fool

Look At That Guy (Wild Racism)
We Like Going To Other Countries (More Wild Racism)

Drinking Is Fun

Drinking Makes Me Long For Sea

God Is My Dad

My Ship Is Great And Full Of Love (Oh God, The Sexual Metaphor is Blatant)

My Girl can cook, and is therefore superior Your Girl, Who Cannot

My Girl cannot cook and is therefore inferior to all other girlfriends

I saw you over a pile of Gold and knew I was in love (on the sea)

I saw you over a pile of Gold and knew I was in love (It’s a Ship)

A list of regional dishes set to the tune of kitchen utensils

I Need a Woman

Women are Evil

My Woman is Screwing the Cook

My Woman is Screwing the Captain

My Woman is Screwing my Best Friend

My Woman is Screwing Everybody in Town (Except Me)

My Woman is Screwing the Milkman/Bus Driver/my Best Friend/Everybody (Except Me) while I Work All Day, Drink All Night

So Tired Of This Shit

Captain Is a Bastard (But If Anyone Else Calls Him That We’ll Fight Them)

I Lost My Job

I Lost My Woman Because I Lost My Job

I Lost My Temper and Murdered My Woman (and Then I Lost My Job)

My Woman Tried to Poison Me

My Mama Thinks I’m Handsome (But No One Else Agrees)

The Weather is a Metaphor and It’s Always Raining

I Have a Lot of Feelings and Drinking Them Seems Like the Best Solution

I Met the Devil in an Unlikely Place and Made an Ill-Advised Bargain

I Got Arrested but it was a Big Misunderstanding (officer I swear I had no idea she was fifteen)
*Fruit-related metaphors for masturbation*

*dogs howling* *ocean sounds* *harmonica solo*

Oh God I’m so lonely someone please touch me

No Don’t Touch Me Like That (You Don’t Know How To Have Sex At All)

Oh Touch Me More (You Know How To Show Me A Good Time)

Orcish folk songs:

There Was A War And Everyone is Dead, There’s Also a Symbolic Bird

There is Going to Be a War And Everyone Will Die, There’s Also a Symbolic Bird

The Dieing Is Happening Right Now, There’s Also a Symbolic Bird

I Had a Dream About Us Dying (No Birds Involved)

Alas You Are Dead

I’m a Bird, I Drink Vodka

Fuck It’s Cold

Frost Do Not Freeze Me Do Not Freeze My Horse Do Not Freeze My Wife Please I Have Children

Ayy Lmao This Guys Head Just Got Shot Off, We Are Going to Die Hahaha

I Am Married To A Man And I Moved Far From My Home But I Want Fucking Back On My Fucking Land To My Parents And A Guy Whom I Actually Planned To Marry Before My Society’s Patriarchal Structure Destroyed My Life

A Guy Whom I Loved Loved Me And Also A Some Other Bitch So I Poisoned Him So That Nobody Gets Him

This Is My Land And I Love It Very Much

I Made A Traditional Kupala Wreath And Released It On Water To Find My Love, No Sexuality Involved, Really

I Have A Veeery Deeep Well In My Garden, And Also A Veeery Curly-Wurly Cabbage, And Also A Veeery Sweeeet Carrot Growing There, Come On Guys Check It Out, Oh, And There Are Totally No Sexual Hints

Graphic Descriptions Of Lesbian Sex

Everybody Is Dead After A Battle But There Is One Particular Orc Whom I Am Especially Obligated To Mourn About Because He Is A Representative Of Our Entire Nation’s Young People

The Couple Cannot Be Together Because Of Various Reasons And Everybody Cries
The Couple Cannot Be Together Because Of Various Reasons And Everybody Cries And It’s Compared To Some Sad Shit Happening In Nature

Let’s Kill All People Who Threaten Us Hahaha Yay!

Let’s Kill All People Who Threaten Us And Involve Some Couple Who Cannot Be Together Because Of Various Reasons And Everybody Cries

Alas, beautiful girls, they’re going to recruit, weep your lovers.

Blue-eyed girl, don’t sit by the stream, it will take away your beauty.

Hey, hay, hey, you’ve been unfaithful, I’m going to die.

Oh dear, oh dear, I’ve been recruited and now my girlfriend is far away. But I got a nice horse and a sword, yay! Anyways, I’m going to die.

Oh the beauty of the green woods, you’ve been unfaithful, you’re going to die.

Oh the beauty of this or that little town, I love you, my black-eyed girl.

Had you listened to your mother, you wouldn’t have been recruited, my poor son.

I gave my scarf to a boy and he doesn’t love me anymore. I have no more scarfs to give. (Sexual Metaphors Everywhere)

My boyfriend is angry because I lost the scarf he gave me. (Not Actually a Metaphor I Think)

Random Song About Farmwork (It’s actually about sex)

Give me a kiss, beautiful girl! I will not, but come to our house this evening and I will kiss you.

I am poor, I don’t have shoes.

Please don’t come to our house, I am ashamed of your poverty. Come on Sunday in better clothes, my mother will be happy to invite you in.

Random Song About Handicraft

I’m Not Gonna Work I’m Gonna Drink (aw yeah)

You Don’t Work You Just Drink (goddammit)

I Don’t Want To Work I want to Party and Flirt

(mentions of a random place) let’s talk about my lover in the other half of the verse

(mentions of random food) let’s talk about my lover at the other half of the verse

(mentions of random thing I/you have) let’s talk about my lover in the other half of the verse

Oh I’m Such a Good Worker

Oh S/he’s Such a Crap Worker (look what s/he did)

Don’t Flirt And Do Your Work
A Song About Flirting (and Implied Sex) and Nothing Else

A Song About Flirting with epilogue complaints about my new spouse

I Was Flirting (Implied Sex) and Got In Trouble

Let’s Complain About My Lover

Let’s Complain About Me Not Having a Lover

My Lover Got Conscripted (And Died)

I Love You Mom, An Inexplicably Sad Song

I Love You My Child, An Inexplicably Sad Song

Dear Gods please don’t smite us

*Duduk solo*

My mom died, a random mention of vinegar, I am sad.

The list of depressing things in my life

A detailed study on behaviour of Perdix perdix, aka Grey partridge. It may or may not be a metaphor for a random village beauty.

Uncle is here, I love him and I’m happy but I’ll sing it extra sadly because fuck you

The list of depressing things in my life volume II

Another duduk solo

Elves killed us, fuck them

My brother killed my lover, so my lover’s family is calling for vendetta, fuck my life, I’m going to jump from a cliff.

The list of depressing things in my life volume III

The best of Depressing things in my life I, II, III, IV

Zurna solo because fuck everyone’s ears

I’m crying again. I can’t stop crying, it’s the weirdest thing; I want to stop crying, because she’s fine, mom’s fine and she’s got more to tell us, I just. I just didn’t want her to ever- go. I never wanted her to go where I couldn’t follow her.

Each of us has a specific fighting style that Mom taught us- or at least, what she asked us to learn. Our Family, the Black- or, in the original language, Kalee- has seven distinctive fighting doctrines, and I suppose Mom assigned one to each of us at birth.
Mom didn’t name us alphabetically; she named us in order of color association.

Deborah is the oldest, and her color is Red. Red is the color of fire and blood, and is associated with energy, war, danger, strength, power, determination, as well as passion, desire, and love. Red is a very emotionally intense color. It enhances human metabolism, increases the rate of breath, and raises blood pressure. It has a very high visibility, which is why stop signs, stoplights, and fire safety equipment is usually painted red. In heraldry, red is used to indicate courage. There is no one I know who is more passionate about food; and no one I know more courageous. She can only bake bads, but that hasn’t stopped her from trying anyway.

I wasn’t able to read all the Grimoire- that’s really Ellie’s bag, honestly- but I do remember what her throwing knives really are.

In our family, it’s called the Vorpal Blade, a weapon bound to our blood; it has followed us since it’s birth, during the Age of Heroes, when Black Alice (or Anais, or some other name of reasonable similarity- I know Ellie prefers Anais, but I like Alice) slew the Jabberwocky. It is the only weapon, in fact, that can slay the Jabberwocky.

The way I, personally, know that Deborah’s throwing knives are actually the Vorpal Blades is down to a series of omens. Firstly, there’s the fact that the way she got her knives is by following a white rabbit down a hole- in a wall, if that matters- and fell into some manner of adventure. Upon her return, she had the throwing knives, her cooking knife, and a bloody gleam in her eyes.

Somehow, I think her cooking knife and her throwing knives are actually the same thing, but she’ll need intercession from a blacksmith-mage to really work that out… Even so, her fighting style is all about knives. She can throw them with stunning accuracy and force; and her knowledge of the vital points of a person means that in a knife-fight, she’s very dangerous indeed. Her style is aggressive, and… so, firstly, knives are not easy to block. When we all get together and spar- which is rare, but it happens often enough that I know this…

Hm.

Deborah’s sparring gear- because we don’t actually want to hurt each other- is a black brush-pen, or marker. Even getting flailed at by a rank amatuer with a marker is enough to know that if they had a knife, you’re walking away with bloody cuts across your legs, your arms, your groin and chest, your face- lots of black marks, everywhere. Which is to say- if you’re not wearing armor, you can’t block a knife. Knives move very differently when they’re trying to get at someone in armor, as opposed to someone in their everyday clothing.

The first thing to know about fighting Deborah is to move your goddamn feet, she’s coming after you. She’s aggressive and crafty, and prefers using one knife at a time, if she’s not throwing them- at which point, she’s using both hands, so basically- find cover.

The second thing is that there are about three different ranges to fighting Deborah. There’s long hand range, where if her arm is locked out, there’s a certain point at which her weapon can’t reach you, but your weapon can. At that range, her most basic move is called Defang; it’s where she backs away from a strike, and cuts at the striking hand; a step closer and the attack can touch her center line, which is where Defang Check comes in. Defang Check is the same as Defang, with the added checking of the attacking hand with her passive hand. Things steadily get nastier from there. Defang Crush is the one you have to watch out for- Deb’s skull is a goddamn hammer.

I think she learned moves off her work friends? There are a lot of punches, kicks, stomps, and
headbutts that she didn’t learn from Mom, is the thing- I think she picked things up at work.

Eleanor is second oldest, and her color is Orange. Orange is energetic and happy in combination. It is associated with joy, sun-tides, and tropical mixed drinks. Orange represents enthusiasm, fascination, happiness, creativity, determination, attraction, success, encouragement, and stimulation. To the eye, orange is a very hot color and so gives the sensation of heat. Still, orange is not as aggressive as red. Orange increases oxygen supply to the brain, produces an invigorating effect, and stimulates mental activity. It’s highly popular among the youths, or the young at heart. It is the most common color of citrus, and associated with healthy food and stimulates appetite. It’s the color of autumn, and the harvest season. In heraldry, orange is used to indicate strength and endurance.

Eleanor is an ambush fighter; she uses the environment, oblique angles, and sneak attacks when she fights at all. Her first instinct is actually to run away or avoid a fight entirely. However, when it comes down to it, she’ll use her wall-climbing skills to jump down on top of people, or her…

I’m not sure why only some of us have this ability; I think it’s because Mom wasn’t entirely honest about our father. Simply put, some of us can spit or excrete ink, and some of us can spit or excrete mucus; Ellie can do both. To that end, she uses her rudimentary knowledge of Fishman Karate, and her ink, as… basically ink-bombs? I know she can throw her normal ink like a paintbomb, and blind or distract a person that way. I also know that depending on what she eats, or something- maybe how she applies her magic to the ink before she throws it?

She can change the properties of her ink. The most common is to make it very slippery; she can also make it dry faster, slower, thicker, thinner, change the color, make it flammable- and that’s not getting into what happens when she mixes it with her mucus.

Still, her fighting style- she uses her ink to blind, distract, and foul the footing of whoever she’s fighting, and she uses her mucus to ensnare and entangle them. She can also change her physical shape with contortion, and change the color and pattern of her skin and hair.

Ellie’s a ninja-thief- and, depending on the day, there’s always a chance that the bag on her back is actually full of Guppies; her faithful crew of tiny thieves. They are vicious little bastards; strong, fast, and incredibly good at being annoying; which leaves the attacker open to catchin’ their own personal beat-down.

I am the third oldest, and my color is Yellow. Yellow is the color of sunshine. It's associated with joy, happiness, intellect, and energy. Yellow produces a warming effect, arouses cheerfulness, stimulates mental activity, and generates muscle energy. Yellow is also often associated with food. Bright, pure yellow is an attention getter, which is the reason taxi-carts and school vans are painted this color. When overused, yellow may have a disturbing effect; it is known that babies cry more in yellow rooms. Yellow is seen before other colors when placed against black; this combination is often used to issue a warning. In heraldry, yellow indicates honor and loyalty.

I’m not a person who likes fighting. I try to stay out of it, if I can. However, there comes a time in every woman’s life when she must cast off the childish garments of girlhood and put on the heavy mantle of womanliness. Shortly after that, she has to kick someone’s teeth in.

Since I wasn’t raised by kung fu fighting wolves, technically, I had to make some important decisions; I couldn’t go through life assuming I was capable of defending myself in a fight because fucking around with my sisters in what can be described as full-contact brawling isn’t really… Nor
could I assume I’d get everything I’d need from a single teacher. Neither way is actually ideal.

So, I learned a trio of styles.

The first style I learned the basics of was Judo. There are no where near as many cool moves as karate, but judo is much more immediately useful. Within the first week of training in the martial art, I learned ten different, easy-to-use throws and sweeps. Within the second and third week of training, using the moves on my sisters had taught me when to use those moves.

The second style was Stickfighting. Old, simple, lots of opportunity to grab a weapon; lots of little tricks you can pick up from, say, the local cops by looking cute and helpless and determined. Good for breaking bones or terrifying your babysitting duties into behavior. A large wooden spoon’s a stick, right? And a fortuneteller with a large wooden stick- or spoon- is just a person who takes Rahbdomancy seriously as a method of divination. (It is a serious method of divination, but it’s best use is in pathfinding in the physical world. It’s a very specialized form of divination; not good for making money.)

The third and final style I learned the basics of was Aikido. Aikido is a martial art that’s designed primarily for self defense. The creator of aikido wanted to make an art that a person could use to defend themselves, without causing injury to their attackers. The majority of aikido is not striking. It’s based on the principle that an attacker exposes themselves each time they go on the attack. The defender is supposed to recognize the vulnerability and respond with an attack to ensure that she is not exposed herself. The defender is instructed to go with the movement of the attacker and use his momentum against him, instead of fighting against it. My favorite move is the forearm return, which I call Reversal. An attacker comes at him with a straight punch and he steps to the side, grabbing the wrist, and using the momentum with a twist to disable the attacker’s wrist. The attacker will likely be put off balance and may break his wrist in the process. Aikido also includes joint locks, a grappling technique that extends the joints to their maximal degree of motion. These do not take much speed, but rather proper technique to disable an attacker.

Genevieve is the middle sister, and her color is Green. Green is the color of nature. It symbolizes growth, harmony, freshness, and fertility. Green has strong emotional correspondence with safety. Dark green is also commonly associated with money. Green has great healing power. It is the most restful color for the human eye; it can improve vision. Green suggests stability and endurance. Sometimes green denotes lack of experience; for example, a ‘greenhorn’ is a novice. In heraldry, green indicates growth and hope. Green, as opposed to red, means safety; it is the color of free passage in road traffic.

Genny’s a nurse, so she doesn’t really fight on the ground, other than some punches, some kicks, and a bit of quarterstaff fighting. In the air is a different story- her main witch skill is broomstick flying. I don’t know all the details, you’d have to ask her- I do know, however, that she likes using bombs, if she’s fighting in the air. Like, actual explosives.

Adelaide is the third youngest, and her color is Blue. Blue is the color of the sky and sea. It is often associated with depth and stability. It symbolizes trust, loyalty, wisdom, confidence, intelligence, faith, truth, and heaven. Blue is considered beneficial to the mind and body. It slows human metabolism and produces a calming effect. Blue is strongly associated with tranquility and calmness. In heraldry, blue is used to symbolize piety and sincerity.

She uses Wado-ryu Fishman Karate, a style characterized by its fluid movements and open-palm
Beatrix is the second youngest, and her color is Indigo. Indigo is the color of the deep midnight sky. It can have a negative effect when used during a depressed state, because it will deepen the mood. Indigo symbolizes a mystical borderland of wisdom, self-mastery and spiritual realization. While blue is the color of communication with others, indigo turns the blue inward, to increase personal thought, profound insights, and instant understandings. While blue can be fast, Indigo is almost instantaneous.

She uses the Two-sword style with a pair of shrinky-dink Germa Rending Shears- a type of sabre that shrinks down into a smaller blade, when the correct magical key signature is used.

Cecelia is the youngest, and her color is Violet. The color violet relates to the imagination and spirituality. It stimulates the imagination and inspires high ideals. It is an introspective color, allowing us to get in touch with our deeper thoughts. Violet has the highest physical vibration in the visible spectrum. Violet is the color of the union of body and soul, creating a balance between our physical and our spiritual energy. From a color psychology perspective, violet promotes harmony of the mind and the emotions, contributing to mental balance and stability, peace of mind, a link between the spiritual and the physical worlds, between thought and activity. Violet supports the practice of meditation. Too much of the color violet can promote or aggravate depression in some. It is one color that should be used extremely carefully and in small amounts by those who are vulnerable to these depressed states.

Cece’s a battle clown.

I’m- Tired. Mab’s done, I think- she just came outside, and she’s picked me up, and she’s picked up my mother’s ashes- we had to burn her body- and she’s got Deb’s sword and all our stuff and we’re-leaving-

And that was the last I ever saw of our old home. I cried myself to sleep on Mab’s shoulder, and that’s where my recollection of events ends.

There are things I am Bound by Oath not to speak of. What I did, exactly, to get the Umbrae of Gobdark to fight on our side of the war- that is one of those things.

I can, however, tell you about the **Memory Palace of Shadows**.

The method of loci is a method of memory enhancement which uses visualizations with the use of spatial memory and familiar information about one’s environment, to quickly and efficiently recall information. The method of loci, also known as the **Memory Palace**, is a mnemonic device adopted in ancient rhetorical treatises. Many methods of recalling faces, number lists, and words rely on this
technique. Success has little to do with brain structure or intelligence; mostly, it has to do with remembering where you put your shit.

The items to be remembered in this mnemonic system are mentally associated with specific physical locations. The method relies on memorized spatial relationships to establish, order, and recollect memorial content.

The Rhetorica ad Herennium and most other sources recommend that the method of loci should be integrated with elaborative encoding (i.e., adding visual, auditory, or other details) to strengthen memory. However, due to the strength of spatial memory, simply mentally placing objects in real or imagined locations without further elaboration can be effective for simple associations.

A variation of the "method of loci" involves creating imaginary locations (houses, palaces, roads, and cities) to which the same procedure is applied. It is accepted that there is a greater cost involved in the initial setup, but thereafter the performance is in line with the standard loci method. The purported advantage is to create towns and cities that each represent a topic or an area of study, thus offering an efficient filing of the information and an easy path for the regular review necessary for long term memory storage.

Something that is likely a reference to the "method of loci" techniques survives to this day in the common phrases "in the first place", "in the second place", and so forth.

The designation is not used with strict consistency. In some cases it refers broadly to what is otherwise known as the art of memory, the origins of which are related, according to tradition, in the story of Simonides of Ceos and the collapsing banquet hall. For example, after the story of how Simonides relied on remembered seating arrangements to call to mind the faces of recently deceased guests, insight from other scholars led to the development of the method of loci, which is a systematic way of improving one's memory by using imagery. In other cases the designation is generally consistent, but more specific: "The Method of Loci is a Mnemonic Device involving the creation of a Visual Map of one's House."

This term can be misleading: the ancient principles and techniques of the art of memory, hastily glossed in some works, depended equally upon images and places. The designator "method of loci" does not convey the equal weight placed on both elements. Training in the art or arts of memory as a whole, as attested in classical antiquity, was far more inclusive and comprehensive in the treatment of this subject.

I suppose I can tell you what I did, actually- but only the surface details. Method of Loci- Loci Method. Place memory- memory place. Same, Same, Same.

The Place remembers too- all places.

Shadow Palace of Memory just… physicalized things.

Time is strange; you start out with so much, and then before you know it, you've run out. Dawn shines over a battlefield in the middle of Corallia, where Shyarly’s cafe stands still; it shines on a princess, freed of her shackles; it shines on a townhouse, filled with pirates and royalty; it shines on a ship where seven teenage girls and two grown men are helping a slightly racist fishman coat the outside with a special bubble mixture.
As the light hits wavering Umbrae, they vanish- burned away by the rolling sun-tide.

Here’s a story. See if you can tell what kind of weapon it became.

I started formal training in the martial arts when I was six years old. My gym was a very masculine environment; there weren’t any other girl students there, but the trainers and teachers there were great guys anyway, and they genuinely loved having me as a student. Part of it was the rarity- it’s very rare that any member of the Morgan House wants to learn something so banal as the spear, and rarer still that they stick with it.

It’s hard to imagine a time when I was ever small, but I was- a tiny scrappy little fae-lette, only a bit over a yard tall- three feet and some change. I was a tiny child.

I was also pugnacious- and back then, I was rambunctious too. I love fighting; I love to be in a spar, the adrenaline rush and having punches hurled at me- and back then, I had more energy than a midsummer bonfire. For me, doing all the suicide drills and the cherrypicks and the crunches and on and on- most people greeted that with a groan of dismay. I cheered, and got right to it.

The coaches and trainers really like that kind of attitude, even the crusty assholish ones; it’s so rare, you see.

Our gym allowed full-contact sparring, which gets brutal in a hurry. The only rules were that we had to wear a mouth guard and hand wraps, no live steel, and no hits below the belt- as in, the crotch- were allowed. That’s about it, as far as rules went; the Gym Master took the approach that the Zeroth Rule was the best rule of all.

For those that haven’t been around a shop before, the Zeroth Rule is thus: Don’t make me make a rule about this.

Anyway, every Fightday was Fight Day, where all we did was spar and go over what happened in the spars. There was also some remedial technique correction going on, but that you had to ask for. On my First ever Fight Day, Coach Feste, who was on loan from the Mime Tower, paired me up with a really cocky and assholish white-ribbon to show me the ropes a little. Our Gym used a ribbon system, much like the belt system of ranking- the colors were black for novices, then red, yellow, blue, and white for the most advanced students, before you got named a Ser, and that was it (aside from gaining respect from your peers, which is a matter of internal character). This white-ribboner was at least six feet and four times my weight; but I was so excited to get into it and fight!

I had a fight boiling in my blood, and everyone at the Gym was at least peripherally aware that I approached every moment of training with the same kind of no-holding-back-for-later enthusiasm I would later learn is called ‘100% effort at all times’.

Coach Feste was not a stupid man and he hated high-ranking fighters with bad attitude. This white-ribboner had bad attitude. I guess he saw the evil gleam of battle in my eye from the moment we met; and that day, at that time, was the best moment for a ‘little’ joke. Of course, for any kind of Fool, but Mimes especially, a ‘little’ joke is a nasty thing to be the butt of.

Coach yelled ‘Fight!’ and I leapt into the fighting stance and the other guy didn’t even put his guard up. He was laughing at me, sneering, jeering, the whole shebang.

I don’t remember if he said anything- I think he must of, because I remember Coach’s face changing
to something absolutely furious, and I remember the white-ribboner’s grin as he slapped at his side, goading me on- and I remember this, too.

In our Gym, we were only allowed to spar when we’d shown proficiency in our level of combinations- we weren’t supposed to ever hit once and stand there, we were supposed to hit and hit and hit until we either had to block or they went down.

When I hit the white-ribboner, I hit him with everything I had; the motion came from below my feet and ended behind his back, all the way up through my legs, my back, and my arms. I struck him, right in his ribs. I felt something crack- like, snap! - under my knuckles.

He went to the floor like a sack of potatoes, and started blubbery like a baby.

Coach Feste leisurely strolled over from the group of Sers who were laughing their asses off at me, the tiny little black-ribboner, sending my Giant to the floor in a squalling heap. I mean, they were laughing so hard they looked about half a gasp away from pissing themselves. They think it’s a game, that I just play hit him and… I dunno.

And in his great, thunderous voice, Coach Feste hollers: “Black Ribbon! Why are you on the floor? Do you not see this White Ribbon has been assigned to fight you?”

Meanwhile, the black-ribboner is crying like a bitch, because I totally just broke one of his ribs.

Coach Feste just squatted down next to the poor guy and whispered, “Don’t you know that women are made of pain, son?”

I’ve been a little bit wary of mimes ever since.

Anyway.

“You guys want to hear how I got rid of that Ghost Army?”

“YEAH!” shouts Luffy.

I snicker, and glance at everyone else. We’re in the lounging conservatory of the Royal Town House in Gyoncorde; everyone’s clean, rested, fed, and bandaged. Deborah is lying on a floating lounge chair, of all things, and-

“TELL THE STORY ALREADY MAB!” shouts Luffy.

“Alright, alright! Now, where was I- ah, yes-”
“Stories are like swords. Even if one borrows a sword, even if one does not forge it from ore and fire and their own sweat and tears, it is still the strength of one’s own body and the veracity of one’s own skill that makes proper- or improper- use of it.

“A sword, even dulled with age, can still draw blood. It can still strike down that which attacks; it can still defend that which is held dear.

“It is true that the sword made by one’s own hand is powerful; it is true, that the sword of one’s own hands is Known down to it’s very essences. One is intimate with its heft and its reach. Indeed, a sword made with one’s own two hands is merely another part of one’s arm.

“That very familiarity breeds hesitation; for it is also true that a reckless swing will notch even the strongest of blades. ‘Is it strong enough, one thinks. Will it withstand this? I worked so hard to make it.’

“A blade one snatches up because one needs a weapon in hand is not prey to such fears. One uses that blade to beat against their foes until the sword either saves- or shatters.

“But whether one makes that sword or takes it up from someone who fell on the field, the battles fought with it are always won by the wielder, not the blade.

“And so, I say this; I, the Queen of All Shadows, shall take the three blades drawn forth on this night, and venture out into the darkness. I shall find three things, which are needed- I shall find the treasure of this Shade, who has lingered this many years. I shall find the last to witness this treasure, wherever they may lurk. And I shall return, with the treasure I seek- and more, if circumstances are favorable. Upon my return, this Shade, who has lingered far longer than necessary, will leave this place- and this World- forever.” I said.

“Yes ma’am!” said the Ghost, shivering.

I smiled, and glanced at the two merfolk who had been very quiet; I nodded to Robin, who nodded back. I glanced over Beatrice-

“Sorry, what?”

“Be-a-trix!” said Beatrix, scowling.

“Oh, I’m sorry- with an ‘X’ at the end instead of a ‘Z’ or a ‘CE’?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

I glanced over Beatrix, and saw that she was sleeping peacefully, if in a melancholy way. Saa- not
something that can be fixed in one night.

“I’ll be back with the dawn, and not before. No matter what happens, you wait until the dawn- I’ll ring at the gate three times, no more and no less. Don’t let any other in,” I said.

And then, I turned, and left.

The Widow’s Chalice was stolen from her; find the Ghost that took it, and whatever remains of her cup, and she’ll find peace at long last. Her story, if you’ve forgotten, goes something like this-

Once upon a time, long ago, there was a young woman. There was a young woman who was different from the other people in her village. She could see and do things that no one else could, which made them scared of her. She became alone, and angry, and had no one to turn to.

And then, one day, she made a friend. It could have been anyone- but, it was enough that someone wasn’t scared of her anymore. Slowly, the woman made more friends, and the village came to accept her. Some wounds heal slowly- others, not at all. And so, the woman married, and her husband built her house at the very edge of their village.

And so it came to pass that that little village had their own resident witch.

Eventually, the witch and her husband had a daughter, and that daughter had her skills and talents, just as her mother did before her. Seasons changed, and seedlings grew- and the witch’s daughter fell in love with a passing soldier.

Maybe he really did mean to marry her; maybe she was foolish and young.

And maybe not.

The point is, the soldier left her with another daughter, and did not return.

And when the Witch’s Daughter, fallen from the good graces of the village, died herself, she did not leave. She stayed, and she stayed- for eight hundred years, through generation after generation of her family, she stayed. And the longer she stayed, the less there was of the Witch’s Daughter- and then, Robin, Beatrix, and myself, ended up at her house, at the very end of the road on which she could still turn back.

I left the house on frog legs, and left it’s little self-sustaining farmstead ringed in the bones of whales, it’s fence posts topped with the skulls of fish and horses and men. I went through the spiny gate, it’s coral bleached white with age, and let it shut and latch behind me. Under my feet, the path changed from cut stones to crushed shells, to muck. All around me, in the darkness, shimmering shapes began to flicker and blaze.

That house was on the edge of a village, once- a lively little place, with stories and lives all their own. Out in the distant night, I could hear the raucous echo of village life; a miller and a butcher and a baker, and their wives and children, the spinster librarian beating knowledge into the children of the
village with the hard length of a switch, if necessary—shouts, screams, and going about their… unlives.

*Over hill and under dell, to the forest where coral fish dwell; on the cliff overlooking war’s ancient strife, there you will find the horses, live.*

My prophetic directions were quite clear, and Faldo had unwittingly given me a heading—half an hour to the west, as the merman swims, is about the same as an hour as the Fairy runs. The name of the place I was running to is Crickhollow Sandbar—or so Faldo said, but there is no proof of his being correct.

As for what my directions told me to do, it’s quite clear, I think—go over the hill, and under a valley, to the coral reef. On the cliff that overlooks the ancient Barrows, the horses live.

And so I started running west. The Hunter chases the Beast to the West; and by their Departure, I knew my path.

“Ah, I had wondered about that.”

“Yeah—not all that helpful on an island or near a city, or even a large enough village—but out in the country and the wilds, knowing which constellations do what, and when, is very helpful to navigation.”

“The only thing I don’t understand is how the stars of this island can mimic the stars at surface level so precisely…”

I grin at Nami, and she blinks at me—but I can’t actually answer that question. Legally, I mean; I can’t answer that—and frankly, the truth isn’t that cool. Movement timing schedules, mechanical gears, and telemetry is really boring if you don’t like mathematics the way I do...

On with the story.

The only thing to really know about the Horse’s Meadow on the Cliff is this—it is wide, and green, rolling with grasses. There is no cover to speak of in any direction excepting the scrubby coral-stones that dissolve into sand and seagrass. The ghostly war raged on below, the barrows become hillocks of engineered encampments, trenches and ditches filled with bodies—Cannonfodder lying in the field of battle; was it the third week or the fourth week of the siege? The
air filled with the smoke and stench of burning bodies in the trenches-

But above, on the cliff where the horses had run, there was still the calm coolness of night. In those darkened hours, the light became soft and faded; the fields were lit with moonlight and stars, and the colors were soft and gentle. All in that place was quiet, the distant roar of the ghostly war a simple noise, as ignorable as a waterfall in the distance, or a storm passing through- noted, surely, but not of importance.

The water in that place is warm, and almost lazy in it’s movements; a gentle, rocking motion much like a mother would use to send a babe to sleeping. My ears had finally adjusted to the water, and so I could hear the soft rustling of leaves and branches of coral in the current, and I could smell- even through the filter system of my breathing rig, I could smell the faint stench of rotting leaves and algae, the unctuous grime of good black dirt.

It was as if Summer had found a place to linger, on that cliff in the sea.

In the tall waves of grass there laid sleeping a herd of horses.

And before me stood- hm. How to say it- Epona is the Goddess of Horses- what they look like, what they move like, how they think and live and die; Rhiannon is the Goddess of Riders, what they want, who they are, what they become.

What stood before me was something older; not what a horse and rider looks like, but what they are.

She appeared before me in increments.

Marrow black and flush with glistening blood shining like rubies in the starlight wove up and around into the barest form of a horse, the thin lines of it’s bones and the flickering of its weight. Then came bones, and blood- sharp white spiderwebs, cobwebs thick and white and made of stone began to build themselves, and before me rose the skeleton of a horse and woman, some strange creature married in vile ways-

A moment of blood filled my nose with- the stink of her, and then came flesh, thick and red and tiny threads clinging and tearing against each other before lumps of muscle appeared, strong gristly strands tying them without any knot to the bone- and then the muscles built and built. I saw glistening guts slithering over themselves, and a womb empty of life. I saw skin scrape itself over rippling muscles, the haggard form of one who ran too far, too fast.

I saw pallid flesh merged with shaggy fur; I saw muscles that bunched over new-skin, and the stretching of arms, the clenching and clamping of fingers. I saw a face, heralded by a mane of hair; ears, a tail, four long legs. Hooves like dinner plates.

A Monster, if I can use that term.

And then, she spoke, and what she spoke was thus-

“Tom of the Road had ridden his last, and was now alone in the Night. From where he was, a man might see the white bleached coral-trees and the black outline of the lonely downs; and the grey lines of the farther and lonelier downs beyond the ridge of the dell; or in the flickering lights far below, the
darkness of the field of battle. Far below him, if the moons shone just so, he could have seen the grey smoke of gunfire arising from the blackened world.

“All alike was black to the eyes of Tom, and all the sounds were silent in his ears; only his soul struggled still to slip from the iron chains and to pass into Heaven.

“The Wind blew, and blew.

“Tom tha’night had nought but the Wind to ride; they had taken his true ugly horse on the day when they took from him the green grass and the blue sky, men’s voices and the laughter of women, and had left him alone with chains about his neck to swing in the Wind forever.

“And the Wind blew, and blew.

“The soul of Tom of the Road was nipped by the cruel chains, and whenever it struggled to escape it was beaten backwards into the iron collar by the wind that blows from Heaven to Hell below. Swinging there by the neck, there fell away the old sneers from off his rotted lips, and scoffs that he had long since scoffed at the Gods fell from his maggoty tongue, and there rotted old bad lusts out of his heart and his loins and his brains, and from his fingers fell the murky ink of deeds that were evil; and they all fell to the ground and grew there in pale rings and mottled clusters. When these ill things had all fallen away, Tom’s soul was clean again, as his early love- the Witch’s Daughter- had found it within him, a long while ago on some spring day he only now could recall clearly. Together, they swung up there in the wind; the old white bones, Tom’s wretched soul, and the memories he had of better days- all of them together in his old torn coat, dancing in the wind to the tune of rusty chains beating and clinking against each other.

“And the Wind blew, and blew.

“Ever and anon the souls of the sepulchred, coming from their consecrated acres, would go by beating up Wind to Heaven past the Hanging Tree and past the forgotten soul of Tom, who might not go free. Night after night Tom watched the ghastly soldiers on the downs with empty hollow sockets, until his dead hair grew and covered his poor dead face, and hid the shame of it all from the horses that roamed this forest.

“And the Wind blew, and blew.

“Sometimes on gusts of the Wind there came someone’s tears, and a great beat and beating against the iron chains, but could not rust them through.

“And the Wind blew, and blew.

“Every evening all the thoughts that Tom had ever uttered aloud came flocking in from doing their work in the World, the work that may not cease, and sat along the branch that hung him and chirruped and cooed to the soul of Tom, the soul that might not go free. All the thoughts he had ever uttered!

“The evil thoughts rebuked the soul that bore them because they might not die; and all those that he had uttered the most furtively, chirruped the loudest and shrillest in the branches all the night long. All the thoughts that Tom had ever thought about himself now pointed at his wet and mouldering bones and mocked his old torn coat, cackling and shrieking and mocking all the night long- but all the thoughts that Tom had ever thought of others were the only companions that his soul had to soothe it in the night as it swung in the Wind. Altogether, they twittered and cheeped to the soul and cheered the poor dumb thing that could have dreams no more, until there came a murderous thought and drove them all to fly.
“And the Wind blew, and blew.

“The Archpriest of the little village Tom of the Roads had left his lover behind in was laid in a white marble tomb, his bones laid facing towards heaven. All over his tomb were sculpted the friezes and figures of Saints writhing in martyrdom, that his bones might be defended from evil. No Wind howled here as it howled in lonely treetops down in the dell, but came with gentle breezes scented by orchards and heavy-headed flowers, over the lowlands from Heaven above; the wind played about forget-me-nots and sweet grasses in the consecrated land where lay the reposed archpriest’s rounded tomb. Easy it was for a man’s soul to pass from such a tomb, and, flitting low over remembered fields, to come upon the gardened lands of Heaven and find eternal easement.

“And the Wind blew, and blew.

“In a tavern of foul repute three men were drinking gin. Their names were Joe, and Will, and the Automatic, Isaac. No other names had they, for of whom their fathers were they had no Knowing, but only dark suspicions. Sin had caressed and stroked their faces often with it’s paws, but the face of Isaac sin had kissed all over the mouth and chin. Their food was robbery; their pastime was murder. All of them had turned away from the love of God, and earned the enmity of all upstanding men. During the Great War, such men had been in great demand; but the war had ended, and those men who were in such demand soon found that there was no place for them in the World they had fought so hard for.

“They sat at a table with a packet of playing cards before them, all greased with the marks of cheating thumbs; and they whispered to one another over their gin, but so low that the landlord of the tavern at the other end of the room could hear only muffled oaths, and knew not by Whom they swore or what they said. These three were the staunchest friends that ever had blackened a lovely day; and he to whom their friendship had been given had nothing else besides, saving some bones that swung in the Wind and rain, and an old torn coat and iron chains, and a soul that might not go free.

“As the night wore on, the three friends left their gin and on their horses, stole away. They crept down to that graveyard where rested in his tomb the Archpriest, with no one to see their passing but the horses of the forest and the field.

“At the edge of the graveyard, but outside the consecrated ground, they dug a hasty grave; two men dug, while the third watched in the Wind and the rain. The worms and crawling bugs that slept in the unhallowed ground wondered and waited; the terrible hour of midnight came upon them with its fears and it’s waves of tide, and found them still digging beside the place of tombs. The three friends trembled at the horror of such an hour in such a place, and shuddered at the touch of strange beasts unseen except by the light of faded stars and scowling moons-light; but still, they worked on.

“And the Wind blew, and blew.

“Soon enough, they had finished, and at once they left the hungry grave with all it’s worms unfed, and went away through the water stealthily but in haste, leaving the place of tombs behind them in the night. As they went they shivered, and each man as he shivered cursed the tide aloud. And so they came at last to the spot where they had hidden a ladder and a lantern. There they held long debate over whether they should light the lantern; or whether they should go without it for fear of the Law. In the end it seemed to them better that they should have the light of their lantern, and risk being taken by the Law and hanged, than that they should come suddenly face to face in the darkness with whatever one might come face to face with after midnight at the Hanging Tree.

“On three roads in the kingdom whereon it was not the wont of folk to go their way in safety, travellers tonight went unmolested; but the three friends, riding several paces wide of the Lawful
Road, approached the Hanging Tree. Will carried the lantern, and Joe the ladder, but Isaac carried a great sword wherewith to do the work which must be done. When they came close, they saw how bad was the case with Tome, for little remained of that fine figure of a man and nothing at all of his great resolute spirit; only, as they came they thought they heard a whimpering cry like the sound of a thing that was caged and unfree and had almost forgotten what it was like to be free.

“Dangling and swaying to and fro, to and fro in the Wind were the bones and the soul of Tom, for the sins and wicked deeds he had done on the Law’s Road, against the good laws of the King and the softer laws of the World after the War had ended; and with shadows and a lantern through the darkness and the water, at the peril of their own lives, came the three friends that his soul had won before it swung in chains. Thus it was that the seeds of Tom’s own soul that he had sown with care and dedication all his life had grown into a Hanging Tree that bore in it’s season chains of iron and clusters of rotting meat plucked clean to bones by cackling crows and nibbling crabs; while the careless seeds that he had scattered here and there again, a kindly jest and a few merry words, oaths upheld and duties fulfilled, had grown into the triple friendship that would not desert his bones.

“The three set the ladder against the tree, and Isaac went up with his sword in his right hand, and at the top of it he reached up and began to hack at the neck below the iron collar. Presently, the bones and the old coat and the soul of Tom fell down with a rattle, and a moment afterwards his head that had watched so long alone swung clear from the swinging chain. These things Will and Joe gathered up, and Isaac came running down his ladder, and they heaped upon its rungs the terrible remains of their friend, and hastened away wet through with the tied, with the fear of haints and fellsome things in their hearts and horror lying before them on the ladder. By two of the clock’s counting they were down again in the dell, out of the bitter wind; but they went on past the open grave into the graveyard all among the tombs, with their lantern and their ladder and the terrible thing upon it which kept their friendship still.

“Then these three, that had robbed the Law of its due and proper victim, still sinned on for what was still their friend, and levered out the marble slabs from the sacred tomb of the Archpriest; and from it they took the very bones of the old priest himself. They carried them away to the eager grave that they had left, and put them in and shovelled back the earth. All that lay on the ladder they placed, with a few tears and sniffles, within the great white sepulchre under the writhing saints, and put back the great slabs of stone. Then the soul of Tom, arising hallowed out of sacred ground, went at dawn down through the dell, and- lingering but a moment about his mother’s house and the house of his beloved, now rounded fat with his child; and finally, about my ears, and whispered he the foolish thing he had done- and then he passed on, and came to the wider lands beyond this warstruck cluster of hills.

“From there, he met with all the kindly thoughts that Tom of the Road had ever had, and together they flew away until, at last, he reached Heaven, and with it, rest. Will and Joe and Automatic Isaac went back to their gin and their robbery and cheating, and knew not that in their sinful lives they had sinned one sin at which the Gods smiled; but We did.

“I was once the horse of Tom; and these, the horses of Will, Joe, and Isaac. There is nothing left of us but the memories we shared together, and the bloodlines that sprang from our loins- here, then, is my wish.

“Take this, and take us- and let the past be passed away, never to return again.”

-and, so saying, she reached into a bag upon her back that I had not seen in her appearing, and held out to me a chalice. I took it from her ancient hand, and then before me stood four horses- the four
we have now, in fact.
Spare Parts, who once bore Tom of the Road on her back.
Pumpkin, who once bore Will of the Road on her back.
Turnip, who once bore Joe of the Road on her back.
And Whiskers, who once bore Automatic Isaac on her back.

“Wait wait wait- hold it, hold everything. We have five horses.”
“Why, yes, Mark; we do indeed have five horses.”
“But the Goddess only gave you four.”
“True.”
“...Mab, where’d the fifth horse come from?”
“Hm. I’m sure I don’t know- Robin, where’d the fifth horse come from?”
“Steady?”
“Mhm.”
“Well. If you must know, Mark, Steady Walker is a ghost horse.”
“What!!” everyone shouts.

I grin wide and toothy, and tilt my head in Robin’s direction.

“Why don’t you take it from here, Rob?”
“Sure, Mab.”

The Sea is more ancient than the mountains, and freighted with the memories and dreams of Time. Be it blue, green, grey, white, or black; mirror bright or wine dark; smooth as glass, ruffled by the wind, or pitched with waves taller than the mountains, the Sea is never silent.

And so it was that night, when the Queen of Shadows, Mab the Merciful, left to find the token of affection the Witch’s Daughter had given unto her soldier-lover so long ago. Mab said once before that I am as much a Witch as Nami is; but where Nami calls the Weather, I commune with the Dead.
And so it was then.

Mab said before that the Witch’s Daughter’s ghost had stayed—she had stayed for long enough that there was hardly anything left of her at all. It is not that her soul was stuck here; so far as I can tell, the soul is bound to whatever heaven or paradise the gods who made us set into being at the Beginning of Men. What remained was her Echo.

An echo is the reflection—not of light, but of sound. In this case, it was the sound of her soul being reflected against the force of the living World; and from that ringing there arose the fearsome haint. The Dead, and the echoes of them, do not belong with us in the living World. For a time, they may ring themselves against the churning wall of Life; but, as with all things, their echoing chimes must end, and so they do, and pass from this world forever. Unless, of course, a grudge is involved.

Some hurts do not heal; some grudges persist beyond the grave. And so it was with the Witch’s Daughter, who had become a Hag; and Hags eat children. There were signs, of course, the most prominent being the young living couple’s reluctance to bring children of their own into that house; their fearful, longing gazes upon Beatrix, and the way the house was set to comfort youths that were not there… And, of course, the malicious miasma of the Hagfish herself, especially when Queen Mab had left the house—a sharp, burning rage at the one she had loved, beginning to eat away at the entirety of her faculty and reason.

And yet, there was no sign that she had eaten a child yet; and, if Mab returned successful, the Hag never would.

Either way, it was going to be a long night. To pass the time, I told these stories three. I started thusly.

“So said Homer.

“The poet of antiquity, who created a synopsis of history, that obliterated centuries of oral tradition and threw me head first into the study of ancient objects—antiquated verse:

“I will teach you this— who wins in the collision of the Nereids and the Faerie? If you are from Skua then the answer is ‘The Faerie’ but in case you’ve no relation to the sky-bound Nations—

“I shouldn’t skip ahead, so I’ll start with this instead: the story starts in Illium; some soldiers took a trip to it, flipped a bitch; tryn’ to get at a Faerie Player—

“Paris’ takin’ Helen but he isn’t supposed to Mene-lay-her—

“Prayers to the gods are flyin’ left and right, beggin’ for a fight; then Achilles quit the battle out of spite—yeah, that’s right—

“Lemme just back-track a little, because I lost track of the tale in the middle—

“And I ought to not fiddle with the canon of the history of Man; Eumelus might have done but that doesn’t mean I can—

“So here, I’ll tell the tale leading up to this tale.
“The Pantheon was havin’ them a party all night; they put some effort into makin’ up the guest list—tidy rockin’ Zeus, Hera, Ares, Aphrodite, Athena, Hermes, Vulcan— if you’re Roamin’— but one biddy weren’t invited—

“Little Eris, they’re embarrassed of her; she’s feelin’ slighted, so the goddess— to be honest she got a little over-excited— she ignited quite a fight by tossing in an apple: Said ‘From Eris, To The Fairest’ and Zeus is thinkin’ ‘Oh snap, I’ll have to adjudicate a beauty pageant; that would be bad— one goddess will be very happy and all the rest will be killing-mad!’

“So he had quite the brilliant idea— he said ‘Who else wants to be the one to judge the three divas!?’

“Ares said, ‘That would be a strategic mistake.’

“Poseidon said, ‘I will! Wait wait, was that an earthquake?’

“Hermes— he wasn’t there, he had ‘messages to take’—

“And Dionysus probably would have but he was totally wasted.

“—Oh, hey, Dionysus! I forgot about that guy— spent his third trimester chillin’ snug in Zeus’ fat thigh, bein’ tracked by Missus Hera because of a couple of Zeus’s indiscretions—

“Oh, those are too good, really, you should hear about it in this lesson.

“When it came to makin’ Zeus was never slackin’; there weren’t a province of his kingdom that he didn’t make the beast with two backs in, and beast is the right word for the way he was attackin’—

“Once, his tactic was to turn into a bird and get crackin’ with a lady named Leda; he was disguised as a swan, flashed a sexy peck a plumages and they was gettin’ it on, makin’ love with lovely Leda on the bank of a pond—

“Then his large libido led him from the lake to the lawn, where he made eyes at Io; he turned her into a cow—

“Then he turned into a bull to plough Europa, wow—

“Iodame, and Niobe, and Eurynome got deflowered—

“With Danae he gave new meaning to the phrase ‘golden showers’—

“With Aegina he’s an eagle, he’s makin’ the rounds—

“Touched the stars with Elara then put her underground—

“Never married Maera, or took Electra on a date—

“And Olympias claimed he was the sire to Alexander the Great—

“He raped Lamia, Laodamia, Podarge, and Thalia—

“(Thalia could have been his daughter, but we have to keep movin’—)

“He hiked up Himalia—

“Poked at Plouto and Phyrra—
“Did Antiope like a satyr-

“Tried hard to get Taygete but she said ‘See You Later’

“Met Alcmene as her husband, blew his load with a chortle-

“And Callisto’s last on the list- but just the list of mortals-

“Except a babe named Semele; when they made love it was gory -

“But Semele birthed Dionysus, and now we’re back to the story.

“Zeus delivered Dionysus, Dionysus made the party, and the party is the way the Faerie Wars got started-

“See, all the gods and goddesses were stumped because of Eris, until they said ‘Let’s get a mortal to decide; I know a guy- his name is Paris’-

“Now, Paris was impartial but the ladies didn’t care; they all decided to offer bribes and the whole affair was barely fair-

“So, Hera says ‘I’ll make you king’-

“Athena says ‘I’ll make you wise’-

“And Aphrodite says ‘I’ll get you laid’-

“And Paris? He was just a guy; so he gets Helen of Sparta and makes her Helen de Fae-

“So beautiful, it’s said, that any man would be brave for a chance to get laid.

“Helen was the wife of Menelaus and now he’s getting annoyed; so he leads an army, fights the Mauls, and wins the First Faerie War-

“And everyone in Fae is killed, the end. Ah, shit- you wanted more?

“Look, the gods give us a little time, and less inspiration; try to tell it all and you get rather impatient-

“The beginning of a story always sparks yet another- like that party all the gods were at? That was the wedding of Achilles’ mother.

“And if you think it’s irrelevant, this story that I’m telling; all’s you need to do is listen to this fact about Helen-

“She was conceived by Zeus and Leda, playin’ birds of a feather; now you see how all this shit comes right back together?”

Bryony lets out a whoop when I’m done, and everyone else starts clapping and cheering, to their wont.

I smile, bow from my seat, and wait for the praise to die down before continuing with my tale-telling.
And then, in that house, there came a tapping, a sort of gentle rapping, rapping at the fence-gate and then the outside door. I didn’t move; but the Hag did. There was a great thrashing and screeching sound, and then a silence so profound I felt a frisson of curiosity shudder down my spine.

I didn’t indulge it; if I had left that house at any point that night, I would have been killed, and Beatrix as well. It really has to do with what that place was before it became a village, and then was abandoned as everyone moved or died or just walked out into the dell and valley and barrow-downs and vanished from this time and place- that place, looking backwards on it, away from the whimsical rush of the moment, was a mine.

Specifically, it was a strip mine.

My grandfather worked in a mine, every day- until it took his life. Mines are dark, dangerous places filled with strange, creaking noises and the darkest dark you will ever see. They’re hot, and narrow; places where humans were never meant to go. Deep inside the earth, as you get closer and closer to the burning heart of the world, you’ll find things you’ve never imagined; things you could never see on the surface.

Strange things happen in mines; stranger things happen on lands where strip-mines once were. It is well documented that every being- every living thing and every non-living thing, even ideas- have their own spirit. In the oldest days, this was known as kami, or god- a small god, for everything that exists. When a place is strip-mined, the small gods of the land- the forest, the stones, the rivers and streams and animals, everything the mine displaces… the kami of that area had been displaced, but they could not leave.

Further, there were the ancient dreams of the men who had mined there to contend with. The Dreams of Men do not die easy deaths; and miner’s dreams are even more tenacious than most. If a man is lucky, a mine will bless him with gold, silver, precious ores, and gleaming gemstones. Strike it lucky, and you, your children, and your children’s children, will be rich beyond all your dreams.

Strick it unlucky, and you won’t come back- the mine will steal the breath from your lungs, crush your skull and brains to pulp, send you falling down into the deep darkness where no man can go- or cling you fast and tight in the stones, and will not let you go.

Places remember, when men do not.

When the Fairy miners came to Ryugu Mergyo in the 800’s to dig the hardrock mines of copper, gold, silver, platinum, lead, opals, and rock-salt, they brought with them their belief in tommyknockers. In this area, they mostly came from Coll’ottova, or Fist’it; and in Fist’it, they were called knockers for their habit of knocking on the walls of the mine- and knocking inattentive miners out. They were said to be small, tontatta-like creatures who lived, worked, and died in the mines; tapping away for treasures too small for the Fairy miners to find and making strange music deep in the stones. They were often heard, and their presence was often felt; but their actual bodies were almost never seen.

Some legends say that they were the ghosts of Automata that had been brought by the Roamin’s as slaves to work in the Fist’it mines. Others felt that they were the ghosts of miners who had died in the mines, or the souls who hadn’t been good enough for heaven, but weren’t bad enough for hell. Still more contend that they were a kind of tontatta that lived in mines and was very shy, and that was the end of it.
Ghosts or dwarves or Fairy superstition, knockers were generally considered to be friendly and
helpful by the Fairy miners. They often warned miners of cave-ins and fire, and were known to lead
a miner or two to a rich vein of ore. They also were known to be vindictive if neglected or abused
through disrespect. Whistling offended them, and was considered to be bad luck; speaking ill of the
knockers was also bad luck. Leaving an offering of bread- usually the crusty edge of their luncheon
pastry, which was covered in mine dirt anyway- was a good way to curry the favor of the
tommyknockers.

As an aside, there were also Fairy superstitions about women with red hair. In general, women in,
on, or near a mine were considered bad luck- probably because women only really came to the old
mines in times of tragedy, looking for lost loved ones, or retrieving their corpses. A red-haired
woman was considered particularly bad, because red-haired women were taken to be omens of
death. It’s my suspicion that this old aversion to red-hair comes from the aversion to the red-haired
Morgans who ravaged parts of Ottava in the Age of Heroes.

Eventually, the Hag returned; a little blood around her mouth, a little wilder around the eyes- but
return she did. She bade me speak on, and so I spoke.
The second story I spoke was thus.

“These elves relate to their little ones a great many stories- and this story, as a matter of fact, is the only
story I really remember my mother telling me as a child. Most elvish stories are about forests and
glades; but in truth, where a tree may grow, so too may an elf live. Thus, this story is more to do with
moors and reed banks, and suited to my age and capacity when she and I were last together.

“The youngest elves- elf-children, miws- are quite satisfied with stories that go nowhere at all, the
girl in the woods who finds a bear-family’s house and eats their pottage and sleeps in their beds; they
quite like these kinds of stories and think them very grand. Older elf-children, perinmiw, want
something with more and deeper meaning, or at least something they can imagine themselves inside
of; or, failing that, a story about their own family.

“This is one of the oldest and longest stories which the emig tell their miw and perinmiw, passed
down from the ancient Deren who lived in oak-tree forests near marshlands and rushing waters. Few
outside the elves know this story, very likely because it is quite an inland story, and even in the oldest
days, most of the best of the World was to be found at sea. Still, this story has been repeated from
mouth to mouth, from one emig to another in her time, for thousands of years; and each elf-mama has
told it better than the one before her- and now, I mean to tell it better than all my mothers before me.

“The first elf-pair who related it lived at the time of it’s happening; and in those days, most elves
lived a transient, migratory existence, passing from forest to forest. They stayed for a time, and then
wandered on- and this first pair stayed in the rafters of the Orc’s house, which was built in the wild
moorlands of what is now Western France. To speak more correctly, the Orc’s house was on the
great rolling moorheath, high up in the north near the Normandy coast, by the seashore. This
wilderness is still an immense wild heath of marshy ground, filled with oak and ash trees, and
wandered now only by deer, wolves, elk, and the wild creatures of the forest. In the olden times, the
place was a shallow sea; the ground underneath had heaved up from beneath and now the moorland
extends for kilometers in every direction. It is surrounded by dampened meadows and shivering,
oozing mud; swamps thick with biting flies and midges, and green rushes, and tall brown cattails that
bob in the wind. On the sturdier banks of fonts there grow squidberry bushes and weepy willow
trees. Mists are almost always hovering over those lands, and on nights when the moons scowl the
howling of wolves echoes throughout.

“In these modern times, that place is still called the Wild Moor; and it well may be that those lands
haven’t changed at all in thousands of years. What is there now was there then: the rushes grow to the same height they always have, and bear the same kind of long purple-brown leaves with feathery tips that chime faintly with the first frost and shatter by the first snow. There still stands the oaks, with their tall straight trunks and their wide spreading branches clustered thick with green leaves like teardrops. As for the living beings who dwell in the particular spot of note, the spiders still dower their daughter’s in glimmering white veils and dresses for their wedding; and the elves are dressed in white, with black and red trimmings.

“It is a strange habit of the elves—especially in their raising of children—that they do not touch the ground excepting during winter, if they can help it. And so it is not so strange to think that of all the peoples that live in this World, it was the elves alone who could bear to live in that wild place. Certainly, if any but a light-footed elf, man or maid, ventured out on the wavering, shaking, undulating marsh-ground of the moor, they met with the same fate; the wanderer sank, and went down to the court of the Marsh King, as he is named, who rules in the great nerotic kingdom below. The elves of that place called him ‘Taur Nentalf’, which means something like ‘The mighty, vast, overwhelming, huge, awful, sublime, High King of the Wet Flat Field’. Elves put stock in saying quite a lot with not much at all; but I prefer the name of ‘Marsh King’ better, and will use that name in reference to him who ruled the nerotic world below the surface of the moorland’s waters. Very little is known of the Marsh King’s rule, as the story was told to me; I think now it is rather that my mother did not wish to tell me of the horrors one might endure in that place, and so did not.

“In the moorlands, and not far from the great towering of the Normandy cliffs of chalk and the Channel that separated the old Faerie lands from the Orc’s forests, lay the house of the Orc. It’s cellars were built of water-tight stone, and it’s tower rose to keep wary watch over all the land for kilometers in every direction, and it stood with three ponderous storeys, its windows shuttered with the intricate white and green bound-willow fences. In the attic of the house, above the rafters closed in with ornate plaster, there lived the elf-pair, and their nest of willow-staves, and their bedding of fur and silk; and the Deren-father had built for his wife a fine bower, and within it she had placed her eggs. There, in that place, the Deren-mother had sat with her eggs and felt sure that their hatching would come to something, eventually.

“In those days, Elves often stayed in the houses of the great, offering service as scholars, minstrels, and wanderers of the land; and so it was that the Deren-father wandered the land, and the Deren-mother copied down stories and songs that had only been told and sung, never caught in the pages of a book or in the turnings of a scroll; and so the two made their living.

“One evening, late in the autumnal season, Deren-father stayed out quite late, and when he came home to his wife and eggs he seemed quite frazzled. ‘I have something very bad to tell you,’ said he to the Deren-mother.

“Keep it to yourself, then,’ she replied. ‘Remember that I am brooding eggs; your news may agitate me, and will surely affect them.’

“You must know it at once,’ said he. ‘The daughter of our Lord in the Sandora has arrived here; she has ventured to journey into the Moor, and now she is lost.’

“She who was born of wolves?’ cried the Deren-mother. ‘Ah, tell me what you have learned, husband; I cannot bear to be kept waiting at a time when I am brooding eggs.’

“Well, you see,’ he replied, ‘she believed what the doctors said, and what I have heard you say as well; the moor-flowers which grow nearest the edge of the Marsh King’s realm would heal her sick father; and she has flown here, far to the north in swan’s down, in company with some other goose-maids and swan-princesses who return to these parts every year to renew their powerful magics. She
who is born of wolves and daughter to our Lord came, and where is she now?!

“You speak too much of particulars,” said the Deren-mother, “and the eggs grow agitated, as I feared; speak your news and leave us in suspense no longer!”

“Well,” said he, “I have kept watch in the moor as the house-lord bade me; and this evening I went among the rushes where I thought the marshy ground would bear my weight, and while I was there three swans came. Something in their manner of flying seemed to say to me, ‘Look hard now; there fly no swans at all, only swan’s feathers.’ You know my meaning; you have the same intuition I have, and you know whether a thing is right or wrong on first sight.”

“Yes, of course,” said she; “but enough of the swan’s feathers and their rightness or wrongness—tell me of the princess!”

“Well, you know as well as I that in the middle of the moor there is something like a lake,” said the Deren-father. “You can see the edge of its shore if you stretch but a little onto the toes; and on windless days you can hear faintly the music of the Marsh King’s court. Just there, by the reeds and the green banks, lay the trunk of an oak-tree; and upon this the three swans stood flapping their great wings, and looking about them; and one threw off her plumage with a great heaving sigh, and I immediately recognized her as one of the daughters of our Lord in Sandora. There she sat, without any covering but her long, black hair and her cloak of swan-feathers. I heard her tell the two others to take great care of her cloak, and I heard her splash into the water—perhaps to pluck the flowers which she fancied she saw there. I heard the others with her agree, and the rustling of the feather-cloak as they picked it up for safekeeping— and I wondered then what would become of it? She most likely asked the same question, and if so she received an answer, very practical and cruel in tone: ‘Dive down now, oh wolf-born woman!’ they cried; ‘thou shalt never more fly in the feathers of the swan; thou shalt never again see the Sandora; here, in this forgotten place, thou wilt remain!’ So saying, they tore the feathered cloak into naught but thread and downy feathers which scattered like a snowfall, and then the two deceitful princesses flew away. And the Princess Born of Wolves was alone.”

“Oh, how terrible! Terrible, terrible!” said the Deren-mother; “I can hardly bear to hear more, but you must tell me what happened next. I can see in your eyes there is more to be said, and you will not rest easy until you have said it.”

“I fear I will not rest easy regardless,” said he, “for as the princess wept and lamented aloud, her tears moistened the oaken stump, which was really not a stump, but the Marsh King himself, he who rules the nerótic kingdom below the marshy ground. I saw myself how the stump of the tree turned around and was a tree no more, while long, clammy branches like arms were extended from it. Then the poor child was terribly frightened, and started up to run away. She hastened to cross the green, slimy ground—but that ground will not bear any weight, much less the heavy bones of a Wolf-girl. She fell into the water with a crash, and tangled herself in the prickling weeds in her terror; and immediately, the oaken stump dived after her—indeed, it was he who drew her down below. Great black bubbles rose up out of the moor-slime, and with these every trace of the two vanished. Now, the princess is buried in the wild marsh; she will never now carry flowers to Sandora to cure her ailing father. It would have broken your heart, my love, had you seen it— for it surely has broken mine.”

“Ach, that such suffering would find our Lord’s beloved daughter,” said she, “in such a season as this; it is a terrible omen for the coming winter. Still, I believe the unlucky princess will soon find help; someone will rise up to help her. Ah! If it had been you or I, or one of our kin, it would have been the end as soon as we were stolen under the waters; but she is made of sterner stuff than us, and may yet survive.”
“I mean to go and look every day’ said he, ‘to see if anything comes to pass;’ and so he did.’

“A long winter went by, and every day- barring the worst of the winter storms- the Deren-father went to a stand of trees overlooking the lake in the middle of the moor, and checked to see if something, anything at all, had happened. One day, after the starveling gap of the year, when spring was in full bombast, he saw a green stalk shooting up out of the deep, marshy ground. As it reached the surface of the black waters, a leaf spread out and unfolded broad and flat on the top and thorny below; and in the center there bulged a velvety bud, blushed with purple.’

“One morning, when the Deren-father had returned to see the stem and leaf and bud, he saw that the power of the thickening sunlight had caused the purple-blushed bud to burst open, and in the golden cup, bowered with purple and white petals, there lay a babe- a tiny maiden, looking as if she had just come from a bath. The little one was so like the Wolf Princess, that the elf, at the first, thought it must be the princess herself; but, after a little reflection he decided it was much more likely to be the daughter of the princess and the Marsh King. This also explained her being placed in the cup of the a water-lily, and even the petals of the flower being purple, when all other flowers that bloomed in that lake had been yellow, white, and pink.

“But I cannot leave her to lay there,’ thought the Deren-father, ‘and in my nest there are already so many. But say, I have thought of something: the wife of the Orc has no children, and how often she has wished for a little one of her own to care for. People always say the Elves bring babes in with the milk; I will do so in earnest this time. I shall flee with the child to the Orc’s wife; what rejoicing there will be!”

“And then the Deren-father crept down to where the purple lily bloomed in the water, mustered up his magic- of which there was not much, as no elf-lord or elf-king was he- and plucked the little babe from the flower-cup. He wrapped her in the soft leaves of the wild giant licorice plant, and carried her back to the house in which he stayed. When the milkmaid brought the milk into the dairy, the Deren-father handed the Orc’s wife the baby over the door-jamb of the dairy- but, being a good man of fine manners, he did not enter the dairy himself.

“His duties done, he returned to his own wife and his own bed, and related to her what he had seen and done before he slept until the noonday meal; and the little Deren-miwos listened to it all, for they were then old enough to do so. ‘So you see,’ he said between yawns, ‘that the princess is not dead, for she must have sent her little one up here; and how I have found a home for her, beyond the Marsh King’s grasp.’

“Ah, I said it would be so from the first,’ replied the Deren-mother, tucking her husband into bed; ‘but now think a little of our own family. Our travelling time draws near, and I sometimes feel a little itch atop the feet. The others of our band have gone already, and I heard the quivering pair in the smokehouse say they would go too as soon as the beer season had begun again. Our miws will go through all the trials we underwent as youngsters quite well, or I am much mistaken in them. Rest now, my love.’ And that was the end of it for the elf-pair, for a time.

“The Orc’s wife was above all measures delighted when she took the sleeping child from the Deren-father who lived in her house. She kissed it and held it to her breast as it laid sleeping; but it awoke and cried terribly, and struck out with its arms and legs, and could not be pleased at all. At last she cried herself to sleep; and as she lay there so still and quiet, it was a most beautiful sight to see. The Orc’s wife was so delighted that her body and soul were aflame with joy; her heart was alight within her, and it seemed that her husband and his soldiers, who were absent, must come home as suddenly and unexpectedly as the little babe had done. She and her whole household therefore busied
themselves in preparing everything for the reception of her Lord Husband. The long colored tapestry, on which she and her maids had worked pictures of their gods, was hung up. The slaves of the house polished the old shields that served as ornaments; cushions were placed on the seats, and dry wood laid on the fireplaces in the centre of the hall, so that the flames might be fanned up at a moment’s notice.

“The Orc’s wife herself assisted in the work; and so that night she felt very tired, and quickly fell into a sound sleep. When she woke just before dawn, she was terribly alarmed to find that the infant had vanished. She sprang from her couch, lit a rush-light, and searched all around the room; when, at last, in that part of the couch where her feet had lain, squatted not the babe but a gargantuan wart-encrusted toad. She was quite disgusted at this sight, and seized a heavy stick to kill the toad; but the creature gazed up at her with such lambent, mournful eyes that she was unable to strike even a single blow.

“Once more the Orc’s wife searched around the room; then she started at the toad’s utterance of a low, painful croak. She sprang from her standstill and opened the window hastily- as in those days, it was quite well known that the croaking of toads heralded foul miasmas; at the very same moment the sun arose in the east, and the thickened spring sunlight gushed through the window until it coated the whole of the room. The couch was bathed last of all, particularly where the great toad squatted. Suddenly it appeared as if the toad’s broad mouth squeezed into itself; it became small and red. The limbs contorted and crackled with the sounds of breaking bones, and took a beautiful, homely shape; and lo, there was the pretty babe lying at the foot of the bed, and the ugly toad was gone.

“What is this?’ she cried, ‘have I had a wicked dream? It is my own lovely babe that lay there; no toad is in my sight.’ Then she kissed and held the babe; but the child struggled and fought and bit as if she had been a little wild cat.

“The Orc did not return on that day, nor the next; he was, however, on his way home. The wind, so favorable to the elves, was against him then; and so it is said that a wind in favor of one is often against another.

“After two or three days had passed, it became clear to the Orc’s wife how matters stood with the babe; it was bound under a horrific curse. By day, it was a beautiful babe with the temper of a fiend from hell, vicious, fractious, and unimaginably cruel; while at night, in the form of an ugly, warty toad, it was honey-sweet and gentle, with eyes full of glimmering sorrow. Here then were two natures, changing inwardly and out in the rolling of the sunlight tide.

“In essence, by day the child possessed the actual form of her mother and the fierce disposition of her sire; and when night fell, the states reverse. Her outward appearance showed the ugly frame of her sire clearest of all; and within dwelt the heart and mind passed down to her from her mother.

“The Orc’s wife was a good wife; dutiful in those rituals which protect the hearth and home from evil. Even so, the manner and method of this curse, and it’s breaking, were far beyond her skills. The wife of the Orc lived in constant pain and sorrow about her lack; and though her heart clung to the little beast, she could not explain to her husband the circumstances of her birth. Or rather, she could—but did not know if she should.

“He was expected to return shortly; and were she to tell him the whole of the truth, he would very likely, as his oaths bound him, kill the child himself and throw it’s corpse back into the marsh from whence it came. The Orc-wife could not bear to consign the babe to such a fate; and so she resolved that her Lord Husband would never see the child excepting in the day-time.
“To this end, she drew up a new contract with the Deren-pair, and—so far as this story goes—secured their help in her deception. Thus, on the morning the elves underwent their great migration, and more than a hundred pairs of elves that had spent the winter in that wild place took their leave, the Deren-pair who lived in the attic-room of the Orc’s house did not. Their children were sent forwards in the care of their kin; and so it was when the elves had just finished their leave taking, the clangor of the warrior’s horns shouted across the heath.

“The Orc had landed with his men. They were returning home, richly laden with spoils from the Faerie coast, where the people—as did also the inhabitants of the rest of the World—often cried in alarm, ‘Deliver us from the Wild Orcs!’

“Life and its noisy pleasures returned to the house of the Orc on the moorland. A great cask of mead was drawn into the hall, piles of wood blazed, cattle were slain and served up, that they might feast in reality. The priest who offered the sacrifice sprinkled the devoted parishioners with the warm blood; the fire crackled, and the smoke rolled along beneath the roof; the soot fell upon them from the beams; but they were used to all these things. Guests were invited, and received handsome presents. All wrongs and unfaithfulness were forgotten.

“They drank deeply, and threw in each other’s faces the bones that were left, which was looked upon as a sign of good feeling amongst them. The Deren-husband, as I said before, made his living as a bard, who was a kind of musician as well as warrior. He had been left behind of the Orc’s mighty host as a kind of safeguard for the house; but, things being as they were, he remained, and listened to the young Orc-bard who had gone with the Orc-lord sing.

“The young Orc-bard had been with his lord all through their marauding, and knew what to sing about; he gave his best song, in which all the warriors of the Orc-lord’s host were praised for their war-deeds, and every wonderful action they undertook was brought forwards with honor. Being of some talent—perhaps not for music, but for reading his audience and turning a phrase, the Orc-bard finished each verse of his warbling with this refrain—

“Gold and possessions will flee away, friends and foes must die one day;

“Every life ends with a sigh; but a famous name will never die.’

“And with that they beat upon their shields, and hammered upon the table with knives and bones, in a most approving manner.

“The Orc’s wife sat upon a raised cross seat in the open hall. She wore a silk dress, golden bracelets, and large amber beads. She was in costly attire, and the elf-bard—who was preferred by the women for his skilled voice and genteel air—named her in his song, and spoke of the rich treasure of gold which she had brought to her husband. Her husband had already seen the wonderfully beautiful child in the daytime, and was delighted with her beauty; even her wild ways pleased him. He said the little maiden would grow up to be a heroine, with the strong will and determination of a man. She would never wink her eyes, even if, in jest, an expert hand should attempt to cut her fringe-hair with a sharp sword.

“The full cask of mead soon became empty, and a fresh one was brought in; for these were people who liked plenty to eat and drink. The old proverb, which everyone knows, says that ‘the cattle know when to leave their pasture, but a foolish man knows not the measure of his own appetite.’ Yes, they all knew this; but men may know what is right, and yet often do wrong. They also knew ‘that even the welcome guest becomes wearisome when he sits too long in the house.’ But there they remained; for pork and mead are good things. At the Orc’s house they stayed, and enjoyed
themselves; and at night the bondmen slept in the ashes, and dipped their fingers in the fat, and licked them. Oh, it was a delightful time!

“Once more in the same year the Orc went forth, though the storms of early summer had already commenced to roar. He went with his warriors to the coast of Faerie; he said that it was but an excursion of pleasure across the water, so his wife remained at home with the little girl.

“After a while, it is quite certain the foster-mother began to love the poor frog, with its gentle eyes and its deep sighs, even better than the little beauty who bit and fought with all around her.

“The heavy, damp mists of autumn, which destroy the leaves of the wood, had already fallen upon forest and heath. Feathers of plucked birds, as they call the snow, flew about in thick showers, and winter was coming.

“The sparrows took possession of the elves abandoned nests—excepting the pair in the attic of the house— and conversed about the absent owners in their own fashion; and they, the elf-pairs and all their young ones, where were they staying now?

“The elves might have been found in the land of Alabasta, where the sun’s rays shone forth bright and warm, as it does here at midsummer. Tamarinds and acacias were in full bloom all over the country, the crescent of their Goddess glittered brightly from the cupolas of the mosques, and on the slender pinnacles of pilloried cacti sat many of the elves, resting after their long journey.

“Swarms of them took divided possession of their ancestral nests—nests which lay close to each other between the venerable columns, and crowded the arches of temples in forgotten cities. The date and the palm lifted themselves as a screen or as a sun-shade over them. The gray pyramids looked like broken shadows in the clear air and the far-off desert, where the ostrich wheels his rapid flight, and the lion, with his subtle eyes, gazes at the marble sphinx which lies half buried in sand. The waters of the Sandia had retreated, and the whole bed of the river was covered with frogs, which was a most acceptable prospect for the elf families. The young elves thought their eyes deceived them, everything around appeared so beautiful.

“It is always like this there, and that is how we live in our warm country,” said the Deren-mother to a sparrow; and the thought made the Deren-father almost beside himself with longing.

“Is there anything more to see?” the sparrow-children asked; “do you go farther into the country?”

“There is more for us to see,” answered the Deren-mother. “Beyond this delightful region there are immense forests, where the branches of the trees entwine round each other, while prickly, creeping plants cover the paths, and only an elephant could force a passage for himself with his great feet. The snakes are large, and the lizards lively.’

“Then there is the desert; if you went there, your eyes would soon be full of sand with the lightest breeze, and if it should blow great guns, you would most likely find yourself in a sand-drift; but there is no silence so profound, and no light so all-encompassing. The riverbanks are the best place for young children; where there are frogs and locusts; but children grow, and so there is more to be seen and done.’

“The parents sit in the nest on the slender minaret, and rested, yet still were busily employed in cleaning and smoothing their feathers and armor and weapons, and in sharpening their knives.

“The female young ones strutted about amid the moist rushes, glancing at the other young elves and
making acquaintances, and swallowing a frog at every third step, or tossing a little snake about with their fingers, in a way they considered very becoming, and besides it tasted very good. The young male elves soon began to quarrel; they struck at each other with their fists, and pecked with their knives till the blood came. And in this manner many of the young ladies and gentlemen were betrothed to each other: it was, of course, what they wanted, and indeed what they lived for.

“Then they returned to a nest, and there the quarrelling began afresh; for in hot countries people are almost all violent and passionate. But for all that it was pleasant, especially for the old people, who watched them with great joy: all that their young ones did suited them. Every day here there was sunshine, plenty to eat, and nothing to think of but pleasure.” said the Deren-mother, sighing sadly.

“But in the rich castle of their Lord, as we call him, pleasure is not to be found. The rich and mighty lord of the castle lies on his couch, in the midst of the great hall, with its many colored walls looking like the centre of a great tulip; but he is stiff and powerless in all his limbs, and lay stretched out like a dead thing.” said the Deren-father, dark eyes flashing.

“His family and servants stand around him; he is not dead, although he could scarcely be said to live. The healing moor-flower from the north, which was to have been found and brought to him by her who loved him so well- a princess, born of wolves and given to his care by the wind and waters- had not arrived. His young and beautiful daughter who, in swan’s plumage, had flown over land and seas to the distant north, had never returned.

“She is dead, so the two swan-maidens must have said when they came home; and they made up quite a story about her, and this is what they told-’ said he, before his wife chirruped out an admonishment.

“Oh, alright- this is perhaps only what I think they said; it makes as much sense as anything else they could have said.’

“We three flew away together through the air,” said they: “a hunter caught sight of us, and shot at us with an arrow. The arrow struck our young friend and sister, and slowly singing her farewell song she sank down, a dying swan, into the forest lake. We laid her in the cold earth. We had our revenge; we bound fire under the wings of a swallow, who had a nest on the thatched roof of the huntsman. The house took fire, and burst into flames; the hunter was burnt with the house, and the light was reflected over the sea as far as the spreading birch, beneath which we laid her sleeping dust. She will never return to the land of her father.” And then they both must have wept false tears. Deceit and lies!” cried Deren-father; “I should like to run my knife deep into their chests.’

“And perhaps be slain for the running,” said Deren-mother, ‘then what a sight you would be. Think first of yourself, and then of your family; all others are nothing to us.’

“Yes, I know,” said the elf-papa; “but I told our good-brother of what I had seen and done in the marsh; and he can easily place himself on the edge of an open cupola, when the learned and wise men assemble to consult on the state of the sick man; perhaps they may come a little nearer to the truth, if he can make himself heard over their squabbling.’

“Far away, in distant Alabasta, just as the Deren-father had said, the learned and wise men assembled together, and talked a great deal on every point; but the elf-cousin could make no sense out of
anything they said; neither were there any good results from their consultations, either for the sick man, or for his daughter in the marshy heath. When we listen to what people say in this world, we shall hear a great deal; but it is an advantage to know what has been said and done before, when we listen to a conversation. The elf-cousin did, and we know at least as much as he, the elf-cousin.’

“Love is a life-giver. The highest love produces the highest life. Only through love can the sick man be cured.” This had been said by many, and even the learned men acknowledged that it was a wise saying.’

“Now the learned men had spoken also of love between this one and that one; of the difference of the love which we have for our neighbor, to the love that exists between parents and children; of the love of the plant for the light, and how the germ springs forth when the sunbeam kisses the ground. All these things were so elaborately and learnedly explained, that it was impossible for elf-cousin to follow it, much less to talk about it. His thoughts on the subject quite weighed him down; he stood the whole of the following day on one leg, with half-shut eyes, thinking deeply. So much learning was quite a heavy weight for him to carry. One thing, however, the elf-cousin could understand.

“Every one, high and low, had from their inmost hearts expressed their opinion that it was a great misfortune for so many thousands of people- the whole country indeed- to have this man so sick, with no hopes of his recovery. And what joy and blessing it would spread around if he could by any means be cured! But where bloomed the flower that could bring him health? They had searched for it everywhere; in learned writings, in the shining stars, in the weather and wind. Inquiries had been made in every by-way that could be thought of, until at last the wise and learned men has asserted, as we have been already told, that “love, the life-giver, could alone give new life to a father;” and in saying this, they had overdone it, and said more than they understood themselves. They repeated it, and wrote it down as a recipe, “Love is a life-giver.’

“But how could such a recipe be prepared—that was a difficulty they could not overcome. At last it was decided that help could only come from the princess herself, whose whole soul was wrapped up in her father, especially as a plan had been adopted by her to enable her to obtain a remedy.

“More than a year had passed since the princess had set out at night, when the light of the young moon was soon lost beneath the horizon. She had gone to the marble sphinx in the desert, shaking the sand from her sandals, and then passed through the long passage, which leads to the centre of one of the great pyramids, where the mighty kings of antiquity, surrounded with pomp and splendor, lie veiled in the form of mummies. She had been told by the wise men, that if she laid her head on the breast of one of them, from the head she would learn where to find life and recovery for her father. She had performed all this, and in a dream had learnt that she must bring home to her father the lotus flower, which grows in the deep sea, near the moors and heath in the Orcish lands. The very place and situation had been pointed out to her, and she was told that the flower would restore her father to health and strength. And, therefore, she had gone forth from the land of Alabasta, flying over the open ocean to the marsh and the wild moor of the Orcs in the plumage of a swan.

“The elves knew all this, and we also know it now. We know, too, that the Marsh King has drawn her down to himself, and that to the loved ones at home she is forever dead. One of the wisest of them said, as the elf-mamma also said, “That in some way she would, after all, manage to succeed;” and so at last they comforted themselves with this hope, and would wait patiently; in fact, they could do nothing better.

“I should like to get away the swan’s feathers from those two treacherous princesses,” said the elf-cousin; “then, at least, they would not be able to fly over again to the wild moor, and do more wickedness. I can hide the two suits of feathers over yonder, till we find some use for them.”
“But where will you put them?” asked the elf-cousin’s young bride.

“In the care of our kin, who languish even now in the house of the Orc-lord whose lands abut the Marsh King’s. You and I will carry them by turns during our trek across; and as we return, should they prove too heavy for us, we shall be sure to find plenty of places on the way in which we can conceal them until our next journey. Certainly one suit of swan’s feathers would be enough for the Wolf-princess, but two are always better. In those northern countries one cannot have too many travelling wrappers.”

“No one will thank you for it,” said the elf-bride; “but you are my lord; and, excepting at breeding time, I have nothing to say.”

“In the Orc’s castle on the wild moor, to which the kin-elves directed their trek in the following spring, the little maiden still remained. They had named her Helga, which was rather too soft a name for a child with a temper like hers, although her form was still beautiful. Every month this temper showed itself in sharper outlines; and in the course of years, while the elves still made the same journeys in spring to the sanded hills of Alabasta, and in autumn to the moors, the child grew to be almost a woman, and before any one seemed aware of it, she was a wonderfully beautiful maiden of sixteen.’

“The casket was splendid, but the contents were worthless. She was, indeed, wild and savage even in those hard, uncultivated times. It was a pleasure to her to splash about with her white hands in the warm blood of the horse which had been slain for sacrifice. In one of her wild moods she bit off the head of the black cock, which the priest was about to slay for the sacrifice.

“To her foster-father she said one day, “If thine enemy were to pull down thine house about thy ears, and thou shouldest be sleeping in unconscious security, I would not wake thee; even if I had the power I would never do it, for my ears still tingle with the blow that thou gavest me years ago. I have never forgotten it.’

“But the Orc-lord treated her words as a jest; he was, like everyone else, bewitched with her beauty, and knew nothing of the change in the form and temper of Helga at night. Without a saddle, she would sit on a horse as if she were a part of it, while it rushed along at full speed; nor would she spring from its back, even when it quarrelled with other horses and bit them. She would often leap from the high shore into the sea with all her clothes on, and swim to meet the Orc-lord, when his boat was steering home towards the shore. She once cut off a long lock of her beautiful hair, and twisted it into a string for her bow.

“If a thing is to be done well,” said she, “I must do it myself.’

“The Orc’s wife was, for the time in which she lived, a woman of strong character and will; but, compared to her daughter, she was a gentle, timid woman, and she knew that a wicked sorcerer had the terrible child in his power. It was sometimes as if Helga acted from sheer wickedness; for often when her mother stood on the threshold of the door, or stepped into the yard, she would seat herself on the brink of the well, wave her arms and legs in the air, and suddenly fall right in. Here she was able, from her toad nature, to dip and dive about in the water of the deep well, until at last she would climb forth like a cat, and come back into the hall dripping with water, so that the green leaves that were strewed on the floor were whirled round, and carried away by the streams that flowed from her.

“But there was one time of the day which placed a check upon Helga.
“It was the evening twilight; when this hour arrived she became quiet and thoughtful, and allowed herself to be advised and led; then also a secret feeling seemed to draw her towards her mother. As usual, when the sun set, and the transformation took place, both in body and mind, inwards and outwards, she would remain quiet and mournful, with her form shrunk together in the shape of a toad. Her body was much larger than those animals ever are, and on this account it was much more hideous in appearance; for she looked like a wretched dwarf, with a toad’s head, and webbed fingers. Her eyes had a most piteous expression; she was without a voice, excepting a hollow, croaking sound, like the smothered sobs of a dreaming child.

“Then the Orc’s wife took her on her lap, and forgot the ugly form, as she looked into the mournful eyes, and often said, ‘I could wish that thou wouldst always remain my sweet toad child, for thou art too terrible when thou art clothed in a form of beauty. Alas, this is all I can do for thee;’ and the Orc woman wrote runes against sorcery and spells of sickness-be-healed, and threw them over the wretched child; but they did no good.

“One can scarcely believe that she was ever small enough to lie in the cup of the water-lily,’ said the Deren-father; ‘and now she is grown up, and the image of her Wolf-born mother, especially about the eyes. Ah, we shall never see her again; perhaps she has not discovered how to help herself, as you and the wise men said she would. Year after year have I trekked and crept across and across the moor, but there was no sign of her being still alive. Yes, and I may as well tell you that each year, when I returned from our travels a few days before you to repair the nest, and put everything in its place, I have spent a whole night darting here and there over the marshy lake, as if I had been an owl or a bat, but all to no purpose. The two suit of swan’s plumeage, which our young cousins dragged over here from the land of the Sandia, are of no use; trouble enough it was to them to bring those articles here in three journeys, and now they are lying at the bottom of the nest; and if a fire should happen to break out, and the wooden house be burnt down, they would be destroyed.’

“And our good nest would be destroyed, too,” said the Deren-mother; “but you think less of that than of your plumage stuff and your moor-princess. Go and stay with her in the marsh if you like. You are a bad father to your own children, as I have told you already, when I hatched my first brood. I only hope neither we nor our children may have an arrow sent through our wings, owing to that wild girl. Helga does not know in the least what she is about. We have lived in this house longer than she has, she should think of that, and we have never forgotten our duty. We have paid every year our toll of a feather, an egg, and a young one, as it is only right we should do. You don’t suppose I can wander about the court-yard, or go everywhere as I used to do in old times. I can do it in Alabasta, where I can be a companion of the people, without forgetting myself. But here I cannot go and peep into the pots and kettles as I do there. No, I can only sit up here and feel angry with that girl, the little wretch; and I am angry with you, too; you should have left her lying in the water lily, then no one would have known anything about her.”

“You are far better than your conversation,” said the Deren-father; “I know you better than you know yourself.” And with that he gave a shake, and flung his hair twice, proudly; then he stretched his limbs and left the house in a strop. He went on for some distance, and then he gave a great sigh loped on his daily course at a rapid rate, his head held tall and proud and his hair streaming behind him while the sun’s rays poured over him like liquid fire.

“He is the handsomest of them all,” said the Deren-mother, as she watched him; “but I won’t tell him so.”

Early in the autumn, the Orc again returned home laden with spoil, and bringing prisoners with him. Among them was a young Faerie priest, one of those who contemned the gods of the north. Often
lately there had been, both in hall and chamber, a talk of the new faith which was spreading far and wide in the south, and which, through the means of the holy Galatea’s forty blessed daughters, had already reached as far as Hedeby on the Schlei. Even Helga had heard of this belief in the teachings of Love, which could not know defeat; and the Burning which resided in the blood of all who turned their faces towards that Love.

“To her all this had, as it were, gone in one ear and out the other. It seemed that she only understood the meaning of the word “love,” when in the form of a miserable frog she crouched together in the corner of the sleeping chamber; but the Orc’s wife had listened to the wonderful stories and songs, and had felt herself strangely moved by it.

“On their return, after this voyage, the men spoke of the beautiful temples built of polished stone, which had been raised for the public worship of this holy love. Some vessels, curiously formed of massive gold, had been brought home among the booty. There was a peculiar fragrance about them all, for they were incense vessels, which had been swung before the altars in the temples by the Forty’s priests. In the deep stony cellars of the castle, the young Faerie priest was immured, and his hands and feet tied together with strips of bark. The Orc’s wife considered him beautiful, and his distress raised her pity; but Helga said he ought to have ropes fastened to his heels, and be tied to the tails of wild animals.

“I would let the dogs loose after him” she said; “over the moor and across the heath. Hurrah! that would be a spectacle for the gods, and better still to follow in its course.”

“But the Orc would not allow him to die such a death as that, especially as he was the disowned and despiser of the high gods. In a few days, he had decided to have him offered as a sacrifice on the blood-stone in the grove. For the first time, a man was to be sacrificed here. Helga begged to be allowed to sprinkle the assembled people with the blood of the priest. She sharpened her glittering knife; and when one of the great, savage dogs, who were running about the Orc’s castle in great numbers, sprang towards her, she thrust the knife into his side, merely, as she said, to prove its sharpness.

“The Orc’s wife looked at the wild, badly disposed girl, with great sorrow; and when night came on, and her daughter’s beautiful form and disposition were changed, she spoke in eloquent words to Helga of the sorrow and deep grief that was in her heart. The ugly toad, in its monstrous shape, stood before her, and raised its brown mournful eyes to her face, listening to her words, and seeming to understand them with the intelligence of a human being.

“Never once to my lord and husband has a word passed my lips of what I have to suffer through you; my heart is full of grief about you,” said the Orc’s wife. “The love of a mother is greater and more powerful than I ever imagined. But love never entered thy heart; it is cold and clammy, like the plants on the moor.”

“Then the miserable form trembled; it was as if these words had touched an invisible bond between body and soul, for great tears stood in the eyes.

“A bitter time will come for thee at last,” continued the Orc’s wife; “and it will be terrible for me too. It had been better for thee if thou hadst been slain, and left in the wet and the muck to rot with the cold night wind to lull thee to sleep.” And the Orc’s wife shed bitter tears, and went away in anger and sorrow, passing under the partition of furs, which hung loose over the beam and divided the hall.

“The shrivelled toad still sat in the corner alone. Deep silence reigned around. At intervals, a half-stifled sigh was heard from its inmost soul; it was the soul of Helga. It seemed in pain, as if a new life were arising in her heart. Then she took a step forward and listened; then stepped again forward, and seized with her clumsy hands the heavy bar which was laid across the door. Gently, and with much
trouble, she pushed back the bar, as silently lifted the latch, and then took up the glimmering lamp which stood in the antechamber of the hall. It seemed as if a stronger will than her own gave her strength. She removed the iron bolt from the closed cellar-door, and slipped in, to the prisoner. He was slumbering. She touched him with her cold, moist hand, and as he awoke and caught sight of the hideous form, he shuddered as if he beheld a wicked apparition. She drew her knife, cut through the bonds which confined his hands and feet, and beckoned to him to follow her. He uttered some holy names and made the sign of the cross, while the form remained motionless by his side.

“Who art thou?” he asked, “whose outward appearance is that of an animal, while thou willingly performest acts of mercy?”

“The toad-figure beckoned to him to follow her, and led him through a long gallery concealed by hanging drapery to the stables, and then pointed to a horse. He mounted upon it, and she sprang up also before him, and held tightly by the animal’s mane. The prisoner understood her, and they rode on at a rapid trot, by a road which he would never have found by himself, across the open heath. He forgot her ugly form, and only thought how the mercy and loving-kindness of the Forty who Loved was acting through this hideous apparition. As he offered pious prayers and sang holy songs of praise, she trembled. Was it the effect of prayer and praise that caused this? or, was she shuddering in the cold morning air at the thought of approaching twilight? What were her feelings? She raised herself up, and wanted to stop the horse and spring off, but the Faerie priest held her back with all his might, and then sang a pious song, as if this could loosen the wicked charm that had changed her into the semblance of a frog.

“The horse galloped on more wildly than before. The sky painted itself red, the first sunbeam pierced through the clouds, and in the clear flood of sunlight the frog became changed. It was Helga again, young and beautiful, but with a wicked fiendly spirit. He held now a beautiful young woman in his arms, and he was horrified at the sight. He stopped the horse, and sprang from its back. He imagined that some new sorcery was at work. But Helga also leaped from the horse and stood on the ground. The child’s short garment reached only to her knee. She snatched the sharp knife from her girdle, and rushed like lightning at the astonished priest.

“Let me get at thee!” she cried; “let me get at thee, that I may plunge this knife into thy body. Thou art pale as ashes, thou beardless slave.” She pressed in upon him. They struggled with each other in heavy combat, but it was as if an invisible power had been given to the Faerie in the struggle. He held her fast, and the old oak under which they stood seemed to help him, for the loosened roots on the ground became entangled in the maiden’s feet, and held them fast. Close by rose a bubbling spring, and he sprinkled Helga’s face and neck with the water, commanded the unclean spirit to come forth, and pronounced upon her a Loving blessing. But the water of faith has no power unless the well-spring of faith flows within. And yet even here its power was shown; something more than the mere strength of a man opposed itself, through his means, against the evil which struggled within her. His holy action seemed to overpower her.

“She dropped her arms, glanced at him with pale cheeks and looks of amazement. He appeared to her a mighty magician skilled in secret arts; his language was the darkest magic to her, and the movements of his hands in the air were as the secret signs of a magician’s wand. She would not have blinked had he waved over her head a sharp knife or a glittering axe; but she shrank from him as he kissed her brow in the manner of the Beloved, and held still as their foreheads rested against each other.

“When it was done, and the Faerie priests’ benedictions finished, she sat before him like a tamed bird, with her head bowed heavy-low. Then he spoke to her, in gentle words, of the deed of Love she had performed for him during the night, when she had come to him in the form of an ugly frog, to loosen his bonds, and to lead him forth to life and light; and he told her that she was bound in
closer fetters than he had been, and that she could recover also life and light by his means.

“He would take her to the holy springs of Charis, and there, her curse would be removed. But he would not let her sit before him on the horse, though of her own free will she wished to do so.

“Thou must sit behind me, not before me,” said he. “Thy magic beauty has a magic power which comes from an evil origin, and I fear it; still I am sure to overcome through my faith in Love.”

“Then he knelt down, and prayed with pious fervor. It was as if the quiet woodland were a holy temple consecrated by his worship. The birds sang as if they were also of this new congregation; and the fragrance of the wild flowers was as the ambrosial perfume of incense; while, above all, sounded the Words, “A light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide their feet into the way of peace.” And he spoke these words with the deep longing of his whole nature.

“Meanwhile, the horse that had carried them in wild career stood quietly by, plucking at the tall bramble-bushes, till the ripe young berries fell down upon Helga’s hands, as if inviting her to eat. Patiently she allowed herself to be lifted on the horse, and sat there like a dead thing.

“The Faerie bound two vines together in a circlet, like a Love-crown, and tucked it on her head. As they rode through the forest, the way gradually grew thicker of brushwood, until at last it became a trackless wilderness. Bushes of the wild sloe here and there blocked up the path, so that they had to ride over them. The bubbling spring formed not a stream, but a marsh, round which also they were obliged to guide the horse; still there were strength and refreshment in the cool forest breeze, and no trifling power in the gentle words spoken in faith and Love by the young priest, whose inmost heart yearned to lead this poor lost one into the way of light and life.

“It is said that rain-drops can make a hollow in the hardest stone, and the waves of the sea can smooth and round the rough edges of the rocks; so did the dew of Charis the Graceful fall upon Helga, softening what was hard, and smoothing what was rough in her character. These effects did not yet appear; she was not herself aware of them; neither does the seed in the lap of earth know, when the refreshing dew and the warm sunbeams fall upon it, that it contains within itself power by which it will flourish and bloom. The song of the mother sinks into the heart of the child, and the little one prattles the words after her, without understanding their meaning; but after a time the thoughts expand, and what has been heard in childhood seems to the mind clear and bright. So now the “Word,” which is all-powerful, and created all things in this World, was working in the heart of Helga.

“They rode forth from the thick forest, crossed the heath, and again entered a pathless wood. Here, towards evening, they met with robbers.

“Where hast thou stolen that beauteous maiden?” cried the robbers, seizing the horse by the bridle, and dragging the two riders from its back.

“The priest had nothing to defend himself with, but the knife he had taken from Helga, and with this he struck out right and left. One of the robbers raised his axe against him; but the young priest sprang on one side, and avoided the blow, which fell with great force on the horse’s neck, so that the blood gushed forth, and the animal sunk to the ground. Then Helga seemed suddenly to awake from her long, deep reverie; she threw herself hastily upon the dying animal. “The priest placed himself before her, to defend and shelter her; but one of the robbers swung his iron axe against the Faerie’s head with such force that it was dashed to pieces, the blood and brains were scattered about, and he fell dead upon the ground.
“Then the robbers seized beautiful Helga by her white arms and slender waist; but at that moment the sun went down, and as its last ray disappeared, she was changed into the form of a toad. A greenish white mouth spread half over her face; her arms became thin and slimy; while broad hands, with webbed fingers, spread themselves out like fans. Warts bubbled and frothed over her brown and murky skin.

“Then the robbers, in terror, let her go, and she stood among them, a hideous monster; and as is the nature of toads to do, she scampered away from what had frightened her, and disappeared into the thickets. Then the robbers knew that this must be the work of an evil magic, and in a terrible fright, they ran hastily from the spot.

“The full moons had already risen, and were shining in all their radiant splendor over the earth, when from the thicket, in the form of a toad, crept poor Helga. She stood still by the corpse of the Faerie priest, and the carcass of the dead horse. She looked at them with eyes that seemed to weep, and from the frog’s head came forth a croaking sound, as when a child bursts into tears. She threw herself first upon one, and then upon the other; brought water in her hand, which, from being webbed, was large and hollow, and poured it over them; but they were dead, and dead they would remain. She understood that at last. Soon wild animals would come and tear their dead bodies; but no, that must not happen. Then she dug up the earth, as deep as she was able, that she might prepare a grave for them.

“She had nothing but a branch of a tree and her two hands, between the fingers of which the webbed skin stretched, and they were torn by the work, while the blood ran down her hands. She saw at last that her work would be useless, more than she could accomplish; so she fetched more water, and washed the face of the dead, and then covered it with fresh green leaves; she also brought large boughs and spread over him, and scattered dried leaves between the branches. Then she brought the heaviest stones that she could carry, and laid them over the dead body, filling up the crevices with moss, till she thought she had fenced in his resting-place strongly enough. The difficult task had employed her the whole night; and as the sun broke forth, there stood the beautiful Helga in all her loveliness, with her bleeding hands, and, for the first time, with tears on her maiden cheeks. It was, in this transformation, as if two natures were striving together within her; her whole frame trembled, and she looked around her as if she had just awoke from a painful dream. She leaned for support against the trunk of a slender tree, and at last climbed to the topmost branches, like a cat, and seated herself firmly upon them. She remained there the whole day, sitting alone, like a frightened squirrel, in the silent solitude of the wood, where the rest and stillness is as the calm of death.

“Butterflies fluttered around her, and close by were several ant-hills, each with its hundreds of busy little creatures moving quickly to and fro. In the air, danced myriads of gnats, swarm upon swarm, troops of buzzing flies, ladybirds, dragon-flies with golden wings, and other little winged creatures. The worm crawled forth from the moist ground, and the moles crept out; but, excepting these, all around had the stillness of death: but when people say this, they do not quite understand themselves what they mean.

“None noticed Helga but a flock of magpies, which flew chattering round the top of the tree on which she sat. These birds hopped close to her on the branches with bold curiosity. A glance from her eyes was a signal to frighten them away, and they were not clever enough to find out who she was; indeed she hardly knew herself.

“When the sun was near setting, and the evening’s twilight about to commence, the approaching transformation aroused her to fresh exertion. She let herself down gently from the tree, and, as the last sunbeam vanished, she stood again in the wrinkled form of a frog, with the torn, webbed skin on
her hands, but her eyes now gleamed with more radiant beauty than they had ever possessed in her most beautiful form of loveliness; they were now pure, mild maidenly eyes that shone forth in the face of a frog. They showed the existence of deep feeling and a human heart, and the beauteous eyes overflowed with tears, weeping precious drops that lightened the soul.

“On the raised mound which she had made as a grave for the dead priest, she found the circlet of vines, the last work of him who now lay dead and cold beneath it.

“A sudden thought came to Helga, and she lifted up the small crown and planted it upon the grave, between the stones that covered him and the dead horse. The sad recollection brought the tears to her eyes, and in this gentle spirit she traced the same sign in the sand round the grave; and as she formed, with both her hands, the circle, the web skin fell from them like a torn glove. She washed her hands in the water of the spring, and gazed with astonishment at their delicate whiteness. Again she made the holy sign in the air, between herself and the dead man; her lips trembled, her tongue moved, and the name which she in her ride through the forest had so often heard spoken, rose to her lips, and she uttered the Word, “Beloved.”

“Then the frog skin fell from her; she was once more a lovely maiden. Her head bent wearily, her tired limbs required rest, and then she slept.

“Her sleep, however, was short. Towards midnight, she awoke; before her stood the dead horse, prancing and full of life, which shone forth from his eyes and from his wounded neck. Close by his side appeared the murdered priest, beautiful, as the Orc’s wife had said; but now he came as if in a flame of fire. Such gravity, such stern justice, such a piercing glance shone from his large, gentle eyes, that it seemed to penetrate into every corner of her heart. Beautiful Helga trembled at the look, and her memory returned with a power as if it had been the day of judgment. Every good deed that had been done for her, every loving word that had been said, were vividly before her mind.

“She understood now that Love had kept her here during the day of her trial; while the creature formed of dust and clay, soul and spirit, had wrestled and struggled with evil. She acknowledged that she had only followed the impulses of an evil disposition, that she had done nothing to cure herself; everything had been given her, and all had happened as it were by the ordination of the gods. She bowed herself humbly, confessed her great imperfections in the sight of she who can read every fault of the heart- Charis, the Graceful; and then the goddess spoke.

“Daughter of the moorland, thou hast come from the swamp and the marshy earth, but from this thou shalt arise. The sunlight shining into thy inmost soul proves the origin from which thou hast really sprung, and has restored the body to its natural form. I am come to thee from the land of the dead, and thou also must pass through the valley to reach the holy mountains where mercy and perfection dwell. I cannot lead thee to my spring that thou mayst receive absolution, for first thou must remove the thick veil with which the waters of the moorland are shrouded, and bring forth from its depths the living author of thy being and thy life. Till this is done, thou canst not receive the fullness of my blessing.”

“Then the goddess lifted her on the horse and gave her a golden censer, similar to those she had already seen at the Orc’s house. A sweet perfume arose from it, while the open wound in the forehead of the slain priest, shone with the rays of a diamond. He took the circlet from the grave, and held it aloft, and now they rode through the air over the rustling trees, over the hills where warriors lay buried each by his dead war-horse; and the brazen monumental figures rose up and galloped forth, and stationed themselves on the summits of the hills. The golden circles on their foreheads, fastened with golden knots, glittered in the moonlight, and their mantles floated in the wind.
"The dragon, that guards buried treasure, lifted his head and gazed after them. The goblins and the satyrs peeped out from beneath the hills, and flitted to and fro in the fields, waving blue, red, and green torches, like the glowing sparks in burning paper; behind them gamboled their fauns and gibbets, giggling and whooping, piping their sweet tunes and laughing with joy.

"Over woodland and heath, flood and fen, they rode on, until they reached the wild moor, over which they hovered in broad circles. The Goddess-priest held the circle aloft, and it glittered like gold, while from her lips rang pious prayers. Beautiful Helga’s voice joined with his in the hymns he sung, as a child joins in her mother’s song. She swung the censer, and a wonderful fragrance of incense arose from it; so powerful, that the reeds and rushes of the moor burst forth into blossom. Each germ came forth from the deep ground: all that had life raised itself. “Blooming water-lilies spread themselves forth like a carpet of wrought flowers, and upon them lay a slumbering woman, young and beautiful. Helga fancied that it was her own image she saw reflected in the still water. But it was her mother she beheld, the unwilling wife of the Marsh King, the Wolf-princess from the land of the Sandia.

"The dead goddess desired that the sleeping woman should be lifted on the horse, but the horse sank beneath the load, as if he had been a funeral pall fluttering in the wind. But the sign of the circle made the airy phantom strong, and then the three rode away from the marsh to firm ground.

"At the same moment the cockerel crowed in the Orc’s castle, and the dream figures dissolved and floated away in the air, but mother and daughter stood opposite to each other.

"Am I looking at my own image in the deep water?” said the mother.

"Is it myself that I see represented on a stormy cloud?” cried the daughter.

"Then they came nearer to each other in a fond embrace. The mother’s heart beat quickly, and she understood the quickened pulses.

"My child!” she exclaimed, “the flower of my heart- my lotus flower of the deep water!” and she embraced her child again and wept, and the tears were as a baptism of new life and love for Helga.

"In swan’s plumage I came here,” said the mother, “and here I threw off my feather dress. Then I sank down through the wavering ground, deep into the marsh beneath, which closed like a wall around me; I found myself after a while in fresher water; still a power drew me down deeper and deeper. I felt the weight of sleep upon my eyelids. Then I slept, and dreams hovered round me. It seemed to me as if I were again in the pyramids of Alabasta, and yet the waving elder trunk that had frightened me on the moor stood ever before me. I observed the clefts and wrinkles in the stem; they shone forth in strange colors, and took the form of hieroglyphics. It was the mummy case on which I gazed. At last it burst, and forth stepped the thousand years’ old king, the mummy form, black as pitch, black as the shining wood-snail, or the slimy mud of the swamp. Whether it was really the mummy or the Marsh King I know not. He seized me in his arms, and I felt as if I must die. When I recovered myself, I found in my bosom a little bird, flapping its wings, twittering and fluttering. The bird flew away from my bosom, upwards towards the dark, heavy canopy above me, but a long, green band kept it fastened to me. I heard and understood the tenor of its longings. Freedom! sunlight! to my father! Then I thought of my father, and the sunny land of my birth, my life, and my love. Then I loosened the band, and let the bird fly away to its home- to a father. Since that hour I have ceased to dream; my sleep has been long and heavy, till in this very hour, harmony and fragrance awoke me, and set me free.”

“The green band which fastened the wings of the bird to the mother’s heart, where did it flutter now?
whither had it been wafted? The Deren-father only had seen it. The band was the green stalk, the cup of the flower the cradle in which lay the child, that now in blooming beauty had been folded to the mother’s heart.

“And while the two were resting in each other’s arms, the old Deren-father crept upon them in narrowing circles, till at length he found them both. Without a word, he bade them follow him; and, upon the end of his trek, he led them through the back of the Orc-lord’s house to his own small room that he shared with his wife and their new brooded children, and the treasure he had arranged be brought to his keeping.

“The mother and daughter took the feather cloaks and threw the swan’s downy plumage over themselves. The feathers immediately closed around them, and they rose up in the form of two perfect swans; the mother, robed in white- but the daughter, robed in black.

“And now I can speak with pleasure and freedom,” said the Deren-father; “for my oath bound my throat from speaking hence to the child or the mother, so long as they stood with faces upturned to the sun- and yet, as we birds do not have faces, I may thus speak. It is very fortunate that you came tonight; tomorrow we would have been gone. The mother, myself and the little ones, we’re about to roam to the south. Look at me now: I am an old friend from the Sandia, and a mother’s heart contains more than her beak. She always said that the princess would know how to help herself. I bade our young cousins carry the swan’s feathers over here, and I am glad of it now, and how lucky it is that I am here still. When the day dawns we shall start with a great company of other elves. We’ll fly first- and here he shook out his own cloak of stork feathers, and took on the form of that tall, wading bird again, ‘and you can follow in our track, so that you cannot miss your way. I and the young ones will have an eye upon you.”

“And the lotus-flower which I was to take with me,” said the Alabastan princess, “is flying here by my side, clothed in swan’s feathers. The flower of my heart will travel with me; and so the riddle is solved. Now for home! now for home!”

“But Helga said she could not leave the Orcish land without once more seeing her foster-mother, the loving wife of the Orc. Each pleasing recollection, each kind word, every tear from the heart which her foster-mother had wept for her, rose in her mind, and at that moment she felt as if she loved this mother the best.

“Yes, we must go to the Orc’s house,” said the Deren-father; “my contract is yet unfinished, and I must end things properly with the house-lord. I will flap my wings at once, that they may hear us coming.” Then Deren-father flapped his wings in first-rate style, and he and the swans flew away to the front of the Orc’s house.

“In the house, everyone was in a deep sleep. It had been late in the evening before the Orc’s wife retired to rest. She was anxious about Helga, who, three days before, had vanished with the Faerie priest. Helga must have helped him in his flight, for it was her horse that was missed from the stable; but by what power had all this been accomplished? The Orc’s wife thought of it with wonder, thought on the miracles which they said could be performed by those who believed in Love, and followed the Forty’s teachings.

“These passing thoughts formed themselves into a vivid dream, and it seemed to her that she was still lying awake on her couch, while without darkness reigned. A storm arose; she heard the lake dashing and rolling from east and west, like the waves of the Sea or the Channel. The monstrous
snake which, it is said, surrounds the earth in the depths of the ocean, was trembling in spasmodic convulsions. The night of the fall of the gods was come, “Ragnarock,” as the Orcs call the judgment-day, when everything shall pass away, even the high gods themselves. The war trumpet sounded; riding upon the rainbow, came the gods, clad in steel, to fight their last battle on the last battle-field. Before them flew the winged vampires, and the dead warriors closed up the train. The whole firmament was ablaze with the northern lights, and yet the darkness triumphed. It was a terrible hour. And, close to the terrified woman, Helga seemed to be seated on the floor, in the hideous form of a frog, yet trembling, and clinging to her foster-mother, who took her on her lap, and lovingly caressed her, hideous and toad-like as she was.

“The air was filled with the clashing of arms and the hissing of arrows, as if a storm of hail was descending upon the earth. It seemed to her the hour when earth and sky would burst asunder, and all things be swallowed up in the Bloody Moon’s oozing tresses; but she knew that a new heaven and a new earth would wave where now the lake rolled over desolate sands, and the ineffable Gods reign. Then she saw rising from the region of the dead; the gentle, the loving, and as the Orc’s wife gazed upon him, she recognized his countenance. It was the captive Faerie priest.

“White Faerie!” she exclaimed aloud, and with the words, she pressed a kiss on the forehead of the hideous toad-child. Then the toad-skin fell off, and Helga stood before her in all her beauty, more lovely and gentle-looking, and with eyes beaming with love. She kissed the hands of her foster-mother, blessed her for all her fostering love and care during the days of her trial and misery, for the thoughts she had suggested and awoke in her heart, and for naming the Name which she now repeated. Then beautiful Helga rose as a mighty swan, and spread her wings with the rushing sound of troops of birds of passage flying through the air.

“Then the Orc’s wife awoke, but she still heard the rushing sound without. She knew it was the time for the elves to depart, and that it must be their wings which she heard. She felt she should like to see them once more, and bid them farewell. She rose from her couch, stepped out on the threshold, and beheld, on the ridge of the roof, a party of elves ranged side by side. Troops of the birds were flying in circles over the castle and the highest trees; but just before her, as she stood on the threshold and close to the well where Helga had so often sat and alarmed her with her wildness, now stood two swans, gazing at her with intelligent eyes.

“Then she remembered her dream, which still appeared to her as a reality. She thought of Helga in the form of a swan. She thought of a Faerie priest, and suddenly a wonderful joy arose in her heart. The swans flapped their wings and arched their necks as if to offer her a greeting, and the Orc’s wife spread out her arms towards them, as if she accepted it, and smiled through her tears. She was roused from deep thought by a rustling of wings and snapping of beaks; all the elves arose, and started on their journey towards the south.

“We will not wait for the swans,” said the Deren-mother; “if they want to go with us, let them come now; we can’t sit here till the plovers start. It is a fine thing after all to travel in families, not like the finches and the partridges. There the male and the female birds fly in separate flocks, which, to speak candidly, I consider very unbecoming.”

“What are those swans flapping their wings for?” asked a Deren-child.

“Well, everyone flies in his own fashion,” said the Deren-father. “The swans fly in an oblique line; the cranes, in the form of a triangle; and the plovers, in a curved line like a snake.”

“Don’t talk about snakes while we are flying up here,” said Mother. “It puts ideas into the children’s
heads that can not be realized.”

“Are those the high mountains I have heard spoken of?” asked Helga, in the swan’s plumage.

“They are storm-clouds driving along beneath us,” replied her mother.

“What are yonder white clouds that rise so high?” again inquired Helga.

“Those are mountains covered with perpetual snows, that you see yonder,” said her mother. And then they flew across the Kush towards the Line.

“Titi’s land! Nefertari’s strand!” sang the daughter of the Sandia, in her swan’s plumage, as from the upper air she caught sight of her native land, a narrow, golden, wavy strip on the shores of the Sandia; the other birds espied it also and hastened their flight.

“I can smell the Sandia mud and the wet frogs,” said the Deren-mother, “and I begin to feel quite hungry. Yes, now you shall taste something nice, and you will see the marabout bird, and the ibis, and the crane. They all belong to our family, but they are not nearly so handsome as we are. They give themselves great airs, especially the ibis. The Alabastans have spoilt him. They make a mummy of him, and stuff him with spices. I would rather be stuffed with live frogs, and so would you, and so you shall. Better have something in your inside while you are alive, than to be made a parade of after you are dead. That is my opinion, and I am always right.”

“The elves are come,” was said in the great house on the banks of the Sandia, where the Lord lay in the hall on his downy cushions, covered with a leopard skin, scarcely alive, yet not dead, waiting and hoping for the lotus-flower from the deep moorland in the far north. Relatives and servants were standing by his couch, when the two beautiful swans who had come with the elves flew into the hall.

“They threw off their soft plumage, and two lovely female forms approached the pale, sick old man, and threw back their long hair, and when Helga bent over her grandfather, redness came back to his cheeks, his eyes brightened, and life returned to his benumbed limbs. The old man rose up with health and energy renewed; daughter and grandchild welcomed him as joyfully as if with a morning greeting after a long and troubled dream.

“Joy reigned through the whole house, as well as in the elves nest; although there the chief cause was really the good food, especially the quantities of frogs, which seemed to spring out of the ground in swarms.

“Then the learned men hastened to note down, in flying characters, the story of the two princesses, and spoke of the arrival of the health-giving flower as a mighty event, which had been a blessing to the house and the land. Meanwhile, the Deren-father told the story to his family in his own way; but not till they had eaten and were satisfied; otherwise they would have had something else to do than to listen to stories.

“Well,” said the Deren-mother, when she had heard it, “you will be made something of at last; I suppose they can do nothing less.”

“What could I be made?” said Father; “what have I done?— just nothing.”

“You have done more than all the rest,” she replied. “But for you and our kin the two young princesses would never have seen home again, and the recovery of the old man would not have been
effected. You will become something. They must certainly give you a doctor's hood, and our young ones will inherit it, and their children after them, and so on. You already look like a doctor, at least in my eyes.”

“I cannot quite remember the words I heard when I listened on the roof,” said the Father, while relating the story to his family; “all I know is, that what the wise men said was so complicated and so learned, that they received not only rank, but presents; even the head cook at the great house was honored with a mark of distinction, most likely for the soup.”

“And what did you receive?” said the Mother. “They certainly ought not to forget the most important person in the affair, as you really are. The learned men have done nothing at all but use their tongues. Surely they will not overlook you.”

“Late in the night, while the gentle sleep of peace rested on the now happy house, there was still one watcher. It was not Deren-father, who, although he stood on guard on one leg, could sleep soundly. Helga alone was awake. She leaned over the balcony, gazing at the sparkling stars that shone clearer and brighter in the pure air than they had done in the north, and yet they were the same stars.

“She thought of the Orc’s wife in the wild moorland, of the gentle eyes of her foster-mother, and of the tears she had shed over the poor frog-child that now lived in splendor and starry beauty by the waters of the Sandia, with air balmy and sweet as spring. She thought of the love that dwelt in the breast of the orc-woman, love that had been shown to a wretched creature, hateful as a human being, and hideous when in the form of an animal. She looked at the glittering stars, and thought of the radiance that had shone forth on the forehead of the dead goddess, as she had fled with her over the woodland and moor. Tones were awakened in her memory; words which she had heard her speak as they rode onward, when she was carried, wondering and trembling, through the air; words from the great Fountain of love, the highest love that embraces all the human race. What had not been won and achieved by this Love?

“Day and night beautiful Helga was absorbed in the contemplation of the great amount of her happiness, and lost herself in the contemplation, like a child who turns hurriedly from the giver to examine the beautiful gifts. She was over-powered with her good fortune, which seemed always increasing, and therefore what might it become in the future? Had she not been brought by a wonderful miracle to all this joy and happiness? And in these thoughts she indulged, until at last she thought no more of the Giver. It was the over-abundance of youthful spirits unfolding its wings for a daring flight. Her eyes sparkled with energy, when suddenly arose a loud noise in the court below, and the daring thought vanished. She looked down, and saw two large ostriches running round quickly in narrow circles; she had never seen these creatures before,—great, coarse, clumsy-looking birds with curious wings that looked as if they had been clipped, and the birds themselves had the appearance of having been roughly used. She inquired about them, and for the first time heard the legend which the Alabastans relate respecting the ostrich.

“Once, say they, the ostriches were a beautiful and glorious race of birds, with large, strong wings. One evening the other large birds of the forest said to the ostrich, “Brother, shall we fly to the river to-morrow morning to drink, Gods willing?” and the ostrich answered, “I will.”

With the break of day, therefore, they commenced their flight; first rising high in the air, towards the sun, which is the eye of the Gods; still higher and higher the ostrich flew, far above the other birds, proudly approaching the light, trusting in its own strength, and thinking not of the Giver, or saying, “if Gods will.” When suddenly the avenging angel drew back the veil from the flaming ocean of
sunlight, and in a moment the wings of the proud bird were scorched and shrivelled, and they sunk miserably to the earth. Since that time the ostrich and his race have never been able to rise in the air; they can only fly terror-stricken along the ground, or run round and round in narrow circles. It is a warning to mankind, that in all our thoughts and schemes, and in every action we undertake, we should say, “if Gods will.”

“Then Helga bowed her head thoughtfully and seriously, and looked at the circling ostrich, as with timid fear and simple pleasure it glanced at its own great shadow on the sunlit walls. And the story of the ostrich sunk deeply into the heart and mind of Helga: a life of happiness, both in the present and in the future, seemed secure for her, and what was yet to come might be the best of all, Gods willing.

Early in the spring, when the elves were again about to journey northward, beautiful Helga took off her golden bracelets, scratched her name on them, and beckoned to the elf-father. He came to her, and she placed the golden circlet round his neck, and begged him to deliver it safely to the Orc’s wife, so that she might know that her foster-daughter still lived, was happy, and had not forgotten her.

“It is rather heavy to carry,” thought elf-papa, when he had it on his neck; “but gold and honor are not to be flung into the street. The elf brings good fortune—they’ll be obliged to acknowledge that at last.”

“You lay gold, and I lay eggs,” said elf-mamma; “with you it is only once in a way, I lay eggs every year. But no one appreciates what we do; I call it very mortifying.”

“But then we have a consciousness of our own worth, mother,” replied elf-papa.

“What good will that do you?” retorted elf-mamma; “it will neither bring you a fair wind, nor a good meal.”

“The little nightingale, who is singing yonder in the tamarind grove, will soon be going north, too.” Helga said she had often heard her singing on the wild moor, so she determined to send a message by her. While flying in the swan’s plumage she had learnt the bird language; she had often conversed with the elf and the swallow, and she knew that the nightingale would understand. So she begged the nightingale to fly to the beechwood, on the peninsula of Jutland, where a mound of stone and twigs had been raised to form the grave, and she begged the nightingale to persuade all the other little birds to build their nests round the place, so that evermore should resound over that grave music and song. And the nightingale flew away, and time flew away also.

“In the autumn, an eagle, standing upon a pyramid, saw a stately train of richly laden camels, and men attired in armor on foaming Arabian steeds, whose glossy skins shone like silver, their nostrils were pink, and their thick, flowing manes hung almost to their slender legs. A royal prince of Arabia, handsome as a prince should be, and accompanied by distinguished guests, was on his way to the stately house, on the roof of which the elfs’ empty nests might be seen. They were away now in the far north, but expected to return very soon. And, indeed, they returned on a day that was rich in joy and gladness.

“A marriage was being celebrated, in which the beautiful Helga, glittering in silk and jewels, was the bride, and the bridegroom the young Arab prince. Bride and bridegroom sat at the upper end of the table, between the bride’s mother and grandfather. But her gaze was not on the bridegroom, with his manly, sunburnt face, round which curled a black beard, and whose dark fiery eyes were fixed upon her; but away from him, at a twinkling star, that shone down upon her from the sky. Then was heard the sound of rushing wings beating the air. The elfs were coming home; and the old elf pair, although tired with the journey and requiring rest, did not fail to fly down at once to the balustrades of the verandah, for they knew already what feast was being celebrated. They had heard of it on the
borders of the land, and also that Helga had caused their figures to be represented on the walls, for
they belonged to her history.

“I call that very sensible and pretty,” said elf-papa.

“Yes, but it is very little,” said mamma elf; “they could not possibly have done less.”

“But, when Helga saw them, she rose and went out into the verandah to stroke the backs of the elfs. The old elf pair bowed their heads, and curved their necks, and even the youngest among the young ones felt honored by this reception.

“Helga continued to gaze upon the glittering star, which seemed to glow brighter and purer in its light; then between herself and the star floated a form, purer than the air, and visible through it. It floated quite near to her, and she saw that it was the dead Faerie priest, who also was coming to her wedding feast—coming from the heavens.

“The glory and brightness, yonder, outshines all that is known on earth,” said he.

“Then Helga the Fair prayed more gently, and more earnestly, than she had ever prayed in her life before, that she might be permitted to gaze, if only for a single moment, at the glory and brightness of the heavenly kingdom. Then she felt herself lifted up, as it were, above the earth, through a sea of sound and thought; not only around her, but within her, was there light and song, such as words cannot express.

“Now we must return;” he said; “you will be missed.”

“Only one more look,” she begged; “but one short moment more.”

“We must return to earth; the guests will have all departed. Only one more look!—the last!”

“Then Helga stood again in the verandah. But the marriage lamps in the festive hall had been all extinguished, and the torches outside had vanished. The elves were gone; not a guest could be seen; no bridegroom—all in those few short moments seemed to have died. Then a great dread fell upon her. She stepped from the verandah through the empty hall into the next chamber, where slept strange warriors. She opened a side door, which once led into her own apartment, but now, as she passed through, she found herself suddenly in a garden which she had never before seen here; the sky blushed red, and it was the dawn of morning. Three minutes only in heaven, and a whole night on earth had passed away! Then she saw the elves, and called to them in their own language.

“Then elf-papa turned his head towards here, listened to her words, and drew near. “You speak our language,” said he, “what do you wish? Why do you appear-you-a strange woman?”

“It is I- it is Helga! Dost thou not know me? Three minutes ago we were speaking together yonder in the verandah.”

“That is a mistake,” said the elf, “you must have dreamed all this.”

“No, no,” she exclaimed. Then she reminded him of the Orc’s castle, of the great lake, and of the journey across the ocean.

Then the elf blinked his eyes, and said, “Why that’s an old story which happened in the time of my
great-great-grandfather. There certainly was a princess of that kind here in Alabasta once, who came from the Orcish land, but she vanished on the evening of her wedding day, many hundred years ago, and never came back. You may read about it yourself yonder, on a monument in the garden. There you will find swans and elfs sculptured, and on the top is a figure of the princess Helga, in marble.”

“And so it was; Helga understood it all now, and sank on her knees. The sun burst forth in all its glory, and, as in olden times, the form of the frog vanished in his beams, and the beautiful form stood forth in all its loveliness; so now, bathed in light, rose a beautiful form, black as soot- a swan.

“Helga in her old raiment flew away, beyond the End of the World; to the holy spring of Charis, as she was bid by the dead goddess so long before. So ends the tale, as elves know to tell it.

Franky is staring at me. Ah, I had forgotten; I never told anyone I’m an Automata too- or rather, my people called ourselves Beloved, in the old style.

This isn’t really the time to talk about it- but I look over at him, and meet his eyes. There is a time for fear- but if I can’t say who I am to my family, my family that I chose and chose me back… when can I ever say it? And to whom?

I nod to Franky; Franky nods back.

I smile, and continue my tale telling; there’s only one left, now.

Every witch knows the most powerful magical substance is blood. By fairest blood was a queen given eternal life; by fairest blood was she killed at last. The worst curses are passed down in blood; the best blessings, also.

And so it was that the Hag gained power. When she had slaughtered the tommyknockers, she had eaten their flesh and drunk their blood; and so she had gained power.

Again there came a knocking at the door- more a raspy scratching sound. From without there was the yelping cry of dogs- and I knew if I had gone to look, they would have been black.

Again the ghostly woman left the house- again there was a hue and cry; and again she returned. This time, she was young and beautiful, and in her eyes gleamed a horrible red light. Violence and fury oozed from her pores- and yet, when she sat again at the table, she was the Good Hag again.

She reached up and unlatched a necklace and handed it across to her good-grand-daughter; she took off a heavy traveling cloak of feathers and handed it to me; and then she snarled herself back to a more or less polite countenance, and bade me tell my third tale.
And so, I drew my third Fairy-sword.

“There was once a girl whose father and mother died while she was still a little child. All alone, in a small house at the end of the village, there dwelt her godmother, who supported herself by spinning, weaving, and sewing. The aged woman took the orphaned child to live with her, kept her to her work, and educated her in all that is good.

“When the girl was fifteen year’s, the old woman took ill; called the child to her bedside, and said, “Dear daughter, I can feel my end drawing near. I leave to thee this little house, which will protect thee from Wind and Rain; and my spindle, shuttle, and needle, with which thou canst earn thy bread.”

“Then she laid her hands on the girl’s head, blessed her, and said “May you be blessed, and all go well with thee.”

“Thereupon she closed her eyes forever. When she was laid in the earth, the maiden knelt thereon, weeping bitterly, and paid her the last mark of respect she could. Now the maiden lived quite alone in the little house, and was industrious, and spun and wove and sewed; and the blessing of the good old woman who had loved her so was on all that she did.

“It seemed as if the flax in the room increased of its own accord, and whenever she wove a piece of cloth or carpet or had made a shirt or sheet, she at once found a buyer who paid her amply for it, so that she was in want of nothing, and even had something to share with others.

“About this time, the son of the King was traveling about the country looking for a bride. He was not to choose a poor one, and did not want to have a rich one. So he said, “She shall be my wife who is the poorest, and at the same time the richest.” When he came to the village where the maiden dwelt, he inquired, as he did wherever he went, who was the richest and also the poorest girl in the place? They first named the richest; the poorest, they said, was the girl who lived in the small house quite at the end of the village.

“The rich girl was sitting in all her splendour before the door of her house, and when the prince approached her, she got up, went to meet him, and made him a low curtsey. He looked at her, said nothing, and rode on. When he came to the house of the poor girl, she was not standing at the door, but sitting in her little room. He stopped his horse, and saw through the window, on which the bright sun was shining, the girl sitting at her spinning-wheel, busily spinning. She looked up, and when she saw that the prince was looking in, she blushed all over her face, let her eyes fall, and went on spinning. I do not know whether, just at that moment, the thread was quite even; but she went on spinning until the King’s son had ridden away again.

“Then she went to the window, opened it, and said, "It is so warm in this room!" but she still looked after him as long as she could distinguish the white feathers in his hat. Then she sat down to work again in her own room and went on with her spinning, and a saying which the old woman had often repeated when she was sitting at her work, came into her mind, and she sang these words to herself-

"Spindle, my spindle, haste, haste thee away,

“And here to my house bring the wooer, I pray."
“And what do you think happened? The spindle sprang out of her hand in an instant, and out of the
door, and when, in her astonishment, she got up and looked after it, she saw that it was dancing out
merrily into the open country, and drawing a shining golden thread after it. Before long, it had
entirely vanished from her sight. As she had now no spindle, the girl took the weaver's shuttle in her
hand, sat down to her loom, and began to weave.

“The spindle, however, danced continually onwards, and just as the thread came to an end, reached
the prince. "What do I see?" he cried; "the spindle certainly wants to show me the way!" turned his
horse about, and rode back with the golden thread. The girl was, however, sitting at her work
singing,

"Shuttle, my shuttle, weave well this day,
And guide the wooer to me, I pray."

“Immediately the shuttle sprang out of her hand and out by the door. Before the threshold, however,
it began to weave a carpet which was more beautiful than the eyes of man had ever yet beheld. Lilies
and roses blossomed on both sides of it, and on a golden ground in the centre green branches
ascended, under which bounded hares and rabbits, stags and deer stretched their heads in between
them, brightly-coloured birds were sitting in the branches above; they lacked nothing but the gift of
song. The shuttle leapt hither and thither, and everything seemed to grow of its own accord.

“As the shuttle had run away, the girl sat down to sew. She held the needle in her hand and sang,

"Needle, my needle, sharp-pointed and fine,

"Prepare for a wooer this house of mine."

“Then the needle leapt out of her fingers, and flew everywhere about the room as quick as lightning.
It was just as if invisible spirits were working; they covered tables and benches with green cloth in an
instant, and the chairs with velvet, and hung the windows with silken curtains. Hardly had the needle
put in the last stitch then the maiden saw through the window the white feathers of the prince, whom
the spindle had brought thither by the golden thread. He alighted, stepped over the carpet into the
house, and when he entered the room, there stood the maiden in her poor garments, but she shone
out from within them like a rose surrounded by leaves.

“Thou art the poorest and also the richest," said he to her. "Come with me, thou shalt be my bride."

“She did not speak, but she gave him her hand. Then he gave her a kiss, led her forth, lifted her on to
his horse, and took her to the royal castle, where the wedding was solemnized with great rejoicings.
The spindle, shuttle, and needle were preserved in the treasure-chamber, and held in great honour.”
And my tales were done at last, and with them, the last link of anything holding the Hag to the house of her birth.

Necromancy has its uses.

A spear of sunlight burst through a high window, and splattered on an arrangement of crystals hung from threads of silk. From without there rang the bell of the gate, and its tinkling voice chimed sweetly thrice.

Queen Mab had returned, at last.

The son, Faldo, left the room; and it was only us left- a maiden, a witch, and a crone. What happened there is not for the ears of mixed company- but, I can say that the crone gave unto her good-daughter the last bits of her magic, her knowledge, and her love. And then Queen Mab returned- and I think I’ll leave the rest of the telling to her.

“Mab?”

“Hmm-? Ah, yes. Right.”

In the end, freeing the Good Hag from her earthly bonds was as simple as talking to the ghost of a horse and giving her back her love-token. I did; and she left, never to return.

As soon as the ghost had gone, Gilly and Faldo packed away all their things into satchels, and put saddles onto the horses we have now. Together, we- Robin on Turnip and Beatrix on Whiskers, myself on Spare Parts, and the last of the Sinisters on Pumpkin still living in their ancient homestead-rode away to the east, where the sun was just peeking out of the mighty roots of Eve.

On the Barrow-field, the battle still raged. It’s a curious trait of that area of the realm; the only way out of that dell and valley was through the barrow-field. Our horses are made of stern stuff; and even so, they did not truly want to go out into that nightmare place, where the ghosts of the pasts could not rest.

And yet, even so, we rode on. Alongside us there came the rider; Tom, of the Road, who loved the Witches Daughter who became the Good Old Hag. Tom looked sharp over us all and grinned once, widely; and at last, through the strange confluence of Royal intervention, ancient grudges, and duties fulfilled, a miracle took place. Tom took from his saddle horn a trumpet, a horn made of cow or ox or auroch, took from a skull and bound with great and ancient runes I dare not say the names of here-
And then-

Tom-

Blew-

*Around us there came the ghosts of the Cavalry.* As it happens, Tom of the Roads was not a messenger- or rather, he was no lowly message carrier, but a Royal Messenger, charged with the duty of mustering the cavalry. It was his direct efforts that broke the stalemate of that ancient war; and it was he who ended things then, as well.

Ghostly horses, and ghostly screams; the hissing of arrows like sizzling drops of rain in dust. Cannon fodder- young men and women, too young to be at war but too old to be overlooked for the job, torn to pieces by stones and lying where they fell for there is no time- the third week, or the fourth week of a siege, in which the castle on the ridge past the dell refused to submit- all around us, the smoke and fire and stench of bodies in trenches, living dead and undecided and then-

And then-

In the glorious tide of the sun’s dawning, the Ghosts were burned away like mist. All that remained was the ghostly Tom, and his steady, ghostly horse. He overtook me, and led me to the center-most point of the barrow-field, a gently sunken, stately hillock of stones overgrown with slowly waving grass. He dismounted, and tugged the reins of his horse down, once; and then he looked to me.

I stood from Party’s back, and set foot on that murky ground. I walked over to Robin, and took from her saddle the netted bag which held the Chalice the old ghostly woman had given away. I took from her the cloak, made of homely feathers; and as I turned to walk to poor Tom, Gilly, his many-removed grand-daughter, gave me a posy of flowers.

I walked then towards the Ghostly Tom, and stood before him with the treasure he had given away.

Tom stared at it, and reached for it- but I stared him in the eye, narrowly. He stopped, and stumbled- and then he took his war-horn off his shoulder, and proffered it to me. I took it, and handed him the bag with the chalice. He shrugged away his soldier’s cloak, and took the homely feathers. Finally, he took from his side a sabre, and traded it to me for the posey of flowers.

In order to get the horn he had needed for battle, it may very well be that poor, Ghostly Tom had traded his tokens for others; and, at the end when he had lived, could not find the one to whom he had traded it away.

A chalice for a horn; a cloak for a cloak; a bunch of flowers for a sword. It’s the kind of trade you hear about in Fairy-tales.

Still.

When he had that ancient thing, a wooden goblet with a ring around the stem, he stared at it in wonder. When he stood under that elf’s cloak, he stood with new pride, and years of pain and anguish fell away with his returned self. At last, the flowers- the smell of them brought a blush of uncomplicated joy to his face, and for a moment I could see the man he was before- a simple, wandering elf-man, whose duty to his Lord interfered with the duty to his heart.
Then, to me, he bowed, and the strange colors that had lit him from within his ghostly stature faded, and he remained only in the most misty of ways; a shadow on mist, soon to burn away. Then, he seemed to hear a call, beyond my hearing; and he turned, face alight with such unfettered joy- and then, he was gone, chalice and all, beyond even my sight.

He left behind his horse, though- and that horse told me a bit of her character, which is why I had Robin ride her into town and hitched Turnip to me and Party on a long line. And then we rode away, into town- Waterwheel Town, where we found Cecelia and her friend, Sancho.

The Raiments of Valor, Glory, and Purpose remain with the horse I renamed Steady Walker, in honor of her gait; and on the ground where the ghost of Tom left at last, there burbles now a sacred fountain, blessed by the Three-Who-Are-One, and the Three Who Made This World, and The One Who Broke It.

As for the Barrows; never again shall any ghost rise from those graves, and the land shall lay sleeping once more.

An’ the Wheel bends, an’ the story ends; thus ends my tale, and the telling of it. So too ends the grudge

“Okay, wait, hold up- if I was there, why are you telling me about it all again?”

“Well, Deb, for one thing you passed out about four times that I noticed that day; and for another, Chopper’s been dosing you with pain-medication so you won’t get out of bed and aggravate your wounds.”

“Oh. So, I was high?”

“Like the Surface of the Sea, babe.”

“Ah. So- what, that whole ‘Ghost Army of the Barrows’ thing mom used to scare us with was just about a chalice, a cloak, and a sword?”

“This chalice, actually- Bea’s called dibs on the sword, and Fern’s swiped the cloak… said something like ‘it’s perfect for reducing contaminated Sight,’ whatever that means. -It was never about the things, really. Things, in the end, aren’t all that valuable- not enough to fight a war over.”

“...Yeah. People fight over food and water, not… cups and coats and fancy knives. That’s- no. Not whole groups of people. ...The Sinisters are very powerful when it comes to traditional things; holding onto your past for so long can have a powerful effect. Still though- how in the fuck did Cecelia get into this? And where the hell is Sancho- is he coming with us too?”

“Well, yes. Cece and Sancho are partners; the Owl and the Raccoon belong together, really. Right now, Sancho and Cece are working with Taffy on their clowning skills; something about needing to
fine-tune their comedic timing in battle? As for how they got into this, well...”
School Daze

They call me Connasse at the Clown College.

Wait wait wait- that’s a bit too abrupt.

Go back.

Okay, here we go- we’re fucking poor, okay? Mom never eats when the rest of us do. When she could sit up, she’d sit at the table with us, but she always had ‘stomach trouble’ that didn’t go away until after we were all done eating. Then, if there was anything left she’d say, ‘well, I guess I should try to eat a little bit of something; to keep my strength up, you know?’ If there wasn’t anything left from what Deb had cooked that morning, she’d say that she just didn’t feel like her could handle anything.

I didn’t realize until I was scrounging for myself more often that she was waiting to be sure that her daughters- us- had enough to eat before feeding herself. She went to bed hungry more than once, especially before Deb got the job at the Acorn.


So yeah, I have no formal clown training. None. What I have is moxie.

So here’s how I got my clowning name. At the Gag, there’s a big-ass room, a fuckin’ room where all everyone does is fuckin’ eat, right? The Caf, or some shit; right, well, there’s this thing called a share-table. Lots of people at the Caf get meals as part of their like, tuition or whatever, but sometimes whatever they get for lunch, they don’t eat all of it. So, instead of throwing their shit away, they put the stuff they didn’t touch on the share table.

That’s where I come in.

See… wait, I should explain. The Gag’s a fuckin’ hoity-toity establishment; and in the student handbook, which they have copies of in the library- I’ll explain that in a minute. Anyway, they only speak French, Wesse, Hispa, Dutchy, and Germa in the college. At all times.

Of all those languages, French, Wesse, and Hispa are learned quickest, followed by Dutchy and Germa for the more technical classes. I only spoke Gobdark Cant, Merrish, Kappash, and Wahongo, when I started going to the Gag for food.

Here’s what I’d do. See, there’s a rolling group of popular students- changes year to year, but there’s always at least one gang of girls and guys who get their full tuition paid by their parents and don’t eat the good shit from their lunch because of fad dieting. So it goes to the share table, right? Well.

Around this time, Deb’s boss at the Acorn had cracked down on all the workers taking home shit that didn’t sell, and, uh, well there was no food at home- not enough to really let everyone eat. So, scrounging.

Five years ago, when I was nine I think? Deb does not understand time.
I’m not sure, really, where my particular Face came from- now, I mean. I know it started as the bare-bones of a Perriot face… okay so they don’t tell you this in the handbook or anything, but individual pans of Slap cost less than those deluxe kits. I’d never seen any Face outside of pictographs and posters so old that the colors weren’t invented yet or had faded all away, so I didn’t know you could put colors on your face at all. I used black, and white, and I already knew what I was there to do, so… there’s this animal that lives all over the country but especially in Gobdark called a raccoon? My very first Face was based really heavily off a raccoon.

I used makeup-skills I got from the other women in our apartment- our entire apartment is all prostitutes, and good makeup can make or break a night, so… Anyway, I’d apply milk of magnesia and then my first layers of foundation and set them, and then I’d put on the second layers and set them again, brush all the excess away- and my face looked fuckin’ *perfect* for the rest of the day, no matter how much I sweated.

Yeah, then I guess I decided to just- go for it, y’know? I went by the local monastery, and I got one of their *worst robes* - it’d been bleached accidentally so it was a weird grey color, and I tried to dye it black but it didn’t take so it turned greyer, and then it was so huge on me I- acquired is a good word, I *acquired* a set of shaolin limb wraps to keep my robes tight to my hands and feet and then, well… I kinda already had the shoes? So, I got a *black obi*, one of the most modern ones, to break up my torso and also, incidentally, help broadcast my gender. Sancho got me the scarf, but I’ll explain that later. So yeah, I looked fuckin’ great.

I also looked like one of the edgy kids, who didn’t really understand what being a clown was all about.

Looks are deceiving, alright?

Anyway, at that time I was hitting my first massive growth spurt, hence the oversized clothing I could really grow into, and- well, anyway the share table had all the food I could want, and I tended to eat, like, everything there, right around the end of the lunch period? Only it was the habit of the poser crowd I wasn’t a part of to grab the good shit and eat it during their lecture periods; come to find out that I’d already eaten most of that shit, and was working through the less-good shit as they came up on me.

And they’d be like “Conasse! Blahblahblahblahblahblah-”

And I’d look ‘em dead in the eyes and say “Oui. Je suis.”

And then I’d go back to eating, still watching them and chewing and not understanding a goddamn word they were saying but knowing every time they said Conasse they were definitely referring to me. In an effort to understand what they were talking about, I basically got Deb to teach me French but I didn’t realize that cook’s french and normal people french is not at all the same, so uh. Well.

I think the Posers first realization that I was a completely different animal from them was when one of them tripped me in full view of the entire Caf and I fell and smacked my face into the ground and yelled ‘Ow! Putain!’ loud enough to rattle the fuckin’ rafters. Everyone who saw it started laughing; everyone who heard it started laughing; even the fuckin’ posers started laughing. It was then, and there, that I knew- I had to be a clown. Nothing else gave me the same kind of satisfaction as accidentally making every person in that Caf start laughing.
So yeah, I ended up with a fuckin’ posse after that or something? I mostly ditched them, because, well, I had no idea how to understand the lectures so, um.

Well.

It’s been true my entire life; the best place to find more information, to learn anything at all, is the library. The Gobdark Local Library is the nicest place in town; the air and water are always fresh, and the librarian, Mr. Potter, is really nice. So, I asked him about how to learn the languages spoken at the Gag, and he gave me a primer for Latin, and German, and Dutchy; told me that French, Wesse, and Hispa all came from Latin, which came from the Roamin’s. So I learned to speak and read and write Latin, which is one of the languages accepted at the Gag- and about that student handbook.

See, the Gag’s library is funded by the state, not the school, making it public property. I, and my family, are tax-paying members of the public, and thus, own a share in literally every public space in the country. Including the Gag school library.

So, it wasn’t a big deal for Mr. Potter to get an old copy of the Student Handbook for me, and- after I read it in Latin- I internalized the school rules. Technically speaking, the school’s a conservatory, with a two year program and post-graduate classes for those interested.

‘The Conservatory does not discriminate on the basis of age, tribe, faith, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, genetic origin, disability, or status as a protected veteran. The Conservatory’s nondiscrimination policy applies to all phases of its employment process, its admission and financial aid programs, and to all other aspects of its educational programs and activities.’ First paragraph of the first page, y’all. I think we all have the thing Deb has, where if we see something once we remember it forever? Like a pictograph of memory, all neat in a row. Or whatever.

As for tuition, well- so long as I’m a registered student, I’m entitled to a spot in class; and so long as I’m under the age of twenty one, the state will pay for any school debt I accrued. All I had to do was fill out the stack of forms and get them to the right people.

Here’s something a lot of people don’t really get about being poor. If you’re poor, you’re okay with inconvenience. Have to wait for the bus in the rain for half an hour? Got my bus pass ready, my jacket’s waterproofed, and cold water will not kill me. I’m a fishwoman, water’s fine.

Sleeping on the floor on top of a blanket? No big; it straightens out the back and we don’t have rats or mice.

Eating rice with beans, or eggs with ketchup, or eggs and rice? Better than just rice with soy sauce again.

Sitting next to a fattass on the train? HOLY FUCK I’M ON THE TRAIN.

Sancho sometimes accuses me of apathy because I don’t get pissed off by silly shit, but literally no inconvenience I’ve ever been through is so major that I have to ruin my moment over it by getting bent out of shape about it. Being poor is a constant grinding parade of little irritations, to the point where if you legit only have one or two things wrong at a given time, you’re fuckin’ great.

Case in point- Mr. Potter knew as soon as I told him where I was going to school that I’d never be able to check out the current textbooks from the library. However, getting copies of the chapter
overviews— which lay out all the points the book is going to hit— and copies of each textbook’s bibliography, which is the list of books referenced, is as simple as asking Missus Wiggly Giggly, the librarian at the Gag. Incidentally, most students seem to just never do that? Apparently they’re put off by Missus Giggly being a Scare Clown, not a Joker like almost everyone else, but honestly I find her amusing— anyway, she let me watch philomes of referenced works when they weren’t books, and uh. Well.

It turns out that when you come to conclusions based on first principles, you gain a mastery?

For example.

Beauty is all about patterns. Our feelings of beauty are a particularly potent and intense form of curiosity. It’s a learning signal that urges us to keep paying attention, an emotional reminder that there’s something there worth figuring out. A feeling that reminds you to pay attention, idiot, this is fucking important.

This particular variant of curiosity is hijacked by art. Experiencing beautiful art… when we get sucked into the undulating tones of a symphony, observe a sunrise after a storm, see a horse and rider in perfect joined motion… Great art always seem to imply something, to set up information in patterns that then keep us that observe them waiting for their conclusion. It’s for this reason that twelve tone musical phrases are so popular; your mind completes a chord that does not exist. The final line of a rap-battle becomes a thing of immense beauty because throughout the entire call and response of verses, that final line was built up. The feeling of beauty tells us there is a pattern to be found here, and that we as observers have a chance of understanding it.

Beauty is a motivational force that helps modulate conscious awareness. The problem beauty solves for the brain is the problem of trying to figure out which sensations are worth making sense of and which ones can be easily ignored. Great art seems to contain promises of great patterns. The beginning of a symphony sets up a pattern and then the rest, more or less, is a tantalizing flirtation with, but not submission to, our expectations of beauty.

There are studies that suggest the medial orbital-frontal cortex, a specific area of the brain involved in our experience of beauty, regardless of source. This is one of the least understood parts of the brain; however, what is known is that it is integral to the integration of sensory information, the regulation of how powerful emotional responses are to stimuli, and it’s also key in decision making and expectation. In particular, the mOFC is thought to regulate planning behavior associated with sensitivity to reward and punishment.

It’s not so unexpected that our experiences of beauty resides in the area of the brain already known to be an important part of the pleasure spectrum. That brain area has consistently been implicated in the recognition of delightful things, from the kiss of a lover, to the taste of expensive sweets, to the luxuriant sensation of cashmere, to the smell of fresh blooming flowers. As we begin to discover how the experience of beauty originates in the brain we can begin to answer the philosophical question of what the common quality of all great art is, in a qualitative and measurable way. In essence, the peculiar quality of art may lay not in the works themselves (music included), but in the brains of their beholders.

If that is so, then a work of art can be seen as a trigger for the sensation of beauty. A skilled artist
might be said to have an understanding of how to form an object, work, or performance into an experience which triggers beauty through setting up a pattern and holding off on its completion. That lack of completion, that moment of mystery that cries out to be understood; it also gives off the hopeful feeling that you’ll be able to grasp it.

In exploring aspects of life as diverse as hallucinogens, masturbatory techniques, meditation, dancing to repetitive music, partaking of religious ceremonies, and studying evolution… I gained the sense that life and everything in life is riddled with patterns. Everything, even the randomest of occurrences, moves to a pattern of some kind; it’s origin is the substance of life, this repetition and creation of seeming chaos that resolve into fracturing patterns that resolve into a procedural order too vast for even the most brilliant of women or men to ever comprehend. The earliest myths we have that ordain the creation of our World dictate the story of True Order being revealed from True Chaos; we mortal beings, mere reflections of ancient gods and goddesses, therefore create meaning from chaos wherever we find it.

It is an indelible part of what makes us human.

As an aside, if beauty is a facet of curiosity, what the hell is curiosity? Well… curiosity obeys an inverted U-shaped curve, so that we’re most curious when we know a little about a subject, but not too much; our curiosity has been piqued, a question has been asked, and so long as our certainty of the answer isn’t, the curiosity remains.

The lesson here is that our desire for more information- the cause of curiosity, wherever it lurks- begins as a dopaminergic craving, rooted in the same primal pathway that responds to sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll music. The thing that keeps us interest is incompleteness, rather than perfection. A stray hair on a calligraphic painting, a golden tooth in a friend’s unguarded smile- these are the things that make something beautiful and interesting.

Beauty is what urges us to pay attention; to keep looking for the resolution to the pattern we saw. It hints at the mysterious, but also gives us the hope that we might grasp understanding. It encourages us with its imperfections to want to know more; to want to know how it ends.

Beauty is what encourages us to find the truth of things.

Enter the Clowns.

Since the Dawn of Man, Clowns have been intertwined with truth in all it’s forms. This quality of truth is what attracts people to clowns, not as individuals but as concepts. Truthfulness is what makes a clown, beyond the mask of grotesquery. A clown, in fully authentic form, will and must say things others wouldn’t dare.

The clown is a liminal character, polarized between the lowest social standing and a position of receiving attention, which in and of itself is a form of social status. People pay attention to clowns- not just poor people, but the rich and powerful too. In previous centuries the Courtly Jester was a clown in the service of a King or some other elevated noble. In this role, Jesters had unique access to, literally, the most powerful persons in the land; on top of that he had a unique permission to speak only the truth.
The Jester’s freedom to mock or contradict rulers is described in records from all over the World, throughout history. It can therefore be assumed that the nobles who kept and employed their Fools were fully aware of this aspect of clowns. To gain the privileged position, the clown had to deserve the merit. Only a master of the craft of clowning; someone who could empathize and communicate with the people whose truth’s they were speaking in a way that would be heard. More generally, the master would have to be compatible with their patron’s sense of humor, overall taste, and temperament.

And so we get to my understanding of the form.

An important part of the education of a clown that is never stated outright, anywhere, is the development, discovery, and ownership of a truthful representation of themselves. Anyone can learn to fall down without hurting themselves, to juggle, sing comedic songs, tell jokes and stories… but the best clowns are not merely entertainers. They are themselves, always, to the point where we remember them as Themselves, not as the characters they played.

The most difficult skill to develop at clown school is unpretentious pretending, because it’s predicated on the idea that you know who you are and what you want. Most people here at school do not; or, at the very least, are only starting to realize what they really need at the end of classes.

I am unapologetic, and everyone who sees me views me with suspicion. I am a master of clowning, because even without a Face full of Slap, I am Conasse, and Conasse is Cecelia, and Cecelia is Me. One person; many names. Still me.

Putting on my Face doesn’t hide who I am, or how I am seen by others; it doesn’t turn me into someone else, or someone good, or someone right, or someone your mother would let you be seen with in public. I will always be the whore’s daughter from the worst city in the country. You can see it, in everything I do; from the features on my face to the sound of my voice.

I will always borrow routines, shtick, gags, jokes, and ideas from the other students at the Gag, from my predecessors; I will always belong to a long tradition of performers, primarily Mimes, as I am a Skuan in my inherited heritage.

My best specific techniques, that I use time and time again, are silent. You don’t need to learn an entirely new language to understand any of my jokes. I’m the kind of clown you see in a circus, or on the street-corner; I’m no pet. Mimes are not pets.

Whatever material I perform, whatever character I present, I enter my clowning persona as a way of being more generously myself than I might be under other circumstances.

I learned to clown- not the superficial skills, the makeup, the clothing, the jokes and the japes and the chicanery- no, I learned the actual deep mechanics of empathy because my sister, Fernanda, didn’t always have her glass orb.

See, people with the Sight are born with… vision, unclouded, is how our local hedgewitchdoctor described it. Fernanda Sees so much more than the rest of us do, and because she was born with unclouded vision, she can’t just ignore what she sees. Her mind is too curious; her pattern
I learned empathy because when Fernanda would See Too Much, she would have a panic attack; and after we figured out that *that’s* what they were, I got books from the Library about how to help her. A panic attack is when your brain says ‘AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!’ but there’s nothing to actually go ‘AAAAAAAAAH!’ about; your heart can beat so fast it feels like you’re about to die.

Time distorts, and it can take you a long time to process information.

I first met Sancho while he was in the midst of a flailing panic attack. It was the second week of Practical Slapstick lessons; my First Year, and Sancho’s third repeat year. To this day, I still don’t really understand *how* he tripped into an open box of sharpened fly fishing lures.

Our class period was about to start, and one of the Second Year’s had tripped Sancho into a box of the things as a cruel joke, I suppose. I didn’t find it amusing.

The first thing you have to do if you see someone having a panic attack is to not panic yourself. They won’t die; it might look like they’ll die, but they won’t. If they stop breathing- or it looks like it- they’ve only hyperventilated; they’ll pass out, and breath slow that way, and wake up again. Eventually.

It was Sancho’s very first panic attack. The first thing I did was check his wrists and neck for a medical charm; there is a **stainless steel** bracelet with the medic’s charm burnt on in red on his left wrist. The glyphs were Common, and they were writ of his Name, his Age, his Bloodtype, and his Illness- in this case, Anxiety.

The seconds thing I did was check to see if he was breathing, and he wasn’t- not normally. So, I did that thing where you count up to ten and get slower the higher you go, and I asked him to breath to every second number I said; and that helped a bunch. I asked him simple questions, and left him as much time as he needed to answer them. He gave me simple answers, and took his time to give them.

When he started not breathing at all, I asked him- begged him, gently, to just take a breath. Just one. Please.

And he did- every time I asked, eventually, he did.

I asked for his name.

He told me ‘Sancho’.

I asked for his other name, which wasn’t exactly polite clown behavior.

He didn’t care, and told me ‘Sancho’.

I asked if I could use his name; I like a man without pretension.

By then, he’d come all the way out of his panic attack, and was sitting up and picking fishhooks out of his skin absent-mindedly.
“Yeah, sure- wait, no, what’s your name?”

“Oh- sorry, I’m Conasse.”

“...Right, yeah, sure; what’s your other name?”

“...Cecelia. Can I help you with the ones in your face?”

“Uh- sure? I- when you get the ones in my eyebrows out, it’s going to bleed a lot-”

“I’ll help you get to the toilette so you can put your Face back on.”

“-Uh. Oh. Okay. ...That’s kinda something only friends would do, though…?”

“Well, naturally.”

“...I’ve never had a friend before.”

“Neither have I, but if you don’t start somewhere, you’ll never start at all. I recognize this kind of hook- I’ll need a pair of pliers to get it out all the way, and the hook’ll be ruined after that. Thankfully, I think I have a pair in my bag...”

“...Why do you have pliers in your bag, Cece?”

“-so yeah, I’ll have to push the barbed ones all the way through, then clip off the barbs, then take them out. Best do it with a towel handy.”

“You’re just going to ignore my question?”

“What question?”

“Riiiiight.”

Anyway, I took Sancho off to the toilette to a chorus of giggling laughter, both of us covered in blood and wet fishhooks clattering down in our trail. I grabbed my bag off the hook, and waited until Sancho hesitantly pointed his out to grab his. Then, we were off to the toilette- after I used my magnet on a string to pick up all the dropped fishhooks first.

This got an extra giggle, and a short chorus of groans.

We partnered up every class we had together, which turned out to be all of them; and after that, we just started hanging out. I guess it was around the midterms we became Partners; the Teachers handed out the Declaration Contracts around then, and, well… No one can play off my jokes with the same ease as Sancho.

Sancho’s a huge guy, about three years older than me- seventeen, now, almost eighteen. He’s got brown hair, and always wears either the grey beanie he got one summer or the hat I made for him after The Thing With The Fishhooks. I actually made two; mine’s the plain hat, while Sancho’s has little tufts on the ears made out of feathers, I think. He has a pair of sunglasses that he wears almost all the time, because he’s an asshole; especially indoors. He wears striped blue leggings under a pair of rolled cuff blue shorts that stop way above his knees, one of his only two shirts, his knee high blue sneakers with stars on, his jacket with a fur hood, and more often than not either his own blood or some bloodstained bandages. He’s always getting himself stabbed with shit, or scraped up, or cut open. I’ve gotten very good at either catching him before he falls on the invariably sharp broken
glass, or tending his wounds.

Genny, once she actually met Sancho, understood why I was always buying double the number of bandaging materials, and more often than not swiping hers too. He doesn’t even have to be near something sharp and suddenly there’s a split in his skin and blood oozing everywhere- I’ve seen him scratch mosquito bites until they bleed. I’m not sure if it’s because he legitimately can’t feel pain if it’s under a certain threshold, or if he’s just oblivious.

Anyway. There are particular, but unwritten, rules for the way transgressive expressions of truth can be presented. Masked with silliness, expressed from a grotesque and lowly state of dignity- your audience is free to take from your performance whatever they want, and discard the rest as mere jest and absurdity. If a grain of truth from the humorous shenanigans is taken to heart, that grain is more likely to fall on fertile ground and take root; more likely to sprout into something new.

Clowning isn’t just a matter of performing truth; the telling of Truth is not just a matter of stating facts, as every jester always knew. The type of truth best expressed by jesters and clowns is not factual, accountant’s truth; we best express the ecstatic, poetic truths of life.

Facts might reflect objective reality, but they don’t illuminate truth. This is the power of clowning. Poetic truth is experienced; greater and more powerful than any fact. It’s a process of communication where the recipient experiences an expression as a deeper and more visceral truth.

Poetic truth cannot exist without human participation; it is not something which is in and of itself- it’s not something you can put in a gallery. A poetic truth is crafted to make emotional connections between people. For a poetic truth to be received, there must be trust between the presenter and the receiver.

The King must trust his Fool; the Audience must trust the Clown.

For that trust to develop, the fool and clown must express themselves as themselves. If you try to speak the opinions of others as your own, you lose who you are. Telling the truth is a delicate process, always with the not small risk of failure. Not the kind of failure which you see the mimicry of in the performance of a clown- point of fact, the clown’s performed failures are just that: performance. Sancho has worked for ten years- since he was seven, his mom told me- to get his particularly bloody brand of Slapstick just right. With me as his partner, he can elevate his particular form of Slapstick to something… else.

The kind of failure I meant is a failure of communication; the failure to connect and understand. If any of these three factors fail: the truthfulness of the clown, the particular truth expressed, or the Audience’s experience of either, the Clown risks death. Choking is the worst, in my personal opinion; but dying on stage is every clown’s worst nightmare.

When a clown dies on stage, the truth of their self fails- when a clown dies on stage, what actually dies is their soul, their passion, their creativity and dreams.

The truthfulness in the clown’s persona is the key to their privilege as the truth teller. When a clown succeeds in acting from their heart, where all poetic truth springs from, the audience hears what the clown is saying. Laughter and levity lowers the defences of the mind and heart, opening the laughers to the possibility of truth, and with that truth, change.

Change your heart; change your mind; change your World.
This is the power of the clown.

In front of the apartment where my family lives, there is an empty field, and every year the circus comes they pitch their tent there. My sisters and I are usually the only ones in our apartment who can go; Mom always has to work, to keep up the rent. After she got so sick, we all started working—still though, we always took the time to go to the circus, I think because it was a moment of wonder and joy in a life of almost overwhelming misery.

Happy people don’t become clowns.

Anyway, I think it started when we were three or four; when the circus came to town, my sisters and I would go with the older kids of the building, and we’d all sneak under the canvass. We’d watch the show from under the bleachers, and eventually we’d sneak into empty seats and watch like everyone who paid to get in. I can still smell that mix of sawdust, straw, and horses.

Gradually, I realized that the clowns were kind of… amazing. I thought that if I became familiar with clowns and clowning, it would open doors for me.

Also, in our floor’s bathroom there’s a portrait of Grandma Clown on the wall, in crushed velvet I think. Landlady’s grandmother painted it, I think? So every time I would use the can, I ended up staring at the portrait. It had effects on me.

I began to imagine.

Something else happened when I was nine. The circus was back again, and I went with a girl I had a huge crush on. She was a bit older than me; I had no idea how to talk to her, but I was so excited… it was a bit ridiculous. Anyway, we sat in the front row.

At one point the clowns asked for a volunteer to join them in the ring, and every kid in the audience raised their hand except for me. I didn’t want to be embarrassed in front of the girl; so, of course they picked me, and of course I was.

The took me into the ring and put me on a horse, a wide-backed mare, and they began to walk the horse around the circle as fast as they could. They’d attached me to a rope so it was safe, but I was still nervous, and people were laughing. Suddenly the clowns hoisted me up by the rope until I was hanging in mid-air; the horse left the ring without me; and now it was just me, dangling, and circling round and round.

Everyone thought it was hilarious.

Then came the grand finale, and the clowns pulled down my pants. I was wearing underwear that day, thank the gods; but because boy’s clothing is cheaper than girls, I was wearing a pair of gag-boxers with fuckin’, fuckin’ hearts on them. By then, the whole audience was crying with laughter, watching short skinny me swinging on a rope without any pants on.

For the clowns that day, it was a great triumph; but for me, it was an invasive moment of horror. I was profoundly vulnerable and intimidated; so shocked and mortified that it was only later, when the girl I took to the show refused to speak to me, and my own sisters started to laugh at me that I was able to cry about it.

Thinking on it now, I think I felt deceived, betrayed… I didn’t think that clowns would be so mean. I
thought, somehow, that they would be more careful. That day, I learned that the clown I had always heard of, the clown I saw staring back at me in the water closet… that clown no longer existed. So, I said to myself, ‘I’ll be that clown; I’ll be the clown I see staring back at me in the water closet, the one who would never hurt a child like that.’

When I began reading the original principles of clowning, that’s what I discovered being discussed over and over—empathy. Empathic people; striving for empathy. Understanding the people… It doesn’t matter whether the audience is old or young, they’re people, just like you. Every person is vulnerable, and every person can be hurt. A clown is the one free to fight anyone or anything with a sword made of rubber; they will cut down anyone and anything, but crucially, will never draw blood.

The principal element of a clown, beneath the psychotic instinct to kill, is empathy. This is of vital importance because, if you don’t understand what people feel or why people cry, you can’t be a clown.

In the end, mastery of clowning comes down to understanding the real meaning of freedom, beauty, truth, and love. In point of fact, the real point of being a clown is empathizing with the most painful truths in the World you live in.

My Face and clothing makes me look like nothing more than a petty thief; or a prisoner. A drunk, a scallywag, a scoundrel; someone not worthy of trust. Sancho’s Face is the simplest of faces—almost painfully simple, and profoundly Elegante. Two dots beneath each eye, plain white face, red smile over a grim expression.

The clown is a teller of truth; a philosophical idea made physical. A clown is the subversive presence in a structure which has to be broken with anarchy; for Sancho and me… well, it turns out that together, we’re a modernized, updated version of the Elegante and the Auguste. Sancho, with me, represents structure and authority; and he represents the state, the media, the boss. He even sometimes represents the people at Gag who think you don’t belong because you’re almost too poor to go to school there.

Which neatly leads into our Final Exam, and how I met up with Beatrix and Missus Mab and everyone.

So. The reason Sancho and Concass work so well together is because as characters, Sancho is a Stupid Owl, and Concass is a Smart Raccoon.

Our actual characters, as clowns, don’t really talk. I realized early on that body language, gesture, and grunting could handle like, nine tenths of the funny business; and it took about six months for me to learn enough Germa and Dutchy to speak with him intelligently, as I’d focused on the Latin languages for so long.

So.

Our best, and final routine for school, went something like this.
Sancho went to class on time, as was his wont; but I wasn’t to appear at all until about thirty seconds into our time, carrying a mystery sack of noisy shit and completely ignoring the gravitas of the moment. In fact, the way it happened is I actually fell out of the rafters and landed on Sancho, which wasn’t the joke at all, and then the bag fell on us both with a humorous clattering. That was our first laugh.

The second laugh was more a series of giggles as we tried- and performatively failed- to get off of each other without hurting each other worse. Eventually, we were both upright- and that’s when Sancho started bleeding down his face again, which also wasn’t at all a part of the joke but I fucking ran with it, right, and-

Well. Suffice to say that as we did our routine, meandering from one part of the stage to another, and eventually falling down the stage’s stairs no less than fifteen times each- because of course we had to go back for the noisy bag of things we never even used- the raucous laughter got louder and more amused- until, finally, our show was over. We took our bows, took our seats, and passed with full honors.

“Oh my gods, Cece, do you really have to explain your entire clowning philosophy every time?” I said.

“Deb, every time you talk even slightly about working at The Acorn, you go on a tirade about cooking or food, it’s always one of the two. Hypocrisy is stupid.” said Cece, idly flicking a switchblade around the back of her knuckles.

I kicked my legs a little bit, and huffed in my lounging chair on the deck of the Thousand Sunny.

“Cece, it doesn’t actually matter that much to me how you met up with everyone. I’m really just glad you’re here, you know? Sancho too, I was kinda worried about him and his mom...”

“Yeah- I mean, honestly, it amounts to ‘I saw Bea on a Horse and said hey; Sancho went home to pack his things, and you know the rest of what happened’. Anyway, what- Oh, hello Missus Mab, what’s all that for?”

“Mm- Chopper said that you’re able to stand for short periods of time today, and after he checks you over tomorrow- well, anyway, I’m doing measurements and preferences today. I’ve already gotten most of your sisters, and checked in with everyone else- but not you, you were unconscious.”

“Uh…?”

“Hmmhhm. We’ll start easy- may I join you?”

“Uh- sure, okay.”

“Fine with me!”
“Good, good. Now; firstly, here are some cloth samples- don’t worry about cost, or if it’s ‘right’ for you. Whatever your hand reaches for, I’ll make you something nice with it.”

“Um. Okay… I’m guessing you’re making shirts?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Oh. Um- this one, and this one… maybe this, but I’m not sure about it…”

“Mhm; you like red, I take it.”

“Er- yeah, um. I do like red. Is that bad…”?

“No, not at all. Do you wear neck-ties or neck-ribbons of any kind?”

“Uh. A bandanna, sometimes, or a soft bow.”

“Okay. Of these styles of collar, which do you like best?”

“Um… the Classic with the long points, I think?”

“Mhm. How about cuffs? These are the three styles I do.”

“Oh. Um… I like the square cuff.”

“Mhm. Buttons- this one, this one, or maybe this one would look nice on your every days; we’ll get to your work clothing in a moment.”

“Uh…”

“Oh, sorry- these represent families of buttons- color, shape, texture. These are the ones that will work with all three of the prints you’ve chosen.”

“Oh. These- the red ones.”

“Of course- those are clay buttons, meant for very heavy wear on everyday work clothing. I’ve actually got them in all kinds of styles with red as the main color; those red ones you like, of course- but there’s also ladybugs, which are lucky; apples, strawberries… I’ve got whole selection sheets of the things, I’ll get you a marking sheet momentarily. These are the preliminary sketches of your casual, semi-casual, and formal-most shirts, with notes on the button choices.”

“Oh!”

“Mhm.”

“Um- what’s with the skirts, though?”

“Oh, those are options for your every-days; I’ve got a style sheet for skirts, as well as skirt-blocks to test if you like other styles, but these seemed most appropriate to me. You’re a classic kind of woman.”

“Heh. Yeah, I think you’re right. Um- what about my work clothing?”

“Ah, that. Right. Do you know who Georges Escoffier was?”

“Uh. No?”
“I’ll find the book he wrote- very interesting reading for any chef. Anyway, he codified and popularized the chain le brigade in the kitchen, as well as the uniform of the cook and chef. Traditionally, it’s a white toque that increases in height with the rank of the wearer, a white double-breasted coat with cloth knot buttons, houndstooth print pants, an apron, and a bandana or neckerchief.

“The white of the coat is meant to signify cleanliness, and the double-breast of the front means that when one needs to make an appearance at the front of the house and there’s a stain on your front, it can be switched with minimal effort. It also becomes very easy to see who’s better at cooking- the best cooks don’t really spill or splash.”

“I see.”

“Hmhm. Ah- the cloth buttons are also easier to undo in case of emergency. Prior to the eighth and ninth centuries, cooking was a messy, dirty, and unsafe business. Kitchens were often in the lowest, darkest, smallest, smokiest rooms with no refrigeration or sanitation to be found anywhere. Ser Escoffier felt that as a group of professionals, a uniform that looked distinguished, clean, and was eminently practical was of great importance.

“As for the pants; houndstooth is a print that came into prominence during the eighth century, and was generally popular. The reason it stayed the pattern of choice for chefs World-wide is because the pattern can hide spills or spots better than any other, while also generally being made of a material substantial enough to protect the wearer from burns, hot oil, and falling knives; while also not wear out or shrink over-much with frequent washings.

“Often, the lowest members of the kitchen will wear one color pants- black or white, depending on preference- while lower and mid-level cooks will wear the houndstooth pattern. Salaried and upper-level chefs will wear solid black pants.”

“-Like Sanji!”

“Exactly so, Cece. You, Deborah, will have a very specific set of uniforms that you will wear Every day you work, without exceptions. I will ensure that you have five complete changes available at any time; when you turn seventeen, I’ll make it six.”

“Oh.”

“Mm. You’ll have a pair of non-slip shoes and leg forms if you’d prefer, thin compression merino wool socks, heavy-wearing houndstooth print skirt, an apron for your work keys, label-tape, notebook, and so on; an undershirt that also acts as a supportive garment for the breasts, or a sporting brassiere - those girls are too large to go without, and don’t deny it; and a white double-breasted long sleeve chef coat made of heavyweight brushed cotton, with sleeve pockets for various tools. Do you need a toque?”

“I prefer something like a tenugui, actually.”

“Mm. I’ll make you a set appropriate for your work. Consider your clothing as much a part of your chef’s tools as your knife from now on, Deb.”

“Yes Mab!”

Okay, I’ll admit it. Maybe mama did raise a fool; I hadn’t realized that all the bits of clothing everyone at work wears all the time had actual reasoning and history behind it. Which, well- of
I know what to tell the guys at work when they ask me what I’m doing next. I mean, I’ve already learned so much, and we haven’t really gone anywhere yet...

Gnngh. I’ll be really glad when I don’t fall asleep randomly in the middle of the day.

I end the last day of being sick by being helped to bathe by my sister Genny, and then in a hammock in the Women’s dorm with the rest of my sisters sees me through the night.

Come the morning, Doctor Chopper takes my stitches out after breakfast. He sonograms my spleen and says something to the effect of ‘it’s growing a bit, now that it’s the only one- you’ll be fine, if a bit sore for a while’; I took it to mean that I should take the day easy, but I could go back to doing my thing.

Which means, since I’m the oldest and in charge of mom’s ashes, I’m going to be planning her funeral rites.

Firstly, her ashes can’t stay as they are; too easy for them to be fouled. Missus Mab wears this pair of cloisonne purple drop-shaped earrings, and I’m thinking something like that would be perfect. Firstly, a portion of mom’s ashes needs to go to the Funerary Glassworks down on Riverside Corner, along with the appropriate wire and fixings for our Charnellements.

I think our best bet is to have one set of students do our fixings; as for the crystal, Borosilicate is the best option I can think of.

Adel, Bea, and Cece will have to make sure that Ellie, Fern, and Genny know how to do the Planting Dance. I think Sancho and Cece will know who to talk to at the Gag to make sure that Mom has enough clowns, musicians, acrobats, and other circasticus on hand to make her funeral… right.

I guess I should talk to Mab about everything… I think she can help. Someone she knows is dead too, right? She wouldn’t wear those earrings of hers otherwise…

So uh.

Mab’s Studio is… it’s an entire deck of the ship, for one thing, or near enough. There’s a massive gallery space, almost entirely empty; and inside is this huge, echoing space. The air is dry, and cool; the light is bright, and warm. There’s a table right in the middle of the room, and long tables with shelves above and below them that have more fabric than I’ve ever seen in my life before. I can see wood from the decks above us, sealed to a matte finish and pale in color on the ceiling; and I can see… This, more than anything else, proves to me that Mab Morgan, Sewing Professional of the Straw Hat Pirates, is a Titled Witch.

She’s got a bookshelf almost bursting with grimoires and mystical texts, and there’s what looks like an alchemy bench in the process of being built… Oh. She was serious about teaching us magic, wasn’t she… It’s like there’s a full section of her studio that she’s setting aside specifically for Arts
and Crafts, right near what I have to assume is the Laundry, because of the two chute outlets on either side.

“Ah, Deborah- something you need?” said Mab, her glasses gleaming for a second in the light as she lifted her head from a sketchpad of… outfits…

“I- are all of those for me?”

“No, yours are all on the board with red tape- over there, see?”

“I- a gown?”

“Sleeping gown, I think, unless you really like that style? For time when you are very definitely not working in the kitchen; a basic style guide because your shape is very female, and so most popular styles won’t be so great on you…” said Mab as she came closer, before she began pointing things out in particular on… on my clothing inspiration board.

“Every good cook and chef I’ve ever met has had a real sense of the dramatic and the avant garde, or at the least for quality and style; thus, most of my inspiration for you comes from the world of old-school glamour, modern pattern techniques, and dramatic combinations and lines. In a group, you might fade into the background, but I get the feeling that you’re the kind of person who’ll command a room every time you enter it. Also, why are you still wearing your pajamas? It’s almost noon, darling!”

“Uh- These are my only clothes? I mean, until you make more for me-”

“Ah. That’s right, Franky hasn’t finished the chest of drawers and wardrobes yet… Come with me.”

I follow Mab to another side of her studio, filled with mostly storage- and there’s a bin, with… with my name on it, and a dot of bright red next to my name, and… there’s clothing. There’s clothing in the bin.

For me.

What?

“I work much faster than you’re accustomed to. What’s your plan for today?”

“Uh. I was actually going to ask for help planning my mother’s funeral services; if all goes well, we should be able to get everything done before we have to, um, cast off?”

“Ah. Sure, happy to help. What do you need?”

“Um. Well, the mail-bird brought the copy of Mom’s will, so- I, uh, I read it with Chopper to make sure that, well, anyway, she had some stipulations about her burial services.”

“Okay.”
“Um. Well, black mourning clothes are completely banned from her funeral… Half of her ashes need to go to the Funerary Glassworks down on Riverside Corner in Dunshilly, so we can put her up on the ship altar with the other dearly departed. Um, her Charnellements are to be split among her eight children- she, ah, she named Sancho in her will as the child of her heart, a-and, um. I don’t know any jewellery makers that can do the job correctly, so-”

“I can do that for you; no problem. What else?”

“Oh. I- thank you, um. I guess all of us siblings need to practice the Planting Dance so we can bury mom correctly; we need a plot of land to plant her in, and she wants to return to the world with a minimum of fuss, so a simple natural burial is preferred. That’s where the rest of her ashes are going to go.”

“I can talk to Zoro about leaving the training deck empty so you all can practice with mirrors, and the lawn deck is usually clear in the mornings- if those are okay, of course. I’ve got land you can plant your mother in as well. What else?”

“I, uh. I think Sancho and Cece will know who to talk to at Gag to make sure that Mom has the clowns, musicians, acrobats, and other circus performers at her funeral. Um. Fern or Ellie can talk to the Madame and see if any of the women at the Whore House want to go to the Funeral too… Um. Clothing…?”

“Put those on; we’ve got quite a lot to do, and you won’t be getting it done in your yukata.”

“I- I can’t take all these, it’s way too expensive-”

“I didn’t spend a goddamn berri on those. And if I had, you’d accept it anyway because I make clothing and other fabric goods for this crew as needed; that’s my Job. Turn around so I can zip up your skirt.”

“I- y-yes, sure. Is, uh- is the sweater blue or grey?”

“A bit of both, actually; it’s a grey that looks blue, or a blue that looks grey.”

“Ah.”

“Mm. Merino wool compression socks; I’ve only got white so far, but black isn’t too far off, nor are prints. Let me know if you see a print you like.”

“Uh, sure.”

“And these are the boots I have in your size right now. You can take one of the messenger bags I have left over from the Postal Job I did a year ago-”

“-YOU MADE THE POST OFFICE MESSENGER BAGS?”

“No, just the prototypes, and the Standard. D’you want the School Special, or the Civil Servant?”

“Civil!”

“The red one?”

“Of course!”

“Dunno why I expected anything else- right, and your toolset… Hm. We’ll talk to Sanji, I think; marking tape, pens, pencils- ah, right. You’ll be needing a waterproof notebook that you can keep in
an apron pocket, pencil or pen, depending on what you like to write with… Hmm. I’ll have everything on your bed by the end of the day. -Oh, yes, and you can’t be wearing your hair like that.”

“Eh?”

“It might have been allowed before, but you were a dishwasher and garbage boy; you’ll be handling food, now, and that fluffy mess is Not Appropriate. Come here- this is your brush and comb, now, by the way-”

“Uh- oh. Oh wow, you’re very gentle.”

“I have nine younger sisters- mm, it’s been awhile since you last really brushed all this out, hasn’t it?”

“I usually don’t have the time...”

“That’s fine, darling. Hold still a second- Shadow Stitching: Carding Wool! ”

My hair falls down in soft waves; I see a fairly small clump of hopeless tangles and broken hairs get thrown into the trash, as well as whatever was caught in my new brush. Then I felt her fingertips start rubbing over my scalp, and smelled coconut oil mixed with- rose oil, wow! Expensive! But very pretty, though. She combs through my hair and I can see it out of the corner of my eye. My hair, under her hands, is turning from an ashy, brittle straw color, to an almost diamond-blonde color with subtle hints of gold when it catches the light. I can see a small puddle of split ends growing on the floor, too.

Eventually, Mab parts my hair in the middle of my forehead, and starts twisting it back; first one side, then the other, and she pins it with bobby pins at my nape. Then again, and again- for three sections of three twists that stop at the nape of my neck. She brushes through my hair again, and takes the long middle section that starts at the crown of my head and goes all the way down to the end- that section I can feel being coiled into a bun and- oh!

“Here- Ellie got this back for me- can you use it in my hair?”

“Of course; it’s beautiful.”

“Ah! Thank you.”

I hand her the comb, and then I kind of… I hold very still as she braids my hair along the sides, and I hold still as she gently tugs and tucks strands of my hair into a soft bouffant. The touch of the three tines of the hair comb against my scalp, and the soft click… it’s really nostalgic. The last time I heard that sound, mom was still…

“Have a look in the mirror, Deborah. Is there anything I need to change?”

“-Oh wow! I look so- I look so pretty !”
The history of the Laundry Chute is hidden, and fairly mythic. Stains, smells, secrets, thieves, corpses, and even deadly poisons have all found their way down that narrow laundry place.

In the 900s, a professor of Urban Studies (at what would become the Fairisle Military Engineering School) by the name of Josiah Thistledown found a collection of trash moldering in the forgotten space between his pantry and his laundry chute. It was a stack of small paper scraps lying in repose at various scales, with sooty edges that were just beginning to stick together and combine. There was a box of playing cards, a train ticket from Pumpkin Hill, a receipt for a passel of unprocessed stinkweed, a diary entry, a delivery card from the local grocery market, sections of handwritten notes, a theatre ticket stub, a laundry ticket stub, and labels from Yule gift packaging. The scraps and bits had gathered over a century or so, escaping from pockets as garments and other cloth goods fell from the higher floors; thusly did the scraps slip through a seam in the chute.

In the perusal of the accidental archive, Professor Thistledown was able to interpret tensions between the upward aspirations and limited means of the Kruger’s, the Germa family who had first built his house- then an Inn- during the early formation of the Sky Nation of Fairisle; using only the artifacts curated by a slit in his ductwork, Professor Thistledown was able to have a very intimate glimpse of the World-That-Was.

The laundry chute is one of several things that Franky had to amend on his plans for the Thousand Sunny, the others being our Home Farm, the Smokehouse and Dairy, and various amenities. The Smokehouse and Dairy are places of distinctly masculine and feminine energy. I’m not allowed in the Smokehouse proper, and indeed, no woman is. Similarly, Sanji is not allowed in the Dairy proper; no man is. However, there are liminal places in these areas of our ship.

For the Smokehouse, it’s a little antechamber where Sanji has powerful ventilation and racks of jars full of whole spices. He takes his smoke breaks there; and I’ve made love with him on the little bench in there quite a few times. The Dairy, being much more sanitary, only has one liminal area- the Milk Fridge.

The Milk Fridge is a refrigerator that has much more in common with a refrigerated display case in a cafeteria, in that it actually opens from the front, and the back. Next to the fridge is a chute through which empty bottles get returned- they clink into a bucket, and I change it twice a day to keep up with supply and demand. As an aside, our fridge is inset in the wall, with only the curved door on the Front and the sliding door on the Back (along with a bit of a lip) to mark it out. I drew up a lovely logo for the fridge, and had to talk Usopp out of using Merry’s figurehead. Not right to use the images of the dead without their family’s permission… Anyway. The logo on the fridge is a pretty goat lady, with the banner under her head reading ‘Milk’ in a jaunty font that I did let Usopp pick.

The big metal milk pails are what the milk comes to the Dairy in. We have very good to exquisite milking goats, of which we have three adults total and about five yearlings. All of them are pregnant, but it’s up to Mark’s discretion which kids will be kept, and which will be given over to Sanji’s kind ministrations. Now, I have glass containers for dairy products in a multitude of sizes; for fluids specifically, I have from half-pint to half-gallon in glass. I also have containers for pudding, custard,
and yoghurt.

“How do you differentiate between different fat-contents in the milk, Missus Mab?”

“The cap color, Deborah. All the caps for all the containers are metal; for liquid milk, red is whole milk, purple is skimmed-cream milk, green is uncultured buttermilk, blue is cultured buttermilk—basically a liquidized yoghurt; brown is chocolate milk, pink is strawberry milk, or other red fruit or vegetable; yellow is coffee milk; orange is half and half, and purple, the last color, is cream.”

“Interesting; just like at the market!”

“Exactly so. The smaller containers for more solidified dairy products are labelled much the same way; plain white is for the basic flavor, then pink and yellow for their flavors respectively. I expect all the girls in the Suntides to spend time in the Dairy. Of course, the Dairy is also where eggs, cheese, and butter are prepared for the kitchen- so, I expect you’ll at least want to see what’s in there…”

“Uhn!”

“Heh. Now, where was I… ah yes, laundry chutes!”

A laundry chute is a mythic and deeply domestic space. It is the quintessentially unwatched door that goes nowhere; the open throat of the yawning abyss that is Below Stairs. The reputation of the laundry chute has as much to do with convenience as with the simple and profound realization that a house is not solid through and through. The laundry chute is a place where stains and embarrassing odors go to die, and dropping linens down the chute is a literal symbol of forgetting those embarrassing occasions and accidents. Most of a laundry chute is sealed behind walls, and this covert quality draws people to encounter such items that laundry chutes are explicitly built to contain.

Deborah, you need to understand right now; I see everything that happens to your laundry. I wash clothing for every member of this crew. I have absolutely no shame. About once a quarter, which is every three months and coming up quite soon, as Imbolc draws near- I wash every single linen on the ship that isn’t in active use, like the sails. If ever there is something that you don’t want me to clean, you need to do it yourself; and chances are, I’ll still find out anyway.

Now; a chute is more like a place than a mechanism, it lacks certain qualities necessary for measure and attribution. No records exists describing the very first laundry chute. The earliest linen chutes on record were fabric sleeves threaded through the spaces that naturally gaped between rooms on the higher floors of the house. Similar to staircases, in that no one even vaguely knows who, when, or where staircases first came from; a laundry chute is too integral to the workings of a multiple story house in which a large number of people live and work for anyone to know where the first one came from.

Bulges were originally added to domestic walls to allow laundry chutes added after the building of the house the ability to pass their falling linens in large numbers. Sunny has two laundry chutes, one in each dorm; it’s helpful for keeping the men’s and women’s sheets separated- not for any perfuming reasons, but because I need to use different stain treatments on them, and I hate getting them mixed up. The stain treatment for body odor, ground in stains, and ejaculate is not the same as for blood, and mixing up the two will lead to a bad time all around.
In simple terms, the linen chute is a kind of integral space, similar to garbage, mail, ash, and grain chutes.

My childhood home in Thuletima, Sky Blue, has one of the oldest chutes for linen in existence. Owning a laundry chute often signals social and financial status in the same way that owning enough linens to get the family through a month without doing the washing does. Since the earliest times, the poor are often depicted as dirty and rank not because they wash their clothing and linens less often- in fact, they wash more often, as they have less clothing. However, due to popular culture being less concerned with the doings of the poor, the more visible, tidily kept rich became idealized and much discussed. The absence of soiled linens in common spaces take with them the common odors and stains attached to human processes- sweat, musk, farts, and so on.

You’ll also find laundry chutes in hospitals, often as far from the entrance as possible. Depending on the size of the institution using the chute, it can be used as an escape route; most asylums and prisons have a laundry chute. Every palace has a laundry chute.

“The Kitchen’s laundry chute is located right next to the sink; I would prefer if all kitchen linen used in the day is thrown down the chute at the end. Ah, here we are- hello, my love!”

“Hello, beloved!”

And then I’m making out with Sanji- just a little bit, as he’s holding a drawer full of… knives?

Goddamn I love my wife. I adore her. I especially love that she took over the boring part of outfitting Shrimp for working in my kitchen so I could focus on cleaning out a section of drawers for her to use. Including knives; I know she has a set of knives specifically for throwing, and there’s the massive giant’s petty knife- really a carver… but I don’t like that it’s the only kitchen knife she has to use that’s of any quality. She’s about to have a massive growth spurt, and the knife that worked so well for her before just won’t quite work for her later; she uses it as a chef’s knife, but it’s really not.

These knives I’ve got are all knives that I have for one reason or another, but I really only use six different knives; so these knives are just taking up space, at this point.

She needs six specific knives to cook; and, if any of the knives I have here already suit, she’ll get her name or symbol engraved on the hilt of each. Every chef should own a set of high-quality knives; they don’t have to match each other- mine certainly don’t- but they do have to be high-quality. Knife skills are the most vital lessons a chef can learn, and they carry over into every area of the kitchen- even dishwashing, where proper handling of knives can save you stitches.

“Hey Shrimp; c’mere and see if any of these knives suit. I’ve just got these ones to sort out- but here are all the chef knives I have and don’t use. I want you to have six knives total; Mab will make you the roll for carrying them with you, and you can get a steel from Franky later.”

“Okay, Casserole; what’s the point of a chef knife?”
“Well, Shrimp, first and foremost it’s a very versatile blade that you can use for everything from chopping vegetables to slicing meat. Pick one between twenty five and three hundred four millimeters; the handle should feel good in your hand, and it should neither be too heavy for you to lift, or too light to do the jobs you ask of it when you move with it.”

“Hmm. This one.”

“The Stardust? Alright; go ahead and pick a backup, then.”

“Sure… this one feels best. It’s not as good as my first choice, though.”

“Mm. This is mine; it’s sharp enough to take your fingers off at the knuckle if you don’t know what you’re fuckin’ doing. Until I’m absolutely sure you can handle a knife properly at speed… Shrimp, if you ever fucking touch this knife for any fucking reason other than you’re washing dishes and shit, it’s on the ground for some reason, or I’ve specifically asked you to that fucking day, I’ll kick your skinny ass across the horizon and back. Got it, Shrimp?”

“ Yes, Chef!”

“ Good. Next is a paring, or petty, knife. The petty knife is what you’ll use for smaller shit, like peeling garlic, strawberries, or chili peppers. All of my extras fall just above, at, or just below eighty nine millimeters. These knives are best for fine detail work and soft fruits and vegetables; it’s no good for harder root vegetables, like parsnips or beets. Pick two.”

“… These. They’re like the ones we had at home when Mom was teaching all of us how to cook; fuckin’ nostalgic.”

“Mm. Those are Wano-style house knives; good choice, and very distinctive if ever you’re working in another fuckin’ kitchen. I couldn’t get used to the shape, myself.”

“Heh. Yeah, it’s different, isn’t it? That’s why I like it, though; I’d never confuse them for chef knives, ever. Not even when they’re old.”

“True. This is mine; because it’s just a petty knife, Mab finally lost patience and made one for me. The hilt is one of Chopper’s dropped antlers, and the blade isn’t anything too special. I don’t mind so much if you use this one; in fact, you’ve got blanket permission from me, here and now. If you ever need a knife to cook with, and you can’t find or use any of yours, you can use this one and it’s fine. Be sure to wash it when you’re done, though.”

“Yes, Chef. Thank you.”

“Sure. Now, you’ll need utility knives. You won’t need it as often as your chef’s or your petty, but when you need something bigger than a petty but smaller than a chef’s, there you go. It’s also got a thinner blade than your chef’s. Really, this one is ideal for fruit, cutting pieces of meat, and sandwiches. These are all around one fifty two millimeters long.”

“Mm. I like this one for sure… and this one’s okay too, but a little wider than I’d like.”

“Yeah, that happens. This is my utility knife. Same rules as my chef’s. You use this without my express permission, I’ll kick your fuckin’ ass.”

“Yes, Chef!”

“Good. Bread knives are always serrated, so that they can cut through the mie without scarring it. I also prefer a serrated edge on waxy motherfuckers like vine apples, watermelons, citrus, and peppers.
You’ll only need one, and I’ll teach you how to use mine; I really only break it out for tea-time. Still, you should pick one.”

“Just one?”

“Just one.”

“Uh. Show me yours first, please?”

“Sure. This one’s mine.”

“Oh! Uh… I’ll take this one, then. That way, I won’t be able to make slices too big…”

“Never used one of these before?”

“Nope.”

“Well, you’ll learn. I actually want you to have four total boning knives. They’re thin blades, about the same length as your petty, with an extra sharp point. I want you to have four total because there are two broad categories of boning knives. Flexible, bendy blades are for poultry and fish; stiffer blades are for beef or pork. I want you to have two of each kind- so bend the blade before you pick.”

“Okay- Eeep!”

“Woah! You okay? Fuckin’ piece of shit, I knew I should have thrown that thing away-”

“Yeah, I- ugh, that was scary! Throw this shit out- um, I should sweep, too, there might be splinters-”

“Sure; I’ll throw this out.”

Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck fuck! Deep breath, shake Mab’s concern away, it's- fine, it's fine; I take the broken boning knife down to Franky’s junk pile. He’ll melt it down for sure; I don’t trust that blade for anything, now. Dammit!

Deep breath; deep breath. Fuck, Dad- how did you do this?

Anyway; back to work! Grab a snack on the way, though; since I’ve cut down to one smoke a day, I’ve started eating more. I’m slowly stepping back my food intake too; eventually, I’ll stop smoking entirely. Half-pint of uncultured buttermilk, and a few rusks. Better.

Deep breaths.

Okay, here we go.

“You done?”

“Yes Chef! I also picked the knives I want. These two for flex, and these two for stiff.”

“Right; these two are mine. I don’t want you to use these because I don’t want anyone except for me to ever touch them. Got it?”
"Yes Chef."

"Good. Now- your Giant knife; do you still want to keep it in your kit?"

"Yes, I do."

"That’s your carving knife, then. In my kitchen, you’re only to use that knife for cutting thin slices of meat, be it turkey, ham, beef tenderloin, or what have you. You’re already going to have a hell of a time learning to tighten up your gestures because you used a carver to do the things a chef’s woulda been suited for; I don’t want to reinforce the habit more than it’s already been. This is my carving knife; don’t you ever touch it. Deborah, I mean it; this Carving Knife is a Germa Blutsbrüderschaft. It will boil the blood in your veins. No one but me can touch this knife; not Captain, not Mab, not Zoro. No one. Understand?"

"Yes Chef!"

"Good. Now; sometime this week, you’ll go down to Franky’s Workshop and have him fit you with a honing steel. Right now, though, I’m going to give you a sharpening stone. Do you know how to sharpen a knife?"

"Uh. I’ve seen it done, chef."

"Hm. You’ve got that picture-memory; some of your notes don’t make sense without taking that into account… still, it’s best you know how to do this. After all, the key to proper and efficient knife work is sharpness. A sharp knife is safer and faster because it fucking works; a dull knife will cut you to ribbons because you have to fuck up your gesture to make it work. You sent your knives out for servicing?"

"Yeah; I got a discount because I’d do barbecue for the guys down at the meatmarket."

"Oh?"

"Hah, yeah- um, all the guys down at the meatmarket sharpen their own knives, right? Well, when I needed my Giant sharpened up again, I’d stop by, do shift on their barbecue pit, and one of ‘em would sharpen my knife. Pretty sure Emilio had a crush on me, but, um. No."

"Alright. Well; here’s your stone. Feel it; one side is coarser, rougher, than the other."

"Mm."

"Rough, then smooth; keep your stone dry, even when you’re using it to sharpen. Generally speaking, you’ll want to sharpen your knives at an angle of about twenty-two degrees. You don’t know what that means, do you, Shrimp."

"No, chef, I don’t."

"Hrm. Mab!"

"-My love?"

"Put Mathemagic on the list of things you need to teach Deborah!"

"Alright-y!"

"Thank you! I’ll show you how to sharpen each of your knives; until you’ve got a muscle memory down, sharpen them in view of a mirror, okay?"
“Yes, chef.”

“Mab will teach you so that when I say things like ‘cut in this shape’ or ‘work at that angle’, you know exactly what I mean. Mathemagics are how specific information gets passed on through time in an exact manner; there’s no time to learn everything from scratch again. Now; I need the books, Mab!”

“Oh, yeah- these are your books. They aren’t Library books; they aren’t mine. They’re yours. Ask Nami, Taffy, Robin, Mab, or even Luffy how best to mark up a book to find information again. Now, watch me do this- this is how to sharpen your knives...”

And I spend the next hour or so teaching my new sous chef how to sharpen her knives. She watches me very intently, and I can see her fingers twitching with the need to write down thoughts about what she’s seen.

Here’s a reason I love my wife that doesn’t come up in your average romantic tale; I love her for her practicality, and her anticipation of practical needs. Shrimp needs a notebook that won’t die in the kitchen; she also needs a uniform that can go over her clothing, an apron to keep her uniform mostly clean...

And, as always, my wife provides.

“Shrimp- walk with me. Bring your knives.”

“Yes, Chef!”

“Right. So, over here on the dining table, Mab’s set out most of your shit. What I’ll be explaining right now is your uniform. You are to wear your uniform at all times you’re working in the kitchen, the smokehouse, and the dairy. It’s also to be worn while you’re in the galley. You may wear your uniform bottoms outside the kitchen; you are to wear shoes at all times you work in the kitchen; and you are never, ever to wear your uniform top anywhere except for your work areas. Got it?”

“Yes, Chef!”

“Good. You don’t have to wear a skirt, by the way- you can wear pants if you’d prefer...?”
“I actually prefer skirts, Chef. I’m a woman, for one; and for another, until my web splits I won’t be able to wear most pants comfortably.”

“Right, you’re a mermaid; is there anything you wished you’d had during your previous work? Water bottle, cooling towel?”

“Yes.”

“Heh. Mab, can you-?”

“I’m already on it, love.”

“Thank you. This is your everyday carry notebook; it, along with this pencil, are your best friends while you’re in the kitchen. If you see you’re running out of space in it, there are more stocked in the Library; Robin or Zoro can show you where. The pencil is a standard school pencil, #2 graphite; Mab has a whole sack of clips, so don’t freak out if you lose the clip, got it? Same with the pencil; there are boxes of these things on this ship, so don’t worry about breaking it or losing it or wearing it out.”

“Yes, Chef!”

“Right. This is your knife case, and the sheathes for each of your knives; when you’re not cooking, put your knives in this case. Your boots are fine; I recognize that style. Those are steel toed, with non-reactive varnish; I expect you to wear shoes in that style every time you work. This is your apron, and I have one too. Mab measured them so that they’d fall below what on me is my knees, and on you is the… what, the bottom of your web?”

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

“Right; there will be days when I ask you to wear it specifically, and days when I’ll ask you not to wear it. It’s one of several safety precautions we both take in the kitchen to keep ourselves and our food safe, clean, and edible. You said you prefer scarves and bandannas to toques?”

“Yes, chef!”

“Right; until I see you cook in a slammed kitchen, I’ll be expecting you to cover your hair every time you’re working. This is the other crap that’ll come in handy when you’re working, or training; dishcloths. We use them for potholders and for wiping up spills and every used dishcloth goes in the chute at the end of the day. Go ahead and take notes, Shrimp, you’re here to learn.”

“Thank you.”

“Heh. Now, neckerchiefs- for you, they’ll be a vital part of your temperature regulation. I wore them during my training, but now my neckties and collars suffice. Mab will make you any style you like, as I don’t really have a specific requirement for how they should look; I do require that you wear a clean one every day.

“There are three saucepans you’ll be practicing and working out of; a saucepan, a sautépan, and an eleven liter stockpot. These have copper bottoms and stainless steel insides; the copper makes them heat evenly, and the steel cleans easy. They go in your section of the kitchen, which I’ll show you momentarily.

“You’ve already got your knives… Here’s the rest of your daily tools: bench scraper, spatulas- metal, straight, offset in a series of sizes; peeler, large balloon whisk, shears, pastry brush, corkscrew, tongs, measuring spoon set, measuring cup set, kitchen scale, instant thermometer… Bowl scraper,
microplane, sheet-paper protectors, wooden spoon with a sharpened end; this is your turntable, for when you’re working with Taffy on cakes and candies; a bunch of squirt bottles, and a spray bottle.”

I’ve been stacking her things into the pots and pans, and then I hand the whole moderately heavy stack to her. I stalk over to the empty shelves where her work things are going to live. Then, I tell her to start putting her things away; everything she has will fit into the space I’ve allotted her.

It takes her a bit less than fifteen minutes to get everything squared away; then, I stalk back over to Mab, Shrimp right behind me.

“So, Deb. These are the contents of your bag; I’ve left room for you to add things, if you’d like, as well.

“Firstly, your bag - it’s good for all weather, and there’s a bottle opener in the male half of the clasp. There’s also a pocket here in the back you can put an icepack in so you don’t get swamp back… I’ve got four utility pouches filled for you, and if you find you need more, you’ve only to say.

“In the Orange pouch, there’s a box full of bobby pins and a few hair ties; a folding hair brush, a comb and mirror compact, and a travel bottle of that rose perfume I used when I put your hair up. Rose oil has antiseptic properties, and is very feminine besides. The kind I used actually gets stronger and more intense the more it gets heated; I think you’ll find at the end of the day when you take your hair down, you’ll stink the whole room up with rose-smell.

“In the Watermelon pouch, you’ve got a pack of tissues, a pack of baby wipes, condoms, lube, first aid kit, and quite possibly the tiniest lighter to ever exist. Oh, and before I forget to say it out loud- if you run out of anything, you need to tell me and I’ll show you where to get more from supplies. These aren’t your only supplies- they’re just the ones you can carry around with you off the ship. You seem like a person who likes being prepared…

“Now, for your menstruation, you’ll need to get measured by me, Taffy, or Chopper; then, we’ll fit you with a menstrual cup. Once that’s done, you’ll get a compact that can go in whichever pouch works best for you.

“In the Pitaya- or Dragon Fruit- pouch, you have lip balm, hand lotion, hand sanitizer, and space for any beauty products you find that you want to just have a stash of with you when you’re off the ship. I, personally, prefer a stash of dry shampoo and a stash of sunscreen on hand.

“Last is the Kiwi pouch; you’ve got peppermint beeswax gum wrapped in edible rice-paper, delicious snacks, and a pocket-box of spices. One of the phials in the pocket-box is empty, so you can put your own favorite spice in there; Sanji has one just like it on him right now. He keeps… what, masala?”

“Ester Masala, yeah.”

“I’ve got a few choices of clutch wristlet- it’s a wallet that can be carried as a small purse, if you’d like.”

“...That’s a thing?”
“Yeah, for when you just want to carry the absolute essentials around, rather than a whole bag of stuff. If you don’t want one, you can just have a coin purse, or-”

“No, I’ll take this one if it’s okay…”

“Sure. And a coin purse, too.”

“Hahaha! Cute!”

“Thank you, I thought so too. Now, Sanji’s given you your Daily journal, yeah?”

“Yeah, right here.”

“Hm. So- here. It’s a larger journal you can copy the best bits of your every day down into, or just use for whatever. This pouch is for all your extra pens, pencils, and highlighters; and this is your pencil case. I got you a pop-out one so you can’t confuse it with any of your other pouches, alright? I mean, if you don’t like it I’ll get you a different one, but I thought- oh, oh darling, come here-”

I don’t know why it is, but… for some reason, being given a pencil case like my mom would have given me is what breaks the icy shell around my grief. I start crying, and I don’t stop for what feels like forever.

When I come back to myself enough to see straight, I’m firmly sandwiched between Missus Mab, and Chef Sanji. Chef Sanji is purring just like Mom used to before she got so sick, and he’s warm like Mom was too, a-and Missus Mab is purring and- and-

There are ways to know if you love someone. Sometimes, it’s taking the time to get together all the things they’ll need for the first day of school, and getting them the cool pencil case because you’d have wanted a case like that, no matter your age. Sometimes, it’s combing all the mats and dead hair and skin out of a ragged pile of hair, cleaning and cutting it and coiffing it just so; and in a style that can be put under a scarf or bandanna without destroying it.

Sometimes it’s not about you at all.

I’ve only known Deborah as a person for a total of maybe two days- and yet, to hear her cry like this… it hurts. I hurt because she hurts. Sanji has tucked her head under his chin, and the deep rumbling from his chest I can only describe as purring is both soothing and worsening Deb’s grief.

Physiologically, Demons are a lot like cats. Their general anatomy is very similar, with incredibly strong and dense musculature, flexible skeleton system, quick reflexes, free-floating clavicles which allows them to fit through any space they can fit their head…

Demons can hear sounds at very quiet or very high frequencies; Sanji actually gets very annoyed if the phone is on for too long, as he can hear the transmissions the snails use to commune with each other. Sanji can see in near darkness; his sense of color is a bit… odd; and his sense of smell, on this crew, is only outmatched by Buttercream, and even then he picks up things she simply can’t.
Despite their cultural bias towards solitary lifestyles, Demons are as human as the rest of us, and need socialization. Thus, they have a variety of tribe-specific vocalizations, pheromones, and nuanced body language. For example; when Sanji is genuinely frightened, usually during or right after one of his worse nightmares, his tail will fluff up to more than twice its normal size.

It’s easy to assume that demons purr because they’re happy; after all, when my demon husband is curled up around me after a round of lovemaking, his chest all rumbly and warm, I know he’s happy and content right where he is.

However, demons also purr when they’re frightened, or feel threatened- like when I cut Sanji’s hair, and I have to clip on the nape of his neck. He hates that; says the feeling of it is too weird. Basically, it’s like smiling; I smile when I’m happy, sometimes- actually, no, I really don’t- but I know I… it has to be called smiling because that’s how you describe the exact movement of facial muscles and teeth. When I do it though, the only thing I can really equate it to is ‘barring my teeth’.

Purring isn’t something only Demons can do, of course; unless they’ve been brain damaged in a very specific way, almost every human being can purr on reflex- or, if they’re like me, they can be taught to purr in vocal training. There’s a specific piece of brain called the ‘oscillatorus’; it controls repetitive action. I use it every time I go through a kata, or sew a piece of fabric. With training, the oscillatorus can be connected to the part of the brain that controls the voice box; in demons, the oscillatorus is connected to the voice box automatically.

The actual mechanics of purring, as far as I know, is thus: the oscillatorus sends messages to the laryngeal muscles, causing them to twitch at a rate of twenty five to one hundred fifty vibrations per second. This causes the vocal folds to separate when the human- demon or otherwise- inhales and exhales, producing a purr. (Fae can naturally scream from birth- and not the emotional screaming that brings up feelings and tension in the body, but like… metal-head screaming, where if you do it wrong you’ll spit blood. I never had to learn the proper technique for that.)

For a long time, it was assumed that humans that can roar- Fae, Giants, Seafolk- and humans that can purr- Demons, Longarms, Minks- could never do the other, and vis a vis. In fact, this is more to do with cultural bias than actual inability. The Tribes that roar were mainly nomadic, and needed a very far-reaching method to communicate with their family. The Tribes that purr were not so nomadic, and didn’t so desperately need a way to keep in contact with each other.

Purring is also a way to heal yourself. Frequencies between twenty four and one hundred forty vibrations per minute are therapeutic for bone growth, pain relief, muscle and tendon repair, respiration easement, and wound healing. Deborah’s actually been purring every time she’s been conscious since Chopper took her off the heavy sedatives.

Sanji’s purr is a very even, mellow sound, a bit higher pitched than you’d expect from hearing his voice. Deborah’s purr is not at all like Sanji’s; loud, two distinct pitches, and just a lot more noise than you’d expect from someone so thin and small.

The best I can do without sustained, intense practice is something like a guinea pig’s purr. I just don’t purr often enough to do it on the inhale and the exhale like Deb and Sanji do; for me, it’s on the exhale every time, unless I’ve trained at it before hand.

Anyway, Deborah has almost cried herself out, and… well, there’s no better place to do something like that than between two purring adults. I can see now that I’m in close… that’s right, she did stop at the sink in the laundry before she came up here, didn’t she? I suppose that’s when she put her earring cuffs on.
The shape of the Suntide Black lineage begins to reveal itself; it’s only selkies that wear ear-cuffs specifically, and roses are for... hm. Grandiflora in gold wire is a very old, very specific style; reserved for the Vinsmoke family alone.

Sanji, look at her ears.

Mab—what. What! Why—how does she have—

You’ll have to talk to her about that; she’s the oldest of her line, now.

...

Sanji, even if the rest of them are shit, you’re not. Ask her! At worst, you’re just wrong; it’s okay!

...only because I know you won’t let this go.

Thank you, my eyes!

Of course, honeybee.

“Hey, Shrimp?”

“Y-yeah, Chef?”

“Where’d you, ah, get your ear-cuffs?”

“...Um. They were my mom’s before me; all of us siblings have a pair, even Sancho, and he was only adopted by the heart...”

“...So they’re heirlooms?”

“Yeah, why?”

I hear Sanji sigh through his purring, and then he takes his hand and scruffs his hair back from his face, showing off both his curling eyebrows. Then, he hooks the wide sheaf of his heavy hair behind his ear, to show off the ear-cuffs... acquired for him. It’s not stealing if it’s already yours, right?

Right.

“So; I recognize your earcuffs because I’ve seen a set just like them on my grandmere. We have the same bloodtype, which is line-based; and now that I’m close up, I can see that your eyebrows are about to do the curly thing mine do, in the same direction, even.”

“...Um.”

“I think we’re cousins.”
Have you ever had a Witch’s broom in your hands and wondered how it actually flies? A witch’s broom can look like an ordinary sweeper to the uninitiated. Mine certainly does- did. Will?

Ugh. How Fern does this all the time- for money, even!- I’ll never know…

Maybe it’s idle curiosity; maybe you’re a witch yourself, and on the hunt for a new hobby-horse.

Maybe you could only do your legal, nursing work about once or twice a week and needed a reasonably steady flow of cash. Maybe your mother taught you how to fly her old-fashioned Bottleneck before she got sick, and you’ve been using it to run family errands and drop people off for their days for a while now. Maybe you took on a daily courier’s job and got so bored with it-steady money. but so goddamn boring!- maybe you learned to fly the delivery route as fast as you possibly could. Maybe those old family-style brooms made about ten to twenty years ago are improbably perfect for street-racing.

That’s a lot of maybes, but here’s some facts about flying broomsticks.

The principle behind any flying broomstick is this: if you put a thaum of magic- which is the amount of magic needed to change a card pulled from a fanned hand into the card required, one white pigeon, or three billiard balls- excepting the eight-ball, which requires one and a half thaums to create, every time- if you put a thaum of magic into a narrow, pipe-like space and give it a jolt, like the kickoff motion of every witch taking off and landing, an incredible amount of energy is released in the form of a self-contained floating field. That energy can then be used to float a wedding cake a thousand feet in any direction for eight hours.

If you set up a cycle that allows for thaums to be jolted in this manner, hundreds of times per minute, they can be harnessed in a useful way. This is the core of the flying broomstick.

Almost all flying brooms currently in use and production use what is known as a four-stroke thaumic bounce cycle to convert thaums into motion. The four strokes of the cycle are as follows; the intake stroke, the compression stroke, the bouncing stroke, and the exhaust stroke. Here’s what actually happens in the broom as the thaums go through the bounce cycle.

First, the jumping beans start at the top of the broom-shaft, the intake valves open, and the beans move down their courses to let the broom take in a stick-full of thaums. This is the intake stroke, and only a single thaum is required for this to work.

Then the beans move back up the shaft to compress the thaum/air mixture. Compression makes the jolt more powerful.

When the beans reach the top of their stroke, the striker emits a spark to jolt the thaum. The thaumic charge in the cylinder bursts, driving the beans down again.

Once the beans hit the bottom of their stroke, the exhaust valve opens and the exhaust leaves the cylinder to go out the tailbristles as colored smoke.

And then the cycle repeats.

The beans move in a linear manner because the broom’s main form of motion is linear as well; all turns are really anglings of that linear motion.
Now, the parts aside from the main bean-bouncer are as follows. The striker supplies the jolt that electrifies the air/thaum mixture so that bouncing can occur. The jolt must happen at just the right moment for things to work properly. The oldest brooms require the witch using it to jump-start their broom, or even take a running start to activate the striker; newer models only require a light kickoff to go.

There are only two valves; the intake, and the exhaust. They are both closed during compression and bouncing so that the jolt chamber is sealed. The intake valve is somewhere between the hand grip and the saddle of the broom- exactly where varies model to model- and the exhaust is always in the broom head, usually before the final row of stitching.

The bean is actually a cylindrical piece of metal, wood, horn, or bone that moves up and down inside the cylinder. It’s referred to in the plural form for convenience’s sake.

There are a series of rings that provide a sliding seal between the outer edge of the valves and the inner edge of the broomstick, where the beans reside. The rings are there for two reasons: they prevent the thaum/air mix and exhaust in the jolt-chamber from leaking into the sink during compression and combustion; and they keep water in the sink from leaking into the jolt area, where it would be electrolysed into hydrogen and oxygen, and cause a massive explosion, followed by a burn on the bristles. Usually not fatal, but fairly dangerous and embarrassing. A broom that tends to ‘burn and gasp’ and has to have a pint of water added every thousand kilometers has old rings that don’t seal things properly. Is it a pain in the ass to replace them? Sure. Does replacing them mean you’re not burning your bristles and blistering your ass every thousand kilometers or so? Hell yes.

The connector yoke connects the saddle to the weft. It pivots on a specialized hinge so that it’s angle can change as the witch shifts on the broom. Experienced flyers can control the speed of intake and exhaust by shifting their weight on the broom; thus, a properly tuned and turned yoke is of vital importance in sport-flying models of broomstick. It’s also your main braking system while flying at low speeds, as the amount of linear front to back shift on the saddle is directly proportional to how wide the intake and exhaust valves open and shut.

The weft turns the bean’s linear motion into turns, just like the rudder on a boat does. A weft is usually hidden under a selection of bristles. To keep it’s motion smooth and even, it needs to be kept pliable and cool with water. Alcohol, with it’s quicker evaporation rate, is used in high-speed models rather than water, and various other coolants are available.

The sink surrounds the weft. It contains some amount of water, which collects in the bottom of the sink (the water bottle). The water bottle itself is anything that can attach to the sink and contain adequate amounts of cooling fluid. Hot water bottles are popular.

Because of the simplicity of the overall flight system of the flying broomstick, there’s really not all that much that can go wrong. There are only three things that can actually happen to keep you from flying: a bad fuel mix, a lack of compression, and a lack of spark. Any number of little nuisances can make or break your day; but these are the big three that can say if you will… or if you will not.

Your fuel mix is where your Power comes from, and a bad mix can occur in several ways. You can run out of available thaums, so the broom is getting air but no fuel. The best way to fix that is take a rest for a few days or even weeks to replenish your magic stores, or install a mage stone as an external thaumic source. The air intake might be clogged, so there are thaums, but not enough air. Solving this problem is a bit trickier; for the most part, the only thing to be done is either get a different style broom, or shell out for the needle nose or hog nose modification. Looks like hell, and makes it much easier to exhaust your thaumic reserves. The fuel/air might not be mixing correctly-
either you’ve got too much or not enough air in with the thaums. Although only one thaum is required to jolt, you need at least three breaths of air to get that first spark to catch into a jolt, and then it’s self sustaining. Not enough air, no jolt. Too much air, and you’ll stutter. Finally, you can have impurities in the fuel mix. This happens when you’ve got a heavy breather that sucks down thaums before blowing them all at once.

Power must be tempered by Wisdom and used with Courage.

The second major problem a broom can have is a lack of compression- if the fuel mix can’t be compressed properly, the jolt won’t go like it should. You get a lack of compression from a very few things: your rings are worn out, your valves ain’t sealing right, or there’s a hole in your broomstick’s shaft. Wisdom is knowing when to replace your rings, your valves, or your shaft before they bust on you and cause more problems than your broom is worth.

Wisdom must be backed by Power and guided with Courage.

There are only three reasons for your striker not to spark. If your striking pin, or the stone it jumps off of is rotted, the spark will be weak. If the striking pin is missing altogether, or if the stone it jumps off is gone, there won’t be no spark. If the spark happens too early or too late in the cycle, the fuel won’t ignite and the broom won’t go.

Courage must be reigned in by Wisdom and fortified with Power.

Power alone is a beserker- that’s how you get them Wessen Crotchrockets. They feel nice on the nethers, and then you’re left with a handful of splinters betwixt your thighs and a burning fire on your ass.

Wisdom alone is a manipulator- that’s all those hoity-toity F1 racin’ brooms are, manipulative twitch-sticks. If you have to be grinding on your broom like a hooker on a dick, then you’ve got no business bein’ on no fly-girls racin’ team.

Courage alone is a fool- that’s what them thrill-riders are. If you need to jump off a cliff to start your broom, girl.

Wisdom and Courage are useful for direction; Wisdom and Power say how to use that direction; Power and Courage say you will go somewhere- and all three together say you will Not.

There are other things that can go wrong, of course- if the bristles dry out, you’ll have a hell of a time doing soft maneuvering; if the bearings that allow the yoke to move the weft get worn out, you won’t be turning at all; if the valves get stuck or get mistimed, your intake and exhaust won’t work and your broom won’t fly; if you run out of water, the bristles can’t move as freely as your flying might require, and you’re liable to flame them fuckers out.

In a properly maintained broom, all of the necessary factors are within flying tolerance.

Some say that I was the one to pull The Sword Of Promised Victory from it’s stony bed, and I am the True Ruler of the Realm. Some say that I naturally face Trunorth, and that my sweat could be used to clean precious metals. Some say that I blink sideways, and that once I actually punched God.

All I know is, they call me ‘The Kid’ and I’m not too sure why. I have tits, dammit! And hips! Tits and hips!
I once had to make do with a mage’s staff that I stuck a handful of gull feathers over the back of and tied some leather down onto t’keep from sliding off. Won five hundred thousand beri that day.

So- some people say you need a good personal store of magic to make a broom fly. That’s not quite right; a broomstick has it’s own intrinsic magic, and can store a limited amount of magical energy. The flyer of the broom is required to replenish the thaums- either with their own store of magic, or by adding mystic stones, which changes the weight of the broom.

So, what do I wear for days I’m not working as a nurse?

Firstly, I clean my face off; I wear a thick layer of pancake foundation over my face during nursing days to protect my skin from surface contamination. Clean it off at the end of the day, and you’ve got a layer of ultra soft skin; and the sparkling freckle-scales from your unknown father sparkle golden under your eyes. Take the hairclip out and let your bangs flop back down over your eye, like you like; put your earcuff back in, and eat the first of many, many lollipops.

Quitting smoking is a pain in the goddamn ass.

I have two outfits for racing in; I only change the outer layers when the seasons turn around. It’s basic layers are a pair of cycling **smalls**, and some plain white thigh-high socks. Spring and summer, I wear a sighing-grey **skater dress**, a soft green-printed **scarf**, and a pair of bright red **Chelsea boots**. I get called the ‘**Comely Kid**’ a lot during the Spring and Summer, but that’s… I mean. Okay?

Winter sees me add a two-tone leather **vest** I got at a thrift-store; and I must say, that vest saved my bubble butt more than once. Speaking of bubble butts, in a **miniskirt** made of holographic green fish scales, and a thick **flannel button down**, my ass looks damn fine under that grey dress. I recently added a pair of windshear fleecy tights and some of the wind-chafing issues I’d been having before cleared right up.

So, here's why all that shit about how broomsticks fly even matters. When you get down to brass tacks, the speed of a broom is determined by how fast your beans can jump. Replacing the beans in a Bottleneck to make it a Bottle-rocket is simple; staying on the Bottlerocket when you let'er rip is not.

Thankfully, the people I’m running from are all flying standard Sweezy Sticks. They’re fast, maneuverable, and painfully easy to overwork; a Sweezy can’t hold up to the abuse even flying through the exhaust of my Bottlerocket dishes out. Even unmodified, a Bottleneck can go for days without needing a drink of water, and only pulls minimal thaums from the flyer. After I modified it, I discovered that I have a huge store of magic inside of me, and it replenishes faster than my broom can draw on it. It’s been days since I last flew; and these bozos are basically couriers with a side-line in leg breaking. They want to catch me; I aim to misbehave.

Of course, it's not all guns and roses- Bottle Rockets are great for drag racing, and not so much for the F1 shit I have to pull to keep away. Every time I spark a liftoff and hit that shit, I yank about a quarter of my available reserves into the blowout, and lose half the thaums on the turns. Not to mention the fact that this is no Fair fight; I’ve got guys on both sides trying to hem me in, at least one guy behind me, and considering this is the Spellbreaker Gang, at least two up ahead.

Here's my exit, though- a narrow little hole in the brick and mortar of Corallia's alleyways. I reach into my flight pocket on the small of my back and fling a handful of smokebombs to keep 'em honest about their failings in life. The smoke plumes out in tangled drifts of green; those stains will never
come out of the laundry hanging on the lines above. It shouldn't be this complicated to deliver a passel of Funeral Notices and Invitations. Gods blood and sweat- if these assholes hadn't decided that now was a fine time to get some revenge, I could have been done by now.

It's not like I'm even that good at racing! So maybe I bet on myself to make outlandish comebacks, and maybe the Spellbreakers used to be the top-tier street sweepers, and maybe my meteoric rise to top-level racing came at the cost of their reputations and most of their money.

That's a lot of maybe's to contend with; here's a fact for you. I got good at racing through a series of events that can only be described as 'coincidence' or possibly 'fate'. Or rather- I got the opportunity to seriously train as a racer through fate; the actually nitty-gritty instinct; the talent, the drive, the skills that make the Spellbreakers frothy with rage? That's all down to hardcore practice, babe.

I slide through the Hole in the Wall and cut my exhaust- it'll build up terribly, but as I'm on a public street, exhaust emission laws are much stricter and I can't afford a ticket right now.

Last stop: Mermaid Cafe, and Keimi the Freebird. She's the leader of the local Post Office, and my indirect gatekeeper to the World of Alleycat Races; she's also an inveterate gossip, and one of the few people I want to invite to my mother's funeral personally. I hunker down on my broom and lean into the wall, then kick with my left foot and hang tight as my broom spins on it's bristles, nose towards the sun. I let go on the third spin, and swing my broom up onto my shoulder; the thaumic exhaust starts to accumulate in the sink.

I don't have much time.

Keimi is working the counter today, and she only squeaks a little as I come to boot-crashing attention directly in front of her. Her spine snaps straight in response, and she accepts the blank white envelope with both hands. I take the bottle from my broom, take a bottle of baiju from behind the bar and pour two shots of the powerful spirit into the thaumically reactive fluid. Then I drain the bottle, and shudder. There's about half a shot left in the bottom; Keimi takes the bottle from me, and drains the rest before shaking her head in resignation.

"I'll tell everyone who needs to know. You can count on me, Kid."

"Thanks, Kei. Always good to know who I can count on to be a massive blabbermouth."

"Hah."

I fill the bottle with baiju and put it back under the bristles, right where it should go in the sink. Then, I walk to the window over the bar sink behind the bar, and pop it open. I can smell Spellbreaker exhaust from here- a rank smell of liquorice and piss. I pause, just a moment. There's one more thing I can do to make my broom as fast and maneuverable as possible. I can put on my Cherumib Blackbird broomring. Four magic stones, four sets of wings, and the bronzed skull of a Black Raven. Clip it onto the tip of the broom and things start to happen immediately. The intake nostrils get thin tubes of diamond hard brass tucked into them; the bristles flex and wriggle as wings take form.

The broom in my hands writhes with power and excitement. I push another fourth of my magic into the broom, supercharging the whole of the beast. I mount; I aim. Keimi let out a whooping cry of joy as I took one soft step out into the air and shot off like a- well, like a bottle rocket. I spun like a top
and ducked the Spellbreaker's bats and knives, and then flew like never before. In racing, they say that your car goes where your eyes go. The flyer who can't tear their eyes away from the wall as they spin out of control will meet that wall; the flyer who looks back as they feel their bristles burst into flames will burn their ass.

On a given day, a given circumstance, you think that you have a limit. If you then go for this limit and you touch it, and you think, 'Okay, this is the limit'. Then you actually touch this limit, and something happens; suddenly, you can go a little bit further. You can move a little bit faster; you can fly just a little higher. With your mind power, your determination, your instinct, and the experience as well, you can fly very high...

The broom clip isn't there to make my broom faster, not really. It's there to help me control my broom.

Maybe if I was closer to eighty one kilograms instead of seventy five, I wouldn’t need a wing-ring; maybe if I could moderate my thaumic intake such that my bottlerocket didn’t pull a full quarter of my available reserves, I wouldn’t need four charmstones; maybe if I hadn’t needed the money so badly, I wouldn’t have so completely ruined the Spellbreaker’s faces.

Lots of maybes; here’s two facts, this time.

Fact one: Races are won or lost in key moments. The only way to know if a moment like that has happened is to go through it; and by experience, discover which moments in a race tend to be key, and which moments aren't.

Fact two: Success in the sport of racing is, above all else, about enduring suffering. In truth, winning a broom race has exactly nothing to do with racing, or how good your broom is, or how high your skill is, or even how much you deserve a win. Winning is about struggle, and effort; it’s about lining all your shots in a row and knocking them down one after the other.

Speed isn’t what kills people; it’s the hard stops that manage it. Suddenly becoming stationary is the real danger of using wing rings and spellstones. If your broom is pulling from your personal reserves, it automatically takes part of your thaumic intake to produce a braking cushion. If your broom is using spellstones or charmstones or whatever to fly, there’s no hard-wired way to keep a reserve of thaumic energy for braking purposes.

Normal brooms can’t pull more than the available thaums from the flyer to fly; modified brooms, technically speaking, can. My broom is, at it’s core, a Bottleneck. It’s a family-oriented broom, and it belonged to my mother before me; at the time of it’s construction, it was the most luxurious flying broom on the market. It has so many safety features built into it, it’s a wonder I can race with it at all-even if I do suddenly run out of propulsor thaums, the broom itself still has enough magic to keep me from dying.

Maybe even enough to keep anyone I end up crashing into from dying too. Maybe even enough to keep the exhaust from thaumically poisoning anyone who gets exposed to it accidentally. Maybe, just maybe, even enough to outtrace the very Wind itself- for a time.

Three Facts, and then we finish this.

Fact one: Memory is time folding back on itself. To remember is to disengage from the present moment; and any kind of success in broom racing depends on a powerful connection to the present. For the best success, a flyer can never remember.
Fact two: the best flying brooms are reliable, above all else. I don’t need a broom that can outrace the Wind; I don’t want a broom that can sweep me off my feet. I want a broom that will fly with me, time after time, through any kind of weather. My mom’s broom is a reliable broom. It’s head is shaped like the tail of a rooster; it’s bristles are made of some fine black grass I can never remember the name of. It’s shaft is made of a single, extremely fine-grained piece of white timber bamboo. It’s bound with horsehair and sinew, and stitched with threads that shimmer gold in the light.

Fact three: even if my broom has enough thaums to outrace the Spellbreakers, and get me back to the Thousand Sunny before the No Fly rules come into effect, it doesn’t have enough to stop me safely and survive the crash.

I come in hot; the baiju in my bottle bought me just enough time. The crash is tremendous, sending me end over end as I roll across the lawn deck and slam to a stop against the main mast. There’s a horrendous cracking noise, and the stink of vaporized spirits.

The wingring chimes as it rolls across the deck, and the skull bounces into a coil of rope, where it chatters to itself noisily. Inky, who was sunning by the main mast, is now wriggling all over my chest and face, smearing mud and- ugh- other things over me in a wild expression of concern.

Thank you, Inky, that’s- that’s great, thanks.

I shove myself upright, Inky’s writhing roots squirming across my stomach and lap, little squeaks of worry escaping it’s pale white mouth and glinting in it's leaf-green eyes- and it’s just as I feared. My broom is snapped clean in half, the head removed from the shaft in a splintered line.

I take each piece in my hands, and stare at them in a sort of shocked horror. I knew this was how it would go if I ever had to use my wingring: I just… this was one of the only things that was just mine and mom’s, y’know? None of the others really took to flying the way I did.

And now it’s. Broken. I kinda thought at worst I’d burn the bristles out, or, or have to replace the rings and beans again, but this- I can’t... I can’t ever use this as a broom again.

Inky wraps his- hers- it’s roots around my waist and hips, and I carefully stagger to my feet. I pick up my wing ring, and put it in my pocket; the skull goes in the other pocket, still chattering and squarking with nerves. The broom pieces I pick up and carry with me towards the bathroom.

I think I pass by someone- I guess they say something?

I stop, and turn- and it’s Nami and Taffy, staring at me wide eyed. I think I might be crying, or something.

“Hey- uh- something wrong with your magic, Jen?” said Taffy, cringing.

“Flying used to be fun until I had to do it for a living. Now that my broom’s broken, I can’t even fly anymore- so, uh. I guess if you just need a nurse, that’s fine. I’m not sure how much use I’ll be
otherwise. Anyway, I have to, uh, I have to wash all this off.” I said, trying not to croak on my tears.

“Jenny, wait-” said Nami, but I was already scrambling up the ladder and I don’t- I don’t talk about my feelings. I never have.

I’m not about to start now.

The hardest part about being in the middle is that no one remembers you; everyone remembers Deborah, she’s… she’s incredibly herself, every moment, she’s herself. You remember Adelaide, too; she’s got a focus and a violence coiled in her frame that just… you don’t forget something like that. My other sisters have their own memorable pieces to them: you remember Ellie because you get swindled so masterfully, or you remember tiny sets of fists destroying you as she waddles off with all your shit; you remember Cece because she’s a genuine master of modern clowning, and you remember Horizon- or Sancho, since it’s not official- because he’s seven feet of gangle at Cece’s side, always. Beatrix you remember as a sort of shadow on the back wall, watching everything; Genevieve, as a cheerful figure either patching you up or outracing you on a broom, again.

That just leaves me. Fernanda; I don’t really go on strange adventures.

I go to the Corallia Market most days, and I sit on a park bench under a pavillion, and I set up my little handpainted sign and ring a bell; people stop by for their fortunes to be told, and I tell them the truth, as I see it.

The first Sight I ever had was of my mother’s dead body; how it had sunken in on itself, withered away from Mist Fever, the blood at her mouth from where she’d tried to cough the miasma out… I’d just finished Secondary, and I didn’t have any plans for College, and Mom- Mom was there with me, and had a softer version of the Sight, and Saw what I did.

Mom told me, then and there, that with that powerful a Blessing, I’d best make use of it to earn a living. We both knew she wouldn’t be around forever to support us, after all- and so, I started going to the edge of Dunshilly and Coralia, in the Cafe District. Madame Shyarly’s Mermaid Cafe is in the other Cafe District, on the Coralia and Gobdark side of Coralia; and so I didn’t have any competition.

My office is pretty simple; it’s a park bench, in one of the public parks across from the nicer Cafe where I usually have lunch, under a pavillion that makes a pleasing sound when it rains. There’s a small table made out of milk crates that I take home with me, and a folding chair too; and my sign.

Fortunes Told! 500 Beri per 3 card spread or 3 Dice Roll; 1000 Beri upcharge every added card or die.

Spells Sold! 600 Beri per cantrip; 2000 Beri upcharge every added spell level.

Get Talismans Here! 700 Beri per object; 3000 Beri upcharge every modification.

All Sales Final; Absolutely NO Substitutions, Exchanges, Coupons, or Refunds.
That day, I’d taped on some paper that read ‘One free Ice Pop per PAYING CUSTOMER; extra Ice Pops 150 Beri per.’

It was a very hot summer. That particular day was the hottest on record for fifty years- I’d had one customer: S’becky, the Dim Sum Lady, who also sold me my lunch and bought half my ice pops outright. Hence why I was about to pack it in and go to the beach- too damn hot, y’all.

And then, of course, someone sat across from me on the wooden folding chair. Well, actually, they sort of collapsed into the chair- he, he sort of collapsed into the chair.

I immediately winced as my precognition violently sparks through the Aether; huh. Guess I’m spending the rest of the day with this fool, then.

First, to save him from heat stroke. I unbuckle my right glove and reach out; press the flat of my palm against his tattooed forehead. He’s in a bad way; his skin is colder and clammy than mine on a normal day, which is not right at all for Lanjin, and he’s dripping with sweat. I open my cooler and pull out my water bottle.

“Drink this before you pass out, stupid Hierophant.” I said, carefully holding the open bottle to his lips.

He drank, glassy black eyes sunken into his head.

I pulled out a small spray bottle I usually use to scare off cats; but he needs to cool down a lot, by the gods. I refilled the spray bottle with meltwater from my cooler and started spraying the Hierophant down, every inch of his exposed skin. I then strip him down- right there in the middle of the park.

I should mention that my sign is in the light, but I’m actually just under a shady pavillion? So anyway; I strip the guy of all his heavy clothing, completely wrong for the season. Eventually, he’s down to his frilly white shirt and his small clothes.

S’becky’s going to be by again with clothing he can wear but I’ll need a- okay, I can make a christening charm, okay. I walk around the table and carefully move the slightly dripping man from the chair, which is under dappled light, to the other side of the table, which is fully under the shadow of the pavilion. I make him kneel and then lay full out on the ground, deep in the shade; the slab underneath us is marble, and holds a chill even in weather like this.

I took his boots and socks off already; so, now I just put his feet up on the bench.

There’s a small fan that I usually don’t use because it disturbs my Fortune Cards; but I’ve had them put away for a good hour or so, and so I just turn the fan on and angle it so most of the cool breeze is going on the Hierophant.

He’ll recover soon enough, and be very hungry and disoriented- idiot didn’t eat anything of substance at all. Well… I don’t actually need a table to do everything I do, just a flat surface. I carefully fold up his clothing, and tuck his clothes under his head like a pillow. I take a tenugui from my bag and dunk it in the ice water, fold it just right and lay it over his forehead. The Hierophant
sighs under my ministrations, and slowly comes out of his overheated state.

The Dim Sum Lady, **Starbecky**, is actually really nice. She’s never once remembered a name unless it’s been written down, but she’s really nice anyway. Her twin brother, **Bucky**, is also really nice, although he’s kind of a piece of shit... Anyway, Bucky got married a year or so ago, and S’becky bought the most auspicious wedding date off of me, and- well, I ended up becoming real friends with S’becky, and uh. Well.

Bucky and his wife, **Cody Jo**, have been trying to have babies for a while now. I haven’t been able to See any indication of Cody getting pregnant at any point; but... well. I know fertility problems run in Cody’s family; and Bucky just wants to raise a family with her, it doesn’t really matter... Aha.

There it is; my charm starts with a **charm bracelet** meant for a fisherman’s wife originally. Then I start adding the other charms; **stingray** comes to my fingers first. Stingray symbolizes... ‘everything being in place’; the stingray symbolizes having the required knowledge, the means, the tools, and the skills—now get on with it. No more hesitation; no more running away. Stingray tells you to have faith in your abilities and follow your inner guidance.

**Octopus** comes next, in gold and heavy to my senses; agility, flexibility, grace, adaptability. The one who learns; the one who seeks. They’re going to need her guidance.

**Bells** to call the spell to Order; they ring in purity and preparation. Command and warning bound in two; the ringing of the bell calls the illusion and truth of the World to Order with every chime. The new World comes on the ringing of the Ox Bell; the Fairy Bells shall ring out in the Night, ere the New Queen Rises from the Depths. The Bell’s voice pierces through the lies you tell yourself; you were warned, and you did not listen, and so the bell rings on.

My fingers touch the last charm I can put on this Talisman—**Stork**! And before my Eye there forms the cloudy-clear image of Cody with longer hair, **smiling with joy at a baby**, their joyful laughter mingling and this finished bracelet wrapped around Cody’s arm.

Done.

“I suppose; not every Seer is good at every kind of divination, after all.” I said.

“...So that’s why I had to come here, now.” said the Hierophant.

“I’m not so sure I’m more powerful; I’m definitely more mercenary than you’ve ever been.” I said.

“You’re a powerful Seer; stronger than I was at your age.” he said.

“I can turn my precog off, yes; but it’s a bit of a pain when it’s this hot out. Lemme see what I’ve got that isn’t so stifling...” I said.

“Could you stop doing that? It’s very hard to have a conversation with you.” he said.

And then I started digging around in my bag; not my for sale bag, my actual ‘me stuffs’ bag.
When I started this small business, I started to carry around a small, pocket book sized bag in my backpack. It started out as a way for me to keep a few things that were of particular use around at all times. Things like the eye mask that I use as a focus for blocking out my precognition, or the jewelry sets that can do the same if I can’t use the eye mask for some reason. I’ve got a bottle of very special anointing oil; a sanctified knife; and some very lucky coins. Over the years, I add other things that start to become important- or at the very least, important to have on me to feel fully dressed and ready to go. A crystal here, a pendant there, a spool of linen-thread; it was never something I was necessarily intentful about, but… I just sometimes needed these particular things together, and if I suddenly needed my collection of tradable enamel pins or a tiny bottle full of sand, I’d have them with me ready to go.

Honestly, when you get down to the tacks and threads of it, my big sales backpack is mostly just Boffo; this smaller bag is also mostly Boffo, but it’s Boffo for me, not my customers. For some reason, no one’s really willing to believe that a short haired girl in a sunflower kaftan is a Genuine Oracle and Witch.

I mean- I guess it’s because of all the Oracles, it’s not many who have such wild variation in what they can actually use for divination… After all, there are many, many types of divination. Divination is an umbrella term encompassing a wide, weird range of styles and types, a bizarre and baffling collection of methods of future prediction that fit under the umbrella. Since the earliest of days, humans have sought after signs to predict their future and guide themselves along the correct path.

Ah. Here we go- my eye bangles, and my bindi sheet. My bangles get split to each hand more or less evenly, so I can channel my future-vision through my fingers instead of my head; the bindi goes over my third eye, as a literal mask.

As for actually blocking my precognition; the best method I have is a sort of meditation where I go over all the divination methods I know of, in alphabetical order. Really, a bit like I’m reading out of a dictionary, although no dictionary for divination exists, nor textbook- I checked.

**Aeromancy**: Divination through interpreting atmospheric conditions, divided into several subtypes. Austomancy (wind); Ceraunoscopy and Keraunomancy (Thunder & lightning); Chaomancy (Aerial visions); Meteromancy (Meteors, Shooting Stars)

Aiuromancy: a type of **Zoomancy**

**Alectormancy or Alectromancy or Alectryomancy**: Divination through observing birds (often roosters) pick through scattered grains and marking the “cock’s crow” as letters from the alphabet. (e.g. the rooster pecks at three grains and crows, denoting the letter “c”)

**Aleuromancy**: Divination through messages written on paper and inserted into dough. (e.g. Fortune Cookies). Another method involves reading the residue left in a flour/water container.

Alomancy or Halomancy: Divination through interpreting spilled salt.

**Alphitomancy or Cursed Bread**: Determining a guilty party by feeding them a loaf of barley bread. Those who experience indigestion are considered guilty.

Amniomancy: Divination by interpreting the caul (the part of the placenta remaining on the head) at a baby’s birth.
Anthropomancy or Antinpomancy or Splanchomancy: Divination by interpreting the entrails of a human sacrifice. I’m very good at this, although I almost never get to use it.

Apantomancy: Divination through interpreting objects or beings encountered in a “chance meeting”, for instance, a black cat crossing your path.

Arachnomancy: Under Zoomancy > Entomancy

Arithmancy: Divination using numbers; mathemagicians do this. Arithmosophy: Divination through a technique of converting words to numbers. Gematria: Automatic numerology, usually interpreting Manual passages assigning numeric values to letters of the Automatic Alphabet. Numerology: Divination through using dates and words turned to numbers (i.e. C=3), often birthdates and names.

Aruspicy or Extispicy or Haruspicy: Divination by examining the entrails of a sacrificed animal; I’m very good at this, but most people are too squeamish to go for it. Fish are cheap; cattle are Significant. Hepatoscopy or Hepatomancy: examining the liver of a sacrificial animal

Astragalamancy or Astragalomancy or Astragyromancy or Cleromancy: Divination through dice, originally done with sheep bones. I’ve become very good at this through extensive practice and occasional references to my Arithmancy textbook from Secondary. This one is preferred by my local customers, who usually order Auspicious Dates or Winning Number Strings- of course, I can’t always say for sure what the winning numbers are for, exactly, and the Auspicious Dates come either with a season or a year, never both. Pain in the ass.

Astrology: Divination by the positions of the planets, the sun and the moon; no Seer raised in this country will ever realize if they have a natural talent for it or not, simply because there is no natural sky here. While Astrology can be learned in Arithmantic form, I’m not good enough at those calculations to offer it to my customers, and unless I get a teacher, I probably never will be. This means I also cannot do Genethlialogy or Natal Astrology, the Divination of the influence of the stars on birth. However, I can do Horoscopy, the divination of interpreting a horoscope- that’s more talking to a person and figuring out how best to apply their horoscope, not making one for them myself.

Autography or Automatic Writing or Psychography: Written communication with a spirit done unconsciously by a person in a trance or semi-conscious state. I don’t like being untethered from this World. I can do it; the few times I’ve done it, I’ve actually gotten some very promising results. But I don’t like doing it, is the thing, so I avoid it whenever possible. My sister, on the other hand, has no real talent for it- but she loves the process of it, and so has become very skilled in this particular style of divination.

Axinomancy: Divination by throwing an axe or hatchet and observing the direction of the handle or (sometimes with a saw) interpreting the quivering of the blade. If you have an axe or a saw, I can definitely do this one. This is one of the fun kinds of divination.
So is **Belomancy or Bolomancy**: Divination by shooting, tossing, or balancing an arrow. If it was legal in city limits, I’d be shooting arrows with prophecies attached every day, every day. Unfortunately, it’s only tossing or balancing arrows that’s legal in city limits, and my prophecies aren’t as effective and immediate with those methods.

**Bibliomancy or Stichomancy**: Divination by randomly chosen passages in books, most often religious books. **Rhapsodomancy**: Using a book of poetry. **Stoichemancy**: Using a book by Virgil or Homer. Book of Changes: the *I Ching* can also be used.

**Botanomancy**: Under Pyromancy > Xylomancy

**Brontoscopy**: Interpreting the sound of thunder. I’m not sure why this one is different from Aeromancy, but it is.

**Capnomancy**: Under Pyromancy

**Carromancy**: Divination by observing melting wax

**Cartomancy**: Divination by using a deck of cards. **Taromancy**: Divination by using a deck of Tarot Cards. I can do both; I actually usually use a normal deck of cards when I use cards. If you want me to bust out the Tarot Deck, you’ve got to ask.

**Causimomancy**: Under Pyromancy

**Ceraunoscopy**: Under Aeromancy

**Ceromancy or Ceroscopy**: Divination through pouring melted wax into water. Not much use to me, particularly.

**Chien Tung**: See *I Ching*

**Chaomancy**: Under Aeromancy

**Cheiromancy or Chiromancy**: Divination through the study of the hand, fingers, fingernails and palms. **Onychomancy**: Divination through interpreting the fingernails. **Palmistry or Palm Reading**: Divination through reading and interpreting the lines and structure of the hand. I don’t offer this; don’t ask me for it. There’s a reason I wear gloves.

**Clairsentience**: Any form of paranormal sensing ability. Most of them can be attributed to Haki; however, some things just aren’t. Some of these abilities, in some people, can be suppressed or trained to be stronger, implying that they are functions of a persons Haki. Some of these abilities in some people cannot be suppressed or trained to be stronger, implying that there is something else at work.

**Clairvoyance**: Also called “second sight”, the ability to interpret or foretell the unseen. I have this. **Clairaudience**: An auditory form of clairvoyance. I have this too; mostly right when I wake up in the morning. **Precognition**: Divination through the psychic ability to “see” the future. I make my living off of this. **Psychometry**: Divination through touching or handling an object. I have this too. I don’t touch people if I can help it- there’s only so much about a person I ever want to know.
Cledomancy: Divination through interpreting random events or statements.

Cleidomancy or Clidomancy: Under Radiesthesia > Pallomancy

Cleromancy: See Astragalamancy

Coscinomancy or Cosquinomancy: Under Radiesthesia > Pallomancy

Critomancy or Critomancy: Divination through interpreting sacrificial cakes and breads.

Cromniomancy: Divination by interpreting the sprouting behavior of onions

Cursed Bread: See Alphitomancy

Cybermancy: Divination through computing object; a snail-phone, a calculator, a loom.

Cyclomancy: Divination through interpreting the revolutions of a spinning bottle, top, or turning wheel. No; I need to be able to use the laundromat.

Dactyliomancy or Dactlomancy: Under Radiesthesia > Pallomancy

Daphnomancy: Under Pyromancy > Xylomancy

Demonomancy: Divination by summoning demons to reveal the future. No. Hurtful racism; I don’t abide by it.

Dendromancy: Divination using either oak or mistletoe. No.

Divining/Dowsing: Under Radiesthesia

Entomancy: Under Zoomancy

Extispicy: See Aruspicy

Feng Shui: The art of placing objects, furnishings, and buildings to create an harmonious and healthy flow of chi (energy that flows around us and carries the life force). I can do this for, of all things, bags, purses, and wallets. The smaller the space, the better I am at managing the feng shui.

Fractomancy: Divination through interpreting the structure of fractal patterns. Only if I use a kaleidoscope; I like eating food.

Gematria: Under Arithmancy

Genethlialogy: Under Astrology

Geomancy: Divination by interpreting the lines and figures traced in the earth, either by reading the lines and figures in cast pebbles, dirt, or sand or interpretation of those already existing in the earth’s natural formations. Not enough practice to offer it for sale.

Geloscopy: Divination through interpretation of the sound or manner of laughter. My other sister’s good at this, although considering she’s a clown, she’d have to be.

Graphology: Divination through the interpretation of handwriting. Cop skill.

Gyromancy: Divination by walking or twirling around a circle marked with letters until dizzy and, using the letters at the point where the person falls or stumbles to spell out a prophecy. It makes me vomity.

Halomancy: See Alomancy

Haruspicy: See Aruspicy

Hepatoscopy or Hepatomancy: Under Aruspicy

Hieromancy or Hieroscopy: Divination by interpreting burnt offerings or slaughtered animals.

Hippomancy: Under Zoomancy

Horoscopy: Under Astrology

Hydromancy or Ydromancy: Divination by interpretation of water, including its color, ripples, ebb and flow. Literally every person who goes outside their house in this country has some skill at this. Not a good seller to the locals here; tourists lap it up, though.

Hydatoscopy: Divination by interpreting rainwater. Ugh.

Lecanomancy: Divination through interpreting the sounds or the ripples made by stones dropped into water. Uuuugh.

Pegomancy: Divination through the interpretation of sacred waters such as springs, pools, wells, or fountains. No.

I Ching/Book of Changes/Chien Tung: An Ancient Chinese type of divination to reveal patterns of change through deep introspection and intuitive thought.

Ichthyomancy: Divination by interpreting the behavior or the entrails of fish. Entrails, every time.

Idolomancy: Divination by interpreting idols.

Iridology: Under Oculomancy.

Lampadomancy: Under Pyromancy

Lecanomancy: Under Hydromancy

Libranomancy or Livanomancy: Under Pyromancy > Capnomancy

Lithomancy: Divination using crystals or semi-precious stones, either interpreting the light from them or by casting them and interpreting their placement as they fall. No.

Lychnomancy: Under Pyromancy

Metagnomy: Divination achieved through a trancelike state. No.

Meteromancy: Under Aeromancy

Metoposcopy: Divination through interpreting the lines and wrinkles in the forehead. No.

Moleosophy: Divination through the interpretation of moles on the body. No.

Molybdomancy: Divination through interpreting the hissing sounds made by molten lead or tin dropped into water. No.

Myomancy: Under Zoomancy

Myrmomancy: Under Zoomancy > Entomancy

Necromancy: Divination through communication with the dead.

Numerology: Under Arithmancy

Oculomancy: Divination by interpreting the eye. Iridology: Divination through observing the iris of the eye.

Oenomancy or Oinomancy: Divination through interpreting wine. I am too poor for that life.

Omphalomancy or Umbilicomancy: Divination through interpreting the shape of the first born’s navel or the knots in the umbilical cord to determine how many children a woman will have in her lifetime. No.

Oneiromancy: Divination through the interpretation of dreams. No.

Onomancy or Onomomancy: Divination by interpreting names. No.

Onychomancy: Under Cheiromancy

Oomancy or Ooscopy or Ovomancy: Divination by eggs. No.

Ophiomancy: Under Zoomancy
Oracle: Making contact with spirits or gods. Technically yes, but mostly no.

Ornithomancy: Under Zoomancy

Ouija or Ouije: Divination with the use of a Ouija Board, a board printed with the alphabet and numbers and using a planchette to spell out messages. No. No. Nuh to the Uh to the No. No, No.

Pallomancy: Under Radiesthesia

Palmistry or Palm Reading: Under Cheiromancy

Pegomancy: Under Hydromancy

Phyllorhodomancy: Divination through the sound made by slapping a rose petal against the hand. Too poor.

Physiognomy: Divining a person’s character through interpreting the features of their face.

Precognition: Under Clairvoyance

Premonition: A warning of a future event, typically an accident or disaster.

Prophecy: A vision or revelation of the future, typically provided by a deity.

Psychography: See Autography

Psychomancy: Divination through the interpretation of a person’s soul, i.e. values and beliefs. Soul Reading

Psychometry: Under Clairvoyance

Pyromancy: Divination by fire

Capnomancy: Divination by interpreting rising smoke. Libranomancy/Livanomancy: Divination through interpreting the smoke made by burning incense. Causimomancy: Divination by observing objects placed in a fire. Lampadomancy: Divination by interpreting the flame of a candle, torch, or lamp. Lychnomancy: Divination through interpreting the flames of three candles. Pyroscopy: Divination by burning paper. Sideromancy: Divination by placing straws on a hot iron and observing the resulting shapes. Spodomancy: Divination by interpreting ashes, cinders, or soot. Xylomancy: Divination by burning wood Botanomancy: Divination by interpreting burning or burned leaves or branches. Daphnomancy: Divination by interpreting a burning laurel branch. Tephramancy: Divination through interpretation of the ashes of burnt tree bark.

Rhapsodomancy: Under Bibliomancy

Radiesthesia: Divination through using a pendulum or rod. Pallomancy: Divination using a pendulum. Cleidomancy or Clidomancy: diving through using a key attached to a cord or string. Coscinomancy/Cosquinomancy: Divination using a sieve suspended from shears or tongs. Dactyliomancy or Dactlomancy: Divination using a suspended ring. Divining/Dowsing or Water Witching: using a rod to determine the location of water. Rhabdomancy: Divination using a stick or
rod. To all of these- No.

Schematonomy: Under Physiognomy.

Sciomancy: Divination by using a spirit guide, different from necromancy in that the guide is not summoned. No.

Scrying: The term for divination by seeking a vision while gazing into a transparent, translucent, or otherwise reflective object. Crystal ball gazing. Yes, but I only have glass-

“That’s a terrible medium for scrying in!” said the Heirophant.

“Thank you; you didn’t mess me up or anything, but please try not to do that again.” I said.

“Sorry, forgot you’re- sorry.” he said.

Crystal gazing; yes, but I only have glass. Fire Scrying; yes, but my candles are shit. Ink Scrying; sure. Mirror Scrying; no. Smoke Scrying; I’m weirdly good at this, actually. Water Scrying; Hell Yes. Wine Scrying; too poor to have ever tried it.

Selenomancy: Divination of the appearance and phase of the moon. No.

Sideromancy: Under Pyromancy

Skatharomancy: Under Zoomancy > Entomancy

Spasmomatonomy: Divination by observing convulsions. No, seems skeezy. Spatalamancy: Divination by interpreting skin, bone, or excrement. No. Ew, no.

Scapulimancy or Scapulomancy or Spatulamancy: Divination by examining the cracks in the burned shoulder bones of an animal. Yes.

Scatamancy: Divination by interpreting excrement. Spatilomancy: Divination by interpreting animal excrement. NO!

Splanchomancy: See Anthropomancy

Spodomancy: Under Pyromancy

Stareomancy: Divination by interpreting the classical elements of wind, water, earth, or fire. I mean, I guess.

Sternomancy: Divination by interpreting the marks or bumps on the solar plexus (breast to belly). Seems like a fun thing to do with someone you want to see naked. No.

Stichomancy: See Bibliomancy
Stoichemancy: Under Bibliomancy

Stolismancy: Divination by interpreting a person’s style of dress. Ugh, no.

Sycomancy: Divination through writing a question on a leaf and ascertaining the answer through how quickly the leaf dries. Dude, what the hell, no.

Taromancy: See Cartomancy

Tasseography or Tasseomancy: Divination through reading tea leaves, coffee grounds, or wine sediments. Yes, but you have to bring your own tea, coffee, or wine.

Tephramancy: Under Pyromancy > Xylomancy

Theomancy: Divination through oracle or direct contact with God. Yes.

Theriomancy: Under Zoomancy

Tiromancy or Typomancy or Tyromancy: Divination by interpreting the holes in cheese or other types of coagulation. Yes.

Transataumancy: Divination by accidentally seeing or hearing. Yes.

Trochomancy: Divination by wheel ruts or tracks. Yes.

Umbilicomancy: See Omphalomancy

Uromancy or Urimancy: Divination by interpreting urine. Ew, no.

Urticariaomancy: Divination by the location of an itch. (e.g. your palms itch, you’ll get money or your nose itches, someone is thinking about you). This is one of the few I do that I can’t actually sell my services in; it only works for me.

Water Witching: Under Radiesthesia > Divining. If I can, I wouldn’t know; we’re surrounded on all sides by all kinds of water. I could probably find a specific kind of water, but no one has ever asked me… I don’t know.

Xenomancy: Divination by interpreting meetings with strangers.

Xylomancy: Under Pyromancy

Ydromancy: See Hydromancy

Zoomancy: Divination though interpretation of the appearance and behavior of animals.

Ailuromancy: Divination through observing the behavior of cats. Entomancy: Divination by interpreting the behavior of insects. Arachnomancy: Divination by observing the behavior of spiders. Myrmomancy: Divination through the interpretation of the behavior of ants. Skatharomancy: Divination by interpreting the tracks of a beetle. Technically I can do all of this; however, this kingdom has a very broad definition of what a cat is; and as for the bugs… There aren’t many insects I can think of that live here. Arachnomancy is actually much broader- it encompasses not just spiders, but scorpions, crabs, and lobsters. Myrmomancy isn’t a thing here, but- I guess really it’d have to be called Decapomancy. Hippomancy: Divination by interpreting the behavior of horses. Myomancy: Divination through interpretation of the behavior of mice and rats. Ophiomancy: Divination by
observing the behavior of serpents. Ornithomancy: Divination through interpretation of the behavior, flight, and song of birds. I can do all of these, but only by prior appointment; finding the right area to do this in town takes prior planning.

However, if it’s really vital I use one of these specific kinds of divination today, Hierophant, Hippomancy, Myomancy, and Ornithomancy are all possible. We’d have to walk around though, so think carefully about that. All of these are under the umbrella of Theriomancy: Divination through interpreting the movements of groups of animals.

Finally, Zygomancy: Divination by using weights.

And it’s done.

“So. What can I do you for?” I said.

“I need some Directions.” he said.

“Okay.”

“I’m looking for the Golden Lotus of the Sacred Realm, and through it, Le Palais de Fleurs.”

I opened my eyes and looked down at the lounging Hierophant.

"I once accidentally Scryed for the Golden Lotus and learned it’s location and true purpose; since that day, my life has never known peace. It was just after I Saw my Mother’s Fate; and so it comes to this."

“‘You ‘accidentally scryed’ the location and true purpose of the Golden Lotus of the Sacred Realm, Hermit?’”

“Listen, Hierophant; we all have moments of weakness, but it’s not about how we failed. It’s about how we learn from events like those and grow as human beings.”

“So, spill the goods.”

“Firstly, the Golden Lotus is Blood Bound; only a member of the House of Vinsmoke can touch it at all. Secondly, it is not a Looking Glass. It’s a calculator.”

“-wait, What?”

“It’s meant for mathemagic, not divination.”

“Oh, godsdamit-”

“Yeah, it’s a real pisser. Further, unless you’re hiding an Ancient Orcish dictionary in your head, you won’t be able to understand what the Lotus has to tell.”

“-Fuck!”

“Yeah. And finally; even if you have a Vinsmoke willing to run calculations on the Lotus, and even
if you understand the language it uses, the legendary palace it once led to—"

“Le Palais de Fleurs—”

“-yeah, it got destroyed and looted during the First Century of our calendar. It’s gone.”

“...FUCK!”

“Yeah.”

The Hierophant looked so miserable after I’d told him the Truth I’d Known so long ago… well, I decided to take pity on him.

“I don’t know Ancient Orcish- but. If you still want the directions to what once was there, I can do the calculations for you...”

“...You have the Lotus?”

“Yeah. I even have the Box of Bones to tabulate the outcomes properly… if you want.”

“...Please.”

I shrugged, and took the Lotus out of my lunchbox. It’s about the size of one of those new coffee grinder calculators, but significantly more ornate and mind-snapping to read. The box of bones I take out from my small bag. Finally, a small shipping crate that gets left under the bench when it’s not in use.

Here we go.

The Long, and the Lat; Long is tough if you can’t do the celestial calculations necessary, because it’s based on time. Lat can be determined by keeping track of the sun’s maximum height over the period of a year.

If this, then that- here. Done.

(The truth is, the Golden Lotus isn’t just a calculator; it’s a watch, too. It keeps specifically the time of the location of the Palais de Fleurs- which, considering it was unmoored to Time by Morgan Morrigan in the Age of Heroes, means more than you think. This information I’m giving the Hierophant out of pity- even then, it won’t actually get him into the palace.)

I tuck the lotus behind my ear, covering the sunflower pinning back my side-fringe. This would be the winter I would grow my hair out— and then the Hierophant asked me this.
“Join my crew.”
“...”
“Is that an answer?”
“I haven’t answered because there isn’t a polite way of saying ‘fuck no’; so. Fuck no.”
“...Why?”
“Too young.”
“...How old are you?”
“Twelve.”
“Gah!”

This was two year's ago, about a month and a half before the War of the Best- if that matters to anyone.

Because I didn’t fill my bag with objects with Intention, it doesn’t quite fit the normal ideal of a true Witch Bag; but, in truth, it is. A Witch Bag is an urbanized version of the shamanic and priestly medicine and prayer bags. All three bags are filled with certain objects of spiritual and magical significance. All together, they can be used to sanctify a space, raise an altar, and even carry out certain Rites.

Manannan mac Lir had the Crane Bag; it was fashioned from the crane who was actually the warrior woman Aoife, shapeshifted. Mac Lir’s bag contained many different things- including his house- but it also held objects both magical and sacred to him and those who followed him. They numbered nine in all.

Mac Lir gave Cormac mac Airt his Goblet of Truth; his ship that did not need sails was named ‘Wave Sweeper’ and it was given to- or stolen by- the Devil Portgas; he owned a cloak of mists that granted him invisibility, which he laid on the cairn of Floria; he owned a flaming helm that he gave to his faithful liegeman, Kostecki, as a wedding gift. He had a sword named Fragarach, that could slice through any armor and upon command could compel a man under it’s shadow to speak the answer to any question asked of him truthfully; the sword, it is said, was lost to the Sea Goddess Calypso in battle.

His horse, Enbarr of the Flowing Mane, was set free upon his death. Enbarr could travel over water as easily as Land; and so it is said that all the horses of this kingdom descend in truth from that ancient steed.

He gave to Lugh as parting gifts, when the boy went to aid the people of Dana against the Dwarves-called Fomorians, in those times. These were his coat, wearing which he could not be wounded; and also his breastplate, which no weapon could pierce. His helm had two precious stones, set in front and one behind, which flashed as he moved; and Mac Lir girt him for the fight with his own deadly
sword, Fragarach the Answerer.

He was buried in his cloak of colors, changing like the sun from blue-green to silver, and again to the purple of evening.

“So- uh… price for this… fifty thousand beri.”

“Uh. Really?”

“Yeah.”

“...Here.”

“Ooh, small bills, nice! -Mm, and that’s it for me for the day. Too fucking hot.”

“-really. You’re closing shop because it’s too hot?”

“Yep. Beach time.”

“...are there nice beaches around?”

“Ehh. Do you mean nice as in ‘tourists come here’ or nice as in ‘I can catch a cool breeze off the ocean and finally relax’?”

“The second one.”

“Yeah, that’s where I’m going.”

“...Can I come with you?”

“-uh. I’m not bringing an entire entourage of shoobies to my favorite beach.”

“No, no, just me.”

“...well, everyone needs some alone time. Do you need a bathing suit, or an outfit that breathes better?”

“-if you can manage that, I’d be grateful.”

“Cool. -Hi, S’becky!”

“Heeeey– woah, hot.”

“Yeah, I’m done for the day- you?”

“Uuugh, yeah, too hot for dim sum sales today.”

“Heh. -Hey, so, your summer sleeping yukata- you know, the one you stole from the ryokan?”

“...What about it?”

“Trade; for your brother and his wife, actually.”

“-You Saw-?!?”
“They’re adopting. Kimono- thank you. Give this to Cody Jo when you see her next, from me. They
need to go to the Dunshilly Orphanage by midsummer this year to get the baby I Saw.”

“A-aye, I’ll tell them.”

And then I take the yukata, and hand it over to the Hierophant. I double check to make sure that
everything is in my bag, as it should be.

(The modern Witch Bag can be made of any material and be of any size. Some, like my sisters who
have very physically dangerous jobs, prefer small pouches worn like necklaces and carry only a very
few sacred objects. Others will create whole travel altars with full sized tools in their bag by using
special packs or carrying boxes.

I have something in between; a set of travel altars in hinged mint tins- and the one folding wallet of
the Northern Saints and Martyrs, and all the cool shit in my bag that’s mostly for sale.

The purpose of my bag is to have a safe, reasonably shielded area for all the mystical items I sell in
my business; it’s also important that I’m able to carry it. Thus, I have a yellow brown leather
backpack full of weird crap; mostly, it’s actually full of pencil cases full of weird crap, and to make
sure I can pick out which selection of weird crap I want, all my pencil cases are different from each
other, even in a set. Because the content of my bag changes week to week- or even day to day- I
can’t think about what might be going into my bag, or where it might go in the future.

There are stones in my bag that I don’t take out- they help keep me grounded; there’s a sachet of
herbs that smells nice. It’s also convenient for taking the bus, which is what we’re about to do.)

The Hierophant, the Star, and the Hermit- in their unreasonably-hot-summertime best- used three bus
tokens and went to the beach.

I built a sand castle, took a picture of it, and then immediately jumped on it. S’becky went surfing a
bit downshore. And the Hierophant ate all the dim sum and took a nap under the shade of a palm
tree.

We had icepops and played with some dogishes; it was a nice day. I even got a cool new hat!

That was a lovely day, really; the last slow, soft summer day I can really remember having. It was
also the last time I wore my one piece yellow watermelon swimsuit before my dugs got too big for it.
I still have the hat, though.

I’m wearing it right now, and lounging in my new, pineapple swimsuit. It supports both sets of dugs
just right, and leaves room in the back for my nubby wings to come in- I can feel them getting ready
to pop, I’ve got maybe another month.

-I just watched my sister Genny crash into the grassy deck and roll off the broken remains of Mom’s
broom. Part of me is hurt because she’s obviously hurt- on the inside, I mean- and part of me is
deeply, vindictively satisfied, because she never, ever missed a chance to rub in the fact that she’s
better than me at flying a broom. Better nature- I must follow my own better nature.

Fish tacos. Genevieve is going to need fish tacos to recover from this- I get up, and stretch, and wrap
my lounging cloth around my hips. I mean, it was only a wrap skirt - and I have the most clothing out of all my sisters in that I have something like five distinct outfits, all of them shit.

Anyway- the family fish taco recipe can be described as a hint of salt to get the taste of poverty out of our mouths, a touch of butter so we can be reminded we're human, a whisper of cheese because meat is expensive, a rumor of salsa- I'm pretty sure Deb uses wasabi as her salsa base for heat and to make the green color just right- a secret of lime, and an unconfirmed document of rosemary in with the fish.

I poke my head into the galley, and espy Deb curled up on the couch, being cuddled by Missus Mab and Mister Sanji. Oh, she was crying.

I tilt my hat back as I walk over and crouch in front of my sister. She looks up at me, a trilling question in her purr.

“Genny bit the big one; she’s gonna need fish tacos when she comes back out.” I said.

“Ah.” said Deb, before wiggling out from between the Mister and Missus, and stood, scrubbing at her face. She grabbed a black and white skirt from the table and stalked out to change into it.

I hummed a moment, and then looked over at the Mister and Missus.

“Is there a uniform like hers I can wear?” I ask them both.

Missus Mab blinks, and then digs around behind herself before pulling out a folded bundle of clothing and handing it to me. I shrug into everything right then and there; I’m only wearing a swimsuit, after all.

I don’t actually know how to put on the apron, though. I’ll put my hair up, first. Braid it all down, and then wrap, wrap, wrap, wrap- and then bobby pin it up, and cover it all with this pretty yellow printed bandanna.

“Hey Deb- how do I tie my apron on-?”

“Just a sec, I need to put my jacket on- okay, it’s like… reverse hakama. Falls to just below your knees- and a knot you can bust open quick, so like, bow knot of some kind.”

“Mm, I see. Today’s fish day.”

“-D’you know what kind?”

“Nope. But it is fish day- right, Chef Sanji?”

“Uh. Yeah, actually- how…?”

“I’m a professional Seer. What kind of fish are we having today, then?”

“Uh- sea bream.”
“Cool, I’ll start descaling them.”

“...Do you need help with the aquarium?”

“Nope.”

And then I walk off and grab the fishing net from beside the fridge.

“Cleaning station’s next to the aquarium, right- ice too?”

“Yep.”

“Anything you want me to leave with the chum specifically?”

“The fins; I can hardly do anything with them, and they go better in the chum anyway.”

“Cool. Uh- wow, four?”

“Yeah. Four.”

“Okay… wait, shouldn’t it be six? We’re all going through growth spurts...”

“Uh. Hm. Yeah, six.”

And then I’m off to gather the fish.

Grief and bloodlust shouldn’t take you away from the things you enjoy the most. I enjoy cooking food for people; and so, while my sister Fern goes fishing, I prepare the other stuff for fish tacos. Taco tuesday. Mmm.

Genny and Fern have this thing between them and tu me fais cheir, la. But what can I do? They aren’t actually fighting, so I can’t say, thrash them both up and down the deck like I would if they were- but they’re not, so, what can I do?

Let me see- rice flour and tapioca flour, salt, water, lard for cooking- or maybe grease drippings, whichever we have more of…

“Grease drippings and lard would taste best, and make best use of our supplies. I have a tortilla press- keep setting up your mis en place, Shrimpy.”

“Yes, Chef Hot Dish.”
“...pfft. Fine, okay.”

“Hehehe.”

Uh- cabbage, dill, cilantro, herbs I don’t know the name of but smell like they’ll go with fish; they’ll be a slaw and that should like, cook a bit together in the saucy goodness- Which reminds me! Wasabi Green Salsa. Tastes like memories.

Salsa Verde con Wasabi. So this one time I wanted to make classic Salsa Verde, only all I had was wasabi instead of green chilles. It honestly tastes best if you use a mortar, not a mixer- no metal implements need apply.

I think if I double the recipe, making it for sixteen instead of eight, we’ll be good…

“Yeah; most of the crew is ordinary about spicy foods, but Chopper hates them and Mab loves them, so sixteen portions is actually about right. Or it would be, except our crew numbered fourteen before the seven of you kids joined up, so. And how should the Miniatures be fed?”

“They prefer Tonnies as a group name, and they eat, collectively, the same amount as one whole person. So- I need to at least triple this recipe. More, if you want leftovers- do you?”

“Maybe. Tell me the recipe.”

“Uh- tripled or regular?”

“Tripled.”

“Okay. Three hundred grams of fresh parsley, forty four milliliters of wasabi, one hundred seventy seven mil shoyu, forty four mil olive oil, fourteen mil rice vinegar, three anchovies- or other pungent fish- uh, two hardboiled egg yolks- doesn’t have to be bird eggs, the Giant Salmon eggs that come round once a year- uh, forty four mil pickled capers, salt and pepper to taste.”

“How do you prepare that?”

“Uh- after you’ve boiled the eggs, crush the parsley in a non-metal mortar with some salt; keeping in mind the shoyu and the anchovy to be added later. When the parsley is in small pieces, a bit of a rough paste, add the capers, anchovies, wasabi, and the egg yolks. Keep mixing until it’s homogeneous, and then slowly add the olive oil, vinegar, and shoyu. Serve immediately or within a pair of days; cover and store in the fridge. Um- steel blades and other cooking utensils made of metal tend to oxidize parsley.”

“Mm. Here’s the mortar. Pan fried fish?”

“Yeah, usually after I do the tortillas.”

“In case you want to use the tortillas for something else, I got it. I’ll start making tortillas then; you’ll be cooking them.”

“Yes Chef!”
A Closet Full of Clothes Can Be Any Size

The first week of our wait in the harbour of Ryugu Mergyo is spent-at least, on my part-in ensuring that the new crewmembers have adequate clothing for their various shipboard duties, places to sleep, and schedules that will allow all of them time to work, learn, train, and sleep as necessary. Zoro, Sanji, and Mark got a pig, like I asked for; Franky revamped our dorms; and Robin gained an apprentice. Actually, so did I? It’s been a busy week.

Deborah Vinsmoke, the oldest of her set of siblings, was the easiest person to achieve my aims for, while the Tonnie Mice were the most near-overwhelmingly complicated.

Go over the actual list of people first, Mab; make things easier on yourself.

So, in order of difficulty: Deborah, Eleanor, Fernanda, Genevieve, Adelaide, Beatrix, Cecelia, Sancho Horizon, Darla Divot, J3LL-3-B34N, Maya Ragnuff, Hildegard - Hildy is her preference, Arlinda Rader Haai, and Quillaby. Quillaby is the most baby-faced boy I’ve ever seen in my life. Sweet faced- but just as deadly as the rest of us.

Deborah was least difficult in that most of her clothing needed to double as both training appropriate gear, and work appropriate clothing. Thus, there were materials and processes I immediately discarded for her; further, being in much the same mold as my husband, her sense of style was much easier to capture quickly and cleanly. The phrase I eventually settled on to encompass her style is ‘Practical Glamor Woman”; her clothing is practical, then glamorous, then feminine.

Deb is actually a deeply feminine young woman in a very masculine profession; thus, any little thing I can do to help her maintain her femininity, her identity, in the face of overwhelming Othering is of good use.

Her wardrobe begins with a series of a-line skirts in cool black, medium-light grey, warm black, red, and the two skirts I had initially designed for her, in a houndstooth and a floral print. All of her skirts have waistbands and pockets; the waistbands help define her waist, and the pockets keep the skirt practical beyond her own physical comfort.

Her work skirts are uniformly maximum length, in three distinct styles. The skirt she’s currently wearing every day is a maxi a-line skirt in a heavy-weight houndstooth, meant not just for her job, but for winter. The summer version is a midi length a-line in a much lighter, translucent fabric; the fabric I chose is a material that meets all the requirements of a working cook or chef’s needs, while also is able to breathe. Finally, for formal events I made her a fit and flare mermaid skirt in the appropriate houndstooth.

Her work jackets are all the same style; plain white with cloth buttons, faux-French cuffs, Estern front closure pattern, and the reduced collar. I’ve finished three already, and have only two more to sew; because they’re all the same, cutting them was a rather simple operation… Her water bottle is actually a super insulated and ultra light water-pack, rated for use in the Volcanic Isles, which regularly reach temperatures over five hundred degrees Celsius. Her cooling neckerchief is actually a cooling towel she can wear as… well, however she’d like, really.

She has two different kinds of aprons; one, which is for practicing in, and the set of five which go
with her chef coat.

It’s important to note that all her work clothing has a material weight of two hundred forty grams, to offer better protection from spills without sacrificing breathability. All of her work clothing is made out of some variant of cotton; be it the thicker stranded winter cotton, or the ultra long and fine summer cotton. Every button, buttonhole, and tie-string is sewn in and reinforced.

Deborah’s underwear, as she’s a Celiate mermaid with unsplit web, requires some careful thought. She cannot simply wear the same kind of underwear as myself, Robin, or Nami; she doesn’t exactly have thighs, yet, or a crotch. Thus, her underwear is a selection of slips and haramaki meant to cover her urogenital opening without putting undue pressure on- real people! Stop prettying it up! Her underwear needs to be less restrictive so she doesn’t accidentally masturbate when she puts her clothing on. Too much constant pressure on a young mermaid’s genital slit can mess up their sexual behavior for life. So- slip skirts are slips, except skirt shaped instead of dress-shaped. I have fancy styles, simpler styles, and ultra soft sleek styles for when she’s having her period. I also have haramaki meant for her specifically, in that they’re all the same style, just in a multitude of colors; they’re for when she wants to train, or for work, or sporty days.

Sports bras for Deborah are either plain white or printed; supportive hose are either ‘flesh tone’, smokey, or red, in a superior wicking style. Her socks are uniformly compression-style merino wool knee highs, as they’re the only style of sock she likes to wear. Yes, it’s weird.

Her shoes come in three different styles, going from shortest to tallest; a pair of cooks shoes, a pair of ankle boots, and a pair of knee high boots.

Moving up a layer, Deborah’s blouses are all in the red family of color. She has a short sleeve button up, an edge-printed floral button up, a polka-dot button up with a ribbon-style neck tie, and a silk hand painted long sleeve shirt without buttons and a ribbon style necktie- no buttons. Her hair scarves are all silk, in a wide range of colors and prints; some meant for specific styles, and some just to wear however she’d like.

One more layer up, we get to her jacket; black leather, silver notions and fixings, psuedo-tuxedo lapels. She saw it in my studio and fell in love immediately, so I marked it out for her and double checked that it would fit her at all- which it does, nearly perfectly. Just a little long in the sleeve, which while technically easy to fix, is only about an eighth of an inch’s wrongness, which doesn’t matter so much. She’s also got her very beautiful heirloom hinged hair comb; I do believe she’s going to wear it every day. She also has her chanellement, passed down from her mother- a pair of ear cuffs in the Vinsmoke style of twisting gold wire. Due to the shape of the rose and the overall simplicity of the vines and leaves, her chanellement marks her as the Eldest of her Line. (The Vinsmoke Line is actually a series of branches that gradually get less and less related to each other; Sanji and I are something like forty or fifty generations removed from each other, but we are, technically speaking, relations. The Noir Vinsmokes are much closer relations, as their Mother- if I’m remembering the Lists correctly- was the current Germa King’s younger sister. So- the Suntides are Sanji’s first cousins, I think.)

As for pajamas, Deborah really liked the nightgown I drew for her, so I’ll just go with that one. Her bag, knife case, and school supplies are not things I needed to put much thought into...

Eleanor is similarly easy to design and create for, in that her sense of style is not terribly distinctive; indeed, she actively avoids wearing distinctive clothing, in an effort to stymie any potential observers from remembering her presence. This is only half defeated by her preference for the color orange; as I explained to her, Orange and Brown are the same colors in different stages of tone. When she
became Robin’s apprentice in archaeology, I designed field-work clothing for her as well.

It was during my measuring of her body that I discovered something horrible and yet ingenious; Eleanor had her web surgically altered as a much younger girl. This was only possible because of two things, specifically- her mother, firstly, was of Lanfolk stock, specifically Demonic stock. If this had not been so, the surgery she underwent would have bled her dry long before her web was split the way it was. Secondly, her surgeon did not split her web all the way up, as is often done in this kind of surgery.

It’s normally done to unsplit mermaids of the Celiate variety in an effort to make it easier for them to… real people, Mab. Plain language, real people. It’s done to whores by their pimps to make it easier for johns to fuck them. Eleanor had it done for a very different reason, however; the way her web was split allows her to wear pants that come much, much closer to fitting her body properly, especially in the crotch. Thus, if she has to or wants to, she can pass herself off as fully Lanfolk.

Her wardrobe reflects these two facts; her desire to blend into her physical demographic of sporty woman of ignorable status, and her need for clothing that can withstand the rigors of whatever Robin has planned for her.

Eleanor’s overall style can be described in the first ensemble I created for her; a unified color palette overall, whereby her loudest accessories and garments fade into the fullness of her form and become merely objects, not colors.

Starting with her pants, she has multiple sets of warm khaki-brown cargo trousers with simple belts to cinch them on to the correct waist position. She asked specifically for her underwear to be part of her pants, and so I obliged.

Her everyday shirts are a series of two-tone collared affairs, meant to look fairly professional and fun no matter what she’s doing. Under her shirts are generally sports bras with interesting backs.

Her work shirts are simple long sleeve shirts in various colors but all in the same style. She has sets of pants without leg pockets entirely, and looks fairly forgettable in them, which is what she wanted. A layer up are a set of identical quilted vests in the journalistic style, because that’s what she wanted and what Robin requested for her.

She wears plain white silk socks and a cute pair of flat bottom sneakers in an entertaining feline print. Her boots are a pair of wet weather two-tone boots, and a pair of hot and dry weather ex-combat boots.

In all honesty, the most interesting things about Eleanor’s wardrobe are her backpack, her cardigans, and her water bottles. Firstly, her backpack is a leather rucksack with a portmanteau meant for various sundries that she needs access to without opening her entire bag- probably for her Tonnie Mice friends. It has one large central pocket, a smaller document pocket, and one square pocket on either side; and the portmanteau attaches with a pair of leather belts.

Her cardigans are really where a lot of the dramatic interest in her outfits come from. I started with a geometrically printed black and white number, meant to really differentiate her top from her bottom; followed by an oversized floral edge print. Then, more geometry, until finally we came up with a print she quite liked that I made in a number of colors.

Her main water bottle is actually integrated into her rucksack, with a secondary flask that attaches to her belt.

Her fanciest outfit is her most obviously suspicious, as I based it off the cover of a very popular
Fernanda’s the first jump in difficulty when it comes to designing wardrobes for the Suntides. As a young working Seer and Witch, she needs a wardrobe that is both professional and weird, to convey the fact that she is a Witch and a Seer, and that you can hire her- without making her appear foolish or too young, which is a real risk.

Opposite from before, I started with ensembles rather than individual items that could work together in outfits. Her first ensemble is a winter set that she can wear anywhere, for any reason, that will not detract from her work, nor draw more attention to her than necessary. Once I had her winter ensemble ready, her summer ensemble came together without much trouble. With the basic central notes of her wardrobe set, I moved to special, singular notes- a few rompers, a mid-length dress, a jacket, a swimsuit… By the time I reach her belts, I realize that Fernanda’s style is in truth very much like my own, with a heavier emphasis on youthful energy and fun. Her jumpsuits are in two styles- strapless, and boat-neck elastic waist. She has two styles of cardigan; massively oversized, and hooded. Then, because I was making knits, I made her a chunky sweater and a much finer sweater; and created ensembles for each garment.

Leggings, shorts - and finally shirts- or rather, a set of sports bras she can wear as shirts because she didn’t actually want any shirts. At all.

Fernanda’s charnellement is interesting- one of the least ostentatious pairs of Vinsmoke ear cuffs I’ve ever seen anyone wear. Further, hers are usually hidden underneath her mass of hair; it’s a very rare occasion to ever see the Third of the Line’s charnellements.

Genevieve is similar to her sister Fernanda, but where her sister is a very static professional, Genevieve moves. In her nursing aspect, Chopper specifically asked for her to have an outfit that was gendered female, and ranked her internationally as our senior operating nurse-practitioner, as well as a teaching nurse. Thus, her uniform is of dark green cotton- for her status as senior operating nurse, median length for nurse practitioner, with clean white piping denoting her status as a teacher. She also has a white uniform for general practice.

For her underthings, she actually prefers her underwear be dual usage - able to both support her during her nursing duties, and support her while she flys on a broomstick. She in fact refuses to fly without a set of underwear that is meant to be seen, like most swimsuit bottoms; or in underwear that could be mistaken for something else, like a pair of shorts.

Flipping through my dress-patterns with Genevieve, we came across a set of tennis-dress patterns, and Genny fell immediately and irrevocably in love. Therefore, I pulled out green and green-turquoise fabrics from my stash-o-fabric, and set to creating clothing for her, including an entire ensemble for when she wants a green dress and peach shorts combination, and a fun printed skirt.

The only fabric I had in the appropriate windbreaker style was suitable for jogging pants; and so that is what I made for her. Thankfully, Genny really likes them; and when I showed her the other option, she went for it, too.
As for shirts, she wanted identical long sleeve scoop necks she can wear for whatever reason she wants. I obliged her.

Her bag on the other hand, was all me- pretty on the outside, functional on the inside. Chopper’s bag, as an aside, is much the same; however, his has more medicine and surgical tools within. She’s also getting a workbench in the stillroom and the dairy.

Genevieve’s chanellement is a pair of no-nonsense elegant scrolls, faintly romantic as is proper.

**Adelaide** is another jump in difficulty, simply because kimono are not easy to make, not because of any particular design difficulties.

Her kimono are mostly neutral colors in a cooler palette, with one pretty blue gingham print kimono and a collection of reversible obi for the sake of fashion and Not Wearing The Same Thing Everyday, Not Even Zoro Does That. And he doesn’t, actually, he wears different haramaki every day- which Nami told me, so I know it’s true.

Adelaide actually prefers ensembles and dresses to anything else; she told me that wearing a dress or ensemble helped her feel… well, safe, is the word I’m going to use instead of her half-mumbled ramblings.

The first ensemble she picked from my lookbook is an old design I did a few years ago; she really liked the whole vibe of it though, and said that, considering the style of the model is what her normal style usually equates to, this outfit would look reasonably good on her. She’s quite right; the dramatic color change and vibrant print would look stunning on her. Ensemble the second was a much simpler affair- a sky blue a line dress with embroidered stars, chunky white heels to finish. She looks positively darling in it; as well as ensemble four, which is a much more formal affair with pops of excitement here and there. The fifth and final ensemble is a very fine tunic with a very delicate skirt, as close as I can get to armor without going too far.

I don’t get to make dresses very often. Most of my crewmates previously just didn’t wear them often enough to justify even designing them; their dresses are basically patterns with some tailoring applied for fit, honestly. It’s… very exciting, for me, to get to use my designing skills like this. Firstly, her sleekest, most put together dress is a blue long sleeve mini-dress that I covered in various star-shapes in embroidery thread. A series of dresses in more or less the same style, with a crystal embroidery piece, and a beaded piece.

The two pairs of shoes she wanted, beyond her wooden geta, were a pair of gladiator sandals, and a pair of winter boots.

Adelaide’s chanellement is where I start seeing the big stylistic shift from one generation to the next- her’s belonged to her mother, not her great grandmother. Much simpler in form, much more… composed, in design.

**Beatrix** is the one who decided to become my apprentice, by asking me to teach her to sew. When I had her in my studio for measurements, she zeroed in on the scissors on their spot on the pegboard and immediately realized that her rending shears were the shape of my own fabric shears.

This is a can of worms I’m about to open, but bear with me. People who sew have two main ways to refer to themselves in general terms; we can call ourselves sewers, or we can call ourselves sewists.
According to the Merryweather-Weber Dictionary and Encyclopedia, the first known use of the word “sewer” to mean “one that sews” occurred in the Fourth century. Over time, a variety of terms have evolved to describe those who sew garments, each with their own set of rules and connotations. Tailors are people who sew mens clothing, often from scratch; needlewoman refers to a woman who has a particular sewing skill, or uses her sewing skills to make a living; dressmakers are people who sew dresses specifically; sempstress and seamstress are regional variants of the same concept—a woman that sews for a living, usually doing alterations or sewing from store-bought or catalogue order patterns; bookbinder, a person who sews books together, because it still can’t really be done by machine. The dominant term used in the trades and the newspapers is sewer, but about a decade before I was born the term “sewist” began to gain prominence alongside the mainstreaming of haute couture.

Haute couture is the creation of exclusive custom-fitted clothing. Most of what I do is technically speaking, haute couture. Haute couture in the rest of the world is high-end fashion that is constructed by hand from start to finish, made from high-quality, expensive, often unusual fabric, sewn with extreme attention to detail, and finished by the most experienced and capable sewists, often using time-consuming, hand-executed techniques. Technically speaking, every technique I use to create clothing is a hand technique, including all the knitting techniques I use.

Couture translates literally from the French as ‘dressmaking’, but may also refer to fashion, sewing, needlework; and is also used as a common abbreviation of haute couture and refers to the same thing in spirit. Haute translates literally to “high”. A haute couture garment is made for one person specifically, tailored to their measurements and body stance—the literal way they hold themselves. Considering the amount of time, money, and skill allotted to the creation of each piece—and required to create each piece—haute couture garments are also described as having no price tag: budget is not relevant to the creation of a haute couture garment.

The term originally referred to the Southie Charles Frederick Worth’s work, produced in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century. The Dapifer notes that Worth would allow his clients to select colors, fabrics, and other details such as notions and trim which was unheard of at the time. Now, of course, these things are a matter of course all across the world of haute couture—be it very fine, or the more utilitarian work like I do.

In modern France, haute couture is a protected name that may not be used except by firms that meet certain well-defined standards as set by L’école de la Mode. However, the term is also used in a looser sense to describe all high-fashion custom-fitted clothing, whether it’s produced in Paris or in other fashion capitals such as Tribelleville, Water 7, Fiddler’s Green, or Corallia. In either case, the term can refer to the fashion houses or fashion designers that create exclusive and often trend-setting fashions or to the fashions actually created.

In the world of haute couture, the people who make the fashion—the garments, the styles—are referred to as sewists. In the past twenty or thirty years, the term sewist has begun to seem like a new word created merely to provide a cool new label for the people creating haute couture, but the earliest printed usage of sewist was in nine hundred sixty four in Annals of Science, Volume 18, published by the South Society for the History of Science (although it was not used in a positive light). “Sewist” is not yet entered in the Merryweather-Weber Dictionary and Encyclopedia, but when has that ever prevented any word from being adopted into use?

There are many people who sew and dislike the word “sewist”. The reasons I’ve read and heard vary, but it’s usually these two that get brought up again and again—firstly, that “Sewist” is a non-word, a chop-job on the Common language, Parlar. However, to this I can only reply that language is in a constant state of evolution; new words and terms are created and adapted to help us describe...
everything around us, all the aspects of our culture, society, and technology. Perhaps the real sticking point here is that terms describing people who sew are already in widespread usage; sewist already means something very specific to a lot of people.

The second thing I often hear is that “sewist” is a hoity-toity word, meant only for people with money and taste in their mouths alone. Maybe so; maybe so.

My argument is this; I need a word to describe what I do. I’m not a needlewoman- I have more than one skill. I’m not a tailor- I don’t just make men’s clothing. I’m not a dressmaker- I don’t just make dresses. I don’t sew for my living, I don’t make alterations, and I only use bought patterns to make muslin blocks for fittings, or for when I need to make multiples of the same garment. I don’t bind books, I don’t knit fabrics, I don’t make shoes, I don’t make hats. Or I should say- I don’t just do any of those things.

Maybe the people who don’t like the word sewist don’t like that it infers a more modern approach, rather than a traditional one. Maybe they don’t like that it implies the user of the word is better than them- after all, the sewists of haute couture make everything that appears on the runway, garment, undergarment, accessory, and shoe. Everything.

I, personally, prefer the word because it cannot be mistaken in any way for the word “sewer”, which can mean “a person who sews”, certainly- but it can also mean “a subterranean conduit that carries off human waste, wastewater, and other forms of sewage”. Sewist cannot be mistaken for sewer.

When Beatrix asked me to train her, I explained all of this to her; and she didn’t seem turned off from the idea at all.

Still, I needed to see to her wardrobe before creating a curriculum for her to follow; thus, I did.

To start, I put together a pair of boots that wouldn’t fall apart like hers were; brown leather, clean stitching, hobnail tread so she’s got some grip, internal waterproofing and external waterproofing. She wanted leather laces, so I gave her leather laces. I also made her a light brown pair of shoes with normal fabric laces in a ladder pattern, rather than the zigzag of her boots; so she’d have options, y’know.

I actually had socks in her size; I just let her pick whichever socks she wanted to wear. Mostly, a series of prints; and then a few crystal embroidered socks. Underwear- she prefers sets, which is fine.

For pants, she wanted denim exclusively, in three different lengths. Ultra short for fun days; middling length, for normal days; and overalls, for working days. Blue printed shirts, button down with varied length in the sleeves- I leave it to her discretion as to how long that should be.

Finally, in case of cold weather, I gave her a bunch of ponchos I hadn’t finished; and realized what to do for her project syllabus.

But first- since we’re just starting out… an ensemble. It marks her as my apprentice; that’s what her shirt pattern means. Becoming an adventurer sewist is a bit painful, really. Although, considering her chanellement ear cuffs, I think she’ll do the world of haute couture quite proud. Kid’s got taste.

“No one ever tells this to people who are beginning a path; but my teacher told me, and so I will tell you, Beatrix. All of us who do creative work- we get into it because we have good taste.
“However, there is a gap. For the first few years you make stuff, or maybe just the first few projects, they just aren’t that good. It’s trying to be good; it has the potential to be good; but, it isn’t good.

“But your taste- the thing that got you into the game, it’s still killer. Your taste will be why your work will disappoint you. That’s alright, though; you’ll improve. You’ll work, and become better, and eventually you won’t be so disappointed every time.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

“Alright, boss. Where do I start?”

“Well, firstly- we need to go shopping. You’re going to need your own sewing machine with a table-case that you can carry around with you and set up on your own; I’ll be giving you a series of assignments to finish within a certain amount of time, so that you can improve in a measured way.”

“Uh.”

“First things first- let’s get you a bag…”

“Can I have this one?”

“The Pillbug? Sure, if you want it. Let’s see now- Mark’s about to go get the pig, so we should go get your sewing machine as well.”

I smile at Beatrix, who smirks back, the frost-scars across her shoulder wiggling over her flesh for a moment or two. Then, I grab my purse and escort us both out onto the deck, where a sleepy looking Zoro and a slightly jittery Mark are waiting for us.

“To the Sento, then?”

“Yep- they’ve got the best quality pigs in the country, and are selling off their first crop of yearlings right now, so. I’m taking Zoro to make sure we get a good one.”

“Hm.”

“-Okay. Well, I’ll be in the town around the Sento; try to stay out of trouble, alright?”

“Yep.”

“Hm. We’ll see.”

“…Okay, well, I tried.”

Beatrix just blinks.

The train ride out to the Bath House isn’t terrible, or anything, just about an hour’s ride from the stop
near our ship; not bad. The Sento Chihiro - or Chihiro Bath House- is a marvelous sight in the full light of day, a towering building painted red, with an enormous steaming pipe reaching high into the air above the verdigris-copper roof.

Mark and Zoro go off down a path leading to the gardens of the Sento; Beatrix and I have a different path.

“Alright, Kid; time for a little history lesson. I know the Fae get mocked for running beauty businesses, especially here; but you need to understand why that is, to understand why the Fae hold fashion in such high regard. This is also a simplified explanation for why, to the Fae, anyway, matters of beauty and fashion are often considered matters of life and death.

“I’ll boil it down to the barest essentials: when the Giants came to the Fae’s ancestral homeland, they destroyed a lot of things, and caused a terrible war to be fought. The First and Greatest Queen of the Fae, Ariel, took her people to the Sky to escape the destruction and havoc being wrought in the World Below; but she had to evacuate her people so quickly, they were often left with only the clothes on their backs and whatever they managed to carry with them.

“So. If you’ve got not enough clothing to go around, and not enough food, and you’ve barely got enough land to grow more food- what do you do? You find ways to make do without, is what you do. The Fae discovered by necessity ways to use beautification rituals to go without things like clothing and protective gear- or come up with ways to substitute entire branches of the clothes tree for something else entirely. Because of this, even though my people eventually came up with ways to produce enough food, and enough clothing, the old reliance on beautification rituals remained and took on significance of it’s own.

“During theVoid Century in Skua, which was never Voided, because of the Great World War- well, many Skuan refugees came to Ryugu Mergyo from the Sky Colonies. Most of them were women, and their children, as their menfolk had been killed in the fighting.

“A merjin actress by the name of Miranda went out to what was known then as Darkville to visit the refugee camp as part of her community service in lieu of prison time. She ended up meeting the women who were living in the squalor of the refugee camp, and decided to figure out ways- some way, any way, to support them. Many of the women had lost their husbands in the war, after all, or had never had husbands to start with; and now they were left without any means of income, and no idea where to start looking for one. Around the side here-”

“-yeah, sure. Go on, though.”

“Heh. Right- well, while Miranda was there, she noticed that many of the women were fascinated by her scaly tail, her manicured nails, her hair, her skin, even her clothing. Miranda got the idea to have her personal retinue of servants come to the refugee camp to teach the women how to do a number of things; massage, scale treatments, wash and style hair, manicure nails, and so on. About fifty of those women showed enough promise that Miranda paid for them to attend beautician’s school and, for the ones that made it through school, she paid to get them licenses. All of them eventually found jobs, directly because the merjin actress Miranda believed in them and helped them.

“By this time, Miranda’s actions had sparked a movement of some kind, and soon enough the refugee camp was emptied as every Fae there was given lessons, opportunities, and a way out. About eighty one percent of all beauticians in Ryugu Mergyo are Fae or of Fae descent, and many of the direct descendants of those First Fifty work here, at Sento Chihiro- which is known to be the very Best Sento in the World.
“About twenty percent of all sewers and sewists in Ryugu Mergyo are actually in Corallia, working in the Kimono Houses; however, Sento Chihiro goes through more sewing machines in a year, which is what you’ll be needing. We’re close- can you hear that?”

“Um- Um! What is that?”

“That’s the sound of hundreds of sewing machines going all at once.”

It’s a steady, rattling, staccato beating noise, punctuated by the creaks and rattles of bobbins being changed out, stops as sewists get to corners and need to turn… cacophony. Soothing. Earplugs!

“Put these in; and get ready to not understand much. It's very loud in there.”

“Yes, Boss.”

And then we go into the Garment Division of the Chihiro Onsen. Located near the Laundry, it contains massive spreading rooms filled with shift-working sewers, standing at their stations, sewing and sewing and sewing. They stand for a very specific reason, and I’m trying to remember what that reason is...

In clearly marked rows there are more bench like tables were skilled needleworkers repair items that can’t be done by machine- kimono, socks, knitted fabrics…

Beatrix’s eyes are enormous in her head. I catch her eye, and jerk my head in a clear ‘follow me’ sort of way.

She does.

We walk through the marked area, carefully avoiding getting in anyone’s way. From higher levels of the factory, piles of stitched clothing fall through cloth chutes to rolling baskets, steadily rolling towards the Laundry. Bundles of stitched and fused pieces fall too, and are run to the stitchers.

Beatrix has to jog to catch up with me quite a few times, she’s so stunned at what’s going on around us.

Eventually, we make it to the Manager’s office, located along the far wall; I pull the Notice lever, and wait until a replying flag pops up before entering, my apprentice behind me.

The clattering noise of the working floor is reduced to a gentle thrumming not unlike bees in a hive. Inside the office, I’m suddenly reminded of who, exactly we’ve come to see. Man, my class basically scattered to the wind; I hope this isn’t… Nah. This office isn’t arranged like Gloriana, Tanaquill, or Clarity would have done. The head of this office is- oh, it’s the Stitchwitch Treacle. Not friends; but not enemies either. Friendly.

She’s spinning on an upright wheel what looks from here like cashmere thread; Treacle looks up from her spinning, sees me, and squeals in delight. I wait patiently as she finishes out the last of her thread, stops her spindle, and leaps onto me in a joyful hug. I hug her back, and gently squeeze my
own happiness into her.

That’s right. We were- casual friends, I guess. She was in my year, and most of my classes, after all.

“Chairete, Treacle.”

“Hallo Mab! Ah, I missed you!”

“I missed you too.”

“How’ve you come?”

“Well, I got an apprentice-”

“Hyakakakakakakakaka! I understand why you’re here, then! Come, come, I’ll show you the Closet.”

And with that, we’re off, through a small door in the back of her office and back into a small room filled with… weird shit. Mostly, it’s that it has no business being in a garment factory.

“Treacle, what the hell?”

“Ugh, I know; but Boss Lady insists we make a profit off this shit, so, here it sits. Now- you’re getting a machine first?”

Yep, this is the first tool we’re getting-”

“Aha. Well- this one is the most complete machine here, it’s just meant for domestic use technically speaking- it’s strong enough to be out on the work floor, it’s just…”

“Too fancy. They’d get jealous of whoever’s using it, and the machine would get worn out too quickly.”

“Yeah. You’ll have to replace at least two gears in it anyway, on account of that recall they ran a few months back; still, for an apprentice, this’ll do fine.”

“Yeah, I’ll take it. And that ship-to-shore box too, don’t think I didn’t see it.”

“It’s full of crappy thread, though-?”

“That’s fine, I can work with that.”

“Better you than me…”

I pay for the items, tie them with twine and outer cloth wrappings so they for sure stay closed; and then I hand them off to Beatrix after paying Treacle for them.

And then Treacle and I have a Silent Discussion, like we used to back in school- because, see, Stitchwitch Treacle is an inveterate gossip hound, and I like to keep my ears cocked to any sort of development.
‘Dia really did a number on you, huh Mab?’

‘I don’t see how it’s any of your business, but yes, she did.’

‘Hmph. And you surely did a number on Titi, ey?’

‘What’s your point, Treacle?’

‘Dia did a number on you, you did a number on Titi, but Titi did you first; my point is, Mab, Titi had allies that you didn’t know about, and you didn’t kill back then.’

‘What, Vainglory, Tranq-will, and Clarbuncle? They couldn’t take me then, much less now—’

‘I don’t mean them. There’s someone else- not Easilee either, y’know.’

‘Easilee’s dead, actually - and not by my hand. -Who, then?’

‘Now that’s interesting… -Erl. You never had the misfortune of meeting him; but I did, once. I was in Domestic Support, Mab; but now I’m here, in the World’s largest middle management job, and you’ve not questioned why?’

‘…Tell me what you can, then.’

‘That’s the thing- I only hid myself here because I didn’t like the way he insinuated. I hid myself on a suggestion, nothing more. And yet… It was odd, you know, because I’d never seen him at school before, and I’d certainly never seen him around Titi but there he was at Titi’s funeral…’

‘…’

‘I’ll describe him. Long thick hair, the color of dried blood and smelling of rotting leaves and some kind of musk; pale skin, like he’s drowned. There was a dark crusting around the bed of each of his nails, and underneath his nails- hands and feet. He was covered, neck to ankle, in roughly draped and stitched fabric, some kind of… raw silk, pongee I think, dyed in purples so dense as to be black. He had fangs in his mouth, and claws on his hands- and above all else, he was not ugly.’

‘Oh?’

‘I remember this clearly; I was horribly, uncharacteristically attracted to him, like he was calling to some wild part of me that yet revels in the spilling of blood. I knew then that he was dangerous, far more than what I, a mere Brownie without a House to serve, could defeat.’

‘A Lord, then?’

‘I think so. He reminded me of you , but in all the most craven and cruel ways.’

‘…Erlking. That’s who you saw.’

‘Y-you don’t think- you can’t be sure just from a description-’

‘ I’ve met him ; I can. And who else would have allied with Titi at the end- enough to pay respects at his funeral?’

‘…Oh dear.’
‘Best you stay inside, Miss Treacle. Getting in the middle of a Wild Hunt is a good way to end up dead.’

‘...Happy Hunting, Queen Mab. I’ll be rooting for you, I think.’

Goddamnit, Titania. Even dead, you’re haunting my life with your bullshit!

Missus Boss… whatever her friend told her before we left her office, it really pissed Missus Boss off. I only remember a few symbols, and the only two I understood were the ones Missus Boss made herself- ‘king’ and then ‘deer’, right after the other. When she did, Missus Treacle blanched whiter than a bowl of rice and tried to frantically deny it- but Missus Boss knew.

We left the noisy factory after that, and Missus Boss- I think I knew she was angry because I’ve been around so many different kinds of mermaids, especially in Gobdark. Her face is stone-still; but her wings are arched high, quivering and the eyespots that are usually brown have turned bright, lurid red- I’ve seen mermaids and fishwomen do that too. Missus Boss is absolutely furious ; I can only hope she doesn’t… well, we’ll just have to see what she’s like when she’s angry, aye.

“Right. Kid, we’ve got about twelve tools you’ll need eventually, one of which Franky should have adjusted for you back on the ship.”

“Missus Boss, what was all that about-?”

“If I’m right, something that the whole crew needs to be aware of, not just us. And it’s not something I’m talking about publically- earplugs out, Beatrix. This is serious; don’t talk about anything you heard or saw, just now, not until we’re back on the ship. Understand?”

“Yes Mab.”

“Good. Now, we’ve gotten you an inexpensive sewing machine; a real workhorse from the last few centuries. Next, we’re going to a supply store- come on.”

And so, dutifully, I follow my master into the thronging crowd. On her back, her wings have settled down again, fluttering like a cape; the eyespots are a soft brown again, with just a hint of red… burnt sienna? Usually they’re burnt umber- she’s still angry, but- keep your whiskers taut, Beatrix.

We ooze through the shoobies and the locals, and then we’re down a side street and in a residential neighborhood, until finally we come to… Daiso!!

Launched in Ryugu Mergyo- Gobdark, specifically- in the 970’s, Daiso is a hundred beri store. They stock a really wide variety of fairly good items at a really low price- because, almost everything is sold at about a hundred beri, sometimes less. At Daiso, you can find everything from kitchen supplies, to stationary, to makeup. By now, it’s a well established, World-wide chain store. Basically, if your home town doesn’t even have a Daiso, you’re in the fucking ass-end of nowhere.
This particular Daiso is really old and really nice. We stop by the bag check and leave our bags and my new sewing machine and my ship-to-shore box full of crappy thread in a locker to be watched over by an attendant; we each get a shopping basket, and then we’re off.

The first things that fall into my basket are a rotary cutter and a mat, a big clear ruler, and a whole bunch of stylus-chalks for marking fabric. These are followed by a pair of seam rippers and a measuring tape; dressmaking shears; glasshead pins, five boxes of them I think; a squishy pineapple and squidberry pincushion; a scalpel and a pair of tweezers, for some reason; a bunch of packets of paper patterns for sewing, I guess; some amount of canvas; a packet of generic washers, like for bolts; a whole bunch of curvy... things; some kind of set with a weird pointy thing and a bunch of little somethings; a pair of nippers; some kind of gauge; and then we were at a wall of... pitchers?

“Steamers, actually. Irons, too; we have those already. Zippers; boring practice buttons in the two major styles; we have cardboard at home... Mm. Now; this is the Sewist Sequence, which is what you’ve asked me to turn you into as a master and apprentice.”

“Uh.”

“I’m a sewist, Beatrix- did I not say that?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“...Do you not want to be my apprentice anymore?”

And here, I paused- because there was an uncharacteristic note of emotion in Missus Mab’s voice. Normally, she talks like she’s been working in a waiting room at the Department of Vehicular Transport for forty years and all the life got sucked out of her within the first week; and her accent is straight out of the talking pictures, that weird, unnatural boarding school twang mixed with some Blue-Skuan flavor here and there. But when she asked me if I still wanted to be her apprentice, even knowing that she’s a hoi-polloi sewist, she sounded... resigned.

Like it wouldn’t surprise her if I said yes, I want to be something else, now; like she- huh.

So this is what it means to grow. Hurts; but in a good way.

“Missus Boss, you’re my Master still.”

“-You’re sure? Because if you just want to learn to sew, I can just teach you how to-”

“No ma’am. I asked to be your apprentice; I meant to be your apprentice. Ain’t no backin’ out of it now.”

And Missus Mab- for just a second, I thought I saw her smile with pride and relief. Then she started talking again, and I had to pay attention to my master.
“There’s a sequence of learning you’re going to go through to learn how to be a sewist- the basics, anyway, as real skill in anything takes time. Firstly, we’re starting with tools; the machines, the hand tools, everything. Then, once we’ve got everything purchased, we’ll put it all away in the studio- I’ll teach you health and safety, how to care for your tools, how I expect you to leave your workspace at the end of each day, and so on. We’ll do samples- seams, zippers, pleats, that sort of thing, so you can learn that pins, irons, and steamers are your best friends. Then, once you’ve familiarized yourself with all that-”

“Why do I have to do all that first…? Can’t I just make something, like sewists do?”

“-Sure, if you want. But… I thought students learned kata before they got thrown into sparring. Since you’re chomping at the bit to sew, I suppose- ah, yes. Mending. You’ll have to practice your hand work anyway, might as well be useful-”

“-urk-”

“-and perhaps consider the merits of not interrupting your teacher in the future. Pick some candy for yourself.”

“Yes, Boss.”

I pick candy for myself, and accept the gentle reprimand for back talking. Mm. Hi-chews. Missus Boss chooses all hard candies in the worst possible old-person and snot-nosed brat flavors; Fishy Anise, Savory Cinnamon, Summer Romance Horehound (BITTERSWEET BITTERSWEET), Violent Lemon, Tequila Lime, Death Liquorice, Punchdrunk Peppermint, and Sassy-Fras. She also grabs a large sack of assorted candies and a box of chewy butter-scotch - I know those, they’re covered in edible rice paper! Yay!

“So. Over here, for some reason, are the paper patterns. Don’t worry about difficulty or anything like that; look at the fronts of the envelopes, and pick out at least one of each in the order I give you.”

“Uh- okay, I don’t know jargon yet, though...”

“No problem. Basic skirt.”

“**This one.**”

“styled skirt.”

“**This one.**”

“Pants.”

“**This and this.**”

“Shirts.”

“**This and this.**”

“Simple dress.”

“**Here and here.** Can I pick some jumpsuits too?”
“You may.”

“Yes! This and this, please.”

“Fancy dress.”

“Sure, um- this one looks **really detailed**, and this one looks… **pretty**.”

“Jacket.”

“Yeah- uh, this one, and this one.”

“Oh, and before I forget- pick a bunch of aprons.”

“Aprons?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, uh- this one, that one, and I guess- this one. For me.”

“Okay, cool. Hand them over.”

“Uh- sure…”

“Good. The chain of building is skirts, pants, bodice, torso, jacket. Bodice is the chest and above the waist; torso is all in one dresses, no waist seam. Adding in waistbands makes it more complicated to sew; we start with boxes, then a box with an extension, and then we do tops. We start with tools, though, in terms of what you actually get to put your filthy hands on.”

“Hehehe.”

“Hmhmhmhm. Alright- we’ll check out, put your tools away in your ship-to-shore- I’ve got doubles in my basket for a reason, shush; and then we’ll go back to the ship. We might even meet the guys along the way. Come along- ooh, muslin! Yes!”

And then, we were done, and steadily walking back to the train station.

I’m going to give Mark a thrashing next time we spar. I fucking told him not to get taken in by the goddamn sales people, and what does he fuckin’ do? Get taken in by the fuckin’ sales people.

We’re going to have to eat the males, for one thing; for another, we can’t afford to feed three females, fucking- goddamn idiot!

Fuck!

So, anyway, we have a litter of piglets now. They’re cute little fuckers, with curly goddamn hair; but we can’t afford three of them. Fuckin’- shit!

Shit shit shit shit shit!
“Neh, Zoro; I’m pretty sure at least two of the females will make weight in time for the Interfair, and then we can just eat ‘em. It’s a five thousand beri prize just if I place in the top twenty five; if I ribbon, it’s another ten thousand, and if I blue ribbon, it’s fifty thousand per animal. I’m entering our goats, our doves, and our quail, too- add the pigs, and that’s several million beri we could be gaining potentially.”

“...Pigs are really smart, Mark. If we ribbon all three girls, or even just one of them... by then, we’ll be attached. I’m not sure we’ll have the heart to end things then.”

“It’ll be fine, Zoro!”

“Hmmph.”

It won’t. Aunt Lizzy told me herself- she wouldn’t have ever done what she did if I hadn’t won her heart, just by being myself. Usually, a male piglet that shows such a strange mutation- green hair, I mean- well, usually that piglet is bound for the kitchen, if the mutation doesn’t charm the farmer.

I- I can’t... think about this, right now. Deep breaths, Zoro.

Oh dear, looks like we just got a few pigs as pets, not just as garbage disposal and food. I know we’re not keeping the males, that’s dangerous on a ship our size, no matter how big. That said, it’ll be interesting to make boarbristle fleece out of curly boar bristles...

The pigs are very sad while we ride the train, probably because they know we got suckered into keeping all of them, and, well...

Hm. Thought; I have a palace. With all kinds of palace-y things.

“We don’t actually have to keep all the pigs on the ship.”

“...Ah.”

“You forgot for a little second that I’m filthy rich enough to actually have an entire palace, with lands and everything, didn’t you? If nothing else, my mom and sisters will totally take one each.”

“Huh. Yeah, I did forget.”

“What kind of pigs are these, anyway? I know they’re curly furs, but...?”

“Oh. Uh- Mark?”

“Y-yeah! Right! Uh, these are called Mangalitza pigs, a particularly delicious breed of Ryugu Mergyo heirloom pig. It was developed in the mid-9th century by crossbreeding Ryugu breeds and...”
Mergyo breeds with local wild boar and imported Skuan Furback Boars which were- and are-known for their docile natures. These guys are gonna grow thick, woolly coats similar to sheep, and apparently it can be spun and treated much like a very coarse sheep’s wool.

“The breed doesn’t produce much in the way of lean meat, so it’s not good for modern domestic meat farming; however, for the purposes of ship sailing, they’re perfect. Hardy, good with wet weather, and fairly strong swimmers, too. Uh, they’re fed on wild pasture, supplemented with root vegetables and whatever gourds we can grow. They’re traditionally used for sausage; minced meat is seasoned with salt, pepper, sweet paprika, and other spices, then eaten in slices with pickled vegetables. It’s also traditionally served braised with sauerkraut, potatoes, and stuffed peppers as a side dish. It’s also good smoked!

“Killing weight (for meat production) is generally achieved beyond twelve months of age; these guys are about a lunar month old, so, twenty eight days or so. It’s gonna be a long while. Um… I guess if Sanji’s available to listen in, he’ll want to hear this? Maybe?

“Hm- he’s here, go ahead.”

“Right. If we mark some of these guys down for fattening, they’ll have an almost unbeatable flavor. These aren’t Kurobuta, because Kurobuta don’t do well at Sea; they’re an heirloom breed that has a flavor that’s equal, if different, to Kurobuta. Mangalitza pigs are extra delicious because almost sixty percent of their body weight is fat. Modern pigs are bred to have virtually no fat, and be mostly lean meat- but, when you breed the fat out of the pig, it becomes tasteless. Uh, we can actually keep like, ten of them if we have a forested area for them to roam and dig in, but- Zoro, when did you call the ship?”

“Sounds like one of these guys would be good in an orchard.”

“I agree, Zoro-”

“Yow, are they okay in cities?”

“They’re really meant for farms, but… I mean, pigs are smart. If you treat them kindly, they’ll act a bit like dogs but way smarter...”

“So… one’d probably be okay in a dry dock?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Neh, Mab- if we all write the letters for our folks, will you deliver them?”

“Are you asking me as Luffy, or as Captain?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure, Captain Luffy.”

“Sweet!”

I listen to Mark and the boys chatter on about the pigs, and watch as the weanling piglets perk up and look at each other and at us with progressively happier eyes. Then I double check that all the males are actually male; in fact, they aren’t. We have three males, and the other eight are female; actually, they were false testicles made out of matted short and curleys. Hehehe short and curleys.
Anyway, back on the ship Zoro and Mark go off to situate the piglets, and Mab and I spend the time before lunch putting away all our purchases.

“Mm- Beatrix, there are about ten things you need to know right away, before you even start sewing. Firstly, you need quality equipment to work with. When you have a finicky machine, sewing anything becomes a hassle. Secondly, you’re going to have to start simple. I’ll teach you how to read patterns, and read the envelopes you bought before you’re neck deep in confusing instructions printed on onionskin paper. Thirdly, the way I’m going to assign projects to you will teach one new skill, and develop only one or two skills at a time. Fourthly- learn to manage your time! It doesn’t matter if you think it looks shitty, or if you don’t like your work; you’ve only got so much time per project, and then if it’s still not done I’ll either give you a punishment duty- which I promise you will not enjoy- I’ll make you do it again, which will annoy both of us, or… hm, I haven’t decided yet. Something.”

“Um.”

“Mm. Fifth; you’re going to become a snob. Accept it. The more you learn about something, the more opinions you’re going to develop. Sixth, you’re going to learn how to finish a damn seam so it’ll last longer than three or four times through the wash. Seventh, you’re going to learn how to fit something. It seems complicated- it’s not. Very simple. Eighth; you’re going to make things you can actually use, or that are for you to wear. Point of fact, some of the very first things you ever make and I approve of are going to be things you use every day, more or less. Ninth; you’re going to need help. If ever you become overwhelmed, confused, or just plain discouraged, you absolutely must ask me for help. I’m your teacher; part of my job is to make sure you learn everything you need to, including things that don’t really directly make any difference to learning how to sew.”

“Oh. You’re… really serious about training me. About… being my master.”

“I am. To that end- I’m going to write up your schedule for training. You are not, without express permission from me, Doctor Chopper, or another of the senior members of the crew, to deviate from it. You can learn everything I know; you can learn everything you want to know. The only thing that will stop you is not making enough of the right kind of effort to learn.”

“…Uh?”

“You’ll understand, soon enough. Tenth, and most important of all: Beatrix, you’re going to do it wrong. You’re going to make mistakes, and you’re going to fail- you’ll definitely fail when you really needed to get it right. It’s okay. Hell, you might even fail after doing everything correctly… My point is, when you fail- when you Fall- you can hide and run from it; or you can face, and learn from it. I, as your master, expect you to learn from it.”

“Yes, Mab!”

“Good. Now; over here in the Studio is your work area. You’ll arrange and rearrange it to your eventual taste, but right now I’ve set it up like so. This is your bookshelf, and it has the nine textbooks I expect you to read; each one is a little different, and some have information not referred to at all in the others. Further, there are periodicals I expect you to look through, to develop your Eye. But all of that can wait- right now, we’re going to do our first Project together. It’s been a long time since I needed to do something like this, so please forgive me if I’m not very good at explaining
what to do.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s begin- for this project, you will need nails; a box you can carry and move comfortably; a small hammer; a pen or pencil; some scrap paper; a ruler; an abacus, if you need it; and non-reactive glue. Go get the tools, and bring them all here.”

“O-okay...”

And off I trot. Um- Box, first. I grab an empty cardboard shoebox with it’s own lid first, to carry everything in; a small hammer, from out of the tool drawers; a wide-bottom jar full of nails; a pencil; a piece of brown butcher paper; a wooden ruler; and an abacus. Then, I go back to my table in the studio, and begin carefully laying it all out on my desk.

I turn to my master, Mab.

“What kind of glue doesn’t react to paper or metal?”

“None. For that box, it would be better to put another layer of cardboard on the bottom; use rubber cement. Bookbinding shelf; the green one.”

“Yes, Mab.”

I get rubber cement and a sheet of cardboard just a little bit larger than the box; and I get a box cutter, because cutting cardboard with scissors neatly is a pain in the ass.

“Right-o. One more thing you’ll need; over on the far wall, where the big cutting tables are- the middle table around the mast is for designing- by the cutting tables, above them, you see all those small little drawers with the straps in front of them?”

“Yes, Mab.”

“Go open one, and bring back one spool of thread; be sure to close it back the way you found it.”

I go to do as my master bid me. It’s a strap and buckle system, and- card catalogue drawers? Full of spools of thread. Okay- weird, but also kind of cool? I mean, the front little squares have little colored paper sheets in them, and inside each drawer is thread in that exact color. I go back to my desk with a full spool of indigo thread, and sit down at my chair.

“Take your spool and measure it; measure the dimensions of the box. Then, divide the total area of the box by the area of your spool to determine how many spools you can fit- without touching- into the box.”
“Measure the perimeter of your box, then replicate those dimensions on your piece of cardboard. Use the box cutter and your cutting mat to remove the excess.”

“I do it; just as I thought, much easier with a knife suited to cutting cardboard.

“Now; mark out in rows and columns where your spools will go; in the resultant boxes, create an ‘x’ figure going from one corner to the other. Then, tap your nails flush to the cardboard where the X marks the spot.”

“I do it; the hammer helps get the nails flush that last little bit, right up next to the board.

“Finally, use the rubber cement to put down a thin, even coat of glue on the bottom of the box, and the uglier surface of the cut cardboard. Once both surfaces are dry to the touch, carefully and neatly place them together with light pressure. Then, you’re done; test it with the spool of thread you chose, and these that I got out for you.”

“I do it; getting a thin layer of glue on the cardboard isn’t my best skill, but I’ve at least done something like it before, so it’s not like, impossible. And then I’m done, and… I have a box with points on the bottom.

I did my measuring correctly- all the spools fit, the one I picked and the ones my master gave me.

I don’t know why, but I’m smiling like an idiot, and my eyes are overflowing with tears.

“I- sorry, I shouldn’t-”

“It’s fine. Really, Beatrix- it’s fine.”

“I… I’m just so happy. I’m not- I’m not just a Breaker. I- I can be a Maker, too.”

And then I start giggling, and weeping.

“You’re not really a beginner, are you?”
“No, I am.”

“I’ve not been clear; I apologise. True beginners are those who have never before held needle, thread, and fabric – be it to sew, to knit, to tat, to lace-make. Then there are those who have wielded needle and thread for five to ten years and still think of themselves as beginners. There are even those who have been wielding the Articles for ten or more years who only think themselves Advanced Beginners.

“Indeed, it is only those who have been sewing for at least forty years who normally have the required skill to call themselves advanced. In truth, there are a standard set of skills one develops in learning to sew, very simple, basic skills that build off of each other. I think, when you think of sewing, you think of mechanical positioning, rhythm, pacing, fluidity of sewing (in a continual process) – these things are built out of experience, practice, and the development of muscle memory. The actual specified tasks, of which I spoke of as skills, build up from simpler to more complex; and, as they are all feats of engineering and mathemagic, skipping ahead before you’ve mastered the use and application of the basics results in disaster.

“The World requires two fairly conflicting things from clothing – it requires that the clothing must not, under any circumstances, fall apart on the wearer; and it requires that the clothing is appealing to the senses, eyes and touch, ear and nose, even the mouth in some cases. Much like architecture, fashion is one of the most demanding fields of study any person can throw themselves into. You’re trying to marry two very conflicting properties – proper structure, and aesthetic joy. Architects, at least, don’t have to worry about their products needing to move.

“Here’s the order you’re going to learn to do things, more or less: Sewing a straight line along a given edge with uniform stitching from the edge of the goods, both by hand and machine. Then, as before, but with two layers of goods.”

“Eh? Is… is adding another layer really that big a deal?”

“In a word: yes. Consider this, Beatrix.

“If one does not position the two layers of two equal lengths of bias cut goods properly – meaning, evenly – the goods will ‘grow’ in length the further along the seam one goes. Sewing a one fourth or three eighths seam is much more difficult than sewing a one inch seam allowance, as there is greater grain stability the farther in from the cut edge that one sews. This applies to bias goods only, as goods on the straight of the grain are more easily sewn with smaller seam allowances. Which is not to say that the skill of sewing small seam allowances on bias is impossible to develop; it is, and you will.

“Consider the concept of sewing two edges of striped or plaid or otherwise printed fabrics together so that the print is matched evenly across the seam as another example of a core sewing skill – although I must say, this is not actually a sewing skill per se, merely the result of a few processes coming together correctly. I do all my studio work factory-style; that is, I set a specific task for the day’s work and do not deviate from its completion. Some days are for designing; some days are for cutting; some days are for sewing; some days are for pressing, or steaming, or washing.

“Regardless of when a seam is actualized, for the way I do work… the required controls for the seamless formation of prints in finished goods is in the accurate cutting of the goods, not the sewing. When you do the sewing lineup, the seam quality of matched stripes is not governed by stitching. The seam quality, in my studio, is designed into the pattern via a precise match stripe drafted and marked on the pattern piece; thus, the matching of the seam is dependent on the pattern grading following that match point, then the mark making communicating the layout of the fabric repeat to the cutting stage, and so on. At the point of the sewing operation, it’s too late to change how a good
has been cut; and you cannot blame errors in the final product on the one that sewed it alone. Just because the garment is sewn last, and the proof of error is easily demonstrable then… that doesn’t mean the stitching is always to blame.”

“…I understood a lot of that. Should I be concerned? Because this is the first time I’ve ever heard any of this, and--”

“I’m using my Haki to convey concepts to you on a more fundamental level; it’s a way of teaching your mind. The only way to teach your body and your eyes, in particular, is to actually physically do the work- but your mind can learn without you knowing about it.”

“Oh. Uh- should my head feel so… stuffy?”

“Yep, that’s normal; tell me immediately if it starts to hurt.”

“Um- yes, okay.”

“Right. Sewing a simple line with two layers of differing fabric is the next step up in difficulty; like a shell layer and a lining fabric, or applying lace over denim, for example. Both of our primary sewing machines are built for industrial use and then fancied up for home use, meaning the pressure of the foot will keep the goods properly aligned. Sewing the tape of zippers to lengths of dress-weight goods- or other fabrics- will be similarly difficult for much the same reasons. I prefer using a fusible interfacing in the zipper inset area for dress weight goods to make it less difficult to sew properly; it helps stabilize things, you see. Successfully sewing a zipper is dependent on processes prior to the initiation of sewing; a good result is dependent on what happened to the goods before a stitching process ever happened. A pattern for the fusible interface has to be made beforehand, graded, cut, paired with the commensurate shell pieces, fused, and then resorted into bundles appropriate to the sewing process order.

“How are you doing, Beatrix?”

“I’m okay. Keep going.”

“Alright. The skill of sewing from one fixed point to another, dot-to-dot, along a defined edge; and again, but with two layers of goods; and again, but with two layers of differing goods. An example would be that of the back ’V’ at garment edge on a back vest waist. Not only must the dot-to-dot points be precise but the differing weights of the shell of the vest and the lining of the vest must be managed.

“Next comes the skill of sewing from one fixed point to another, dot-to-dot, on the interior of a piece, perhaps along the placement lines of a welt pocket. It’s more difficult to sew evenly on the inside of a body of goods, rather than a seam allowance edge, as more skill is needed for the work to lie flat and be correctly aligned. Then, finally, all as before but with two layers of differing fabrics- like a welt pocket on a wool coat.

“Our studio manages these matters in a very specific way, long before you get to the sewing operation. As in welt pockets, the shell side which receives the pocket is fused from the underside, or wrong side of the goods, at least one inch away from the area to be sewn all the way around. The entire area is stabilized prior to stitching. Because I guard against wasting goods, we use additional goods and processes; meaning that the successful completion of the job is highly dependent upon stabilization and worth the increased effort of production, use of more interfacing, complication of design pattern, and additional processes and steps in production, beyond the strictly necessary.

“Doing the last one consistently- the additional here being fusing and doing that fusing within a
precise target area - is not a process often found in the repertoire of home sewers, or even needlewomen. It’s a factory, mass product skill that usually requires a placement guide made by the patternmaker before hand. Guides are something you might not have seen before, ever- it’s a pattern piece not used to cut fabric, but to mark them for the placement of ties, buttons, clasps, hooks, and so on. Very useful if you’re making one kind of thing repeatedly- or you know that your whatevers need to be a certain distance from each other every time.

“Doing okay?”

“Yes, Mab.”

“Mm. Finally, sewing a curve to a straight line along a given edge with uniform stitching from the edge of the goods, both by hand and machine. Then, as before, but with two layers of goods. Then again, with differing goods; and again with two layers of differing goods. Then, sewing two opposing curves along a given edge with uniform stitching from the edge of the goods, by hand and machine; and again with two layers; and again with two layers; and again with two layers of differing goods. This is the most complicated basic sewing operation you can do, because the fabric actively and vehemently doesn’t want to do what you’re telling it to do. Darts are usually a matter of dot-to-dot, but sewing anything so it moves around a curve is complicated.

“Now. When I give you an assignment, how well you complete it will tell me several things- how well I’ve taught you, what you still need work on, how motivated you are, all manner of things. Failing to turn in an assignment will result in punishment duty; also, as your Master, I don’t just want you to be a good Sewist.”

“Eh?”

“Beatrix, I’m in loco parentis of you now- I’m basically your parent. I take that sort of thing very seriously- so no, I don’t want you to just be a good sewist. I want you to be a good person, too.”

“...oh.”

“Mm. ‘Oh.’ So, any broken rules, any missed chores, any bad behaviour- and the normal shitty Apprentice work will get much shittier.”

“...What’s my apprentice work, then? -and how can it get shittier?”

“Well, to start with, you’ll be making bias tape- you’ll be cutting it, first with the rotary cutter, then with the bias tape cutter; you’ll be joining it, pressing it, and spooling it on those big spools, there by the fabric stash shelves?”

“I see them.”

“Mm. That can get shittier in a few ways- I can make you use the rotary cutter as the method of cutting, I can make you join it by hand, and I can make you spool it without the rotor.

“You’ll be washing and pressing fabric- both for unmade goods, and the garments that come through the Laundry that need pressing. It’s very important to press along the grain, by the by- that won’t make much sense now, but it will later. I can make you do the washing by hand, and I can make you use the heavy press.

“You’ll be cutting fabric- to start, you’ll be cutting muslin toile, all the paper patterns and guides I assign you, and lengths of bias tape as needed. It’s not really something that can be made shittier, but I can make it very boring.
"You’ll be tracing patterns from pattern paper to transfer paper, and transferring those patterns onto new paper- and eventually, you’ll be allowed to use the mimeo, but mimeo privileges will be taken away for bad behavior, understand?"

"Um… what’s a mimeo?"

"The mimeograph machine is a duplicating machine that works by forcing ink through a stencil onto paper. Ours can be adjusted to work on prepared fabric, but I prefer screen printing. I use the mimeo to make all the forms we use to keep track of the fabric repairs needed on the ship; and Franky uses them to keep track of all the repairs in general. Sanji uses it to make the list that’s posted on the pantry, basically just a spreadsheet he fills in week to week- or month to month, sometimes- and Mark uses it for the list that keeps track of all the animal feed and medicine. Chopper uses it too, mostly for the physicals where he checks a set number of things- useful machine.”

"Oh! The- the thing that makes all the temple bulletins?"

"Yep. Not being allowed to use the mimeo makes the entire job just drag , by the way. You’ll have to sew on buttons, hooks, bars, and other finicky fasteners; it’s always done by hand, of course, but I can make you do the very tiny, most finicky ones of all. You’ll be cleaning the sewing machines, oiling the iron of the tables and polishing the wood; and checking the machine oils. I’ll make that one shittier by changing how much detail you need to attend to. You’ll also have to refill the irons and the steamers- the irons need to visit Franky’s forge so the Dials inside them can be refilled with heat, and the steamers have both Heat and Wet dials inside. There’s a whole list of things that have to happen for that, and it’s already a shitty job- about the only way to make it shittier is to make you do all of them at once, and I can definitely do that.

"Which reminds me- and this is my fault, really. When I started with this crew, I had been shot in the head, resulting in fairly severe brain damage that manifested as partial amnesia. I’m fine now, as I’ve remembered or relearned everything I forgot- but back then, I neglected to properly tag a large amount of the things I made. One of your ongoing jobs is going to be sorting through the Wardrobe, checking to see if each garment has a laundry tag, checking to see if the laundry tag is correct , and replacing as necessary. It needs to be done; I don’t want to do it. So, you’re doing it. If it’s punishment duty, you’ll have to make each tag you use beforehand, instead of using my premade ones.”

"Okay."

"Hm, there were other things- ah, yes. Hand stitching practice- not necessarily on a garment. You’ll also be doing embroidery, embroidery samplers, beading, beading samplers, sequins, applique, fringe and trim, pompons, tassles, lace, and if you really shit the bed, I’ll make you do cross-count stitching. You’ll be doing some of all of these things anyway, but if it’s punishment, it won’t be fun and I’ll be very strict about how it’s to be completed.

“Last among your duties, but most important, is that it’s now your job to keep the floor swept, the ceiling free of cobwebs, and the lightbulbs changed. You’re also to take the trash out when it’s full, clean out the lint trap in the washer and dryer, check to make sure we have adequate clothespins, and make sure the drying lines are in good repair.

“Understand?”

I stare at my master, and then I nod. I do understand, after all.
“-can you embroider, Beatrix?”

“Yes, Mab.”

“Good. I’m going to be giving you your first assignment; you’re to complete this embroidery. I’ll give you two weeks, and I’ll be checking in daily to see how you do.”

“I- I only know how to do satin stitches, boss, I don’t-”

“Hmhm. Then your other assignment is going to be a trio of samplers. This is the first one you need to replicate; this is the second one; and here is the third. I suggest you work on the straight stitches first, followed by the more fanciful stitches, and then finally the large sampler; finishing with the art piece. -and I suppose since you have four assignments now instead of one, you’ve got the next four weeks to finish each of them.”

“Y-yes, Mab.”

“...questions?”

“Um. I- I don’t know how to start.”

“Hm. Well, put your assignments down on your desk, and bring along the straight stitch example, and the pattern paper. This is how you complete this assignment.”

“Yes, Boss!”

“Firstly, over here is all the embroidery supplies- this bin has all the unworked tea towels, and unless I tell you otherwise, you’re to use these to embroider with.”

“Mm!”

“These are your embroidery hoops- your samplers will be framed, if I consider them up to standard, so don’t worry about wasting a hoop.”

“Mm!”

“Needles for embroidery are in these screw-top jars; I expect you to keep track of your own needles. Take as many as you need; mark down how many you take on this sheet; and use this roll of paper-tape to secure them while they’re in transit from here to your work table.”

“Mm!”

“Finally, embroidery floss; this thread catalogue with the white top-board is all embroidery floss. Take as many skeins as you want and mark them down on this sheet here, so I know when I need to refill a drawer.”

“Mm!”

“For this first assignment, you’re going to need thirteen different colors of thread, so you don’t get any stitch row confused; at least two needles; I suggest a thimble, to protect your fingertip; a tea towel; an embroidery hoop; and you’re going to need to read the first fifteen pages of your first textbook, the one on the right side. I suggest reading the whole first chapter, but you’ll need the first fifteen pages especially.”
“Yes, Mab!”

“No- if you’re having trouble understanding what the book is telling you to do, I can show you. Don’t hesitate to ask for help, Beatrix!”

“Yes, Mab!”

“I’m going to show you how to transfer your pattern onto your cloth; then, I’ll observe you setting up your embroidery, and if there’s enough time, you can do your first row of stitches before it’s time for lunch.”

I nod, and then watch carefully as Master Mab irons my embroidery sample pattern onto a tea towel corner; I carefully secure it to the embroidery hoop, then put it on my desk. I count how many rows there are- fourteen- and the top row is all nearly-white threads in various tints, so I skip the topmost box of a column of red. I take five needles, and two thimbles, and I go back to my workdesk. Mab points out where I can turn the light over my desk on and off, which is nice; she hands me a small work tote.

Then she teaches me the first stitch I have to do; the back stitch. It’s so simple, I actually do finish it before lunch.

While I was working, Master Mab wrote on a blackboard the list of projects I have to do before she’ll consider my training completed- Thread Holder was first, and it got a checkmark. Next came a Clapper-Point Presser; then Bias Tape; Handkerchief; Pillow; Pockets; Apron; Tool Tote; Sorbetto Pattern Top; Sorbetto Pattern Top with Bias Tape; Laurel Pattern Shift Dress; Ginger Pattern Skirt; Macaron Pattern Dress; Macaron Pattern Dress in Knit Fabric; Swimsuit; Jacket. She also put up weird shelf-pocket things that the patterns I picked out at Daiso got carefully sorted into; the highest ones have my fancy dress and jacket patterns in them, while the lowest one has aprons. There are also patterns for a tool tote, and a swimsuit I’ve never seen before.

Then it’s about an hour before lunch- I’ve been sewing for two hours straight, and I’ve gotten through three of my stitch rows.

Master Mab makes me stop, stretch, and separate and wind skeins onto cards for the rest of our time before lunch; she says that it’s important to simplify various future operations by doing this kind of work now. It’s not as fun as sewing, but… I’m done in a bit less than forty five minutes, and spend the rest of the time clearing my desk, sweeping up with the dustpan, and going over myself with the lint roller. Master Mab says I’m to do sewist training in the morning, and full-body stuff in the afternoon- says that letting my skills in battle and Breaking atrophy would be irresponsible of her.

Trust your master, Beatrix.

Lunch is a little weird, mostly because we’ve never had so many people in the galley at once. Franky had to rearrange it so that there are two tables, instead of just one; allowing for the various groups of
people to all sit together, without crowding each other.

I’m at the… well, ‘Adult’ table, with Zoro, Sanji, Robin, Nami, Franky, Brook, Chopper, Usopp, and Luffy. The ‘Kids’ table has the Suntides, and the Kids; and the Tonnie Mice are on the breakfast nook, so they don’t get stepped on.

“I have some important information you all need to be aware of.”

“Wassat, Mab?”

“Please don’t talk with your mouth full, Luffy.”

“-Sorry. What’s that?”

“...One of my Crazy Exes is probably going to try to kill me. Probably after we leave this island, but it might be sooner, I’m not sure.”

“...Mab… Six before Puck, right?”

“Yes, my love. Six before Puck.”

“Which one is this?”

“Number three.”

“...uh?”

“Puck was the one that grew large enough for me to name; there were six before him, and six lovers who helped make them, Nami.”

“Ah. And they’re all crazy?”

“Well, I was too, so- but, yes. In different ways, but yes. They’re all quite Crazy.”

“Anything we need to watch out for, Mab?”

“Mm… if you see strange dogs or wolvarks hanging around the ship, don’t approach them, and don’t turn your back on them. If you smell rotting wood or rotting meat, particularly, you need to be ready to fight for your life. And if it’s at night, about the only thing I can recommend you do is run towards the largest moving body of water you can find- a lake, a river, the Sea itself. The Third is a bit like Granuna- he knows when his name is being spoken, or even his title.”

“...Can you draw him?”

“-Yes, but I won’t. He has this weird power to see through his own eyes- if I draw a picture that’s close to his image, he’ll be able to see through it. All the names I can think of for him… I know. He can’t hear recordings- just a moment.”

“I’m done with lunch, anyway- delightful noodle dish, I think. I was distracted.

By the couch where Bryony clips coupons and goes through catalogues- well, there’s the mail shelf, where we keep our bulk stamps and envelopes, and there’s also… aha! There’s my opera recordings!
I need… this one. And the player, too.

“This is who I mean.”

I play the song; everyone is quiet, listening to the singer. My eyes catch on the Kid’s charnellement; a swirling line that could belong to anyone, if it weren’t for the exact arrangement of loops.

The song ends, and my friends look at each other and then at me. Sanji is smoking. From his nostrils.

“You’re not happy about it either.”

“…If he comes here... if he even tries to speak with you, pchelka, I will kill him.”

“...Good. I don’t have the heart to, so. Thank you.”

Sanji lets loose another gush of hot black smoke, before shaking his rage away with a flip of his hair. Sanji is Best Husband.

Cecelia has had the fewest visible signs of strain. Considering all the Suntides lost their mother, so far their grief has had minor repercussions. Genevieve broke her mom’s broom in a fit of recklessness; Deborah is throwing herself into her apprenticeship with Sanji. Beatrix is with me; Adelaide is picking fights with Zoro and Luffy and Franky and calling it sparring. Eleanor has been more or less a living ghost; she stays up all hours of the night, hiding in the Library or the Crawlspace of the ship, her Mice right there with her. Fernanda has been sleeping out in the sunshine on the deck, or just… watching. I know that expression from Atty- she’s trying really hard to deny her gift right now, in a strange bid to keep from learning more than she wants to know about her sister’s futures.

Cecelia is the most ‘normal’, probably because she’s got actual coping methods that are helpful, instead of maladaptive. She’s spending real, quality time with Sancho Horizon and Taffy, and when she’s sad, she cries.

More practically, her entire style is centered around a pair of scrunchies from Daiso and the way she puts her hair up. It’s a very practical, very cute style, even though it’s basically always hidden under her hat. Similarly, the shoes she wanted were a cute, practical set- one for sharp days, one for every days.

Her tights are horizontally striped, in an allusion to prisoner’s garb; all of her socks are black and silken, for the professional touch. Her shorts are all high waisted, to accentuate her feminine curves, and with suspenders to preserve the line of the high waist and remind everyone who sees her that she’s a clown, yes, really. Her pants are also high waisted, and skulk right up to the edge of trashy before stomping all over it. Even her skirts get in on the high waisted suspendered action; but those are for when she wants to be seen as a female clown, not just a clown.

Cecelia has exactly two kinds of shirts, in the same color; she has grey button down shirts, and she
has grey t-shirts. She has exactly three jackets, in the same color; she has a black jacket with straight lapels, a black double breasted jacket, and a black leather jacket. She has exactly three ensembles, whose pieces can be used to garnish any outfit she chooses to wear.

The first ensemble is a tight, sleek affair with a bright white long-sleeve shirt, pegged tuxedo pants, and a tight black suit-jacket in an informal style, with patent leather shoes to finish. The second ensemble is a modern take on hakama, with a two-tone jacket and an informal shirt- for days when she wants to be a tough-girl, not a girly-girl. The third and final ensemble is a cute shorts and button-down shirt combination, with a black scarf-bow and a jaunty hat.

Her charnellement is the most formal and ornate out of all of her siblings; it’s even got jewels on it, which is fairly distinct from all the other possible Vinsmoke ear cuff options.

Cecelia is a clown; she builds her wardrobe like other people build a resume, or a stockpile of weaponry.

Vinsmoke Sancho Horizon is very much like Cecelia; but where Cecelia’s style has more than a little touch of suspicion and smarm, Sancho is all absent minded scholar; a mystic outside his tower, if you like. Except there’s a weird stripe of musician’s bizarre flair that… well. Sancho has three pairs of shoes; a pair of distressed finish white bucks, a pair of two tone casuals, and a pair of white canvas sneakers with black and yellow bootlaces. He exclusively wears knee-high dress socks in a multitude of pattern-prints.

His pants are feathered; either smooth, or fluffy. His shirts are two toned, in a variety of colors- from what he came in, to the relaxed versions I made for him. His vests come in two styles- side closure, and straight up and down. His jacket is what really stands out- not the hooded one he came with, but the one I’ve just today finished making for him, as it’s finally dried and cured properly. It’s a greatcoat, to really sell his ‘awkward academic’ image.

His soft hat is great; about the only thing I did was replicate it so the one Cece made for him doesn’t wear out before it’s time. I also made him a stiff, felted version - complete with feather tufts, like a great horned owl- so he’d have options.

Sancho Horizon is… odd. I can guess some of his story just from what he looks like, how he moves, and what his personal names are; at a guess? I’d say he’s descended from the old Donquixote Line, which left Mariejois about thirty nine years ago, if I’m counting correctly- maybe thirty six. He’s got the crazy height and at least two more growth spurts left before he’s done; the gangly limbs, the quixotic clumsy-grace… but, he doesn’t have the family name of ‘Donquixote’. Sancho must be what his birth mother named him, in an effort to protect him from either his sire, or the kin of his sire- it’s a Dressrosan name, is the thing.

Vinsmoke Aquila- because there was only one woman of the right age in Sanji’s immediate male-following Line that fits the bill for being the Suntide’s mother; Vinsmoke Aquila knew who Sancho’s sire was. Vinsmoke Aquila gave Sancho his charnellements before she died, not after- thus making him a Vinsmoke, beyond all contestation. Further, she made him her son by naming him such in her bequeathments- ‘whosoever possesses the Sunrise Cuff is my beloved son, Sancho Horizon’, as I recall. Deborah showed me the Testament her mother left behind- and unlike the other charnellements, which can be passed around the family with impunity… The Sunrise Cuff is passed from Mother, to Son, to Daughter- repeating, endlessly. Sancho cannot remove that cuff on his ear for any reason other than he’s giving it to his daughter. Vinsmoke Sancho Horizon- or, more probably, Sancho Horizont Donquixote- doesn’t quite fit in with any of the other Vinsmokes on this ship; not even Sanji, who is of the Ruling Line. Even so; his sisters love him, and he them.
There's nothing wrong with being adopted.

After lunch, and the answering of some fairly invasive questions (No, he wasn’t a good kisser, actually; yes, he was quite handsome when we were lovers; I don’t actually like killing people, or being forced to kill people- further, it would make him happy if I killed him, and I don’t want to do that, either), I returned to my studio where I stared down the dilemma of making clothing for people in the range of five to ten centimeters in total height, and only a few grams in weight. Even Arlinda Rader Haai is only about two hundred eighty three grams- less than a pound. Less than a kitten.

Honestly, the only thing for it is… well… I’ll do the Starter Kit and let Franky do the Custom Version- shims, I’m gonna need shims-

So, uh. Dwarves.

I need to think about something while I do this- might as well be dwarves.

I’ve mentioned before- somewhere- that my particular nation in the Tribe of Fae came from the Dwarves, from beneath the earth… Um. Hm.

So, in the beginning, The Three Who made the World, and the One Who Watches from the Edge… no, not like that. Hm. How to tell it.

Oh, hey Franky.

“Hey Mab. What’re you doin’?”

“I- uh. Well. The Mice need clothing, and everything that’s already set up is too large to use for their stuff, so I was going to- uh, okay, or you’re going to put together a Dollsize Sewist Studio on these shelves here, and yes, I have wall paper I’d like to see used- thank you. Um.”

“You were saying somethin’ about dwarves, Wing-sis?”

“-! Right, um- I don’t have to, uh-”

“Start at the beginning, s’my advice. Tiny ears.”

“R-right, um. Hm…

“Alright. The story goes a bit like this, I suppose-”

I flick my fingers, and thousands of ribbons, pieces of paper, and silken pocket squares dart up to illustrate my spoken words.

“In the beginning, before the creation of the Sun and the Moons, there stood two great trees, from which the light of all Creation shone. This was the Age of Darkness, when all the World in which we live was stilled, as Pandora had not yet broken the Egg. The time between Pandora's breaking of
the Egg, and her eventual punishment is where that Age gained its name, if you didn’t know…

“Concerning Dwarves, or Dwarrow as is the proper plural- they were created by the Maker of Things, the Smith, the Star Maker, the One Who Lit the Flame; in secret did the Flame-setter work, far from the other Ancient Ones. The Maker intended his children be the inheritors of his powers and craftings, for even then it was sure that nothing may last forever- to all things, there is a season, and a seasoning. The Maker carved his children from the living stone- of metal, and crystal, and sacred gem did he cut his children, aye, and cold stone, bloodstone, heavy stone, and scale stone too; but before he could breathe life into them, the Great Three and the One found his hidden place and saw what he had done.

“It had been the decree of Her Grace, the One Who Waits, that it would be her first-born, the Three Who Are One, that would be First of All. And so, his crime evident, the Maker raised his hammer high to destroy what he had wrought-”

I hear a series of tiny gasps from somewhere, and Franky’s lip tilt’s upwards as he carefully saws through another set of johnnyboards. Beside me, just outside my line of sight, I can feel all the Suntides quietly watching the flaring fabrics and colors that I’ve set to move; and behind them, I can feel the rest of my crewmates.

Hm.

“Before the Maker could bring his hammer down, Her Grace stayed his hand. She Who Waits sees more clearly than any other; and so she said unto the Maker ‘You did not create out of malice or cruelty; and so you must not destroy them, for they are your children.’

“And the Maker did not destroy the Dwarrow. As punishment for ignoring the great Order, the Maker had to cast his children deep into the hearts of the Mountains, where they would wait until after the Waking of the Three Who Are One, the Weavers, the Braiders, the Gather, Spin, and Cut; only then could his children wake.

“Seven children did he make, and seven did he secret away in the heart of the mountains; and there they waited for their Birthdays.

“After the Three Who Are One woke in the waters of Wom- to which there is no returning- the Seven Fathers woke, and dug themselves out of their slumbering stones. The eldest of them, called in the new language Ariel, but in the old language, Kostecki; he wandered the World as it was then, naming nameless hills and dells- drinking from yet untasted wells- until at last he came to a place called Mirrurmaer, where he founded the ancient city of Ffaraon in the natural caves between three mountains. The city was populated by Kostecki’s Folk, all throughout his life-”

“A life which was so long,” says Sanji, taking a seat next to me and gently smiling at me when he does because I was not going to go there, but okay- “that he became known as Kostecki the Deathless. That’s also a reference to the belief- still held to this day- that he would be reborn seven times, the final time being in The End of All Days. His ancient city of Ffaraon, or Ambrosius, is also where all Orcs are said to have originated from; it is said that Ffaraon is fed by the River of Death, and that the hills on either side of it echo with the long dead howls of furious dwarven women chasing down orcish rakehells after yet another panty raid.”

“Quite. Nowadays, Ffaraon is known as Paris, and is one of the only cities in the World known to
have existed in one way or another since the First Age. Far to the west of Ffaraon, the great cities of Thule and Tiffan were founded in the Blue Fingers during the First Age, before the arrival of the Elves in the Kush. The Dwarves of Thule were the first to forge mail of linked rings, and they traded such for weapons with the Orcs of Tiffan; the Dwarves of Ffaraon carved the Catacombs that now sit under Paris, at the behest of the Orc Queen, Una Morgan."

“This is how the Orcs came to posses Ffaraon, which is now Paris. During the First Age, when Pandora broke the Egg in which All Evil dwelt, it scattered all across the World, bringing chaos and horror wherever it went. During this time of chaos, two great weapons were forged- the Grass Cutter, and the Flame. Their fateful battles are well known, I suppose- but what’s less well known is that during this time, the Crown of Stars was lost as well- for good reason.”

“It was during the Battle of Unnumbered Tears that it was lost, when Kostecki’s secret weakness was discovered and exploited; he died in battle with the ancient terror-

“-the first and greatest of all Nagas, the one known as Glaurung. It was only the Dwarves of Ffaraon who could withstand the terrible flames of the beast; and only for so long as the battle was fought. When Kostecki tore out the dragon’s heart and sliced it into four pieces, so too did his own heart of crystal shatter, caught as it was in the death-scream of the horrible beast. After that battle, the dwarves who had followed their king most faithfully… being made of stone, they shattered too. And so it was that Kostecki’s banner was raised by his only living son, an orphaned orc-boy he’d taken in long ago.”

“The boy’s name was Udoroth of the Smoking Vine; and so we come to this. After Glaurung’s defeat… how did that old hymn go… ah, yes. The place where Una scuttled her foe- the tempest never dies! His final throes and shudders and shakes, a thousand years gone by…”

“The Maker, whom we call Awl; he had never intended his children live forever. Kostecki had broken a great Law; and so from the depths of the Sea there arose the one who would destroy him. Udoroth, his son, only halfheartedly wished for the destruction of his crazed father; but Una Morgan, the one his father arranged he marry-

“-the one whose lands were destroyed in the battle between Glaurung and Kostecki-

“-she wished his death with all her heart. It was she who saw the way to destroy what tethered the Mad King to this World; and it was she, not the dread beast, who screamed so and slew him, ere the end. Her scream was so potent; not only did it shatter the crystal heart of Kostecki, it shattered the seven jewels knotted into silver thread and woven into his hair as well. And so the Crown of Stars was lost in the screaming of Death that Rides. The dwarves who followed Kostecki were just as mad as he was; and so they died too. Thus did Ffaraon become Paris; and passed from the hands of the Dwarves to the hands of the Orcs.”

I lean against Sanji as the flickering silks show my Granuna and her beloved, Udoroth, storming the city and taking it for their own. Sanji tucks his head over mine, and a low rumbling purr shivers through my shoulder.

“This was the beginning of the Age of Heroes, the Second Age of the World; during this time, mithril, adamantine, orichalum, sky iron, cold iron, and red iron were forged into blades of terrible, miraculous power, beyond what had come before. Sometime during the Second Age, the Dwarf city of Thule fell, and no city would bear that name again until much, much later- Mab’s the queen of it,
actually.

“The Third Age, sometimes called the Age of Time, is where the first calendars were created- and there, I leave this tale. More can be discovered by speaking with Robin, or reading a book- but I’ll leave off this story here. Mab?”

“Mm. Right. From the First of the Dwarves, we know these things; a Dwarf is carved, and then planted somewhere quiet and dim, and then in the fullness of time, that being wakes and breaks it’s way out of their safe and stifling prison. From this ancient divine magic, a homelier magic emerges, which I practice now and again- that of fairies making their eggs, and guarding them faithfully until they hatch- or do not. Orcs, on the other hand, do things a bit differently.

“Orcs do not exactly hatch; Orcs… well, they sprout. Legends say that the first Orcs sat up out of a turnip patch, but I’m of the mind it was more than likely cabbages- GAHAHAHAHAHAHA, STOP, STOP, AHAHAHAHAHAHA."

Sanji started tickling me when I obliquely referred to him as ‘cabbage’ because, of all things, he doesn’t like being called ‘mon chou’. Weird? Yep. Fun to tease him about? You bet your ass.

I suppose I should mention- Dwarves got the reputation for being brutish and rough as a direct result of Kostecki being a fucking asshole. In truth, the Dwarven habit of bashing and hacking the shit out of their enemies is a direct result of their innate ability to be good metal smiths. Metal smithing is the fiddliest fucking thing in the gods-blessed World.

Mom taught me quite a lot, actually, and I’m a fair silversmith; until you’ve spent hours precariously balancing a ring on a firebrick, poking a tiny prong setting into place, applying flux and a microscopic piece of solder, and then fighting tooth and nail to keep it all exactly as you placed it until the solder melts- until you’ve done that, you will never understand the otherworldly patience and finesse the Dwarves of ancient legend possessed. Even simple blacksmithing, like nails and shit, requires a lot of minute and careful maneuverings as well as some serious striking power. Their size is one thing; and their incredible strength is another- but honestly, immense strength is a basic requirement for extremely delicate work because your body won’t get tired so easily and slip up. Smithing, like sewing, requires an unusual, almost psychotic obsession with detail because one tiny little mistake might mean a thousand hours of correction- and even then, it still might not be quite right.

It’s because of this ancient need that today, if a dwarf is cutting gems, setting stones, making knives, or hell, giving a massage, they are one of the most delicate people to do the job. Dwarves are, as a whole, delicate- meaning here fine, intricate, dainty, frangible- but delicate movements are often the most powerful. You don’t need all that much to kill a man; and you don’t need much to save him, either.

Now, as for the Dollsize Sewist Studio that Franky built for me…

Basically, it’s the interior rooms of a house, sans roof-space rooms, built into the shelves of a bookshelf I emptied ahead of time and partitioned in non-intuitive ways. There are a series of balconies and sliding wall-doors, meant for easy access and egress. Further, there’s a mark on the studio floor that clearly shows where to- and not to- step. Stay behind the yellowstriped line, indeed.

The actual studio space is three shelves high, above my waist, with **the room I’ll be using as a sewing**
room at my own eye level. There’s one large shelf below the studio levels, onto which I relocate a selection of vivariums, which will hold various creatures- spiders, silkmoths, beetles… Next to my sewing area, I place Beatrix’ sewing area, because becoming Dollsize is not limited to just me. There’s a room where I set up drawers full of Doll-weight fabrics, sorted by woven/knit, then weight, then color, then print/woven pattern; drawer after drawer, in neat rows, their tops becoming cutting tables with the addition of smooth-varnished top-pieces and a daub of wood glue. A supply room, where I’ll keep overflow fabrics, extra sewing machines, other tools… basically a closet.

The design room is actually a pair of desks that are miniatures of our actual desks; Remenent Miniature Company sells working models of nearly anything you can think of at a very reduced size. As I understand it, the Tontatta (which is Modern for Dwarf, keep up) in Water 7 want all the amenities of city living, just at a size and price they can be getting on with. The Kid and my own desk are actually right next to each other, and while they’re quite neat now, I know that won’t last forever.

Finally, for each Mouse, which is Darla J3LLYB34N Maya Hildy Arlinda Rader Haai Quillaby six, six distinct rooms, each one carefully laid out much the same… They’re basically walk in closets, with little chests of drawers and shelves for folded clothing to live on too. The reason I put their wardrobes in their own individual rooms is because their actual dorm is a legitimate Skuan dollhouse that’s been carriage bolted to the very top of the bookcase and then bolted again to the wall; the top shelf of this bookcase is devoted to the tiny generator, the water treatment, and the reservoir for the actual water inside the house.

The Mice have spent most of this week moving into their individual apartments, getting wallpapers from me… oh gods, I’ve become my mother, I’m their landlord.

Oh my gods.

Oh my gods.

Oh, hey Beatrix.

“Hey Boss- what’s with the second tiny desk?”

“You didn’t think I’d be the only one sewing smallsize, did you?”

“Uh?”

“Hmhmhm. Learning to sew dollsize is not different from sewing full size, except in the minor particulars- meaning, of course, that it’s entirely different and a bit of a pain in the ass. To start with, seams need to be smaller than people clothes- alright there, Beatrix?”

“Um, a little headachey-”

“Then we’ll continue this lesson at a later time. Which reminds me! Chopper?”

“Yeah, Mab?”

“This is the schedule I’ve written out to keep Beatrix to. I need you to fix it so she has time for herself- rest, recreation, free time… it’s hard to make choices for yourself if you’re never given the opportunity to do so.”
“Ah- holy shit, structured timesheet much? Mab, good gods-”

“Mm. That’s why I asked you to fix it; Sanji, Zoro, even Usopp wouldn’t see anything wrong with that schedule, but I know I’ve done it… not wrong, perhaps-”

“It’s certainly not right!”

“Quite. Need a red pen?”

“I have my own!”

I half smile, as Beatrix blinks wide-eyed at me.

“Um… Master Mab?”

“Mm?”

“…Will you tell another story?”

“-! Um. Sure? Hm- every night before you sleep, I’ll tell a bit more of the story I’ve picked. Right now, I’ll tell you the introduction- get your embroidery, Bea, and we’ll do what I always do after lunch…”

I shoo my friends back to their jobs; shoo! Shoo!- and calmly lead Beatrix through the rest of my daily schedule. After I put away all my impromptu story-telling devices, of course.

This is the time I usually spend mending, after all; and in the galley with Sanji at my side as he takes his daily rest. Can’t do much at this point, cooking wise, except let things be and wait for their finishing; and so he sits together with me, and listens to me natter on about nothing at all.

There’s also usually a heavy kissing session too, but I don’t know, he might not feel comfortable doing that right in front of Beatrix…

Beatrix takes the corner, with her embroidery; I sit next to her, with my basket of mending and my supplies.

“Right; stop me at any time if you have a question, alright?”

“Mm!”

“-Did you wash your hands?”

“Of course!”

“Good, good, just checking… now, to begin that story you asked for-

“The Cattle-Raid of Cooley is the chief story belonging to the heroic cycle of Ulster, which had its centre in the deeds of the Ulster king, Conchobar Mac Nessa, and his nephew and chief warrior,
Cuchulainn Mac Sualtain.

“Tradition places their date at the beginning of the Third Age. The events leading up to this tale, the most famous of Fae oral histories, I will shortly summarize here from the introduction to the Tain, and from other tales belonging to the Ulster Cycle.

“In essence, the Dun Bull of Cooley, for whose sake Ailill and Medb, the king and queen of Connaught, undertook the expedition of which I shall tell you, was one of two bulls in whom two rival swineherds, belonging to the Tribe that was once known as Sidhe (now Syreene), were reincarnated- after passing through various other forms, of course. The other bull- and the other swineherd- was Findbennach of the White Horns.

“Findbennach was in the herd of Queen Medb at Cruachan Ai, the Connaught capital, but left it to join Ailill’s herd. This caused Ailill’s possessions to exceed Medb’s. In the Fae tradition, a King is equal to other Kings, and to his Queen; thus, to equalize matters of possession, Medb determined to secure the great Dun Bull, who alone equalled the White Horns.

“A politic embassy to the owner of the Dun Bull failed, and Ailill and Medb therefore began preparations for an invasion of Ulster, in which province (then ruled by Conchobar Mac Nessa) Cooley was situated. A number of smaller Tana, meaning cattle-raids, prefatory to the great Tain Bo Cooley, relate some of their efforts to procure allies and provisions. I’ll tell you those, if you really want, I suppose…”

“Well, keep going with this bit, Boss.”

“Aye- best to finish what I start. Queen Medb chose for the Tain Bo Cooley the time when Conchobar and all the warriors of Ulster- except Cuchulain and Sualtaim, were at their capital, Emain Macha, in a sickness which fell on them periodically, making them powerless for action; another story, of course, relates the cause of this sickness, the effect of a curse laid on them by a fairy woman. Ulster was therefore defended faithfully only by the then seventeen-year old Cuchulainn, as Sualtaim was a bit of a stuttles…

“The Hound of Ulster, Cullan’s Hound- Cuchulainn was the son of Dechtire, the Ulster King’s sister, his father being- well, either the stuttle, Sualtaim, warrior of Ulster; Lug Mac Ethlend, a divine hero from the Sidhe; or Conchobar himself. The story I’ll be telling you considers both Sualtaim and Lug Mac Ethlend to be Cuchulainn’s father.

“Cuchulainn is accompanied, throughout the adventures here told, by his charioteer, Portgas D. Elphame. Elphame was a Connaught hero; she was exiled from Connaught through a series of events I can only describe as Pervert Overload, and no more will I say on the subject.

“In Queen Medb’s forces were several Ulster heroes, including Cormac Conlongas, son of Conchobar, Conall Cernach, Dubthach Doeltenga, Fiacha Mac Fir-Febe, and Fergus Mac Roich. These were exiled from Ulster through a bitter quarrel with Conchobar, who had caused the betrayal and murder of the sons of Uisnech, when they had come to Ulster under the sworn protection of Fergus, as told in the Exile of the Sons of Uisnech.

“The Ulster mischief-maker, Bricriu of the Poison-tongue, was also with the Connaught army. Though fighting for Connaught, the exiles have a friendly feeling for their former comrades, and a keen jealousy for the credit of Ulster. There is a constant interchange of courtesies between them and their old pupil, Cuchulainn, whom they do not scruple to exhort to fresh efforts for Ulster’s honour.

“An equally half-hearted warrior is Lugaid Mac Nois, king of Munster, who was bound in friendship to the Ulstermen.
“Other characters who play an important part in the story are Findabair, daughter of Ailill and Medb, who is held out as a bribe to various heroes to induce them to fight Cuchulainn, and is on one occasion offered to the latter in fraud on condition that he will give up his opposition to the host; and the war-goddess, variously styled the Nemain, the Badb (scald-crow), and the Morrigan (great queen), who takes part against Cuchulainn in one of his chief fights. Findabair is the bait which induces several old comrades of Cuchulainn’s, who had been his fellow-pupils under the sorceress Scathach, to fight him in single combat.

“I suppose I ought to tell you now, before we’ve gone too far- Scathach has always been a hereditary title, a name which gets passed down through families in specific ways for various reasons. In the days of my Danelphe’s youth, before she swore herself as sister to my Granuna, Scathach was her great-grandmother. Nowadays, Scathach is me.

“Oh, yes- and this never fails to make Sanji just a little nutbars, which is one of the reasons I try not to break it out too often- use a joke too often, and it goes stale, you see-”

“Of course, Boss.”

“Right. Cooley is spelled ‘Cualnge’-”

“Wait, what? So, Maive is spelled-”

“M E D B, aye. My name is spelled M A B, but said as-”

“Mav. What the hell.”

“Oh yes. Just to be sure- don’t try to retell the story unless you know how to say the names, and how they’re to be written. I can hear when someone’s got it wrong, the same as you can hear when someone’s calling you ‘Beatrice’. It’s a Fae thing.”

“Huh.”

“Anyway; it’s about time for afternoon training, prefaced by sucking face with my ULTRA SEXY HUSBAND-”

“-LOVE YOU TOO, BABE-”

“-and a short nap. You don’t have to stick around for the face-sucking or the nap, but I would like to have a bit of a spar to see where you’re at this afternoon.”

“Uh. I… I think I can do that, but my Rending Shears aren’t all that strong… I don’t think they were ever intended to be weapons, is the problem.”

“Hm, no, those them in your belt holster?”

“Yeah?”

“-Aha! These are Sail Cutters, meant for use in the production of ship sails. They’re very good at cutting fabric… and you’ve been using them on more than fabric, haven’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Hm… They’re almost broken- the spellwork’s fine, but the metal underneath… No, you can’t use these in this condition. I’ve got the training to fix them, but it’ll take at least a month…”

“R-really?!?”
“Hmhmhmhm. Guess I know what my new project is while you’re working on assignments. Ah, Chopper- did you mark the schedule up?”

“Yes, I did; the only way you’re getting everything done is with block scheduling, not everyday stuff. Here.”

“Oh, thank you, that’s really helpful. -um. Is Sundays supposed to be almost entirely empty?”

“You specifically asked me to give her time for herself- and, considering her age...”

“Gotcha. Here, Bea; this is yours, not mine.”

“Uh- right, thank yooooou’re putting me back in school?!? ”

“Yes. This is just your schedule, mind, Chopper already fixed the one for the rest of your siblings, and Sanji’s got Deborah’s nearly done-”

“I’ve got it done, actually, I just need Chopper to fix mine, too.”

“WHAT THE FUCKING SHIT, SANJI??”

“S’why I need you to fix it.”

“FUCKING OBVIOUSLY- first of all, she cannot work every service, she’s too young.”

“Uh-”

“Secondly, the only Watch any of the SunTides or Mice are cleared by me, their Doctor, to sit, are the First ones. If you want Deborah to take First Watch, she cannot do the Dinner service; and if you want her to do the Dinner service, she cannot do the Luncheon. I’ll give you a pass on Tea service, as that’s not something that’s too much for everyday, and Breakfast service is complicated enough for you to genuinely need an assistant; but hear me now, Cook. Your apprentice is a young woman who is still growing. She needs sleep, and time for herself. If you want her to work two formal services, and one informal service, that’s fine. However, she is still scheduled for scholastics; and no, you cannot just put her on all services and all scholastics on alternating days. She will burn out.”

“...You’re being much meaner to me, Chopper.”

“MAB didn’t overschedule her apprentice; she gave me a schedule with a series of classes, available time slots for each, and a request for some empty space so her apprentice could eat, sleep, enjoy life, and so on. Fix this, Sanji.”

“...um. That’s how I grew up, though, and-”

“...That’s how I grew up, too, Sanji. There’s a reason we follow, and not lead. I want better for Beatrich. And how can you expect Deborah to innovate if you never give her the time, tools, or inclination to do so?”

“...right. Sorry- let me just...”

Sanji spends the rest of the time between luncheon and training furiously scribbling on his schedule.
for Deborah, before Beatrix takes pity on him and offers her own schedule to crib from. Sanji blinks at it, blinks at her offering it to him, and thanks her for the kindness.

I hand Beatrix a butterscotch; good girl. I spray Luffy with a small spray bottle I keep chilled and salinated for moments like this- “You don’t deserve a butterscotch, Captain!” spiffity!

And he runs off cackling.

The schedules look like this, when they’re done: Moonsday, Wyrsday, and Foolsday, a series of classes, starting with Grounding, Centering, and Ethics in the morning with either me or Sanji, right after we get up for the day. I’m sure Sanji has his reasons, and Ethics are important… Then, after First Breakfast but before Breakfast service, a very important distinction, the ’prentices are scheduled to have their Master/Apprentice time, learning the Arts and Trades of which myself and Sanji are both Master of. Then, of course, Breakfast Service, followed by a block of free time, and then Martial Arts training out on the Deck with myself, Sanji, Luffy, and Zoro. Mm. I think I’ll be asking Zoro to teach Beatrix how to wield Swords, she’s a swordfighter if I ever saw one…

Then it’s tea-time, followed by smaller classes with the various persons on this ship; first aid, rites and rituals, potions and alchemy, music… all important things for the well rounded individual!

Tuesday, Throughsday, and Sidleday, the schedule starts with self directed study, followed by hardcore academics, then social studies and the humanities- mythozoology, mysticism, herblore, animal husbandry, literature, languages, mathemagic… good schedules, really. I quite like how they’ve got free days on Sunsday, to do as they like with, and copious blocks of free time scattered here and there for them to enjoy life with. S’better than I ever got.

“While Sanji works out how to make better life choices, I’ll tell you how the tale of the Cattle-raid shall be divided. Firstly, Fedelm’s Prophecy; Secondly, Cuchulainn’s first feats against the host, and the several geis, or taboos, he laid on them; Thirdly, the narration of Cuchulainn’s boy-deeds, by the Ulster exiles to the Connaught host; Fourthly, Cuchulainn’s harassing of the host; Fifthly, the bargain and series of single combats, interrupted by breaches of agreement on the part of Connaught; Sixthly, the visit of Lug Mac Ethlend; Seventhly, the fight with Fer Diad; and eighth, and last, the muster of the Ulstermen. Right now, though, it’s time for training.”

One of the very first things Missus Mab did when we all got to the ship was take us Suntide Vinsmokes down to her Laundry Room and give us a measuring. Apparently, we didn’t actually need to stand for measurements; Missus Mab knew our sizes as soon as we set foot on the deck as crew. This was for more… sentimental reasons.

The Laundry Room is a bit like nowhere I’ve ever been, and a bit like all the best places I’ve ever been; it’s marked out neatly, with the kind of purposeful thought behind it’s form that means ‘this is the area of a Master; tread lightly on this ground’. Somewhere between the woodshop and the library, with a hint of humidity, soap, and sweet smelling essential oils. There are beeswax candles stacked fifteen deep on one shelf, and tins of paint and varnish on another; sparkling things flicker here and there.
There’s a big post in the wall on one side of the room, and on that post there are a series of lines marked in perfectly level scrawls, each one notated with a careful hand in letters I don’t quite understand. She started with the Mice- each one had to take off their shoes, sandals, or walking slippers, and stand flush against the post; then, Missus Mab took a ruler and a scratch-marker and made a straight line on the wood, marking out what have to be numbers, and then a name.

She did this for all of us- and then she did it for all the Officers, and cheerfully intoned each new height. Captain cheered loudest about growing a whole five centimeters, but gods blessings he’s a short man…

Honestly, the only thing that really stood out to me was the terrible, terrible joke Mister Sanji told his lovely wife, when she was taking his height- and also, now that I think of it, goosing his horns.

‘What happens if a wolf falls in the washing machine?’ said Mister Sanji.

‘I dunno.’ said Missus Mab, obviously playing along.

‘She becomes a wash and werewolf.’ said Mister Sanji.

Missus Mab howled with laughter, and it wasn’t the polite, closedmouth laughter I learned of in my Jesting classes- and I’d heard her regularly use; it was deep, belly laughter that comes from a true and healthful place.

Missus Mab likes terrible puns. Missus Mab likes her jokes as pungent as possible; if you can change the entire metaphorical ph of a conversation by letting one rip, she’s happy. Mister Sanji is exactly the kind of person who is not only similarly amused by terrible, terrible puns; Mister Sanji is the kind of person who collects them and repeats them to his wife, specifically so they can laugh together.

I think that’s what real love is supposed to be- what a piece of it looks like, anyway.

Oh, yeah, and Missus Mab taught us all how to use sock clips- it’s a lost cause for most everyone else, but… if we want our cool socks back in anything approaching timely fashion, we’d best get into the habit of clipping them together, like she showed us. She also took the time to show us all through the laundry room, where everything is, and how it’s all used…

I think, of everyone in this crew- even Mister Sanji… I think Mab is the most chronically kind person I’ve ever met.

Basically, it boils down to this- there will come times when we won’t want her to explicitly know what’s happened to our fabric goods- not our bedding, not our clothing, nothing. She, of course, will know anyway- but, if it’s not explicit, in essence, if she didn’t wash everything herself (or make Beatrix do it), she won’t bring it up later.

Ever.

Trauma, she said, doesn’t care who you are or what kind of reputation you have. Mab, herself, doesn’t care who is doing laundry, or when- she only cares that stains and odors are treated correctly, as laid out on the large informational poster right there, above the washing machine. -And yes, there is a way to get the various Clown Slaps out of fabric, and blood, and chocolate, and coffee. It’s all right there.
She even explained the clothing tagging system, and if there was no tag on our clothing that we could see, to please, please put one of the supplied safety pins into the article, so she (or Beatrix) could correct it.

Hell, she even explained how and why to use the pet grooming station, which is a thing I wish we’d had room for back at Ma-quila’s house…

You know, it wasn’t ever my intention to become a pirate? I always thought I’d end up being a Jester in some Noble court, or maybe a carnie in a circus… still. Vinsmoke Sancho Horizon, Pirate Joculator, has a certain ring to it, y’know? I mean, a Pirate Clown, that’s fun. You can do things with that- because, really, clowns aren’t funny.

No clown is ever really funny. That’s the whole purpose of a clown. People laugh at clowns, but only out of nervousness, or a sort of- thank the Powers, that isn’t me- sort of feeling. The point of clowns is that, after watching our blood-less play, anything else that happens seems enjoyable.

Shit, maybe I am meant for piracy…

"If it's clean in the kitchen, go ahead and toss the salad."

D’you know what that means? It means, if my dick is freshly washed, no smegma buildup or awful urine stench, it’s safe to assume my balls, and my asshole- including my asscrack- are clean as well. Thus, go ahead and lick it, if you want.

Here’s what you ought to know about what it feels like when your beautiful wife decides that the thing to do to add a little spice to today’s dish is to go straight for the salad. I will say this: it feels fantastic!

Nerve endings I never knew I had lit up and danced under her heavy wet tongue. It’s… really, it’s astoundingly nice, a disarmingly sensational experience, overwhelming and heavenly at once. It felt like I was being possessed by a hot wet Power, and, well- when she did it, I started speaking in Demonic, which… I’ll get to that in a bit.

Basically, to start, we were in 69; she would work her magic on my dick, I would put my whole face in her mojo, the usual. Then, I don’t know- she started going lower, and by the time she was at my taint all rational thought had fled me and uh, then she was giving my pucker a little hello and the phrase ‘transcendental copulation’ had never applied so well.

I feel as if I quite lost my mind, or at least whatever piece of it is involved in not putting bruises on my wife’s skin, not speaking in Demonic, and not sodomizing my wife either. I usually don’t moan so loudly either, but here we are.

Demonic is the language of Demons; it sounds a bit like… um… well, there are some sounds in Muscovia that are similar, I think. Comes from the Ura tribe of Orcs, in a very specific region of Musovy… Udoroth spoke Uralic, which is what Demonic came from originally.

Anyway, Demons don’t say ‘I love you’ in Demonic.

In Faesh, which is one of several languages Parlar gets its particular je nes quoi from, it’s normal to say ‘I love’ for things you consider extremely enjoyable- food, music, cats, and so on. You can even
use it on, and for, people- but in Demonic, ‘minä rakastan’ is exclusively for your romantic partner alone. I’ve never said that to my wife before, because I wasn’t ready- it’s- honestly, growing up I heard it most in a sarcastic sense (‘I just LOVE the way you fought your brothers, Sanji’); I think I only heard it used seriously once, and that was between two people so old they were past caring about propriety.

Even when I do want to say ‘minä rakastan’, it’s ridiculous! It’s so awkward to say, and the meaning is so- urgh! It sounds wrong. If I’m speaking Demonic at all, which is fairly rare- although I might have to, as the Suntides do deserve to have that part of their heritage- but if I was speaking Demonic, I’d much rather say ‘olet rakas’. It sounds better, and it can be used by friends and family without being so connotative. I- hm. If it were just a matter of it sounding weird, the language would have changed entirely- but it hasn’t.

“Go on.”

“I- this is kind of difficult to explain. The words for ‘I love you’ in Demonic are so uncomfortably formal- it doesn’t roll out of the mouth in the slightest, it’s not- it’s not flirty, or teasing. There is no way to lessen the weight of those words.”

Mab- after tossing my salad and listening to my helpless babbling in Demonic- asked me what I was saying. When I replied I didn’t know, she repeated back what I had said, and when she felt my shock and embarrassment, got worried enough about me that I just started… I started explaining it to her.

She, of course, listened to me intently and with a gleam of curiosity and ‘want to understand’ in her eyes, because she’s an absolute treasure.

“Linguistics isn’t my forte, but I’ll try to explain this. Firstly, words really do have more meaning and weight in Demonic than they do in any other language, even Sung-en, or Sunken, Faesh, the language of the Court of Law. Demonic words are precise to the uttermost, at a level beyond Sunken Faesh. If it’s been said in Demonic, what is meant is exactly what is said; there are no take-backs, no deviations, and no derivations. It’s- it’s a language of absolutes.

“I’m not kidding- there are synonyms, sort of, but each slightly different word that means broadly the same thing differs in the connotation of the tone in which it’s spoken. Some words in Demonic come with centuries of baggage for you to unpack to even begin to understand how deeply ingrained their meanings are- Mab, I’m talking… I’m talking F-word, B-word, G-word levels of ingrained meaning and connotation.

“There are newspapers printed in Demonic, of course- it’s the national language of Germa Kingdom, there have to be- and if ever a journalist makes a mistake and tries to do a take-back… You could never sound more untrustworthy, more like a liar or a faker, than what that sounds like to a Demonic speaker. In Demonic, you, and everyone who hears you speak, or sees you write, knows exactly what you said, knows exactly what you wrote, and exactly what you meant when you did.

“In the textbooks that teach non-native speakers how to speak Demonic, it’s often said that ‘Demonic is spoken as it’s written’; what they actually mean is pronunciation. You say the words like they’re written. No one, excepting, possibly, formal reciters, ever speaks written Demonic.”
“Why not?”

“Written Demonic is extremely formal and rigid. There are vast differences between the spoken and written forms of Demonic. Written Demonic is the standardized, default written form of Demonic. Most books published in Germa Kingdom, like school books, technical manuals, poetry- those are written in that style. That way, every Demonic speaking person can understand the book, even though the various dialects of Demonic have… well, there are words unique to each dialect, that don’t cross over and can’t be explained easily at all.”

“...Se on se, jonka oppin koulussa?”

“Jep. Written Demonic was sort of, um, developed way after the spoken language was, and that shows. Demonic on paper doesn’t move like it does on your tongue. Spoken Demonic often drops entire words, syllables, vowels, you name it. Meaning and direction of conversation is provided by the speaker and what is spoken- so, a lot of things can be left unsaid, and usually are. Demonic personal pronouns aren’t gendered because of that, basically; and the Fae stole the idea off us because, what?”

“Made filing easier.”

“...really?”

“Jep.”

“Let that be the reason, then… Um. Hm. I got a lecture on this once, let me see if I can- right, okay, Demonic is an agglutinative language, so words bend tremendously and allow for new and understandable words to be created on a whim. A lot of dialects affect consonants and vowels- and yet, if you know Demonic, it’s still perfectly understandable. Go figure.

“Back to written Demonic- the way it behaves out loud sounds incredibly odd, most of the time. Written Demonic is clunky, when spoken aloud; personal pronouns sound out of place when following the proper format. It doesn’t allow for letters or words to drop. The order, also, is very stiff when compared to what actually gets said; the inconsistencies that crop up are often bizarre, and not at all intuitive. Very- businessy, if that makes sense. Thus, it only gets trotted out in non-spoken formats; which is why it’s always referenced as ‘the Written Demonic’; chiefly because, no one in their right mind who can speak Demonic talks in Written Demonic.

“The best way I can explain this is- if a Faesh-speaking native heard someone start speaking, I dunno, Sidhe-”

“Actually, if it’s Sidhe, it becomes Sira, language of Syreenes; if it’s Faesh, it used to be Tuathic.”

“Fine, Tuathic then. That’s how different the tones and verbs behave and sound between Spoken and Written Demonic. No one talks as is written in Demonic. I- I can’t stress that enough, Mab- no one talks like that . It’s grating to the ear, and personally I avoid Demonic audio anything where it was written down, first, because Demonic as it’s spoken is does not sound like Demonic as it’s written, then spoken.”

“And you don’t say ‘I love you’.”

“N-no. No, saying ‘I love you’ in Demonic sounds weird, because ‘Minä rakastan sinua’ is Written Demonic. No one speaks Written Demonic; it’s not meant to be said. Therefore, the exact phrase for ‘I love you’ is never, ever spoken in that particular format.”
“I- I don’t-”

“The literal translation of ‘Minä rakastan sinua’ is I love you, literally, but it sounds like ‘It is I that loves you’, which is a bit-”

“-Oh! Oh my. Yeah, that’s a bit-”

“So. The nearest you might hear is where the ‘I’ from ‘I love you’ gets dropped; it actually still translates to ‘I love you’, because of how Demonic verbs and conjugation works. ‘Rakastan sinua’ instead of ‘Minä rakastan sinua’ sounds better, because it drops the whole ‘It is I’ part, letting it be implied like in normal spoken format. The word ‘you’, ‘sinua’, is still in its formal version, but since that’s something that can’t be left out, you either say ‘Rakastan sinua’ and sound a bit weird, or use a spoken variant of ‘you’; thus, it becomes ‘Rakastan sua’. This can then be replied to with the equivalent of ‘so do I’ or ‘I too (love) you’, ‘Minäkin (rakastan) sinua’ where the word ‘love’ can be dropped out because the meaning is carried from the previous sentence.”

“Rakastan sinua, Sanij.”

“Minäkin sinua, Mab. -Still, it’s fairly rare for any Demonic speaker to ever, ever say that, in that particular way.”

“What do you usually say, then?”

“Mm. Well, instead of ‘I love you’, we usually say that ‘you are loved’ or ‘you are dear (to my heart)’; ‘olet rakas’, because that’s how predominately Demonic language and culture works. Faesh doesn’t have words for ‘rakas’ that could bring the heart-felt implications to the forefront like Demonic does. No language I’ve ever had the pleasure of hearing comes close.”

“What are the connotations, then, hmmmmmm?”

“It- um. Mnmphm! Mmmmpffmmmm! Fwuah, it, hah, it comes with heavy romantic, endearing and- hhhah- sickly sweet connotations. Oh-oooh-other words- other words- w-what was I saying?”

“Other words, hmmmmm…?”

“Yeah! Other words get tacked onto ‘rakas’ if the speaker doesn’t mean it as a declaration of undying romantic love- the w-w-weight remains, b-but-”

“Rakas, Sanji. MmmmmMmmmmMmmmMmmMmmMmmMmm-”

“♥♥♥! Minäkin sinua, Mab! In- in a way, it’s a bit- fffffaaaah!- it’s a bit intimida-”

“Hmmm?”

“NNNNNGH- it’s intimidating because if I call someone ‘rakas ystävä’ that’s a huge ffffuck, fuck fuck fuck, fucking deal. Hhah. Th-the implications of that level of end-d-d-d-DAMMMMIT-endearment means that it’s ride or die- I- I- MAB-! FINGERS-?!”

“Mmmmmhm. Not good?”

“IT’S GOOD, I- I- I THINK♥? ♥! ♥!? ♥!?! RAKAS!”

“Minäkin sinua, Sanji. Let me see if I’ve gotten it right- when a Demon says they love you, it means a hell of a lot more than it does otherwise, particularly if they say it in Demonic. Like, say, you’re tossing your husband’s salad, or giving his boy-clit a massage-”
“♥♥♥!!! ♥♥♥?? ♥♥♥!!!!”

“And he starts babbling in Demonic, and one of the things that pops out is his declaration of undying romantic love— that means more than if he’d squealed in, say—”

“Rakastan sinua niin paljon! MaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAB—”

“Minäkin sinua, Sanji— it means more than if he’d squealed in Parlar or Faesh, aye?”

“AAAAaaaAAaaAAAAaaA—”

“Hmhmmhmhm. So, it’s basically as serious as a formal declaration of war, but for love instead.”

“-AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA♥!”

“Hmhmmhmhm- mm, that’s enough for right this second.”

...Demonic is like a heavy, carved boulder; so heavy, in fact, that you only move it with precise intention, and probably only once if you can help it. Parlar is more like small pebbles and the occasional flat-stone you find on the shore, easy to throw into the water or skip across; effortless. They hardly weigh anything at all. I- I can’t take ‘I love you’ back, but it’s lighter in connotation, and you understand what I mean which is what I want. To say the same thing in Demonic takes years of careful planning, support structures, proper tones, and a future intention; in Demonic, I’d end up carving a whole new boulder for each person I said ‘I love you’ to, so, in Demonic, I usually don’t say it at all.”

“Mm.”

“...Rakas, Mab.”

“Minäkin sinua, Sanji. ...You still want to have a course of ‘hide the sausage’, or…? Because I thought ‘Fish-wrapped Sausage with White Sauce’ would be a nice dish for this evening’s pleasure—although maybe ‘mushroom’ is a better euphemism, if we’re using euphemisms— I can’t think of any fish and sausage combination that would go well with a white sauce, but mushrooms could be nieeeEEP!”

I’ve flipped Mab onto her back, and I’m shoving my rapidly swelling dick against her warm soft wet pussy and I’m pressing my forehead against hers and just- beaming.

“Jos haluat vielä seksiä kanssani nän, mielestäni nyt on aika ...” she murmurs in her charmingly schoolgirlish Demonic.

“Kyllä,” I rumble back.

And then my Fairy wife puts her Mermaid on, and I can hear her soft breaths become the very beginnings of moans.
Crown to tailtip- begin at the beginning, and end at the end. Mab’s hair doesn’t change all that much, when she puts her Mermaid on. It’s smoother to the touch, maybe, and individual locks of hair don’t want to pull away from each other; if I try to run my fingers through her hair, even in this smooth and shiny state, my fingers get caught. So thick I can’t touch her scalp, and softer than feathers...

Her skin is different- less soft, more rubbery, like there’s a layer of some springy weave under her skin, thicker fat, I could flick a coin at her breast and take someone’s eye out- firm. She becomes firm, and sleek, and the hair she has in abundance is only those places you’d expect hair to be- her head, the spine-line, her brows and lashes. All the rest is gone, and Mab is paler for it, redder, duskier- tawny becomes ivory, sand turns to gold.

Kissing her is as marvelous as ever, but she responds- more? Thrills to my touch in ways I don’t think I’ve ever seen a woman do- a teenage girl, maybe, but I wasn’t good enough then to ever- kyaaa, and the way she nuzzles into my hands is so cute, I can hardly-

Can hardly-

She has freckles, freckle scales, about the size of pinpricks, scattered across the bridge of her nose and her cheekbones, the curved apples of her face.

“Could we- jewellery?”

“Mmm. ‘kay.”

And then, underneath my questing fingers, as I draw trails of delight over her neck and hips, delicate chains of pearls that drip and drape like luminous drops of sunlight over silver and blue-black scales.

Down again to her tail, so smooth it’s slimy.

Normally, I’m in a wild frenzy, bonfire-bright and straining to love her- but right now? Right now, I’m the steady yellow of the pilot light in my oven.

Slowly. No rush.

This is what I Know. Orgasm is a cognitive task for women, and an associative task for men. Men can do more than one thing, or be distracted, and still cum. Women can only orgasm- no other motions, distractions, or voluntary tasks can occur simultaneously.

Make sure everything is nice and warm, dim enough to be comfortable but bright enough you can still see what needs doing. Pay special attention to her feet- if Mab gets unexpectedly cold, her orgasm can get stuck.

Lecher a bonbon? Easy enough- starts with long, broad licks, to build up anticipation for what’s coming later. Up and down and up and down, enjoy the strange scraping texture of her pelvic fins and the soft whimpers of her throat; up and down and all around the swelling ring of pleasures, and when it starts flaring and leaking, well.

Mermaids don’t have a clit; or maybe they do, it’s just the entire first and last thirds of their vaginas- is it really a vagina if her assole’s in there too? Dunno. I do know that using your teeth to apply
pressure - not to bite, just to press- will make her squeal.

You’ll have to practice this a few times, but eventually you’ll see a sign from Management telling you you’re on the right track- at which point, you really focus in on the bulgy ring around her rosie. It’s basically the tip of a penis, just circular- so all the things I like, she’s into as well; circles, nibbles, pressure… suction...

When her ring starts to change color, swell, or even when her hips start to buck and shudder against your face, that’s a good time to put the thumb on her introitus- the very slippery entrance of her pussy. It’s very sensitive, and using the pad of your thumb lets you get to more of it at once. Finally, pick one thing that you know feels good for her to do- motion, speed, and pressure- focus on one part of her ring- high, low, curvy side- and fucking commit goddamnit. Do it until she cums; if you’re not sure when that is, just keep going until she pushes you away.

If you’re doing it right, her ring will just keep swelling up and her physical responses will become more urgent.

Mermaids are narrower than any other human woman; so, while you’re eating, insert one finger at a time and focus on stretching her just a touch. It’s best to do this before you’ve committed to making her come, but if you forget, it’s okay. Just wait a while after you’ve made her cum, and then start the stretching- a limber pussy is a happy pussy when it comes time to fuck!

Either way, always start slow and deep and build it up until you’re finger fucking her and suckling on her ring. Once you find a rhythm and style that works for you, DON’T CHANGE A FUCKING THING AND DON’T YOU DARE STOP. You’re in this to win this; go until she cums or shoves you away.

Repeat as necessary until- and this is just a personal preference- she’s begging you in a tizzy of sweat and slime and bright red pussy swollen and quivering for you, she’s begging you to fuck her into the floor, please, Rasputin, please please please-

And you do. Because your wife asked for you to- she even used your name~!

The actual fucking of a mermaid is a slow, measured affair- not something a greenhorn should attempt! It’s measured in centimeters of progression, not the in and out schlick schlick of other styles- certainly not at first. If I try going to fast, I could really hurt my wife and completely ruin the moment for her, and I want-

Gggah-

Slowly-!

Slowly, until my hips are pressed flat against hers, and she’s shuddering from the sharp points of my hips pressed into her soft smooth skin and she’s whining as the tiny little bucks and shudders of my hips translate into some of the finest fucking she’s ever had, and her tail is pounding into the bed because when my dick is all the way inside her, hilted and swallowed whole, my tip digs into the squishy base and makes her whole world go spark bright and pleasurable.

Find her eyes, brush her hair away from her face and catch her eyes- god my wife is so cute when she blushes, and she always does when I lean my face in close while we’re fucking-

Unph-
-gently catch her lower lip in your mouth and **bite** on it a little so her eyes flash open and lock on mine again, **don’t you dare look away** hard thrust punctuation and her brown eyes flecked with gold get huge in her head and she’s so- **mine**-

-warm ridged soft wet rippling up and down and up and down the brush of fins over my shoulders and the slap of her tail against the bedsheets and the deep growly-purr that vibrates in my chest and then- and then-

She wraps her hands. **Around my horns. And squeezes.**

The thing in my chest that couldn’t decide if it was a purr or a growl becomes a roaring brushfire, and my hips slap and snarl against her, all delicate rhythm thrown to the wayside.

I press our foreheads together and **pound** , watching her eyes pop and flick with each thrust- she can’t break my gaze, now, and I can feel hear think see the babbling in her head being replaced by bright white light pure and clean and radiant, shining out from the top of her head.

I, perhaps cruelly, scrape her over that edge and fling her into infinity, the writhing kisses of her pussy against the head of my dick all the incentive I need to follow her up and out. Just before I do, though, I seal her drooling mouth with a kiss, and wrap my fingers in her hair- she can’t hold this transformation through an orgasm, it’s too much.

The World is pure white and beaming, and I- I dare to run into joy, screaming fit to split the heavens.

When I finally come back, Mab’s wrapped her legs around my hips in an iron grip, and I’m- fffffah- h-how, how am I hard again, I didn’t-

Oh. I didn’t actually ejaculate.

Oh boy.

It’s gonna be a long night. A long, hot, sweaty night.

Mab rolls me onto my back and then-

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Here’s the complicated lecture I was going to give to Beatrix, broken down to it’s basic elements.
Doll- or Tontatta- clothing is hard to make, not because it’s hard to sew - once you know how to sew, you know how to sew, and that’s that. Doll clothing is complicated because of all the things you have to take into account long before you get to the sewing stage. Although, now that I think of it, doll clothing is complicated for a few reasons, really.

In particular, seams need to be smaller than normal, and bulk is always a problem. Fabric does not lay on Tontatta the way it does on larger people. The seams are the first obvious difference on inspection of doll-size clothing; almost without exception, all seams are a quarter inch. The exceptions are eighth inch seams, when even less bulk is required. The entire reason for such small seams is to reduce bulk.

Tontatta waists can be described as an ‘X’, proportionally much smaller than other human waists - I think it has something to do with a smaller rib-count, as in they have fewer. When unclad, a Tontatta can easily be mistaken for another kind of creature entirely, not human at all - but they are. Besides, when properly made, the thickness of the fabric makes up for the different proportions of the Tontatta.

Cloth will always appear proportionally thicker on a Tontatta than on a person. So, fairly thin fabric must be used to sew Tontatta clothing; thus, the reduction of bulk wherever possible, which is easiest in the seaming.

Less bulky seams are those with one layer, such as flat felled seams; and when in doubt, a plain seam is better than others. Too much backstitching is also not advisable; it’s better to cross the unruly seam with another seam at an angle, or use a hand knot to finish things. For finishing raw edges, which stops ravelling, there are a few options. Sergers and overlock machines are not advisable, as the sheer amount of thread builds up very quickly, creating too much bulk; there are some styles where the serger is used to create a lace-like finish, but those are for very specific articles. The normal Tontatta-style seam is usually a type of glue known in the trades as Waterproof Fray Check, which seals the fabric edge; the other common seaming method is using heat to seal the edge by burning it. Other styles of seaming Tontatta clothing include a zigzag stitch over the edge, or a hand overcast.

Sewing the actual doll-size garment together requires a different order of operations than the sewing of full-size garments. Skirts and blouses and trousers and pants and shirts - if made as a set, the skirt or pants are begun with, and the blouse or shirt follow after. If a dress is being made, the bodice is the first piece completed, followed by the front and side seams for the fashion fabric and the lining; then the lining is sewn into the bodice.

When interfacing is required, storebought is no good; it’s too heavy for Tontatta clothing. Self fabric or cotton batiste or silk batiste are preferred. These types of fabric will add no noticeable bulk to the tiny garment.

The skirt seams are sewn next, followed by attaching the skirt to the bodice at the waist. Usually, the back of the garment is left open for either inserting a Tontatta zipper, Tontatta buttons, adding velcro, attaching eye-and-hooks, or stitching snaps. Closure types are decided at the pattern cutting stage - snaps, eye-and-hooks, and velcro all require a larger seam allowance than zippers or buttons do. Of course, generous seam allowances do make the entire process just a bit easier…

Fabric must be considered carefully. Avoiding bulk on a small body is paramount, as is staying within scale at small size. The choice of fabric for the garment can make or break the final good; thus, it is very important to stay in scale, not just in print or pattern, but in the actual weave of the
fabric itself.

Plain fabrics will always work well for garments, but prints and plaids can be tricky to use. The scale of the print or plaid must be small enough to be plausible on the Tontatta, while still reading as prints or plaids to a larger eye. Those within the ten centimeter and under range will be hardest to create garments for, while larger Tontatta are easier to clothe. It is particularly difficult to find purchasable fabric for the very smallest of Tontatta; often, it’s easier and faster to simply weave the required fabric oneself. Pickiness and snobbery are of the utmost importance here, as the tiniest details really do make the largest differences- the wrong print, the wrong fabric, the wrong pattern, the wrong cut- a single one of these can completely destroy the image trying to be attained. All of them can ruin your interest in the entire enterprise for years.

Fabric weight is also of utmost importance when created Tontatta garments. For those Tontatta in the middle range- that is to say, at or around thirty centimeters in height- the use of much lighter weight fabrics than in a garment meant for a person is commonplace. The attributes of the fabric that are not intrinsic to it- like how flannel or lightweight wool are not as durable or warming as tweed or camel- are produced using a series of potion-baths, alchemical transformations, and runic weavings. These processes are not often used in a larger scale, as they are prohibitively expensive, cause complications at larger scales, and require a level of dedication not found in the average sewist. (Runic weavings are the basis of traditional Fae Fabricraft; however, it takes a very specific kind of person to get any good at it, much like it takes a very specific kind of person to weave complicated heirloom lace for fun.)

Natural fabrics are easier to work with at this scale than synthetics. Polyester’s only real advantage- in this instance- is that it’s cheap and plentiful. It does not press well, it does not take potion or alchemical processing well, and it does not have the right weight or hand compared to it’s natural equivalents. Runic weaving is hard no matter what you do; there are no shortcuts to excellence. The best fabrics to use are lightweight; cotton, silk, wool, linen, and even rayon will work well, especially for the smaller Tontatta. There is more leeway in fabric choice for Tontatta forty to forty five centimeters; and Tontatta over fifty centimeters tall will be the easiest to find appropriate fabrics for.

Mainly, the look of the thing is what’s most important; unless the Tontatta in question is a clown, the fabric should never look clownish.

Linings are often considered garish compared to larger clothing; but there is one very specific reason for the color of the lining and the thread in Tontatta clothing. Tontatta are highly ritualistic and religious people- at least, the ones with the money to fund most major Tontatta fashion houses are- and accordingly require the clothing they buy to adhere to their religious laws. There are enough Tontatta, who follow the same religion, worship the same way, and adhere to the same laws, that their requirements became standardized.

The law, as I recall it, goes something like ‘Thou shalt not stain thy skin with the colors of the World; for I have made thee perfectly in My image.’ Thus, all fabrics meant to touch the skin of a Tontatta are either bleached white, or undyed. And, because the seams go everywhere, the thread is white too.

Sewing sleeves onto Tontatta clothing is different from the regular operations because of size. Normally, the bodice shoulders and side seams are sewn, followed by setting in the sleeves. On Tontatta clothing, the seams are far too small to be able to set them into the bodice, not to mention bulk. The best approach is to sew the shoulder seam, then sew the opened sleeve to the bodice, before the side seams of the bodice or the seam on the sleeve is sewn.
A line of ease stitching just inside of the sleeve cap seam, either by hand or machine, is where it starts. The sleeve is then pinned to the bodice with appliqué pins, and basted in by hand. The sleeve cap is then sewn to the bodice, by hand or machine. The smaller the garment, the easier it is to do by hand; and at that point, a tiny running stitch, as in embroidery or quilting, is preferred.

As always, forcing a flat plane to curve is the most complicated operation of all; introducing a small size raises the difficulty exponentially. Still, some things remain as they always are- the tip of a dart should always end just before the bust point. If it goes exactly to the bust point, it’s too long and looks wrong. There should never be a dimple at the end of the dart; it should always end smoothly and unobtrusively.

Even though Tontatta clothes are much smaller than literally everything else, even baby clothes, a proper dart when required is paramount to success. After all, poorly fitted clothes look no better on Tontatta than they do on everyone else- worse, in fact, because there’s so much less to see.

Double ended darts are usually found at the waistlines of sheath dresses. They supply shaping in the waist area, which is especially important in Tontatta clothing because their waists are so much smaller than other waists. Putting a dart at the waist is no more difficult than anywhere else; sewing a double ended dart is the same as sewing two single darts in mirror of each other.

“The first time my teacher, Madame Stitchworthy, ever had me make clothing for dwarves, I was… hm, probably about your age, maybe a year younger.”

“Oh. So- it’s not… hard?”

“It is; but because of how small the finished garment is, I can justify letting you play with really expensive fabrics. You’ll be getting mostly scrap pieces, and anything I approve of will be going into one of the Mice’s wardrobes.”

“…They’re gonna have some really cool clothes, aren’t they?”

“Gods, I hope so.”

I smile over at Beatrix, whose steady stitches have gotten her through the first sampler well within the schedule I gave her. She’s now working on the second one, and will soon have enough self-confidence to do the disk I first assigned her.

As for the Mice’s clothes, I might as well go over that while I’m doing the mending- I don’t actually need my full attention to do this, not anymore.

To start with, D’artagnan ‘Darla’ Divot is male, not female as I thought on first meeting him. I only narrowly avoided causing a rift between us due to my habitual use of non-gendered language; and, thankfully, I’d already taken his measure for his smallclothes before I needed to use a gendered title. D’artagnan is a young hot blooded man, about fifteen year’s or so, with a deep respect for his friend, Eleanor. It’s a fairly easy mistake I almost made; Darla’s got long brown hair, a high soft voice, and
a very curvy body. Don’t let that fool you- he’s a Seahorse type merman, and very definitely a man.

How to say it- outside of the martial arts world, Seafolk come in two varieties. They either look very much like the fish they’re classified as, or they look ethereally beautiful. There’s a reason why my husband Sanji, who loves me more than anything except perhaps a well aged Bordeaux, still has a mild nervous breakdown anytime he’s cognizant of being in a room with more than one female mermaid of near-canoodling age. Or even why he still fucks me senseless when I’m in Mermaid Aspect- frankly, it’s two parts rumor campaign and one part how our eyes work.

Seafolk, even the really ugly or weird looking ones, are shiny. They sparkle and shimmer in the light of day- or stars, or moonlight, or candles… Point is, human beings are hardwired to pay attention to shiny things.

Anyway, Darla has an absolutely shameless sense of style, and loves showing off what he considers his best features- and if that means he’s nearly naked, or wearing the ‘wrong gender’ of clothing, he’s fine with it. Apparently, his full name is actually D’artagnan, but he goes by Darla because it’s easier for everyone- including himself- to pronounce. I call him D’artagnan anyway, as does Sanji; it never fails to make him smile, just a little bit.

Anyway, his clothing is a combination of cropped tops, shirt-less sleeves, and halter tops, which show off in order his waist-size, his abdominal and pectoral muscles, or his shoulder and arm muscles. For small clothes, I made a run of low-chafe haramakis so he could cover his spike-ring without putting undue pressure or tension on it.

Skirts for men are tricky- a straight fall is usually best, with some manner of pleating to allow for much broader movements. D’artagnan likes simple a-line skirts the most, with wider waistbands and a slip or petticoat sewn into the skirt; as for pattern, he detests them. He’s Estern Ryugu, so it makes sense; if he could wear hanbok, he would, but he can’t. So, I make his skirts a multitude of brilliant colors, and do the same to all his shirts, with not a print or pattern to be seen. I also made him a teeny-tiny bangrip out of the beard of wheat heads in it’s natural black color, which he got a kick out of.

J3LLYB34N is about as different as you can get; for one thing, she says the nickname she always wanted was ‘Aramis’. She’s ambitious, as far as Automata go, with a very deep thirst for… well, something. She can’t seem to decide on what; but she always has some manner of plan for getting what she wants rattling away in her brain.

Darla bounds through life on the whims of his heart; Aramis always has a plan. Where Darla was content with a number of brightly colored articles he could mix and match freely, Aramis wanted ensembles for various levels of formality. I obliged her.

It started with a jacket she could throw on over any old thing; translucent, of course. Then, a dress with fur sleeves in a vibrant, non-repeating print; a set of rompers in black, which she quite likes, and a long sleeve ensemble she frankly adores. Another jacket, longer, shorter sleeves, colorful panes of clear… it’s not exactly fabric, but it’s not not fabric, and that’s all I’ll say on the matter. A velvet long sleeve dress and a clear shiny skirt, simple a-line; one of the simplest ensembles I’ve ever made. The other, of course, is the clear overall skirt with the sundresses, as changing the print and pattern changes the entire outfit.

Her most formal ensemble is meant for those Automatic occasions where religious formality is required; her particular sect of the Beloved believe that their Mother, beyond Galatea, was Aglaea, the Splendid. Thus, their worshipping garb must be splendid as well- and so, it is.
She wears flat, flexible shoes with a strap that goes around her ankles, which helps keep them on; and her hair is little more than a clear fuzz atop her head, pointy ears jutting from the sides.

“Hey, boss?”

“Mmm?”

“What was your teacher like?”

“Hm.

“When I was subbing for Moda, who is now my goodly sister, where she worked at one time, a really harrowed- or possibly harassed- looking woman who was perhaps in her early forties came into the shop. She was wearing a cloth of gold cravat that was swiftly becoming an overly-fancy scarf, it’d been tied so poorly; and a rumpled light blue waistcoat embroidered with black ferns. She was not wearing a shirt, and I could not see her legs or shoes.

“Part time cashiers are sometimes not afforded the luxury of seeing a customer’s entire body.

“We said hello to each other as I rang up her purchase- bottle of tea and a small bag of granola; D2.69- me sounding more interested than usual simply because she sounded so out of breath and very engaged in her purchase. Also, maybe, because I could not see her shoes.

“How’s your life going?’ she suddenly asked, passing over her bank card, not casually but almost pleadingly curious.

“Ahm, well enough I s’pose’ I said, too startled by her deep and raspy voice to think of a more cheery lie.

“She nodded somberly. ‘Me too… I guess.’ She paused, and looked at me for a long moment, and then just said ‘It’s a Moonday, you know.’

“Moondays are like this sometimes’ I supplied, feeling like we were having a really weird conversation underneath the one that was actually taking place.

“And then she left. I forgot to look at her shoes.

“Honestly, I had no idea that I would ever have the privilege of meeting this fleeting spirit again. I considered it then as an odd moment, an interaction that changed me in a small way, but a fleeting moment nonetheless. I automatically assumed our paths would not cross again, there was such a finality to that window of time on that particular Moonday in August of my thirteenth year.

“And yet.

“She returned.

“I didn’t really notice her come in, glancing up from whatever menial and instantly forgotten task I was busy with. I surely saw her come in, but did not register who it was I saw, or why she seemed to put out an aura of familiar feeling. It had been weeks and I hadn’t even caught a glimpse of her, nor the barest whisper of rumor; the memory of Moonday in August had faded like a dream. But lo, she appeared before me, dressed in exactly the same fashion that made her look like she had just rolled out of an overly friendly bush- albeit, with a pink blouse and purple feather bowtie this go-round.
“Her face lit up when she saw me, again holding a bottle of tea and a bag of granola. ‘How is your day going?’ she asked earnestly.

“Pretty well’ I said, professionally containing myself, ‘how are you?’

“I’m good, I’m good’ she said, sounding more cheerful than before but just as harried. When I handed her back her change and items she looked like she was going to cry.

“She bowed and I do mean that literally, she literally bowed and then made a hurried exit stage left, reminiscent of Lear just before the second act, halfway into madness.

“A Lear I had again forgotten to note the footwear of.

“I still reel, even now, at the fact that she returned a third time, after four long months of nothing and on a Foolsday instead of a Moonday as well. She was wearing literally the same ensemble she had worn on our first meeting- poorly tied cloth of gold cravat, rumpled light blue waistcoat… with an added day glo orange boating sweater underneath the vest and a heavy military jacket that marked her as a professor at my school. It being the tail end of the winter holidays, the ushanka could be, perhaps, forgiven, but the mittens really caused me no end of consternation, they just didn’t match at all…

“She bought salt and vinegar beet chips this time instead of the standard granola, but the bottle of tea was as usual. She told me that she always felt guilty for buying nutritionally empty snack food, but that ‘we do what we must, mustn’t we.’

“She then smiled sadly at me and said ‘enjoy your weekend, Miss Morgan… if you can.’

“I stood in stunned, unblinking silence for about six minutes until another customer came up and looked me over worriedly.

“Who is this woman?

“What class did she teach at my school?

“When did she learn my name?

“Where did she live and work that she could come to this store every now and again for snacks?

“WHY DID I KEEP FORGETTING TO LOOK AT HER SHOES?

“No, really, how does she know my name?

“These questions would not be answered for some time.

“The fourth time our paths crossed in the never ending quest to sate the snack-craving hunger, I managed, finally, to make note of her shoes. They were a simple pair of burgundy brogues, no more than two years worth of distress worn into their leather, and polished to a soft shine regardless. Her socks were, in order, a pair of knee-high compression tights that did not restrict the toes and I knew that because I was wearing a pair just like hers at the time; and a pair of character ankle socks. They looked like owls.”
“The only reason I became aware of her socks was because this particular human being has absolutely no fear of fashion, and the cuff of her shorts hovered about an inch over her knees. I kept thinking that her outfits can’t possibly get any better; as always, I am pleasantly mistaken.

“That day, she wore a crumpled white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a gigantic shawl made of macramed thread in a color I can only call baby-puke green, a neon-orange and pink striped cravat, and a matching wooden watch varnished that same unnaturally bright orange that she probably got as a gift over the holidays.

“She did not grace me with her odd conversational charm that day, but I did receive something better: a clue. Today she was buying a red notebook and three fountain pens instead of snacks, a questionable decision for a Throughsday. Then again, it was a Throughsday; a day which falls under the baleful shadows of the Chaotic Powers, and which you will find I have a deep and near overzealous distrust of.

“When she pulled out her luxurious black and steel plated bank card to pay for her items, she said eight words which shook me to my very core.

“I do get a tenure discount on these.’

“This had never come up before because discount plans don’t apply to food items. I had no need to ask the identity of The Woman buying a bag of granola and a bottle of tea- but now!

“I didn’t speak as I handed over her receipt, merely nodded courteously. Only staff and students of my school knew about the specific discounts available, so I had no real need to ask for an ID for proof; and I cursed my mistake in not asking for it anyway for weeks after the fact.

“I had to find this woman.

“I had been going to school there for four years, and yet had only seen her within the confines of the student grocery at odd intervals during the holidays. I’d never even seen her step into the store, or leave, as another customer is somehow always in line behind her and demanding my attention.

“I spent half an hour going through the school’s entire staff directory that afternoon; and, somehow, I found something. I didn’t want to get my hopes up; I wasn’t certain and would have to gather more information to sniff out even a hint of certainty, and yet- for the first time, I could promise myself a trail to follow, a thread to pull. Perhaps, even, an ending.”

I pause, stand, and stretch. Then I walk into the kitchen, and take the carafe of lightly acidulated water from where Sanji left it for me, along with a pair of glasses and a tray of light snacks. I return to my apprentice and my mending, pour us both glasses of water, and continue.

“My work schedule changed after that Throughsday in January, and I was honestly beginning to think that I would never see the woman again until summer or the fall, as it’d been more than two months since our strange meeting. She startled me quite a bit when she literally blew in as if by a gust of wind right as my shift was ending.

“She was in quite a hurry and only bought a bottle of tea before blustering off, giving me no chance to run an investigation or perception check, but if fashion checks were a thing- and in fact, they are-

“Please imagine, if you will, a woman wearing a repeating chevron-patterned cravat that was, for
once, correctly tied, underneath a macrame vest in periwinkle blue threads held closed with twelve sparkling brooches I recognized as the Limited Astrology set from promotional material of the musical, Pyre; she wore the watch I mentioned before, khaki tights, an indigo blouse with three quarter sleeves- and an impeccably matched indigo cape, in velvet, with a collar that stood and neatly framed her eyebrows, not merely her chin and neck. Her shoes were a pair of **pearl-pink double strap mary jane heels**, and her hair was the exact shape and texture of a cumulonimbus cloud- a thunderhead.

“She looked like a hedge witch.

“I wanted answers.”

I take a sip of my water.

“I found my answers at the start of Fall Semester; Bobbin ‘Needlepoint’ Stitchworthy had graduated with Masters in Divinity, Fabric Arts, Fine Arts, and Mathemagics from Fairisle Military Engineering- FaME, for short.”

“Fame?”

“Mm. She earned distinction as a Professor of Technical Theater; here’s a **pictograph** of her. I couldn’t believe, after signing up for her introduction class as an elective and immediately falling in love, that I had not been hallucinating that woman for the past year and forty nine days.”

“...Will I ever meet her?”

“Mm. Maybe. Certainly not before I fix your weapons, though- Skua’s not the kind of place to go unarmed.”

Beatrix nods, and continues her sewing; as do I, after finishing my glass of water.

Ah, before I forget; the rest of the Mice’s clothing!

Maya wanted exclusively tracksuits or androgynous clothing, in forgettable shades of grey and neutral- she doesn’t like standing out, does our Athos.

Hildy wanted clothing she could run around in; as she’s Head Animal Wrangler on our crew by dint of us not having one before, I can see the appeal. I did sneak in a few pretty dresses, as I saw the glances between Hildy and Quill, and I like to encourage such things where I see them.

Arlinda Raader Haai and Quillaby were the easiest to create wardrobes for- they wanted traditional kimono, with a few nods here and there to modernity.
And so, my efforts for wardrobe were completed; all that’s left on the list of To Do’s is- ah.

Of course.

Tomorrow, the Funeral. After that- Imbolc!

My, how time’s passage creeps up on us all...
When I wear my eye mask to sleep in, I don’t get prophetic dreams. I try not to even take it off after bedtime so’s I don’t let any of those fuckers sneak in- but last night, I had an itch at the corner of my eye that just would not go away.

When I reached under and scratched at it, it was just past midnight, and thus a new day- and this is the thought that popped into my head.

‘Someone’s getting a funeral tonight. We’ll see who it is.’

-No, fuck you. I’m not going to worry myself over something that might not even happen, dammit. I’m going back to sleep.

Fernanda Out.

Deborah’s the oldest; Adelaide’s the most sociable. Beatrix is outgoing; Cecelia’s introverted. Eleanor has her own group of friends; Fernanda prefers her own company.

Sancho’s good on his own or in a group.

And then there’s me. Genevieve.

I don’t really- I feel like such an outsider! And it’s worse, now, that I don’t even have a broom- I’m terrible at witch skills, did you know? I’m not good at fortune telling like Fern or potions like Deb; I’m terrible at chance dancing like Ellie, and thatamurgy like Trixy does is just… not me. Cece and San have their own thing going and I- I just-

I used to be such a happy little idiot, super honest about my failings but always so damn… happy. I used to actually talk to people, and I’d at least try to make friends, but now… God, I can barely stand being around my friends! I snap and snarl at people left and right, and- and I can’t bear to be in the same room as my siblings at all. I don’t- what the hell is wrong with me?

Tch, so pathetic- I don’t even have human friends, all my friends are animals.

Omnifarious isn’t really a pet, or a familiar- he’s still wild, he just- I guess he likes hanging around me. We used to fly together; he’d teach me tricks, and I’d race with him, but… I can’t do that without a broom. He’s an osprey- and I don’t think he’s going to come with us. He’s got that feel to him- I think he’s going to fly off after the funeral, never to return.

It helps that he’s told me of his intentions himself, and spends almost no time on the ship now that he’s out of Auntie Whisper’s place. I guess he was Mom’s, more than anything else, and with her gone- he doesn’t. He doesn’t want to stay.
Grumble, Jabber, and Shriek are more like… friendly acquaintances. They’re really Fernanda’s familiars, not mine. They’re still a bit too young for their calls to be intelligible, but I know a Swear Toad when I see one- or three, in this case. These particular Swear Toads came from Corally, near the dockside. I’m sure they’ve got vocabularies fit to make even Whitebeard blush- but they’re still a bit too young to really shout it out with gusto. They have mildly venomous bites, and are incredibly fertile- if there’s any damp patch of ground, a colony of swear toads is soon to infest it. You see them a lot around docks in the Kingdom, and especially in the back alleys of dive bars.

Inky, Winky, and Blinky are actually Adelaide’s familiars; they’re all Battle Cats. Inky is actually a Bird Cat, so he fights very situationally. The reason I think Adelaide wanted him is actually for utility, as he synergizes well with some of her stranger applications of Fishman Karate. Winky is a Dragon Cat, if you can believe it. Blinky is a Whale Cat. He fights best at short range, against a single opponent- there’s another stage in his development coming, but damned if I can remember what it is. He’s tough, though- tough as anything.

Goblynn must have liked one of them long enough to make kittens- they’re all calico, so my money is on Winky. Goblynn is Beatrix’ familiar, and always has been- she’s nosy, overly protective, and very wary of strangers. Beatrix, all the way.

The creature I call Inky, and my sisters often get confused with Inky the Cat, is… well, technically, they’re a kind of Oak. Really, they’re… if a witch can have an overly-mobile tree for a familiar, then… Puffy is mine.

Puffy is… I got her, because she’s a her, when she was just a baby. Or should that maybe be seed…? She was trapped under some banana leaves that got piled up near our roof- I was clearing them away, and she just… she fell, right into my training bra. I didn’t notice her for days, actually- I thought the drain on my magic was the onset of a cold, and it would be another year before my breast-skin got sensitive enough to note the miniscule changes in heat and pressure Puffy made then. Even now, Puffy is a tiny, tiny creature - only about as big as a pair of balled up ankle socks. The thing that she rides around in, that’s her armor. Part of it is that she wants to be a dragon - she’s told me this herself, y’see. Part of it is that she has a huge crush on one of the Jackfruit Bats that live near the open air market.

Mostly, I think it’s because she doesn’t want to get left behind anymore, and she doesn’t want one of the others to eat her. In her normal form, she’s about the size of a large cotton ball, just as soft and sanitary. In her armored form, you could be forgiven for confusing her with an oaktopus.

I haven’t seen bark nor fur of her since I broke my broom and shoved my head under the bathwater, trying to drown. I have gills; I can’t drown.

I was so mean to her, I can’t believe- I can believe I said that to her, I’m such an idiot-

I used to be able to talk to my friends- animals, my friends were animals, and I used to be able to talk to them. I guess it started with Omnifarious deciding that he would not journey on with us- I just. I guess it was a bit before I went out and returned and crashed onto the deck, and… And I can’t understand what they’re saying, I can’t understand at all. I only hear croaks and grumbles, no-
nothing I can converse with.

It’s very lonely and crushing, not having friends. I’ve never been very good at making friends, and- and now that I can’t even talk to the animals I was friends with, I’m discovering that I don’t know how to talk to people, either.

I’m starting to wonder if there’s not some intrinsic flaw in me, that I can’t seem to fucking- I just, what the hell am I supposed to say to my sisters, to my brother, ‘sorry mom’s dead, what are you doing later today?’ Is- is that it?

Ugh, gods, and it- it feels like everyone on this ship has something they want to do, someone they’re struggling to become. Every time my sisters look at me, I know that all they can see is some useless lump who’s only good for patching other people up after their adventures, I can’t even- I can’t even go on an adventure without fucking something up!

I just wanted- I just wanted an adventure, and all I got was a broken broom and dirt in places dirt was never meant to go. I’m just a stupid, friendless weirdo loser who’s only good as an object lesson in what not to do and for cleaning up other people’s mistakes.

I- goddammit, I can’t even enjoy myself at a fucking party! I don’t- I don’t-

There’s a gap in my memory- I remember going to bed after another useless day of kicks and punches on the bag in the training room, and eating a dinner and it fucking- it tasted like ashes, and I know that’s not right, I know that’s not what it tasted like but- but- I can’t.

I can’t do this anymore.

can’t do what?

I can’t be like this anymore, I can’t I’m just going to- I’m going to jump.

please don’t jump that would be such a mess

I don’t care, I’m going to jump.

can you tell me why?

I- yeah. The so called ‘psychotically depressed’ person who tries to kill herself doesn’t do it out of ‘hopelessness’ or any abstraction in conviction that life’s own assets and debts don’t square away. Death does not appeal. I- I’m going to jump for the same reason a person trapped in a burning building will jump.
what reason is that- is it somehow better to jump than to burn?

Of course it isn’t! Don’t be stupid! The terror of falling is just as great as it would be for anyone else- jumping and falling is no better than burning! It’s just- it’s just, in the moment, the terror of the final stop is smaller than the terror of being consumed. What will I be if I let this consume me? I won’t be myself- I’m hardly myself now- a-and, and I don’t want to fall, can you understand that? I do not want to fall- I do not want to jump. I don’t desire to fall; I fear the consuming flame behind me, devouring what I- *who* I am.

would it matter if I asked you not to jump?

No. You don’t understand- no one here does. Even if, if they all woke up and came out and started screaming ‘Don’t!’ and ‘Hang on!’; the proverbial nobody down there on the decks could never understand why I have to jump. I have to jump, and they’d never ever understand that, not really- not even if I explained it. You’d have to have personally been trapped like me and felt these flames to really understand a terror beyond falling.

are you really sure this is what you want to do?

It’s not like anything else has worked! I don’t have the guts to kill myself in a catastrophic broom crash, because what if I take someone else out with me? My failure of a life is my problem, not anyone else- it’s *my* sadness that will devour me like a loathsome flame, I- I- I won’t let it hurt anyone else! I’ve tried hanging myself a bunch of times, and- and I guess I’m just shitty at tying knots, because the rope always broke, or maybe- maybe I’m just terrible at picking spots, because last time I tried hanging I woke up in a ditch full of mud with the rope smacking me in the head and it felt like someone was going ‘STUPID STUPID STUPID’ and I do that enough to myself, I don’t need everything else doing it too. And poison is right out-

why’s that?

**IT DOESN’T FUCKING WORK ON ME, THAT’S WHY.** So. I’m- I’m jumping. I’ve tried hanging and crashing and poisons and none of them ever work- but this. This might do it. I’m all the way on the highest point of the crow’s nest, and there’s nothing sticking out for me to grab onto and there’s no one who can ‘save me’ when I jump. Everyone’s asleep except me- Fuck, I wish this stupid worthless version of me had died when I ate all those pills.

“Genevieve, please don’t-” said Bryony.
“I’m leaving. Goodbye.” I said.

And then I took a step forwards and fell.

There’s this moment, when you’re falling over, where you can feel your balance tipping too far for you to save yourself- an actual, physical sensation for when you’ve actually begun to fall. When I took that final step, I felt that moment.

In that moment of falling, I realized that everything in my life was fixable- except for this. Instant regret, just add suicide attempt number seven.

So, okay, here’s how fucking useless I am- I had everything planned out. I wrote a goddamn note, I snuck out right near the end of a watch so that whoever was on it wouldn’t be too aware, I even-fucking, I snuck up the mast!

I had a final conversation with my- what, my fucking conscious? I fucking confronted my goddamn reasons, confirmed my course- and then I fucking jumped.

Godsdamnit, I’m such a fuck up- this was not the right thing to do! Fuck! Fuck, I’m going to die, I’m going to hit the deck and my body’s going to break so badly I- my sisters are going to be so sad , fuck, fuck I didn’t think of them at all, fuck-

There are things I was still looking forwards to doing, even! I’ve never left this fucking island, and I kill myself now? Gods fucking damnit-

“Ooouf!” I gasp, as Bryony- catches me. We land on the deck in a bit of a heap.

I’m not dead. I’m not dead. I’m crying, and clinging to her, and she’s holding me and squeezing me and I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m not dead-

I remember when I thought Mab was an adult. I was still- it’s odd, y’know, becoming human after being distinctly Not. It took the most on me, then Mark, then Taffy; the magic filled in the broad strokes of our memories, gave us details and story beats to fill our lives in around.

If I lean too hard on my memories, they falter, and I remember what I was Before. I thought Mab was my mother, for a time, and then merely my teacher- now, I know she’s my friend, and that has to be enough.

First look at my past, and I grew up on Ilha da Agulha; the daughter of a flower-seller and a passing marine. Second look, and I’m the daughter of a fairy, born on the sea and raised on a ship. Third look? I’m a snail and a crab, bound together with song.

All of those, by the way, are true. I used to think Mab was an adult.

Now, all of my friends, and me too, are adults or close enough. Everybody is just kind of fumbling
around, doing their best and tripping over each other’s shit; but, really, we’re just trying to figure out where all the free food is.

It’s in the kitchen, by the way; I poked Brook awake and he stood watch for me, so I could devote my full attention to Genevieve.

Mab took a portion of their mother’s ashes, and had them turned into glass beads. She then took a portion of those beads, and turned them into tokens for each Suntide to wear. Genevieve’s broke when she fell, and I’ve been re-wrapping the wire so she doesn’t lose what remains of it. It’s… it’s the best I can do, I don’t know what else to do, other than be here with her and listen to what she has to say- if she can say anything at all.

I don’t have a song for this; I don’t know what melody would get across what she’s feeling, what I’m feeling. There has to be one- I exist because there was a song to be sung.

As the smell in the kitchen goes sweet and warmello, I make two bowls of oat-porridge, set the water boiling for coffee or tea, and sit down next to Genevieve again. I put the warm bowl in her hands, and watch her listlessly eat, glassy eyes under eyebrows just starting to curl and exhaustion writ large in every wavering line of her body.

There’s a soft, terrified peeping noise, and then a tiny puffball of a bat, bright white against the dark- it’s got yellow ears, and a pointy yellow nose, and tiny little yellow wings. And it’s screaming at Genny.

Genny listens to the little bat’s terrified scolding, and tears- the first real tears I’ve seen from her at all- start dripping down her face. She swallows her bite of oatmeal, and sticks her spoon back in the bowl and sets it aside on the table, before her little friend burrows into the little nook between her clavicle and her shoulder on the right side. It’s tiny little body shivers and squeaks, and Genny brings up a thumb to stroke it’s back.

“Do… you understand what it’s saying?”

Genny shakes her head ‘no’; “It’s enough for me that she came back at all. I was… I was really mean to her a few days ago. I was- cruel.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bats like Puffy… they’re meant to go around in big clumps, like ten or fifteen per flock. But Puffy is alone.”

“Ah. …I wish there was something I could say to make you feel better about… any of this, really, but… there isn’t. For that, I am sorry- I am truly sorry.”

“…It’s weird. Hearing you say that… it doesn’t make me feel better, exactly, but it doesn’t make me feel worse, either.”

“Hmm. Oof- it’s almost bedtime for me… Hm, but I don’t want to leave you by yourself, either.”

“I- yeah. I don’t want to be alone.”

“We have to tell Chopper.”

“-!!”
“He won’t tell anyone else, if you don’t want him to; but he knows better than anyone what you’re going to need. Considering what would have happened if it wasn’t me on watch… we have to tell Chopper.”

“...Okay, Bryony.”

Once I’d attended the Ash Glass’ production, making the actual personal Charnellements for the Suntides was a simple matter. Silversmithing, after all, isn’t that far off from Crystalsmithing or Goldsmithing; the basic tools for each are much the same.

Deborah’s Red Shell on Waves; Eleanor’s Orange Fins, one the sister of the other, not the twin and wrapped with warming copper; Fernanda’s Yellow Horn, silent ‘till the end; Genevieve’s Green Tablet… broke, and recently considering how sharp the edges are. That can only happen when the wearer goes in direct conflict with the one whose Ash made the glass; incongruous intention that breaks a bond.

At her age there really aren’t that many things she could have done in less than twelve hours to break her mother’s heart. I’ll let her tell me what it is, and pray that my suspicion is unfounded.

Adelaide’s Blue Fins, sisters not twins and wrapped with cool silver; Beatrix’ Indigo Spindles, as she follows the path of the Three-Who-Are-One, and is my apprentice besides; Cecelia’s Violet Drops, wrapped in jarring copper- perfect, for a clown.

And finally, Sancho Horizon’s Teeth, just a touch more wild, a smidge crueller than any of his sisters.

As for where the majority of their mother’s ashes are to be interred, the Morgans have reservations in every major graveyard in every major city in the World. Mostly, it’s so that any Morgan that dies and wants to be buried in a specific place can be buried in accordance with the rest of the family’s wishes.

It’s going to be a strange day.

“Um, Missus Mab- should we put Mom on the Altar before we go?”

“We certainly can, Deborah.”

“...Will you Witness with me?”

“At the altar? Sure. -It’s almost time for breakfast anyway. Just a moment, I need to put my shawl around my shoulders-”

“Yeah, Chef wouldn’t actually eat if you went without it at breakfast, would he?”

“Hmhmhm, no. No, he wouldn’t.”
And then, covered and appropriately somber, I direct Deborah to the glass beads that represent the ashes of her mother. They’re pale green, and tiny, in a glass bottle that’s widest at the bottom so it absolutely will not fall over.

The actual ashes themselves are in an urn of woven willow lined with undyed recycled hemp- it used to be a grocery bag, actually.

I follow Deborah, the swishing of a fancy skirt I know for a fact she won’t wear again for at least a year- excepting, perhaps, to another funeral- the only sound outside our somber footfalls. Deborah’s excruciating solemnity is echoed in the rest of her outfit; the three-quarter sleeve black boat neck sweater that’s been tucked under her skirt, the thick black hose, the chunky pumps that click with every step…

When we get to the galley, it’s early enough that it’s only Sanji, Robin, Nami, Franky, Taffy, Bryony, Genevieve, Beatrix, Adelaide, Gurry, and Brook sipping at their first hit of hot caffeine. Sanji’s wearing a black suit, as he always does, but his shirt is a cheerful yellow, and his tie is lightly dancing with daisy-flowers. Robin is wearing a purple cocktail dress and a pair of sparkling drop earrings, and her hair has been left loose, only a few small pins here and there keeping it out of her eyes. Nami, in contrast to Robin’s almost brooding attire, is resplendent in a frothy, creamy orange gown, her neck draped with pearls and her hair bound up high in a bun crowned with- you guessed it- even more pearls. The orange blush ribbon around her waist is a touch I know she added specifically to make Zoro go just a little crazy with lust. Franky, contrary to what most believe, has a preternatural ability to read the mood. So, even if his color scheme hasn’t shifted at all, his attire has- a floral suit jacket over a white shirt, with rhinestone buttons. I think this is also the first time I’ve ever seen him wear pants, too… Taffy is wearing a brown tweed suit. I never thought she’d wear that; I mean, of course I fitted it for her, and all, but- well. I genuinely didn’t think she’d wear it. I guess she’s grown. Gurry, sitting next to Taffy, is in the most somber attire I’ve seen him in yet. Smock-like jumpsuit with the short pants, a dark vest, a dark trench- in this light it looks black, but in the sunlight it'll look blue. They’re cute together.

Bryony is wearing an ensemble today! It’s a minty turquoise school girl special - or it would be if she wasn’t so statuesque. Bryony has a small persona; she fades into the background, right up until she doesn’t, and then it’s far too late. Her lasso is a glimmer of gold at her hips, and her feathery earrings are uncharacteristically still. So is Genevieve; gods, she has that exhausted look to her… I’m fairly certain I know exactly what happened to break her mother’s heart, now that I get a glance at her. On the other hand, I think Bryony is handling it- or has handled it. That’s the brightest color I’ve seen her wear for a while now. Adelaide is tentatively hopeful, and surreptitiously watching Genny feed her familiar(!) a bit of reconstituted mango. She’s also wearing a much more intensely blue kimono than I’d thought she’d wear for months… it well may be that their Mother taught them more about the Noble Properties than I assumed. Beatrix is also keeping an eye on their apparently fragile sister, when she’s not stroking the velveteen cat lounging across her shoulders. She’s wearing a sweater dress and navy blue tights with navy blue suede shoes; and because her cat’s velveteen, she’s not getting cat fur all over herself. Her lap is also full of sleeping kittens, which is, I must admit, the cutest goddamn thing I’ve seen in my life. Brook is wearing a suit from some five hundred years past; he looks good in it, for all that he’s a skeleton.

Deborah, after pausing a moment to make a new space on the altar, sets the bottle of Ash Beads down with a final, somber clink. She steps away, the wicker urn clutched to her chest, before she stands straight. She bows deeply, as do I, and then she sits at the table with her sisters.
Eleanor creeps in sometime after that. I almost didn’t recognize her- then again, her wardrobe is the most colorful, so that’s kind of the point. It’s a simple outfit, for all it sticks in my head far more than her actual expression, or even how she moves does; just a sweater and a pair of jeans and a pair of ballet flats. She’s wearing her hair dark today; sad. She’s sad.

Fernanda, in her oversized cardigan is just the same; sad. Her hair is brushed neat, and pinned with daisy-flower pins, one larger golden one at her crown- and yet, she is sad.

Cecelia is in her third ensemble, and mutinously staring down her siblings; ah, I had wondered. A woman who wears black at all occasions isn’t going to stop just because it was expressly forbidden. Her violet drops look extra violet against the white of her shirt. Sancho, following on her heels, is in his normal, everyday clothing; white bucks, fluffy-feather pants, two tone shirt and the feathered hat that makes him look more than a little like an owl. He’s also wearing a pair of two tone folding sunglasses, which are bizarre yet entirely him. Just one thing, though-

“No sunglasses indoors.”

“Sorry.”

And off they come, to be folded up and tucked in the breast-pocket of his shirt. Saving them for later. I’d describe the rest of my crew’s outfits- somber, without using black- except I was caught in a bout of melancholy, and so do not remember them at all.

The actual funeral was to start at sundown; we had from the middle of the afternoon until midnight to get everything done, lest we incur the wrath of the Heavens. The burial plot Missus Mab secured for us is in Dunshilly; we have to start in Gobdark anyway, so it all works out I think. A parade; a show; an ending.

Poetic, like.

Mom actually made the arrangements long before she died, what with my Prophecy giving her a huge lead time on it. Her cremation was planned; her urn was purchased- everything was ready to go. All I had to do was make sure everyone who needed to know about her death knew.

So, I set my sisters on it.

Now, it’s time to finish this thing- it’s time, for the one, the only Funeral of Vinsmoke Aquila~!

I start my bally right when we’re about a quarter of the way through Gobdark, as my queue dictates. Deborah went over the whole thing with us, and even showed us Mom’s Testament just so we’d believe her- not like Deb would lie, anyway.

Also, even though Sancho and Cece went to school for this sort of thing, I’ve got more skill at reading a crowd and shouting my lungs out, so, here we are.
“TONIGHT ONLY I SAY TONIGHT ONLY THE FUNERAL PROCEEDINGS OF VINSMOKE AQUILA WILL COMMENCE THAT’S RIGHT TONIGHT ONLY YOUR ONE FREE CHANCE TO SEE THE BURIAL OF A VINSMOKE THAT’S RIGHT FOLKS, IT’S ALL FREE, RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW, IT’S STARTING UP RIGHT NOW, A BIG FREE SHOW THAT’LL ONLY GO ONCE, THAT’S RIGHT A ONCE IN A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY HERE FOLKS FOR ABSOLUTELY FREE THAT’S RIGHT BROUGHT TO YOU FREE BY MANAGEMENT’S REQUEST AT ABSOLUTELY NO CHARGE TO YOU THAT’S RIGHT FREE FOLKS SO GATHER ROUND GATHER ROUND AND SEE THE AMAZING THE STUPENDOUS AND WONDERFUL FOR ABSOLUTELY FREE SHOW ONCE IN A LIFETIME SHOW FOLKS STEP UP AND SEE THE MAGIC HAPPEN BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES-”

Missus Mab has been to funerals like this before, and immediately started spinning as she moved forwards with us, before she swept off her shawl and egads, she’s gorgeous-

“-THE MAGNIFICENT QUEEN MAB, HERE LIVE AND IN LIVING PERSON FOLKS, THAT’S RIGHT QUEEN MAB THE WILD FAIRY QUEEN OF THE FAR NORTH, HERE FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY ON SPECIAL REQUEST QUEEN MAB FOLKS DANCING THE ANCIENT FAIRY DANCES ONLY SEEN BY A PRECIOUS LUCKY FEW AND HERE AT SPECIAL REQUEST FOR THE FUNERAL OF VINSMOKE AQUILA THIS IS ONLY HER WARM UP FOLKS COME TO THE FUNERAL PROPER FOR THE WHOLE DANCE I SAY THIS IS ONLY HER WARM UP FOLKS DANCED HERE AND NOW FOR YOU FOR ABSOLUTELY FREE RIGHT NOW STEP RIGHT UP STEP RIGHT UP COME AND SEE THE MAGNIFICENT-”

At some point, Sancho and Cecelia started playing instruments they’d brought from the ship- Sancho’s on an accordion, and Cece’s having a party with a viola. We’ve already drawn a massive crowd who’ve gathered round to gawk because, well, the past five year’s are no real indication of who my mother was at all, really.

There’s no real distinction between the way things were and the way things are; just different justifications. The old crooks mix right in with the young bloods, and there’s always a winner somewhere- thought it’ll hardly ever be you. In Gobdark, there’s never really been a time when the survivors among us didn’t proudly earn their reputations as cheaters and unabashed crooks; but it’s also true that in Gobdark, there was never really a need for cheaters and crooks. It’s been a long time since the people who lived here had to sleep under the wagons which held all their worldly goods- had to bed down in muck and scrub with cold water. We don’t need to promise the whole of the world for the price of admission, and deliver absolutely nothing.

Those days are gone- except, of course, where they’re not.

“-STORMBORN NAMI! SOME SAY SHE WAS BORN IN A HURRICANE AFTER OL’
SCRATCH LOST A BET WITH DEATH; SOME SAY SHE CAN'T BE BEAT IN A GAME OF CHANCE! WHAT DO YOU THINK FOLKS? ARE YOU BRAVE ENOUGH I SAY ARE YOU MAN ENOUGH TO TEST YOUR LUCK? FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY ABSOLUTELY FREE, THE MAGNIFICENT WEATHER WITCH STORMBORN NAMI! HERE AT SPECIAL REQUEST TO MAKE SURE THE STRUCK DOWN VINSMOKE AQUILA STAYS STRICKEN FOLKS I SAY HERE FOR FREE ONE NIGHT ONLY STEP RIGHT UP FOLKS YOU’LL HAVE TO MOVE IN CLOSE MAGNIFICENT NAMI IS NOT A LARGE WOMAN AND SHE’LL ONLY BE HERE TONIGHT—”

In some places, for some people, old habits don’t die at all. We’ve got our motley crew of gawkers—now, to use them. They might never actually set foot in the boneyard for the Proceedings, but they can attract people who will. Like a corpse in the depths— one bottom feeder can’t help but attract another.

“—now folks we’ve got a special treat for you tonight, that’s right a special treat i say the amazing sharpshooter, king of all snipers, the one, the only, Sharpeye Usopp! Legend says he never misses a shot, and can only be stopped by donations of gems to this, i say this handysack right here? Could it be true? Could that ancient legend be true, folks? You’ll have to come to the funeral to be sure I say you’ll have to come right along and see to be sure step right up and see for one night only absolutely free step right up step right up and see—”

Yeah, all I did was stop shouting, and the crowd pressed immediately closer. I am good at this. Zoro is holding out a sack and people are flinging in gold and gemstones by the handful, yep, that one works every time—monkey see, monkey do, and even the people who didn’t hear what I said are throwing valuables in now. I can see Nami starting to grin out of the corner of my eye; and we’re only just at the edge of Gobdark now! Ah, here we are—

“NOW FOLKS WE WOULD LIKE TO CONTINUE WITH THE FREE SHOW BUT WE HAVE RECEIVED SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS I SAY SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS FROM YOUR LOCAL EMERGENCY SERVICES THAT WE ARE REQUIRED TO MAINTAIN A FIRE LANE ON THE ROAD THAT CANNOT BE BLOCKED BY ANYTHING I SAY ANYTHING, SO BEFORE WE CAN CONTINUE THIS ABSOLUTELY FREE SHOW PRECEDEING THE FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS OF VINSMOKE AQUILA I NEED, I SAY I NEED EVERYONE THAT’S RIGHT EVERYONE HERE TO PLEASE TAKE A FEW BIG STEPS FORWARDS TOWARDS US THAT’S RIGHT EVERYONE CROWD AROUND—BY THE GODS, IS THAT—BY THE GODS IT IS! LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, BOYS AND GIRLS OF ALL AGES AND SIZES, WE’RE IN FOR A SPECIAL TREAT TONIGHT! COMING DOWN THE LANE, I SAY COMING DOWN THE LANE—”

Sancho and Cece pulled through. As I asked the crowd to come closer, I swept them in three times and stepped back each time—and they did it. It also made room for all the graduates of Gag to set up their bit, and here— Ah, here they come now—
“BY ALL THE GODS OLD AND NEW, COME TO SEE THE FUNERAL OF VINSMOKE AQUILA IN PERSON, IT’S THE NEWEST GENERATION OF CLOWNS! OH, GIVE THEM A HAND, FOLKS, A ROUND OF APPLAUSE FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY YOU GET TO SEE THE VERY NEWEST GENERATION OF FULLY ACCREDITED CLOWNS, BORN AND RAISED AND TAUGHT AND UNLEASHED WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT IN THIS VERY CITY, I SAY FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY THE CLOWNS OF THE KINGDOM HAVE COME OUT TO SEE VINSMOKE AQUILA OFF HOW ABOUT THAT FOLKS HOW ABOUT THAT LOOK AT ALL THESE PRODIGAL SONS AND DAUGHTERS AND THEIR WONDERFUL FACES—”

Screams and squeals of laughter are filling the crowd. Clowns, man. What can you do but laugh? Crying is just a sign of weakness, after all; and clowns, like all predatory creatures, have a specific taste for the weak. And—here come tumblers, and with them, pickpockets—Ellie came through too, even though she’s—right, her turn comes after—

“-TURN YOUR ATTENTION, I SAY TURN YOUR ATTENTION TOWARDS THE WONDERFUL AND MAGNIFICENT FREEBIRD SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMERS! AREN’T THEY LOVELY FOLKS? SOARING THROUGH THE AIR AND WATER ALIKE FOLKS THIS IS A ONCE IN A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY SHOW YOU’RE ABOUT TO GET HERE, YOU WON’T SEE THESE LOVELY LADIES DANCE LIKE THIS BUT ONCE IN YOUR LIFE, HERE AT SPECIAL REQUEST TO OBSERVE THE FUNERAL OF VINSMOKE AQUILA AND SPREAD THE NEWS OF HER PASSING TO ALL THE LANDS THAT’S RIGHT FOLKS ONE NIGHT ONLY FOR ABSOLUTELY FREE—”

Above us, Keimi and all the other postal workers at her command dive and dart through the air above us, a spectacular display of synchronized, uniformed aerobatics. Genny, darling, you’re a wonder. Now, for Ellie.

“-YOU CAN TELL YOUR GRANDCHILDREN THAT YOU WERE THERE WHEN A VINSMOKE WAS BURIED THAT’S RIGHT FOLKS I SAY YOU CAN SAY YOU WERE THERE WHEN A VINSMOKE WAS BURIED AND WASN’T THAT A LOVELY WARMUP BY THE FREEBIRD SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMERS FOLKS I SAY WASN’T THAT A LOVELY WARM UP EVEN I DON’T KNOW WHAT THEY’LL DO FOR THE FUNERAL FOLKS NOW IF I COULD HAVE YOUR ATTENTION FOLKS I SAY IF YOU COULD TURN YOUR EYES TOWARDS ME RIGHT NOW, YOU’RE ABOUT TO SEE FOR ABSOLUTELY FREE A WONDERFUL THING I SAY A WONDERFUL THING—HERE, NOW, AT NO COST TO YOU—THE AMAZING—THE STUPENDOUS—THE ONE AND ONLY JUMPING MICE CIRCUS—”
It starts fairly small- and then, by the time masked and costumed thieves of Eleanor’s acquaintance are leaping through the air in synchronized feats of daring, we’re halfway through Corallia and we’ve picked up a fairly respectable crowd. The steady beating of drums and the crashing of hooves on stone; carts carrying more people who agreed to come to the funeral.

“-HERE LIVE FOR ONLY ONE NIGHT THE SPECTACULAR JUMPING MICE CIRCUS, WITH SPECIAL GUEST BY REQUEST THE ONE AND ONLY ALLEY CAT! HERE AND LIVE FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY HERE TO SEE VINSMOKE AQUILA GET BURIED IN THE GROUND FOLKS FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY THE FUNERAL OF VINSMOKE AQUILA A ONCE IN A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY FOLKS-”

They’re packed in tight like canned sardines, and we’re rumbling up towards Dunshilly Boneyard, the most expensive and rarefied graveyard in the Kingdom.

“I SAY FOLKS I SAY WE’VE BEEN PREPARING THIS FOR FIVE YEAR’S IN ADVANCE, THE ONE AND ONLY BURIAL OF VINSMOKE AQUILA! THIS IS A ONCE IN A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY- A ONCE IN A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY TO SAY THAT YOU, YES I SAY YOU, WERE THERE TO SEE VINSMOKE AQUILA BURIED- HERE AND NOW, FOLKS WE’RE COMING UP TO THE GATES OF DUNSHILLY BONEYARD, WHERE THE VINSMOKE WILL BE BURIED AND WHILE OUR SHOW IS COMPLETELY FREE THE ENTRANCE FEE FOR THE BONEYARD IS NOT- I’M WITH YOU FOLKS, I’M WITH YOU, BUT IF YOU WANT TO SEE HOW THIS ENDS- WHY, FOLKS, THE TICKET TELLER’S RIGHT HERE FOLKS! THAT’S RIGHT, ADULTS ARE FIFTEEN HUNDRED BERRIES, AND CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF TWO ARE FREE THAT’S RIGHT FOLKS JUST FIFTEEN HUNDRED BERRIES AND YOU CAN SAY TO ANYONE WHO EVER ASKS THAT YOU WERE THERE TO SEE VINSMOKE AQUILA BURIED IN THE GROUND FOLKS FIFTEEN HUNDRED BERRI IS NOT TOO MUCH TO ASK TO SEE A LIVE ANGEL WITH A MASSIVE SNAKE FIFTEEN HUNDRED BERRI IS NOT TOO MUCH TO SEE A REAL AMAZON FIFTEEN HUNDRED BERRI IS NOT TOO MUCH TO SEE A DEMON FIFTEEN HUNDRED IS NOT TOO MUCH TO SEE A PIRATE FIFTEEN HUNDRED IS NOT TOO MUCH FOR THIS ONCE IN A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY WHY THAT’S A CASE OF SODA-POP AT THE DAISO YOU CAN BUY A CASE A POP NOW CAN’T YOU FOLKS THIS IS A ONCE IN A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY AND THE WONDERS YOU’VE SEEN FOR FREE WILL PALE IN COMPARISON TO THE WONDERS YET TO BE SEEN!”

Now to reel them in.

“YOU DON’T WANT TO MISS THIS!”
Got’em. There’s one born every minute, I do declare...

“I CAN SEE OUT THERE IN THE CROWD THAT YOU DON’T BELIEVE ME- GOOD! YOU’LL NEVER KNOW FOR SURE IT’S A VINSMOKE BEING BURIED UNLESS YOU COME IN AND SEE FOR YOURSELF! THERE ARE WONDERS I CAN’T EVEN TELL YOU ABOUT BECAUSE YOU’D DISBELIEVE ME SIGHT UNSEEN- I SAY SIGHT UNSEEN!”

I take my deepest breath yet, and tilt my head back so I can really bellow.

“COME ONE! COME ALL! SEE VINSMOKE AQUILA- YES, THAT’S RIGHT, THE WORLD’S BEST LOVER!! BURIED HERE IN DUNSHILLY BONEYARD! ONE NIGHT ONLY, FOLKS!”

And then I backflip off the fence I’ve been balancing on and cartwheel through the tombstones to my family. Cousin Sanji has turned a bright, furious red, but he’s also grinning like a fool. All around us, clowns and acrobats jabber, as our throng moves from the entrance of the Boneyard, all the way back to the tallest hill.

Sunken into the middle of that hill is a massive tiered bowl, that faintly echoes at the top but goes silent the closer I go to the flat stage down in the middle.

It’s… I think the word is amphitheatre?

As we go down into the stage, we start tromping around and flattening the grass; the clowns pull out their marching instruments, and after a few nerve-reducing pratfalls, start playing marches. And so, we march; the gloomy first line stomps the grass flat, and clears a bare place in the center.

We’re arrayed in a specific way that I forget the name of- the closest members of the family are arranged by age, closest to the ground on which blessings are about to be pressed. Everyone else arranges themselves as they see fit.

The ice gets broken by the clowns; they did all just graduate, and a funeral is as good a test as any to see if what you learned in school is of any use. But really, when it comes down to it; most clowns, whores, and dancers want to be buried in their best, and they were always at their best when they were working.

Clowns want to be buried in their motley, a full face of slap ready to go home in. The skydancers led by Keimi, on the other hand, don’t want to be buried at all- they pass their names back to the big
sorting houses on postcards, say that so long as their names get spoken they aren’t actually dead. They wheel and flick through the air like fireworks- and then the first round of actual fireworks goes off, and they dance with the sparks and the flames and the smoke and the squealing of lights. Then their dance ends, and in come the clowns again- this time, with a special guest, the one and only Laffy Taffy!

She’s completely wrong for circastic clowning- but she’s a spectacular acrobat, leaping from ladder to ladder like thaaaaaaaaAAAAAat oh my god that was amazing, holy shit . She then begins to balance on things- first, some wooden blocks, then… then things happen , the clowns keep throwing things at her stack and she keeps catching them with her wings and adding to her precarious tower, Precarious Tower- and then, and then she leaps away as her tower comes crashing down! She’s standing on a thin bamboo pole! She hops on it to prove it’s not attached to anything and then- and then she’s standing upright! Holy shit! OH GODS WHERE DID THAT SNAKE COME FROM? AH, NOW IT’S A SWORD, WHAT THE- WHAT THE HELL? MAGIC! MAGIC!

What follows I can only describe as Laffy Taffy, Opera Clown, Schools her juniors in what it means to really put on a show. Her snake-sword darts and flashes but crucially, never bites anyone; and the crowd roars with awe, laughter, and joy. Laffy Taffy leaves the stage with a sword on her hips, a smile on her face, a near-insensate group of young clowns in awe of her, and a bow to the crowd.

The clowns recover their equilibrium by staggering and pratfalling off stage, to clear the way for-

MARK!!?!

Holy crap. Holy fucking shit. Mark the Gunslinger is a Trick Rider! Oh my gods, oh my gods- holy shit! I- he moves like he’s an extension of the horse, like- oh my gods, those are the horses we got in the Royal Boneyard! They’re still wild!

I- I’m not watching a Trick Rider. I’m watching a horseman spend time with his friends. When I glance over, Captain and Usopp are watching Mark with a strange sort of awe; like something within him is shining, and that glow of light is bouncing off their faces, reflected back a thousand times in their shimmering eyes-

I look away, and watch the beautiful bodies in motion. They run, they lunge, they turn and wheel and their bodies shine like burnished coins in light. The audience gasps and sighs to see them; and when Mark tips his amazing hat in a bow and rides the lead horse Spare Parts out, the crowd goes wild with applause.

This isn’t exactly what I’d envisioned when Mom told me her theme for her funeral… it’s… It’s better.

Mom, in particular, wanted her funeral to be an occasion not just of sadness- but a celebration, of everything she was and wanted in life. She wanted a hedonistic explosion of life to herald her passing; she wanted clowns to terrify laughter out of people, and hurly burly dancers to whirl across the dirt in near-nudity, titillating and tempting with every glimmering sweep.

Missus Mab is one of the most caring people I’ve ever met; thoughtful, considerate, gentle. She likes making warm, comforting places for people to live, and enjoys living a simple life most of all, I think. Queen Mab, on the other hand, is the Sexiest Woman in the World. As the various dancers Mom taught to be sexy take their turn, I can see them start to set up for Mab- the crowd, on the other side, seems to be in a state of disbelief.

How could having a good time be part of a funeral, after all? Hasn’t enough blood been spilled? But
sir, but ma’am- we’re at a funeral for a clown, a hurly burly, a monster. She got the taste for blood when she was licking her own wounds; and death will not change her tastes now.

How could Queen Mab, Sexiest Woman in the World possibly beat this? For th’gods sake, two women nearly had sex on stage just now! There’s no possible way she- she could be-

And then Queen Mab Dances.

It’s not any one part of her; it’s not the music, even the kazoo one clown broke out and couldn’t stop using. It’s not her smile; it’s not the shining flare of her skin; it’s not the way she moves her body; the way she dances; how she moves her thick shawl here and there, ghosting over various parts of her body before drawing it away slow then fast and inviting- it’s not even the way she makes men and women bleed just for looking at her.

It’s all those things at once; the bouncing curl of her hair, the sparkle of her body…

Yowza! Give it to ‘em, Queenie!

Woo, she smells like an axe in the hand- wood polish and cold iron; power and fear and the musty smell of sweat.

And finally, it comes to this- my sisters, my brother, and I, must dance, and lay our Mother to rest at last.

Deborah, being eldest, rises to speak. As she says the Last Words, we, her siblings, take our places. It’s almost time to dance.

“Long ago, we sought to respect our dead. We did not wish to leave their corpses for beasts to feast upon; we did not wish their spirits to know torment. Through trial and error and time and effort, we learned how to give them peace. We learned to make cairns and bury them under piles of stone; we learned to burn them, and return them to the earth.

“With each death there arises a new life; with each passing of something old, a new something comes. Over time, we built crypts and mausoleums, cities dedicated to our dead- all so that we might honor and keepsafe their memory. We exist because of those who came before us, and we owe them our gratitude for providing us our history, our world, our very lives.”

“You piddling piece of shit, you can’t honestly expect us to take those as the Last Words-”

A heckler at a funeral. I do declare.

“Missus Seedle, you’ve had eight fucking years of Last Words, and they’ve all been shit. -Onwards, Mother. When you were young, forevermore-” said Deborah, raising the urn high and beginning the dance. A strange gust of wind blew all through the crowd, stealing their voices and rustling skirts, before whirling around us. My ears tingled as I heard an unearthly sigh, and then a soft, weary groan.
The urn in Deborah’s hands grew dim and pale, losing its youthful gleam and golden color.

Cecelia’s diving stomp on Beatrix was blocked by Beatrix’ crossed blades, and the flurry of Red Ribbon Knives that drove her away were dodged with slick, oily ease. “-never to return, you said-” said Cecelia, hands full of thick, heavy flans that splattered here and there, swallowing Red Ribbon Knives and turning the ground perilous slick where custard splattered.

The straws that made the woven urn turned dull and rotten in Deborah’s hand before she tossed the urn high and spun out of the way, a brace of knives in her other. The urn fell and landed in one whole piece in a divot Deborah’s spin had left behind; and Beatrix, twin swords held high and deflecting the Red Ribbon Knives Deborah started throwing at her, began to chase after her. “-you stepped beyond your homely door-” said Beatrix, each clash of metal in strange punctuation to the groaning wailing starting to echo through the tromped-flat stage. The urn dimmed further, losing even the glimmer rot had given the dry wicker strands, before those crumbled into dust; there was only a small sack now, crumpled and sad. Cecelia began to fling her pies in every direction, catching Red Ribbon Knives out of the air for just a second- long enough for Beatrix to catch up to Deborah, and get right in my way.

“And to the Sea, you merry-fled.” said Adelaide, a slender cyclone of water dancing between her knuckles.

“You bared your teeth and grit them tight-” I say, before beginning my whirling dance, catching Adelaide’s waterspout before it can even begin. If Adelaide’s the refined fishwoman fighting, I’m the brawler. There’s no real pattern to my movements, just action, reaction, block and tackle and watery slash, until- yes, there it is. The linen bag that held the ashes is crumpling further and further, pitting and warping until finally a strange seed is burrowing into the ground.

“-till sun and stars and moons did twist-” said Eleanor, tarry black ooze in each hand and an expression of furious calculation on her face. Rather than try to directly affect any one combatant, she throws her slimy offerings to devastating area effect; each sticky patch placed just so that when in conjunction with the earlier slime patches, stable footing is all but guaranteed to not exist at all.

“You ran ‘till Home was out of sight-” said Genevieve, pelting each injured person she sees with a water balloon filled with healing potion. Of everyone here, it is her that has the most stable footing; she doesn’t slip, or falter, never wavers or slides. She cannot be moved so easily.

“And then, at last, you died. Goodbye, Mother; you will be missed.” said Horizon, flat on his back and listening to the chaos around him. He has terrible balance normally- this is sufficient to just make him not want to bother.

And then our offerings are accepted; and so, we stand in our eight directional points, and the Dance proper begins. We say nothing else, but begin to warm up; we kick dirt by clod and scatter into a small heap, ever so careful to not disturb the place where the seed burrowed into the rich soil below.

When at last it was done, and we were all ready, we paused a moment. Nami, the weather witch, remembered her que- and so, there was a small, gentle rain that came down in soft mist to start. We began our solemn and reserved dance, weaving in and out and around the grave, tamping the soil down and settling the earth.
It’s an old orcish tradition, planting the dead; it mirrors the tradition of spring, to plant seeds in their rows and dance along them, packing the earth and nurturing the slumbering ones with your magic. But what we’re doing is a bit… reversed, is the best way to describe it. So important is this tradition that there are actually unions of grave dancers, troupes of demons whose only job is to secure the dead in their final rest.

Against all intuition, Mortis Dancing is popular among all the Tribes of the World, not just Demons. It dates to before the invention of writing; fifth century writers think of it as ancient. There are lots of traditions that say they’re the real original version, but honestly… it was probably a form of competitive dance that got invented alongside wargames, and then substituted for actual war when the time came.

The one we’re doing is the simplest you can have; six dancers, a musician, and a spare- or fool- in the likely case of injury. Sancho, who cannot for the life of him dance to a beat, is our musician; and Cece is the fool. We trained with sticks and buckets- but now, we use our actual weapons, and clash for real. A bunch of prissy Demons from France came ‘round once and tried a bit of pick-up Mortis’n, but there weren’t a groinin’ in the whole of an hour, so we gave it up for a bad job.

Here’s the thing about Demonic Funerals; all your life, if you’re a good, gods fearing Demon, you’re under a steady assault by a traditional faux-wholesome pseudo-merciful regimented honorable glorious family atmosphere, and then you die and all of a sudden, you have the power to make your living relations do any godsdamn thing you want.

Is it any wonder then that as older Demons die off, their funeral Proceedings become wilder and more spectacular? Fuck, when Missus Dreary down the lane kicked her bucket, we got three weeks of half-naked pole-dancers, a large fortune of fireworks shot off into the night, and an all you could eat buffet with open bar and free dance hall!

I’m not sure any other Tribe can really understand how it feels to be compelled to let your wildest urges out- encouraged, even! It’s the antithesis of the ‘obey conform and discipline yourself or GET OUT’ overtone Demonic culture is usually about. And even though it can generate billions of berri, there’s no pressure, shaming, or guilting to spend money on it like there is for all the other holidays.

Demons spend that much on their funerals just because it’s fun and why the hell not, you can’t keep it- we do it because we want to, rather than some unspoken rule that you must do these things or you’re a heathen and you don’t love your family or country or tribe at all you sick twisted freak.

You can give everything a really weird theme, like, y’know, circus- and it’s totally acceptable.

And there arose in the center of the stage where our dearest Mother was buried a bougainvillea tree, with a profusion of petals blooming across it’s mighty limbs in… in whore-house pink.

That’s about when I started crying and laughing, and I guess the funeral picked up from there...

In all honesty, it’s because Demons don’t have an official inversion festival- not one that everybody celebrates, because the Feast of Fools only comes once a year and isn’t at quite the right time for merry-making. All this wildness has to get out somehow, after all.

Inversion festivals are a necessary part of most highly regimented and class-divided cultures- that’s
what the ‘Night Shift’ in Skuan holidays is all about. All year- all our lives- we spend ourselves on keeping rigidly to our class, our creed, our ‘values and mores and morals’. We watch each other and behave just so, we worship these gods and obey, and obey, and obey.

And then we die, and the rules don’t apply anymore- we’re dead! It doesn’t matter!

I know in some Skuan festivals, the classes are inverted literally, and the nobility have to serve. Suddenly, nothing is taboo- the macabre, the ugly, the violations and the sins are glorified. For a period of time- longer, depending on how regimented your society is- you’re free to do and be whatever the hell you wanted.

You can wear a costume; you can hide behind a mask.

You can set off three weeks worth of fireworks and set bells to ringing with your very passage because you’re driving out the evil in your community and the evil inside of you; and whatever anyone says about Demons, the Fae are just as regimented and class-oriented. More so, even- the lead-in to their biggest inversion festival is two months long and ends in a bloodbath.

Funerals are often the only inversion festivals Demons ever enjoy; Yule has terribly rigid expectations, Imbolc makes you want to burn your godsdamn house down so you don’t have to clean it anymore, Ostara’s all about babies so if you’re too young everyone tries to pretend sex doesn’t exist, if you’re too young for Ostara you’re definitely too young for Beltane, Lughdasnagh they want you to make a bunch of fucking useless shit, Mabon you get shitty gifts in direct proportion to the good shit, and Samhain is for mourning.

For Demons, Funerals are it. They are the only international, interKingdom cut-loose parties we have; and that’s no accident. Funerals for demons have been inversion festivals since the death of Kostecki the Deathless, when the Orcs realized the war was over, the darkness was coming, and everyone was gonna have to spend the next four months indoors trying not to murder one another while the World curled up in the snow and ice and died.

Mama buried herself under a whore-pink tree in the fanciest boneyard in the kingdom, I do declare...

Random facts in an attempt to stave off the Depression. Here we fucking go.

The scientific name for vineapples is Lycopersicon exculentum, which translates to “edible wolf peach”. This is because members of the nightshade family of plants, which includes vineapples, dirtpuddings, and death berries, are used by witches to summon werewolves. Yeah, that’s right- suddenly vineapple chowder doesn’t seem so innocent. Tomato sauce with roasted garlic is the ultimate culinary move in the werewolf vs. vampire wars…

No, no good. I drew up just enough vavavoom to dance at the Funeral Proceedings before immediately needing about twelve consecutive naps, and my nap index only rose as the day continued- right now, it’s at about a seventeen, and the day’s not done yet.

Did you know that Captain Bonchon of delicious chicken fame was not a military Captain, or even a Pirate, but a Ryugu Captain? (I’m speaking, of course, of IT’S NOT JUST FRIED CHICKEN, IT’S
Way back in the day, Ryugu Captains did have some manner of involvement in the Kingdom’s military; it’s basically the same kind of thing as a Knight of the Sea where the only qualifications are ‘Ryugu Mergyo thinks you’re cool’. Ryugu Captains do not need to be from Ryugu Mergyo. They don’t need to have lived in Ryugu Mergyo. They don’t even need to have, technically speaking, lived at all.

Other Ryugu Captains include Abdullah Baba, Montblanc Norland, Louis Arnote, and King Ryuma- which is a comedic play just waiting to happen, it only needs a pair of lovers and an interlude by fairies…

He was born Harl Davro Bonchon in September, in the year of one-thousand three hundred ninety, in a four-room house located three miles east of the Dun Hills. He was the oldest of three children that lived past the first year; the family attended the First Kiss Temple, one of the oldest Beloved enclaves in this Kingdom. The family were of mostly Fairy and Djinni descent, but the mother became an Automata after a close encounter with a gang of wild accountants- to be fair, an encounter like that would shake even the most devout, much less an agnostic.

Captain Bonchon’s father was a mild and affectionate man who worked his eighty acre farm, until he broke his leg after a fall. He then worked as a butcher in Corallia for twenty years. Bonchon’s mother was a devout Beloved and strict parent, continuously warning her children of ‘the evils of alcohol, tobacco, gambling, jazz music, prostitution, and whistling.’

One summer afternoon in one-thousand three hundred ninety-five, his father came home with a fever and died later that day. Bonchon’s mother obtained work in a tomato cannery, and the young boy was required to look after and cook for his younger siblings. By the age of seven, he was reportedly skilled with bread and vegetables, and improving with meat; the children foraged for food while their mother was away for days at a time for work. When he was ten, Bonchon began to work as a farmhand.

In one thousand three hundred two, Bonchon’s mother remarried, and the family moved to Waterwheel Town. Bonchon had a tumultuous relationship with his stepfather, and the next year he had dropped out of compulsory school- saying later that algebra was what drove him off- and went to live and work on a nearby farm. He was still ten. He then took a job painting horse carriages in Gyoncorde. Four years later, with his mother’s approval, Bonchon left Gyoncorde to live with his uncle further to the south. His uncle worked for the streetcart company, which became the Royal Bus Service, and secured Bonchon a job as a conductor.

At sixteen, he faked his age and joined the army. He was honorably discharged a year later, and moved to where a different uncle lived, to the west. There, he met his brother Clarant who had also moved there in order to escape their stepfather. The uncle worked for the Southern Railway, and secured Bonchon a job there as a blacksmith’s helper in the workshops. After two months, Bonchon moved further west where he got a job cleaning out the ash pans of trains from the Northern Railroad- a division of the Southern Railroad- when they had finished their run. Bonchon progressed to become a fireman, or steam engine stoker, at the age of sixteen or seventeen.

In fourteen o’nine, Bonchon found laboring work with the Norfolk and Wessen Railway; while working on the railroad, he met his wife, Josephine. They were married about three weeks after they met, and would go on to have a son, Bentham, and two daughters, Marge and Mildred. Bonchon then found work as a fireman on the Central Railroad, and he and his family moved to Dunshilly. By night, Bonchon studied law by correspondence through the Worldwide Correspondence University.

You can get licensed as a Notary, for Taxidermy, to sell Hard Liquor; to do Accountancy,
Acupuncture, Animal Shelter, Arcade, Bail and Bounty Hunting, Beekeeping, Blacksmithing, Cemetery, Dentistry, Dog Grooming, Fireworks, Ginseng Growing, Ice Cream, Laundry, Law, Mortician, Musician, Optometry, Patent Registration, Raffles, Salvage, and Wholesale Cheese Disposal- you can get licensed for all of those by mail through the Worldwide Correspondence University. If you’ve ever been in one of those fifteen house one road towns in the middle of nowhere-ocean, tiny spit of land that barely rates an island- sure enough, there’s one house or shack or tiny little shop that purports to sell Taxidermy, Notary services, Hard Liquor, Optometry services, and Dry Cleaning- that’s because you can get the training and licensing for all of those by mail.

Bonchon lost his job at Central after brawling with a colleague. While Bonchon moved to work for the Gyoverly Hills Railroad, Josephine and the children went to live with her parents in Corallia. After a while, Bonchon began to practice law in Gyoverly Hills; for three years he earned enough fees for his family to move back in with him. Bonchon’s legal career ended after a courtroom brawl with his own client. After that, Bonchon moved to his sister’s mansion, which became the Gyojin Dojo- but Bonchon got a job as a laborer on the Gyojin Station.

In fourteen sixteen, the whole family came to live with Bonchon and his sister; at which point, Bonchon got a job selling life insurance for the Prudence and Temperance Insurance Company. He got fired for insubordination and dereliction of duty. He then moved to Corallia, and got a sales job with Symbiotic Benefits Insurance Company.

In fourteen twenty, Bonchon established a ferry boat and tour company, which operated a boating and tour-carting service through Dunshilly, Corallia, and Goblin Park. He canvassed for funding, becoming a minority shareholder himself, and was appointed secretary of the company. Although the tour service was an instant success, Bonchon had entered into a fractious relationship with his son, Bentham, and couldn’t devote his full attention to it.

Around fourteen twenty two, he took a job as secretary at the Chamber of Commerce in Corallia. He admitted to not being very good at the job, and resigned after less than a year. Bonchon then cashed in his tour-boat company shares for thirty-five million, one hundred twenty four thousand, three hundred thirty nine beri, in today’s money. He used that money to establish a company manufacturing acetylene lamps. The venture failed after Delco introduced a similar lamp that they sold on credit.

Bonchon then went to work as a salesman for the Cutco Knife Company. He lost his job in fourteen twenty four when Cutco’s general manager, founder, and owner ran off to become a Sea Boar researcher, thus prompting the closure and sale of the entire Cutco business. As an aside, Cutco was known for it’s very fine, very hard wearing knives, and genuine Cutco knives are considered to be some of the best in the world by collectors of such things.

In fourteen twenty four, by chance, Bonchon met the general manager of the Board of Tourism in Corallia, who asked him to run the main office in Corallia. In fourteen thirty, the station closed as a result of the Great Depression, which was set off by- you guessed it- the execution of Gol D. Roger.

In fourteen thirty, the Sout-Wes Trading Company offered Bonchon a service station in Dunshilly, rent free, in return for paying them a percentage of sales. Bonchon began to serve chicken in his family style, and other meals such as bulgogi beef and bimbap. Initially, he served customers in his adjacent living quarters before opening the restaurant proper. It was during this period that Bonchon was involved in a shootout with Pratt Sowards, a local competitor, over the repainting of a sign directing traffic to his station. Sowards killed a Shell official who was with Bonchon and was convicted of murder, eliminating Bonchon’s competition. Around this time-
“Hmm?”

“Is Bonchon and Bon-chan the same guy, Mab?”

“Ah, no- Bonchon is Bon-chan’s dad, Luffy.”

“Oh. Wait, really?”

“Yes. Shall I continue, or…?”

“I wanna know what happened to the chicken-man, Boss.”

“Well- it’s almost dinner time, so I’ll make things brief. Bonchon became the uncontested king of local chicken after his competitor showed up, tried to shoot him, shot a Shell official instead, and was convicted of murder. After his wife took their kids and left him to move back in with her parents, Bonchon hid in the forest outside their house planning to kidnap the kids when they came outside. He got bored of waiting for them so he just strolled over to the house and talked things out with his wife and in-laws. Right about then is when Bon-chan went of a-pirating, Captain.”

“Aha!”

“Mhm. Captain Bonchon’s Chicken happened, being a Ryugu Captain happened; he sold it but continued to be the company’s public image. He then spent the next twenty years randomly showing up at various CBC’s and insulting them if they made the food poorly. He would insult CBC’s parent company Takara forever, including saying that their food was bad and suing them for misusing his image. They tried multiple times to sue him for libel and were unsuccessful.”

“-neh, Bryony, do you have the phone and th’ blue notebook on you-?”

“-Uh, yeah, here Captain.”

“Bonchon wore literally nothing but the famous ‘red-hot’ suit for the remainder of his life, and actually bleached his facial hair to have it match with the rest.”

“Hiya, Bon-chan!”

“~Hello, Luffy~!”

“-Neh, we’re at Fishman Island; ‘s there anything you want me to get you while we’re here? I said I would, back in prison-”

“Aah-haaa!~ Actually, yes. If you could put an offering on my parent’s grave and give my sister this phone number, I’d be much obliged. My father… he was a Gods-fearin’ man with a nasty mouth and a willingness to pummel a man with a joint-chair, and I wouldn’t be who I am today without him.”

“Oh, yes, and the public version of his file in the Gran Mariner’s office begins with a paragraph stating that ‘Captain Harl D. Bonchon has not been the subject of an FGM investigation’, immediately followed by something along the lines of five-hundred pages of redacted text.”

I sigh, and dig back into my bowl of Bonchon chicken. Sanji didn’t have the stomach for cooking today- he only just realized that he went to his aunt’s funeral, and that the Suntide Vinsmokes are his genuine family.

Now, he’s hurting because he never got to meet a woman he’d probably have liked a hell of a lot;
and I’m hurting because he’s hurting. That’s what it means to love someone, too.

The difference between Cajun and Creole is Cajuns don’t use vineapples in their cuisine unless it’s a foreign recipe, and Creoles do. That’s the big one- everything else is how often you see a certain kind of meat, how it’s cut, or what gets added when; otherwise, vineapples are what you have to watch for.

Cajun is country; Creole is city. Mab’s Cajun as hell, and it shows up in the oddest of ways- for example, she considers Bonchon chicken a perfectly natural funeral day food. But only for funerals.

I suppose it has to do with Fae history- her home country Fairisle is famous for it’s Cajun French music and language. Of course, it didn’t get refrigeration until about fifty years ago; thus, for most of the Fae’s culinary history, if use wasn’t made of every part of a slaughtered animal or harvested vegetable, it would be wasted. Boudin, for example, contains pork meat, rice, and seasoning; it also contains pig liver for extra flavor. Tasso and Andouille are two other pork products that use salts and smoke as preservatives. When I first had real Faesh food, I misunderstood it’s powerful seasonings as spiciness- but that’s not right.

Faesh food, good Faesh food, is no more exhilaratingly painful to eat than a good Iber-coastal paella.

On the days of Rites

There is a season, and a seasoning, for everything. This is Spring; it’s seasonings are Rosemary, Aloe, Calendula, and if the Winter was hard enough, Yew. In Cajun cooking, a heavy spoonful of cayenne pepper is key; along with a medley of vegetables based on the French mirepoix. The holy trinity is onion, celery, and bell pepper; garlic makes an appearance often as well. Paprika, thyme, file (which is ground sassafras leaves), parsley, green onions, and a great deal more are very common guests to the table.

“Mab?”

“My love?”

“...Can we not, tonight?”

“...Of course. Do you… um, do you want to sleep in a different bed, or…?”

“No, no- I don’t want to sleep somewhere else, I just… not tonight.”

“Okay.”

I pass my bones over to Mab, who carefully crunches them down- chicken bones tend to splinter, and she doesn’t want to hurt herself…
Later, much later, we finally go to bed. Mab rearranged our bedroom so that our bed was tucked into a small nook with a curtain that could be pulled across. I guess you can take the caveman out of the cave, but he’ll just crawl right back into it at bedtime, or when he’s scared or sad enough…

Our room is actually right next to the girls’ dorm; we share a wall. If it were any other day, I’d be angry about it- but. He’s their brother. And they’re fine with him- and…

Oh gods. They know the hymn-!

I-

I can’t-

My wife is a warm comfort in my arms, and when I tuck my face into the crown of her head and breathe her fresh-washed smell in, I can feel something in me finally break.

I spend the moments before falling asleep weeping into my wife’s hair. I didn’t even know my Aunt Aquila, but I’m sad- I’m sad I never got to meet her at all.

And now, I never will.

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The falling stars you wished upon
Are cinders now and now they’re gone.
Their residue festoons our fetid fields.
Revealing husks of lovers past,
Their shells are all that ever last-
I’ve taken everything that they’ve concealed.

Whoever told you life was fair?
Look around you everywhere,
The cruelty of Nature is displayed.
Why the scorn; why the surprise?
Everything that’s born must die
And it isn’t I who made the World that way.
What wicked little twist of fate
Placed you here upon my plate?
Here where no one hears your cries?
Where were your Gods to steer you through?
Perhaps your God’s forsaken you?
Otherwise, why leave you here to die?

I know the way how.  
I’ll melt away now.  
I know the way.  
I’m feeling bliss now,  
Dissolved to mist, how-  
Strangely I go away.  
Now I finally know…

It’s merely moments now,  
Moments now until  
Your feeble flesh bends to my will-  
And it will, so rest your weary head.  
There’ll be no pain, no pain at all,  
As everything you are dissolves.  
Your fate’s resolved upon my silken threads.

I know the way how,  
I’ll melt away now,  
I know the way.  
I’m feeling bliss now,  
Dissolved to mist, how-  
Strangely I go away.
The girls—because that’s what they are, A B C D E F G, they’re just girls— they all have red eyes. Cerise, I think is the word for it. Sancho’s eyes are a brown so dark they look black— and of course, he’s adopted, so the only real indication of who he isn’t is the gills on his chest, instead of his shoulders. He’s not part fishman, after all— he’s part Syreene. His eyes are usually hidden behind his sunglasses; either the folding pair he was wearing earlier, or a pair of sunglasses that really push that whole ‘owl’ thing forwards.

His training gear is a set of summer and winter weight urban martial artist style clothing; so far, his actual fighting style isn’t particularly stylized, if you get my meaning. A staff is a formidable weapon, and in his hands it’s deadly— but he’s not quite… he’s so tall, it’s hard for him to find a staff that really does what it should for him.

He sleeps in an extra-oversized shirt and his boxers— and, for just a few nights only, after the funeral of his mother, he’s allowed to sleep in a pile with his sisters. They are small and sad, just girls— and a boy, as it happens.

Adelaide’s eyes are the harshest, especially if she’s used makeup to enhance her fishwoman characteristics; they all but burn in her hard-browed face. I actually did one of my favorite designs for A’s training and battle gear, something I whipped up back in school for a sparring partner who agreed to model for me… and of course, she immediately asked for a few changes when she saw the first-fitting product. Nothing really beyond my skills— a different neckline was the most major change, merely because she doesn’t like showing that much of her chest; no sleeves is fine, a different obi, she’d be using her own belt as is proper… and most important of all, she wanted a skirt, not pants. Fair enough— but I did inform her of the need for undershorts, to prevent flashing of underwear. She seemed surprised I would consider that as a concern.

The pajamas Adelaide was eventually, reluctantly, accepting of— a pair of blue-white candy stripe pajama pants, no pockets, and an oversized t-shirt from Daiso. Why make things hard? After all, after the first wash, Daiso t-shirts age five years and develop that perfect hand for sleeping in.

Beatrix’s red eyes are softer than Adelaide’s, but that’s a function of their faces— B got softer features, not softer eyes. Her training gear draws on my own childhood, and once I started on hers, I ended up redoing mine as well. Because B’s my own apprentice, her appearance reflects on my skills— our relationship’s only a week old, just about, she’s not got the skills yet to make her own training gear. Thus, it’s only natural that I make it obvious to anyone looking that we’re a pair. Further than that, I’ve given her two ensembles she can mix and match at her pleasure— a lighter, summery version, and a heavier, wintery version.

To sleep, a chemise— less antiquated than mine. She insisted, actually.

Cecelia is odd; her eyes only flare red when the sun catches in them, otherwise they’re as brown looking as Sancho’s. Her training gear is a lot like Sancho’s, except she has a much more rustic style. Her pants and top are all-weather, and her skirt can also be worn as another layer up top— and that’s
all she wanted.

**Pajamas** - long sleeve shirt and a pair of shorts, with a sweet ribbon belt for a little definition- and a raccoon-hat so she feels like herself.

Surprisingly enough, Sanji specifically told me that Deborah’s normal work clothing is what she’d be training in; just make her a bandolier for her throwing knives she can wear in the kitchen. Fine- a belt for her throwing knives it is. It’s the obi style all the girls prefer, and though it looks like velvet, it’s not. Funnily enough, Deborah’s the one who asked me for a swimsuit, in addition to her pajamas- I suppose she realized that her work clothing, while perfectly fine in the water, really isn’t as suited to a bit of actual swimming as a swimsuit would be. It’s a **simple suit**, that I can switch out for larger versions as she grows, meant for a mermaid. The crown is because she’s actually a minor princess, and is allowed to wear a crown.

Eleanor, when she’s not putting on a front, is one of the calmest people I’ve ever met. She’s shy, and hardly ever looks anyone- sister, brother, friend- anyone, directly in the eye. Her training gear is perhaps the **most abbreviated**, consisting of what I can fairly describe as a very stretchy belt and a sports bra. Then again, considering the myriad of contortions and twists she has to be able to put her body through, having very little clothing to get in the way is for the best.

Her swimsuit is the addition of a **poncho** to her regular training gear, along with a truly excellent hat.

As for pajamas, she sleeps in a **hooded onesie**, one of three. It doesn’t have feet and sits a bit oversized on her; she really doesn’t like wearing skirts, it’s the damndest thing…

Fernanda looks like a human version of a Red Eyed Tree Frog, and she sounds like a forty-year old waitress at a diner. Her training gear is much slinkier than any of her siblings, as she practices a unique kind of martial arts that’s very similar to Eleanor’s- at least, that’s what I first thought. In truth, she’s a **markswoman**, a bit of a middle ground between Usopp and Mark. She also really took to a **top hat** I had in wardrobe, so I let her have it.

Her swimsuit is a **high necked bikini** on the green side of yellow, along with a pair of clips to ensure her hair stays out of her face.

And for sleeping, a **sleep-dress** I made in lingerie weight silk. The yellow detail at her neckline is particularly cute; and, um, it’s part of the nightly ritual that one of her sisters, or one of us women, braids her hair back so she doesn’t have a hopeless tangle come the morn. Two heavy **french braids** and a satin pillow case, along with her sleeping mask, makes for a well-rested Fern.

Genevieve has red eyes; and Genevieve has eyes red from crying. Oh, darling. Genny’s also a self-taught witch; her training gear thus has three very distinct outfits that are *not* meant to be mixed. Outfit the **first** is meant for flying; a flying robe, a mid-sleeve sweater, a dark skirt, and a pair of grey tights to tuck into her boots. Outfit the **second** is meant for her thaumaturgical studies; **warning-striped** tights, heavy duty smock, green neckerchief, and a witchy hat with a point on the end. And finally, third, her battle outfit- for that, I **let her pick her own outfit**, after I made her basic school-girl special as a base. She’s a budget Witch, and that’s alright- it means she’ll use a wand of ash, maple,
or hickory, and it’ll probably be shaped like a baseball bat before it’s ever shaped like a wand. She’s also started a special kind of rhubarb in the garden, whose leaves will grow large enough to use as umbrellas if necessary. I’m not entirely sure it’s because she’s realized her familiar, a tiny White Bat, is pregnant, or if she’s doing it because she thinks her bat will like having a leafy roost- either way, it’s a good idea.

Genny is the only one of the girls who ignored the color separation; she asked for a bright red swimsuit, like the lifeguards at the beach have. She is, after all, a part of our medical team- and her job is, in fact, guarding our lives with medicine. I personally think she just wanted something classic and simple. To sleep in, an oversized t-shirt- and, interestingly, a pair of Daiso sandals for when she has to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. They remind me of watermelons.

I, of course, am in my chemise, and my hair is braided back much like Fern’s; and Sanji actually sleeps in a deep v-neck t-shirt and a pair of pajama shorts, which is itchy for me but not overwhelmingly hot for him. The couple’s matching set was cute, but too hot for him, and not at all up to the rigors of our lives- still, it was nice while it lasted.

“Every night, I’m going to tell a bit more of this story- until, at last, there is no more to tell. I’m telling all of you, because we are very distantly kin, and you have as much right to this story as I do- you deserve to know where you came from.

“Also, I know Beatrix would tell you these stories if you asked, but I’m not convinced yet she can remember all of it from just the one telling- so, I’ll just tell all of you.”

“...Why’s Mister Sanji here, Boss?”

“I’m here to make sure Mab doesn’t overdo it- she’ll talk the night through, y’know.”

“Ah,” they all say, nodding.

Not gonna lie, I would do that.

There are many ways to tell a story. The story I will tell you can be explained thusly- an Introduction, in which I explain a great deal of background information- mostly the history and some of the words I’ll be using that I won’t translate, followed by the setup of the story; so you understand what kind of story this is; Cuchulainn’s Boyish Deeds, The Death of Fraech, The Death of Orlam, The Death of the Meic Garach, The Death of the Squirrel, The Death of Lethan, The Death of Lochu, The Harrying of Cooley, Mac Roth’s Embassy, The Death of Etarcomol, The Death of Nadcrantail, The Finding of the Bull, The Death of Redg, The Meeting of Cuchulainn and Findabair, The Combat of Munremar and Curoi, The Death of the Boys (the first version), The Woman-fight of Rochad, The Death of the Princes, The Death of Cur, The Number of the Feats, The Death of Ferbaeth, The Combat of Larine Mac Nois, The Conversation of the Morrigan with Cuchulainn, The Death of Long Mac Emonis, The Healing of the Morrigan, The Coming of Lug Mac Ethlend, The Death of the Boys (the second version), The Arming of Cuchulainn, The Combat

The Tain Bo Cooley survives, entire and in pieces, in a considerable number of manuscripts. The most important are three in number- Leabhar na h-Uidhri, or ‘The Book of the Dun Cow’, the oldest, is a manuscript dating from about the hundredth year of our current calendar. This version is very, very old- mostly, it deals with the piece coming between the death of the herd Forgemen and the fight with Cur Mac Dalath; including Cuchulainn’s meeting with Findabair and the ‘woman-fight’ of Rochad, and the whole of what follows the Healing of the Morrigan. In this manuscript, then, the beginning is missing, but the ending is clearer. The second version comes from the Yellow Book of Lecan, a fourth-century manuscript. The Tain in this is substantially the same as the first manuscript I mentioned- beginning missing, ending present. Finally, there is the version recorded in the Book of Leinster, written before the year One-sixty. The Tain is at it’s longest and fullest, essentially a literary attempt to give a complete and consistent narrative; thus, it’s much less interesting than the older texts. However, from it we do gain clarity- what began our end, and so on.

The main reason these particular manuscripts are considered the canon of this story is thus; of the three copies of the spoken story, none is the direct ancestor of any other. That is to say, they do not reference each other; they do not use the, hm, architecture and building blocks of the other to relate their tales. They are each unique, and currently, the only surviving copies of their kind. Further, they differ entirely in aim, bias, and method; the writers of ‘Dun Cow’ and ‘Yellow’ aimed for accuracy; while the Leinster tried to present an intelligible series of events. Hence, where the two former reproduce obscurities and corruptions, the latter omits, paraphrases, or expands- with the unfortunate result of rarely, if ever, helping clear up textual obscurities in the older copy. Then again, it does explain certain episodes not clearly stated in the previous two- as the Leinster was very much aimed at teaching the story, rather than pressing it down onto paper for posterity.

I will be using words that I will not translate from the Faesh- not because I can’t, but because I don’t want to. I miss hearing them- further, if I try to translate what I remember the story to be, I’ll become distracted from actually telling the story. A considerable part of the Tain is occupied by connecting episodes with placenames- I will be explaining some of the commonest elements hence.

Ath is a ford, like Ath Gabla, Ath Triaged, Ath Carpat, Ath Friach, and so on; Belat means crossroads. Bernas is a pass or a gap- Bernas Bo Ulad or Bernas Bo Cooley; clithar is shelter; cul is a corner; dun is a fort. Fid means woods; glass means a brook or a stream; glenn means a narrow valley; grellach means a bog. Guala is a hill’s shoulder; loch is a lake; mag is a plain, like where horses run. Methe is the prepository adverb of meth, meaning death- specifically, it’s used when referring to animals that have been killed, not died. Reid, or Rede, is a plain that is not like a mag; sid is a fairy mound, and sliab is a mountain.

This is the Tain Bo Cooley.

A great hosting was brought together by the Connaughtmen, that is, by Ailill and Medb; and they sent to the three other provinces. And messengers were sent by Ailill to the seven sons of Magach: Ailill, Anluan, Mocorb, Cet, En, Bascall, and Doche; a cantred with each of them. And to Cormac
Condlongas Mac Conchobair with his three hundred, who was billeted in Connaught. Then they all come to Cruachan Ai.

Now Cormac had three troops which came to Cruachan. The first troop had many coloured cloaks folded round them; hair like a mantle; the tunic falling to the knee, and long shields; and a broad grey spearhead on a slender shaft in the hand of each man.

The second troop wore dark grey cloaks, and tunics with red ornamentation down to their calves, and long hair hanging behind from their heads, and white shields, and five-pronged spears were in their hands.

“This is not Cormac yet,” said Medb.

Then comes the third troop; and they wore purple cloaks, and hooded tunics with red ornamentation down to their feet, hair smooth to their shoulders, and round shields with engraved edges, and the spear the size of a pillar of a palace in the hand of each man.

“This is Cormac now,” said Medb.

Then the four kingdoms of the Fae were assembled in Sirenland, till they were in Cruachan Ai. And their poets and their druids did not let them go thence till the end of a fortnight, for waiting for a good omen. Medb said then to her charioteer the day that they set out:

“Every one who parts here today from his love or his friend will curse me,” said she, “for it is I who have gathered this hosting.”

“Wait then,” said the charioteer, “till I turn the chariot with the sun, and till there come the power of a good omen that we may come back again.”

Then the charioteer turned the chariot, and they set forth. Then they saw a full-grown maiden before them. She had yellow hair, and a cloak of many colours, and a golden pin in it; and a hooded tunic with red embroidery. She wore two shoes with buckles of gold. Her face was narrow below and broad above. Very black were her two eyebrows; her black delicate eyelashes cast a shadow into the middle of her two cheeks. You would think it was with paertain her lips were adorned. You would think it was a shower of pearls that was in her mouth, that is, her teeth. She had three tresses: two tresses round her head above, and a tress behind, so that it struck her two thighs behind her. A shuttle6 of white metal, with an inlaying of gold, was in her hand. Each of her two eyes had three pupils. The maiden was armed, and there were two black horses to her chariot.

“What is your name?” said Medb to the maiden.

“Fedelm, the prophetess of Connaught, is my name,” said the maiden.

“Whence do you come?” said Medb.

“From Fairyland, after learning the art of prophecy,” said the maiden.

“Have you the eyes which see?” said Medb.

“Yes, indeed,” said the maiden.

“Look for me how it will be with my hosting,” said Medb.

Then the maiden looked for it; and Medb said: “O Fedelm the prophetess, how seest thou the host?”
Fedelm answered and said: “I see very red, I see red.”

“That is not true,” said Medb; “for Conchobar is in his sickness at Emain and the Ulstermen with him, with all the best of their warriors; and my messengers have come and brought me tidings thence.”

“Fedelm the prophetess, how seest thou our host?” said Medb.

“I see red,” said the maiden.

“That is not true,” said Medb; “for Celtchar Mac Uithichair is in Dun Lethglaise, and a third of the Ulstermen with him; and Fergus, son of Roich, son of Eochaid, is here with us, in exile, and a cantred with him.

“Fedelm the prophetess, how seest thou our host?” said Medb.

“I see very red,” said the maiden.

“That matters not,” said Medb; “for there are mutual angers, and quarrels, and wounds very red in every host and in every assembly of a great army. Look again for us then, and tell us the truth. Fedelm the prophetess, how seest thou our host?”

“I see very red, I see red,” said Fedelm.

“I see a fair man who will make play

“With a number of wounds on his girdle;

“A hero’s flame over his head,

“His forehead a meeting-place of victory.

“There are seven gems of a hero of valour

“In the middle of his two irises;

“There is ----- on his cloak,

“He wears a red clasped tunic.

“He has a face that is noble,

“Which causes amazement to women.

“A young man who is fair of hue

“Comes -----.

“Like is the nature of his valour
“To Cuchulainn of Murthumne.
“I do not know whose is the Hound
“Of Culann, whose fame is the fairest.
“But I know that it is thus
“That the host is very red from him.

“I see a great man on the plain
“He gives battle to the hosts;
“Four little swords of feats
“There are in each of his two hands.

“Two Gae-bolga, he carries them,
“Besides an ivory-hilted sword and spear;
“--- he wields to the host;
“Different is the deed for which each arm goes from him.

“A man in battle-gird, of a red cloak,
“He puts —— every plain.
“He smites them, over left chariot wheel
“The Riastartha wounds them.
“The form that appeared to me on him hitherto,
“I see that his form has been changed.

“He has moved forward to the battle,
“If heed is not taken of him it will be treachery.
“I think it likely it is he who seeks you: Cuchulainn Mac Sualtaim.
“‘He will strike on whole hosts,
“He will make dense slaughters of you,
“Ye will leave with him many thousands of heads.
“The prophetess Fedelm conceals not.

“Blood will rain from warriors’ wounds

“At the hand of a warrior- ’twill be full harm.

“He will slay warriors, men will wander

(Of the descendants of Deda Mac Sin.

“Corpses will be cut off, women will lament

“Through the Hound of the Smith that I see.”


This is the story in order.

When they had come on their first journey from Cruachan as far as Cul Sibrinne, Medb told her charioteer to get ready her nine chariots for her, that she might make a circuit in the camp, to see who disliked and who liked the expedition.

Now his tent was pitched for Ailill, and the furniture was arranged, both beds and coverings. Fergus Mac Roich in his tent was next to Ailill; Cormac Condlongas Mac Conchobair beside him; Conall Cernach by him; Fiacha Mac Fir-Febe, the son of Conchobar’s daughter, by him. Medb, daughter of Eochaid Fedlech, was on Ailill’s other side; next to her, Findabair, daughter of Ailill and Medb. That was besides servants and attendants.

Medb came, after looking at the host, and she said it were folly for the rest to go on the hosting, if the cantred of the Leinstermen went.

“Why do you blame the men?” said Ailill.

“We do not blame them,” said Medb; “splendid are the warriors. When the rest were making their huts, they had finished thatching their huts and cooking their food; when the rest were at dinner, they had finished dinner, and their harpers were playing to them.”

“It is folly for them to go,” said Medb; “it is to their credit the victory of the hosts will be.”
“It is for us they fight,” said Ailill.

“They shall not come with us,” said Medb.

“Let them stay then,” said Ailill.

“They shall not stay,” said Medb. “They will come on us after we have gone,’ said she, ‘and seize our land against us.”

“What is to be done to them?” said Ailill; “will you have them neither stay nor go?”

“To kill them,” said Medb.

“We will not hide that this is a woman’s plan,” said Ailill; “what you say is not good!”

“With this folk,” said Fergus, “it shall not happen thus for it is a folk bound by ties to us Ulstermen, unless we are all killed.”

“Even that we could do,” said Medb; “for I am here with my retinue of two cantreds,” said she, “and there are the seven Manes, that is, my seven sons, with seven cantreds; their luck can protect them,” said she; “that is Mane-Mathramail, and Mane-Athramail, and Mane-Morgor, and Mane-Mingor, and Mane-Moepert -and he is Mane-Milscothach- Mane-Andoe, and Mane-who-got-everything: he got the form of his mother and of his father, and the dignity of both.”

“It would not be so,” said Fergus. “There are seven kings of Munster here, and a cantred with each of them, in friendship with us Ulstermen. I will give battle to you,’ said Fergus, ‘in the middle of the host in which we are, with these seven cantreds, and with my own cantred, and with the cantred of the Leinstermen. But I will not urge that,” said Fergus, “we will provide for the warriors otherwise, so that they shall not prevail over the host. Seventeen cantreds for us,’ said Fergus, “that is the number of our army, besides our rabble, and our women (for with each king there is his queen, in Medb’s company), and besides our striplings. This is the eighteenth cantred, the cantred of the Leinstermen. Let them be distributed among the rest of the host.”

“I do not care,” said Medb, “provided they are not gathered as they are.”

Then this was done; the Leinstermen were distributed among the host.

They set out next morning to Moin Choiltrae, where eight score deer fell in with them in one herd. They surrounded them and killed them then; wherever there was a man of the Leinstermen, it was he who got them, except five deer that all the rest of the host got. Then they came to Mag Trego, and stopped there and prepared their food. They say that it is there that Dubthach sang this song:

“Grant what you have not heard hitherto,

“Listening to the fight of Dubthach.

“A hosting very black is before you,

“Against Findbend of the wife of Ailill.
“The man of expeditions will come Who will defend Murthemne.

“Ravens will drink milk of ----

“From the friendship of the swineherds.

“The turfy Cronn will resist them;

“He will not let them into Murthemne

“Until the work of warriors is over

“In Sliab Tuad Ochaine.”

“Quickly,” said Ailill to Cormac, “Go that you may —— your son. The cattle do not come from the fields

“That the din of the host may not terrify them.

“This will be a battle in its time

“For Medb with a third of the host.

“There will be flesh of men therefrom

“If the Riastartha comes to you.”

Then the Nemain attacked them, and that was not the quietest of nights for them, with the uproar of the churl (ie. Dubthach) through their sleep. The host started up at once, and a great number of the host were in confusion, till Medb came to reprove him.

Then they went and spent the night in Granard Tethba Tuascirt, after the host had been led astray over bogs and over streams. A warning was sent from Fergus to the Ulstermen here, for friendship. They were now in the weakness, except Cuchulainn and his father Sualtaim.

Cuchulainn and his father went, after the coming of the warning from Fergus, till they were in Iraird Cuillend, watching the host there.

“I think of the host to-night,” said Cuchulainn to his father. “Go from us with a warning to the Ulstermen. I am forced to go to a tryst with Fedelm Noichride, from my own pledge that went out to her.”

He made a spancel-withe then- a twig twisted into two rings, joined by one straight piece, as used for hobbling horses and cattle- then before he went, and wrote an ogam on its bar, and threw it on the top of the pillar.
The leadership of the way before the army was given to Fergus. Then Fergus went far astray to the south, till Ulster should have completed the collection of an army; he did this for friendship. Ailill and Medb perceived it; it was then Medb said:

“O Fergus, this is strange,
“What kind of way do we go?
“Straying south or north
“Some kenning for blood?
“We go over every other folk.

“Ailill of Ai with his hosting
“Fears that you will betray them.
“You have not given your mind hitherto
“To the leading of the way.

“If it is in friendship that you do it,
“Do not lead the horses
“Peradventure another may be found
“To lead the way.”

Fergus replied:

“O Medb, what troubles you?
“This is not like treachery.
“It belongs to the Ulstermen, O woman,
“The land across which I am leading you.

“It is not for the disadvantage of the host
“That I go on each wandering in its turn;
“It is to avoid the great man

“Who protects Mag Murthemne.

“Not that my mind is not distressed

“On account of the straying on which I go,

“But if perchance I may avoid even afterwards

“Cuchulainn Mac Sualtaim.”

Then they went till they were in Iraird Cuillend. Eirr and Indell, Foich and Foclam (their two charioteers), the four sons of Iraird Mac Anchinne, it is they who were before the host, to protect their brooches and their cushions and their cloaks, that the dust of the host might not soil them. They found the withe that Cuchulainn threw, and perceived the grazing that the horses had grazed. For Sualtaim’s two horses had eaten the grass with its roots from the earth; Cuchulainn’s two horses had licked the earth as far as the stones beneath the grass. They sit down then, until the host came, and the musicians play to them. They give the withe into the hands of Fergus Mac Roich; he read the ogam that was on it.

When Medb came, she asked, “Why are you waiting here?”

“We wait,” said Fergus, “because of the withe yonder. There is an ogam on its bar, and this is what is in it: ‘Let no one go past till a man is found to throw a like withe with his one hand, and let it be one twig of which it is made; and I exempt my friend Fergus.”

“Truly,” said Fergus, “Cuchulainn has thrown it, and they are his horses that grazed the plain.”

And he put it in the hands of the druids; and Fergus sang this song:

“Here is a withe, what does the withe declare to us?

“What is its mystery?

“What number threw it?

“Few or many?

“Will it cause injury to the host,

“If they go a journey from it?

“Find out, ye druids, something therefore

“For what the withe has been left.
“Line of heroes the hero who has thrown it,

“Full misfortune on warriors;

“A delay of princes, wrathful is the matter,

“One man has thrown it with one hand.

“Is not the king’s host at the will of him,

“Unless it breaks fair play?

“Until one man only of you

“Throw it, as one man has thrown it.

“I do not know anything save that

For which the withe should have been put.

Here is a withe.”

Then Fergus said to them:

“If you outrage this withe,’ said he, ‘or if you go past it, though he be in the custody of a man, or in a house under a lock, the magic of the man who wrote the ogam on it will reach him, and will slay a goodly slaughter of you before morning, unless one of you throw a like withe.”

“It does not please us, indeed, that one of us should be slain at once,” said Ailill. “We will go by the neck of the great wood yonder, south of us, and we will not go over it at all.”

The troops hewed down then the wood before the chariots. This is the name of that place, Slechta. It is there that Partraige is. According to others, the conversation between Medb and Fedelm the prophetess took place there, as we told before; and then it is after the answer she gave to Medb that the wood was cut down:

“Look for me,” said Medb, “how my hosting will be.”

“It is difficult to me,” said the maiden; “I cannot cast my eye over them in the wood.”

“It is ploughland there shall be,” said Medb; “we will cut down the wood.”

Then this was done, so that Slechta was the name of the place.

They spent the night then in Cul Sibrille; a great snowstorm fell on them, to the girdles of the men and the wheels of the chariots. The rising was early next morning. And it was not the most peaceful of nights for them, with the snow; and they had not prepared food that night. But it was not early
when Cuchulainn came from his tryst; he waited to wash and bathe.

Then he came on the track of the host.

“Would that we had not gone there,” said Cuchulainn, “nor betrayed the Ulstermen; we have let the host go to them unawares. Make us an estimation of the host,” said Cuchulainn to Loeg, “that we may know the number of the host.”

Loeg did this, and said to Cuchulainn: “I am confused,” said he, “I cannot attain this.”

“It would not be confusion that I see, if only I come,” said Cuchulainn.

“Get into the chariot then,” said Loeg.

Cuchulainn got into the chariot, and put a reckoning over the host for a long time.

“Even you,” said Loeg, “you do not find it easy.”

“It is easier indeed to me than to you,” said Cuchulainn; “for I have three gifts, the gifts of eye, and of mind, and of reckoning. I have put a reckoning on this,” said he; “there are eighteen cantreds,” said he, “for their number; only that the eighteenth cantred is distributed among all the host, so that their number is not clear; that is, the cantred of the Leinstermen.”

This is one of the three severest and most difficult reckonings made in Fairyland; Cuchulainn’s reckoning of the men of Fairyland on the Tain and Lug’s reckoning of the Fomorian hosts at the battle of Mag Tured and Ingcel’s reckoning of the hosts at the Bruiden Da Derga. These are the most difficult of all.

Then Cuchulainn went round the host till he was at Ath Gabla. He cut a treefork there with one blow of his sword, and put it on the middle of the stream, so that a chariot could not pass it on this side or that. Eirr and Indell, Foich and Fochlam (their two charioteers) came upon him thereat. He strikes their four heads off, and throws them on to the four points of the fork. Hence is Ath Gabla.

Then the horses of the four went to meet the host, and their cushions very red on them. They supposed it was a battalion that was before them at the ford. A troop went from them to look at the ford; they saw nothing there but the track of one chariot and the fork with the four heads, and a name in ogam written on the side. All the host came then.

“Are the heads yonder from our people?” said Medb.

“They are from our people and from our choice warriors,” said Ailill.

One of them read the ogam that was on the side of the fork; that is: “A man has thrown the fork with his one hand; and you shall not go past it till one of you, except Fergus, has thrown it with one hand.”
“It is a marvel,” said Ailill, “the quickness with which the four were struck.”

“It was not *that* that was a marvel,” said Fergus; “it was the striking of the fork from the trunk with one blow; and if its end was one cutting, it is the fairer for it, and that it was thrust in in this manner; for it is not a hole that has been dug for it, but it is from the back of the chariot it has been thrown with one hand.”

“Avert this strait from us, O Fergus,” said Medb.

“Bring me a chariot then,” said Fergus, “that I may take it out, that you may see whether its end was hewn with one blow.” Fergus broke then fourteen chariots of his chariots, so that it was from his own chariot that he took it out of the ground, and he saw that the end was hewn with one blow.

“Heed must be taken to the character of the tribe to which we are going,” said Ailill. “Let each of you prepare his food; you had no rest last night for the snow. And something shall be told to us of the adventures and stories of the tribe to which we are going.”

It is then that the adventures of Cuchulainn were related to them.

Ailill asked:

“Is it Conchobar who has done this?”

“Not he,” said Fergus; “he would not have come to the border of the country without the number of a battalion round him.”

“Was it Celtchar Mac Uithidir?”

“Not he; he would not have come to the border of the country without the number of a battalion round him.”

“Was it Eogan Mac Durtacht?”

“Not he,” said Fergus; “he would not have come over the border of the country without thirty chariots two-pointed round him. This is the man who would have done the deed,” said Fergus, “Cuchulainn; it is he who would have cut the tree at one blow from the trunk, and who would have killed the four yonder as quickly as they were killed, and who would have come to the boundary with his charioteer.”

“What kind of man,” said Ailill, “is this Hound of whom we have heard among the Ulstermen? What age is this youth who is famous?”

“An easy question, truly,” said Fergus. “In his fifth year he went to the boys at Emain Macha to play; in his sixth year he went to learn arms and feats with Scathach. In his seventh year he took arms, and the boy who was Setanta died, and stood as Cuchulain. He is now seventeen years old at this time.”

“Is it he who is hardest to deal with among the Ulstermen?” said Medb.

“Over every one of them,” said Fergus. “You will not find before you a warrior who is harder to deal with, nor a point that is sharper or keener or swifter, nor a hero who is fiercer, nor a raven that is more flesh-loving, nor a match of his age that can equal him as far as a third; nor a lion that is fiercer, nor a fence of battle, nor a hammer of destruction, nor a door of battle, nor judgment on hosts, nor preventing of a great host that is more worthy. You will not find there a man who would reach his
age, and his growth, and his dress, and his terror, his speech, his splendour, his fame, his voice, his form, his power, his hardness, his accomplishment, his valour, his striking, his rage, his anger, his victory, his doom-giving, his violence, his estimation, his hero triumph, his speed, his pride, his madness, with the feat of nine men on every point, like Cuchulainn.”

“I don’t care for that,” said Medb; “he is in one body; he endures wounding; he is not above capturing. Therewith his age is that of a grown-up girl, and his manly deeds have not come yet.”

“Not so,” said Fergus. “It would be no wonder if he were to do a good deed to-day; for even when he was younger his deeds were manly.”

Sanji strokes a pair of knuckles up the velveteen of my spine, and my breath catches in my throat. In front of me, the children’s eyes shine tiredly in the gloom; bedtime. I’ve settled them down a bit- a little structure works wonders, after all.

“Goodnight, my darling ones. I’ll tell you more of Cuchulain to-morrow. Care is heavy, so now sleep you; you are care, and care must keep you.”

“G’night, Missus Mab,” comes the sleepy blushing chorus. Aw. They’re embarrassed I care about them.

Sanji cries into my hair that night again. I wake up a bit before the third hour of the morning, and ghost from our bed, gliding in silently to gaze at the sleeping children.

I worry for them; I worry in the night their breath will cease, and they will be gone from my keeping. I also worry about Robin and Taffy and- Gurry’s in bed with Taffy again? Hmm. Well, that’s fine, I think, it’s not like the dorm separation of genders is really anything other than a formality we pay lip service to- it really amounts to who wants to sleep in a room that smells a bit like farts, and who wants to get sleep groped by Robin. You think I’m kidding; the woman sleep-gropes.

Mm! Sanji-! I lean back into the warm chest behind me, and resist the urge to rub my ass into his crotch because he’s not been interested for two days now and I don’t want to push-

‘Come back to bed, love. They’re fine.’

‘I know, I just- I worry they’ll stop breathing if I look away.’

‘...well, shit. -Wake me up next time so we can do shifts, alright?’

‘A-alright. -One last look, and then we can go back to bed.’

‘Alright.’
I look them over, and then silently sigh and turn, and allow Sanji, my beloved, to lead me back to bed. I’ve gotten too used to having so much sex every day, I think— even two days without any, hardly any kissing even, has been bizarre and disorienting.

It’s been a long time since I used my fingers; let’s see if I can still-

Fuah-

Rub rub rub in little circles and rub the ‘U’ just underneath the clit and above the- nnng- uuhfa uuhf uuungh, mm, mm, mmmmaaaah ah ah ah aaAAH! Sanji-!

‘Sh, move your hand-’

‘Aaah!’

Mmm, mmmm, we haven’t done this since our plighting, back in Skypiea; it’s been a long time since Sanji’s gnnnnnggh fuah fuh mmmmmmmnggh mmm mmmaaa uugh- gggngh aaah ah ah ah AH AH AH AH AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-

My legs won’t stop twitching. Mmmng. Sanji’s rubbing little circles on the pooch of my uterus, his fingertips gentle on the soft skin below my belly button. My feet are almost cramping they’ve been pointed so hard; my toes are curled over. My pussy aches for my husband’s cock and I can’t bear to ask it of him and bring him shame for having to tell me ‘No, I can’t’. Ffuck, I want him so badly…

“Mab?”

“Mhm?”
“...how do you feel about sodomy?”

“Uh... That’s the one where it’s up the ass, aye?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve no problem with it, so long as we use condoms or you don’t come inside.”

“-no I kind of... I meant for me. You sodomizing me.”

“OH! Um. Well, I think I’d start with rimming- er, salad tossing? And then I’d start adding fingers, and, um. See how comfortable you are from there, really.”

“Um. Pegging?”

“...I suppose, if you want- if I’m female-aspect with a strap-on dildo, or in male-aspect with an erection, I... well, really, it’s whatever you’re most comfortable with.”

“...I’m. I’m curious about having sex with someone who visually reads as ‘male’, I think? I just- I want to try everything.”

“Okay..”

We fell asleep after that, but I didn’t forget. This is going to be interesting. And Fun!
Dread Bread and Fish Roe (The Terror of Baking!)

For those that don’t know, Imbolc in the modern era usually falls on the second day of February. It’s one of the four major holidays, alongside Beltane, Lughnasadh, and Samhain. The solstices and equinoxes are also celebrated; thus, the Spokes and the Turns of the great Wheel of the Year. Imbolc can be said as ‘IM-bulk’ or ‘EM-bowlk’, but usually not ‘IM-bowlk’. The provenance of this holiday is usually attributed to the Fae, but every Tribe has their own version of it; ours is most popular because of all the sex we encourage people to have.

Traditionally speaking, the actual time of year is what’s important, not the actual day- right about now is when the wind changes and clears out the fine dust and grit from the Heights, making the stars extra-visible. This, in effect, makes it very easy to divine weather, astrally mark the exact time of year, and produce the over-arching Meta-prophecies for the Zodiac and Astrological signs.

Most people pay tribute to the Goddess Mother by arranging an altar and invoking her through prayer, offerings, and sacrifice. It’s in the name of the holiday- the Old Faesh word ‘imbolc’ means ‘in the womb’ or ‘ewe’s milk.’ Thus, the holiday being a celebration of fertility, sex, and the young, as overseen by the Goddess Maiden- well, it’s a bit obvious, isn’t it. Traditionally, Imbolc observes the wane of winter and the come of spring; we, as in Fae, are taught to use fire and other forms of light to encourage the lengthening of the day. I’m fairly sure that Ace will have fire-hair for the entirety of Imbolc…

Seeds, buds, and flowers are also used, because we all know what we’re really here for. As with all holidays, food and music is essential. Dishes for Imbolc incorporate seeds, fresh dairy, and bright green foliage. All the members of the house prepare talismans to use during the holiday ceremonies and then keep the rest of the year; a Bridesmaid, and some kind of Bride-cross.

Finally, and most importantly, Imbolc is the time for Spring Cleaning. This one, we’re doing, if nothing else- it’s time to clean the ship, observe certain bathing rituals, and de-clutter, dammit. We’ve got new crewmates anyway, so it’s going to have to happen sometime- the dorms need restructuring, frankly speaking. Hehe.

As for how long this celebration lasts; it begins at sundown on the first of February and ends at sundown on the second of February. Imbolc is the center-point of the dark half of the year; if you make it through Imbolc, it usually means you’ve made it through winter entirely.

This is also- according to last years almanac, as this year’s won’t come out until Beltane at the latest- about when lambing season is to start. Now is when the World Magic is right to put blessings on tools, seeds, and all our animals. Our dogs will blow their winter coats, as will our horses, quite soon indeed; some of the fish still in our aquarium are fat with eggs, which means Sanji’s going to toss them back into the ocean pretty damn soon.

The Girls are to make Bridesmaids out of straw, and put them in a basket with white flower bedding; then, all us adults will tuck gifts into the basket, as blessings on the little-women we, well, hope the girls will become. More like… omamori, is the word I think; though some of us (LUFFY) will use extra envelopes meant for New Year's and stuff them full of money. How do I know Luffy’s going to do that? He’s finally started asking me if he can take stuff from the Studio- and this time, I gave him a cute spring stationery set instead- an abbreviated set, actually, pre-folded envelopes, washi tape, and stick-on name tags…
He then asked me to help him convince Nami to give all the kids money— and that’s about when I realized he’d completely missed the part where it’s for the girls, not all the people on this boat younger than him, but, well. Captain is Captain; and when I gave Nami a long, slow smile, she sighed and handed over a fat stack of cash.

“-and he’s gone. He doesn’t actually care that it’s for only the girls, you realize?”

“No; I figured that out when he asked me how to spell ‘Horizon’; I just… we can’t just put a boy into the Women’s Business, it’s… not right.”

“No… But then again, there’s some things a boy ought to have a lecture on before he becomes a man. I’ll put a hair in Sanji’s ear; you put one in Zoro’s, aye?”

“-aha. Not the Sex Talk- the Sex is Fun talk.”

“Mhm. I’ll handle lots of it, and so will Robin- but you’ve got unique experience that you’ll need to give them access to.”

“I- oof, well, it’s not like it’s a secret at this point...”

“Some things you don’t need to figure out first-hand.”

“True. -Ugh, I’m so tired of being pregnant... were you always this godsdamned hot?”

“Oh, yeah. And as soon as I’d get comfortable, I had to get up and pee again; and, of course, you’re at the point where you can’t sleep any way except on your side-”

“Fucking shit! I know, right? And- and I want to sleep on my back so fucking much - ”

“-and have you started pissing yourself?”

“Fucking hell, yes! These little shits keep kicking my bladder with no fucking warning, and then-woosh! Like a goddamn geyser!”

“Ugh, gods, I remember now- Here’s something I noticed and it was the goddamn worst. So, most of mine that got big enough would always sorta… flip-flop around, I guess? And then my balance was shot-”

“-IS THAT WHAT THAT FUCKING IS? FUCKING SHIT!”

“-and the fucking constipation- ”

“-uuuuuuuuugh-”

“-Oh! And, uh, has your hair changed yet, or…?”

“Fucking Gods, yes it has! It used to be so soft and untangle-y, and now this motherfucking rat’s nest, won’t even…fuuuuuuuck.”

“...You wanna go to Chihiro Sento for the Imbolc Baths?”

“...we can do that?”

“Hells yeah we can.”
“-Fuck it. We’re goin’ to Chihiro Sento for Imbolc. I don’t even care that all the baths are co-ed, I want pampering.”

“Cool. Hehe, they might even have the kind of lotion I used...”

“ So. Itchy!”

“Oh- oh no, Nami, don’t cry, it’s gonna be okay-”

“-uuuaaaaaagh-!”

All of last year’s remaining candles- really, they’re a few year's old, so- all the old holiday candles, of which there are enough to light an elaborate chandelier, will be burned through the night of February first; and then most of Imbolc day is devoted to candle-making, or at least the parts that require cutting the string for the wicks.

The hearth fire and engine fire are put out, cleaned, and re-lit; and that’s usually done before the preparation of the feast, so... breakfast is going to be cold, probably. Anyway, after the feast which-knowing my husband- is going to be delicious ; we throw the men out so they don’t have to hear us talk candidly about sex. Us older women- Me Robin Nami Taffy Bryony- will make tiny little acorn-phalluses for the little-women to hold, and give the girls the benefits of Older Women’s Wisdom, so that they might make a better class of mistakes than we did.

We’ll also be weaving Bride-crosses from wheat stalks and exchange them with the ones the men will be making out of reeds, as symbols of protection and prosperity for the coming year. Taffy, Genny, Gurry, and Chopper will be making the besom that I’ll be sweeping the entire ship out with on the final day, in the final ritual- and then we burn that too.

I’ll put a new candle in each room of the ship to honor the revival and renewal of the Sun after its near-permanent defeat by the Serpent and Scorpion of Darkness at Yule; the snakes, Banana and Marzipan, will shed their skins and possibly cough out lucky gemstones; and all through the garden, the first blooms of the season will bud, and possibly burst into flower.

This holiday is all about purity, growth, renewal; union between man and woman- so, sex; pregnancy; and getting rid of the old to make way for the new.

Magical rites and talismans for the holiday are the Little-women, besoms, white flowers, candle wheels, crosses, priapic wands (acorn tipped as they are; a witches wand has a knob on the end, hnmhmhmhmhmhmhm), and ploughshares. The herbs of Imbolc are Angelica, for inspiration and magic; Basil, because it’s both hardy and green; Bay for glory, honor, and triumph; Blackberry because they taste good; Celandine, good for medicine, latex, and deadly poison depending on which one you need; Coltsfoot; Heather; Iris; Myrrh; Tansy; Violets; and all white or yellow flowers, including Baby’s Breath and Daffodils. The foods of Imbolc are seeds, nuts, dough-breads, all dairy products- that’s eggs, milk, butter, and cheese- peppers, onions, garlic, and all dried fruit, including peel. The drinks of Imbolc are all mixed spirits, particularly Advocaat; spiced wines, and herbal teas- but not tea-leaf teas. The incense of Imbolc is basil, bay, wisteria, cinnamon, violet, vanilla, and myrrh. The colors of Imbolc are white, pink, red, yellow, green, and brown. The gemstones of Imbolc are amethyst, bloodstone, garnet, ruby, onyx, and turquoise.

The activities of Imbolc, which tend to happen no matter what your particular traditions are- are: candle lighting, stone gathering, snow hiking and searching for signs of spring, making the Little-
women and bestowing blessings upon them, making priapic wands, decorating poughshares, feasting, and bonfires. All part of the Turning of the Wheel, naturally.

“Um. Missus Mab, what wheel needs turning?”

“...They didn’t teach it at the Gag, Sancho?”

“No ma’am.”

“Hm. Well, it is breakfast; as fine a time to learn about religion and magic as any other. Just a moment-”

I clear my plate of food in two quick bites, and hand it off to Taffy, who’s on table-bussing duty today; then, let’s see… A few sheets of parchment, my own personal fountain pen, a red brush pen, and a blue brush pen- and I’ll pull everything out from behind Sancho’s ear, which is amusing to me and awe-inspiring to Luffy, who is observing curiously.

I unroll the parchment, and carefully draw out a cross perpendicular to another cross with my black fountain pen, making an eight pointed star in a quartet of lines.

“Everyone who’s lived among enough people knows about the holidays eventually; in order, then. Yule, or the Midwinter Solstice; Imbolc, which is also Maiden’s Day; Ostara, the Spring, or Vernal, Equinox; Beltane, which is also known as Witches, or Walpurgis Night; Litha, or the Midsummer Solstice; Lammas, which is also Taitiu’s Day; Mabon, the Fall, or Autumnal, Equinox; and Samhain, All Hallows, the Night of the Dead.”

I label the eight points with their holidays and dates- or, in the equinox and solstice cases, approximate dates.

“Solstices and equinoxes move just a touch year to year, and tracking those movements is of the utmost importance to witches and fortune tellers alike. Excepting very rare circumstances, they will fall between the twentieth and twenty-third of the month in March for Ostara, June for Litha, September for Mabon, and December for Yule. All their properly magical rituals- and I mean the ones of significance, that serve to protect the entirety of the family, house, or individual- are to happen during the day, at dawn, or at sunset, depending on alignment. The other four spokes on the wheel are overnight celebrations set between them, also to alignment. Imbolc is the first to the second of February, sunset to sunset; Beltane is the first to the second of May, sunset to sunset; Lammas is the last of July to the first of August, sunrise to sunrise; and Samhain is the last of October to the first of November, sunrise to sunrise.”

“Neh, Mab; how do you know what day the solstices are? All those days feel the same, right around then...”
“Hmhmhm; well, usually, I just check the almanac-”

“-Oh, of course-”

“-but if I don’t have an almanac or can’t get to one in time, I’ll use my knowledge of astronomy. Fernanda, Beatrix, Genevieve, Deborah- and anyone else who wants to know- I’ll be teaching you to do those calculations cold. You’re all going to need the skill- Fernanda, specifically, will need the skill to increase the accuracy and clarity of her Sight. Now-”

I make two copies of my diagram, one red, and one blue; without the dates for clarity’s sake- just names on a spidery star, in fact.

“If you ask someone from the modern school of religious theory, they’ll tell you the year is divided like this,” as I draw a diagonal line in black across the red copy, bisecting the spidery star in angled halves. “Mabon, Samhain, Yule, and Imbolc are the Dark half of the year, and Ostara, Beltane, Litha, and Lammas are the Light half. I, personally, am Properly Neutral, also known as Harmonious, meaning I don’t favor the Light or the Dark; I give proper respect to the ritual and celebration of both side. However, this means I practice both Light and Dark Magic- which I’ll be explaining momentarily, so shush. The reason I don’t currently practice Neutral rituals or attend such celebrations- or even use that much Neutral magic? It’s weak as baby piss is why; neither light nor dark, and less than either, lacking in form, function, structure, and nuance.

“I don’t consider them magical rituals at all; and, quite frankly, a series of hymns from a religion you don’t adhere to would be just as useful. Proper light mages celebrate these holidays,” I say, circling the appropriate names in blue on the blue diagram as I explain. “Yule, because the Light begins to gain power again over the Dark; Imbolc for youth and potential; Ostara for Life and Fertility- also the point at which Light gains dominion over Dark; Beltane for choice; Midsummer is the height of the Light’s power; and Lammas as a day of commitment. Light Mages observe the other holidays, of course- they do their best to balance their lives on Mabon, and honor the dead on Samhain; but neither are days of power for them, by which I mean there are Light Magic rituals that are meant to take place on Yule, Imbolc, Ostara, Beltane, Litha, and Lammas, but not on Mabon or Samhain. Well, I say that, but immediately think of quite a few that ought be done on those days- here, then.

“On the six circled holidays, Light Mages will build their workings; on the other two, they will break their workings. There are times it is best to build something up; and there are times when it is best to break it down. Everyone follows so far?”

“-I think so, Boss. Is Dark the opposite?”

“Not quite. Dark Mages celebrate these holidays,” I say, smiling softly as I circle the appropriate holidays in red on the blue diagram. “Mabon is when the Dark begins to gain power again over the Light; Samhain for age and destruction; Yule for duty and self-sacrifice- also the point at which Dark gains dominion over Light; Walpurgis, or Beltane, for wildness and freedom; Litha is when Light’s power begins to wane; and Lammas is a day for binding and compulsion.

“As it is above, so it is below; thus, Dark Mages observe the other holidays. Imbolc, for dark mages, tends to be the day when they clear away the belongings and final physical reminders of the ones who have died, or general house-cleaning; Ostara is a good day to renew a vow, or remind oneself of the ground; but neither Imbolc or Ostara give power to the Dark Mage. Dark Magic rituals are meant to take place on Mabon, Samhain, Yule, Walpurgis, Litha, and Lammas; not on Imbolc or Ostara.
With that said; on the six circled holidays, Dark Mages will **build** their workings; on the other two, they will **break** their workings. A season, and seasoning, for all things.

“In review- the Light of the year, or Wheel,” I say as I begin to draw the perfect curved line in black on the blue with red copy of the diagram, “is from Yule to Lammas. The Dark of the Wheel is from Beltane to Yule. Four of the eight holidays have both Light and Dark powers active: Yule, Beltane, Litha, and Lammas, where the Light and Dark overlap,” I say as I draw simple chevrons pointing to each named day on the Wheel. “Mabon and Samhain are only dark, and Imbolc and Ostara are only Light, for ritual purposes. Light and Dark, despite their opposition, have two important things in common: they both comfort, and they both blind. Too much of either is just as bad as not enough of both, to my mind. There are some things that can be done with either Magic; and there are some things that can be done with only one or the other; and there are some things that ought not be done with Magic at all. Power, and Powers, are nothing without control.”

“-neh, Mab, I’ve been wonderin’ about this since I was a kid...”

“Wassup, Luffy?”

“Well, I hear people swear by the Powers sometimes, and I was wonderin’- since you mentioned them an’ all, are they like… th’ gods or somethin’?”

“Ah. No, Luffy- the Powers are **not** the Gods. The Gods are the Powers.”

“Huh?”

“Like how you’re not a straw hat with a guy, you’re a guy with a straw hat- or, uh, how you can toast bread then butter it, but not butter bread then toast it.”

“Oh!”

“...Um, Boss, could we get the Not-Luffy explanation?”

“Sure thing, Bea. The Powers which you might have heard of when a witch, wizard, or mage swears by something, is… hm. The gods, all the different pantheons- each familiar face is an aspect, or facet, of one or more of the Great Powers. There are eight Dark Powers, eight Light Powers; Seven Virtues, and Seven Sins.”

“...what about the terrible fates, Missus Mab?”

“The Terrible Fates are something different, Ellie- I’ll explain those too, if you’d like…? Right, remind me so I can tell you later- Now, the Dark Powers are Binding; Chaotic; Deathly; Deceptive; Destructive; Infernal; Solitary; and Tangible. The Light Powers are Deliberative; Orderly; Lively; Naive; Constructive; Mundane; Cooperative; and Intangible.” I rattle off with the ease of long practice, as I write them out on the back of the red diagram, each in their ordered pair. “The Virtues can be disputed as one word or another; however, the way I learned them is like this: Kindness, Loyalty, Generosity, Camaraderie-”

“-kahm-rah-dur-eee-” calls Sanji.

“CAW-MAR-RAW-DEER-AUGH- Ecstasy, Honesty, and Determination. The Sins can also be disputed as one word or another; but I learned them as Cruelty, Treachery, Greed, Discord, Misery, Lying, and Cowardice. The Powers differ more in associations and focus than anything else, even if they’re celebrated at the same time or exist in the same action.”

“Uh…?” is the chorus I’m greeted with.
"Well, here- most of the Powers aren’t really what one thinks of as Light and Dark in terms of magic. Order and Binding are very similar, and both are celebrated on Lammas; Chaotic and Deliberative are celebrated on Beltane. It’s these qualities of duality that make certain holidays suitable for both Light and Dark rituals, and not one or the other alone.

“As I said, the real difference lies in the association and focus, not necessarily the proximity- Beltane is about the freedom of Choice. Chaos and wildness abound; but, so does deliberation, and reason. Freedom of choice doesn’t just mean ‘I can do whatever I want’; it also means ‘I can choose to do what must be done.’ Duty, responsibility, change- these are choices, as much as any other, and you can choose to follow through with them, or not, as the moment comes.

“Honestly, the philosophy of the Powers isn’t all that important unless you’re dedicating yourself to a Path- which is the following of one specific Power above the others- or performing a ritual. You girls- and boy, I see you there, Sancho- are ready for neither without supervision.

“Also, things get really fucking weird with Infernal and Mundane and Tangible and Intangible. Most people stick to the major Dark and Light magical definitions for their workings: compulsion versus choice; wildness versus domestication; deception versus honesty; and independence versus cooperation.”

“...Boss, why are you Harmonious? Really, not the quick reason.”

“...Well, it really does come back to balance, Beatrix. Compulsion, wildness, deception, and independence- it’s a fine way to live, but very lonely, in the end. It breeds arrogance and overconfidence, and I’ve never, ever seen that path end too terribly well for anyone. Choice, domestication, honesty, and cooperation- also a fine way to live, but soul crushing, eventually. The World is not kind to people who choose outside of their fellows; who cannot abide safety for overlong; who are too honest; who cooperate only if their collaborators are their equal or better. The truth is, you need both halves to make a whole; you need to compel yourself to do some things, and give yourself a choice in others; wild and tame; false and true; alone, together. When I was very young, I decided to do something very hard all by myself, and I didn’t care what I had to become so long as I did it- except, in the end, I became someone I was not, for a reason it took me many years to understand.”

“...It’s better, when you’re not alone. If you’re not okay, it’s still not great- but it’s better than being alone,” says Genevieve, before Sancho wraps an arm around her.

“Yes. Yes, it is. -ah, the Powers are divided thus, over the holidays,” I say, scrawling powers next to each named holiday, black juxtaposing red. “Yule is for independence or isolation or solitude; Imbolc is for honesty, youth, potential, and naïveté. Ostara is for life. Beltane is for freedom of choice, chaotic and deliberative; Litha is for interdependence- sorry, cooperation. Lammas is for binding; order, compulsion, domestication, duty, commitment. Lots of marriages happen on Lammas; it’s usually a nice day for it too, not too hot or cold. Mabon is for deception, wisdom, experience, and age; every masquerade-”

“-mas-ker-aide-” calls Sanji.

“MACE-QUEUE-RAID- and orgy I’ve ever been to has started or coincided in some way with Mabon. Then, of course, Samhain for death and the dead. If we add the other Powers, the destructive Power goes with death; constructive goes with life. Infernal and Intangible go for Yule with solitary; and Mundane and Tangible go for Litha with cooperative.”

“Neh, what’re those ones, Mab? Infernal and intangerine and muddy?”
“Infernal- or Celestial, it depends on the source- Intangible, and Mundane, Luffy; and they’re fucking weird is what they are. Infernal is technically Dark and has something to do with other dimensions, I guess, and also magic. Intangible is technically Light; it’s spirit and ideas and memories and past and present and emotions, and things like that- but all of this World. They go at Yule with the solitary power because they’re hard to explain and kind of similar, but really entirely different; different sources, different aims. Both powers are outside of you as a person and the World in completely different ways, which kinda doesn’t make sense for Intangible but what the hell do I know, I nearly failed out of Divinity… Oh, Divinity is the what the class for this kind of thing is called, if you didn’t know.”

“Shishishishishishi- neh, what about Muddy and Tangerine?”

“Mundane and Tangible? Mundane is this World, the opposite of Infernal or Celestial; it’s everything we can sense in this plane of existence, from the smallest hint of mustard to the most massive of mountains; our wills, our wonders, our everything. Tangible is everything physical, and is often confused with hedonistic pleasures- sex, drugs, booze, that sort of thing- but that’s not all Tangible is. Mundane and Tangible go with the Cooperative Power because you experience them as part of the World around you. There’s a lot of overlap- but Infernal is different from everything else. You can have tangible and intangible and all the other powers within the mundane world; but Infernal as a concept and a force exists completely outside and away from all others. I never quite understood how, exactly, Infernal Power then acts and effects the World if it’s completely separate from it, but it does. It is a Mystery.”

“Mystery Power!”

“Mhm!”

“-So, Boss, what’ll we be doing over the weekend?”

“Ah, right- Imbolc! Everything gets cleaned; we’ll go to the Chihiro Sento, the girls will make Little-women with the Women, the Boy will go with the Men to do Man-things; sweep out the old year, becon the new with fire… some of it’ll be fun, most of it’ll be work. At one of the cruxes, a point in the year at which All the World Turns. The Earth turns and the Sun is reborn; we light fires, we clean winter away… Get some fresh air.

“Also, since all of you can see over the bar, there, you can get really fucking drunk on basically custard mix spiked with really hard spirits. It’s Traditional, after all.”

“-Hey, Mab?”

“Mmmyes, Chopper?”

“When’re you going to start making Advocaat?”

“Hm, probably today.”

“Yeeeeeessssss-”

My friends are silly.
So, actually, this is something I can teach Genny- I may just be a journeyman Weather Witch, but she can learn this from me. It’s better she learn this from me, yis, because if Nami tries to teach it to her… Well, if she wasn’t pregnant she’d probably be fine, but- best she hear this from me.

“So. There are four main schools of Magical Philosophy, each with it’s own valued qualities and personal appeals. In truth, magic is only limited by what you, personally, think it is; how you believe magic should be used will both reflect your personality, and change how you use the power.”

We’re in the stillroom, making the poisons that will become medicine under Chopper’s gimlet eye, or even more deadly poisons under Gurry’s graceful hand. Genevieve is wearing her potion-making clothing; I’m wearing a heavy white coat and protective eyewear.

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“Most lay-people understand magic as a weapon. Daring, nerve, and chivalry- these are what the average person thinks of when they think of a wizard, witch, or mage. They think of the aggressive forms of magic- fireballs from empty hands, the shattering of entrenched walls, war and glory… And, to be fair, most magic users who become any kind of famous are that kind of person; they do perceive magic as a weapon. The ones who excel in aggressive forms of magic- offensive and defensive spells, dueling… and the truest of them know that power is a responsibility in and of itself, and so use their power to stand for what is right and good. They are very much like swords; cutting down their foes and defending their friends alike. I’m like that; so is Captain, and Bryony.”

We grind down seed-husks and bark; we crush bits of wood into splinters and put those splinters in water. We bottle what remains, and set things to boil. Refine, refine, refine.

“Those people who live near enough magic to have the shine worn off- those people who live near or work with hedgewitches and hedgewizards… those people tend to think of magic as a gift. The best gifts are given- not always freely, but always given. Loyalty and justice tend to be their creed, and the best of them abhor the idea of jealously guarding magic from the world or ever using it to bring harm. This kind of magic user shares their magic to benefit their community, to protect the overlooked and helpless, and to oppose those who would use their magic to torment and bully others. Nami is the first; Mab is the second; and Zoro is the third.”

We crush crystals left from boiling away the fluid into powder; we put that powder into brown bottles, and label them with extreme care. Name, Date Made, Who Made It, Good Until, Do Not Use If…

“Then, there are those who believe the direct opposite. Some people consider their magic a treasure that they’ve been entrusted to protect. Their fascination with purity, advantage, cunning, and secrecy- which, while easily perverted, are not qualities in and of themselves bad - comes from the idea that
people with magic have been given something special that it is their duty to protect at all costs. The thing of it is, they aren’t entirely wrong: power, in the wrong hands, known to the wrong person, can be very, very dangerous. Using your power to interfere in matters that do not concern you is a gross presumption that often leads to overconfidence, arrogance, and death. They are cautious with their magic, and cautious in general- though that may not be apparent at first. Mark, and Brook, and Usopp, fall in this realm.”

We steadily clean what we have used, obeying the ordinances meant to neutralize and nullify what remains of our work. We hang up our tools; we pack away the unused raw materials. Genny mulls over what I have said.

“Finally, there are those who believe that magic is an art form; a beautiful art form, that should be appreciated and studied for its own sake. These people are often considered the innovators and geniuses of their generation, because, outside of an intrapersonal relationship, unless they explicitly indicate their interest in magic, whatever they choose to put themselves into… they very often become the best they can be at whatever they’ve chosen to exalt. ‘Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure,’- that’s an aphorism and a dick joke, all in one go. That's the kind of person who considers magic art; and if that’s what you think, asking what magic is for is useless. These people push the boundaries of magic to see if they can; they want to know how far they can go. Robin wants to know the True History of the World; Gurry wants to Paint like no other has painted before him; Sanji wants to find an impossible place; Chopper wants to cure every disease.”

“...Some of those personalities overlap, though…?”

“Well, of course! A person isn’t just their core- a tree is not just it’s heart. People, like onions and well dressed men, have layers. Magic can be a weapon, a gift, a treasure, an art- and it can be none of those things, or all of those things, or any combination of the four. What matters is how you think of magic; do you really want to learn how to make potions? Fine. Do you really want to learn battle magic? Good on you! Do you want to see how fast you can fly? Outstanding! The World, and all the wonders therein are your edible bivalve mollusc of choice! Could be an oyster; could be a clam!”

“...You’re not very good at pep talks, are you Taffy?”

“No, I’m not. Still; we’re about to start gathering the straw for the Bride-crosses, and I wanted you to be thinking about some things when we start. Who are you, Genevieve? What do you want? These questions aren’t meant to frighten you, though they are very big and a bit scary- but challenge! You’re becoming someone new; you’re growing, as we speak. Who will you become, in this next year?”

“Wobbly start, solid finish. I give your pep talk a solid Average Plus grade, with room for improvement.”

“Well, considering it’s my first ever pep talk, I’ll take that as a win.”

“Heh.”

“Heeheeheehee- mm, change into something you can work outdoors in, and if you see your sisters, tell them to do the same. S’time for the first grass-cutting of the season!”
And Genny, with a smile that doesn’t ring false like it did a few days ago, nods and trots off. I sigh, and roll my shoulders, let my wings flutter and fluff. Gods in heaven, how did Mab do this?

Here’s how you make a Bride-cross. Cut straw- thin reeds, wheat, even grass will do if it’s long enough- and let it dry not quite stiff. Take a straw for each of the Powers, sixteen in total.

The shortest straw goes in the center, held upright; the longest gets folded in half around the shortest, making a square angle. Making sure the opening is to the right, pull it tight; and turn, so the opening is pointing upwards, and fold another straw; fold again and again until only four straws remain. Put a stone in the center and gather the loose ends in your hand; use one of the four straws to tie the end, and taking care not to cut or rip the straw, tuck the long edges inside until no end or seam can be found. Do the same for all four ends of the cross, and you’re done.

Stack ‘em near the fire so they really dry out; and get ready for the next thing.

I’ve managed five of them, since we began; and I suppose it’s time to put the handles on those blades I made at Zoro’s request… I’ll bless them during Imbolc, and then Nami can have Zoro put them under their bed… probably under the mattress in their hammock box, actually.

“-naw, Adelaide. I know he comes off as deep and mysterious, but Zoro’s really an open book. You just have to take the time to read the pages; he doesn’t volunteer information about himself, but if you just ask, he’ll tell you. He actually left his dojo a final time to get groceries, but he got lost and ended up here with a bounty on his head and no groceries to speak of-”

I smile, and take out the blades. They’re actually very small; no different in form from a steak knife. I thought about putting the magic into the metal, making them ornate and spectacular- but these aren’t weapons meant to be seen with the eye.

It’s when I take out the binding I’ve been preparing that things get very quiet. After all, Zoro said what he wanted- One, and One, and Two-As-One. Wind, Rain, Thunder-and-Lightning.

“Heed the North wind’s mighty tread;
“Sky grows dim, heart fills with dread.
“When the wind flies from the South;
“Love’s gentle kiss will guard your mouth.
“When the soft wind blows from the West;
“Those departed will have no rest.
“When the wind runs from the East;
“Danger comes and wise ones feast.”

For all her bellyaching about being ‘nothing like Nami’, Taffy’s a very good Weather Witch in her own right.

For the North Wind, black thread; the bringer of change, the mighty one. It’s power is unmatched. For the South Wind, yellow thread; knower of the heart, the passionate lover. It’s warmth is unrivalled. For the West Wind, blue thread; the finder of secrets, the mysterious one. It’s patience is unfaltering. For the East Wind, white thread; learner of wisdom, the young student. It’s advice is uncontested.

Each Wind has a very important energy that can’t be falsified; and all of them work together very well, which is why most mages who aren’t Weather mages call them together. The winds are often called on in magic in conjunction with watchtowers, but that varies with tradition.

What does not is the method of their tying into a talisman. (Really, there are only so many ways to tie an effective knot; and while general calling in ritual magic can vary with whatever you’re comfortable doing, making an effective talisman really is a matter of tradition.)

It’s a simple four strand braid around a solid core; over, and down, round and around, until at last the hilt is covered and there is no more to weave. Seal the end; and seal again, with a touch of magic. Even though I added no flourish to it’s construction, the magic will out; the plain blade has become different, and beautiful in my hand. The blade itself looks more like a feather; the four colors of the wind zig-zag down the hilt.

A Blade of Wind, as Zoro indicated would be appropriate.

Rain isn’t Wind; what works for one does not work for another. Wind can be bound into thread- in many ways, Wind is thread. Heat rubs against itself to make Wind; but Rain is not Wind. Seeds of dust drift through the sky and gather water around them; when they attain too great a weight, they fall.

Rain grieves, and reconciles, and nourishes too. The Rain falls and the earth is refreshed and renewed; the rain falls and the earth is covered in sorrow. Clean and cool; clean and warm. Clean- and so a glass of rainwater that fair beats on my head with it’s power.

I take the designated knife, and let it fall into the water; power rushes, and gushes, like a gutter rattling with rainwater- and then it is done. The water is gone, absorbed or transformed into the power of the blade; and the blade itself is changed, becoming a thing of equal lines and sharp beauty.

A Blade of Rain, as Zoro asked for.

Finally, the Brothers; Thunder, and Lightning. For this, only an incantation; for this, only words, nothing more.

“For you are indeed a splendid storm, though it is not theirs to know; thunder is the soundtrack for
the places you choose to go. Your rage brings renewal; or the breaking of a heart- you the curling reminder; you the crashing start; together or alone, you are a second early or late- you stumble through a soggy sky, and you do not wait. The light that shows will always leave them stricken, numbed and blind; you race ahead with dainty tread, your beloved close behind. Lover or brother or somewhere between; you dart away in the dark and you roaring follow. To see, to speak; you were not made for tenderness or stillness. Bright and blinding; strong and striking; call the world to being and shatter it in the same moment. You, who are untamed- I call upon thee! “

A spark; a flash. The smell of sky and heat. And then, only blades and a wide eyed gaggle of girls.

They’ve become identical; a pair of pocket knives that weight the same, and have the same mechanism keeping them open and folding them shut. The difference is, Thunder’s knife is all sharp lines and hard angles, the booming crash of air on air; Lightning’s knife is curling and flickering, a coiling dance of plasma that changes the very nature of the world it touches.

Thunder and Lightning; two-as-one.

When the stars align- the rites will come to bear- illuminate the signs- the exiled shall be there-strands may break alone- but twisted make a braid- together, on their own- the journey must be made!

I smack Nami’s hand away from where it was creeping towards the unfinished magic blades.

“They’ll be done after Imbolc; you can have them then, Nami.”

“...kay...”

“Have a biscuit.”

“Yay!”

“This is a serious subject, with no easy answers- to start, I want you to tell me, in your own words, about the first time you committed suicide.”

I roll over onto my back, the squishy bag-thing under me supporting my weight. Mab’s a deeply calm and non judgemental presence at my side; we’re almost wrapped around each other. She’s warm, and sweet smelling, like freshly bloomed flowers and coconut oil.

I’m warm and safe and I can’t bear another moment of silence.
“When I was eight, I hung myself with a belt. Or rather… I decided to do a test run to make sure the beam I was using in an old barn would hold before saying goodbye and… finishing it. During the test, I slipped and actually hung myself. The panic I felt during those few moments I was dangling was all it took to convince myself I should live. I needed desperately to tell my mother and my sisters I loved them. I needed to get out- and, luckily, I managed to get my footing back on the stool I was using to get high enough. I realized then I wasn’t ready to go- and even… even if in the coming years I would get to that edge again… for one reason or another, I never could die.

“It’s funny- right after Bryony caught me, I immediately thought of Puffy, and how she wouldn’t understand that I was gone forever, just that she’d been left behind. I have so much love left in me; and I know they love me too, I just… It’s like I’m covered in tar, or something, and every time I scrape enough off of me I can see my skin and try to get out of the pit, I trip and fall in again and have to start over, and I just…

“I’m tired. I’m tired of so much goddamn tar, and always falling over into it again and having to clean it off again.”

“Mm. I know exactly what you mean.”

“Is there a way to… get better? I want- I want to get better.”

“Well, to start, you have to understand- no one will ever come and save you from your depression, and that’s what you have. From what you’ve told me, it sounds like you have chronic depression. So- first, I’m going to recommend Doctor Chopper give you an antidepressant regimen; I’ll set up a few therapeutic regimens for you, and I’ll give you some homework, too.

“To start with, you have to get into situations where it’s at least possible for you to be happy. You can’t sleep in bed all day; you can’t keep refusing to go out and do things when your siblings ask; you can’t just stay inside all day now that you’ve no broom to fly with. No one will come and save you; you have to save yourself.”

“How will I know I’ve gotten better? …will I ever get better at all?”

“...It’s not like eating an extra spicy pepper and bursting into tears, Genny. Depression swallows your memories of actually feeling happy; you can remember being happy, but you can’t remember what it feels like. Even when you’ve recovered a great deal, that doubt lingers. For me, the most I can remember feeling happiness is a mild contentment, a sort of… a happiness that needs no smile to be felt. That’s what I want; so that’s what I strive for.”

Mab heaves a deep sigh, and cuddles me closer. I feel warm, and safe, but not tired at all- but I don’t really want to move, either.

“No light ever shone through my eyes; there was never a moment I said ‘I’m better, now.’ Depression, coming and going, sneaks like a fox into a henhouse- it’s easy to miss the warning signs, and when you’re waist deep in the tar your concern is not getting neck deep. Honestly, the hardest- but also, best- thing I ever learned to do for myself was ask for help.

“My most recent depressive spell was about a year ago, and I only realized it was just that, a spell, a passing storm, when I rolled over in bed, looked at my husband, and went back to sleep. I can only describe it as what I don’t do, what I don’t feel- I don’t dwell on the terrible, and I don’t feel like I’m
locked into one form of being, one road to the end…

“Mostly, you have to understand that everyone is different, and you feel things differently from everyone else. Recovering from an illness takes time, Genny, time and support and patience. Your mind is as much a part of your body as your lungs, and needs caring for, same as the rest. Also, you’ll probably have lots of small ‘Oh, i’m getting better’ moments where you’ll do stuff you couldn’t before. You’ve had a cold before, right?”

“Yeah, of course. Oh. Oh! -I… There’s no easy fix, is there?”

“No. No, there isn’t.”

“...But I can fix this, right?”

“Of course.”

“Okay. Then… to start, I’m going to need to build a new broom.”

I left Mab’s Cuddle Spot feeling… determined. I also left with a journal Mab bound for me; she said it’s cover was a simplification of the cover of Zoro’s personal journal. I’ve seen him writing in it, now that I know what I’m looking at- it’s thick and green and he always scribbles in it furiously right around tea time. Mine’s more… turquoise, I think. And Mab’s right, the design is simpler than his. She also gave me a fountain pen with a case.

This is the first thing I’ve written in my journal.

_In the desert_

_I saw a creature, naked, bestial,_

_Who, squatting upon the ground,_

_Held his heart in his hands,_

_And ate of it._

_I said: “Is it good, friend?”_

_“It is bitter- bitter,” he answered;_  

_“But I like it_  

_Because it is bitter,_

_And because it is my heart.”_

I don’t know why I wrote a poem to start this journal, but… I don’t know, it felt right. The only person I have to justify this to is myself, right? Right.
I’ve started writing at tea time, near-ish to Zoro because the vibe he throws out when he writes is really conductive. I always feel like I can write down what I need to write down then, and… I’m starting to develop a habit.

Bryony said that part of my exacerbating problem was not using my talent; and now that I’m engaged in learning real Magic, I think she’s… well, she’s not wrong.

I’ve turned to Humor as a shield for my problems; it’s my only defence, now.

These are the stages of Exhaustion:

Sleepy
Tired
Exhausted

The sort of manic, insomniac sugar-rushed caffinated cocaine in the cola screaming buzz high that you annoy your friends and family and pets with because Do you think that houseplants know they’re indoors? Do you think they mind? Does our dog know I’m sorry for stepping on her tail? Does she know I love her? Like, does she really know?

That weird liminal space as one day smears into the next and you’re half expecting to get abducted by aliens but all that happens is you chew through your breakfast without really tasting it and everyone sounds like they’re saying ‘bork bork bork bork’.

The fuzzy-headed, dry-eyed, cotton-mouthed, too much benadryl-esque hell reminiscent of the time you slugged two benadryl back with a mini-cup of nyquil and slept for four days straight because that was pneumonia, not a cold, actually. Woo, I totally should have died that time, godsdamn.

I have broken through to the other side of exhaustion and now posses an invincible exoskeleton, a deep appreciation for fuzzy sweaters, and absolutely no fucks left to give. Come at me, O Reaper, O Fortuna; I have seen the inevitable heat-death of the cosmos and bitchslapped it into next week. You. Don’t. Scare. Me.

Black out; wake up and you can’t tell what day it is.

I don’t care if I offend someone by writing this; I’m going to get better. I’m going to be content with my life, and have good relationships with my family, and I’m going to make that happen if I have to drag myself there kicking and screaming.

So, like, when I was a kid I thought the generic witch or wizard used a wand or a staff, but all I could afford to buy with my scrimpings and the occasional pocket money Mom gave us was a bargain baseball bat. I mean- I just thought your spell medium needed to have a wooden body, and two-by-fours kept giving me nasty splinters, so… Baseball bat. I mean, I could have used a bokken, but those have connotations and I wasn’t interested in using a sword.

Anyway, it means that when I run out of… I don’t know what it’s properly called, but I call it gusto, when I run out of gusto instead of cutting and running I can just crack my heavy hickory bat all
stamped with burnt on runes and mystical sigils over the head of whichever punk’s challenging me this time. Very useful.

You can’t undo who you are. You can’t take back what you said. You’ll never forget what you did… but you can accept, and apologize, and forgive. That has to be enough.

“Hey Sanji?”

“My love?”

“What’s a vampire’s favorite fruit?”

“I dunno, love, what?”

“A neck tarine!”

“Pfffffffff-”

Chef and Mab are In Love With Each Other, and that’s fine, I guess; but good god these puns. They are so bad.

My training schedule that Chef gave me- with a few notations by Doctor Chopper- is pretty simple, in that none of the exercises are really all that new to me. I have a slightly different set of exercises to do every other day during the work-week, and I do intensive stretching exercises on the weekends—excepting Sunday, when I don’t do anything except my laps.

I do laps around the decks first thing in the morning- first set wet, second set dry- after meditation but before breakfast prep; then I lift weights by moving stuff around in the pantry- heavy sacks of flour, sugar, cans of milk… I also have to squat, so I can get at the lower shelves and bins. There’s a military press I have to do a series of reps in, then arm curls without weights to start but he’ll start adding weight next week; one-arm overhead tricep extension, full hanging leg raise… That got partially modified by Zoro and Chopper because I’m a mermaid, not a fishwoman. Eight legs, not two. Then, squat to raise with a medicine ball- or a melon, when the season for melons comes around, and crunches. Finish the day with another set of laps, and I’m done. That’s Moonsday.

Weirdsday, it’s my laps; then pull ups, chin ups, dumbbell lunges, dumbbell side lunges, alternating kettlebell rows; then ab plate twists, ab rollers, and pulse ups. Finish the day with another set of laps, and I’m done.

Foolsday, it’s my laps; then bench press, deadlifts, dumbbell hang clean, arnold press; hammer curl, tricep dip; plank, side plank, and squat to raise with medicine ball again. Finish off with another set of laps, and I’m done.

That’s all conditioning, by the way- MWF, I’m conditioning my body for combat and work in the kitchen. Tuesday, Throughsday, and Soulsday are all combat training days. Chef can’t actually
teach me his particular fighting style; his relies on having solid bones in the leg, and mine are all muscle. So, he had to accept my fighting style as my fighting style.

I’m a knife fighter, after all.

Anyway- I didn’t really notice myself getting any stronger, as I’ve only been training according to my schedule for about two days or so, but… well, Mab put us all through our paces, and told us that we were welcome to participate in the group training they hold every day or so.

I’ve never beaten my sister Adelaide in a one on one fight, but- yesterday, I nearly killed her. I didn’t think the knife I threw would move that fast; and I swear, I thought she’d dodge, not stand there like a lump and- It’s only because of Mister Brook that my sister didn’t lose an eye.

Addy apologized and stormed off; and after I took my knife back from Mister Brook, he went to have a talk with her. I dunno what happened with those two, and I dunno what he said to her; but she’s been more herself. I mean, it’s like… like she was trying to pretend our Mom actually dying didn’t affect her, when it did- it affected all of us.

Sancho and Cece didn’t let themselves fall into the trap of repression. I do wish they’d repress some of their fart jokes, though.

‘What do you call a person that doesn’t fart in public?’ ‘I dunno, Sancho, what?’ ‘A Private Tutor!’ ‘Hahahahahahahaha! Okay, okay- uh- Why don’t farts graduate from high school?’ ‘I dunno, Cece, why?’ ‘Because they always end up getting expelled!’

‘Heeheeheehee! Did either of you hear about ninja farts?’

‘No, why?’ ‘No, do tell.’

‘They’re silent but deadly.’

‘Hahahahahahahaha- ‘Ohohohohohohohohoho-’

I had to listen to those jackasses tell each other fart jokes for two hours. Chef’s been explaining why he wants me to show him my baking style, but all I can think of is fart jokes. What did the pad say to the fart? You are the wind beneath my wings. What’s it called when the Queen of Fairies farts? A noble gas. Why do farts smell? For the benefit of those who are hearing impaired!

“SHRIMP!”

“YES CHEF!”

“START BAKING!”

“YES CHEF!”
Now. I- oh dear. I need to… the intercom is over here, Bryony spent an entire day taking making sure we all knew how to use the intercom and the phone, flip this switch and press here.

“Attention, everyone. Due to circumstances beyond my control, I, Deborah, will be baking today. Brace yourselves.”

Far in the distance, through no less than three distinct walls, I can hear my sister Beatrix scream in terror; the terrified screech mingles with the horror-filled wailing of my sister Eleanor in the Library. Sancho and Cece stumble over each other trying to get into the Galley so they can watch what’s about to happen; they are followed by a slightly more sedate Genevieve, who dives into the Sanitary Ward mid-change into her nurse’s uniform. She throws Fernanda out; Fern rolls across the ground, staggers to her feet, and bolts out the Galley doors- directly into Adelaide, who grabs her, tucks her under one arm, and tromps the both of them over to the Galley couch. The pattering of tiny feet fills the air for but a moment, and then the Mice drop down from one of the ceiling beams and settles at their tiny table on the mantle.

Chef Sanji’s eyes have opened very wide. I crack my neck, and begin.

Most of my baking efforts are really just finishing jobs; I buy already prepared doughs or batters, add whatever I’m going to add to them, and finish them off in the oven or skillet. Either that, or I go for things you boil- noodles, dumplings, and so on. However, when Mom got sick, I became the primary food-producer for our family, and… well, I should be able to bake, right?

Women cook for their families; there are magazine articles about it and everything.

However, I have a problem. As much as I don’t like admitting it, I’m no good at baking. Anything I do that involves making dough or batter, ovens, baking trays, or griddles- to name just a few!- goes horribly, disastrously wrong. Even finished baked goods have a tendency to behave oddly on bad days- that’s why I’m not allowed on pain of pain to help Cece make her yeasteel weapons.

Even so, all of us love baked goods, partly because they’re just so rare at a reasonable price, and, well… even before I went a bit crazy about pizza and flan, I would do my best to bake something that had at least part of the finished product be edible.

The pizza… forget about the pizza. The flan, though… I swear, I thought I’d manage it! It was just an eggier pudding, and I can do a pudding! The body of a flan is not typically very sweet, and that’s why it’s got the caramelized sugar syrup; it throws the eggy richness into relief. A sharp burnt sugar taste, and then the neutral caramel taste.

I set out the last of my mis en plas, and I carefully look everything over. No faults I can see; and I’m not trying to do anything with yeast, Chef specifically asked me to make a simple batter-bake, I remember it clearly…

My siblings- who haven’t been horribly scarred by traumatic encounters with bread-noughts and yeast beasts, anyway- are arranged quietly in the Galley, ready to intervene if necessary. I look at them all, including the Mice, and then I nod once sharply. They all nod back. Chef looks a bit… well, he asked.
Time to give Chef what he asked for.

“Dekiru yo!”

I calmly survey the kitchen, noting where problems are likely to flare up. This is going to be a battle. One I can’t lose— I can’t even bear the thought of losing again. From this moment until I can continue no longer, because it’s dinner time, I will fight on for the sake of a delicious baked good. The enemy is my own inability to bake.

I close my eyes, and take a long, deep breath.

I am calm; I am prepared.

I step forwards, onto the field of battle.

Simple measures must first be taken before tackling the larger obstacle; from the cupboard, I take a plate and a place setting and set it delicately in front of Sanji, who’s taken a seat next to the mast. It’s a normal ship plate, wooden because I’m not— it’s not going to be like the pizza, but it’s not going to be good, either. Forks on their left, spoon and knife on the right, knife facing the plate and closest to it.

Chef gives me a nod. I nod back, and carefully set down the bowl on top of his plate, which makes him raise an eyebrow at me, but I’m no fool. I go over to the dry pantry which doesn’t get raided like the fridge, and so has no lock, and take out two new boxes of dry cereal— the lightly fermented kind Robin likes during her period, yes, Chef specifically told me that, and the double-frosted nightmares that Sancho loves. I carefully set both down in full view on the counter, and move away— like I said, if I’m around finished baked goods too long while also trying to bake myself, things get weird really quick.

Even so, the boxes weighed… they felt off, somehow. Hm. Well, I’ve never actually seen Robin’s cereal until Chef showed me and made me taste some; could be a new formulation. As for the double-frosted sugar-hells, there’s a guaranteed prize in every box— it’s probably another decoder ring or something.

I look very carefully at the fruit basket at the far end of the counter, and, as expected, it’s full of fruit. I take a generous selection, including Wild Apples, Zappy Bananas, and Thin-Skin Sugar Beets, and I set them out nice on the table, in their own large bowl, then set that bowl of fruit near Sanji.

My fruit and cereal contingency is in place; it’s time to prepare for the real challenge of this battle: Baking.

Pancakes. Everyone actually likes pancakes; and I’m fairly good at making them, and have had marginal success making the batter from scratch— it often works better if I do savory. I’ve already portioned out the necessary dry ingredients and carefully measured each one; they’re all in a bowl, on the other side of the kitchen, with a lid on top. My griddle is on the unlit stove; my spatula is at it’s side.

I am ready.
I start with the eggs, cool from their storage in the Dairy. With one hand, I crack the first egg against the side of the metal bowl. The egg shell shatters against the palm of my hand instead, and slime oozes down my wrist. I carefully put as much egg-yuck into a sieve I’d had on standby just in case that happened; and after carefully getting as much yolk and white into the bowl as I could, I tapped out the shells into the compost trash, rinsed the sieve, washed my hands, and continued.

The enemy had made itself known, after all.

I take another egg. A different approach would have to be taken; this time, I used both hands to break the shell open after cracking it on the rim. It struck perfectly, and cracked in two pieces. The enemy was one step ahead of me though, and instead of the expected raw egg, a baby dragon popped out, squalling and hissing and flailing everywhere. It flopped into my workbowl and squirmed around in the broken egg in the bottom, before smelling it and slurping it up into it’s tiny pink mouth. It then began peeping and chirping at me, hungry for more.

I’m not mad at the little dragonet; it is, ultimately, just an unwitting agent of the enemy. Frankly speaking, it’s a miracle the mocking-drake that laid an egg in the dovecote wasn’t found by Mark, and that this particular egg wasn’t pulled for eating sooner, and even that the egg survived Mab’s vetting process. At any other time, on any other day, I’d take a moment to sex the dragonet, get it a nice slurry of meaty bits and egg, and raise it as a pet; but today, I just don’t have time for that. Thankfully, Mark’s right there- he just came in, actually.

“Mark! I need you to take care of this baby-”

“Uh- oh, oh dear, how’d this litt’lun get on our ship-”

“It’s a mocking-drake dragonet, so, I’d imagine at some point in the last two weeks a mocking-drake snuck into the dovecote, ate one of the eggs the doves were brooding, and left it’s own behind. Anyway, I’m trying to bake- can you look after it until I’m done?”

“Uh- sure, no problem. They eat…?”

“Eggs, meat, eggshells, seashells… feeds and waters like a gamefowl, as I recall.”

“Aa. I can handle that, sure.”

And that’s that sorted; now, onwards.

I take out a new bowl, and set it where the old bowl was. Then, I try my very best to crack open the eggs and get them into the bowl. Eggs squirm; they twitch; another dragonet pops out, this one curled up into a ball with tiny little nubs on it’s narrow skull. However, I had set my opening area over the sieve just in case, and manage to catch all four kinds of the little dragonets that pop out with no mishaps or spilt eggs. Over to Mark they go; a Kirin Sparrow, a handful of Turtle Doves, a Crow Snake, a handful of Planta Rays, and the tiniest Lionbird kit I’ve ever seen in my life. I think it’ll grow to be the size of a cat, maybe?
Anyway, after those mishaps, I’ve got a bowl full of raw eggs, no egg shell, and no more baby animals in the breakfast area.

You shouldn’t keep all of your eggs in one basket; and for me, keeping all my opened eggs in one bowl is asking for trouble. Bad things have happened to me with eggs before. I pour half my eggs into a redundancy bowl and set it aside.

To my work bowl, I add milk, sugar, and cold melted butter; all the wet ingredients. Then, I thoroughly whisk to combine them, creating a smooth slurry and fostering a nudging sense of- not worry. Concern. I’m concerned because the enemy hasn’t shown up for a while. It waits, like a snaggadile, to strike when I least expect it.

I take my egg mixture and add it to the dry ingredients; flour, salt, baking soda. Stir ten times exactly and tap the spoon on the bowl to get the excess off. Don’t worry about the lumps or the left over slurry; that will even itself out.

I double check the griddle, and make sure it’s on the burners evenly. Then, I light the flame and set them to cooking temperature. When the griddle is hot, I butter it, and pour a fourth of a cup of pancake batter onto the hot surface with a one-fourth measuring cup.

I take the spatula in hand and wait- a minute for one side, or until the edge is dry and the top is philomy; thirty seconds or less for the other, depending on how brown you want it. I listen to the sizzle, and then as the smell of frying bread wafts through the kitchen, I flip the pancake to the other side.

It’s perfectly browned.

My danger meter’s starting to jitter into the red, here. I take the pancake off the griddle, plate it, and take a careful glance over the kitchen. Nothing seems out of place; I haven’t knocked into anything accidentally, nor left my backup flour mixture or redundancy eggs too close to the edge. I keep making pancakes; they keep coming out perfectly. With every perfectly cooked disc of brown, steaming goodness that I produce, I can feel my own nervous tension ratchet higher; behind me, my siblings are fairly vibrating with terror.

...Time to make the coconut sauce. I take a small chisel, and a hammer, and a coconut, and then I set to- EEEEEK!

“AAAAAAGH GET IT OFF GET IT OFF GET IT OFF.”

“Okay, Okay, it’s okay, just hold still-”

“-ew ew ew ew ew ew ew-”

“-aw, it’s just a little clutch of coconewts Deb, they can’t hurt you-”

“- it’s slimy and gross Mark! No slimy lizards in the kitchen! Out! Out! Out!”

When I got a face full of coconewt, I accidentally flung my hammer. The hammer ricocheted through the kitchen, before finally crashing into the platter of perfect pancakes, knocking them all to the floor, and ricocheting away again. The dining vessels in the cupboard didn’t stop shaking for a good long minute after the hammer stopped spinning around it’s hook on the wall, where the final ricochet had
bounced it.

After I regained my composure, I cleaned up the ruined pancakes, and tossed them and the remaining coconut husk into the slop and compost bins respectively.

Right about then, I smell the smoke. FUCK I FORGOT THE SUGAR FOR THE COCONUT SAUCE- shit, can I save it? Yes, Dulce de Leche, stir and add- water- skkkkksh! I got to it before there was open flames, but- the BREAD- Got it. Phew. Set the bread in it’s spot in the assembly line; keep stirring the pot. I’ll… I’ll do something with the caramel sauce I’ve just made, I’m sure. Take it off the heat anyway; it can be loosened up later, if I need it.

The coconuts were just a distraction so I’d burn the sugar; thankfully, I took a bunch of candy-making classes at the local culinary school, and so I saved the sugar.

I take a moment to mourn the loss of the pancakes; but, this battle is not over yet!

I still have the rest of the pancake batter, after all-

Skzzzzzzzzzzzzzing-chink-chink-chink.

So, there’s a lightbulb over the counter, under the cupboards; it helps to have area lighting while you work. Yeah, that lightbulb just broke, and glass got into the pancake batter. People can eat lumpy pancakes; people can eat burned pancakes; people cannot eat pancakes with glass in them.

The enemy got the pancakes.

But I am not yet defeated!

“DEKIRU YO!”

The air rings with my declaration of war. I clean up the pancake batter, rinse and wash and wipe down; replace the lightbulb; and recenter myself so I can try again.

The bread box door thumps as it falls open. It must have been loosened by the hammer.

I take a deep breath, grab my bread knife and the loaf within, and start slicing the day old loaf that’s left over into suitable French Toast sizes. The bread inside, so far, is completely undamaged; I assume being in the breadbox kept it safe from my presence.

Egg mixture- sweetened condensed milk, cream, cinnamon. Thrash the shit out of it; move the mixture over to the cooking side of the counter, then the bread because I remember what happened last time I tried to carry both at once and- Deep breath.

It is, at that point exactly, that Taffy bursts in screeching about ‘creepy feels!’ , before tripping over her own feet and falling. Banana, a very cute and very large ball python, is Taffy’s animal partner; Banana also usually rides on Taffy’s neck, head, and shoulder-joints where her wings connect to the rest of her body. When Taffy tripped, Banana went flying through the air, and crashed into my face.

This was problematic, as I had both hands full of a platter full of sliced semi-stale bread. I caught the snake; the platter, being made of wood, clattered on the floor without breaking. As for the bread… really, there’s only one thing that could have happened to it, but I can’t exactly tell for sure because
Banana’s coiled around my head and it’s getting a little hard to breathe-

‘*Banana! She’s not a tree! She can’t breathe!*’

‘*Sssssorry!*’

**AIR! SWEET, BLESSED AIR!** I look over at Banana, who is now a yellow and white monkey-fist knot of snake, shivering in Taffy’s arms. I look at Taffy, who has blood leaking from her broken nose, and is rapidly gaining a pair of black eyes. I look down at my feet, where the wooden platter fell, and the crumbs- and then I step over to the pig slop bin, where the sliced bread flew... and fell.

First things first.

“Will Banana be okay?”

“Yis, she’ll be okay.”

“Will you be okay, Taffy?”

“Yis, I’ll be fine.”

“Good, good. **Get out of the kitchen, then.**”

“**YIPE!**”

And off she scurries. I pick up the platter, sweep up the crumbs and a few pieces of broken glass I missed earlier- I’ll have to mop, later- and observe my battlefield.

The bread was a serious loss. The enemy’s power grows stronger.

I am not discouraged, however- even though the loaf is gone, I still have one more option.

I can still make muffins.

As I begin to take out the muffin tin from my storage area, my siblings begin to whimper. It’s going to be fine, guys. I mean- I still have the rest of the original dry mix, which is a base for a whole realm of goods, and the redundancy bowl of eggs; there’s dried fruit, and nuts, and spices galore.

It’s going to be fine.

I’m lying to myself for the purposes of morale.

I will not surrender; my master will have an example of my baking this day.

I begin by rearranging my mis en plas; I chop up nuts, I lard the muffin-divots in the baking tins, I make sure I have clean, dry towels ready for taking them out when they’re done, a rack to rest them
I quite like muffins; for one thing, they’re really delicious. They can be the older flatbread, or the newer quickbread, and can be any combination of flavors you deem delicious.

My homemade muffins are hard to classify as muffins. The word ‘muffinesque’ would be a stretch, even, but that’s the idea. There’s only one way to trick the enemy. If I don’t know I’m baking, then the enemy won’t either.

I set the oven to cooking temperature, leaving it to heat; half close my eyes, and begin to hum.

Through half closed eyes, the world looks different. The air is thick and golden, syrupy sweet; the light is warm where it touches. I know who I am; and I know what I want.

I take the bowl of what might be a flour mixture, and pour it into the bowl that’s probably eggs. I continue adding ingredients from my mis into the workbowl. When I feel like I’ve added everything I prepared, I take the spoon I set out and start to stir.

Just ten times; and then I open my eyes, tap the excess batter away, and nod once to myself. I take a spring-scoop and start portioning out the batter; two thirds of the way full, and no more. Nuts all the way through. A little smokey flavor from the paprika.

Do I know if these flavors will work together? No. However, it’s far too late to try again; I’ve got just enough time to bake these, plate them up, dress them nice, and serve- and then it’s tea time. I did manage to make just enough batter for all four of my muffin tins; and I did grease them appropriately. Into the sink goes the batter bowl; wash my hands clear of any remaining food bits. Dry my hands.

Last chance at baking, Deborah.

I open the oven, check the heat, and place the muffin tins in; I close the door, lock it, and set it to rotate. Convection ovens cook more evenly, after all. I set the timer, and now- the backup plans. Uh-first, I’m going to clean up my workspace, eesh, messy messy messy- there, done. Set the water to boil for the actual tea, while we wait. Tea set’s already laid out; just need the water to get that done.

Pre-prepared Cereal, when poured by someone desperate, counts as a homemade breakfast. I calmly walk over to the breakfast counter, and eye the boxes of cereal I got out earlier. I open the sugar-hells first, revealing nothing but little prize bags full of toys. Something must have gone wrong at the packaging center. I pour the little prizes out onto Sancho’s empty eating place, and watch his eyes widen in gleeful disbelief. Though this is a sally by the enemy with a joyful outcome, it is not a good one; my master cannot eat toys, as they are made of inedible safety glass, metal, wood, and various kinds of sealants and paints, not to mention being choking hazards.

The second box of fermented cereal is opened, revealing the secrets within. I frown mightily, before carefully examining the dried curls of wood inside the muslin inside this brightly printed cardboard box. I continue emptying it out, before finally pulling out a table lamp in the Tiffany Harbor style. It’s a lovely piece; I’ve never seen an oil lamp quite so beautiful. I very carefully assemble it, and set it in front of Cece, whose confused expression matches my own.

I sigh.

The enemy got the cereal.

I clean up the shavings and compost them, check the muslin- aha, Tiffany Harbor Lamp Company, so I guess there was another mixup at the packaging center. Cece accepts the bag, but her confusion, if anything, has grown stronger. With cereal out of the equation, I began to turn to the fruit I’d set
aside earlier. Perhaps a delightful salad could be arranged-

And it was at this point in my kitchen warfare that the law of probabilities caught up with me. The Dulce de Leche, ignored until now, had been steadily heating up by proximity to the oven. This created a smell of intoxicating sweetness, potent and alluring- too alluring for the Foebeetles in Hildy’s care. Taffy, who was still calming the distraught Banana, had neglected to close the Galley door behind her; now, simple physics took over as the draught ferried the delectable scent of sugar to the lawn deck, where Hekate-chan and the Foebeetles abide.

The Foebeetles darted through the Galley door, buzzed through the Galley proper, and hurtled with unerring accuracy towards the unmonitored pot of Dulce. I turned and grabbed a small lid, as well as a wide flat plate. The fruit I had been examining in the fruit bowl was scattered across the counter. I skidded to a stop before the beetles made it to the dulce, took out the spoon along with a generous scoop, and put the lid on before they could get at the pot. I spread the sticky-sweet out on the plate, and carefully carried it over to where Hildy could observe her charges without getting in the way. I also gave them a nice bowl of water, so they didn’t bring harm to themselves.

The Wild Apples had bounced everywhere, one of them falling to the ground. I stepped on it. My momentum as I turned away from the delighted beetles and back to the stove combined with my now oddly angled boot caused me to flip forwards. The apple launched away from me and bounced off a cabinet. I- upside down and falling- crashed into the counter cabinets, thankfully without injuring more than my pride.

The impact with the cabinet had split the apple into a core and slices, the majority of which sailed through the air and landed in a lovely pattern in Sanji’s bowl. The core bounced off the edge of the counter, and smacked into my face. I closed one eye as apple juice started to sting at it, and then had to close the other as the sugary skin of a Zappy Banana hit me next. I could only hear the shrieks, yelps, and sizzle as the banana splits into slices and then tumbles with the sugar beets- which, as we all know, take twice as long to fall to the ground as any other root vegetable- and then, somehow, lands in the cereal bowl I had yet to take from Chef Sanji’s place setting.

I washed off my face, to a strange, ominous silence. I glanced over the content of the bowl in the salad- and, uh. Hmm. That actually looks surprisingly nice. Brightly colored, even pieces, smells good- I just have no idea what it’ll taste like. Nothing even splattered, which is… ominously surprising. In the silence of the kitchen, and to my siblings stunned horror, I let a wide, violent grin cross my face.

The enemy would be furious.

The enemy makes little distinction on what it attacks once I start baking; fruit, cereal, bread boxes- anything and everything is fair game once my inability to bake starts to happen, but the plate? The plate is different. That is a service plate. Once food is on the plate, it lays on sacred ground and is no longer part of the battle. At the very least, I managed to cook an interesting fruit salad. At the very least, Chef will be able to taste that, and say if I should make it a real recipe or never serve such again.

I looked through the glass window on the oven. The batter in the muffin tins had expanded greatly and turned a nice golden brown with a faint terracotta hint. The enemy must have given up once I had succeeded with the fruit. The timer dings- meaning, happily, it’s time to take everything out!
Cool, remove from tins, ice with Dulce, serve! Almost done, yes!

I take a dry kitchen towel, and pull open the oven door.

There was no sound—merely the sensation of ‘whomp’, and the thick smell of baked bread. My back was flat on the tiled floor; my head throbbed; my ears rung. All is darkness—no, wait, my eyes are closed. I open them to find a world much more upside down than normal, punctuated by the soft ‘pop!’ of something brown, trailing curling steam in its wake. I try to make sense of what happened, but my vision blurs and the world develops two distinct versions that slide in and out of each other, upside down as they are. Something smacks into the floor near my cheek. I wobble my eyes over to look at it full on, and see a crumbling muffin, still hot from the oven. I wobble back flat and watch as more muffins fly past every couple of seconds.

My senses slowly come back together.

The enemy.

It launched a final assault when I had let my guard down.

I roll onto my side and turn my gaze to the oven. The muffin tins within had turned into a swirling miasma of evil that reminded me in no small part of the time I tried to make pizza. Not quite as bad as that—there are no peppirana, after all, and no tormato to speak of—but still. Pretty bad.

A sound is coming from behind me—my siblings?—yelps and shrieks of shock and pain. I know what that is. It’s the sound of my siblings being faced with yet another baking mishap. I only have mere minutes to fix this, before someone really gets hurt.

“YOSH… DEKIRU YO!”

I roll over, bending my legs so I’m kneeling. My body doesn’t want to move, but I don’t care; I belly crawl out of the line of fire, and haul myself upright on the counter with the—dry towels. I take one and let it drop open, and then turn to regard the howling monster within the oven.

The enemy is angry; it doesn’t like me to succeed. As I sway with every painful step, I advance on the snarling baked goods roaring from the oven, smacking ballistic death muffins out of the air as they fly at me. Again and again, I strike them down before they can hit me or my siblings.

My siblings are Mine to protect; Mine to defend! Mine to care for!

There’s not a damn thing the enemy can do about it!

I reach the oven, put my hand on the cool oven door, and begin to move it back to the closed position. The last remaining muffin—muffin-ish shaped lump of cooked batter, golden brown in color and smelling faintly of paprika—chose this exact moment to leap for me, screaming with fury. I snatch it out of the air with my towel-hand, shut the oven, and turn it off. I’ll clean it out once it’s cool. I calmly walk over to the dulce, and anoint my prize.

Then, I turn and walk in a reasonably steady and straight line to Chef Sanji.

The world is weaving in and out of focus, and everything smells faintly like blood and it sounds like I’ve got cushioning around my skull—but I walk anyway.
Finally, I set the sweet muffin on his plate. It’s still warm, even; and then, ha, I get a good look at some of the ones that went ballistic, and realize it’s more like an oddly shaped piece of omelette than anything belonging in the kingdom of bread.

Damn. Even though fruit salad and an omu-ffin would be satisfying by themselves, something else is needed- not for nutrition, but satisfaction. I wobble over to the breadbox to check... and there, in the back, a slightly corrugated heel of bread, still soft enough to be worth eating.

I take the last piece of bread, place it on the counter below the breakfast bar, and stare at it balefully. After a few seconds, the bread catches fire. I blow it out.

Then, I put it onto Sanji’s plate, along with sidebars of butter, jam, and spread.

Today’s battle is won; but the war never ends.

Still, this time it was only a small mess, and an at-least mediocre spread of food. Could have been worse. Could have been like the pizza… Nnge-

“What? Drink some water then come here so we can both taste this.”

“Yes Chef. Ow…”

“Yeah, I didn’t see you get hit in the head with anything, but just in case- NURSE G, BRING DEB AN ICEPACK WOULD YOU PLEASE-”

“-RIGHT AWAY-”

I lean against the kitchen counter, sipping a big glass of water and surveying the mess I’ve made. Not too bad; shouldn’t take more than five minutes to get the worst of it.

“Chef, can I have five minutes to clean up?”

“Sure, Shrimp; finish your water first.”

“So… tell me about what you did for school before, Ellie.”

“...Well, once we got through pre-school and kindergarten, all of us were basically home-schooled. Mom figured out that our mandatory educations were really based on a series of tests we’d have to pass to be considered ‘at our level’; but, well… she hated the way we were taught in school, so… homeschooling.”

“What did you like about it?”
“...Um. I liked being taught to mastery, not just ‘good enough’. We weren’t pushed through the system; if we didn’t understand a subject, Mom encouraged us to work through it and then move on when we mastered it. I also liked the efficiency- it’s more efficient to move on if you understand a concept, rather than wait for everyone around you to catch up, and it’s more efficient to take three or four times as much time as everyone else so you can really understand what you’re doing. I liked being able to learn at my own pace, and I actually got through the first five years of science and mathemagics in about a year or so. All of us- even Sancho- actually had full secondary school diplomas about two or three year’s before our peers. I didn’t go to community college because nothing there interested me- but Cece did, and she actually did it before she graduated and got her first years worth of credits squared away.”

“What do you think is the best thing you learned from being homeschooled?”

“Time management. We’d get assignments, a deadline, and the understanding that we had to get it done by the deadline. All of my siblings- all the kids in our building, really, were homeschooled. We’d all finish school by lunch time, and then spend the rest of the day playing with each other outside until sunset, when our mothers would go to work; that’s when we would have dinner together, and go to our ‘culture’ classes, which was really just games at the arcade, cinema and theater, swim-parks... I think having self-motivation is better than any punishment or reward; I learned because I liked learning, and I wanted to learn. I did it quick and efficient because I wanted to have the rest of the day to play with my friends. I liked it because I got to have a say in what I learned, and when; I got to sleep in as much as I wanted, and pick the kind of learning style works best for me.”

“What kind of style is that?”

“Hands on, with lots of research when possible. I like doing a hands-on learning experience first, then research about what I did, and then go do it or something like it again, to see what I learn this time.”

“Hmm. Well, you’ll need good grounding in science and history, with a secondary in literature; so you can understand the action and context of what you’re seeing, and relate it clearly to others. I understand you’re the Alley Cat, notorious burglar?”

“...yeah.”

“Jewels and objets d’art, yes?”

“Mm. Art History?”

“Art history. A master’s degree at least, if you want to take your crew of ‘Mice’ into the field. As for the qualities you’ll need to have to be successful... you’ve already demonstrated, by dint of your success as the Alley Cat, that you have the ability to work well with others. You have investigative skills, as seen by your ability to find what you go and steal; you have critical-thinking skills, to ensure you can get through whatever tricks and traps separate you from your prize; and you have analytical skills. How often do you mistake a fake for a genuine piece?”

“It’s very rare, and usually only happens if I’m doing something spontaneous, or if my client has lied to me.”

“Mhm. Indeed, the only thing I can think of that you might not have is writing skills- archaeologists don’t spend all their time in the field. We can’t; we have to travel, rest, live our lives... There are journals and publications for archeologists, and one of the things you’ll be doing while learning under me is creating written pieces for these journals.”
I’m glad I’m havin’ this talk with my master, Robin, before we get too deep into our learning of each other. Even when m’sister Deb announces before the gods and everyone that’s she’s… baking… again, and I have a flashback to th-the. Pizza. I’m still glad to have Robin as my Master.

She knows how to calm people down when they have panic attacks, even, it’s grand. After that, she told me to take a look around and get familiar with the Library, as I’d be training in it most days.

I really like the Library on Sunny. It’s a surprisingly airy room, with these big archy beams like spokes on a wheel, keeping the curved ceiling up. The ceiling itself is mostly windows, with big shutter-things in rolls along the spine-beam at the top of the ceiling. Long old-brass chains hang down, with gambler’s green shades angling the light towards the floor- one, two, three four five six seven eight.

The lights come down just above the tops of the bookshelves, so every book in them is easy to see; and the bookshelves rise to the middle of the room, dividing it in half. There are about twenty books on every shelf, and eight shelves on the built-in cases, so that’s… a hundred and sixty per case, and there are eight cases so that’s… approximately one thousand two hundred eighty books on the built-in bookshelves. Well, it would be, except down at the very bottom there are these slidy-door things that keep light from getting in at the… I can only open some of them. Mostly they’re periodicals, microfiche boxes, um, there’s a portable record player and a bunch of audio books in all kinds of languages, and a really beautiful gramophone—oh, I see. The record player is for the ship-wide intercom system, but the gramophone is just for the room.

Master Robin says that the eight built-in shelves originally belonged to each member of the crew who had large amounts of books they needed to store. They still show the mark of their previous ownership… division? Well, there’s a case of mostly fish-books and cooking books and recipes; there’s a case of financial news, and the newspaper, and star charts and nautical stuff. There’s a case of romance novels and pulp adventures and classics I had to read for school and classics I read for fun, and all the plays of “Billy” Shakespeare; there’s a case of poetry and berri-dreadfuls and knitting and crochet and fashion magazines; there’s a case of old almanacs, and issues of McSweeny’s Quarterly, Reader’s Digestive, Sygyzy and Susurrus, Argently Occult; there’s a case of books about plants, and animals, and cultures. There’s even a case about wood, and building, and chemistry. And there’s a whole case that’s just songbooks, and reviews, and musical history, and hand-written recordings of operas and musicals.

As for the storage cubbies, with their open-close slidy doors… it’s mostly things that didn’t really fit on the shelves, loose pages, loose photographs… I kinda want to look through them all, but, um, I guess… Later, maybe?

There are two double sided bookcases of eight shelves doubled across a thick vertical separating board; they make the room just a touch smaller, and they’ve got a weird top-thing with a little fence-thing that keeps potted plants from sliding around too much. When I dangle down and look carefully, I can see a multitude of thin rune-chains keeping the pots in place, and there’s a method to their watering and care. They’re nice houseplants; aloe vera, spider plant, blue kalanchoe, philodendron, ivy, and fern.

The double sided shelves usually have ladders clicked into their window-facing sides- that’s where they’re stored when not in use; and on the book-holding shelves are books I can Feel have magical meaning, er, they’re magic books- mathemagic, potions, wards, runes, that sort of thing. But… I can’t read their spines. It’s kind of… I feel like I could almost read some of them, if I focused a little
on just reading that book only for a while, or knew just a bit more mathemagic; and some of them are so far beyond me I can only just see that they take a space on the shelves. There are two more bookshelves way in the back, next to the windows; those shelves are also full of magic books.

Unlike the double-features, these books are all ones I’ve read or heard of before; I can read most of the spines, or just puzzle them out. All the old standbys are there: Introductory Mathemagical Theory; Draughts, Potions, Poisons, and Poultries; all ten volumes of Magical Herbs and Fungi; Curses and Cures, a book I’ve only heard of; House Spells and Rituals, a book Mom used all the time before she got sick; Hijinx and Hexes, this appears to be an omnibus edition of the pamphlet thing they sell in most jokeshops; Folkways and Folktales, all fifty two volumes, B’Il be happy, she’s not read all of them yet after all… Raising Spirits and Rattlin’ Bones: a Beginner’s Guide to Necromancy; Organized Lightning, a beginner’s weather witching manual; there are a few books about how to knit, sew, weave, crochet, lace-make, macrame, tat, and nallbind… There’s a book that’s really more of a hand-written journal by Usopp, with the words ‘Plants, Fungi, Animals, and Bugs of the Boinsea’ on the spine. There’s even a book about Spangle, that game Mab played in school…

Oh! And… eight thick, beaten up journals from… Mab did say she’s a fully accredited Mage; these are her notes, then. There are eight spokes in the Wheel; and eight schools of magic that draw power from the holidays. But- no, I counted wrong. There are eight journals that I recognize, but the ninth one… I can almost read the name, if I squint.

Abjuration, Conjuration, Divination, Enchantment, Evocation, Illusion, Necromancy, Transmutation; and the last one is… is…

If I squint and tilt my head- starts with a ‘U’…

“Abjuration, Conjuration, Divination, Enchantment, Evocation, Illusion, Necromancy, Transmutation, and U… Univffff- Universaa- Universal? Ow-!”

I snapped my mucus strand as I convulsed. When the pain of forcing a Magical understanding before was ready subsides, I can feel owies where my thrashing knocked into the shelves. They’re built right into the floor, after all, they aren’t furniture pieces.

I drag myself up and freeze carefully; my head throbs, and settles. Robin’s next to me, all concerned.

“What happened?”

“Um. I- I read the title of a magic book above my level. Ow.”

“Oh my- Ellie, you’re bleeding from the nose- no, don’t get up, I’m taking you to Chopper-”

And that’s how I spent the rest of the day in the Sanitary, being fretted over by Chopper. I got an ice pack and a long nap, which… I mean. I guess I needed it? I mean, I was in the bed with Beatrix, who cut the shit out of her hands and feet when Deborah told us she was- well, and so she was also on bedrest. I actually ended up in the same bed as her because neither of us had abdominal injuries, really, we were just slightly traumatized by our reactions to a massive trauma that happened a few
years ago.

When the snarling and the screams and yelps started, Beatrix started shaking so I- I told her about the Library? To try and… I dunno, distract her?

“-you’ll have to d-do research um, there, and you’ll probably really like some of the fashion magazines, even when you were a thaumaturgist exclusively you always spent your pocket money on fashion magazines, a-and I think Genny’ll really get a kick out o-of, of all the… the magic books...” and, like always, I trailed off all quiet because… because i guess i’m just not interesting to listen to and… it’s fine, really. I know I’m not unlikable, and I don’t… I don’t have anything to really relate to my sisters or my brother with, beyond our bond of blood and fellowship.

I’m not like them; I never have been. If we’re a set of plates, I’m the odd one out- not because I’ve got a giant crack down my center, like Genny, but because… I’m. Boring.

I don’t know if it worked. My distraction, I mean; I don’t know if my babbling was enough to keep B from being swallowed alive by tormented memories.

I don’t know if I was good enough.

I never know if I’m- enough.

But… that doesn’t mean I can’t keep trying.

-I don’t ever know what to do to relate better to my sisters. They’ve all got so much potential, and all I can do is steal stuff. Like, even after I learn whatever Master Robin has to teach me, at best I’ll be able to tell people exactly what it is I’ve stolen, where it came from, and who stole it before me…

I’m not much more than a petty thief. That will have to be enough.

My full name is Marguerite Gloriosa Amaryllis Lefay.

When I was about eight or so, my father committed suicide by drinking a cup of milk and cyanide-almond milk, my father used to call it. He needed cyanide to electroplate metal with gold- said it was a safer method than the old way, with mercury.

My aunt and mother and grandmother wouldn’t let me read his suicide note. They said it was far too much for the feeble heart of a boy to bear.

My uncle, Orpheus, disagreed. He made a copy of the note, and he hid it away; and, before I left Amazon Lily, Elder Nyon gave it to me, as it had been left in her keeping when Uncle… well, my mom said he ran off to seek his death on the high seas, but considering what I’ve seen in the record stores, I think he became a famous musician. I- I should write him a letter...

I’ve been holding onto it, the letter Uncle wrote to me, for a year and a half. I’ve been- scared. It’s not a small letter- it’s actually a very thick envelope, yellowing with age.

Still, I can’t resist my curiosity- what did my father make of his life at the end? Did he live a worthwhile life?
Did he care about me at all?

I’m sitting at the kitchen table, way earlier than I’d have ever wanted to be- but I can’t. I can’t sleep. Bryony came in to check on me a little while ago; she's a good friend.

I take the butter knife, and I open the envelope.

It’s a massive letter, jam packed with pictures and notes and pressed flowers; and I… I start at the beginning. Where else do you start?

In my father’s suicide note, he writes “I have not lived a spectacular life; but, within my four dozen or so years, I’ve had more hours to pursue that which I chose than most people get in their lifetimes. I have been blessed with a loving wife, a beautiful son, and a family to care for- even a mother to abide by, though her station is so far above my own.”

Father’s suicide note is very long. It includes edited versions of famous essays I’ve read before, an apocalyptic manifesto, and a bit called ‘Boy, You’ll Be A Man, Soon’. But the last several pages are… heavy.

They describe the life of a man who, for the vast majority of his days, despite his yearning- never went further than a handful of kilometers from the spot he was born. He describes becoming a citizen of the World at a distance, from one tiny spot in the forest of Gorgoria, the name of our island. From that tiny spot whose very essence he wove into his own bones, he says, he found ways to embrace the World, in all its cruelty and ugliness and kindness and beauty, it’s most thrilling and challenging ideas.

My father was a Horologist- meaning, he was a person who made a life and career out of studying time, and time-pieces. He made and restored old clocks and astrolabes, and he was… “I have coaxed infirm and broken clocks back to mellifluous life,” he wrote. “Studied projective geometry and built astrolabes, sundials, taught myself ancient techniques of bronzing, patination, micro-machining, fire-gilding, horology; I learned to play harpsichord and dulcimer and dance the fan dances of my mother’s childhood; I read Poe, de Maupassant, Boccaccio, O’Connor, Welty, Hugo, Balzac, Kafka, Bataille, Gibran; I listened to Verdi, Vivaldi, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Mozart.”

“The very best times of my life,” father wrote on, “I realize were the times I spent in the forest and field. I’ve walked in ringing solitude, beside the babbling brooks and creeks of my forest; and I’ve wondered at the undulations, meanderings, and tiny detritus that were occasionally swept into its milling fingers.

“I’ve spent time in idleness and idolatry, with violets, fern, serpent, and bird. I have audited the discourse of the stones, shells, and sand; even when no cloud was present to cast a comforting shade. I have wandered astride the roiling shore in winter and summer in the company of my dearest companion, Frangipane; and I have spent hours entranced by the exquisite curiosity and vibrant joy that shines forth from my son, Marguerite’s, eyes- an entire exaltation of the World-that-is, within a tiny being I had some small part in making.

“I have also ran thrashing and cursing from red ants and black flies and bright yellow hornets.

“Before I could bring myself to commence this discourse, I spent a few hours out under the night sky, reacquainting myself with the constellations like old friends. Sometimes I just spent hours playing with my son. Sometimes I just spent hours playing my recordings. Sometimes I took my record players apart just to peek within and admire the engineering of their flawed entrails. Sometimes I read old books, or whittled spoons, or danced as I did when I was young. Sometimes I sat in the dark and listened to the creaking of the house. Sometimes I went out at night and listened to
the uncaring crash of the sea.

“I have lived on this serpent-infested rock for about seventeen-thousand six-hundred days, and when I look about me and see the leaden dispiration that coats so many persons, young and old, ugly and beautiful, I know that if I die tonight, this very moment, my life has been inestimably better than that of most of my compatriots. Additionally, my absence makes room and leaves some resources for others who deserve no less than I have enjoyed. My hope, in leaving, is to provide no measurement for which my son need aspire to reach- I only want you to be yourself, Marguerite. I have always been proud of you; I will always love you.”

And then my father’s writing ends with, “I would hope that all persons reading this can enjoy some of the aspects of life that I have enjoyed, as well as those aspects that I never will; I pray you, take cognizance of the number of waking days thou hast remaining, and make use of them with prudence. To all that have loved me, and all I have loved; Jason Gloriosa Amaryllis Lefay, the Gilded Lily.”

And that was it. There wasn’t any more...

**Eucharis, Gorgoria.** came into being as a thriving iron mine in the late eight hundreds. Though the boom times wouldn’t last long, in the eight-nineties with the population on the rise, the citizens of Eucharis started taking advantage of each other- stealing from each other, murdering each other, burning each other’s houses down. It got so bad, a local newspaper called the country ‘Amazon Lily’, a place where only the wildest of flowers could hope to survive; and the name stuck. Amazon Lily, the place where our family began.

In eight-ninety one, one of the main perpetrators of this chaos and bloodshed, the most notorious gangster in the country, Jessie ‘No Relation’ Lefay, who extorted lots of land for herself and stole her neighbor’s jackfruit and cotton, and whose gang killed people who knew too much, was finally locked in jail- but then escaped and fled Gorgoria for good, signing over control of all her land in the county to her daughter, Amaryllis.

Years later, after building a palace in the most defensible position upon the family lands, and ruling the empire of Amazon Lily with an iron fist, Amaryllis took the deed to the house and the family lands and the crown of the empress and transferred ownership of it all to her daughter, Gloriosa. Years after that, in our more modern era, Gloriosa, pregnant and empress of the country, began a ritual of sitting in that palace and rubbing her stomach and pleading to the Gods, saying, please, gods, give me a genius. Gods, please, just make my child a genius.

On the fifteenth of March, thirty two years before my birth, Elder Nyon- Granma Gloriosa- had a golden-haired boy, and gave him a middle name after her mother, Amaryllis, and kept him home in the rolling lands and the old palace with three chimneys in the middle of the snake infested woods. She had gotten what she asked for, after all- and in those days, Beauty was a product of the mind.

My father was the most beautiful man of his generation.

My father was Jason Gloriosa Amaryllis Lefay.

I am Marguerite Gloriosa Amaryllis Lefay; the least-desired man of my generation.

Today, I turn twenty seven years of age. My girlfriend, Dracule Taffeta, is twenty years old; she loves me, and I her. I have a beloved snake-companion; her name is Marzipan.
For my birthday today, I’m going to have all my favorite things at teatime; we get to eat out on the lawn, and enjoy the return of the thick sunshine we’ve been missing all winter. We’re going to have raspberry caves, a kind of sweet biscuit; lemon meringue tarts; and onion, cheese, and ground pork knishes. It’s finally warming up- and I’m…

Happy. Contented.

I’m so happy to be alive.

I’m so happy to know that my father would be proud of me, even now, after- everything.

And I am so godsdammed happy I got off that snake-infested rock in the Northern Calm Belt.

“Well, as far as I can tell, you’re about twenty-eight to thirty weeks along- anything strange going… Nami? Are you alright?”

“Hm-? Oh, yeah, I’m fine. I’m just… getting really tired of being pregnant, that’s all.”

“Mm. I understand; just a bit longer. You’ve got another six weeks or so to go, possibly eight-”

“…is there anything I should watch for, when… um.”

“When it’s getting closer to time? Sure- right now, your pudge is right under your tits, aye?”

“Yeah, it’s basically a shelf-”

“So, when it’s time, the whole thing’s going to drop down closer to your hips. Bye-bye barrel chest; hello, pot-belly.”

“Oh!”

“Mhm. Another indicator is your fundal growth- have you been tracking it?”

“Every day, just like you asked; I seem to be within the average size for seven to eight months along, and my cravings and sensitivity haven’t gone down at all.”

“Hm. Well, unless you want me to check-”

“I do not-”

“Right. My best guess is you’re having twins, Nami. You noted that your pregnancy symptoms came about much earlier and more clearly than you had ever heard of, aye?”

“Aye-”

“You still experience extreme difficulty with eating outside your selected pregnancy menu?”

“Yeah. I can… I can barely tolerate the smell of alcohol, now, and every time Luffy gets too close I feel like vomiting.”

“Hm. He smells like meat; you’re definitely pregnant.”
“Well, gee, Mab, I’d have never guessed that on my own. Ughh, I can’t believe how much I miss coffee and tea, even when they smell like bilgewater now...”

“Hmhhmmhm. I remember that; don’t worry. Breast tenderness has-?”

“Remained on the very tender side of normal; I’ve started wearing my sleeping bra exclusively, and that’s helped a lot.”

“Mm. Do you want more of them?”

“Please. Also- I have to pee so often now, it’s fucking crazy-”

“Hmhhmmhm. Don’t worry- that will pass after birth. Have you started taking naps?”

“...yeah. I just- I can’t get through the day without them, and, well...”

“Taffy is a good navigator.”

“Yes, she is; I just… wish it was me. Um- my heart’s been beating much more strongly when I’m at rest than normal, so Zoro’s had be doing cardio-strengthening exercises to help build up the muscle. It feels nice, actually, and the baby seems to enjoy it too. Um- I’m still moodier than I’ve ever been, and, um. Oh gods, I’m such a me-he-he-heeeeeees-”

I hug Nami while she cries it out. We end her checkup without more upset; Nami’s fine, and healthy, and her baby- or babies, we won’t know for sure until they get here- are too.

I’ve been having strange cramps lately- almost like I’m extra gassy, somehow? Feels like period cramps, but I stopped spotting the other day… then again, I’ve never had a particularly regular cycle, so who knows.

Ugh, and I’m… really craving pickled fish roe, for some reason? It’s the texture and the smell I think I want, the taste is just… fishy spicy-pickle juice? Not all that outrageous…

Locally, the cheapest roe I can get before Imbolc is going to be ikura; and… knowing my appetite… hrrrm. Salmon.

Bleah, think about it later; wash face now. Oh, Sanji just rolled out of bed finally- I did use the suction-technique on his dick, so… I guess he finally pulled it together? One more rinse- oil up! And brush teeth.

Sanji quietly tromps behind me, yawning, and walks right into the toilet, not even bothering to close the door to take a piss. We’re married, for one; it’s just about four-forty five in the morning, for another, and no one except Bryony and Mark are awake at this hour for the clinch. Sanji flushes, and I hear the clack of the seat being put back down before he tromps back out to wash his hands and do his morning ablutions.

I go in to take my morning piss, and a thought occurs to me- hm.
“So, after breakfast I’m going to the fishmarket; do you want anything, or to come with me?”

“...Why are you going to the fishmarket, love?”

“I want spicy pickled ikura, and I know you don’t like eating it so I was going to make some for myself—”

“...Let’s go to the fishmarket then. I’ll leave dry cereal out for the crew.”

“What, now- we’re making a morning of it?”

“Yeah, now. Like… a low-key date. I’ll grab Deborah- are you bringing Beatrix?”

“Um- well, I suppose I might as well...”

Spontaneity! I wipe, flush, and go back out; Sanji is shaving, but moves over so I can wash my hands. Final thing to do- I take a wide-tooth comb and quickly go through my hair, pulling it out of it’s sleeping braids and giving it a light scruffle to make sure it doesn’t look too sleek and put together. Glasses on from where I left them on the sink- egads, these are filthy, wipe'em off; and finally, deodorant. I make it in little tubs with spoons so you scoop it out and rub it in; I take just enough for myself, then wait for Sanji to finish wiping his face clean to hand him the little spoon, which he takes.

Rub that in; brushed the teeth? Brushed the teeth. Perfume of...

“Sanji, which one?”

“All of them are nice- but I like Honey-Vanilla.”

“Okay.”

Perfume of Honey-Vanilla it is! Dab behind one ear; then the other; collarbones, nape of neck, quick swipe through hair, and done.

“Love you, Raspberry.”

“Love you too, Honeybee.”

And then I give my husband a smile good-morning, and a sweet, chaste kiss. He smiles back, and huffs a laugh when I pinch his sexy butt. My husband has a sexy butt.

“You’ve got a sexy butt, Raspberry.”

“Pfft-”
Then, I wander back into our room to get dressed. Ugh, I’m tired of bowing to winter’s whims, and by the flicking of my wings today promises to be rather lovely, so- a pair of tights, I blocked the pink in and dyed brown to match my skin; a one-piece leotard with fine net-toile neckline, just exactly the color of my own skin. Then a skirt, pastel lavender, pleated with a high waist and thicker waistband, and a beautiful cloth-ribbon bow pretty as you please in the front. Pastel lavender ballet shoes; a blue-toned pink-nude lip.

Another me shook Beatrix and Deborah awake; they scrunched up and glared blearily, but let themselves be chivvied into a quick wash off and then into clothing for the day. Beatrix has decided on coiffed her hair today, which looks damn good on her; and Deborah’s wearing her hair down in a long braid, which I suppose is a relief from the coils and pins she has to wear daily. Fernanda quietly appears just as we’re getting ready to go, in a loose tunic and denim jeans.

I suppose what I consider notable in my crewmate’s wardrobe, and what I dwell on, isn’t necessarily what they themselves consider notable— or even what they choose to wear. I also don’t tend to notice small details like hair color— especially considering what with the advances of modern chemistry, how someone chooses to wear their hair is increasingly a matter of personal choice. I assume the reason Fernanda’s hair was black was because it was safer for her to appear in a very public job with black hair; but a few days of easy access to hot running water and conditioner has stripped the black dye from her hair, leaving a blonde fall not unlike Sanji’s in color— almost identical, really.

“Hey, Raspberry- ready to go?”

“Sure Honeybee- um, it’s right near the shore where we’re going, and they keep it very cold for the sake of the fish...”

“Should I wear a shawl, then?”

“I’d recommend it, yeah.”

“Hm- and the girls?”

“Uh- they’re gonna need something more, yeah. Deb, I suggest you wear whatever you feel comfortable with; I’d give you my old coat, but Beatrix already grabbed it, and Luffy’s old one got eaten by ants...”

“Um- I can wear whatever Chef, it’s no big deal. -Oh, thanks Mab. Um... d’you have a pin so it stays on?”

“Sure- I’ve got fancy ones if you like, or you can just use a couple of safety pins?”

“Safety pins, please.”

“Here you are, darling- Bea, d’you want a scarf? Sanji’s old coat isn’t really fitted for you yet-”

“Uh- yeah, please. Oh wow! U-um, thank you for the pin, I like it.”

“You’re quite welcome; and Fernanda, are you coming with us?”

“Mm!”
“Have a jumper, then.”

“Thank you! -can I have a pin too? I want to feel included...”

“You can have a hair-pin, this sweater’s main appeal is it’s stitchwork...”

“Alright.”

And then, we’re off!

Fish markets have existed for as long as people have had the concept of money and fishermen (or women) have been catching more than they can eat or store. They often serve as public spaces where large numbers of people can gather and discuss current events and local politics, sometimes without being suspicious about it.

Since refrigeration and rapid transport have become more widely available in our modern era, fish markets can technically speaking be established at any place. However, because modern trade logistics in general are shifted away from marketplaces and towards retail, such as bodegas and specialized storefronts, most seafood is actually sold through restaurant trade or at the grocers, like most other foods.

Most major fish markets mainly deal- and dealt- with wholesale trade, and the one we’re going to, Tsukiji, is also a major tourist attraction… after nine am. Before nine am, it’s a regular fish market- hello, Deborah’s saying something.

“-Naw, Chef, the tuna auction is a really nasty tourist trap these days. I guess a lot of travel guides wrote about it? But, the demand to get in is really high, there’s a limited entry, and a hard time limit for how long they can auction- it’s better to buy in parcel for steak or catch’em yourself if you’re doin’ sushi. It wasn’t like this about two years ago, but a lot of things have changed- and honestly, it’ll probably get worse before it gets better.”

“Aa. Well, we’re not here for tuna anyway- we’re here for ikura.”

“Oh! Um… hm. I dunno, Chef- I mostly got sent here for big meat items and large amounts of shrimp… Beatrix, Fernanda, d’either of you…?”

“Uh- if it was white fish, seaweeds, sea urchin, or molluscs, sure. Otherwise… Fern?”

“Hm… I really only came here for breakfast, guys. I mean, I’ve had everything they’ve had on sale at least once; but where’s best to get ikura at this time of year… Oh! I know- this way!”

“-Uh, Fern? That’s the way to the, uh, the place where the fishermen who work for the market hang out before they go home or back to work-”

“I know, B! That’s where we’re going!”
knows…

As for where we’re going, exactly… the scent of the sea gets thicker and thicker, adding in a sharp twang of rotted meat and underlying notes of spilt alcohol. We walk through towering pillars and along narrow causeways between pallets of neatly stacked product—fish, crustaceans, seaweed in bales taller than Whitebeard sitting down…

And then, finally, we come to a shit-cheap dive bar, a place that shows up wherever enough working class people take a rest and some entrepreneurial spirit takes a risk. It’s a hollowed out tree, basically, with three nice shelves of cheap-to-middle range booze kept in clean order, and Daiso ‘sticky-back’ wall mirrors behind the bottles. Hunks of wood that have been sealed with wax are scattered haphazardly around the barrier, on which congregate a number of—oh, fishermen. Fishmen, Fishwomen, Merfolk, Lanfolk with ambition— all of them wearing the telltale color of the fisherman, a bright yellow… aha.

This place reminds me of Tiffany Harbour, which is where Mother had her Townhouse. Walking the streets of downtown Tiffany Harbour really made me see the sordid darkness beneath the clean, hardworking facade of that city. It might have been painted in carnival colors, but in truth… the colors that stayed were black, and white, and grime, and red. It was worn into the faces of the people; grime smeared into lines of stress and time and age and pain, stark-linking the people who were trying to become something better and the people who had given up… this place, too, stinks of hope and desperation. I can feel it starting to cling to us, that ragged whirling prayer— it sinks in under my thoughts like Sanji’s cigarette smoke into my skin during our after-breakfast mack-on. At night, this must be one of the most lonely places in the world; the neon signs proclaiming their sales-lies to the open air only shine on fallen fish-scales and broken dreams.

The hustle and bustle of this fishmarket only masks the cruelty of this life; and, somehow, Fernanda knows this place well enough to not only find it’s main watering hole in the wall, but be welcomed with joy and condolences by the patronage.

“Ey- you slobs, you wretches— it’s Li’l Albatross, come back again!”

“Heeheeehee; hey there, Benkei.”

“Bah, c’mere kiddo— I heard about your mama. You doin’ alright?”

“Eeh. I have good and bad moments, and it really hurts, but— it wasn’t a surprise, or anything.”

“Yeah, that’s about right— it’ll even out, and it’ll hurt less often, but it won’t really stop hurting.”

“I know, Benny. I know. -Saa, are the Brass still goin’ on about freshness or-?”

“Those sanctimonious pieces of shit! They just know how to sell the fish, not how to eat it- the only fuckin’ way my guys could get their fish in fresher is if they pulled them in live and floppin’ and that shit won’t fly with the tuna. Those pieces of dog-shit think that, what, freshness means it’s still bleeding when you eat it? No! Still wriggling octopus and squirming shrimp are nothing but novelties! Fresh is not just determined by when a fish came out of the water, godsdammit!”

“Yessir.”

“Those cocksucking bastards— they act like wild or farmed or pastoral doesn’t matter, and then the location doesn’t matter, how it’s killed doesn’t matter, the handling, storage, shipping—GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH! It’s enough to drive a man to drink, godsdamnit.”
“Well; and it’s not like I can use the fish safely when it’s all-but raw. I have to freeze it first to kill off worms and parasites—” growls Sanji, in total agreement with the livid Benkei.

“-GODSDAMN RIGHT! Fucking swordfish worms! Holy fuck, never a-fucking-gain,” yowls Deborah.

“EXACTLY! And most importantly of all, just-been killed fresh is not ideal for all the really good shit! Bonito, tuna, turbot… if I want to highlight a texture from a fresh fish, the fresher the better; but flavor… if you want to know what you’re actually eating, waiting a goddamn day is the thing to fuckin’ do.”

The fish-connoisseurs of our party snarl and commiserate about the indignity of bowing to people with their heads up their asses and screaming into the wind. I fold myself down onto a bench-log, and let Beatrix lean into me. Eventually, I’m joined by Fernanda, who cuddles up to my other side; and then Deborah, who climbs into my lap—? Which is a little odd, but also… I’m really pleased and honored that she feels safe enough with me to do that, and doubly pleased that she feels safe enough here to do that.

Sanji, of course, has never met a fishmonger he won’t natter the hours away with; thus, I tuck my wings and my shawl around the four of us, tuck Deb’s head under my chin, and rest my eyes. He’ll let me know when it’s time for us to mosey on.

I feel very awake; not tired at all, which is strange because I’ve not eaten anything yet today… Hm, maybe the air here agrees with me?

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I don’t know what exactly prompts me to look over. I guess making a new friend in Benkei, the Leader of the Fishermen’s Union, was distracting… but when the conversation lulled, I glanced over to Mab and the girls.

It’s funny- a year ago, the thought of having babies with Mab made cold chills run down my spine. Now, when I think about having babies with Mab… even just seeing her sitting there, curling around the girls so they can warm up and sleep safely… it brings the stupidest smile to my face, and I can’t bring myself to care who sees it.

“Ah. So that’s how it is.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing of importance; anyway, what’re you an’ yours after, Chef?”

“Ikura; age doesn’t matter overmuch, but quantity does. We’re pickling them.”

“Aha. In that case… Ferg! C’mere!”

“Yassir?”

“You still have that bumper crop of ikura you can’t find a buyer for?”
“Yassir; don’t nobody want the winter-run ikura, which is a damn shame, they’re real nice this year...”

Mab actually gave me the budget; said I’d know the right price for fish, and that she trusted me with her money. We’re using her money because Nami would not let us buy fish, especially since she can’t stomach eating any large quantities of it; she barely let us buy new cereal, after Deborah’s astounding Food Luck revealed itself.

I buy up as much of Ferg the Fisherman’s Ikura stock as I can, which brings a grin of relief to his face. He gives me a ticket to a particular flat of crates, a receipt; I gave him the price we agreed on, and we shook hands on it.

I look back over at Mab.

It’s funny- she’ll say she’s not changed at all, not really. *I* say the person she is now, and the person she was two years ago only share a name. I’ve watched her, and learned about her; dreamed about her… I’ve memorized the exact cadence of her laugh, her real laugh- the one that comes from deep within her gut, that rings through the air like a clear, sweet bell- it’s so rare… and her full, genuine smile… each of those are so rare, even one is a treasure worth savoring.

I’m starting to become a kind of expert on Mab. I know how she thinks; more often than not, now, I know what she thinks. Sometimes, I’m wrong- but most of the time, I’m right. She’s not smiling any more than usual. She’s not laughing more, or harder- but…

So much of her emotional life is lived on a subconscious level- she trusts herself, and she trusts her heart, and she almost never dwells on either. So- I’ll catch her, out of the corner of my eye, when she’s noticed my attention on her isn’t asking for hers in return; a look in her eye. Guilt, then confusion, then joy- as if she’s sorting through… well, there are a few things I can think of.

Even though she doesn’t smile all that often, there’s a cute, curving satisfaction in her eyes, even on days when she’s down.

It’s happiness without a smile, because a smile isn’t necessary to be happy. Here and now, I see that expression again; pure, unwavering joy, with no smile needed for that joy to be seen- to be felt. I tug on Mab, just a little, and she opens her eyes.

She looks at me.

She smiles.

I, helplessly, smile back.

She tells the girls it’s time to go; they get up; we go. I carry the whole frozen salmon in their cold wooden crates back to the ship, set them out to thaw somewhere Luffy won’t get at them immediately.

Tomorrow, Imbolc begins. Second of February; all is well.
The strongest prophecy of the day always hits right after I finish flossing. I almost never know what they mean; and I almost never remember them later.

“When Icarus fell, burning wings and all; He Arose; Wishing for the world to burn with him. A simple death would not suffice. -Need help with your hair, Deb?”

“Mm, yaaaaaaugh! Yes, please; mm, thank you, fern.”

“Mm. mphm.”

“No, Beatrix, if you try to go back to bed, you’ll just wake up groggy and be angry and confused for the rest of the day. It might be a few hours until proper Morning, but- just fight through it, okay?”

“eeehk.”

“No one likes being up this early; you just have to get used to it. I’m pretty sure there’s hot water for tea and coffee now, though, so- and wash your face, that always wakes you up.”

“Bleagh.”

“That’s the spirit! -All done, Deb. Good Morning~!”

“good morning, Fern...”

“Mrngpffle.”

So… over these past two or three weeks, I’ve figured out the actual Sleep Index of our crew. It goes like this, if you like.

Twelve or more hours: Hell fucking yes. Decadence has a name, and that name is ME ME ME I go to bed at Eight and I wake up at Eight. This has been my dream for years. When I was a little girl, I dreamt of marrying my bed and inviting all my siblings to the wedding. I’m starting to feel groggy and angry for the rest of the day when I actually do get up, though; I thought it would be Totally Worth It when I had to get up at five every day to get my park spot. Now that I hardly have to do anything, though… I’m kinda Done with the whole deal. Alternatively, if I slept twelve or more hours like Genny did after mom’s funeral… knowing what I know now, I’d have been deeply depressed and approximately three centimeters from sudden death at any given moment.

Eleven to ten hours: Ideal. I’m functioning at a perfected hundred percentum capacity; my body and mind are a well oiled machine. I’m ready to knock out all my errands, training, and chores in under an hour; work a full day; and then study that complicated magic I’m trying to learn. Genny usually has this schedule, but she took Mom’s death really hard. She worked so hard to keep Mom from feeling too much pain… Tcha, nothin’ doin’. Oh, Doctor Chopper, and Adelaide.
Nine hours: Good! I could have slept longer, but getting up was no great horrifying trauma either. Mostly Sancho has this schedule, even though he doesn’t really have a particular time he’s going to get up or go to sleep… Bryony says she sleeps like that during the summer, but Bryony gets her actually restless sleep during her naps.

Oh, incidentally- the optimum nap times, and what they’re good for, are as follows: a quick boost of alertness is best fostered with a ten to twenty minute power nap. It’ll let you go back to work in a pinch after a long, bad night. For cognitive memory processing, a sixty minute nap does more good. This is where slow-wave sleep happens, and it helps with remembering facts, places, and faces. However, you’ll be a bit groggy on waking.

Finally, the 90-minute nap will allow for a full cycle of sleep, which aids in creativity, emotional and procedural memory, and feeling like a human being. If you have the time, I highly recommend it.

The best nap positioning is as follows: sit or lay slightly upright, to avoid a deep sleep. An eye cover of some kind will help quiet your mind; some manner of sound dampening, even just a quiet room, also helps quiet your mind. If you find yourself dreaming during your nap, it’s a sign you’re sleep deprived.

Eight to seven hours: The “medically recommended amount” for adults, but in reality more like a “fine, if I have to, I guess” amount of sleep. Normal to mild levels of angst at having to get out of bed; hot-to-cold shower to start the day is HIGHLY recommended. Nami, Usopp, Sanji, Mab, Mark, Robin, Franky, Gurry, Zoro, Bea, Cece, and Deb all sleep like this. Zoro, Bea, Cece, and Deb all take naps, in addition- although Zoro’s naps even his sleeping out, rather than supplement it.

Six hours: Silent unceasing internal groaning for at least the first hour after waking. Don’t expect any coherency or quality in conversation for the first two or more hours. I’ve got a less than Medically Recommended Amount of the Sleep, that means I’m a martyr, Right?????? Oddly enough, no one on our crew actually sleeps this much-little.

Five hours: Fairly unpleasant. It feels Gross and Icky. Expect a moderate to severe crash during the late afternoon, depending on how good you are at napping. This is the first number that is considered worthy of entry in a sleep-dep contest on any college or work campus; although, if you try to enter with five measly hours, dead-eyed hordes of the grumpy and Tired will instantly materialize from the cold bright bushes and one up you with “Five hours?? HAHA SWEET SUMMER CHILD I HAVEN’T SLEPT IN THREE YEARS.” Captain and Brook sleep like this; Captain, because I think he thinks he’ll miss something if he sleeps more, and Brook because he can’t bear to be alone with his dreams for longer. Oh, and no one on our crew sleeps for less than five hours, so the following are just examples with no, uh, examples.

Four hours: A Very Poor Decision was Made, and you have to Live With It. You might think you’re going to die; you might want to die; you will not. Deep seated, incoherent rage upon waking will persist up to several hours afterwards; only slight reduction with application of ninety minute naps. Consume as much of your stimulant of choice that won’t result in organ failure; you’ll feel like a cave troll and have a temper to match. Expect a constant, cloying aftertaste of chemicals and regret.

Three hours: Half awake; half walking in an astral plane haunted by the wails of the newly-dead and profligate gamblers getting caught by their own mistakes. Children, animals, and the innocent of heart fear the emptiness in your vacant eyes. This is the kind of person that asks for the largest take-away cup at the coffee house and makes the barista fill it with their strongest espresso and a packet of chemical stimulants that they are only allowed to serve one of to the customer, by law. They don’t care how long it takes; all the baristas are horrified at their presence. Although it’s a very respectable
entry to any sleep-dep contest, you’ll still get beaten by the “two hour” and “all nighter” people. Everyone knows this is Bad, though.

Two hours: You can get up. You can, but only by rending your feeble soul from your physical body in a paroxysm of spiritual agony, since it will refuse to leave the bed. You can still feel pain; but you assign little to no meaning to it. You are now soulless and will feel absolutely Zero (0) emotions until sometime in the late afternoon or early evening. It is at this point that your soul returns to your body and ALL THE EMOTIONS HIT AT ONCE, leaving you alternately sobbing or laughing in terrible, self-sustaining hysteria.

One hour: Tes con. You imbecile, your hubris and fear and weakness has brought you to this point. They are coming. You cannot escape. Why didn’t you just go to bed? Why didn’t you just stay awake? The strength of your no-sleep headache threatens to stab through your skull like an ice pick. Your eyes feel like damp fruit snacks that you left in your pocket on the hottest summer’s day. All you can taste is blood. They are comi-

Zero hours: THIS IS ACTUALLY FINE, THIS ISN’T BAD AT ALL, AHAHA. I’M NOT EVEN THAT TIRED! WATCH ME DRINK HALF MY WEIGHT IN COFFEE AND DEVOUR EVERY COOKIE AND SWEET IN THE HOUSE. I CAN FEEL MY HEART BEATING IN MY EARS AND FINGERTIPS ISN’T THAT WEIRD, GUYS, AHAHA. WHAT DO YOU MEAN MY EYES ARE BLOOD SHOOT AND I CAN’T FOCUS, I’M COMPLETELY NORMAL RIGHT NOW AHAHA. I CAN HEAR COLORS AND SEE SOUNDS. AHAHAHAHAHA.

So anyway, breakfast is Okayu with thin slices of shallot, pickled ikura, dried sardines, adzuki and natto beans, black sesame seeds… it’s a beautiful meal, and delicious, and it’s really seasonal too! Umeboshi, salmon sashimi, fruits and vegetables, tea and coffee.

We spend the morning cleaning- sweeping out every room, rearranging furniture so we have…

The dorms in the Thousand Sunny are actually exactly reversed of each other. Captain, Zoro, Nami, Usopp, Sanji, Mab, Chopper, Robin, Mark, Taffy, Bryony, Franky, Brook, Gurry; Adelaide, Beatrix, Cecelia, Deborah, Eleanor, Fernanda, Genevieve, Sancho. Two dorms; two small cabins; one large Captain’s cabin. However, we don’t each have individual bunks- technically speaking, we don’t each need individual bunks. Captain, Usopp, and Mark all share the Captain’s cabin; Zoro and Nami share a cabin; Sanji and Mab share a cabin. That’s seven.

In the men’s dorm, there’s Chopper, Franky, Brook, Gurry, and Sancho. Five.

In the women’s dorm, there’s Robin, Taffy, Bryony, A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. Ten.

Twenty-two on the crew; and that’s not even counting all the animals. We have three dogs; we have a flock of doves with their own dove cote, a flock of quail with their own run, angora possums, beehives, milking goats, a pig… and extensive gardens! It’s really like… like a farm, on a ship.

We’ve actually been cleaning and ordering everything for days preceding this one; Imbolc started yesterday, at sunset. Mab did a bunch of magic over us, and spoke a prayer, I think, and now we’re done cleaning everything and we’re going to the sento.

We’ve been cleaning so much… honestly, it only took about a half-hour to get everything clean and
swept to Mab’s satisfaction.

Mab says that Imbolc is all about noticing that the days are finally getting longer again; that this is the time of year when it really becomes clear that winter is over.

Mab gave me Lady Shyarly’s dank-ass orbuculum, and said that as I was the only proper Seer on the crew, it was my responsibility. I’m… ambivalent that I’m really the best person to clean an orbuculum. That said, I’ve been spending the past two weeks taking up a new… passion? Hobby? Woodworking.

After Mom’s funeral, I had to throw out all my old hair sticks… Let’s start at the start, I’m doing it out of order. There’s a deep and elemental satisfaction that comes from using your mind and your hands to solve a problem or make something, build something, and woodworking fits the bill for that perfectly. Building anything- a drainage ditch, a birdfeeder, a cat scratching post- is a passion that anyone can have, and anyone can be proud to have. I just couldn’t make a living at it, so I was a fortuneteller for mostly tourists, with a few local repeat customers- shopkeepers with gambling habits near the park, fishermen who wanted to know what to hunt for a season in advance at the market… pirates just passing through.

But… it’s not really satisfying, being a fortuneteller. There’s no way for me to know if my fortunes helped or not- I just say shit, and people take it as gospel or ignore it as they see fit. But woodworking? At the end, if you do it right- or wrong- you’ve got something real you can hold in your hands.

These are the few things I know for a fact about woodworking. All you need to get started is a ‘thing you want’, a plan to make that thing, materials, and tools. The thing you want could be as simple as a spoon or a hairstick, or as complicated as a canoe or a ship-to-shore box. Materials just need to be wood- preferably, wood that won’t kill you to work with, like rosewood- and you can get wood from demolished buildings, from old barns that are being torn down, from pallets and crates at the fishmarket… anywhere will do. Chunks of tree from the park where the storm knocked it down. As for tools? A chisel is just a knife; and any knife that’s nice in your hand and keeps it’s edge will do just fine. You’ll fuck up, and have to start over, many times- but it’s only wood, and your time.

It’s not something you’ll be good at overnight; but you can get good enough to be going on. When I started, I just needed to add a sort of… notch? To some disposable chopsticks, so I could pin my hair up. Then, as time went on, I got better and better at carving; to the point where… well, it doesn’t matter. What matters is, my old hairsticks are saturated in energy that’s… it’s too painful for me to keep, anymore. I can hardly bear to touch them, much less use them, and when Mab saw what I’d added to the ‘burn’ pile for Imbolc, she looked… understanding.

I’m not perfect, and I never will be- no one is, no one can be. No matter what I do, the only thing that will happen is I improve and become more efficient at a certain skill. I’ll screw up- I’ll have to start over. But… I can always start over. What I didn’t know about disposable chopsticks is that they’re made of a fairly soft wood, a type of bamboo. For anyone else, that’d have been fine- but I’m a very powerful Seer. There’s a reason orbuculums are made out of very hard stone; it’s so the energies we channel when we See don’t soak into the orb. Magical contamination is no joke.

There is no tool that will magically make you a master of whatever you’re trying to do. Practice and patience make you a master of whatever you do- and of course, by the time you get to that point, you realize what more you have to learn. The only thing a tool can do is make your job easier- and that’s only if you know what you’re doing with it. Would an electric saw, a router, a lathe, make my life
The size of your workspace doesn’t define you, or what you can do. I was a very successful
fortuneteller, and my office was a desk I built out of some milk crates and a park bench under an
awning. The only thing a large workspace is really good for is storage; if you need to make
something, you’ll find a way to make it, even if all you have is your kitchen table and a cup of dice.

Never, ever underestimate the importance of safety. I’m burning my old hair sticks because keeping
Seer-tainted objects around is hazardous to my sanity. No amount of nostalgia, time, and effort, is
truly worth my health. I have no excuse; I should have done this years ago. I’m lucky I didn’t get a
Headache, honestly...

Finally, what I know for sure about woodworking- and fortunetelling, come to that- is that there’s
always a way to do what you want to do. If you asked ten woodworkers how to do something, or ten
fortunetellers how to do something, you’d get twenty different answers; and all of them are right.
What matters is finding the methods of getting it done that work for you the best. I’m not good at
arithmetic, and that’s okay. I don’t have to do simple arithmetic in my head; I can use scratch paper
and a calculator. Honestly, my customers found it endearing whenever I flipped to a brand new page
for them, and started working out their numbers with my abacus and scratch paper… one woman
said to me that it reminded her of her Aunt, who used to calculate the exact best days to make hay in
just the same way, except with the addition of a calendar. There’s a reason tools improve, glues get
better, fasteners get stronger, and new methods of doing the same thing are introduced. A lot of the
time the focus in woodworking and fortunetelling is on finding shortcuts to get the same, or even
better results. You can throw runes for a fortune; you can also roll dice, to the same end. Don’t let
traditionalist snobbery influence you unduly.

Let’s be real here- the only formal training I’ve ever gotten as it relates to woodworking or
fortunetelling is a semester of Mystical Health and Safety at the community college when I was ten,
and being taught how to whittle by Benkei on slow winter afternoons. I only paid enough attention
in MHS to not get Curses, and to plan out the cheapest way to do fortunetelling as a job.

How does a fortuneteller go from an abacus to a chisel?! I think it honestly started with having to sit
out in all weather, with my hair steadily getting longer, hotter, itchier- I finally couldn’t take it. For a
while I used hair ties and combs, and while they worked fine, it didn’t quite fit with the image I was
trying to go for- bargain brand fortunetellers can use Daiso hair things, but… I needed a more rustic
touch. I never woke up one morning and thought to myself ‘wouldn’t it be great to be a
woodworker’, it was a gradual progression of “I need this thing; I have these things; I will make this
thing I need” and “this thing is broken; I will fix it”.

The very beginning was my aforementioned hair sticks; business didn’t pick up, per say, after I
started wearing them, but tourists were willing to accept my existence with a lot less giggling and
smirks at “oh how cute” I was with all my Daiso hair things. I still have all my Daiso shit, come to
think of it…

Anyway, my next few woodworking projects were all geared around fixing up things that had gotten
worn down in our apartment. I couldn’t go out and work when it was too stormy, after all; so, I did a
few things around the apartment that helped keep everyone’s spirits up. Living in a place where
things are broken… I dunno, it wears out your heart, it blinds your eyes. I think it was the success
and satisfaction of these simple projects that really sowed the seeds of “I can actually make
something, do something, if I think about it and give it a fair go.”

The first thing I fixed was just replacing some rotted shelves in the kitchen cabinets, the ones near the
sink. They hadn’t been sealed properly; really, the only woodworking there was cutting some boards to length and width with a saw, a hand plane, and sandpaper, and then finishing it so water wouldn’t get in. Dunk in varnish; boat wax; cure time; cabinet papers to preserve the finish. It was a genuinely simple project that built a lot of confidence in me; and it made cleaning the kitchen, having enough food storage, and so on, a genuine possibility.

The second thing I made was a Biltong dryer for my sister, Deb. I might actually repeat this project in Sanji’s smokehouse; Deb really likes drying meat, seaweed, and sausage in that careful way. It wasn’t fine joinery or anything, but it was a bit more involved than whittling hairsticks or cutting boards to size.

The third project was actually doing some genuine repair work- cosmetic damage from a termite colony on our patio door. The termites had found that the architrave and framing were nicer to eat, and ignored the studs, top plate, and lintel, so there was no structural issues to worry about- thank the gods. This project required a bit more carpentry than previous jobs, and I think I did a pretty good job. The landlady didn’t take us to task for it, after all- even though I had to completely remove the sliding door and all the half eaten timber, replace the framing and architrave, and then stain to match the rest of the architrave and door frames through my house. Mitring is annoying; and staining is also annoying.

By now, I had Seen that Mom was going to get a Terrible Fate, and so I decided to tear the carpet out of our apartment and replace it with floating floor. I knew from watching women down in the courtyard beat the dirt out of their carpets that wall to wall carpeting hid a multitude of sins; and I had Seen that Mom would have a chest-related death, and… I just. Wanted to make things less painful for her. This was fairly significant in my path to becoming a woodworker; I replaced all the carpet in the apartment, and tiled a hearth around the fireplace. The flooring and tiling were the first time I went to the local tradeschool for day classes- simple little things for people who were, like me, just doing a few home improvements that didn’t really need a full on education… or they were already in the trades and needed to learn a new skill, or just a refresher. The tile came out nice, especially when I still don’t quite understand how I got it all so cheaply; and the floors, once I finished sealing and waxing them, were a very pale color that really brightened up the carpets and rugs, and made the whole apartment brighter. I will say that I didn’t find the whole project as straightforward as the classes I’d taken had made it seem, but then all real projects are like that.

By this stage, I’d done all the repairs and renovations our apartment needed, and the satisfaction of the job well done… well, it’s about this time I decided to make my own portable table and chair, so I could attract better customers. The seed was sown.

However, before that, my sister Beatrix said that she’d seen “a home-blackboard in a magazine, and wouldn’t that be useful for all of us with our different schedules?” which is as good as being handed a signed work order, especially considering B came up with most of the money for actually doing the job. Not complicated joinery, but I’d acquired a real chisel by then and was able to use some more specialized hand-planes and a router at the trade school to round over the edges and make it all very nice to the hand.

Then I made my table; and then I worked for the next five years so our mother didn’t have to while she was sick and dying.

I think I’m taking up woodworking again because… part of it is, I’m tired of using my Sight as a method of making money when I could just… not. Part of it is, there’s a real, deep satisfaction I get from woodworking that I don’t get other ways; being able to do for myself without having to buy it
built or get someone else to do it for me. It’s not about saving money in the short term- but… long term, yes.

There’s also the fact that now that I know how much the materials cost, the quality of what I get is… not good enough. I might not be able to make a three in one in time for Nami myself- but I can design a high-chair, rocking horse, and changing table-ette, and ask Franky to teach me to make one like it! Or make it for Nami, and teach me how to make one like it too… I want a new fortunetelling table, one that’s built to last! I want a box for my tarot cards, and a tray to roll my dice in, and… and a holder for my new orbuculum when I use it!

I just… Sometimes, things that are expensive are worse.

But for right now, I just need new hairsticks; I’m going to bless them on Beltane, so I started them just after Mom’s funeral.

It started with me going into the Shop for the first time, maybe the day after Mom’s funeral. Usopp’s side of the Shop is really more Genny’s bag; I was immediately struck by the… the *superness* of Franky’s side. More than anything, I wanted my own space in there- not a big space, but *my* space.

I’m honestly not sure why Franky did it- but when I asked him about it…

“Uh- Franky, can I have a space in the shop?”

“For what, kiddo?”

“I wanna make stuff too!”

“Hah. Bring me a bubble for a spirit level, fresh elbow grease, and a Left-handed Monkey Wrench, and we’ll talk.”

“...Okay.”

Contrary to popular belief, being a fortuneteller does not make one an airhead. Quite the opposite, really.

I go to the Sanitary, first.

“Hey, Nurse G, can I have an alkaseltzer tablet?”

“Uh- do you have heartburn, or-?”

“No, no, I- I need to get a bubble for a spirit level, and-”

“Oh. Uh- Oh! Oh, sure- here, an individual packet.”

“Thank you!”
A stop in the kitchen, next; I’ll be able to get everything else I need there.

“Hey Deb, got a few minutes?”

“Mais c’est chiant ca- two minutes, then I can talk!”

“Okay.”

I wait twenty minutes.

“Wassup, Fern?”

“I need a jar of cooking lard, like a sample size jar?”

“Uh- we’ve got a bunch of forty-five mils for when Chef comes up with a new honey-plus-something variation or has just a little bit of jam left over to jar… d’you want it labelled?”

“Yeah- label it ‘Elbow’, if you please.”

“…Prop comedy?”

“Some people don’t get the joke unless you really hammer it in.”

“Heh. Sure. Anything else?”

“A Left-Handed Monkey Wrench.”

“…Why do you need one an’ a half ounces of light rum, three ounces of cranberry juice, and a dash of bitters?”

“Prop comedy.”

“…If you say so. Any particular serving instructions I should know?”

“It’s normally served in a pre-chilled glass as cold as Genny’s angriest stare, but if you don’t have time, on the rocks is fine.”

“No, I can mix a proper drink.”

“Merveilleux! -Oh, and I need a glass of water, and a way to take them all down to the Shop safely.”

“Hmmph. I’ll see if there’s a tray you can use.”

There was, indeed, a tray; and, for all her grumping, Deborah really loves nothing more than giving people what they ask her for, especially when it comes to food.
I took the tray back to Franky, and when I got to his work desk, I carefully unloaded it onto a flat surface and coughed to get his attention. He looked at me with a raised eyebrow, and I stared back blandly. Neither of us spoke.

Finally, he caved and asked me about what I’d brought him.

“Well, Chief, they only sell dehydrated spirit-level bubbles in multipacks, so I got that; and the elbow grease is clearly labelled, and I have it on good authority it’s fresh as of this morning; and I dunno why you wanted a mixed drink before noon, Chief, but we all go through some things sometimes.”

Franky looked over all the things I’d brought him, and then he eyed me up and down, and then he said, “You can’t wear your hair like that while you’re in the shop. Isn’t safe; and you’ll need to wear close fitting clothing, so you don’t get caught in anything. Closed toed shoes, every time; and always clean up your area when you’re done for the day.”

“My area, chief?”

“Over there, kiddo. You didn’t think I was just sitting around while you were gone, did you?”

“What- Oh! This is really nice!”

I grinned on seeing the makerspace Franky made for me, and then I ran off; came back in over-alls, a tshirt, and hair done up in a bun and a bunch of Daiso shit. Sneakers are close-toed, right?

I had the space; I had the drive. Once I asked about the scraps in the scrap shelves, I even had materials.

In all honesty, even though I had to make new hairsticks, what I wanted to make was a new broom handle for Genevieve. I designed it instead, while I worked the cramps out of my planin’ hand. I used to be really close to Genevieve; we’re the two youngest by a margin of five whole minutes, after all. Five minutes counts a lot when you’re one in a set of seven.

Anyway, I know enough about magic that I can’t… I can’t make Genny a whole broom. Chances are, I can’t even make her a broom haft. I’m… I’m not really sure why I’m doing what I’m doing. But… just because I can’t fly like my sister doesn’t mean I can’t fly at all.

There’s a strange statuette my Mom brought from her homeland; she called it a pie vent. Mom never used it to bake, and it creeps Deb out… so I kept it. I like the shape of it; the curve of the head and the chest, the way the mouth opens… even the tiny little eyes- I think they’re cute, really.

Shaving down the form of the pie vent onto paper into a collection of evocative lines is… not the most fun, but also not the least. Mostly, it’s wrapping my mind’s eye around a pole that doesn’t yet exist that gives me my first few conniptions. Then, I start considering… well, I need a wand.

Genny’s use of a bat-shape is… really really inspired. Mimicry is a sincere form of flattery, and I can design the way I want the bat to swing easily enough- but… I don’t want to make a wand without asking Genny if it’s okay I use the same kind as her. Hm. Maybe a different kind of bat? Hurley sticks are more suited for flying… Cricket? Maybe cricket…
I’ll make hairsticks and mull it over.

Making hair sticks is actually pretty simple.

Start by choosing the wood; it can be aspen, chestnut, pine, cedar, cherry, sandalwood, paulownia, koa, ash, hickory - doesn’t matter, just has to be hard and water resistant. There is no wood that is magic resistant, and I’m not ready for Adam wood.

Then, cut the wood down to approximate width and double length with an axe or hatchet, paying attention to the wood grain. Roughly shape it with a plane, and then slice it in half with your axe or hatchet. You want long, straight grains down the entire length of the stick. Each resulting stock-pair should be slightly larger than a quarter inch thick.

Shape the sticks with a nine-inch plane; set the chamfer on one end of each stick. Finish shaping with a six-inch smoothing plane. It’ll get rid of any rough spots and make the sticks smooth. Round the ends and the tips with the smoothing plane.

The sticks I made came out at around ten inches long, which is fine for some of them; but some of them, I needed shorter. So, cut them to length, honestly, and then slightly chamfer the ends to finish the shaping.

Finish them with hair-safe stain or varnish; beeswax, boiled linseed oil, and so on. Let’em cure for at least a day, and then clean and polish after every use for a long life together. Oh, and consecrate at the holidays to prevent mystic buildup. I’ve been wearing my hair in a long braid, pinned to my head with a bunch of cheap hair combs from Daiso; but today, I’m going to consecrate my hairsticks, and pin my hair up the way I really want to.

The train ride to the Sento is long and kinda boring, if you’re me. The day before yesterday, all the dogs blew their winter coats, so we had to brush them out.

Mab Morgan is a part of the United Textile Worker’s Union, and about a year ago they all went on strike. Mab got herself an entirely deserved reputation for being a sucker who loves animals, so people all across the world would dump their pets and farm animals on her. When we had to rehome most of the piglets Mark got, the majority of them went to her palace- and yeah, that threw us all for a loop, that Mab has an actual palace - but it’s full of her Morgan cousins and all their family and the pets and the grounds are full of animals so like… There’s Pickle, the three-legged housecat, and Chatterbox the Tortise, and Cushion the pet Pig, and Cushion’s twenty children who wander the orchard out back, Spooky Garbage Mule, Chiquita the Orb Weaver who lives in the Banana Palms.

I say all this for the context of how, exactly, we have a wolf as a ship pet.

Mab, Mark, Bryony, and Taffy all were hanging out with Franky, trying to convince him to go with them and be pirates because if they couldn’t, Captain wouldn’t take no for an answer anymore and my eyes kinda crossed after that but basically they stole the three dogs- Pearblossom, Bubbler, and Buttercream- because they were in a dog-fighting ring and bit a bunch of people. They were scared; it happens.

Dogs that bite aren’t good for family homes; but we live on a pirate ship, and we treat our dogs right, so… it’s kinda perfect? Four tons of angry dog will stop a lot of shit before it starts, seems to be the prevailing wisdom. Anyway, Mark, Taffy, and Bryony had never owned dogs in their life; Mark’s
Momma had ‘Pretty Bird’, a parakeet, and his sister, Merry, had finches- but we all know birds are dinosaurs, not pets.

So anyway, Franky’s district of Water 7 is not a great place. Lots of drugs, lots of gangs, prostitution everywhere and terrible civic management. Franky was able to get a lot done- but it’s the work of seven lifetimes to turn that area of the city around, and Franky was just one man. Franky’s also told me that he learned to identify different types of gunfire while he was the yeoman of that district, whatever that means.

Like, not to say the dogs aren’t pretty- they are gorgeous . But, I mean, it became obvious within days that something was Amiss with Buttercream. Buttercream knows how to open doors; the lock on the fridge is for Luffy. The lock, bar, and complicated clamp on the Smokehouse and Dairy? That’s for Buttercream. Apparently, she once got into the Dairy and ate fifteen gallons of cottage cheese in a bit less than half an hour.

Most dogs bark at or chase News Coos. Buttercream stalked, live-captured, and presented one to Nami on the second week of her living with the crew. She then proceeded to lick the poor seagull over it’s entire body, and… well, apparently we’ve got one specific seagull that’s our News Coo, and all others keep a wide berth around our boat.

Buttercream knows all her commands, but clearly stops to consider the merit of the command giver before obeying; and she trained Usopp to hand over tidbits of his food within the second week.

She wanders off from the ship every day, be it at sea or ashore, but she always returns by dinnertime. She also brings tunnies, and other large fish, when she notices the ship is low on supplies.

As the months went on, and the crew gradually realized that Buttercream was in fact smarter than their own Captain, Mab and Chopper gave her a real checkup, which included a blood draw. Doctor Chopper came back from the testing, stared Mab dead in the eyes, and said “Where in the hell did you get an adult female Great White Wolf Shark?”

After a bit of hemming and hawing, and a very-angry Doctor Chopper being Disappointed at his friends, they determined that Buttercream had decided that the Crew was her new family-pack, and the ship was the den, and was probably going to be a lil’shit her entire life.

“Ok,” said Doctor Chopper, “I don’t like destroying animals; she’s not a problem on the crew, and I didn’t find any signs of mental instability when I had a talk with her. We can keep her, but! I want her away from small children because her Preydrive could kick in, and then we will have to kill her. I don’t want things to ever get to that point, understand?”

Two years later, Nami came back pregnant.

Buttercream noticed instantly, and reacted by digging a large hole in the lawn out by the Aquarium, which pissed Franky off but she kept re-digging it until finally he put sod over the dirt pile and washed his hands of it; and she started catching even more fish for Nami, because she needed the protein or something. That’s what you do when the Big-mom Wolf Shark is pregnant, right? Dig a birthing den and ply with food, right? Right? (Mab’s advice for Nami is to deliver somewhere that isn’t the ship, and send back something that has hers and the baby’s scent on it.)

That’s how she introduced us to Buttercream, actually- she made us all do jumping jacks until we
started sweating, or just wiped her feverish forehead in Deb’s case, and then the next day we were introduced to Buttercream. Apparently, BC spent the whole night puzzling over the pile of hankies Mab left for her.

The next day, when we all came home, there was the sudden and instantaneous recognition of PUPPIES! PUUUUUUUUUUUPIEEEEEEEEEEEES! And Buttercream has been the most aggressively maternal being I’ve ever met since that doesn’t have thumbs - I’m talking about Mab, if you didn’t notice. She’s playful, sits under our table at mealtime, sleeps under our beds - it rotates each night but she’s especially careful with Genny; she lets us nap on her side and cry into her fur and brings us rocks for her to retrieve when we throw them.

I’m making living with a Great White Wolf Shark sound cool as hell, but it does have a few inevitable drawbacks. Firstly, Great White Wolvarks are native to Skua, not the rest of the World; thus, after a certain level of age and strength is achieved, they gain the ability to talk. Buttercream has a very raspy voice, and is willing to fight Anything, at Any Time. Just like Mab, actually. Buttercream has to be muzzled when it’s time for her shots and bi-yearly checkup, because she has Opinions about having needles stuck in her softmeats, and thermometers up her butt.

HAIR. When all the dogs blew their coats… well, Pearblossom’s came out with a vigorous brush and wash, and Bubbler’s had mostly fallen out in her daily swims so all we had to do was give her a brushing for the trouble spots. Buttercream needed three baths, two separate brushings, and a comb to get most of everything- and some of her fur won’t actually fall out until the sakura blossoms bloom, which isn’t for at least three weeks.

Her favorite way of waking someone up is hitting them in the face with half a dead animal. Luffy enjoys this; no one else does.

She is more than capable of opening the foodstorage and eating everything. I think the only reason she doesn’t do so with the dry goods is… “Bucky, why don’t you?”

‘I don’t like sweets.’

“Ah.”

‘I do like sudoku, however- pass me that travel magazine, would you?’

“Sure thing.”

Oh, did I not mention? Buttercream decided to be my Imbolc-buddy. Meaning she’s accompanying me for whatever I’m doing today.

I’m just going with it, really; I mean, I’m not going to tell a wolf the size of a Great White what to do, especially when she knows how to put together a cohesive argument and can back it up with row upon shining row of sharp, white teeth. Even if she does howl along with the fishmarket auction sirens at four in the godsdamn morning every fucking day.

Anyway, all this together means that I’m allowed to go through the Sento basically on my own, because I’ve got Buttercream with me. It’s no big deal for me to go to the… ambiguously moral Sento so long as I have Buttercream. I mean, even now on the train, I’ve got an entire seat to myself because people don’t really want to fuck with a girl that’s got a ton of Overprotective Wolvark looking after her. I mean, I’ve also realized that ‘bitch’ means teeth and the willingness to rip an asshole’s entire face all the way off for being rude, and I like that definition better than the one I had
before. I also like the new version of the I-Own-This strut and Murder-Stare that Buttercream’s been teaching me; very effective. Cuts right through the bluster and goes direct to the hind-brain.

‘In most cultures, an event like a royal christening is not a private party; it’s the public social event of the year. To not invite any person of rank to such an event is a deadly insult.’

“Buttercream?”

“I assume you know the story of the Sleeping Beauty?”

“I do, yes.”

“Well. The Evil Fairy or Witch’s name was Vinsmoke Maleficent; and she was certainly not someone you’d want at a puppy-party. However, she was also someone powerful enough that only a fool would ever dare treat her with such blatant disrespect. The only way the King and Queen could have possibly gotten away with not inviting Maleficent was to not invite any of the fairies at all; inviting the other fairies and excluding her is explicitly taking sides in the conflict between the fairy factions.”

“Oh. That means… they made themselves her sworn enemies, and she responded by treating them as such from then on. If they had apologized for their disrespect, and invited her to the party, she would have given the Princess an awesome present. And, because she had, the rest of the fairies would have had to as well-right, sensei?”

“Just right.”

Buttercream has taken it upon herself to teach me the true and intricate lessons behind all the old fairy-tales; I’m not sure why, considering Beatrix is the one who loves those stories so much, but… then again, it’s fun to learn a new thing, right?

Oh, uh- Mab came down to the Shop right at sunset yesterday. She cleared off an anvil, and she struck a nail with a hammer until it turned red; then she lit the forge fire, which had been cleaned out days before and a new nest of wood set within.

She spoke words over four knives I’d never seen before, and Franky would not look upon at all; and she said- she said-

*The blade is the most important part. Hilt and pommel and guard and handle all have their place, but it is the blade that holds the soul.*

Her hammer came down again and again, until the blades were glowing in strange colors I’d never seen before and could not speak the names of. Again, again, again she struck, the bones on the anvil becoming more refined and more- Real, the realest of reals, around which other things merely echoed- until at last they began to gleam with a strange light of… of something?
Steel purified of evil by All the Powers shall be the vessel for this holy blessing. I, Mab, Queen of the Dreaming, give them the shape that will carry their purpose unto the end of all days and nights and halflight-gleamings. No might shall bend it nor shall the abyss of time shake its glory. This wonder I make here and now with my own two hands; I, Mab, Queen of Wrens, have made it.

I lost count of how many times Mab said that prayer over those three- one, and one, and two-as-one-blades. Again and again, until the light within the weapons matched the light within Mab, and then- and then- she consigned them to the fire. They were cooled in a bucket of water left in full sight of the wheeling sky above; moonlight and stars filtering down.

This morning, she gave the three weapons to Zoro, who presented them to Nami- and then they went off together, and came back a little sex-scruffled so… I guess it’s a good gift?

She also gave Beatrix a pair of Rending Shears to use while hers are being refurbished as actual weapons- they aren’t as nice as Beatrix’ normal scissor-swords, but they do work, and, being of much stronger materials than her own, are less likely to break in her hands.

Oh, we’re almost there- ah, Mab’s speaking.

“Now- I’ve made everyone a token for… well, if you need to find your crewmates in a hurry, or you need to call for help. Pay attention, girls and boy; I’m not keen on you learning this lesson the hard way. Telekinesis is magic, but it isn’t like other magic. Magic magic, spells and so on, are all thaumakinetic. They draw on the ambient magic all around, or stored in various objects- crystals, metals, water, thread, and so on- channel it in various ways, be it a wand, the ritual of creation, even a punch- and then direct it in a way that you desired. Ready, aim, fire.

“Telekinesis is psychokinetic; it is drawn from within. You need a fraction of a fraction of the amount of magic from the world to power telekinesis; and because it is psychokinetic, it depends on willpower, concentration, imagination, and creativity. These are your tokens; pray do not lose them. I have pendants, bracelets, pins, and hairclips- take one, and pass the basket please.”

I take a pendant. It’s heavy in my hand.

“I want you to close your eyes, and make a decision to find a member of your crew; it could be a sibling. It could be an officer, or even Captain Luffy. Fix it in your mind.”

I do.
“Focus on some way of finding them; a path your feet will follow, a sound that you know to be them, a series of actions to take.”

I focus.

“Now- open your eyes and see what’s become of your token.”

I open my eyes to find, quietly sitting where my pendant was before, a tiny gold and black frog.

“Your magic has shaped the Token into a form most suitable for you; one you can understand and follow without fear. Keep them with you; keep them safe. If I have to make new ones for any of you, I will not be pleased. Anyway- here’s money for each of you for the Sento, here’s your bath pass- Mark, hold on to Luffy and Usopp’s passes please- j’hallucine, I have a Devil Fruit power- sorry, Nami, I can’t actually go with you through the relaxation regimen we discussed. Zoro could, though…?”

“Sure.”

“Good. -hmm, sorry?”

“I said, so you’re free to do the kiausauna with me?”

“-the kiausauna?”

“The kiausauna. Yeah, the thing with the stove and- pieni huone tai rakennus, joka on suunniteltu paikka kokea kuivia tai märkiä lämpöistuntoja- quelle est cette merde appelée- Sauna. You’re free to do sauna with me?.”

“Oh! Um- sure, of course. Are we doing the thing with the birch branches?”

“…if you want to?”

“Good! -Now, Sanji and I will be doing traditional Demonic Sauna for Imbolc cleansing; Robin and Brook are having their bones realigned, as well as taking rejuvenating milk-baths and getting their hair polished. Nami and Zoro are going to the Tepidarium, to swim, get massaged, mud-masked, scrubbed, and have mani-pedi’s done. Usopp, Luffy, and Mark are getting professionally bathed, whatever that means, as well as massages; Taffy and Gurry are getting Romantic Couple’s Massages. Bryony and all the girls except for Deborah, Beatrix, and Fernanda have never been to a sento like this before; they’ll be mostly just soaking in the hot water, and taking extensive showers with fancy soaps. Chopper and Genny are getting their hair seen to; Franky, Beatrix, and Deborah are doing the most deluxurious and extensive relaxation package they have without making a reservation of some kind; Sancho, who is of age, is going to get a makeover-”

“Aaaw-” groan all my sisters.

“None of that, should have asked earlier but it’s too late now! And Fernanda, accompanied by
Buttercream, will be doing whatever she wants to do. ...what do you want to do, Fern?”

“Uh… quick stop at the makeup counter with Sancho, if that’s okay- I need to consecrate my hair sticks? Then, um, there’s a sex shop right?”

“Of course.”

“Yeah, so, we need more and better supplies, so I’m gonna hook us up-”

“Here’s my bank card, Fern- either get brazen about what you buy or don’t buy it at all, I’ll see every purchase anyway. There’s no spending limit on it, is the thing; if you’re like me, you only want to go to the store once, aye?”

“Aye-aye! Um, then I’ve gotta clean the Orbuculum, say my prayers, get purified in the cold water spring, and, uh, probably eat a bunch of weird shit while I wait for you guys to get done? The future is murky today.”

All my siblings share ‘uh-oh’ looks with each other, but I pretend not to see them as I put Mab’s bank card away in my wallet. Mab just gives us cool shit- it literally just appears in our closets? So, uh. I have a crossbody purse now? It’s nice.

What’s nicer is the delicious squidberries inside it. Um- so there’s all these amazing crops in the Aquarium, beyond the fish, right? Fruits and vegetables we didn’t get to eat all that often because of expense- but we all picked them over the summer. Anyway, a Squidberry grows underwater on tangled vines; the first bloom of bright white flowers sometime in early January becomes sweet red berries right around Imbolc. Sanji and Deborah- really, mostly Deborah, once Sanji taught her how he wanted it done; on account of her gills, y’know- spent most of yesterday picking Squidberries for today. They’re traditional fare… y’know, I understand why Mab’s always interested in Sanji. Really, I get it. If I had a man like that… well, and they really love each other? So.

Anyway, today I’m wearing a sports bra, granny panties, a pair of overalls, and my oversized cardi; my hair’s blond again, and it’s braided up around my crown, pinned in place with about twenty or thirty black floral hair pins. Daiso shit. I’ve got my yellow backpack full of my various spells and enchantments, which need to be renewed- that’s easy enough to do, honestly.

My hair sticks are in… well, technically it’s for paint brushes, but Gurry said he didn’t use it, ever, so I got it from him? Works fine. I’ve got foldin’ money from Mab, Mab’s bank card, a wallet that’s otherwise empty excepting my business cards, a list of things I need to get done, and a wolf companion. I’ve got clean socks with no holes, in an unfortunately colorful style, but that won’t bother the ascetics I’m going to be visiting later… My clothing fits fine for meditation… no phones in Chihiro Sento, it’s a rule of the place… Oh, and the ascetics that live on campus accept donations of fruit, incidentals like socks, underwear, and hygiene supplies- you know, mensis sponges; and very occasionally, straight money. I’ve got fresh squidberries for them, first of the season. Smaller than I’m used to seeing, but they taste good so I suppose it doesn’t matter?

I’m going to get my laity over with before I do the thing I need to do- so, in order. Go with Sancho to the Makeup Corner, get my hair sticks consecrated and probably something special for myself; get the Orbuculum cleaning supplies from the Divination Counter, and go where they direct me to clean it; Meditate in the Room of Stars to align my new, clean- need a bag for the Orb, this wrap is okay but it won’t survive the day… hm.
“Mab, where should I go to get a real bag for the Orb?’”

“Gift Shop.”

“Okay.”

So, in order: Makeup Corner, Hair Sticks, Gift Shop for Orbag, Clean the Orb, Meditate and Alignment; Cleansing of Magic, Renewal of Enchantments. Then, make my donations, and have a wonderful late lunch. After that… Sex Shop. End the day with… hm, I’ll find out, I guess?

Today is Murky.

For me, visiting a Sento isn’t really… relaxing. I don’t really relax around lots of people, or in liminal spaces like a public bath house. If I try, I’m more likely to open up my psychometry, and in a place like a bath house… there’s really a lot of things I’d just rather not know, y’know?

However, most local sento actually have the facilities to properly dispose of the wastes produced by cleansing a mystical object, so- that’s usually what I go to one for. You can’t just clean an orbuculum in your bathtub, you’ll fuck up the pipes!

Actually, I need to do this in a different order. I need to find out how to clean the orb first; then do everything else. That’ll be easiest.

We get to our stop, and walk up the cliff to the bridge to the bath house. Everyone scatters just about as soon as they get through the doors; Sancho stays with me.

“I actually need to do things in a different order than I thought- you can go ahead if you want, Sancho.”

“Nah, I’ll stick with you.”

“…Okay.”

I read the map on the wall. It’s a simple thing, clearly written- and then, I’m off! Around this corner, let the large burly pirates pass me by- oh, Whitebeard’s, cool- around another corner, down the hall, up the stairs, and, yep, the bath token main desk. Good place to ask for things.

“Hi, I need to cleanse an old Orbuculum-?”

“-relax and enjoy- Hmm? An orbuculum, you say? Mah- and I suppose you need to do a full cleanse of yourself and your crafts, as well?”

“That’d be ideal, yeah.”
“Hmmph. You need two bath tokens, then- this one for yourself, and this for your orb. The attendant will direct you to where you’ll need to wash it so we can dispose of the thaums properly... First time?”

“...Is it that obvious?”

“To me, sure. You’ll want to stop by the Makeup Corner anyway, we don’t have toiletries in the bathing areas- here’s a list.”

“Shampoo, conditioner, which stylist to... go to... ah. Right, forgot- okay, anything else? Sancho, you need anything?”

“-Could I have some bath tokens like my sister’s, please?”

“-Here. Pay up- yeah, thanks. Relax, and enjoy it- if you even can enjoy something like that...”

“Honestly, it’s about the same as shaving down the crusty bits on your feet at the end of a season. Gross, but very satisfying. It also clears out any lingering aches and pains, acne scars, and thinning spots in your hair.”

“Mhm. I’d have much worse acne scarring than I do if my sister hadn’t talked some sense into me.”

“-Aa, is that so? Might have to try it myself, then...”

“You should! I mean- I know it’s not expensive, but... sometimes, things that are expensive are worse, you know?”

“Heh. Don’t say that too loud, now.”

“Heeheehee. Sure, sure. Thank you for your help!”

“Of course!”

And we’re off again! This time, I take the long way around so we can get a glimpse of our... friends and family, our crewmates, relaxing and enjoying themselves.

We pass Mab and Sanji lightly smacking each other with birch branches before rolling around in a massive snow bank. Mab is squealing while she does so, which just makes Sanji laugh; then they go back into a room that I can see gouts of vapor escaping from.

We pass Usopp, Luffy, and Mark being scrubbed by wrinkled old men. The pile of dirty scrubbing cloths by Luffy, in particular, is starting to become staggering.

We don’t see Taffy and Gurry at all.

We do see Nami and Zoro swimming in a pool that only lightly vapors when a cool wind rushes across it. Bryony and most of my sisters are there too, relaxing in the warm water or swimming under a high-bottom fence and going towards what I’d guess are showers? But vanishing from my gaze all the same. Sancho and Cece wave to each other before we turn down a hallway and are gone.

Chopper and Genny we meet in the Makeup Corner, just after they’ve been cared for. Chopper’s mink fairly blazes with polish, and Genny’s fall of blonde hair is thick and honey-colored and wavy
like a flag in a soft breeze. They’re talking about breast exams, of all things, and… seem to be considering the best way to instruct a man in how to check himself for breast cancer. I didn’t know men could get breast cancer, but I suppose all things are possible. Genny gestures animatedly, and suddenly, I don’t have the heart to interrupt them. A small, copper coin dances in Genny’s fingers; she’s playing the finger knuckle game with it?

I haven’t seen her do that in years...

I have thick, ‘Merjin’ hair, but because of the color, most stylists assume that they can treat it like… I dunno. Lanjin hair? Basically, what I want is a wash, and a trim; I need the hairdresser to take off split ends, condition my hair, and brush it out. That’s it.

If I had the time, I wouldn’t use shampoo at all, I’d just continually brush and condition it all; but I don’t have that kind of time, or a hairbrush that can withstand the abuse. I go into the Makeup Corner and grab the shopping basket right beside the door. Firstly, I need my skin regimen- and no, not the piddly little tubs meant for traveling. You cannot use the same thing on every part of the body; different areas produce different thicknesses of skin.

Not all my sisters use the same regimen- for one thing, we have differing skin types; for another, we have different levels of effort we’re willing to put into our skincare. Genevieve, Deborah, and Beatrix have the most available energy to put into their skin care; Cece is average; Adelaide and Eleanor have the least. My skin care regimen has ten different parts of equal importance.

Step one is to remove makeup; and it’s very important to cleanse not once, but twice. The first cleaning removes all the makeup and dirt of the day; the second removes the leftovers from the first round. Contrary to popular belief, using an oil-based makeup remover gives better results, and here’s why: oil has more lubrication, so you’re not irritating or pulling at your skin when trying to remove long-lasting makeup or ground in stains. This is crucial for areas like the eyelids, where the skin is thinner and more fragile. Oil also helps remove sebum build-up inside the pores, so you’re actually getting a thorough cleanse. Into the basket it goes- a tub of **solid cleansing oil**.

Part two of step one- the second cleanse! The second round of cleansing focuses on removing any excess residue from the first round. I prefer using gentle cream or foam-based cleansers that won’t dry-out the skin. Drier skin forces your sebaceous glands to secrete more oil in order to protect itself. If you like that paper-dry or tight feeling after a cleanse, you may very well be over-cleansing. Into the basket; a **tub of cleansing cream**.

Step three is exfoliation. Exfoliating is a very important step in skincare, as it removes built-up dead skin and encourages renewal; it improves texture, tone, and can sometimes lessen the appearance of unfortunate scars. A popular practice of exfoliation is scrubbing off dead skin cells to encourage new cells to the surface; but there are other methods, if you don’t like using abrasives. My sister, Genny, doesn’t- she prefers using gentle chemical exfoliants, or peels. I personally prefer using a **black sugar scrub** , and a **berry-based peel**. I alternate them- one one week, the other the next. It’s not good to over-exfoliate, after all. Into the basket they go.

The first optional step (or step four, for those counting at home,) is one that not everyone needs. Detoxifying masks are best used when you’re experiencing extreme oiliness, over-active acne, or strange discoloration. However, clay based masks are very drying if used too often, so I like having two. The one I use most often is the **rice-based one** ; the one I use less often is the **pink clay one**.

Step five: Toner. After cleansing, your skin is stripped of its protective barrier. Thus, your skin won’t be at it’s normal 5.5 pH level. 5.5 is slightly acidic because the skin actually has what is called an
“acid mantle,” or a protective barrier comprised of fatty acids. If your skin tends to be dry and sensitive, this is a sign of weaker acid mantle, meaning your skin is too alkaline. A toner helps bring your skin’s pH levels back to normal and creates a balanced environment for the next step in your skincare regimen. I like the smell of the aloe one, so into the basket it goes, along with a bag of reusable makeup rounds.

Step six is tricky, because of inevitable price and the difference between day and night-time regimen. This is where a lot of people get confused. There’s essence, serum, and ampoules. We’ll get to ampoules shortly.

An essence is a lightweight, hydrating liquid, meant to help prepare the skin for your moisturizer, post cleansing. Think of it like a sponge; once you clean and dry a sponge, it takes a little bit of dampening before it can absorb a lot of moisture again. Essence is the dampening for your skin-as-sponge. Essence isn’t like a toner- they’re meant for different purposes and have different ingredients. Toner is used to remove the last traces of cleanser and is essentially water that’s been enhanced with essential oils and often alcohol for quick drying. A facial essence contains higher levels of active ingredients and is designed to actually soak into your skin. Ugh, think of it like… like you know how sometimes after you shower and you put on the body lotion, you rub it in, and you come back and find your skin’s still dry and crackly so you put on another coat of lotion? It’s like that, but for your face.

Depending on your type of skin and the time of day, you’ll have different needs: essences are the least concentrated and very watery, whereas serums tend to be thicker in consistency and more concentrated; and ampoules are basically skin-heroin. I would recommend essences for people with oilier, acne-prone skin, a serum for others who need hydration, and ampoules for people who tend to get trouble spots overnight. I actually need all three, as I have mixed-type skin and get night-zits. So. A hydrating essence; an even more hydrating serum; and an ampoule that’s mostly filtered snail slime. Just you try and get me now, dry and flaky skin! -into the basket they go.

An optional step is for spot treatment of zits and pimples. Most real regimens are built around nutrition, not products- but, occasionally, you just can’t help but get an owie. I don’t actually need to buy anything, this time- I just use honey. Dab it on; leave for a while; wipe away gently with water. No big deal.

Sheet masks? Eehh, the one I got from Daiso is fine; I do, however, need new stuff for the actual mask part… oat milk, green tea, tea tree oil, lavender oil, pollen, seaweed, rice paper, glycerin, rosewater, witch hazel, rosehip oil… and purified water. Into the basket.

Eyecream? Oho, didn’t know the snail-guys made an eyecream- I’ll take it.

Almost done here- step nine is the genuine moisturizing. For daytime, a lotion (or “emulsion,” as some of them are marketed as) is ideal since they are usually lighter in consistency. For those who have oilier skin, a gel would be optimal. Gel moisturizers tend to contain glycerin, a humectant that helps moisturize the skin without weighing it down. Creams are the nighttime alternative to lotion and gel. A thicker moisturizer helps to seal in all the product and prevent the skin from drying out as the hours pass. Some days, I need light moisturization; some days I need average; some days I need heavy. Gel, emulsion, and cream. Into the basket they go.

Now this is something I don’t need very often- but! A night-time mask is very useful for when you’ve asked your skin to go above and beyond. You went swimming and forgot to reapply sunscreen? Nightmask! You went dune-surfing? Nightmask! Got thrown up on at work! Wash that shit off and then NIGHTMAAAAASK! Why a night-time mask, you ask? I’ll answer: sometimes your skin is in turmoil and you just know you need to do a little something extra to help it. When we
sleep, our body works hard to regenerate and heal itself in every department, and your skin is no exception to that. Incorporating an extra step during your slumber can help boost your skin’s ability to repair itself. I like the smell of the pink one, so in it goes.

And Chopper makes the best damn sunscreen I’ve ever had the pleasure of using- not too heavy, not too light, easy to apply, hypoallergenic… It’s basically perfect. Oh, yeah- and sunscreen is step ten, if you didn’t realize already.

As for actual makeup? About as fancy as I ever get is curling my eyelashes with a spoon and going extra-extra on my cat eye with the sticky-khol. Maybe some lipgloss from the Daiso if they’re on sale. Maybe. Other than that- eyebrow brush, eyelash comb, spoolie. That’s it. Makeup Done.

As for hair- look, if you’re doing a ten-step to beautiful dance, you might as well double or nothing.

So, step one: scaler. The beginning of each hair starts at the follicle right at the scalp. By keeping the scalp clean, healthy and exfoliated, we can allow for healthier hair to grow in. Enter the scalp scaler! Scalers are salicylic acid-based pre-treatments that exfoliate the scalp to remove and debris, dead skin cells, and oil build-up. If you have a dandruff problem, this can really help keep things from building up to unmanageable levels.

I haven’t used the store bought versions very often, because usually I just ask Genny or Deb to make me a packet of salicylic acid (after gathering the willow-bark for them, of course) and dilute it with purified water in a squeeze bottle. Honestly, just that with maybe a little hint of rose water and a drop or two of glycerin works better than anything else; and it makes my hair smell fantastic.

I use it maybe once every other week? It goes on before shampoo, directly on my dry hair. The pointy tip of the squeeze bottle is helpful getting down to my scalp without going through the rest of my hair, and a grid pattern works best for total coverage. Rub it in and let it sit for fifteen minutes; rinse it off and we’re at step two.

Step two: shampoo. We all know that technically the first step to hair care is shampooing, just like we all know that technically a mermaid’s first dildo is her own scalp brush with a handful of lube. But! By adopting the scalp care principle, we need to cleanse the scalp thoroughly- thus, one’s fingers are not enough!

Integrating the use of a scalp brush during shampoo sessions gives a lot of benefits: it maximizes lather, promotes blood circulation and stimulation, and provides a thorough cleanse of all remaining dead skin cells and debris. I personally use a brush that came with a shampoo and conditioner set I won at a raffle, but any will do so long as it’s comfortable in your hands and doesn’t scratch your scalp.

I’m really not a fan of 2-in-1 shampoo and conditioner products because they’re drying and lead to tangles and split ends. If you’re currently using a conditioner and it isn’t working for you, try leaving it on longer. The point of a conditioner isn’t just to quickly detangle your hair, it’s to … condition it. Applying it like a shampoo and rinsing it out simply will not do. I definitely suggest pairing your conditioner with the same brand and formulation of your shampoo, because these manufacturers design their shampoos and conditioners to work together with similar ingredients.

Apply your conditioner and let it sit in your hair while you do other things like washing your face or shaving. This allows more time for the conditioner to work its magic. Avoid wetting your hair while the conditioner is in. I keep a hair clip in the shower and clip my hair up while conditioning. Avoid applying conditioner on the scalp. The scalp’s pH level is 5.5, whereas the hair shaft is 3.7. When
using different products that have different pH levels, you can dry out one or the other.

As for what, exactly, I like to use? Tsubaki. Designed for people with hair specifically like mine. Into the basket goes the pair!

Step four: mask, or pack. Some people like to condition and then follow up with a hair mask afterward, but I prefer to use a hair mask in its place. Hair masks, or “packs” as they’re known by in Gobdark, are an ultra-dose of nutrition and powerful ingredients blended into one. Just like conditioning, I leave this on my hair while I shave and wash my face. Same rules apply as with the shampoo and conditioner; I really do recommend you buy in one brand if you can for what you put on your hair and scalp. Best not to over do this one; once a week is plenty. Preferably not within a day of doing the next step, though.

Step five: Once weekly vinegar rinse. With both hair and skin, it’s important to strive for the correct pH level. Normal pH levels on the scalp and skin are slightly acidic between 4.5 and 5.5. The skin has an “acid mantle,” which is a thin film of acid that helps seal out bacteria (aka sebum! Natural moisture!). Dry and itchy scalps often mean that your scalp’s pH is too alkaline and has a weak acid mantle – this can cause acne, eczema, and dandruff. If you have a dry and itchy scalp or suffer from dandruff, a vinegar rinse can help!

Apple cider vinegar has a pH level of about 3, which is on the acidic side. By diluting it with water you can bring it down to around 4, and use it as a rinse. (You can also use white vinegar, but it has a pH of around 2, so needs to be diluted even more.) By bringing down your hair’s acidity levels, your cuticles can seal properly instead of unevenly, resulting in split ends. Your itchy scalp will also thank you! Even if you don’t have dandruff, a routine vinegar rinse can help bring down the alkalinity of your hair and scalp that may have been caused by styling products. A single vinegar rinse will give noticeable results right out of the shower… I did one the day before yesterday, and my scalp and hair both still feel amazing. Although it can be tough to get the vinegar smell completely out of your hair, I recommend just grinning through it. You can do this step after shampooing and before conditioning. However, I strongly recommend doing a vinegar rinse last because water normally has a pH level of about 7-8. By rinsing it out, conditioning, and rinsing with water again, you’d be going backward.

Step six: Once weekly scalp pack. This is best done when you’re packing your hair, too. Peppermint, because this much hair is always hot and itchy, and there’s no getting around it. Basket!

Step seven: hair tonic. After washing your face with a cleanser, you should use a toner and then moisturize, right? With hair, a scalp tonic is the equivalent of a toner and a great way for you to prep your scalp for the next few steps. Get the same brand as your hair mask, actually. After your shower, dry hair with a towel, making sure not to rub your hair together as this encourages frizziness (squeeze and pat dry). Simply spray the tonic into the scalp and leave on. Basket!

Step eight: scalp essence or serum. Applying an essence or serum to the scalp is similar to an ingredient-packed serum for the face. Depending on your needs, a lightweight essence or leave-in fluid may help for oily scalps and a serum may be better for a dry scalp in need of hydration. Some who have normal scalps may choose not to use a scalp essence or serum and stick to a tonic. My scalp tends to get irritated, especially during the summer when sweat and product buildup can’t get thoroughly cleansed from my scalp. By the time my scalp is clean it’s then dry and irritated, but an essence helps re-hydrate it. Use it the same way you used the scaler- grid pattern, massage in. Essence; and a serum, when an essence isn’t enough. Usually happens in winter, if it’s gonna happen at all. Basket!

Step nine: hair essence or serum. There are different formulations for essences and serums meant for
hair and scalp- because of the difference in pH levels between both, y’know. Just like skin serums, hair serums are designed to deliver a large amount of active ingredients to the hair, while an essence acts like a moisturizing agent that hydrates hair. Some may use both an essence and serum while others may only use one or the other – it simply depends on your needs. I use a serum to continuously treat my hair with nurturing ingredients and follow up with an essence to lock-in moisture. Which serum and essence? Tsubaki brand serum and essence of camellia.

Step ten: Miscellaneous hair shit.

At the very back of the Chihiro Sento Makeup Corner, there’s a large table sunken into a massive stone from which flows a merrily burbling fountain. This water is used to purify hair-accessories. Hand a bath token and the hair sticks over to an attendant; go shopping, pay for your purchases; come back, and it’s all done. Oh, and buy a five-n-go bunch of quilter’s cloths for rag-rolls later; they’re clean enough. A new boar bristle brush after the, um, the Pizza ate my old one- it’s best for dry brushing; and a new paddle brush for wet-brushing. Scrunchies in my favorite colors- yellow, black, and white. And- done!

“Can I get these delivered, d’you think Buttercream?”

“Mm. Probably best to not carry around your hunt like that all day if you don’t have to, yeah. Oh, there’s your brother- I can tell by the scent, his fur’s entirely different-”

“Eh? -EEEEEH? Horizon! Your- your hair!”

“Haha… you like it ?”

“It’s wonderful! -but, um. Are you done for the day?”

“Yeah. Spa’s aren’t really my thing, and that was the most cleansing I needed done- d’you want me to carry your shopping back?”

“Will you really?”

“Course.”

“Thank you, Sancho!”

“Hahahaha- alright, alright; see you later, then. I think I’m gonna take a nap- you know how I get in places that aren’t home…”

“Aa, yeah; later, brother!”

Sancho, like all predatory creatures of a certain kind, doesn’t relax outside of his own territory; thus, even though Sento Chihiro is relaxing to most people, to him, it’s really not. Thankfully, he’s of age; so, he’s going to go around and find everyone, and offer to carry back the shopping. In this Kingdom, Clowns are licensed to kill; only an idiot or a tourist would attack Sancho for the stuff he carries.

For those of us keeping score, the game is set at Makeup and Hair sticks; last purchase of the day? A bag for the Orb. To the Gift Shop! …blast and damnation! They only have a bag in the right size and shape in blue ! Ach- well, it’s not so bad, they might not have had the proper bag at all. Welp. Too
late now; I’ve only so much time in the day, after all, and it’s not like it’s a bad bag or anything. Just… not my color. I mean, even a way to add my color would be fine- a simple line the same color of leather as my regular bag would be just about perfect… maybe Mab can do that for me? I’ll ask her, when we meet back up.

Next stop: my orbuculum.

Let me just read this instructive pamphlet Ellie copied out for me from one of the books in the library on this handy bench here...

The proper method of cleaning an orbuculum, as I know now, is actually four distinct methods that can be used in lieu of each other- the Seer who wishes to use the orb just has to find some resonance with the ritual cleansing. Since this orb is a new one, and hasn’t been cleansed in a while anyway, I need to cleanse it.

The simplest way to cleanse it is to hold the orb in running water and focus on purging all the built up, stagnated energy from it. Crystals are radiant, pulsating stores of mystical power; they should never, ever feel like dead rocks in your hands. The other ways of cleansing- burying it in earth for a day, anointing it with holy oil, or passing it through incense smoke- all of those would work fine, but… I’m in a bath house, and washing it away is the most… right, to me.

The actual area to do this isn’t in any building; it’s a fountain under trailing vines, a path lit by… glowing stones in the darkness? I- I’ve been in a trance since I stopped reading the pamphlet. There’s a locker room of a sort before I get to the fountain proper; it’s made of stone, naturally. I’m in a sort of… cairn? Cave? It doesn’t matter; the only light is from the stones, and the water, and it is like… like I am in a sky of stars.

I carefully take off all my clothing, and fold it neatly, and put it on the dry shelf, along with my socks and my bath-house shoes. I empty my various enchanted objects into a sort of wooden dish with a slotted bottom, and take the unclean Orb in its frayed wrappings, and I walk, dazed and dreaming, through a room that isn’t actually empty.

There are others, here, but I can’t… See- them? I walk, and carefully step around onto stones and I climb and climb, until I am at a certain ledge that leads to a special fountain, kept separate from the bathing pool below by some arrangement of pipes and sewers.

Crystals grow out from where the water misted up again, and moss in strange green mats clings to the high pillars bounding the sacred fountain’s falls. I set my enchantments aside, in a small child-stream that flows and flows down into the pool the sacred waters collect in, before being purified again and falling lower. Then, I unwrap the rags around the orb, and begin walking closer to the falls. The ground is slippery and cool, and the water is cold, but not painfully so. There is an indentation in the stone, and a wall angling back behind it, where countless others have sat and cleansed themselves before me.

I sit in the lotus-style, and put the Orb in my lap; form my hands into the circle of supreme balance; and the water washes over me in a cold, pure wave.

The magic starts below, in the stones on which I sit. It rises up through my red vagina, through the orange base of my spine; it arcs and coils out through my guts before jolting in one thick yellow wave through my solar plexus, right where I’m holding the crystal orb. The magic rushes green through my heart, and thick-blue syrupy and hot in my throat; my brow is weighted with indigo force, and it rises higher and higher, until my head and my mind and the crown of my head is the rim
of a chalice overflowing with violet light muladhar-svadhishtan-manipurak-anahat-vishudda-agnya-sahasrara so-much-light-

*Strange shapes in the trees circle a yellow thing with wings- a photo with a dark shadow in it’s grip- a coin, one of thirty, silver underneath it’s washed away blood- a phrase only the dangerous know-songs sung by the Righteous- Terrible Fates Approach.*

I need to get out. I need to go, right this moment.

I stand, and Buttercream rises from the pure-pool, dark and dripping; I move quickly but carefully, grabbing my basket of enchanted objects now pure and doesn’t matter. I go back to my clothing, pack my things away, redress, and all but run out the nearest exit to the Bath House because *I have to go right now.*

Most people on Imbolc move like they’re walking through foggy water. I move like an arrow.

I make it; I don’t know how I know that, but I do.

Buttercream huffs next to me.

“Was there a reason we ran out like that, cubby?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know what, exactly.”

“Hmph. Well, I won’t pretend to understand the mind of a Moon-eyed; what now?”

“More shopping, then back to the Ship.”

“Greaaaat.”

So, mermaids, mermen, fishmen, and fishwomen- they all have more or less the same thing in between their legs, and that’s a slit. Guys have bumpy slits, and gals have smooth slits; get a guy worked up, and his cock’ll pop out. Get a girl worked up, and her slit will puff up red.

Mermaids and Fishwomen can have sex with any man they like, and have a baby by him; but from what I understand, and from what I’ve explored… it’s not really very nice to go in further than your finger with a vibe until you’ve got real dugs to back your claims up with.

Lanjin call it a clit, or sometimes a pearl if they’re feeling fancy. On a merjin or gyojin, the clit goes all the way around the slit, and it’s what puffs up all red an’ excited when I have some me-time.

There are really only two things you actually *need* to have some quality alone time: you need a good understanding of what turns you on, and you need quality lube. The first keeps the wheel turning; the second makes sure nothing trips you up. It can also make some things last longer.
What all this boils down to is me buying three or four of everything, including unscented, unflavored pump-bottles of lube, having everything put in discreet brown bags, and riding back home without much care at all.

I then got a severe hint that I wouldn’t be seeing any of my siblings, barring Sancho, for the next three days at least.

Oh dear.

“So. In your own words, please introduce yourself for the Court Record and explain what you were doing between the hours of Ten After Midnight, and Four Previous Midnight.”

“Yes, officer. We were bathing-
My husband and I were washing
And trying to clean the year off.
We took it slow and steady and sweet-
And did our best to relax in
Pools of hot and cold water and
A small room of wet heat, steaming;
We sat on benches of stone and
Relaxed together like we
Can’t do in our everyday lives.”

“You were no-where near the scene?”
“Right.”
“You’re quite sure you saw nothing?”
“Right.”

“-and you’d never met him before?”
“Of course not! I hadn’t had time to ever-”
“What?”

“Well, Mab, you’ve gone and stepped deep in the shit now.”

“Daunelphe?”

“Meet boys! I’m the oldest of my sisters- and I had to support them!”

“No, officer- when I take naps, I’m basically un-wakeable.”

“So you’re telling me that you had no idea something was wrong across the hall?”

“We get very loud together!”

“Daunelphe?”

“You’re under suspicion for murder- you, and every member of your crew that was in the Sento at the time of the crimes.”

“-crimes?”

“Mm. You’re going to need a lawyer to get out of this one.”

“We’re going to need one hell of a lawyer- and I think I know just the one…”

Dead my old fine hopes
And dry my dreaming but still...

Iris, blue each spring.

Chapter End Notes

Why did I make all the Court Cases /sung/ now I have to make them /rhyme/ shit shit
“ENOUGH! I see no reason to further entertain these flights of fancy- I said enough!” screams the Judge.

Yiu presses a hand to her covered eye and grits her teeth.

“This case’s evidence is extremely clear- the guilty party is Mince Coffyn! I’m through with your bluffs, your condescensions, and your disgusting attitude! They don’t call me ‘Magnificent’ because my eyes can’t see what’s clear-” snarls the Judge.

“It wasn’t me! I swear to all the gods, it wasn’t me!” babbles Mr. Coffyn.

“THAT’S ENOUGH! This Court sees no reason to further prolong this trial! The evidence and testimony that we’ve seen and heard are quite worthwhile! The victims were alone in their rooms, when they ate from the poisoned tart-” sneers the Judge.

“No, you’re wrong, you’re all wrong! I made those tarts, and I would never- I would never!” wails Mr. Coffyn.

“The only person in the room who had access, ability, and motive to kill was you-” growls the Judge.

“No! No!-” whimpers Mr. Coffyn.

“Mince Coffyn; it was you who killed your parents with a poisoned apple tart!” said the Judge, glaring with triumph.

“No! No! I swear I didn’t kill my parents, or my unborn sibling! Someone else must have been there- someone must have wished them harm! That person is the one who killed my parents! Why won’t you believe me-?” gasped Mr. Coffyn

Fuck it. I know a contradiction when I hear one.

“OBJECTION!”

February 4th

Tilly’s House and Office
At the end of a holiday, I’m always exhausted; this time, it was because I was finally old enough to participate in some of the more… adult elements of Imbolc. Frankly speaking, I’m going to give it a miss next year, unless something significant changes- I mean, sex with girls is okay, I guess, but… I’m not into it.

Blargh. Like licking a stab wound- slimy, hot, tasted like weak beer… I’m not into it. Interesting experience; but not one I’ll be repeating.

My siblings can usually handle their own shit, so it’s a real surprise to get a call from my oldest sister, Mab, needing help- particularly *my* help. She’s good at not getting caught out in anything incriminating; and she never, ever leaves evidence of her own involvement behind.

She’s been so much happier lately, too- but for her to call me directly… that’s never a good thing. My direct line is specifically my work phone, and my work… I’m a lawyer. I’m a defense attorney that specializes- kinda unwillingly, maybe?- in murder trials.

Getting a call on your work phone when you’re a defense attorney from your sister is never a good thing. Especially when that call comes in at too-fucking-dark at night, right when you were having a good fuckin’ sleep.

**DAY 1 (72 HOURS REMAIN)**

“Tilly? Tilly, I’m so glad I caught you- or, um, sorry to wake you up?” said Mab.

“M-aaaaugh- mab, what is it? Wh-aaaaugh- what’s wrong?” I said, between yawns.

“Tilly, I’m in Sento Chihiro; there’s been a murder. They’re accusing my crew of it, but mostly… Tilly, they’re trying to pin it on me.” she said, before hanging up.

Shit.

I hung up, got up, *got dressed for work*, and went to Sento Chihiro via the Swan Lake- after kicking Aster Mistburrow out of bed, of course. Can’t go investigate without my partner.

Legally, I can’t explain more than I just did- about how I got to Sento Chihiro when I live in Fairisle, which is on the other side of the planet and in the Sky. I can’t tell you how I got from Fairisle to Ryugu Mergyo in less than half a year- more like half an hour- other than that I did. The Law has it’s own powers and privileges, okay?

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**February 4th**

*Chihiro Town Detention Center; Cell Block A, Cell 7*
Chihiro Town is what happens when you’ve got a place where damn rich people like to come and play; those rich people need services, and those services need people to make them happen, and those people need to live somewhere. Generally, somewhere that isn’t their place of business, too- and then those people need amenities as well- and so you get Chihiro Town, which is beautiful from every angle you’re likely to see it from if you’re filthy rich and lazy enough to let yourself be ferried and ushered around.

I may be filthy rich- but I’m not lazy.

The Chihiro Town Detention Center was built with two things in mind; first, that not every person cooling their blood in the Center would be necessarily built for land or sea or sky; and two, that Devil Fruit users needed to be restrained. Thus, the actual Cells are basically gigantic clear pipes that can be flooded or drained in a matter of seconds- of course, with seawater, as we’re in the ocean.

Ryugu Mergyo is not a country you want to be arrested in if you’re a Devil Fruit user. I’m just sayin’.

Anyway… there’s something deeply disturbing about seeing my sister in Chains. I was too downy to have been anywhere near her case five years ago- and yet… the way she’s slumped listlessly on her side, the way the harsh lights of the Chihiro Detention Center glare over her, turning her wings to so much glass and wire- it’s horrible.

Hell, she’s still in her holiday clothing… gods in heaven, she looks like Mother Morgan. I can never, ever tell her that- but she does. Mother Morgan was never known to wear glasses, of course- but… No, I can never say it aloud.

“Back again, Mab? This doesn’t seem like your usual hotel…” I said, trying for levity. My sister’s a jokester- but maybe this wasn’t the right time. Aster sighs and shakes his head in the corner of my eye.

“Hmhmhm. You’d know if I was here a’purpose, Tilly. And honestly, the accommodations here are rather nice; I’ll be leaving a good review on my way out…” Mab said.

“Mab, did you do it? Did you murder someone again?” I said- because she has before, it’s why things went the way they went five years ago.

“No, I did not.” Mab said, “But if I don’t get some help, they’re going to say that I did anyway.”

“What happened?” I said.

“This whole awful business started at the fifteenth hour yesterday, and it happened right here, in Sento Chihiro,” Mab said.

“Sento Chihiro?” Aster said.

“Ah, right, most people don’t know, since they don’t actually advertise except by word of mouth- Sento Chihiro is the Best Bath House in the World. Really, it’s more of a vacationer’s resort, combining venues such as shopping and restaurants with a casino, a bath house, a hotel, and various halls and ballrooms,” Mab said.
“I see...” Aster said.

“As I recall, there was a family in the suite next to the one I had rented for Sanji and myself; I’d offered such to the rest of the crew, and some of them took me up on the offer...” Mab said.

“Do you remember who, exactly?” I said.

“Mhm, yes, I do. Sanji and I had a suite on the second floor, the second suite; Taffy and Gurry had a suite on the third floor, the third suite; and Zoro and Nami had a suite on the second floor, the sixth suite.” Mab said.

“Aa… What can you tell me of the murder?” I sang, softly.

“There was a family in suite three; a father, mother, and son. The parents were somehow poisoned; and now, of that family, there remains only one,” Mab sang back, soft as tears in rain.

“Hold on a sec- I’m just confused; and surely this is important news- but Mab, did you know the victims?” sang Aster.

“I knew them by correspondence sales only, I’m sad to say; they were customers of mine, and I don’t have so many that the loss of even two can be treated as blasé. Bad Bakers need clothing that can stand up to their mistakes; I’m working on being the Best Sewing Professional, and it takes what it takes,” sang Mab.

Definitely no motive to kill, then. Mab’s one of the premier experts in using metamaterials in clothing. She actively cultivates clients that will require strange things in their clothing- fireproofing, waterproofing, electric-proofing, breathability, toughness… She actually made my work clothes, or designed them, anyway, and I’ve never found anything I liked better. A sewing professional would never kill their customer- because then, how will they be paid in the future for their work?

“Did you see the killer at all?” I sang.

“There was no one suspicious that I recall,” Mab sang.

“Why did they arrest you alone?” I sang.

“Politics, I think- smaller crews can be accused in ways larger crews won’t,” Mab sang.

“If you didn’t see the murderer, and you didn’t do the crime- why were you arrested?” Aster sang.

“Because no one else was there to arrest,” Mab sighed.

“Eeh?” Aster said.

“I was the only living person near suite three that wasn’t the son when the police got there, and I have a record- I suppose they thought it was an open and shut case. No one else was there,” Mab said.

“But- how can that be possible? Even in a hotel, there’s always someone around...” I said, confused.

“I don’t know, Tilly. But no one, not one person other than me, was near suite three at the time of the crime. More to the point, the found something incriminating on my person...” Mab said.
“What?” Aster said.

“A poisoned spoon,” Mab said.

“EEH? Y-you had a poisoned spoon on you!” Aster said.

“Well, I thought it was odd; it was a clear glass sugar spoon, and I thought someone had dropped it… I was going to take it to the lost and found, because it was obviously part of a set, and someone would surely miss it,” Mab said.

“What makes you say it was part of a set?” I said.

“Well, two things, really- firstly, it wasn’t a very sturdy object. Most people could break it with one hand. Secondly, it was quite small, making it easy to misplace- and it was labelled with a number, a two, I think? -Something like that, you have a number of them to prevent not having one when you need it, especially if you go to the trouble of numbering them...” Mab said.

“What can you tell me about the politics of the situation?” I said.

“Not much, I’m afraid,” Mab said, before sighing. “Listen, there are things I’m contractually bound to not reveal; however, I can say this. If they weren’t so well established and beloved in this country, the Whitebeard Pirates would have been implicated, and it would be Asher on this side of the barrier, not me.”

“...I see. Don’t worry, Mab; I’m here, now, and I’m going to figure this out,” I said.

“I certainly hope so, Tilly; I’d hate to lose my head over something I didn’t even do...” Mab sighed.

Aster and I left the Chihiro Detention Center after that. I go over what we know with Aster on the way to the Sento. Well, really I just put things together a bit in my mind out loud, Aster normally doesn’t wake up until after sunrise.

“At the fifteenth hour on the Third of February, or at about four p.m. Imbolc Day, two people were murdered; with what we must for now assume was poison. They were in the third suite, second floor; they are survived by their only son. Mab was the only living person on that floor near suite three when someone found the bodies and called the police. The police arrived, and arrested Mab after finding a poisoned spoon on her person. The victims were Mab’s customers, however; depriving her of motive.” I hummed to myself.

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**February 4th**

**Sento Chihiro**

“Where do we start, Tilly?” said Aster, rubbing sleep from his eyes as we walked into the Sento proper just a bit after dawn.
“I think I’ll speak with the witnesses; there must be one or two,” I said, musingly.

I first met Aster Mistburrow when he was accused of murdering his elder brother, Quarrel. We later discovered that Quarrel was digging into secrets that people with power didn’t want him, an investigative journalist, to be reporting on— and by the time Quarrel had realized he’d dug himself into a grave-sized ditch, it was too late to climb back out. With that said, all the Mistburrow’s are Spirit Channellers to some degree; even with him gone, Aster still has a way to commune with Quarrel, and get his advice if necessary.

That case was also when I first met Inspector Heesis Noopwright. He’s an upstanding kind of guy, from a long line of law-dogs, and possesses sterling moral character. It’s too bad he can’t seem to hold on to more than a thousand dola at a time.

“Hey, pal! Terrible way to start the New Year, right?” said Inspector Noopwright.

“Inspector, New Year’s is at Yule—” growled Aster, because it’s one of his Things.

“I need information, please. What do you know of the double murder?” I sang.

“The married bakers ate a poisoned tart, pal. Talk about your irony!” said Inspector Noopwright.

“Got any trace of foul play?” I sang.

“The suite hasn’t been cleaned in months, not since that weirdo family came to stay— if there is, you’ll have to slog through all their crap anyway,” grumbled the Maid.

“What did you find inside of the bodies?” I sang.

“Here’s my preliminary autopsy report— now can I get back to work?” said the Coroner.

“Have you a bead on any leads? ‘Cause I need ‘em today.” I sang.

“Actually, a witness is missing,” said Inspector Noopwright.

“Missing?” I said.

“Yeah! The victim’s son! A family of father, son, and mother—” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“-and the son is a witness...” I hummed.

“-oh, that poor boy—” hummed Aster.

“-he was the one who found them dead,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“So he’s our primary witness—” I hummed.

“Please take a flyer for the World’s Worst Baker’s Contest!” sang a pretty Huldra-boy.

“Hey- Mince Coffyn, you’re a witness in this case; stop running off for that baking contest when you’re needed here!” barked Inspector Noopwright.

“I need to draw attention to this subject; without my parents I’m surely doomed! But if I win the
contest, and prize-money- I’ll have something at the very least to have my parents entombed!” sang Mince Coffyn, who now that I got a closer look at, obviously hadn’t been sleeping well. His leafy fronds were all starting to look withered; his eyes were wild with shock. He’d been crying, too- his eyes were bloodshot, and his tail showed signs of being used as a worry-grip.

“Aster, please conduct an interview; you know best what he’s been through- I’d do it but I need to-” I sang, quietly.

“Get going,” sang Aster, before taking Mince Coffyn aside and beginning to speak quietly. My last sight of the both of them was Aster gently holding poor Mr. Coffyn as tears overflowed his pain-filled eyes.

“I’d best take a look around the Coffyn’s suite and see what truths arise… it will be the only way to see through the upcoming lies,” I sang to myself, before talking to the SSH Officer and getting geared up- and permission- to enter the scene of the crime.

Poison was used, after all; I need to be careful. The talisman and rune will negate all poisons until I decontaminate (which the Officer explained meant I needed to take a hot shower and scrub everything feasible, and to keep scrubbing until the water ran clear beneath my feet), at which point they- and any poisons stuck to me- will dissipate harmlessly. The evidence gathering kits are specially designed to be either disposable, or to keep me from touching anything in the scene.

February 4th

Sento Chihiro; Suite 3, Second Floor

Investigation Start!

The very first thing I notice when I get inside of Suite Three on the Second Floor of Sento Chihiro is the smell. It smells distinctly of almonds, with a faint hint of bitterness. I know I’ve smelled it, or something like it before, but I’m not sure where- only that this feels like an important detail to make note of, and so I do.

Added to Evidence: “The overpowering scent of bitter almonds in S3:2F.”

The second thing I notice is the layout of the room; it’s a typical ryokan style suite, fairly common for this part of the World. The tatami are neatly laid out, and the area where the bodies were has been carefully marked with black-and-yellow hazard tape and flags. The table is still set for whatever meal killed the Coffyns- it looks like tea-time, actually. I make a drawing of the suite’s layout just to have it on hand, and take a picture of the table from a few different angles.

Added to Evidence: S3 layout drawing; murders marked with ‘X’.

Added to Evidence: Pictures of the Tatami-room Table, still set with food.
Huh? That’s odd- there’s a plate in the center of the setting here, but there’s nothing on it but a few crumbs. I’ll put a few in an evidence bag just in case…

**Added to Evidence: Crumbs from Empty Plate.**

There’s a tea set here too, and the teapot is made of silver. That’s funny- the spout on the teapot has a line of tarnish, like a drop of tea rolled down the spout-edge and turned all the silver black. I’ve never seen anything like it before; I take a picture, and- huh? There’s still tea in the pot, too. I take a sample of the tea.

**Added to Evidence: Picture of Tarnished Silver Teapot.**

**Added to Evidence: Sample of Liquid Tea.**

I check the bedroom, to find what the Maid had meant- the Coffyns were obviously preparing for the World’s Worst Baker’s Contest. The room is dominated by stacks of toasting-ovens, baking paraphernalia, and chemistry equipment. It all smells… actually, really bad? Like bread, but also poison… The contest is being held in Ryugu Mergyo this year if this flyer is any indication, and there’s a staple hole in the top, like there was a file or something at some point… and on the back, there’s a note that reads ‘Remember to take daily regimen!’’. Hm, I didn’t know that there’s a cash prize of… 112,833,000 beri? Do the conversions, and that’s- woah, a million dola!?! …Now that’s a motive if I’ve ever seen one…

**Added to Evidence: Contest Flyer.**

A contest held every year where if you win you get a million dola? That has to be a clue!

There’s also a folder full of registration information, but it’s not written for a contestant… a schedule, notes about speeches to give- oh, I see.

**Added to Evidence: Judge Registration File.**

The futons are pressed into the back corner of the room, where a crossbreeze draws air out towards the room, not to this corner. There’s a stack of receipts in a clear zip-pouch next to the neat bed; I take a picture, and then I take the pouch.

**Added to Evidence: Picture of the Two futons.**

**Added to Evidence: Pouch of Receipts.**

The bathroom door is locked; I can’t check it. I can smell the scent of diarrhea farts from here, though… The balcony, however, isn’t locked- and I find something very odd indeed. There’s a strange, slimy splatter-trail, with odd black and white feathers stuck into it; I take a sample, and a picture of the above balcony, where the slime trail originates.

**Added to Evidence: Sample of ‘Weird Slime’.**

**Added to Evidence: Odd Black and White Feathers.**

**Added to Evidence: Picture of S3:F3 Balcony.**
“Portgas, you’re intruding,” sang- Oh for th’god’s sake.

“Sue Yiu, w-w-what the hell?” I trilled.

“-I’m trying to have a bath-” sang Sue.

“-at the scene of a murder!?!?” I squeaked, indignant.

“Portgas, the baths here are all shared.” sighed Sue.

“Oh. Sorry-” I said.

“Either way, I’m still quite naked, so- GOODBYE OR FACE MY WRATH!” shouted Sue.

“RIGHT! Sorry, sorry, I’m going- sorry!” I yelped, before running out of the crime scene.

Investigation End!

Shit, I wasn’t able to find much more than bits and pieces…

February 4th

Chihiro Town Detention Center; Cell Block A, Cell 7

Back to the Detention Center with a very serious Aster in tow; maybe Mab will have some ideas about what I’ve found?

“Hey, Tilly- back from the grind?” Mab said.

“Yep. I found a few things that I’d like your opinion on, if you don’t mind,” I said.

“Sure, anything to help,” Mab said.

Presented: “The overpowering scent of bitter almonds in S3:2F”

“Did you smell anything weird when you went by Suite Three?” I said.

“Mm, no, nothing I can think of really- although, I’m sure Sanji did,” Mab said.

“What makes you say that?” I said.

“Well, he sneezed; he only does that when he’s come across a particularly overwhelming scent. He’s
a chef, y’know?” Mab said.

“Interesting; any idea where he is, right now?” I said.

“Um, knowing him? He’s either petitioning the guards here for a conjugal visit, or chain smoking downwind of the Sento,” Mab said with a soft smile in her eyes.

**Presented: S3:F2 Layout Drawing**

“Ah, that’s interesting- our suite was laid out the exact same,” Mab said.

“And you had access to the shared bathing pool?” I said.

“Oh, sure, everyone in the second floor wings does-” Mab said.

“Eeh, wings?” Aster said.

“Ah, yes- I suppose it’s really Wing Three, Suite Three, Second Floor?” Mab said.

“Hang on, if it’s the second floor, why can you enter without using a lift or taking the stairs? -and how many wings are there?” Aster said.

“Oh, that’s just the Sento- the first floor is actually the basement, with subfloors being a bit removed and below; the second floor is really the first floor,” Mab said.

“I see...” Aster said.

“And how many wings are there?” I said.

“Oh, just the three- Sanji and I were across from Wing Two, Suite Five, if that helps any,” Mab said.

“It very well might,” I said.

**Presented: Picture of Tatami-room Table**

“?!?” squawked Mab.

“What is it?” I said.

“...They ate it?” said Mab, wonderingly.

“Ate what?” I said.

“Whatever was on that empty plate with the crumbs- even bad bakers have tastebuds, after all. Whatever was on that plate, none of the family baked it; if they had, there’d be most of it leftover!” said Mab.

“I see...” I said.

**Presented: Picture of Tarnished Silver Teapot**
“Oh, now that’s interesting...” said Mab.

“What?” I said.

“Silver is reactive to sulfur on contact; if there’s any sulfur present in whatever the silver piece is touching, it tarnishes,” said Mab.

“...you know that how, exactly?” I said.

“Y’all forgot for a little minute Mom trained me as a silversmith,” said Mab, eyebrow raised over the frame of her glasses.

“-oh yeah, she did. Do you know why this tarnished, then?” I said.

“Did you smell sulfur? Or rotten eggs?” said Mab.

“Not really...” I said.

“Then I’ve got no idea- usually, it would tarnish like that because there’s sulfur in the tea-water or the tea. Some people think it has health benefits,” said Mab, shrugging.

Presented: Sample of Liquid Tea

“Hm. Looks like regular tea to me,” said Mab.

“It came from the tarnished teapot,” I said.

“Be careful with it, then- anything that tarnishes silver has sulfur in it, and sulfur often indicates the presence of arsenic,” said Mab.

“Hm...” I said.

Presented: Contest Flyer

“Oh yeah, I forgot that was here this year- I should mention it to Sanji, see if he thinks Deb should enter...” said Mab.

“Deb?” I said.

“Oh! Deborah is Sanji’s apprentice; she’s a bad baker too. Right now, Sanji’s trying to see if he can figure out how to help her, because she wants to bake-” said Mab, about to go on a tangent.

“So, no connection to your case?” I said before she could get going.

“None I can see, sorry,” said Mab, distracted from her tangent.

“It’s fine,” I said, smiling.

Presented: Judge Registration File

“Ah, so these are them- Aloo and Apple Coffyn?” said Mab.
“I think so- and… oh, there’s a regular contestant’s application here too, for a ‘Mince Coffyn’,” I said.

“Mm. That’s probably their son; I can’t tell you personal details beyond this, I’m afraid. Mince Coffyn can only bake with batters- meaning, pancakes, griddle cakes, drop cookies, and so on,” said Mab.

“Eh? I thought bad bakers couldn’t bake at all-” said Aster.

“No, check the flyer- there are categories of bad baking, see? If you look at Mr. Coffyn’s application again, you’ll see he’d signed up for everything excepting batters; while his parents, of course, were only judging batters to prevent accusations of nepotism,” said Mab.

“-Oh! So they have… interesting…” said Aster.

Presented: Picture of the Two Futons

“Ah, wao. So, one of those people was very different from the others- at a guess, I’d say the son,” said Mab.

“What makes you say that?” I said.

“Well, it’s two things, really- firstly, their son is about the same age as Deb, so… fourteen? -yeah, he’s about the right age for an apprenticeship, I’d say. There should be a notation about his age on the contestant application… Secondly, look at the beds themselves; one futon is almost haphazardly arranged, while the other is fairly neat and tidy by comparison,” said Mab.

“That matters?” I said.

“Listen, Tilly. I can’t tell you anything about the actual content of mine and the Coffyn’s correspondence, but I can make generalizations. The adult Coffyn’s weren’t terribly organized; that’s part of why they were such terrible bakers. Their son, whom they gushed about in every letter after the first formal few, was very organized as part of his teenage rebellion- and so, his baking reacted more… chaotically. The adult Coffyn’s merely made terrible food; their son makes dreadbread. Further, look at what’s right near the bed- the messy one has a glasses case, some hair curlers, a strip of condoms, and a bottle of lube. The neater one only has a box of tissues, an earplug case, a broken camera strap, and a bottle of lube- meaning, to my eye, that the messy bed had two people in it, while the neat bed only had one,” said Mab.

Wait, a camera strap? But we didn’t find a camera, whole or broken…

“…wait, are you saying the parents had sex next to their son, and the son masturbated with his parents right there?” said Aster.

“Honestly, it wouldn’t surprise me at all. The Coffyn family were expats from Fairisle living in Ryugu Mergyo for years before they had their son; they probably adopted a lot of the local culture to fit in, and ended up raising their son in the local fashion too. Space being at a premium for most of this country’s history, a deeply ingrained culture of politeness and face isn’t that surprising,” said Mab, shrugging.

“So… you’re saying that if the parents or the son did, neither would ever say anything about it?” said Aster, horribly confused and embarrassed.
“I am, yes,” said Mab, shamelessly.

**Presented: Pouch of Receipts**

“Ah, I’m not sure how much help I can be, here- hmm?” said Mab.

“What is it?” I said.

“Well, right there- a receipt for a tube of pictographer’s cyanide solution. It’s a common component of insta-print pictography cameras, and needs to be replaced every so often. And the other, it’s a receipt for Arsenic Acid, which is commonly used to treat certain nerve disorders. Either one could be the poison used on the Coffyn’s, I’m afraid- although, considering that all sales have to be registered in the store, it’d be fairly easy to find out who bought what,” said Mab.

“Do you know the symptoms of the poisons?” I said.

“Ah, sure- arsenic poisoning looks like food poisoning, or a particularly nasty round of cholera. It can go on for months before the final dosage is administered. Cyanide is much, much faster; a lethal dosage kills within the day,” said Mab.

“Should I be concerned?” I said.

“Well- Aster, can you smell any rotten eggs or bitter almonds on Tilly?” said Mab.

“-uh, no,” said Aster.

“Tilly, did you touch anything with your bare skin, or get anything on your clothing?” said Mab.

“Hell no, I used the standard decon procedure, same as always when poison is suspected,” I said.

“Then you should be fine; I’d recommend taking a thorough soak after you decontaminate, deep conditioning your hair, and changing clothing as soon as possible, though,” said Mab.

“Hm- Tilly, Court starts in the evening this case; we should have plenty of time to bathe, and I can pop back to your place and get your other work clothing...” mused Aster.

“-Yeah, that’s probably for the best, Aster. Thank you,” I sighed.

**Presented: Sample of ‘Weird Slime’**

“Uh- this used to be a slime?” I said.

“Oh. It’s male ejaculate, then,” said Mab.

“What,” I said.

“Mm! Male ejaculate- did it smell bleachy?” said Mab.

“Yeah, now that I think about it...” I said.

“Mhm. Male ejaculate comes out in an emulsion, but rapidly decays into a fluid; and because of its alkaline nature, smells like bleach. You’ll have to get it tested to see who's ejaculate that is, though,”
said Mab.

“O-okay...” I squeaked.

“Although, I suppose it could be another kind of emulsion tainted with bleach, but it’s much simpler to consider it-” said Mab.

“I g-got it, thank you!” I squeaked.

**Presented: Odd Black and White Feathers**

“Oh, Taffy must have started moulting-” said Mab.

“You know who these belong to?” I said.

“Sure; those are Dracule Taffeta’s moult feathers. She and Gurry were in Suite Three, on the Third Floor, as I recall,” said Mab.

“-Oh! So their suite is right above the Coffyn’s?” said Aster.

“Yup,” said Mab.

Hm. Not much new was learned; then again, maybe something was revealed anyway...

Mab knows Sanji better than anyone other than herself; if she says he sneezed at an overwhelming scent, I believe her.

All the rooms on the scene’s side are laid out the same, and I can make an inference that all the rooms in that wing are laid out the same, unless they have a specific name attached to them.

Whatever baked good was on the table at the time of the crime, the adult Coffyn’s ate all of it, and found it tasty enough to leave only crumbs behind.

The teapot tarnished because of silver’s reactivity to sulfur, which is often an indication of arsenic.

The World’s Worst Baker’s contest has a million dola prize, which is a motive for someone to kill; however, Mab lacks that particular motive as she can bake, and had the Coffyns as customers.

Mince Coffyn, the son, can only bake with batter; anything else goes wrong.

Mince Coffyn also kept the receipts for the family, as he was the most organized.

A camera is missing.

Arsenic is characterized by a smell of rotten eggs; cyanide is characterized by a smell of bitter almonds.

Dracule Taffeta and Gurry were in the suite above the scene, and… probably having sex on the balcony?

Taffy is moulting, as well.
So what can I infer from these facts?

Sanji smelled something when he and Mab walked past Suite Three, something strong and distinct enough that he sneezed.

The only ways in and out of the suites on floor two of that wing are through the suite door, and through the bathing area.

No Coffyn baked whatever baked good was on the table at teatime; none of them would have been able to do it.

One of the Coffyns bought a Cyanide-solution tube for an insta-print camera; one of the Coffyns bought Arsenic Acid.

Although a tube of cyanide-solution for an insta-print camera was purchased, no camera was found at the scene; and I only have a picture of the camera strap.

The room stank of bitter almonds; was it cyanide?

The teapot had some kind of sulfurous substance inside it, as the silver on the spout tarnished.

Mab had no motive to kill the Coffyns, and if she had, would not have used poison or left behind bodies to find.

Dracule Taffeta and Gurry were in the suite above the scene; it’s possible they noticed something.

It’s definitely spring.

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**February 4th**

*Chihiro Town* Train Stop, between the DC and the Sento

Urgh; I’m not going to learn anything else on an empty stomach. Check these receipts again- yeah, I thought so. The poisons were bought at Daiso; c’mon, Aster.

“Tilly?” said Aster.

“We need to go to Daiso. Not only do we need breakfast- we need to check up on who bought these poisons, too,” I said.

“We should shower first- and I actually need to bathe too, so: I called the guys while you were investigating. Ren’s going to get your suit from the cleaners, and he’s- ah, there he is; Sage’s going to be here within the hour, and he’s already started researching local laws and precedents for you, as well as bullying a case history out of the cops. Mr. Coffyn is in holding; he’s not currently under suspicion, but… Tilly, if you get your sister out of this within the day, he’s going to be next on the chopping block. You know how zealous the Court is for quick resolutions,” said Aster.
“If it comes to that, I’ll defend him too. Ren! Over here!” I said.

“Boss! Sorry to keep you waiting; I grabbed your suit from the cleaners, and your spares; I got underwear and brassieres from your drawers- they’re all in this case, along with your toiletries. Your pocket book is here; and Sancho’s weekend bag from your hall closet, as well as the spare vestments he keeps in your coat closet are all in this duffle, as his weekend bag was too small. Your house is locked up; I made sure the stove wasn’t on, your fridge was closed, and I notified your housekeeper that you’re out of the country on a case- ugh, you both stink like bitter almonds,” said Ren.

Ren Combag’again started out as my paralegal, but quickly became disillusioned with the whole world of Law and Order. He’s got almost no taste for Court proceedings- however, he didn’t want to leave me, or stop working for me. He’s my personal assistant, now; I ask him to do things, or rather, Aster asks him to do things for me, and he frequently goes above and beyond my expectations.

“Ren, you’re a godsblessed treasure; take my bank card and buy us all breakfast. Sancho and I are going to scrub down, get rooms for while we’re here, and change; you’re still legally a member of Law Enforcement, right?” I said.

“Yeah, Boss,” Ren said.

“Good. I’m putting the evidence in your care, then; be careful with all of it. Not just for the usual reasons; this case was a poisoning,” I said.

“Got it, Boss!” Ren said.

“Right; we’ll meet you at the Daiso nearby,” I said.

Then I carefully exchange our bag of evidence for my own things; and then Sancho and I are back to the Sento.

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February 4th

Sento Chihiro

I- huh, it’s the Maid again. Let’s try getting her name, this time-

“Hello, miss-” I said.

“Oh no-! I answered all your questions already!” the Maid snapped.

“Sorry, sorry- I’ve got two more for you, actually,” I said.
“Uuuugh. Fine, what is it?” the Maid grumbled.

“Firstly- what’s your name? Secondly- how much is it for a bath and a room here? Cases always take three days max, and I’d rather not sleep in a hostel...” I said.

“Oh! Oh, um. My name is Kayumi Polleen; and baths at their cheapest are four hundred ten beri, and that’s for everything you’d get at a local sento- locker use, clean towels, basic toiletries, and clothing washes. Not to be morbid, but- why do a pair of lawyers need to use a sento?” said Kayumi.

“I see. There’s a fairly good chance both my partner and I have been exposed to very powerful poisons; is there a way to... actually, what I need is a pair of non-permeable garment bags. Would you need to charge for that, or...?” I said.

“Uh- let me check something… hm. It’s a small fee of a hundred beri per bag; and the four ten is the individual flat rate; is that okay?” said Kayumi.

“That’s fine, yes- and a room?” I said.

“Uh- the Third Wing is closed and the WWB contest is next week, so rooms are at a premium right now, even with so many leafing... I have a small single available in the First Wing, but, um, it’s meant for newlyweds? So, there’s only one bud available in it; I can get you a cotton, I suppose, but... I really- Lilac the authority to search for anything nicer, I’m afraid… It’s fifteen hundred beri for each night, so three nights is forty five k- is that alright?” said Kayumi.

“...Does it have a bed, a toilet, and locking doors?” I said, thinking it over.

“Yes,” said Kayumi.

“Can I actually rent it for the next three days?” I said.

“The next three daisies? Let me check... yes, that should be fine,” said Kayumi.

“In that case, we’ll take it,” I said.

“Um. Bouquet, I’ll just need your bank card or- ah, sure, cash is fine... and this is- right, your bath tokens. For another hundred beri, I can give you two for each day you’re staying with us?” said Kayumi, rapidly writing something in a ledger...

“Here,” I said.

“Thank you! I just need your names, please-” said Kayumi.

“My name is Portgas D. Tigerlily Orlaith,” I said.

“I’m Aster Mistburrow- no, burrow like a bunny, yeah, there ya go-” said Aster.

“And I have one more question for you after this,” I said

“You’re registered for today, the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh; check out is at five of the clock, promptly- and, um... I guess I can answer that?” said Kayumi.

“Okay; thank you,” I said.

“Here’s your tokens, six for each of you; here’s your room keys- oh, and your room number and floral all on the key fob; relax, and enjoy your stay with us! And um... what’s your question,
exactly?” said Kayumi.

“...Thank you, we’ll see what happens. -my question is this: Are the Coffyn’s registration records available?” I said.

“Um… let me check- yeah, they are. I can’t let you take the ledger, though…” said Kayumi.

“That’s fine- can I take a picture?” I said.

“Um, sure? Yeah, that’s fine- here!” said Kayumi.

“Thank you,” I said, taking an insta-print picture.

**Added to Evidence: Picture of Sento Logbook.**

I look over at Aster, who shrugs. I look back at Kayumi Polleen, take the non-permeable garment bags, and then we walk off to take our baths.

I’m used to onsen, now that Gabby’s built her own house, finally- she built it to take advantage of her Devil’s Fate, really. Anyway, onsen and sento are basically the same thing, except onsen source their water from natural springs, and sento are just heated water from the tap, basically. Etiquette is about the same Worldwide, though.

First of all, there’s a genkan, or a traditional entrance hall in the local style- this one’s actually much larger, and is meant for you to put all your clothes away in a locker, not just your shoes. Enter the non-permeable garment bags; Ren and Mab were both concerned about gaseous agents. Well, really, Mab was concerned; and Ren, who hadn’t been exposed to the crime scene, said we both stank of bitter almonds.

That’s a clue if I’ve ever heard one.

Anyway; right inside the door to the bathing facilities, there’s an attendant whose only job is to take bath tokens. They’re silver in color, and they look like coins; and I see, when I go up to the desk to hand my token over, that there’s a whole array of shapes, presumably for different levels of bath. We get handed tickets for our lockers, and offered small complimentary bags of toiletries- which we both end up taking, because it’s free and I don’t think I repacked my toothbrush or toothpaste anyway...

After paying, Aster and I go to the changing area and take all our clothes off, and pack them away in the non-permeable garment bags. I take a moment to put the ‘EVIDENCE’ stickers over the seal on each garment bag, and then put them both in my locker, before locking it securely and putting the key around my wrist. Aster puts our bags in his locker, after fishing out our toiletry bags from both our luggages.

Although the entrances and washing areas of a sento and onsen are segregated, the actual bathing or, really, soaking area, kind of… isn’t? At least, not in Ryugu Mergyo, it’s fairly famous for it. The doors are always marked, either way; I go through to the women’s side, put my toiletries in a handy basket along with a wash towel, and pick one of the least desirable showers- in this case, right next to the wall.

Before I start, I wave the attendant over, and explain who I am and what I’m about to do- or is there somewhere they’d prefer I bathe?

As it turns out, there *is*. I walk behind a tiled corner I wouldn’t have noticed on my own, and- Aster!
Also being led by an attendant! They take us to- oh wow. It’s a whole decontamination area; and it’s not meant for public viewing at all, you can tell by the stark blandness of everything. The attendants turn the showers on, and hot steamy air blocks my view of Aster.

Aster and I set to scrubbing, and at first I don’t notice anything different; and then I see the water running down the drain is thick and ugly blackness, spotted with splotches of green and pink. I wash, and scrub, and scrub, and wash; I wash my hair and my face, and continue down until I’m rinsing my feet- and then I do it again, again, again, until the water is finally running clear underneath me. I condition my hair, trim my body hair, and brush my teeth before rinsing in cool water collected in a clean blue bucket just outside the spray.

Finally, I’m done. I don’t have time for a soak right now, and neither does Sancho- however, I am ready to face the day. I signal I’m done with the shower, and dry my hair before wiping everything down and walking back to the changing area.

I get there, wipe down again, and use a dryer for my hair. Then, I put it back up in the customary buns, and put on my clean suit; no wrinkles, no mess. No substitutions. I even put the hair bells at the base of each bun, for formalities sake. Last thing to go on is my badge, then my socks and shoes- and that’s it, I’m done.

Aster is as well; and he looks the same as he always does.

Off to the Daiso to meet up with Ren, get some more answers, and eat breakfast, finally- but first…

“Aster; I need you to take our things to our room,” I said.

“Sure, Tilly. Go on to the Daiso, and I’ll meet you there- and remember your key and our new evidence!” said Aster.

“Oh- shit, right, thank you,” I said.

**Added to Evidence: Contaminated Clothing**

I go out into the dawn’s light; my hair chimes softly with each assured step, and the light of spring is warm on my face. It’s going to be a beautiful day; shame I have to spend it on a murder.

The nearby Daiso is so old it’s got real wood and stone making it’s construction; it’s a real building, with actual interesting architecture. Ren waves me over from the entrance, and hands back the satchel of our evidence; I add the **Contaminated Clothing** to the bag, and then we both go and sit at one of the patio tables to eat breakfast.

I’m filling him in on the case when Aster arrives and bolts his breakfast down.

“And that’s about the shape of things. Any thoughts before we move forwards?” I said, as Aster slurped his ramen.

“Several, actually. Firstly; if Missus Morgan knows her husband well enough to know why he’d
sneeze, does the Mister know her the same way? I think it’s vital we find him, and get his take on things. Secondly; just how easy or not easy is it to pick, or otherwise spoof the outer and inner locks of the suite? Thirdly; what was the baked good on the table at the time of the crime? Where did it come from? Who made it? Fourthly; where is the camera that the cyanide-solution tube belongs to, and for that matter, the cyanide-solution tube? Fifthly; did any of the Coffyns have a nerve disorder? And if not, why did they have arsenic acid? Sixthly; we need to get empirical evidence that the smell in the room is from cyanide, or find whatever is off-gassing the smell. Seven; we need to get the tea sample tested for any toxins, poisons, and what have you. Eight; based on past evidence, Mab Morgan- when she murders- does not leave whole bodies behind, nor does she use poison. Further, she has no real motive for this crime- the Coffyns were her customers, and they liked each other well enough to keep a serious correspondence with each other. Nine; Dracule- and I got the list of people under suspicion for this case; Gurry is actually Marguerite Gloriosa Amaryllis Lefay. Dracule and Lefay might have seen or heard something; they need to be found, interviewed, and possibly called to the stand. Ten: the time of year may in fact be significant. Imbolc is the holiday by which old is thrown out, and new is ushered in; I think Aster needs to feel the vibe of the scene before it’s further disturbed, and check for residual mystical energies. Eleventh, and finally: Why did the Coffyn’s decide to stay in a hotel for nine months instead of renting an apartment or purchasing a house?,” said Ren.

There’s a reason I kept him in my employ, beyond his genuine usefulness.

“Right; Aster, you’re checking out the suite’s security, along with checking for mystical energies. Ren, I need you to get in touch with Sage; tell him we need the Coffyn’s medical records, their financial records, and their travel log; I also need you to get some of the evidence tested. I will be checking these receipts, talking to Mister Sanji, and talking to Dracule and Lefay- as well as mulling over that final question. I’ve got one of those funny feelings in my fang-teeth; I think the answer to that one is going to be a doozy,” I said.

“Roger-roger, Boss Tilly,” said Aster, before he moseyed off, back to the Sento.

“Give me the evidence; oh, and here’s your phone, boss, I almost forgot-” said Ren, handing me my phone in exchange for the evidence I wanted him to check.

I left Ren as he began to rattle off what we needed to Sage- oh! Sage Nowage is my paralegal. He started out as my PA, but we both quickly realized that he is entirely the wrong kind of person to be doing that sort of thing. He’s not quite personable enough to be a full-on lawyer, and he just doesn’t have the ambition, either- but, in terms of being liked by librarians and finding information, no one can match him.

He knows to fax me all pertinent documents; and, my phone is rigged such that it wirelessly transmits the information to the micro-machine in my briefcase, which is on my back right now. Thank the gods for crossbody straps…

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**February 4th**

**Daiso ; Pharmacy Counter**
“IRASSHAI! Welcome to Daiso; we’ve got shit you need for days, yo!” shouts a *Demon boy* dressed… not professionally.

“YOU DAMN BARTOK, GET OUT OF MY STORE-” bellows a much more formally dressed *Demon man*.

“HAHAHAHA-” cackles the Demon boy- Bartok?- who bursts past me right as I go to open the door to the Daiso.

Okay. So, that just happened- a Demon about my size and half my maturity just shouted a mangled version of the Daiso greeting before being run off by… I guess the franchise owner?

“Um, hello?” I said.

“Irasshai! Welcome to Daiso; we’ve got what you need, and our prices are low! How can I help you?” says the Demon man.

“My name is Portgas D. Tigerlily, but everyone calls me Tilly- and I’m a lawyer. I need to know-” I said before the Demon man cut me off.

“Oh my goodness, you’re a Portgas? Come in, come in, a Portgas in my shop-” squealed the Demon man.

Godsdammit, Asher.

“Um, sir, I really-” I said.

“Please, tell me what you need- Goodness, you look like a kitten rejected by it’s own mother. You are fatigued, no? Ah, this is what you need- an aromatic tincture of lavender and honey, to be inhaled when under stress. Saa, if I’d known a new Portgas was coming I’d have had our best meats out front and center-” babbled the Demon man.

“That’s very kind of you, but- urgh-” I said, before the stench of ammonia kicked the thoughts out of my head.

“Yes, yes- only the finest smelling salts sold at our little chemistry counter! I Oh, I’ll never get back a first impression- that damn Bartok boy, always getting into trouble ‘round here-” said the Demon man.

“Excuse me, but-” I said.

“Oh, such a wonderful day this has become, another Portgas has chosen to grace my shop-” said the Demon man.

“Excuse me. I’m very sorry to be so rude, but I need to verify these receipts. I am currently investigating a murder, and could really use your help, Mister-,” I said- not loudly, but there’s
more to a conversational interrupt than just volume.

“O-oh- y-yes, yes of course, my apologies,” said the Demon man, “My name is Hearb Kurree. I have the records you need right here, in the log book for the pharmacy- and the copier, you can use free of charge!” said Kurree.

“Thank you, that’s very kind of you,” I said.

“Um- I can’t have herb you correctly… you’re investigating a murder, you said? Lentil you’d mentioned it, I hadn’t thought anything of it...” said Kurree.

“Thought anything of what?” I said, as I made copies of the relevant pages in the log book with the relevant receipts included in the copy.

“Well, I’m not one to gossip, but... well, the Bad Baker’s boy, he’s been in and out of my shop for months, now, close to a year,” said Kurree.

“Oh?”

“Yes, the poor boy; you know, it’s not right to push children so hard, I’ve always known that. And his parents wouldn’t even let him take a part time job here, it’s not like I’m an unreasonable man- we could have scheduled around his training time, but... his parents insisted on Mithridatism, and he was so sick all the time... it’s only recently that he’s even started looking beyond the tip of his own nose, you know? He even started his old hobby of photography a few months back, and it must have been going well for him, as he recently had to get a refill for his instaprint camera with his parents usual order of Arsenic Acid... well, I’m just... are you sure he didn’t commit suicide?” said Kurree.

“-oh my. Um. No, the- Huldra-boy, always looks a tad harrassed?” I said.

“That’s the one, yes,” said Kurree, “Is he not the one who died? He’s been looking unwell for months, but I suppose if your parents insist on poisoning you to build up your tolerance, there’s not much to be done about it...”

“No, um. It’s his parents that are dead, not him,” I said, carefully clipping the copies together with a paper clip and considering this new information. Unless I can get evidence to support it, it’s just hearsay- but! It does provide... quite a lot of doubt, actually. Hm.

Oh dear, Mr. Kurree looks so... stricken. Sad, confused... hmmm.

The pot thickens.

“Mr. Kurree, if I need to call you to court, would you come?” I said.

“...well, it would be a bit of a loss to my shop... but for a Portgas, I curdn’t do anything less than be there when they had need of me! Of course- If you need me, call upon me!” said Kurree.

“Thank you, Mr. Kurree. I still have investigation to do- but, rest assured: if I have need of you, I will call upon you,” I said, before being crushed in a not-unpleasant but very unexpected and inescapable bear hug.

“Of course, Miss Portgas- and if there’s anything I can do for that poor boy, you let me know. Naan of the people I can think of who hang around that family like a passel of leeches are in any way the kind of people you need around when you’re grieving...” said Kurree.
“I- um. I will. Oh! I almost forgot to ask- the Bartok boy?” I said.

“Oh, sure; not to cast aspersions on another man’s method of raising his child, but Judge Bartok really needs to keep a firmer hold on that boy- or perhaps a lighter touch is needed? Certainly, the way he’s doing it now isn’t right at all, and what with him so busy, it’s a wonder that poor boy hasn’t gotten into worse trouble...” said Kurree.

“-Sorry, Judge Bartok?” I said.

“Oh, of course- Chihiro Town looks quite large, right? In truth, it’s got a permanent residency of just about five thousand people and is run more like a country in it’s own right; and so far there’s only one judge, Judge Bartok. Everyone who doesn’t have a home address in Chihiro Town is a seasonal worker, or in charge of an event being held here in Chihiro Town- like those poor Bad Bakers...” said Kurree.

“I see. I’m guessing you’re a permanent resident of Chihiro Town?” I said.

“Born and raised for fifteen generations!” said Kurree.

“Then you might know- I’m looking for somewhere downwind of the Sento, where a smoker would go. Any ideas?” I said.

“Oh-! You must be looking for that dapper Demon with the yellow hair and fine suit who came in around dawn? He bought enough tobacco to last most men a month, the same in smoke papers, and had his lighter refilled- I remember because it was such a lovely smoking set he had-” said Kurree.

“Yeah, his name’s Sanji; where did he go?” I said.

“Well, he had the same question as you did, most tourists who smoke do- he went to the Downside, as I recommended, I think. There’s a smoker’s lounge there called the Smuggler’s Den that every smoker goes to eventually, as it’s the only one in town; I’ll write out some directions for you. Oh- and is there anything I can interest you in before you go?” said Kurree.

I bought four ten beri grab-bags of candy for the boys- one for Aster, one for Ren, two for Sage; and an assorted packet of ground-meat jerky. Mmhm. Oh, yeah, and a bag of wasabi peas because I know Mab’s going to like them and want something to munch on while she watches the proceedings... and the only thing I really know about what Mister Sanji likes to snack on is what I know about his food preferences, and that’s that he really loves fish... so.

Before I got apprenticed, I was a firm believer that grades mattered most- they don’t, not really, they’re just indications of how well you can jump through hoops and schmooze your teacher- but I was one of the only kids who went to Saturday tutoring (me tutoring other students) instead of the park. I mostly did half days, either the morning or the evening; and it actually did help me master a lot of subjects I would have only been good enough in, so I don’t count it as a waste of time.

Anyway, I managed to keep myself awake through those sometimes dreary hours by eating seafood snacks. Dried up squid and withered mystery fish that hang out on racks in the open sunlight down near the docks, or wrapped up in pretty paper packages on the Daiso shelves- maybe an acquired taste, but, well, I like them! They’re flavorful and stealthy; no loud crackle or crunch to disrupt my student or alert the study monitor. Even now, a whiff is enough to boost my energy.

Shit, I might as well grab some for myself...

Hmm. They’ve got a lot of flavors here, and I don’t want to just impulsively buy them and then force
myself to eat the rest of something I don’t actually want… kimchi flavor dried scallop gills, salted fish slices, almond and dried fish mix… hmm…

Honestly, for me, it all boils down to two choices: shredded squid, and dried fish. I consider myself a bit of an afishianado of seafood snacks; and while squid jerky is nice, the scent is often too powerful to eat it anywhere other than the comfort of your own study or at the beach proper. No one can actually eat a single serving of Calbee Jagariko, the crossbreed of salty potato chips and pencil fries is too strong. Almond fish are for drinking; Katto Yochan Ika is a children’s snack; Big Katsu is basically sin in a bright orange package. Calbee Kappa Ebisen- no, I don’t like shrimp. I don’t want scallop gills today, and I’m not eating corn…

Aha! Jane-jane’s Hot Prepared Shredded Squid!

Dried squid has long been integral to the cuisines of the coast, where it’s a popular method of preservation and concentrated flavory delivery. It wasn’t until the nine-seventies that shredded squid became a popular snack in Fiddler’s Green.

It should be beige, and shredded into thin strips- a bit like a tangle of white chewing gum or torn up mozzarella, but that’s where all resemblance ends. Good squid snacks are on the chewy side of chew, but softer than beef jerky; sweet, spicy, salty, and extremely fish forward with a somewhat creamy finish.

Some brands veer towards the overwhelmingly sweet, the uncomfortably spicy, or even the exhaustingly dry. For a mild, rich flavor accompanied by a tender, chewy texture, I can find no fault in Jane-jane’s offerings. I’ve been a fan for years, and considering it’s enduring appeal, I have no fear of my fave-flav being discontinued.

Unlike their betenacled brothers, dried fish snacks aren’t typically used in cooking. You find them in similar packaging though; chewy, wrinkled up straw-strips that taste like sweet smoked fish-of-choice. That said, they’re not simply dehydrated fish with a little salt to get the taste of abject poverty out of your mouth; the meat is typically blended with spices and taro root, baked into thin sheets, and then shredded and packaged. Eaten plain, they’ve got a similar odor to bonito flakes, but flavored varieties carry notes of spices and hot peppers.

North Blue Fish Snacks are unequivocally superior to all other brands; they’ve got a balanced flavor with just enough sweetness to stand up to the salt, with a hint of spice to keep you reaching back for more.

And a bag of Sunflower seeds, just in case.

Then, it’s off to find a dapper Demon man…

February 4th
Chihiro Town Downside: Smuggler’s Den

Chihiro Town’s Upside is meant for tourists and damn rich people; Chihiro Town Downside is meant for locals, pirates, and ne’er do well’s. It smells somewhere between cat piss and ocean; reminds me of Kiriko Village, actually, the day after it rains. The Smuggler’s Den, for all it proposes to be a simple smoker’s lounge, reminds me in all the worst ways of my old part time job, back when I...

Let me tell you a story- not a fantastical one, or a thrilling chiller, but a simple story of how a nice young paralegal got out of her depth in a completely abnormal club, pub, and diner. That nice paralegal is me, by the way- and the completely abnormal dive is Silver Straw, my sister Ezra’s establishment.

It all started when I moved to Kiriko Village, which is where the SOL Academy is located. I had to travel up into the Bushwilds, past Pumpkin Hill to study the Law, and the crazy student lifestyle of doing nothing and going nowhere became very expensive and boring, so I had to get a job. I looked around town and came across Silver Straw, my sister’s hybrid monstrosity. She was hiring; I needed money; within the week I had a trial shift. I worked there for the rest of my time in SOL Academy, until I got a job with my actual firm.

The reason I can’t seem to fix on a descriptor for Silver Straw is because Ezra couldn’t quite decide what theme or aesthetic or even kind of business she was trying to run- and I don’t mean a ‘best of all possible worlds’ situation, it’s more of a… an engineered abomination that shouldn’t exist for several ethical and moral reasons. It’s a pub for most of the week; during the day-time, it’s a diner. And when the clock strikes nine on a Foolsday, Saturday, and Sunday night, the tables are pushed to one side; the lights are dimmed low; a student musician that may or may not be any good comes in to be Master of Ceremonies. All glasses are replaced by wooden and tin counterparts by ten pm, and it’s a three dola entry between eleven and twelve thirty; and it’s final call at two am, and everyone has to get out by four am.

Silver Straw had three managers, each with very different styles of management, and who never ever seemed to speak to each other or Ezra, the actual owner. Baz spends most of his shift sitting upstairs on the balcony, getting high on skunkweed brownies, and only saunters downstairs when he fancies a glass of milk. Keith is consistently whiny, extremely patronising, and just generally unpleasant. Sam, of course, is an edge so straight you could use him to measure the curve of the horizon. It would be impossible for me to choose my least favorite; and that’s not getting into the customers!

The Gov’nor was the first customer I ever had the misfortune to serve. I still wake up with his image in my mind when I get the cold sweats after a nightmare. He walked into Silver Straw and immediately captured the attention of all that were present, like an unremarked fart in a small elevator; deadly silence and overly polite horror. The Gov’nor was not a large man, but what he lacked in height, he made up for in sheer presence. He was clad in a thick brown fur coat, dark silk scarf covering everything except his smoked glasses, and a tall brown ushanka that was obviously once a bear, as it was in fact a bear’s head and face made into an ushanka. He came in with an attractive young woman on each arm, which was incredibly perplexing given that he was half their size and pushing ninety years old.

Now, to be fair, he kept to himself for most of the night, not causing any trouble- that is, until one rowdy young cuss got a bit too big for his boots. Let’s call the cuss Jackson, never liked that name- and our Jackson was throwing some very disrespectful insults towards the Gov’nor, mainly aimed at his ridiculous hat. Jacky was relentless, just kept going and going- I can only assume he had a death
wish. Eventually, enough was enough and the lovely ladies at the Guv’nor’s side took action. They left Jackson a bloody unconscious mess under his table, and escorted themselves out; and the Guv’nor waved me over instead of following them.

It was like meeting my hero, Daun Elphame, and being told off by Mom, all in one go. He drew me in, closer and closer. And then he pointed towards Jackson and shouted “TELL THAT FOOKIN’ LI’L PISSBABY THE GOV’NOR SEND ‘IS REGARDS, AND TO KINDLY FOOK OFF!”

This scared me to death, of course, because I was not expecting anything like the quality of Voice I got from such a withered old man. I was in such a state of shock, that when I gathered my wits enough to, not unreasonably, ask what the fuck was even happening right now- the Guv’nor was gone. Maybe he had a previous engagement with his lady friends. Maybe he was being mature enough to leave before he had to kill a man for insulting his hat.

Maybe, just maybe, he was never actually there- just a ghost of a lawyer past, come down for a pint of cider with his paralegals. No one knows for sure.

Then there was Old Nick, so called because he’s the elder of the two men called Nick who come in regularly, and was a man who made everyone there terribly, terribly uncomfortable. Me especially, actually, now that I think on it. He had just turned seventy at the time, and looked out at the world through thick jam-jar spectacles, and had slightly too much saliva on his lips at all times.

My interactions, though minimal, were exactly the wrong kind of memorable.

The first time I ever interacted with Old Nick, it was as the bartender, and he and a young Nokken were loudly debating the benefits of hitting children. Old Nick was on the side of ‘hitting children teaches the spry bastards some godsbedamned respect’. As this was fairly early on in my career as a bartender- as in, maybe my third week working there- I was still too shy to interject and tell them both what utter nonsense they were saying. Children learn a multitude of things from their parents, but how to be afraid ought not be one of them.

I also witnessed him get very upset that a man he calls “Dan the Man” had started calling him “Nick the Dick”. He obviously wasn’t appreciating his ‘friendly’ moniker giving being reciprocated.

The most memorable- horribly, horribly memorable- moment with Old Nick, however, came on a Saturday night. He was predominantly a patron during the week, however on this occasion he’d stayed past the Transition hour and was aimlessly walking around harshing people’s mellow.

He was on what must have been his tenth Black Tonic Original 07, and he had stopped by the bar because I assume walking had become too difficult. Suddenly there was a small commotion between him and a much younger man, so I went to investigate. The man explained to me that Old Nick had made an inappropriate remark about him, and when he turned away, Old Nick slapped his ass. So, I called the bouncers over; they took him away, I dusted my hands of a job well done, and carried on miserably serving drinks.

Roughly ten minutes later I saw Old Nick sitting in the corner of the bar with his head in his hands. I asked the bouncer why he hadn’t been thrown out for sexual harassment, and the bouncer explained to me that he is a regular, so he gave him a second chance- so long as he stayed on the other side of the room. I approached Old Nick and I could see that he was crying his eyes out.

At this point, I want you to stop and think about what you’d do in that situation. You’re in a pseudo-nightclub, music blaring, people between twenty five an’ forty years dancing and all but fucking
around you, and you’re staring at a seventy year old man who’s been naught but a public asshole and
nuisance for as long as you’ve known him, an’ he’s crying his eyes out after being reprimanded for
an objectively inappropriate action. What do you do?

I couldn’t decide if he was crying out of regret, or crying because he got told off. In his mind- in the
brains of Old Nick- did he honestly think that this young man would enjoy a butt touch so much that
he would turn around and speak to him all night? Surely not? -so, Why do it?

All I could do was ask “Are you alright?” to which I got an answer I couldn’t hear or understand…
so, I just left him to it. I told the bouncer to call him a cab if it got worse and went back to trying to
ignore the fact he was there.

Finally, of the strangers that have true stories attached to them that I, perhaps unwillingly, learned-
there’s One Punch Will.

As busy as the weekends got, the evenings during the week are stone dead. I would have more to do
in the graveyard shifts than I ever would on a Monday night at Silver Straw. That time did allow me
to get to know the very few locals that came in.

Will’s an interesting man. About five-foot eight, stocky like a Spangle-Batter, with a jarring baby
face. Stylish, too, he has one of those nice cuts where it’s shaved all round the sides leaving only a
careful souffle of hair balanced across the crown of his head. He’s also one of the only people I’ve
ever seen that actually wears a rat-nibbled hoodie as a fashion statement, so he’s not without
problems.

So I got chatting with Will, and he told me that he was in the middle of a big legal battle, because he
had accidentally knocked his girlfriend out, whilst “defending himself.” This came as a big shock as
he seemed simply too nice to be capable of something so despicable, but what came as a bigger
shock was his attitude towards the whole thing. Will said he was facing up to six months in prison,
but he could not care less. He told me that he has several mates in prison, and he’d be glad to see
them, plus it would be more like twelve weeks with good behaviour.

The next shock came when he said that he is legally not allowed to see his girlfriend (now ex-
girlfriend) anymore, but they have been arranging steamy hook-ups in hotels via snailphone, so she
must’ve gotten over the whole knocking out thing fairly quickly. The most amusing part was that the
girlfriend’s housemate’s boyfriend is also in prison, and Will seemed chuffed that they could cartpool
when they’d be coming to visit.

I’d go on, but I’ve just spotted Sanji.

I’ve seen Sanji in swim trunks- so I know he’s got more hair on his entire body than some men ever
get on their heads. You’d never know that from just looking at him with clothes on; he said once at a
family meal that all his knuckle hair got burnt of as a boy and simply never grew back, and it’s not
like he doesn’t shave...

He’s a nice man, a good man; loves Mab, and she him, so his less savory habits can be brushed off
as simple quirks.

He’s got two full ashtrays, and a cigarette in his mouth that’s steadily wisping to ash as he breathes in
the noxious fumes. A samovar of hot black coffee is on the table too, and from the looks of things he’s been nursing the pot for hours.

I walk over to him, my steps just slightly louder than the silence of the lounge.

I sit across from him, and wait.

Sanji blinks, ashes his cigarette, and scrubs a hand against his eyes and brow before looking me dead in the eyes.

“Hello, Sanji,” I said.

“Fuck. Hello, tiny-asshole; fuck, Tilly, your name is Tilly. I fucking guess you’re the asshole who’s protecting Mab, right?” said Sanji.

“Yeah, I’m her defence lawyer. You mind if I ask a few questions?” I said.


“When I questioned Mab, she mentioned you sneezed in response to a powerful scent. Can you elaborate on that please?” I sang, softly.

“Sure, I can tell you why I sneezed,” sang Sanji, “I smelled an overpowering amount of bitter almond, if you can believe.”

“And that was where, exactly?” I said, carefully making note of his preliminary testimony on my Evidental Notepad.

**Added to Evidence: Chef Sanji smelled an overwhelming scent of bitter almonds.**

“Just outside the door of Suite Three on the Second Floor of Wing Three. I even remember the time-we were going out to get something to eat for Tea, because I sneezed so hard I bit my tongue and couldn’t really enjoy my oolong...” said Sanji.

“Ouch! -I’m probably going to have to call you to Court. Will you come?” I said.

“Sure, Tilly,” said Sanji.

“Hey- it’s going to be okay. I’m one of the best at what I do; and I’d never let them execute my sister for something she didn’t do,” I sang.

“I know you are, and I know to believe you- but I still can’t help but worry; I don’t know if that’s really true...” sang Sanji.

“Oh- and d’you have any idea where to find Taffy and Gurry?” I said.

“Uh... at this time of day? Check the Park, actually- you’ll want the area with the best light,” said Sanji, carefully lighting his next cigarette.

“Thanks- oh, and I got these for you,” I said, handing him about half the snacks I got at Daiso-including the semechki.

For the first time that day, I saw my brother-in-law smile. I smiled back, and nodded, and then I went off to find Taffy and Gurry.
February 4th

Chihiro Town Central Parkade

It started snowing while I was in the Den; and as I climb up from the Downside and enter the Central Parkade, I’m struck by a strange dichotomy. This town is… basically a microcosm of my own home island, Fiddler’s Green. There’s a city that’s old- or pretending hard enough it’s old that the truth doesn’t matter, but clean and serene seeming; and there’s a city that’s truly old, and grimy, it’s chaotic nature bare for all to see. And here, in the Park… the wildness that runs beneath it all, an alien order that from outside is only chaos- and from within, the most perfect of orders. The contrast between the Park and the City is… stunning.

To start with, almost no road or street in any Fairisle city looks straight from the ground. Further, due to certain mandates and laws, there is never, ever any stretch of unbroken buildings larger than half a block. This city is different; they built, and built, and overbuilt, until at last the road which stretches out straight and cruel before me is the only line between the city and the countryside. It’s strange, and jarring - and this is a manicured country I’m walking through, no wild in it to speak of. The snow is too white, next to the grimey slush in the gutters; the crystals too pristine.

For a moment, I’m struck breathless by the realization that I am in a Realm of Humans. Clear boundaries between what is Nature and what is Made; seeking to organize that which was already organized. Fae cities seem to bloom out of the land around them; buildings growing on trees like branches or leaves, stones piled into houses, trails and paths made by wild creatures only just beginning to be paved…

This place is strange- but it is… heartening, to find, even here so far from my home that the people have not forgotten that green is the color of all creation, and that from which it’s loveliness arises.

I walk through the snowy park, admiring the cold world I’ve found myself in- and then I come to find a Painter and his Muse sitting by a waterfall. He’s painting her in the full spring sun, and… hm.

I know a thing or two about painting, being Del’s sister and all. Painting that particular muse would be tricky as hell; she’s all dark shadows and sharp lines, highlighted with black and grey and silver. The only spot of color on her is the red of her mouth, and it’s a pale, pink sort of color- easily made too lavender. Her eyes are the sharp gold of a wild fox, and her hair is black as midnight. Her environment is all blue, which does and doesn’t help- the silver is cold-toned, the silver of her chemise, I mean- but…

“-no, Taff, I had a mania for drawing the shapes of things from the age of about four or so. When I was ten, I’d made a whole universe of designs- but really, everything I do before I’m seventy won’t really be worth bothering with. At seventy-five, gods willing, I’ll have managed to cram something of the pattern of nature- animals, plants, trees, birds, fish, insects, stones and stars- into th’ole dome-plate. When I’m eighty, I might even begin to make real progress. Ninety? I’ll have found maybe a sliver of the Truth of the World. I’ll be a hundred before I’m good; and a hundred and ten before I can truly create anything new. One day, I’ll be an old, old man- as crazy about drawing and painting
as I’ve ever been,” said the Painter.

“If we both live that long, will you still paint me, Marguerite Lefay?” said the Muse.

“...Dracule Taffeta, I’ll be painting pictures of you on the day I die,” said Lefay.

“Hm. Is that right?” said Dracule.

“Oh yeah- that’s right,” said Lefay, salacious and sly.

“Heeheehee. I think it’s time for a break, Gurry. You’ve been painting for hours, now; and I’d like to warm up, just a bit...” said Dracule, a drab of sultry swagger in her voice.

“Hm- light’s almost gone anyway, might as well just pack up and go on back to th’- oh, hello? Can I help you?” said Lefay.

“Ah, sorry to eavesdrop; my name is Portgas D. Tigerlily, y’all can call me Tilly. I’m the Defence Lawyer for Mab Morgan?” I said.

“Ah!” said Lefay.

“Oh, yis, makes sense,” said Dracule.

“Would you mind terribly answering a few questions I have? I need to- um,” I said, before stopping and staring at the painting.

“Heh, yis, I have the same reaction,” said Dracule, laughter in her nasal voice.

“Uh- w-would you, ah, like to sit? I, um- oh, it’s not f-finished, I’m not v-very-” stuttered a blushing Lefay.

“You painted this?” I asked, wonderingly.

“Uh. Yeah, yeah, um- I, er,” mumbled Lefay.

“What were you doing yesterday?” I said, shaking myself back to the matter at hand.

“We went shopping, yis. Gurry bought a whole bunch of brushes-” said Dracule.

“Brushes,” said Lefay, “Yes, ‘twas then I took a sharp left away from Taffy and wandered deep into the aisles filled with all kinds of bristles, both the short-handled variety for fine work and the longer-handled type for blocking. My brush collection had always been made up of whatever I could make, buy on sale, or got gifted- which means I’ve always had an eclectic mish-mash of all kinds of brushes, which I tend to treat like they’re made of solid gold and infinitely more precious. Such a bounty of choice- I could not bear to leave without testing each as they came to my attention, and by the time I was finished, well…”

“He buy so much brushes and canvas an’ cases to put in, he not have enough for paint, so I use my allowance to buy the rest, yis!” cackled Dracule, grinning at her blushing beau.

“And, well, I, I can’t help by try to paint Taffy- I would paint her in every light, in every season, capture the very essence of her for but a moment in paint and varnish on linen stretched taut- but, well, I’m... I’m not very good yet, I’ve only just started to get her feathers approaching right, and I’ve not gotten her eyes right at all- ” said Lefay, fidgeting.

“We are all works in progress, yis; is okay, Gurry-” reassured Dracule.
“-I’m, I’m not good with words, so how’m I supposed to-” sighed Lefay.

“Gurry, I already know. Is okay, yis? Yis, is okay,” said Dracule, gazing at Lefay with such… oh, I see.

“Um, I’m sorry- I meant yesterday at Tea? I need to know if you noticed anything out of the ordinary- a sound, a smell, anything at all,” I said.

“Hm, no- we was enjoying the springtime too much to notice things like that. Maybe Banana or Kusa-chan notice, but they only have enough courage and patience to answer at Court,” said Dracule, shrugging apologetically.

“Uhm. Spring is a bit- um, too much fun. As I understand it, there was a murder directly beneath our suite, correct?” said Lefay, scratching the back of his neck sheepishly.

“That’s right. Anything you noticed that was out of the ordinary that day would be of help,” I said.

“Hm. Marzipan was in the room that whole day; she might have seen something. However, it’s still much too cold for her, so- and isn’t it getting close to Court Time, Miss Tilly? Might be best to just ask your questions in Court, like with Banana and Kusa-chan,” said Lefay.

I paused, and realized something- not only have I not been wearing my watch-lace, but… Ren wouldn’t have known to reset it to Local Standard Time, he’s never been out of the country before. Oh my god, fuck fuck-

“Here, yis; deep breath, you are not late. Breathe, miss- yis, just like that. This is my watch; it have accurate time as of dawn yesterday. Use it to reset yours, alright?” said Dracule.

“I- y-yes, thank you Miss Dracule,” I squeak.

“Call me Taffy, please; I hear Dracule, I look for my brother,” said Taffy.

“Sure,” I said.

I took Taffy’s watch, and reset my own after fishing it out of my pocket book. Taffy’s watch is an aggressively simple, sleek thing- rated for the bottom of the ocean, with an adam-wood case and a leather thong to keep it tied to her belt-loops.

My watch is much more elaborate, with no less than eight different alarms that can be set and a much smaller face- still, it’s easy for me to set it, after all this time… and Lefay’s right. I’ve got little more than half an hour left. I need to get to the Courthouse.

“You’ll both be at Court, aye?” I said.

“Our whole crew be there, yis. Mab is our friend,” said Taffy.

“Yeah- if you need any one of us to testify: call upon us, and we will come. Even Captain, should it come to that,” said Lefay.
“Thank you; both of you,” I said.

And then, I turned, and bolted in the direction of the Courthouse.

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February 4th

Chihiro Town Courthouse; Defense Lobby

I nearly killed myself on a patch of black ice, and so as I run into the defense lobby and have to hand everything off to Sage so I can bandage my hands. Going into Court with **literal** blood on my hands is a *terrible omen of misfortune*, and- every little bit helps, alright?

Mab, of course, is a calm, cool bastion of Unseelie grace in these times of turmoil; and it’s only here in the full light of the crystal chandeliers, softer than the harsh glare of the Detention Center, that I can see what I missed before. **Mab “Queen” Morgan** looks just like her Mother, Harriet “Harry” Morgan- except for where she doesn’t. The truth is, every woman of the Morgan Line and Name looks like Granuna, without exception. Even me.

Mab’s hair is shorter than Mother’s ever was- even loose as it is, it falls down near her ass, not all the way to the floor. Her lips are lavender, not blue; her nails are clear coated, not tipped with azure-staining poison. No pauldron rests over each shoulder; the only adornment on her arms is the tattoo that states emphatically and without question the nature of her relationship with Sanji- that being, they’re married. Her shoes are flat, not heeled; her eyes are tawny, not umber. Her weapon is a spear, not a sword; and, frankly speaking, you could scrub an entire city’s worth of filthy linen on those abs. She’s a big woman, built out of heavy stone bricks with two extra large for her ovaries and one split in half for her tits. If you hit her, you’re the one that’ll move.

I can remember… a long time ago, Mab’s hair was long like that, and… **she was doing my hair**? It was for a festival… you know, it’s funny. I only wear my hair the way I do because Mab taught me how to put it up in the style I use: ‘twin buns, bells on for festivals, otherwise just use ribbons. You’re a beautiful girl, Tilly, and a doughty fighter; letting your hair get in the way is just stupid, in the face of that.’

I wrap my hands tight, but not too tight, and double check that my feet are still ready for battle- and they are. I pin my *Courtly* bells into my buns, and take the stack of files Sage has collected for me with help from Ren and Aster. Ren’s quietly talking to the rest of the Straw Hat Pirates, explaining how the trial will go and where they’re to stay- preferably seated- while they’re not in court. He even takes a moment to explain why Mab doesn’t want to fight- “Oya, Straw Hat: you’d really make Queen Mab kill her cousins, just so she doesn’t have to deal with people’s suspicions? Because if she runs, they won’t stop chasing her unless she kills them, y’know.”

I quickly go through my files, to review the case. I’ve got the picture memory, same as everyone in
my family- I only need to see something once to remember it forever. I go over the Local Rules for Court- Prosecution and Defence alternate calling witnesses and taking lead on who question them, Judge is not made cognizant of all portions of evidence until after the Trial is concluded, all Judgements are carried out after a three day period to allow for counseling and Final Requests…

And then, of course, my rival appears like a fart that won’t go away. I am using a lot of fart analogies today…

“Hello, Portgas,” said Suisan Yiu.

Suisan “Sue” Yiu is a Chief Prosecutor of the Prosecution Office in the SOL. During her first four years as a prosecutor, she had a perfect win record in trials owing to her willingness to do just about anything to get a guilty verdict for the defendant. Her defeat in Court at my hands was the beginning of a series of seismic shifts in her attitude concerning our profession.

Hell, she even quit twice- the first after the Case that lost her the eye, the second for… more personal reasons- only to return each time with a fresh outlook on how she conducted her life. By the time of this case, she’d become an internationally known prosecutor who’d prosecuted in five other countries at least, as well as being one of the top prosecutors back home.

Her goal as prosecutor is to seek the truth above all else, and to use the power of the Law to save people.

Her eye is… special. As far as I know, it’s technically a magatama, one that broke into a bunch of pieces during that Case where she lost her eye and gained a Broken one in return… A magatama is a sacred charm, imbued with strange and esoteric magical powers. Aster won’t tell me more than that- not how it’s made, not what it’s made of, nothing. According to him, the fact that Sue’s magatama broke during that Case was due to her own spiritual state, not any true fault in the gem. After the Break, Sue came back with her new eye, which she usually keeps under a wrap of some sort- be it an eyepatch, a bandanna, a lock of her own hair- doesn’t matter, she doesn’t like showing it out in the open except in certain circumstances. After all, it has the Broken Magatama making the bulk of its core; thus, her Broken Eye, which can only see where lays lie… whoops, lies lay, sorry.

A magatama properly charged with magical energy allows its possessor to see Psyche-Locks, which appear when someone is hiding information from themselves or the world. A Psyche-Lock is a psychomystic barrier that an individual, group, or genius locii possesses, which protects their secrets from others. Sue Yiu’s Broken Eye allows her to see these barriers manifested as chains surrounding whatever represents the secret-keeper best, sealed by red or black locks. Red locks are consciously kept secrets; black locks, on the other hand, are subconsciously kept secrets. Removing a red lock is as simple as poking logical holes into someone’s argument, and presenting evidence until the lock breaks down; removing a black lock by force is damaging to the keeper’s soul, their mind, and… well. It’s not something you do.

When Sue Yiu looks someone in the eyes with her Broken Eye, they are not compelled to tell the truth; but she will know if they lie, and will press relentlessly until the truth is revealed. How do I know all of this? Well, we go out for coffee pretty often, and Sue cannot hold her caffeine…

I don’t have any fancy magic stones, and my hair bells are just bells. I just use Logic to get through a
“Oh. It’s Yiu ,” I softly growled.

“Hahaha. You finally figured it out, Portgas?” sneered Yiu.

“Yeah- but, Yiu, dirty tricks like that won’t actually win a trial. You’ll need more than some misdirection to prosecute my defendant,” I said.

“Oh, that won’t be a problem, Tilly; after all, we’ve got a real Judge this time, not the old fool who usually ordains these things...” said Yiu.

“Is that right?” I said.

“Mmhm,” said Yiu, “And, wonder of wonders, he was the one to write out Mab Morgan’s Warrant of Arrest.”

I inhale, sharp and deep and suddenly furious.

Yiu glances at me, and nods once, her smile never wavering- and her one visible eye burning with rage.

“You know as well as I that Mab Morgan didn’t do this, Siusan,” I said, quietly.

“What I know, Tigerlily, is that unless you’ve got ironclad proof and extra silver in your tongue, Missus Morgan’s headed for a terminal date with the chopping block. -I also know that a preliminary autopsy report is worth less than the paper it’s printed on... Good luck,” murmured Yiu, before walking into the Court.

Shit.

Yiu wouldn’t give a warning like that unless it was genuinely warranted. Shit, fuck, and goddamn it all to hell.

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February 4th

Chihiro Town Courtroom

Quick tip, boys and girls- if your partner across the Court tells you, between the lines, that they’re suspicious of the Judge? Yeah, that’s a very bad sign. The Judge doesn’t look like someone to be wary of... then again, the fact that the Judge has a name of his own, and that name is Bartok... See, most Judges are content to simply go by their title in the Court Record; hell, it was only after Sue Yiu revealed a series of corrupt officials in the PO: SOL that Defense and Prosecution were required to name themselves...
We take our places; the gallery is filled with spectators- mostly Whitebeard Pirates, actually; the Defense Gallery has all my sister’s crewmates in it- except for two, I think.

*Bang-bang-bang* went the gavel.

“The Inquiry and Trial for the Murderer of Apple and Aloo Coffyn will now come to Order. Is the Prosecution ready?” said Judge Bartok.

“Ready, Your Honor,” said Yiu with a sharp grin on her face- crap, she’s not going to make this easy, she can’t…

“Is the Defense ready?” said Judge Bartok.

“Ready, Your Honor,” I said, chin tilted forwards and up in defiance.

“Prosecution! Call your first witness,” said the Judge.

“The prosecution calls Inspector Heesis Noopwright Detector to the stand,” said Yiu.

**Inspector Noopwright’s Testimony:**

“Calls came in around the fourteenth hour,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“Fourteenth hour-” I hummed to myself.

“When their bodies were found on the scene,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“Who were the bodies?” I sang.

“Tell us about the bodies please!” sang the Judge.

“They were Aloo and Apple Coffyn,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“It feels like I knew them…” hummed Aster.

“We won’t let Mab Morgan get away clean!” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“-is that how it’s gonna be? Fine, then, ready- **OBJECTION!** Where’s your proof Missus Morgan was there?” I sang.

**HOLD IT!** She was loitering at the scene without a care!” growled Yiu.

**OBJECTION!** Her suite was next door! By all accounts her marriage is a loving one too! If her husband had asked her to wait a moment outside-“
“TAKE THAT! Inspector, update your testimony; we have evidence that won’t be denied!” sang Yiu.

Updated Testimony: Poison?

“Poison was used to kill Aloo and Apple-” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“What kind of poison?” I sang.

“Tell us about the poison, please!” sang the Judge.

“Cyanide is what’s to blame,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“-from bitter almonds?” said the Judge.

“-yeah, something’s surely bitter here...” I hummed.

“It was obvious from the position of the bodies,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“Please explain that!” I sang.

“Besides the spoon pal? Aloo and Apple were stiff, upright, and foaming, at the mouth!”

“Can you add that to your testimony please?” I said.

“Add it to your testimony, Inspector.” said the Judge.

“Sure thing, pal. Poison was used to kill Aloo and Apple; Aloo and Apple were stiff, upright, and foaming at the mouth! Missus Morgan is to blame here-” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“I truly doubt that-” I hummed.

“-and of that there is no doubt!” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“-because the obvious contradiction is- OBJECTION! On arrest, was Missus Morgan armed?” I sang.

“Uh- no, no, she wasn’t,” said Inspector Noopwright.

“HOLD IT! Missus Morgan is a Fairy Queen; she doesn’t need weapons to kill anyone; ignoring that fact would be folly!” said Yiu.

“OBJECTION! Fairy Queen Morgan fights exclusively with a spear, and when exacting Vengeance uses her enemy’s own weapon! When committing a murder of any kind, she does not leave bodies!” I sang.

“Gyaagh!” yelps Yiu, as I just scored a direct hit and anyone familiar with the accused would know it; “W-well, we’ve still got more evidence to go through. Inspector, continue your testimony!”

Continued Testimony: What was in the Bathroom?
“Our killer was quite crafty,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“Somehow, I know that’s true,” I hummed.

“She knew the elder Coffyn’s routine,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“...something is wrong here, I just have to wait for it-” I hummed.

“Mab Morgan snuck a poison into their fruit-tarts,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“Oh no she didn’t-” I growled.

“She even had the nerve to leave the poison behind at the scene!” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“If that were true, there wouldn’t be a reason for me to- **OBJECTION!** Where was the poison found?” I sang.

“Uh, in the bathroom, pal,” said Inspector Noopwright.

“So, the killer left the poison in the couple’s bathroom, and killed them in their tatami room? Doesn’t something about that strike you as odd?” I said.

“Going somewhere with this, Portgas?” said Yiu.

“Take a closer look at those bottles of poison, Yiu. See it yet?” I said.

“...No, it can’t be true-” sang Yiu, wide eyed.

“Here’s what the bathroom poisons mean: Apple and Aloo were judges in this year’s World’s Worst Bakers contest!” I said, slamming a fist down on the defense bench.

“-my gods-” groaned the Judge, looking a bit green at the prospect.

“Knowing they would be exposed to some of the most dangerous cooking in the World, they had been preparing for months by practicing a serious regimen of mithridatism! There’s even a reminder on this flyer-” I said.

**Presented: Contest Flyer.**

“-which as you can see, has a note on the back, reminding someone to take something daily! If we check it against the registration forms in this folder-” I said.

**Presented: Judge Registration Folder.**

“-we’re sure to find a match in the handwriting! Those poisons belonged to the v-v-victims, I’d bet!” I trilled.

“Gyaagh!” said Yiu.

“Damn, pal, that’s a great point- if it weren’t for one thing!” said Inspector Noopwright.

“What’s that, Inspector?” I said.

“Mince Coffyn saw Mab Morgan leave the hotel suite!” said Inspector Noopwright.
“I’m gonna need some testimony, there, Inspector.” I growled.

**Continued Testimony: Motive?**

“Every killer knows their victim,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“By and large, that’s true-” I hummed.

“Mab Morgan knew the Coffyns,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“Well, she had better!” hummed Yiu.

“It’s not like she killed a man- oh, wait-” I grumbled.

“Not sure why Missus Morgan picked them,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“Picked the victims?” said the Judge.

“As we fear it’s clear that she hated their guts!” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“Pretty unlikely, because this story is really quite- **OBJECTION!** Wasn’t Missus Morgan in their employ?” I sang.

“Uh- yeah, pal, so what?” said Inspector Noopwright.

“Well, why would anyone bring harm to the source of a lucrative contract? Missus Morgan is a self-employed sewing professional; the majority of her international reputation comes from commissions and private contracts. She has no motive to kill the victims; they were her customers!” I said.

**HOLD IT!** Murder of Opportunity is hard to prove- but not impossible. Mab Morgan was found at the scene with a poisoned spoon- the poison in question matched the poison used to kill the victims! Pray tell, Portgas; how do you explain that?” said Yiu.

“Easily! The Killer dropped it when exiting the scene, or planted it to frame someone else!” I said, slamming my palm down on the barrier.

**PORTGAS! YIU! PLEASE DO DESIST THIS DEBATE ABOUT LOGISTICS; WE’RE HERE TO FIND OUT WHO DID IT-**” sang Judge Bartok.

“But Your Honor, how else are we supposed to-” I said.

“NO ‘TAKE THAT!'S, NO MORE RETORTS! NO SECOND CHANCES, NO LAST RESORTS; FINISH THIS UP OR I’LL FIND YOU BOTH IN CONTEMPT OF COURT-” sang Judge Bartok.

**CORRECTION!** My witness is not finished testifying. Detective, complete your testimony!” said Yiu.
“Sure thing, pal! When the victim’s son found their bodies-” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“That poor baby...” hummed Aster.

“He ran out from the scene-” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“That must have been- scary- strangely-” I hummed.

“-painfully- plainly-” Yiu hummed, scrubbing at her eyepatch.

“The bodies were brought to Dr. Vavoom,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“Dr. Vavoom? ” I hummed.

“And Mab Morgan was arrested near the scene,” sang Inspector Noopwright.

“I’m really, really sorry but- **OBJECTION!** Apple and Aloo were poisoned? Where’s the proof?” I shouted, drawing the stare of the Judge.

“Other than the foam at their mouths, pal?” said Inspector Noopwright.

**TAKE THAT!** There’s photos of their bodies, as well!” sang Yiu.

**HOLD IT!** How do we know the defendant went into their suite? We need evidence or we can call this whole farce a goof-” I sang.

**OBJECTION!** If you claim that your defendant’s being framed-” sang Yiu.

“-and if you argue she’s to blame then all the same I ask you-” I sang.

**WHERE’S THE PROOF?**” we shouted at each other.

**OBJECTION!** shouted the Judge, to everyone’s gasps.

“-Did I do something wrong?” said Inspector Noopwright.

“I object to wasting my time going in circles like this! Verdicts are required in three days, and this sing-songy yammering has already cost us part of one!” said the Judge.

“Y-y-yammering?” I trilled, arms akimbo.

“I thought it was rather catchy...” grumbled Yiu, rubbing at her eyepatch again.

“You’d best both examine some evidence and try a bit harder going forward. I expect a far better performance from you!” said the Judge.

“Oh, you’ll get a performance...” I grumbled, gripping the bared skin of my upper arms so I don’t loose my temper.

“Defense; Call your Witness,” said the Judge.
I bit my lip for a moment, and then I called-

“The defense calls Mab Morgan to the stand!” I said.

**Mab Morgan’s Testimony:**

“It was just after tea time;” sang Mab.

“After tea time,” hummed Yiu.

“My husband and I were returning to our suite;” sang Mab.

“Who is your husband?” sang Yiu.

“The full name of your husband please!” said the Judge.

“Vinsmoke Sanji is his name, sir-” sang Mab.

“Add that to your testimony, please,” said Yiu.

“It was just after tea time; my husband, Vinsmoke Sanji, and I were returning to our suite; he went in first to prepare for after Suntide; I noticed a spoon on the ground, and thought it was neat!” sang Mab.

“Interesting story, but I really must know- **OBJECTION!** What drew your attention to the spoon?” said Yiu.

“Well, it’s small and made of glass; and it sparkled oddly in the light- and also, I think it made my husband sneeze-” mused Mab.

**OBJECTION!** Relevance, please?” I said. If Yiu doesn’t want an easy time of it, I’ll happily oblige…

“Dr. Vavoom states in the autopsy report that the poison on the spoon and the poison in the victims is one and the same. I’m simply following the chain of evidence, Portgas-” sneered Yiu.

**HOLD IT!** Are you implying that the spoon in question and Mab Morgan are connected beyond the bounds of chance? Anyone could have found that spoon, and anyone could have picked it up!” I said.

**OBJECTION!** I find it suspicious that Missus Morgan was the one to find the spoon! Why didn’t her husband notice it? He’s a professional chef- surely he would have noticed something like a spoon on the floor? An explanation, Missus Morgan!” said Yiu.

**Mab Morgan’s Continued Testimony: We were getting hot and heavy!**

“The Holidays aren’t just times of celebration,” sang Mab.
“Theologically, that’s true—” I hummed.

“They’re times when the Barriers between all Worlds thin,” sang Mab.

“Get to the point please,” sang Yiu.

“My patience is limited—” growled the Judge.

“For safety’s sake, sexual congress during the holidays ought experience a cessation,” sang Mab.

“...You can’t be serious—” said Yiu, visible eye showing white all around the edges.

“In an effort to keep restless spirits from finding a way in!” sang Mab.

“...I really really hate you, Portgas—OBJECTION! Are you trying to say that the reason Mister Vinsmoke didn’t notice the spoon was because…?” said Yiu.

“Because we were groping each other with intent to bone, yes,” said Mab.

“ORDER! ORDER IN THIS COURT! -Missus Morgan, are you saying that the reason your husband didn’t notice the spoon on the ground was because he was too busy, erm-” said the Judge, twinned spots of lurid red high on his cheekbones.

“Fondling my funbags? Weighing the goods? Massaging my mammaries?” said Mab with a salacious eyebrow waggle.

“-Missus Morgan, do you have any shame whatsoever?” said a flabbergasted Yiu.

“Nope. Got that beaten out of me years ago, Prosecutor Yiu,” chirruped a sunny Mab.

“...So, to recap: Your husband, a professional chef, didn’t notice the spoon on the ground because he was playing with your breasts?” I interjected.

“Well, yes; and I was checkin’ to see if his ass was still finessin-” said Mab with a lascivious grin.

“Um- Missus Morgan, how often do you and your husband engage in sexual congress?” I said, head tilted to the side.

“Oh, about five times a day, why?” said Mab.

“ORDER! I WILL HAVE ORDER IN THIS COURT! -Missus Morgan, don’t you get a bit…tired…?” said the Judge, entire face gone red.

“Well, no, I was the one to suggest the schedule we settled on, actually; we used to go at it almost constantly, but we both have full time jobs, so that just wasn’t feasible. Honestly, we didn’t really find our limit during our honeymoon, we kept passing out before we got tired of the sex, and then we had other things to do...” said Mab, mournfully reminiscent.

“Missus Morgan, you mentioned in your previous testimony that your husband sneezed- could you testify here about that?” said Yiu, Done with all of this.

“Oh, certainly,” said Mab.

Mab Morgan’s Final Testimony: A Strange Reaction
“My husband is a professional chef, and knows his business well,” sang Mab.

“Can you explain that, and add it to your testimony?” said Yiu.

“Oh, sure; my husband is a three star chef, with full accreditation- you need only check his Fugu License to be assured,” sang Mab.

“Holy shit, Mab,” I murmured.

“Holy fuckin’ shit, Mab,” mumbled Aster.

“Because of the quality of his skills and senses, he has trouble- hm, how to say it...” sang Mab.

“Best just say it,” hummed Yiu.

“Sanji has always had an adverse reaction to that which he is not inured,” sang Mab, shrugging.

“OBSESSION! What relevance does this have to the case at hand?” said Yiu.

“OBSESSION! The relevance to this case is obvious!” I said, “Mab Morgan just stated that her husband has powerful and very finely tuned senses that react adversely when presented with overwhelming amounts of new substances. It’s very well known among the Trades that chefs of any Star Ranking are progressively more degenerate and perverted as they gain higher levels of accreditation; it’s to do with how much time and effort they have to put towards their mastery of skill versus their regular life experience. It makes perfect logical sense that the only reaction Chef Vinsmoke would have to the spoon in question is a sneeze when the circumstances of his exposure are taken into account- no three star chef would notice a small detail like a spoon on the ground when they don’t work at the establishment and, coincidentally, have a live woman in their arms! With these facts taken into consideration, Mab Morgan must be struck from the suspect list!”

“HOLD IT! That’s a stretch, even for you, Portgas!” said Yiu.

“TAKE THAT! -check the Autopsy Report again, Yiu,” I said.

“What- gyaaaaaaah!” shrieked Yiu.

“That’s right! The poison used in this murder has a half life of five days! If exposed to a person’s skin, hair, clothing, or any other permeable surface- including nails- while not lethal, it will continue to be detectable for the duration. If Mab Morgan had killed the victims, she would have been exposed to the poison, and her husband would have noticed! If she had been wearing protective gear of any kind, he still would have noticed- it’s flatly impossible to remove all protective gear without contaminating oneself, which is why the standard blocking runes have been mandated! Further, if she had used those runes, he still would have known - they are not the kind of thing that can be hidden in any way, PARTICULARLY AT A PUBLIC BATHING HOUSE!” I roar.

I take a deeply calming breath, and stare my rival down across the tiled swan in the floor.

“If Mab Morgan had poisoned the victims, Vinsmoke Sanji wouldn’t have been able to approach her at all, much less grope her so thoroughly he missed an entire glass spoon on the floor,” I rumbled, slamming my fist onto the barrier with a resounding crack.

I can actually see Siu’s thoughts racing through her head, before a flash of- apprehension? Distaste?
Then a jolt of pure, focused determination- all these cross her uncovered eye, and then- oh no.

“Fair enough, Portgas. Your Honor, Prosecution requests permission to call final Witness for this Day,” said Yiu, with mocking lightness.

“Granted; Prosecution, call your Witness,” said the Judge.

“Prosecution calls Mince Coffyn to the stand!” said Yiu.

Oh hell.

**Mince Coffyn’s Testimony:**

“I could never have imagined finding my parent’s corpses,” sang Mr. Coffyn, exhausted.

“What were you doing earlier that day?” said Yiu.

“Tell us of your day, boy,” sneered the Judge.

“I went to get my insta-print camera restocked; I needed more philome, new printing cartridges, and more pictstock,” sang Mr. Coffyn.

“I think she’s gonna do it,” hummed Aster.

“Yiu, don’t you fuckin’ do it,” I hummed, scowling.

“After my camera got stolen, I went back to the hotel and found out that I’m an orphan,” sang Mr. Coffyn.

“We still need to find that camera- or his pictures…” I hummed.

“I think I’ve spent the past few days in shock!” sang Mr. Coffyn.

“I don’t like to do this, but I really have to know- OBJECTION! You said you needed more philome, printing supplies, and specialty paper; however, neither the Prosecution or the Defence was able to find any pictographs at the scene. Can you explain where they went?” I said.

“Uh, yeah, I think so…” said the increasingly tense Mr. Coffyn.

**Mince Coffyn’s Continued Testimony: My Photo Collection**

“My photos are mostly family pictures and recipes of foods I’ve made,” sang Mr. Coffyn.

“That’s intriguing…” hummed Aster.

“I got more serious with my hobby after Mom started to show-” sang Mr. Coffyn, tears starting to run down from his painfully reddened eyes.

“Wait, he can’t mean-” gasped Aster.
“Oh no-” I hissed.

“She had a real craving for fruit tarts at the end there…” sang Mr. Coffyn, as his voice began to break.

“Oh my goodness-” said Yiu, the barest hint of tears in her visible eye.

“I don’t know why anyone would have wanted to take my picture albums, though…” sang Mr. Coffyn, almost caved into himself, abject misery in every line of his body.

“I cannot be hearing this- **OBJECTION!** -are you saying your mother was pregnant?” I said, horrified.

“Yes, about thirty-five weeks or so- th-the actual day of their d-deaths was her due date, but, well, she’d only dropped the day before, a-and the midwife said that due dates were really more like due guidelines… I was, ah, I was looking forwards to having a sibling anyway,” said Mr. Coffyn.

**OBJECTION!** Are you saying your picture albums were **stolen?** ” said Yiu.

“Oh, yeah- um, my whole bag was, actually- I’d run out of space in my picture albums, and my camera prints a weird size, so it’s easier to just… I needed new albums anyway, mine were falling apart…” said Mr. Coffyn.

“Did you get a good look at who stole your bag and camera?” said Yiu.

“Actually, yeah,” said Mr. Coffyn, perking up for the first time in probably days.

**Mince Coffyn’s Continued Testimony: The Theft**

“My bag was stolen in the Parkade; near the waterfall, where painters like the light,” sang Mr. Coffyn.

“How do you know that?” I sang.

“Tell us how you know that, boy,” sneered the Judge.

“Dad was having the house remodeled and Mom couldn’t stand the noise or the smells-” sang Mr. Coffyn.

“Ah, I get it,” hummed Aster.

“-so, to keep mom happy, we moved to the hotel,” sang Mr. Coffyn.

“Add that to your testimony, Mr. Coffyn,” I sang.

“Oh, sure. Our house was being remodeled; a new addition for the same; we moved to the hotel for the duration, and things really weren’t the same. When my bag was stolen, I was in the parkade, near the waterfall where painters like the light; I was taking my camera out to take a picture of the frozen landscape, because- aside from fruit tarts- I knew it was the kind of thing Mom really liked,”

“Get to the point boy,” growled Judge Bartok.

“Defence cannot recuse the Judge-” I hummed at the exact right pitch so that only Yiu could hear me.
“I was just putting my camera back in my bag; when the thief came around and snatched it out of sight,” sang Mr. Coffyn.

“I’m at the very end of my tether here- **OBJECTION!** The thief took your bag, and your camera?” I said.

“Yeah- snapped my camera strap right off, I’ve got a bruise from it right here-”

“Show the Court for the Record, please,” I said.

“Sure, DA Portgas,” said Mr. Coffyn, before showing his bruised wrist to the Court.

It’s a thin line, probably from something thin, like the strap of a small camera.

**HOLD IT!** Can you describe the thief?” said Yiu.

“Yeah, of course,” said Mr. Coffyn.

**Mince Coffyn’s Final Testimony: The Thief**

“The thief is a local demon, known for loitering around the nearby Daiso,” sang Mr. Coffyn.

**HOLD IT!** Can you be more specific?” I said.

“I mean the Daiso owned and run by Hearb Curree; and I mean the demon named Osvaldo-” said Mr. Coffyn.

“Please add that to your testimony, Mr. Coffyn,” I said.

“The thief is a local demon named Osvaldo, known for loitering near Hearb Curree’s Daiso,” sang Mr. Coffyn.

**HOLD IT!** Please describe the demon named Osvaldo,” I said.

“He’s a boy about my age, with a sooty cast to his hair; he wears a pompadour and a black leather jacket-” sang Mr. Coffyn.

“Oh no-” I hummed.

“His eyes are the color of the inside of an avocado-” sang Mr. Coffyn.

“Oh no-” I hummed.

“And because of him, I’ve been having to carry my baking things in a shopping basket!” sang Mr. Coffyn, showing just a bit of temper.

As Judge Bartok reels back with a thunderous expression, his face a rictus of rage and vitriol, I consider what’s about to happen.
Who is Portgas D. Elphame? Mab doesn’t remember names very well, she never has- it’s why she gave all of us nicknames, and tends to use pet-names where possible. So.

Portgas D. Elphame, also known as The Honorable Daun Portgas D. Elphame, is the Queen of Swans. Mab Morgan is Queen of Wrens; Morrio’ghan Morgan is Queen of Crows; and Portgas D. Gable is Queen of Swifts. In theory, that means Mab Morgan is the Queen of All Witches; Morrio’ghan Morgan is Queen of the Dead; Portgas D. Gable is Queen of Lands; and Portgas D. Elphame is Queen of Hell. In practice, Mab Morgan is currently ensuring that those with magical power nearest to her are getting educations; Morrio’ghan Morgan is the Grana of the Theatre; Portgas D. Gable is Grana of Infrastructure; and Portgas D. Elphame is the Graun of Judgement.

The international Court system was established permanently around the forty-fifth year of the modern calendar by Portgas D. “Scratch” Elphame and her sworn liege, Queen Ariel “Grand Line” Morgan. Despite the best efforts of the World Nobles, religious fanatics, and the insidious spectres of piracy and chaos, the International Court of Law has survived and thrived, in it’s own blood-drenched and psychotic way.

Thus, the World Government unofficially washed its hands of the Courts many centuries ago, after Queen Ariel quite literally sailed across the horizon, never to be seen or heard from again, and never to return- but always present in the hearts of those who loved and feared her. The following six Swan Queens who commanded the Court of Law made only a token effort to enforce justice, mainly by vigorously enforcing executions and imprisonment for lawbreakers- mostly pirates, actually. They also re-posted the SEVEN LAWS signs, which in the finest traditions of safety signage everywhere, are stolen every end of semester by drunken students World-wide.

The Seventh Swan Queen, Honorable Daun Portgas D. Elphame, is a return to form- being a contemporary of Queen Ariel, and one of the founders of the system entire. They returned in a flash of white light and brimstone-smoke in the middle of the SOL Training Academy campus quadrangle, during a heated debate where both sides were not only illogical, but wrong. This might have caused problems, except most of the teachers were so grateful to finally have someone, anyone, who knew what they were doing when it came to the Law… Daun Portgas D. Elphame was made Swan Queen that very afternoon, and has remained such ever since.

Every internationally ranked lawyer is terrified of them. Basically, if Gol D. Roger had been an officer of the law and functionally immortal, he'd have been a young scamp at Daun Elphame’s knee.

The speech every lawyer, Defense or Prosecution, memorizes sometime in their first year- that Queen Scratch gave to a visiting dignitary, is thus:

“Come in, please, come in. I can’t entertain you shipboard as I once could, but there is tea and plenty of food, and I understand you’ve done well for yourself at the gambling tables down in Chihiro Sento. I suppose I can afford to lose a little now and then. My late first husband was a wealthy man and I magnified his wealth- well, you know how.

“I think there should be discipline in everything, you know, even lawlessness. When I ruled the sea
and the Red Rag Fleet, no one disobeyed me- and I do mean that literally. After all, those who did were beheaded. But, on the other hand, I think my rule was mainly beneficent. Did you know I forbade those under my command to steal from villagers who supplied us? That only made sense, of course. Death was also the sentence for any assault on a female captive. One makes these laws when one grows up as I did.

“I also insisted that anything taken from town or ship was to be presented, registered, and given out amongst all- oh, the original taker got a percentage, and twenty percent is better than nothing, you know. That’s how you keep a sailor happy.

“My dear second husband, he also issued some laws, I suppose, but they weren’t written down or very well enforced. What were they? Who knows. What does it matter? My laws were what mattered.

“Eventually, of course, it became easier just to tax the local cities than to keep sacking them.

“Nicer for all concerned and not so much work for us. Bureaucracy will have its day, sooner or later, always.

“That is how I came to be here, you know; several years ago, after I defeated their entire Navy, the local government offered amnesty to pirates. Well they might; what other option did they have? But I was wealthy, so why should I continue to work when I was no longer a criminal? It was in thirty-eight that I left crime behind forever and opened this little house of respite. Here I am content, you know, and I think I will be for quite some time. Hopefully a long, long time!

“Oh, I am called many things. I was called Shi Xianggu, and I am called Cheng I Sao, sometimes, but mostly I am known now as Ching Shih- the Widow Ching, wife of two pirates, but a pirate empress myself. Of course, that’s only what my countrymen call me, these days- most would know me as Portgas D. Elphame, Old Scratch himself.”

If the Judge in your Trial is behaving badly- as in, not according to the Laws and Orders of the Court- then the Prosecution may, at any time, call for the Queen of Swans to take their rightful place as Queen of Judges. Defense may only Second the Call, not Initiate.

And everyone knows that Daun Elphame has no set gender to speak of…

I suppose, before we get much further, I should explain what the Chihiro Sento actually is. Chihiro Sento isn't just a bath house; it's a Temple, and a Hotel, and a Casino, and an Embassy too. Even more specifically, the Queen of Swans is the ultimate ruler of the Chihiro Sento, and all it's environs- and most people don't realize that the limits of the Sento are much larger than the limits of the town...

I mean. If you've ever been here and wondered why there are stylized swans literally every-gods-damned where... well, now you know.
Judge Bartok roars with fury; his bellow breaks through the silence of the Court like a bomb.

“ENOUGH! I see no reason to further entertain these flights of fancy- I said enough!” screams the Judge.

Yiu presses a hand to her covered eye and grits her teeth.

“This case’s evidence is extremely clear- the guilty party is Mince Coffyn! I’m through with your bluffs, your condescensions, and your disgusting attitude! They don’t call me ‘Magnificent’ because my eyes can’t see what’s clear-” snarsls the Judge.

“It wasn’t me! I swear to all the gods, it wasn’t me!” babbles Mr. Coffyn.

“THAT’S ENOUGH! This Court sees no reason to further prolong this trial! The evidence and testimony that we’ve seen and heard are quite worthwhile! The victims were alone in their rooms, when they ate from the poisoned tart-” sneers the Judge.

“-no, you’re wrong, you’re all wrong! I made those tarts, and I would never- I would never!” wails Mr. Coffyn.

“-the only person in the room who had access, ability, and motive to kill was you-” growls the Judge.

“-no! No-” whimpers Mr. Coffyn.

“-Mince Coffyn; it was you who killed your parents with a poisoned apple tart!” said the Judge, glaring with triumph.

“-No! No- I swear I didn’t kill my parents, or my unborn sibling! Someone else must have been there- someone must have wished them harm! That person is the one who killed my parents! Why won’t you believe me-?” gasped Mr. Coffyn

Fuck it. I know a contradiction when I hear one.

“OBJECTION!” I roared, punctuating with both of my hands slamming into the Defense Barrier; the sound of my rage beat on the air with all the same crash and violence as a cannon firing next to your ear.

“Judge Bartok… how do you know what kind of tart Mr. Coffyn made for his parents? That information is not in any of the presented evidence, and the Bench is not privy to all the collected evidence of the Prosecution and Defense until after the conclusion of the Trial,” I rumbled into the shockingly silent Court, my voice the cruel grinding of metal on bone.

The Preliminary Autopsy Report was astonishingly thorough- it named the murder weapon as a poisoned apple tart, although I have my suspicions about that… and, considering what I know of Mince Coffyn’s skills, he could have made the tart in question. Except for one, very simple thing.
The Judge is frozen, his rage-red face starting to pale.

I continue, merciless.

“Judge Bartok… setting aside your acquisition of knowledge you are not privileged to have at this time… where would Mince Coffyn have gotten the apples for the alleged murder weapon?”

In a Courtroom this silent, you can hear every minor sound - the shuffle of the Bailiffs, the creak of Yiu’s eyepatch as she digs fingers into the leather… the soft, sobbing gasps of Mince Coffyn as my sister, Mab, wraps an arm around him. When she was struck from the suspect list, her cuffs were removed by a Bailiff - over the soft, fabric scream of my jinbaori, as my wings strain against it’s soft caress, I can hear her gentle, soothing hum.

In that strange silence, my fists slamming into the Defense Barrier booms.

“Judge Bartok… if Mince Coffyn had made the alleged weapon, he would have needed to prepare the apples, which we must assume was the delivery method of the poison used to kill both victims. Mince Coffyn is noted in his medical records to have a hypersensitivity to Cyanide, which as far as preliminary evidence can prove, is the poison used in this murder. Mince Coffyn could not have tainted the apples himself without causing his eyes to swell shut; and if the apples had been tampered before, making this a case of negligence, not Murder- Mince Coffyn would have smelled it immediately and discarded the apples in question! But, if you still will not concede that Mince Coffyn did not murder his parents with an apple tart, consider this- in this Hungry Month, where did Mince Coffyn get apples for a tart?”

The Judge chokes.

I can hear my jinbaori starting to tear.

I’m too enraged to stop now.

“I ask you again, Judge Bartok: how did Mince Coffyn get the apples to make that tart? It wasn’t from the Sento Kitchen; he’s registered for the World’s Worst Bakers contest, they banned him sight unseen - it’s right here in the Coffyn’s registration! Nor could the poisoned apples have come from somewhere in town; this kingdom prizes apples, so much so that only the wealthiest of Nobles can afford to purchase one, and only the growers themselves can afford to eat them whenever they’d like! MINCE COFFYN HAS BEEN SPENDING ALL OF HIS MONEY ON PICTOGRAPH ALBUMS AND PICTOGRAPHY SUPPLIES FOR THE PAST NINE MONTHS! WE HAVE HIS RECEIPTS, BECAUSE HE IS A FISCALLY RESPONSIBLE AND WELL ORGANIZED YOUNG MAN!” I said.

My jinbaori was made for me specifically as a graduation present from the SOL:A by my sister, Mab. In my rage here today, I’ve shredded it completely.

My wings stretch wide and stiff across my back. They’re thick enough to block out all the light, and shaped just like the wings of a bat; my shadow rises across the Court, heavy and black over the Judge.

My fists slam into the Defense Barrier a third, and ominous time; I can hear it creaking underneath my furious weight.
“Judge Bartok… The Defense demands an explanation for these discrepancies, or an immediate dismissal of this Trial!” I snarled across the Court.

In the resounding, roaring silence that followed my enraged declaration, Sue Yiu finally had enough. I could hear the sharp crack of her eyepatch tearing, and from the corner of my eye I could see the blazing purple of her Broken Eye.

I continued staring down Judge Bartok.

Sue Yiu slammed her own fists into the Prosecutor’s Barrier.

The sound was like a gunshot.

“Judge Bartok, the Prosecution demands an explanation for the discrepancies noted by the Defence, or an immediate dismissal of this Trial… with you as Judge,” said Yiu, her own black bat-like wings stretched wide and furious.

Judge Bartok sneers.

I look over to Sue Yiu, who looks back at me. There’s a hesitant wariness on her face- but at my simple nod, my hair-bells chiming, that wariness firms into the kind of determination that shatters mountains into the Sea.

“Prosecution calls The Right Honorable Daun Portgas D. Elphame to the Bench,” said Yiu.

“Defense seconds the Call,” I said.

You ever have a moment where you can feel the energy of a room, or maybe the mood, and that mood is… not good? Not bad, either- teetering.

It’s not like that, when the Queen comes.

It’s like that when Granuna visits- but then, Death brings out the most primal urges in people. She always has.

The first thing I notice is the pressure, an almost unbearable weight on my entire self- my body, my mind, my spirit. The pressure eases just enough that I can hear the gasp that rings out through the Gallery as the wet-sounding slap of bare feet on tile echoes.

Somehow, in the throes of rage, Judge Bartok manages to gasp out an accusatory “Who the hell are you!?” at Queen Scratch.
For perhaps the only time in living memory, Queen Scratch deigns to smile, and draw their-satsumata… and then, they tap the butt of the spear-fork onto the ground, once, twice, thrice-

At each tap, another Bailiff steps forwards, vanishes, and is replaced by one of the Executioners. The Executioners are the Elite of the Bailiffs, and in the Court Record- unless they sit the Bench or are called to testify- are always referred to by their weapon, which is mandated by Law for use in the apprehension, capture, and retrieval of those who are accused of and have committed crimes.

They appear in order, and rank; and all of them are kin to me, one way or another. First comes the Three Tools of Arresting: Satsumata (a forked spear meant for man-catch), or in this case, Queen Scratch, Judge Portgas D. Elphame; Sodegarami (a spear with the head of the angered Vajra, meant to tangle trailing sleeves and wings), a beautiful Fishwoman who is a bit older than myself, Cousin Misao; Tsukubo (a spiked push-pole meant to corral crowds), oh, hey, that’s Cousin Heloise- I usually see her at Sunday dinner with Mom and Auntie…

Then come the others- Kanamuchi (a riding crop style whip made out of flexible steel), oh, Cousin Siobhan; Kiriko no bo (a wand-like stave made of heavy wood or iron), Cousin Ragannie; Tetto (a pipe weighted and shaped like a sword with no cutting edge), Little Holly-go-Lightly, but I’d have to ask Mom how we’re related, it’s complicated and boring; Jutte (a club or truncheon made of iron or wood weighted with metal), Cousin Vivian; Metsubushi (blinding agents in powder or mist form), Cousin Sunshine, but she’s really named something else… I think it’s Susurrus, actually? But she punches people if they call her Susurrus, so we call her Sunshine which she likes much better; Te Yari (a spear meant for close quarters), ah, Mab’s favorite cousin, Cousin Slyphia; Mankiri (weighted chain weapon meant to capture and ensnare), and my favorite cousin, Gristelau; and, finally, only really noticeable by dint of how the hell are we related- Hojojutsu (a method of securing the accused or the executee), or Despereaux. Despereaux just sort of… showed up one day at Sunday dinner, and just kept coming back? I’m not entirely sure we are related, except for the fact that she’s given me stern Sisterly advice before, and I’m fairly sure she’s fought for Mab’s honor at least once...

But nevermind that shit, Queen Scratch is speaking.

“I’m The Right Honorable Daun Portgas D. Elphame, Queen Scratch to those who don’t care about names. I’ve fought in two World-wide wars and countless smaller ones in no less than five separate Ages. I’ve led countless men and women into battle with everything from horses and stone weapons to artillery and explosives. I’ve seen the headwaters of the Great Sandora River, and treated with Tribes of Folk no other has ever seen before. I’ve won and lost a dozen fortunes, killed many men, and to this day love only one man with a passion a sniveling wretch like you could never begin to understand. That’s who I am. As for you, boy? YOU ARE IN. MY. WAY,” said Queen Scratch, their voice a biting, overwhelming, stomach wrenching pressure on ever sense and surface.

Have you ever been walking along somewhere very narrow, and you think nothing of it until you look down to your side and see that there’s an entire mountain’s worth of space between where your feet are, and where you thought the ground was? Or how about… have you ever woken up because something with scratchy feet just ran across your arm? Or how about you saw something awful, heard a song that didn’t fit the mood at all, and now every time you close your eyes you can see it, you can hear it- that’s what being near Queen Scratch in a mood is like.
I don’t recommend ever putting yourself on the receiving end of Their Majesties ire; even being on the side, just as an observer, is fairly painful.

It occurs to me that I haven’t ever really looked at a Bailiff before; I see them so often, I never really take the time to look at them. Well, let’s start with the apprentices- each Office of the SOL has it’s own unique style of uniform, with the least codification being in the Prosecution and Defense. The Bailiffs are a more militarized version of the police; and so, their uniforms tend to be very military.

Ah, there they are- the Bailibabies, I mean. The uniform doesn’t change, Winter to Summer- but the length of their hair does. The only real way to tell if the babe in question is male, female, both, neither, otherwise- is to ask. The uniforms are just that- uniform. The one with the very fancy hat and nearly sheer shirt is the Court Stenographer; their entire job is to record everything that happens in Court, every word, every presented piece of evidence…

That’s the Evidence Guard, and there are always three of those… ah, there’s the other two. Full Bailiffs are dressed in the Uniform, with the various differences representing their rank- the fanciest one is almost never at simple murder trials, unless they’re covering for someone else, of course. And that, of course, is Bailey, Queen Scratch’s personal Sniper-in-Waiting. Yes, really.

And then, of course, the Executioners- everyone involved in Court knows exactly who they are. They don’t have to wear uniforms; their weapons are their uniforms.

Queen Scratch has left Judge Bartok to the tender mercies of the Executioners- Kanamuchi takes a particular disliking to betrayers and oathbreakers, and so has laid the very tip of her iron crop to the fluttering pulse at Judge Bartok’s throat- and taken their rightful seat at the Bench.

They regard us with mild amusement, which feels just exactly like having a kitten dig their tiny needle claws into the flesh of your neck as they lovingly purr into your ear.

“I surely hope none of y’all girls are allergic to pickles, because you just dragged me about knee deep in one,” mused Judge Elphame, “Then again, I hardly ever get to act as Judge in Trials anymore- something about being overwhelming for the lawyers of today. Well, how are they s’posed to get any kind of spine if we coddle them? I do declare…”

“Now, girls, I hate to be a bother- but it’s the end of the day, and we just don’t have time for any more witnesses. I’m dismissing the accusation against Mince Coffyn, as it was made by Mister Bartok with evidence he could only have if he were involved in the crime himself-” said Judge Elphame, glancing over the Court Record that Bailey just handed off to them, “-and I expect we won’t be getting much further without clearing up a few things. Judge Lorenzo Bartok, you are the current Accused. You have stated, on Record, knowledge that you should not be cognizant of, excepting if you had been involved in a most nefarious and unseemly way in the Murder of Aloo and Apple Coffyn. Who stole Mince Coffyn’s pictograph collection, and why? What poison, exactly, killed the Coffyns, and what was the method of it’s delivery? Why were the Coffyns murdered, and by whom? Who else is involved here? And, most importantly of all- if no baby was found at the scene of the crime, yet a baby was supposed to be present within Apple Coffyn… where, in the name of the gods, is that baby?

“These questions require answers, if we’re to go forwards… Rain falls on the roofs of the just and the unjust, the saints and the sinners; those who know peace, and those who live in torment. Justice must be as the rain; uncaring of whom it falls upon, merely that it falls. Tomorrow begins at a dark
hour; a dark story began this day, and in it’s twisting strands, perhaps a thread of Truth will be revealed. You two have the ends of this day to rest, consider evidence, and find more witnesses to this case. **Court Adjourned,**” said Judge Elphame.

**CRACK!** went Honorable Daun Elphame’s fingers as they snapped them.

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End of DAY 1.

**Added to the Court Record:** Poisoned Glass Spoon

**Added to the Court Record:** Photo of Apple and Aloo Coffyn just after their murder

**Added to the Court Record:** Contest Flyer.

**Added to the Court Record:** Judge Registration Folder.

**Added to the Court Record:** Autopsy Report

**Added to the Court Record:** Mince Coffyn’s Bruised Wrist

**Added to the Court Record:** The Coffyn’s Registration at the Sento Hotel

**Added to the Court Record:** Mince Coffyn’s Receipts
DAY 2

CHIHIRO TOWN COURTHOUSE

“Unfortunately, neither of you have presented enough evidence to make a ruling in favor of murder for either Defendant, nor have you provided evidence or reasonable doubt in the ruling of a double suicide. Unless a witness appears who can lay serious and unassailable blame at the Accused’s foot, I’m sorry~” sighed Judge Scratch.

“Dammit-”

“-but I’ll simply have to-” said Judge Scratch.

“Gods dammit.”

“Dismiss this case against Lorenzo Bartok-” said Judge Scratch, her fingers raised high and ready to snap.

“GODS DAMMIT WAIT! Wait! I can provide witness to Lorenzo Bartok’s crimes! At the very least, I can prove he’s lying!”

“Shut up, boy!”

“Fuck you, old man! My accusation: Lorenzo Bartok killed my mother! He killed Isadora Bartok! He’s a liar, and a thief, and he killed those two people, too! He ain’t never stopped gambling-”

“-shut UP boy-”

“-which is in direct violation of his Pardon! An’ Miss Ashtraghi’s lyin’ too, if y’all ain’t asked her nothin’ yet! She lives at our house! Her room is under the backstairs!”

“Hmm. Bailey!” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!”

“Swear that Boy into the proceedings and get him on the stand. I want to hear what he has to say,” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!”

February 5th
I was so exhausted after yesterday’s Recusal, I barely had the strength to eat an unsatisfying dinner and put on my chemise. Aster actually had to put me in bed and tuck me in, I was so worn out- he even took the time to undo my buns, and braid my hair down like I would have for sleeping.

A lot of people think we’re romantically involved, simply because we know each other like a married couple would. If Aster has to go to the toilet while we’re ordering food at a new restaurant, I know what he’s going to want to eat; if I’m too tired to do my evening beauty routine, Aster can- and last night, did- do it for me.

Here are my beauty tips: go to bed with brushed and braided hair, if it’s long like mine, especially if you don’t have satin pillowcases. Always be sure to take off your make-up with an oil-based cleanser (cold cream is old-school for a reason, y’all), and wash your actual face with a water based cleanser- plain old water and baby soap will do just fine; never, ever, no matter what, go to sleep with your makeup on. Moisturize and wear sunscreen every day; don’t be afraid to add more conditioner, and brush brush brush. For hair like mine, which is fine, thick, and nearly bone straight, brushing every day is essential to getting the natural oils from my scalp all the way down the hair follicle and removing dead strands. I use a store bought conditioner on my ends, too, and spot check for splits when I’m on the toilet because what else can I really do while I’m on the toilet? Mm- other than the obvious, of course.

Go to sleep early enough to ensure you get at the very minimum, eight hours when you have to wake up- not because it’s the “minimum requirement”, though it is, but because you’ll look and feel like dog-shit without enough sleep.

Also! Fuck fad diets! The real secret to maintaining your weight is simply to Eat a Food when you’re hungry- not a snack, an actual food, like an egg or a sandwich- and stop eating when you’re full! Don’t eat because you’re bored or sad or angry! Be bored and sad and angry! It’s okay to be bored and sad and angry! Exercise! It’s better to walk somewhere- even just to the corner store- or even take the stairs when you can; you can even keep yourself healthy by doing about half an hour’s worth of physical labour in and around your house. Plant things; rake leaves; take out garbage; check the mail; laundry; dishes; sweep… Try not to get pickled- it’s okay to have one too many drinks if you want, but just be sure to drink as many glasses of water as you did glasses of coffee or booze.

There’s more I could think of, but… it’s about time to take off my eye mask and greet the day with something approaching a smile. A grimace? Is that the word? Bleh.

Oh holy hell, I didn’t notice until I turned on the lamp; our room’s a beginner-to-intermediate sex dungeon! Well, alright, it’s a fairly ostentatious hotel room at first glance… but there are one or two little things that make me think, no, this is a sex dungeon. A fairly vanilla sex dungeon, but a sex dungeon.

Firstly, I’m on one of the most comfortable waterproof sheets I think I’ve ever laid on; I can feel some of the terry cloth weave under the silk. It’s not my area of expertise, but I can tell that there are two fitted sheets, not one, because one layer has come loose near my feet, which happens when the sheets don’t quite fit the mattress, or when the waterproof sheets are new, and haven’t relaxed yet. And, of course, the advantage of using waterproof sheets over vinyl is that they last longer with hard use...

Secondly, literally everything in this room can be quickly wiped down or replaced for the purposes of cleaning. I’m out of bed, and- yes, the walls are covered with fabric, but the fabric is of the kind
that can be quickly wiped clean with a damp sponge. The soft goods in the room—bedding, rugs, the
cover on the couch, and so on—are all quickly replaceable, of course, as are the curtains which are
covering… a very heavy pair of blackout curtains, and behind that, a window that’s been treated to
be one way. A one-way mirror used as a window, I recognize the practice from love hotels and
whorehouses—it’s a way to indulge in the fairly common fetish of exhibitionism without actually
breaking any public decency laws. Oh, and there’s a micro-balcony because this window opens,
nice; and I’d bet good money that the privacy hedge outside and the steep angle of the hill that leads
to the walking path below, escorted as it is by tall flowers, makes it almost impossible to see into this
balcony.

Thirdly, there are hard points scattered all over the room. There are loops of metal screwed into what
must be the studs at nearly every possible height, set equidistant to each other in a way that could be
considered artistic, if it weren’t for the fact that linen rope of the correct gauge to fit through the
brassy hard points is in both side-table drawers. The cabinet below is full of bandages, bandage tape,
two kinds of lube, spermicide gel and foam, dental dams, and condoms. There’s even a little basket
that I’d bet fits right into an auto-sanitizer, like they use in hospitals and whorehouses for the various
toys I’m quite certain can be rented from the front desk and delivered to this room. There’s a small
phone-snail and a menu, and a little printer too for receipt tickets, even.

The reason this is a beginner to intermediate level sex dungeon is how they did soundproofing, in
that they *didn’t*—they did noise absorption. Noise absorption is achieved by changing the
characteristic of the noise. Stop it from echoing. Stop the reverberation. Stop the noise reflections. All
this involves handling the noise that is within the room. It seldom involves noise from outside the
room. You have likely heard of a room as being a “live” room or a “dead” room. For this type of
noise reduction or soundproofing you will use carpets, upholstered furniture, acoustical ceiling tile,
soundboard or interior walls.

What works for noise absorption does not ever work for noise reduction. Yeah, that’s right:
soundboard is useless at stopping noise. When put up with the sheetrock it is useless unless it is the
outside layer. Making this an intermediate at most sex dungeon, as the participants within are still
fairly concerned with surfaces to set the mood, rather than bringing the mood themselves.

You learn things when your mothers are Very Serious about teaching you The Sex, Sexuality,
Romance, Gender, and Gender Identity Knowledge. Like, for example, knowing that the [the ceiling](#) is not decorated in an avant-garde manner, but actually festooned with hooks between the tiles.

Classy.

Ugh, I need to get ready for the day. Hair first, then makeup; brush, perfume, part, braid, pin, add the
bells after. Makeup is never more than waterproof eyeliner and mascara; add lipgloss after. That’s
everything I needed a mirror for, so out I go—and Aster is panicking about…

“Aster, it’s fine,” I said.

“-BUT WHY ARE THERE HANDCUFFS?” Aster screeched.

“Some people like being restrained. Bathroom’s free, by the way—meet down in the Cafe for
breakfast at six-thirty sharp, aye?” I said.

“A-aye, I’ll just… get ready for the day…” Aster mumbled, shuffling into the bathroom. The door is
fully shut when the shriek of horrified embarrassment comes—ah, he must have found the auto-sanitizer, with it’s helpful little cartoons...

I peel off my chemise, change underwear, and pull on my spare jumpsuit. Normally, I’d put on my jinbaori and be ready for the day, but there’s two problems with that—firstly, because Queen Scratch is in residence at the Chihiro Sento, more formal attire is required, and secondly, I shredded it yesterday. It’s… almost completely ruined.

Deep breaths, Tilly; we soldier on. Mab will be… not exactly happy to make me another one, but she will, if I ask her to… and pay her for the time. Oh, wow, okay, why did Ren pack one of my very best dresses…?

My jumpsuits are actually a set of five, for reasons I feel are obvious, as they were on sale and I’ve yet to outgrow them; pasties and a bandeau, to keep my dugs restrained, and body glue to keep the bandeau in place no matter what; and my jacket. It looks red in the soft mood lighting of this room, but in the sunlight from the window it blazes an intense, royal blue. It has cap sleeves, a small keyhole in the front, and a much larger keyhole in the back, as it was made for a full grown Demon woman, not a girl. I suppose I really did need a new jinbaori anyway, but I’d have certainly preferred not to tear the one my sister made for me to pieces...

I put on new clean socks, pull on my yellow shoes, tie them and wrap them so I don’t forget later; wrap my hands and wrists and put the my-flesh tone color gloves over those— I need to get my nails done soon, probably after the case—and finally… uh, perfume, check, no jewellery, check, pack my bag for the day.

Fur stole on; bag over shoulder and across my body; key for the room, final check… wallet, keys, phone, purse, hair bells off the side table and one on the back of each bun, check to make sure the ribbons are neat—check, okay, let’s go.

DAY 2

Chihiro Sento; First Wing, First Floor Hallway

I step out of the room and make sure to close the door behind me, hearing the click that denotes a successful lock. Oh, it’s Sue—oh wow, she’s gone more formal than I’ve seen her since graduation at SOL:A.

She’s wearing— holy crap, she’s wearing shoes! Floral pants like she always wears, but I can tell by the sheen that they’re a much finer cut of fabric, and—oh, I’ve seen her wear the summer version of those, which are shorter, but—yeah, the winter ones go all the way to just past her ankles, and I know she wraps her feet like I do, she’s a kickboxer like me… Her shirt is a crop top, and made entirely out of lace. Well, she hides it as best she can, but she’s a provocative shit-head, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

Over the pants and under the shirt, there’s a stretchy haramaki in her favorite color of magenta that goes from her hips all the way over her dugs. Over the haramaki and the shirt is a sash belt in the
local style, because Sue Yiu’s never met a layer she hasn’t liked; and if this was a regular day, it’d be
tied in front, but it’s a Court day, so the bow is in the small of her back. Her vest is actually an ultra
fine mesh that photographs solid, but looks see-through in person and over everything, there’s a
cape. It’s a very fine cape, actually, I’ve only seen one other even remotely like it, and that was in a
drawing- and, yes, there is a hood just like on my stole, but it’s currently off her head.

She’s changed her hair! There are thick gold ribbons woven around her braids, and fine golden
chains woven in her braids, and they’ve been pinned on each side of her head, leaving her angle cut
bangs to hang loose- and she’s smirking at me?

Shit, I was staring.

“A woman’s liable to get ideas when she’s examined like that, Portgas,” smirks Yiu.

“You hardly ever change your look; I wanted to be sure that you’re still you, underneath all that paint
and gloss,” I sneer.

“Hmph. Yes, well- still me, underneath it all. And… I suppose you didn’t enjoy your Imbolc,
considering you never, ah, you n-never called back...” said Yiu- no, Siusan.

“I- no. No, I didn’t really like, uhm, I didn’t like… I didn’t like licking you. I- I didn’t like the taste,
or the texture, and… I should have just told you then I wasn’t having a good time,” I said.

“No, no, I- I should have been more attentive, to your needs. I- I’m sorry, I wasn’t... I wasn’t a good
lover,” said Siusan.

“No-! I’m sorry, I shouldn’t… I should have called you back, I should have… fuck, we really ruined
our friendship, huh?” I said, shaking my head.

“I mean, that’s usually what happens when friends decide to be lovers, even once. Even if things had
worked out to be the very best possible, our friendship would have been different,” said Siusan,
smiling sadly.

I sigh.

So does Suisan.

“Tigerlily, I- we could try again? It’s okay if you didn’t like something, and I would like to try
again… if you’ll have me...” said Siusan, hopefully.

“I- sure? We- ah, we can try dating, maybe, or, um, just… being together. What, ah, what did you
have in mind?” I said.

“I- hah, well, maybe we could take things slower? We don’t have to go right to the, uh, sex-stuff, we
can just cuddle if you want… maybe go to the outdoor theater when it’s warmer?” said Siusan.

“I’d like that, Siusan,” I said.
So, Ren’s a meddler; I know why he packed that pretty dress. Hell, I think I saw a cute pair of flats and a spring-weight jacket in my luggage too, but of course I never manage to get around to unpacking until right about when I have to repack everything to go back home and need to fit everything back in my suitcase…

I shake my head, and my bells chime gently.

“Tilly…” said Sue.

“So, did Freckle and Grump pack date-night clothing for you, too?” I said, smirking.

“…! Those meddling dogs!” said Sue.

“Hahahaha, yeah, Ren got me too. Think we should make ‘em sweat it out?” I said, grinning.

“Mm. Nah, they’ve been listening behind the doors of their rooms since we started talking- there wouldn’t be much point, I think. Although, we could probably get away with just going straight to breakfast and letting them squirm…” sniggered Sue.

“Awkward. I like it. Let’s go, then,” I said.

And then, we’re off. Behind us, I hear the sharp barking laughter of Franky and Gary, along with the high, fluttering laughter of Ren; and beyond them, the growling of Gunther, and the yelping of Aster, and the soft chittering of Hue Lin and Mue Lin, and the grumpy hoots of Sage. I’ve never really thought about it seriously, but I think the main reason Sue Yiu has a team of five people, and mine is only three, is because of how many more people she has to coordinate with to get her side of the job done.

Gunther Stonedge is very like Aster Mistburrow in the small details- he grew up in Mistvale, same as Aster, he has two older brothers, he’s a spirit channeler… but the devil is in those little details. For one thing, Gunther is a much less jolly person in general, what with all the black and red. For another, his main focus for the channeling of spirits isn’t a staff, but a small flock of crows he hand raises every few years. On formal occasions, like today and tomorrow, his normal cape of spotted woodpecker and grouse feathers is exchanged for a cape of spotted woodpecker, blackbird, and cuckoo feathers, which gives an ominous depth to his presence- no second chances, clarity, and being overlooked are a heady combination.

Franklin “Freckle” and Gary “Grump”, also known as the Wulf Brothers, are Sue’s personal assistants. One has the job of coordinating her general life details, while the other has the job of coordinating her work details- making sure her schedule for each case includes all the officials she needs to talk to, and so on. Lots of people think that there’s some cool reason they always wear scarves wrapped around their faces, but the truth is they just both have headgear toothbraces, and don’t want people to see. Most people think you can only get toothbraces as children; the truth is, you can only get toothbraces when you have enough money to pay for it out of pocket, as the NHS doesn’t pay for it unless your dentist says it’s a genuine health risk. Some people get dealt a bad hand in their tooth arrangements; Freckle and Gary were not dealt particularly bad hands, but they are just a little self-conscious about their teeth. Then again, they’ve got just enough Lanjin to dilute the Mink enough to have a mismatched teeth-pattern to actual tooth, and I’ve heard them bitching about caring for their hair and skin- apparently, they have patches that are more fur like that actually grow under their long-hair, all of which shed at different rates. Hard Luck.
Finally, there’s [Hue and Mue Lin](#), Sue Yiu’s research paralegals. The reason we have teams of paralegals behind us is simply because even if they’re all good at parsing the law, each of them has a different specialty- Hue and Mue Lin are only really comfortable socially with Sage, and Sage is an awkward turtle of a man. Their wedding was nice, though, and the three of them are very happy, so far as the rest of us can tell. Hue and Mue are almost relentlessly happy, upbeat, and cheerful, so… I guess it’s a good balance-match to Sage’s near constant pessimism.

**DAY 2 (48 HOURS REMAIN)**

Even so, even with all the ephemeral details of our teams, and my relationship issues with Sue, and the weirdness of passing the actual rent-a-dungeon desk, which looks more like the entrance to a discrete spa- even then, I still can’t stop turning the information revealed in yesterday’s trial over and over in my mind. Something about this whole thing stinks, beyond the corruption in the Judge.

We need Judge Bartok’s personal records- his purchases, sure, but also we need to know if he’s married, who’s on his payroll, and so on. Something about Kayumi Polleen’s attitude yesterday strikes me as suspicious… she was awfully resistant to answering questions, and seemed especially convinced I was going to somehow inconvenience her. I need the results of our tested substances back- I need to know what in the tea I got from the Scene, exactly, caused that silver to oxidize; and I need to know what exactly killed the Coffyns.

As for Answers to the questions so far posed… Mister Vinsmoke does indeed know Missus Morgan better than anyone- considering how often they have sex, he would have to. There are only so many things you can try before it’s just not as fun anymore- the fact that they’re still going strong after three years of marriage means they must know each other very well indeed, otherwise that much sex would become a chore, not a privilege. We need his version of events, no doubt.

Aster will be able to tell me at breakfast about the locks, and if there was any mystic aura to detect.

What the hell was the baked good on the table, where did it come from, and who made it? We haven’t proven that Mince Coffyn did- he said he made tarts for his mother fairly often, but we don’t know for sure if he did the day of the murder, nor do we know what he normally makes tarts with. We don’t even know for sure that it’s a tart that killed the Coffyns, only that chunks of fruit tart were found in their stomachs. Got that off the preliminary autopsy report; I’ll need the updated one to make further inductions and conclusions.

Where is Mince Coffyn’s camera, his pictogalbums, and the various paraphernalia for pictography that would have been in his bag? Did Osvaldo Bartok really steal it; and if so, why?

None of the Coffyns had a nerve disorder; the parents were, however, avid mithridatists. Could they have been self-dosing with arsenic acid? If so, how?

Mab Morgan could not have committed this crime, as the modus operandi is entirely wrong for her, and the victims were her customers besides. Opportunity does not equal motive; just because a person can do something doesn’t mean they will.

Dracule and Lefay need to be interviewed and possibly called to the stand; not just to testify for themselves, but to produce the aforementioned “Banana”, “Kusa-chan”, and “Marzipan”. Any of those five might have seen or heard something that proves important to the case.
Is the time of year significant? I don’t know enough about this case to make a definitive “yes” or “no” determination.

Urrgh. I also need to go to Daiso for a Vape and a mixture of specific Essential Oils. I forgot my moon-phases again- but, well, February is fucking weird, okay?

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February 5th

Chihiro Sento; Cafeteria

Properly speaking, breakfast in winter- and make no mistake, even if Imbolc was not more than two days past, it is still winter, February is the Starving Month- is almost always okayu, oatmeal, or congee, with a wide arrangement of condiments and additives so you get a bit of interest in your bowl.

Today’s breakfast is no different; a bowl of kashi with curls of candied lime peel, a small stack of lentil dosa, a small bowl of spicy kadala, a larger bowl of brisling in mustard sauce, bhar bhat, tonak, poha… and Kimchi over fluffy white rice, because it’s going to be a long-ass day and it’s very cold outside. No chest colds.

“Hey Tilly,” said Ace.

“Hey, Asher- g’morning!” I said.

“Morning! Ah- can you answer a few questions of mine, please?” said Ace.

“Uh, maybe? I’ll do my best, brother-” I said.

“Why was Mab arrested? I’m the one charged with protecting this area of Ryugu Mergyo, and I’ve got crew stationed here… so why did they arrest Mab?” said Ace, suspicious- as any Portgas would be.

“Politics, for one- not wanting to put Danelphe in a bad position, for another,” interjects Sue.

“Hah?” said Ace, eyebrows furrowing.

“Well- here, Sue, finish your kalada before it gets cold- Ace, politically speaking, you’re basically untouchable. It’s not just that you’re Second Division Commander of the Whitebeard Pirates; you’re the Prince Consort of the Sargasso, and you have a slew of other titles besides. Accusing you of a crime wouldn’t just be accusing you of a crime- your person, in many ways, isn’t your own,” I explained. Ace’s blind spot is always himself, and his own self worth.

“…It’d be an act of War, or- there’d be someone, somewhere, who’d take it as such,” said Ace, scowling into his bowl of congee.

“Yes, it would; and yes, they would. Mab, while no less important a person, has much less political
It’s not so… volatile, her position in these things. Further, she’s got the temperament to be arrested with little more than a bit of resigned irritation and dark sarcasm. What do you suppose would have happened if someone had tried to arrest you, Asher?” I said, mild as milk.

Ace grimaced, but nodded with some chagrin, the rage-scars on his hands and wrists and forearms glinting silver in the light.

“As for Danelphe… you do know that the Courts are Unyielding, aye? Rigid, even- their Inquiries are invasive and overwhelming, and their Rulings are final. Asher- Ace, brother, if you had been arrested, and everything had gone as it has gone… Danelphe would have been left in the untenable position of deciding whether you would live, or die. They’ve made that decision before, for Mab—countless times, even, as it took countless tries for Mab to Earn Her Name, but on those occasions Danelphe was allowed the Mercy of their kinder nature. Court does not allow for such. Disregarding everything else- their love for your Father, their doting on you- yes, Asher, they dote and brag on you all the time, you’re just never in a position to hear it or see it… Asher, they let you wear their cape, they let you hug them, they… they do not Insist on making you wear a shirt. You are their very favorite child; their most beloved. And if you had been arrested, Danelphe would have been the one to Judge if you had committed a Crime under Skuan Law,” I said.

“Oh,” said Ace, wide eyed.

“Oh, indeed,” said Mab, in a fine white shirt and a curving ladies vest and a soft pair of honey-colored buckskin trousers- shit, knitted Kushy ankle boot covers, breeches and smooth boots- hell, I’ve only ever seen my sister this visibly angry once before, and that… shit, I can’t even remember why, just that she was. There’s jewelry, too, just to make the point sink in- her charnellements, of course, are dangling from her ears, and there’s the badge of her Office, hanging around her neck on a short, fine chain. Her hair is in thick, coiling braids, wrapped around her head like a serpentine crown- a fillet of hair.

And her eyes… underneath her bottom eyelid, there is a thick, black line, like the startling red of a Noh mask eye but black, and a second black line following the crease of her eyelids- because that’s what Fae warriors do when they’re going into battle…

My sister, for all her gentle manners, is a dangerous lady. Crossing her is crossing over your own grave- with no guarantee that something in those sepulchral depths won’t just reach out… and touch you.

Ace is a seasoned pirate, son of one of the Great Sea Lords- and yet, and yet… in a fight, I wouldn’t dare say which of the two would win… and which of the two would Fall.

“Tilly- it’s about time for one of your courses, aye?” said Mab.

“Aye,” I said.

“Here, then- I bought it for you before I knew why, yesterday,” said Mab, handing me a Soothie Blue Vape.

I grin, make sure the little bottle of oil and water is in correctly- safety first- and take a long, heady drag of the heavy blue-tinted mist. What comes out of my nose is pale white and cloudy; and the deep easing of pain in my guts is all the indication of veracity I need. After a moment, I dig through my purse and find my vape clip, and the little chain too- and into the smoking pocket of my stole it goes. My watchlace, I pull out and wind for the day- also adding the necessary alarms, one for lunch,
one for Court, a third for Bedtime… and around my neck it goes. It will vibrate against my skin when the time comes; otherwise, it’s just a necklace that tells time. Nothing terribly special about that.

Ace is staring at my vape.

“Okay, I have to try it,” said Ace.

“Eh?” I said.

“Easy, Yuki, Jackie, Atty, Gabbie, Sisko, Fee, Del, and you, Tilly- even Mab and Spadey, sometimes, and Mommarav and Auntie all the time- all of you are puffing on those things, and they don’t smell like anything but mist and flowers if I’m close. So. I have to try one, if that’s alright-” said Ace.

“Oh, uh, sure. But- maybe not with a Blue? It’s really strong…” I said.

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” said Ace, before taking my Soothie Blue and inhaling deeply of it.

Mab’s eyebrows have gone straight up, behind her glasses. My own eyes are wide as saucers. Sue, the brat, is laughing so hard tears are starting to form in her eyes.

Ace is still holding his breath. He actually holds his breath long enough that Sue stops laughing and starts looking worried too; before finally letting loose a thick-rising cloud of fine white mist. Looks like a cumulus.

Oh, there it is- the CBD just hit, I can tell by how relaxed Ace just got. The goofy grin is also a bit of a giveaway, as is the staring at his arm and the giggling. Mab has very carefully tugged my Soothie Blue out of Ace’s hand, and given it back to me.

I clip it back into my smoke clip, and after taking another drag tuck the entire thing away in my stole. I carefully catch the eye of Nadia, who is stifling a giggle into her toast and watching her Commander sway and grin to himself.

“Keep an eye on him, please. He is my older brother, after all,” I said.

“Of course!” said Nadia, who is not a morning person. I can tell because that’s the shortest sentence I’ve ever heard her say.

Aster chooses that moment to tap me on the shoulder. I turn, and look, and see that he’s got Ren and Sage at his back and a stack of files just begging for my perusal.

Right. Oh, there’s Gunther coming with Freckle and Gary and Hue and Mue Lin; time to get to work.
February 5th

Chihiro Town Detention Center Hallway

The actual exterior of the detention center was built to look like any other building- a particularly nice office building, even. It’s only slightly imposing, really; the overall vibe really is one of a fairly high-class hotel mixed with a bureaucracy steeped Office- one half posh, one half it gets done in it’s own time, usually too late to be of any use to anyone.

The edifice is clean; the lobby is clean; the halls are clean. No unlit corners; no blind hallways. Because I’m looking for them, I can see the security snails watching everything with bland care; and because I’m listening for the echo, I can hear the hidden hallways that would allow an Officer of Detention to quickly get into any hall in this building without alerting any of the other detainees of their passage.

The Cell Blocks are separated from the actual Intake and Exeunt by a system of elevators and trolleys that lead deep into the bedrock of the island; although it’s technically only a detention center, it was designed as a prison. On the way to the cell holding Lorenzo Bartok, I reviewed what my team had found for me.

Judge Bartok’s personal records show a very clear and damning pattern- a steady withdrawal of funds nearly every day, in cash. Could be innocent- but for that much money, I doubt it. Patterns like that mean gambling, drugs, paying off a blackmailer… something.

He was married, to a woman named in the Marriage Certificate as Isadora Polleen; they have one child in the City Registry that we can pull records for, but there’s a note here that says they filed for more birth certificates… That child is named Osvaldo Bartok, and he’s got a record of petty misdemeanors that steadily gets thicker and more outrageous as he ages from the age of… six? Six years old. I’m… hm. That’s odd, is what that is.

Kayumi Polleen definitely has more information to share than she’s letting on. Sage is a thorough researcher, after all- and Kayumi is the only Polleen sister still unmarried; she would have known Isadora, being sisters, and- yes, here, a wedding photo… that’s been torn in half?

Added to Evidence: Half of a Wedding Photo

Let’s see, what else- Lorenzo Bartok has the regular bevy of bailiffs and paralegals under his employ, and Sage didn’t report any discrepancies in their behaviours, so we can strike them from the suspect list… and he’s got no personal employees, no maid, no cook, no housekeeper; he never has. That’s flatly impossible, there’s no actual way to get everything he needs done without more than himself and his underage son doing- so. He’s lying; and here we are, once a month quite a bit more than his daily withdrawal in cash, of course…

Added to Evidence: Lorenzo Bartok’s Withdrawal Records
There was Arsenic Acid in the tea as well as in the tarts, which caused the silver to oxidize due to the sulfur compounds; and the Coffyns were killed with lethal amounts of Cyanide, which… could not be found at the scene… Hmm. I need to know more about Mince Coffyn’s Camera. Mithridatism explains the Arsenic Acid, I’d wager. The murder weapon was not an apple tart- it was a lemon meringue tartlet, meaning Mince Coffyn couldn’t have made the tarts in question, as he is a Bad Baker in Batters. We have Mince Coffyn’s receipts- he’s noted for buying materials for mince pies fairly often, as well as yeast breads and shortcrust pastry, but no whole fruit, and no juices either.

Apple Coffyn was nerve-dead a the time her baby was correctly surgically removed from her body; and she was brain dead by the time the poison impregnated her emptied uterus, which would have killed the baby within. Small traces of placenta and endometrium were found on Apple Coffyn’s kimono and obi, with the rest being hidden under a false floorboard in the tatami room, along with an umbilical cord and tools for surgery. The placenta had no Cyanide in any amount, meaning- it’s very likely that the baby is still alive. The safe that was also in that hidden space, curiously, was empty, even though the Coffyns were registered as having requested the use it.

Added to Evidence: Surgery was Performed Correctly

Added to Evidence: Safe was Emptied

Added to Evidence: No Cyanide in Placenta

Mister Vinsmoke still needs to provide testimony…

According to Aster, the locks on the outer doors of the hotel rooms in Wing Three are not pickable with anything other than magic, and there being no mystic residue, no magic was used. The inner doors don’t actually lock at all.

The only person who can provide credible answers about the why of it are Osvaldo; for now, I must assume that he did steal Mister Coffyn’s bag, as it wouldn’t be the first time he did a bit of purse snatching.

Mab Morgan didn’t do this; Mince Coffyn didn’t do this. Looking again at the Judge Registration File, it appears the Coffyns weren’t merely judging the World’s Worst Bakers; they were in charge of protecting and distributing the Grand Prize.

If I’m reading this log of purchases correctly, Lorenzo Bartok almost certainly did murder them- he had means, he has motive… and if this is right, he had opportunity, too.

Added to Evidence: Picture of Lorenzo Bartok at the Baccarat Table

Dracule and Lefay were interviewed by Ren, actually- and they will be called to the stand, along with their compatriots.

Finally- the time of year is significant; Isadora Bartok died on the Third of February.
February 5th

Chihiro Town Detention Center; Cell Block D; Cell 6

Lorenzo “Magnificent” Bartok would never have been able to become a Judge in Fiddler’s Green. He was a gunslinger; gunslingers aren’t the type of people given that kind of power under the Law.

A gunslinger is a kind of fighter who uses guns and gunplay; they are still considered one of the more vulgar kinds of fighters, much more likely to be of the populous than the gentry. If you have the talent for it, learning to use a gun “good enough” can be as simple as getting a book from the library and going to the shooting range for a few months.

You don’t need honor to be a gunslinger, not in the same way swordsmen so often do; guns are still young enough as a Conception that there’s no real gun spirit - and that’s not getting into the distinctions, either. Some guns- most guns, even- don’t work on most Sea Kings, simply because the amount of focus one needs to apply Haki to a bullet being fired is significantly higher than the amount of focus one needs to apply to a sword. Guns have doubt attached to them in ways swords and knives and spears and fists simply don’t.

In his youth, Lorenzo the Magnificent was a Drifter, not out to do much more than get enough money together he could pay off his most significant debts and have some left over to gamble with. He was a young man smack in the middle of the Great Western Migration, part of the fallout of the economic depression in Wes Blue about twenty years ago.

He was known for his incredibly quick draw, and his spectacular trick shots; his guns were named “Truth” and “Mercy”. All of his bullets were marked with palle, also known as balls, and he was known for shooting people in the mouth (the fastest way to the spine). After doing a series of services to the Royal Seat of Ryugu Mergyo, he was given a full Pardon for his crimes against the Kingdom, and- using some of the money he was given for previous services- went to Law School, becoming a Prosecutor and eventually Judge.

His trick shots included pinning an Ace of Diamonds to a tree, walking sixty paces away, then shooting the diamond right out of the center of the card; and fending off the only “Trillity Standoff” style ambush on him, personally, in this country’s history with a manual action revolver. He interviewed for his college place as a Prosecutor- which in those days was an arm of the Police, not the Court- by throwing a hundred beri coin in the air and shooting through its center and through the heart-area of the target on the range. The Dean waived his Secondary School Diploma requirement, and the rest is history. As a "special negotiator", brought in to deal with hostage situations and standoffs- with terminal consequences for the suspects who chose to try to out-shoot him- he became so well-known and so feared that law enforcement only had to call him to the scene and suspects would surrender without a fight.

He was wanted for Theft, Extortion, Gambling, Murder, and Indecent Exposure; his Royal Pardon absolved him of all crimes for services rendered to the crown. A man willing to steal, rob, kill, and indecent himself for the filthy habit of gambling doesn’t quite change; he might get better at controlling his urges, he might get his hands on a much larger sum of money and someone who holds onto it better than he ever could… but he never stops longing to gamble. Once you’ve gone a
ways into hell, with a longing to return to a habit that drew you down into that perditious place before, going back- going further - is a prospect that gleams like fools gold and poker chips.

Added to Evidence: Wanted Poster for Lorenzo “The Magnificent” Bartok

Added to Evidence: Royal Pardon for Lorenzo “The Magnificent” Bartok

Here’s the thing; just looking at the evidence, there’s no way in hell Lorenzo Bartok is innocent of this crime. Aster said as much before we got in here.

To which, I reply: our duty as Defence is to Defend, no matter what.

No matter our opinion of our Defendants.

Lorenzo Bartok is an old man with blood and fire in his past; young enough to have fathered a teenage son, but old enough to be grown twenty years ago. He’s got a flat black hat in the Wes Blue style common twenty years ago, and he wears a chased bronze bolo-tie in the shape of a skull. The aglets on the leather of his tie are made of bullets. White shirt; black suit; old bloodstains that never quite washed all the way out. His pipe looses a draught of noxious fumes as he stares at me for a long moment.

I finish my perusal of his file; and then I look at him for a long moment.

Presented: Flyer for “World’s Worst Baker’s Contest”.

“Is this supposed to mean something to me?” sang Mister Bartok.

“Think hard, or you’ll never be free,” I sang.

“...I suppose the prize money is of some import,” grumbled Mister Bartok.

“Just think: if you’d only filled out the entry form, it could have been yours,” said Aster.

“Feh; try my son. I’m not much in terms of cooking, it’s true- but my son is… cursed, in the kitchen, especially when it comes to baking. I might have gotten to the second tier… Oz could have gone all the way,” said Mister Bartok, bitterness and raw greed turning his fairly nice mezzo-bass into a wretch in the gutter, begging for scraps.

“Hm. But did he want to?” I said.

“No, he didn’t. Useless boy...” sneered Mister Bartok.

Presented: Half of Wedding Photo

“I thought she burned all of them...” said Mister Bartok, wide eyed.
“Who?” I said.

“Kayumi- she never did like that I married her sister, and she refused to come to Oz’s Confirmation before the Gods- ah, that one wasn’t torn in half, it was folded,” said Mister Bartok.

“Oh- oh! Wow, you look so happy together,” said Aster.

“Heh. Yeah, we sure do look happy,” said Mister Bartok.

**Added to Evidence: Whole Wedding Photo**

**Presented: Lorenzo Bartok’s Withdrawal Records**

“Ah. That,” said Mister Bartok.

“Mm. Could you explain this, please?” I said.

“I- gamble. That’s not illegal,” said Mister Bartok, hunching into himself as if avoiding a blow to the head.

“No; it’s not illegal. But… it’s suspicious. What’s especially concerning is the amount of money you spend, at the same time, every day- just enough to be written off as a snack, but the same amount, every day, sir,” I said.

“…” said Mister Bartok.

“Then, here, it’s once a day at almost twice the amount- and now, well, you’ve dug yourself a fine ditch, haven’t you? Mister Bartok?” I said.

“…” repeated Mister Bartok.

**Presented: Surgery was Performed Correctly**

“What’s this matter to me?” said Mister Bartok.

“Well, I don’t know how much you’d know about it- but, for the first, what, six?” I said.

“Seven, usually-” said Aster.

“For the first seven months of a baby’s life, the mystical imprint of their mother is carried in their aura- the imprint entire, from the circumstances of their conception, to their birth. In this case, we’d certainly find a Permissible Echo of the mother’s murderer. Isn’t that neat?” I said.

“…Still, what does this have to do with me?” said Mister Bartok.

“Hm, well- it’s interesting, no? The baby in the deceased was removed surgically, and correctly- and isn’t it funny that the terms of your pardon reflect a certain surgical skill…” I said.

“…” said Mister Bartok.
“And, of course, most interesting of all… no baby has been found, living, dead, or otherwise. Almost like someone’s hiding the poor thing,” I said.

And Lorenzo Bartok blanches. -It’s hearsay; it won’t hold up in Court. But, if we can’t bag him, giving my observations to the Executioners ought to sort things out sharpish…

Presented: Safe was Emptied

“The money wasn’t there, you know,” I said, conversationally.

“...what?” said Mister Bartok.

“The Coffyns kept the prize money in their suite safe; and no one- not the coroner, not the police, not even their own son- no one has possession of the money. No one that we’ve found, anyway; and no one’s begun to spend it, either. A million dola- and the contest was to be in, what, two days?” I said.

“Mm-hm,” said Aster.

“Well. The Coffyns got the Dola exchanged to more than enough beri to cover over all a man’s sins the day before their murders- and it. Isn’t. There,” I said.

“What,” said Mister Bartok.

“Hm. So you don’t know anything about that? Such a shame...” I said, staring directly into Mister Bartok’s eyes.

Presented: No Cyanide in Placenta

“Not many people could have done that surgery in time, y’know,” I said.

“...” said Mister Bartok.

“We have the placenta- the baby’s egg sac? And wouldn’t you know it- no poison in th’sac, and it has to go through th’sac to get to the baby,” said Aster.

“It would have taken about… well, our Sage dug up the old record for it- someone who could draw a gun and shoot the center out of the Ace of Diamonds after throwing it out a window… someone who was pardoned for performing a cesarean section on Queen Otohime in less than five minutes...” I said.

“So what? Even if I could do something like that in five minutes-” sneered Mister Bartok.

“Mister Bartok…” I sighed, shaking my head in mock amusement.

Presented: Picture of Lorenzo Bartok at the Baccarat Table

“That’s you, right?” I said, pointing to the relevant area of the picture.
“Yeah, what of it?” said Mister Bartok, bored and hiding his fear.

“The thing about casinos, especially those owned by the Devil, Mister Bartok? They consider debtors to be only just above scum in the hierarchy of the World; and they watch scum closely, at all times. You owe the Teahouse Social Club- oouf, Aster, that number, it fair made my head spin, it did-” I said.

“A million five hundred thousand beri, Tilly,” said Aster.

“Wao. And the prize money from the World’s Worst Bakers… a million dola, well. That’s not just enough to cover a man’s sins, that’s enough to let him sin again, every day, until he dies- still a rich man, if a foolish one. Hell’s bells, for a hundred million beri, even men who’ve never entertained a thought to kill another would find themselves in a murderous mood- much less a man staring down an appointment with the… hmm, what’s the slang for them again?” I said.

“Legbreakers?” said Aster.

“Good enough for me, Aster,” I said.

“…” said Mister Bartok.

“Tch- a man in debt so deep it’s looking like a pair of broken legs and his own neck in a social loophole set to strangle at any moment is the only way out… a hundred million beri, exchanged from dola the very day before the Coffyns turn up dead… and the only man with motive, and the skills to make the crime scene as it was, well… he won’t account for his time the day of the murders,” I said.

“…” said Mister Bartok.

“Where were you, Mister Bartok? Maybe you did go to the restroom for your average seventeen minutes- but you were out of the casino for forty-five, and Mister Bartok… even allowing for irregularities and visitations, you’d have taken twenty eight minutes at most,” I said.

“A lollygagger you are not, sir,” said Aster.

“So- I just have to ask, Mister Bartok- for those, hm, extra seventeen minutes… what, exactly, where you doing?” I said.

“…” said Mister Bartok.

I smiled, and asked nothing further.

Presented: Wanted Poster for Lorenzo “The Magnificent” Bartok

“What’s that got to do with anything?” said Mister Bartok.

“This man is you twenty years ago, correct?” I said.

“Yes? What of it?” said Mister Bartok.

“Just being thorough, sir,” I said.

Presented: Royal Pardon for Lorenzo “The Magnificent” Bartok
“Mine as well. Thoroughness, I presume?” said Mister Bartok.

“Yes sir; all part of my job,” I said.

Presented: Crumbs from Empty Plate

“...Are those supposed to mean anything to me?” said Mister Bartok, shifting in his seat.

“Mmm. I suppose not, Mister Bartok,” I said, staring him down.

Presented: Six TSC Chips.

Mister Bartok takes one look at the evidence bag of chips, turns an alarming shade of puce, and lunges for the divider- which, of course, activates the electrical collar around his neck, dropping him into unconsciousness.

Gotcha.

The guards carry him out; and I share a glance with Aster before we both leave the Detention Center. Judge Lorenzo Bartok is guilty as hell, but we can’t not defend him. Damn it all to hell; just… blast, hellfire, and damnation.

February 5th

Sento Chihiro, Teahouse Social Club

Every resort I can think of that’s ever been built for rich people- damn rich people, even- to play in has a casino. The Gran Tesoro, which my brother Spadille took over maybe three years ago, was originally an orchid-lover’s floating hothouse; it became the massive casino-resort structure it is today through a series of events only Spadey really knows for sure, and he’s not telling anyone.

The Teahouse Social Club, which my Danelphe owns outright, was originally just that- a teahouse and social club, with a few games of mahjong, go, and cards here and there for entertainment. And the exotic dancers, of course. Most people don’t really look into the history of prostitution, but it has one- a long one, it’s the oldest profession for a reason, and yes, a prostitute is a professional. There is a reason this place, Chihiro Sento specifically, it’s entire campus- there’s a reason it’s considered part of the Skywards Coalition of Islands, both legally and socially.

Because, you see- in Skua? Whore-houses are temples of faith, too. The Teahouse Social Club is dedicated to the goddesses of deception, wisdom, experience, and age- Ame-no-Uzume, Mohini, Brigid, Beten- and Fortuna, because it’s also a casino. Every year on Mabon, this temple’s most sacred day, there’s a sacred orgy that happens.
Aster and I are actually staying in overflow rooms meant for Mabon’s inevitable crush of piety-explains why it’s more ‘sex dungeon’ than ‘hotel room’. Then again, due to the building and zoning laws of Ryugu Mergyo, love hotels are cheaper and more popular than any other kind…

The TSC doesn’t have slot machines- probably because Danelphe didn’t want to deal with patrons pissing and shitting themselves so they could stay on a particular machine, and they can’t stand the noise of a pachinko parlour- they own one, it’s on the other side of the hotel, and from what I understand, it’s run very nicely…

And there it is. The Coin Pit.

I know in house it’s probably got a name like the Check Exchange or something like that, but really? It’s where you throw money in and get scrip out- scrip that can be used in the casino freely, and is much easier to keep track of than a handful of money…

I might as well explain it; I thought long and hard about my Path before deciding, and running a casino was in my cards. Knowledge Earned, friends.

Chips are the currency of casinos and poker games around the world. Walk into any brick-and-mortar casino and you’ll see more than a few chips. Even the sound they make as they clink together is as timeless as the bright lights of the Vegas Strip.

There’s a lot of money in Vegas, but it all starts with those little round chips you see circulating the casino floor. So why do casinos use chips instead of cash? At first, you’d think it would be easier to deal with cold, hard cash. There would be no need to constantly cash in and cash out. The casino wouldn’t have to hire cashiers simply to exchange chips for cash. Things would run easier, wouldn’t they?

Well, casinos use chips for a few reasons, and it’s not just tradition. Let’s see what I remember…

The main reason casinos use chips over cash is because of separation- you’re not gambling your hard earned money away, you’re playing a game with game tokens. Logically, you know that the chips represent actual money, but since it isn’t straight cash in your hands, you feel less inhibition towards taking on bigger and bigger risks. Is’ a matter of psychology- think about it like this. If you wanted to place a fifty-thousand beri bet- five hundred dola- on’a hand of Grease and all you had was cash, you would have to sit there and count it all out. It might be five ten-thou’ beri notes, or a stately stack fresh, crisp, thousand beri bills. But it’s real, and it’s right there, and it’s accepted at your local Daiso for a couple bags of fish-snacks and a bottle of tea. Counting out all that dosh gives time for what’s happening to really sink in and fester- but if it’s a chip? Just a funny little coin thing, don’t weigh anything like a real one, silly little bits on, funny color? Throw a gold-ish one down on the table; it’s just the one, doesn’t look like much at all. Just a single lonely chip sitting there in the shadow of the green felt sea. One second, and the money’s gone.

Chips provide casinos with an extra layer of security. The casino issues and controls those chips, and it’s International Standard Practice (ISP) to have a number of tricks embedded into the chips, including a tracking mechanism. That’s what I’m here for, really- Mister Bartok had a few chips in his personal effects, confiscated on his arrest. I’ve got them with me, and I want to get them checked out.
The tracking mechanism, Snail-Frequency Identification (SFID), enables casinos worldwide to track and determine exactly where all of their chips are- and as the Teahouse Social Club is a part of the Chihiro Sento, the chip had to have been on the grounds of the Sento for the whole day yesterday, otherwise there would have been an alarum receipt with the local police- and there wasn’t one, Ren checked. Furthermore, if a chip is removed from the Sento campus, it cannot be cashed in. For a career gambler like Lorenzo Bartok, such a thing could never, ever be allowed to happen.

This, by the way, is the other reason casinos use chips- it’s much more convenient to have a small stack of multicolor-coded coins to gamble with, than a stack of fat cash that you have to count every time.

Inside the casino itself, I pause a moment to take the place in. The air is fresher, sharper; I feel more awake having stepped through the door. Part of that is the higher level of- hmm, oxygen? I watch a lovely waitress on rollerskates efficiently dole out free food and drinks to various patrons giving away all their money to the House; girls in helmets and less attractive clothing hustle empty dishes back to the kitchen. A psychedelic carpet in the most aggressively grotesque colors jolts my eyes back to the tables; the only clocks present is the one around my neck- and the one in the General Manager’s pocket.

Near the bar, there’s a jazz band, quietly playing classics and soft jazz songs in a way I can only describe as “fine dining mashed potatoes”; so smooth you hardly taste the butter at all. And baby, there’s at least half a pound of butter in every serving. From this vantage point, I can see row after row of tables- or ‘pits’, as in money pits, overseen by Alraune- fair enough, their comportment is legendary… as is their ability to subdue aggressors with intoxicating powders… All of these appear to be Royal Palm Alraune, from the same stand, I think- nothing else explains their physical similarity.

Oh, yes, and none of the pit bosses are wearing shirts- necklaces and torcs, sure; shirts? No. So far as I can tell without getting up close and personal, they appear to be wearing high waisted pants that come to about a hand’s span below the upper edge of their bark if they’re male, or a sheer linen dress of violet cinched tight with a white obi that knots in the- back- if they’re female. Their breasts are on full display, which must be a distraction for the gamblers… It’s certainly a distraction for me, seeing so many perky, heavy green breasts with nipples taught from the cool rush of air, smooth planes interrupted by thorny patches of hair-

Ahem!

The place I need to go is actually right near the kitchen door; I make my way there through the bewildering flare of lights and the endless noise of chips and gamblers and dice, the thwap of shuffling cards and the surrussus of endless voices. The scent of unwashed bodies covered over with a thick, horrible layer of perfume, the squelch of surreptitious fucking in corners out of direct lines of sight- and ever present, overhead, the watchful stare of monitoring snailcams.

And now- I’m in the bland corridor that connects the kitchen to the floor. Multitudes of waitresses
and the occasional waiter, busgirls and pit-bosses, and actual security personnel, all in a steady-frantic mob, each going in their own direction. I cut through them like a dagger through a lung. I even walk past a full portrait of Danelphe and Granuna, both in full battle-dress- from their time in the Sandora, which is where they gained their individual notoriety- and posed ready to strike. As I pass the images of my elders, some of the workers here who’ve been around long enough glance between me and the portraits and- they don’t quite gasp, but there’s a general tension to the air that wasn’t there before they noticed my presence.

Finally, I get to the General Manager’s Office- Diego “King” Dice.

I could have sworn there would have been a line- or he’d be in a meeting, but no. I’m greeted by the man himself, ushered into the office; I’m offered food, drink, cigars- no, thank you.

“Mister Dice, I’m here to investigate a murder,” I said.

“Anything I can do to help, DA Portgas- but please, do call me King, or Diego. No Portgas ever need call me ‘Mister’,” said Mister Dice.

“That’s very kind of you, Diego. I only have a few questions, and some requests, if you have time now-?” I said.

“Of course! Anything you need,” said Diego Dice.

Present: Six TSC Chips

“Ah, I can see by the bag that these are evidence- but why show them to me?” said Diego Dice.

“You’re the GM of my Danelphe’s casino, Diego. If you can’t tell me what they are, no one can,” I said.

“Hmm- well, let me put my glasses on- legally blind without them, y’know. Hrm- ah, these are chips from the casino; I’ll input them to the system to be sure... Ah, here we are; they’re coming up as a payout of a hundred sixty thousand beri- Are you quite sure these are all the chips?” said Diego Dice.

“Yes sir, very sure,” I said.

“Well,” said Diego Dice, taking off his glasses to clean them before tucking them back onto his nose, “These were paid out to Lorenzo Bartok the day before Yesterday, in the amount of a hundred sixty thousand; and he did not use any of our other gambling facilities after his payout, nor did he make use of our bar, restaurant, or Gentlemen’s Lounge.”

“So... the fact that there are only six black and whites means...?” I said.

“You’re missing either ten more of these, or you’re missing a copper chip, worth one hundred thousand beri,” said Diego Dice.

“Would that be a lot...?” I said, as if I can’t do conversions in my head.

“It’s about a thousand dola, DA Portgas,” said Diego Dice.
“Would you mind providing examples of every denomination of chip this casino uses?” I said.

“Not at all- would you like them in individual bags, or an envelope?” said Diego Dice.

“Both, if at all possible,” I said.

“Certainly. Ah, and… will you be taking the baby?” said Diego Dice.

“Yes, of course- do you have their baby things, or should I get some…?” I said, trying not to show my shock.

“Ah, no, I’ve got an entire bag of things for them, along with a nurse- It was certainly a shock to me, getting a call from my cousin, step-cousin, really- Kayumi Polleen? She works in the Bath House…?” said Diego Dice.

“We’ve met, briefly,” I said.

“Well, yesterday she called me and said she needed my help, and when I went over, she shoved a newborn into my arms and a bag of essentials over my shoulder. I understand why she couldn’t care for her friend’s child, of course, and I suppose… I suppose her wound is just too fresh,” said Diego Dice.

“Mm. Where is the baby?” I said.

“Oh, she’s with Nurse May; I hired a wet nurse to care for the little mite, and I suppose… I’ll just sign her contract over to you…?” said Diego Dice.

“Please do,” I said.

“Certainly- here it is, sign here and I’ll countersign- then I could call her here?” said Diego Dice.

“Mm, please do,” I said, “-and is there a secondary exit to the casino? I’d rather not take a newborn through the floor, if that’s alright…”

“Oh; where would you like to exit?” said Diego Dice.

“Hm… nearabouts to the Hotel Lobby, if possible,” I said.

“Certainly- ah, yes, and I sign… here… done! I’ll make that call, if there’s nothing else?” said Diego Dice.

“Ah, one more thing- you might get called to Court today, if that’s alright?” I said

“Certainly! Have the Bailiffs call my office- here’s my card-” said Diego Dice.

Added to Evidence: Diego “King” Dice Business Card

Added to Evidence: Examples of All Denominations of Chips used in the Teahouse Social Club Casino

I take the card, and the envelope of chips.
“One more thing, sir- how hard would it be to track the movements of Lorenzo Bartok’s payout chips? I have reason to believe he never cashed them in,” I said.

“Hmm. Well, the earliest I can have the information to you is after noon today, DA Portgas,” said Diego Dice.

“That’s fine,” I said.

Meeting over, I exit the office and wait for the nurse and babe to appear. They soon do; a tall, fierce Automata woman, a swaddled newborn on her chest. They are escorted by an eel-mermaid in the Security suit-jacket- ah, *electric* eel, I see.

I peek in at the baby in the nurse’s arms, behind the swaddle-pouch that resolves into a bag over her shoulder; it’s been just long enough that the squashed newborn look has smoothed out. The soft colors around the babe are all the information I need to guess their gender- a girl.

She looks like her brother and parents- more importantly, she’s got a few little shoots of peas tufting from her head, as good a mark of paternity as any other. Mince Coffyn is a Troll; and in his blond locks grow tendrils of field peas. This baby girl is too young for classification; but I know pea shoots when I see them!

She’s also evidence, but I can’t confirm that without Aster; I text a message to him, telling him to meet me in the Hotel Lobby.

The eel-mermaid shows us out a nondescript door, and shuts it behind us. I escort Nurse May to a small alcove in the Lobby, and bid her sit on a small bench. I sit next to her, on the door side of the small space, and watch the crowd carefully.

“Nurse May?” I said.

“Yes’m?” said Nurse May.

“My name is Portgas D. Tigerlily, and I am a Defence attorney. I have reason to believe that the baby in your care is evidence in a murder investigation. My partner will be meeting us shortly; he’ll be able to tell if this is the babe in question. He’ll need to touch her- is that alright?” I said.

“...So long as he cleans his hands first with these here sanitizin’ wipes, that should be fine. Will I need to defend this baby, DA Portgas?” said Nurse May.

“I hope not; but if you do, don’t hesitate,” I said.

“Right-on, DA Portgas,” said Nurse May.

I cluck my tongue; Aster jerks, turns to me, and trots over. When he sees my company, he does not hide his shock very well; I nudge Nurse May to prompt her to get out the sanitation materials she wants Aster to use.

Aster wipes his hands, then very gently reaches in and touches the soft green fronds and the utterly
soft skin. His eyes close, and his face relaxes; and his staff balances upright next to him because-
shit-

I dig around in my purse before pulling out an emesis bag and shoving it into his flailing hand. Aster fings himself away from the nurse and the babe, and vomits into the bag I gave him—just in time. He spits a few times, then twists the bag shut and accepts the wet-wipe Nurse May hands to him; he wipes his mouth, and throws the whole mess away in a trash can just outside the Lobby door. He comes back with sad eyes and stooped shoulders; and when he looks at me, I know what he’s going to say before he says it.

“She was there. Her aura is admissible,” said Aster.

“Right. Defence Paralegal Aster Mistburrow—Nurse Mendy May, although at this point she’s an Au Pair. Nurse May is contracted to care for this child for the next twenty four to thirty months. Regardless of what the Court decides to do with the child, Nurse May will still be her primary caregiver—I know that’s not what’s in your contract, Nurse May, but…” I said.

“She is an orphan; I knew that before I signed my part of the contract,” said Nurse May.

“We’re investigating and prosecuting because it was her parents that were murdered; and although she has a brother, he’s only just fifteen. As far as my partner can tell, this child was born at the same time her parents were being murdered,” I said.

“I—ah. Has there been anything about what is to happen to the elder child, or…?” said Nurse May.

Aster shakes his head.

Added to Evidence: Day Old Coffyn

“Until this trial is over, he’s considered a Person of Interest to the Court; Ren’s gone through the civil Courts for him as a Courtesy, so. He’s got assets— but… he’s not an adult,” said Aster.

“If he needs an adult to speak for him, I will,” said Nurse May.

“You’ll take responsibility for him?” I said.

“…Yes. I will— if, ah, if that’s alright with him?” said Nurse May.

“When he’s got a better hold on his particulars, DP Mistburrow will escort you to where Mister Coffyn is being held. Once there, the three of you can draw up whatever sort of contract seems most appropriate— it’s not my area of expertise, but I suppose a Contract of Guardianship, much like the one you’ve got for the care of the baby, wouldn’t go amiss?” I said.

Aster drank some water from his water bottle, and then nodded.

“A standard Guardianship paper should take care of everything Mister Coffyn needs from you, Nurse May; if there’s anything else it turns out you want or need from each other, you can work that out later. I’ll escort you to him, now— actually, considering the time… shit. Tilly, we all need to go to
“Court right now—” said Aster.

“Hmm—? Fuck! You’re right; okay, let’s go,” I said, as my watch vibrated between my breasts.

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**February 5th**

**Chihiro Town Courtroom**

We make it with just enough time for Aster to square away the most basic of Guardianship Contracts for Nurse May and Mister Coffyn. We collate data; we get ready for the day.

And then Aster and I walk in to face down The Hon. Daun Elphame, and Prosecutor Sue Yiu.

*It’s… something, certainly.*

Crack! go Judge Scratch’s fingers.

“Court is now in session for the Trial of Lorenzo Bartok,” said Judge Scratch.

“The Prosecution is Ready, Your Honor,” said Yiu.

“The Defence is Ready, Your Honor” I said.

“Because the Defendant is a member of the judiciary, this case is subject to the highest scrutiny; no evidence, pending or otherwise, will go unseen. No argument is too small to not discuss. I have full power of authority here; my ruling, when I give it, is final. This trial, as all others, must therefore be fair, but swift. Although you might have heard this before, perhaps in different trials, it is important enough to repeat here and now,” said Judge Scratch.

Crack! go Judge Scratch’s fingers.

“Prosecutor Yiu! Please make your opening statement,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor. As we discovered yesterday, the Defendant is accused of being involved in the murder of Aloo and Apple Coffyn. What’s worse is that the Defendant tried to use his position as a member of the Judiciary Court to collar the murder victim’s own son, Mince Coffyn, with the murder. The Prosecution will prove that the guilty party in this matter is the Defendant!” said Yiu.

“Quite. Prosecution; call your first witness,” said Judge Scratch.
Sue Yiu smirked, then nods.

“Prosecution calls Kayumi Polleen!” said Yiu.

Kayumi Polleen walks out to the stand in her work clothing; fawn brown dress under a pale ivory apron, long brown hair back in a tight bun. I can see now that she’s in full view that her Alraune parts must be below the waist, making her a dryad, I suppose.

“Miss Polleen. For the Court Record, please state your relation to the Defendant,” said Judge Scratch.

“Uh-um. I’m- We’re in laws. The, um, the Defendant married my stepsister,” said Miss Polleen.

“I see. Your witness, Prosecution,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor. Witness! Please give the Court your testimony,” said Yiu.

“Um. Yes,” said Miss Polleen.

Kayumi Polleen’s Testimony: That Man’s No Good!

“Even though he got a pardon,” sang Miss Polleen, “Love is not enough to change a heart!”

“Where’s she going with this?” I hummed.

“My poor sisters were so stupid- giving their love to a man not worth a fart!” sang Miss Polleen.

I narrow my eyes.

Yiu blinks, and raises an eyebrow.

Judge Scratch rubs the bridge of their nose.

“Witness you seem to be confused about some of the central points of testimony-” sang Judge Scratch.

“I answered-” screeched Miss Polleen.

“Do not interrupt; the Prosecution or Defence is allowed to question you as they see fit, and you to answer them as you see fit. If they catch you in a lie, it is around your own neck you tied a loophole- and, regrettably, it is both of their jobs to pull it taught in pursuit of the truth. In your previous statement, no actual statement pertaining to the matters at hand was, well, stated. Please, try again,” said Judge Scratch.

“Um- um, right,” said Miss Polleen.
Kayumi Polleen’s Testimony (2nd Try): That Man’s Still No Good!

“In the murder of the victims,” sang Miss Polleen.

“Of the victims,” I hummed.

“There’s only one man who need be blamed!” sang Miss Polleen.

I narrow my eyes again.

“Janet Ashtraghi for this is blameless-” sang Miss Polleen.

“I don’t like this,” hummed Aster.

“The murderer: Lorenzo Bartok is his name!” sang Miss Polleen.

“I don’t like this either, so- OBJECTION! Where’s the proof of your claim?” I sang.

“Um, how about his past actions?” said Miss Polleen.

“OBJECTION! The Defendant was pardoned for all previous crimes-” I said.

“-forgiving a man of his sins does not remove the capacity or impetus for him to sin again!” roars Miss Polleen.

“Witness; please elaborate on your statement,” said Yiu.

Kayumi Polleen masters her great rage, nods, and sings again.

Kayumi Polleen’s Further Testimony: Love Did Not Make Him Change!

“Lorenzo Bartok was a scoundrel twenty years ago-” sang Miss Polleen.

“Sad to hear, but true,” I hum.

“Lorenzo Bartok is still a scoundrel now!” sang Miss Polleen.

“At least Janet never fell for him and she’s still living-” sang Miss Polleen.

“If she had, I’d be helping Isadora out-” sang Miss Polleen, before blanching.

Gotcha.

“OBJECTION! Witness is being unnecessarily cryptic!” I shout.

“I answered all your stupid questions already, Miss Defense Attorney! I don’t have to-” sneered Miss Polleen.

“CORRECTION! By entering this Court at my request, you agreed to answer all questions posed to you by the Prosecution and Defence-” snarled Yiu.

“I. DID-!” growls Miss Polleen.
“OBJECTION! You have not!” I shout, slapping my fist onto the bench.

“Witness; you will answer the questions posed to you without mendacity, or I will free you of the burden of a tongue. In simpler terms: answer the question with full disclosure, or retract your testimony entirely,” said Judge Scratch.

Kayumi Polleen gulped, nodded, and sang again.

**Kayumi Polleen’s Further Testimony (2nd Try): Love Cannot Change What Isn’t There!**

“Lorenzo Bartok is a scoundrel,” sang Miss Polleen.

“We just got through that,” hummed Yiu.

“Lorenzo Bartok is undevout,” sang Miss Polleen.

“That’s not a word I hear often,” hummed Gunther.

“It doesn’t surprise me that he killed them,” sang Miss Polleen.

“Killed the victims…?” I hummed.

“Or that he’d drag both my sisters down,” sang Miss Polleen.

“I need some clarification, so- OBJECTION! When you say that the Defendant is undevout, what do you mean?” I said.

“I mean- I mean to him, oaths are just… words. They don’t bind at all,” said Miss Polleen.

“Could you add that to your testimony, please?” I said.

“Add that to your testimony, please,” said Judge Scratch.

“Lorenzo Bartok is a scoundrel,” sang Miss Polleen.

“I’ve yet to hear proof that’s true,” hummed Yiu.

“That man thinks oaths are weightless words to be thrown around!” sang Miss Polleen.

“Considering his conduct yesterday…” I hum.

“It doesn’t surprise me that he killed them,” sang Miss Polleen.

“That’s not right-” I gasp.

“Or that he’d drag both my sisters down,” sang Miss Polleen.

“She says it like there’s more than two- OBJECTION! To which victims do you refer?” I sang.

“I- um, I-” stuttered Miss Pollen.

“OBJECTION! What other victims are there, Portgas?” snarled Yiu.
“Considering Miss Polleen’s testimony, at least four!” I shout.

The crowd in the Gallery gasps.

Crack! go Judge Scratch’s fingers.

“Order. DA Portgas, you’re stepping out onto some mighty thin ice. I sincerely hope you have evidence to back up your claim?” said Judge Scratch.

I look over at Aster, who firmed up his jaw before nodding grimly. I look at Judge Scratch again.

“I do, Your Honor,” I said, before locking my gaze on the recalcitrant and aggressively obscure Kayumi Polleen.

“Witness,” I say, my voice like the breaking of ice in the quiet of winter’s chill, “please answer my question. To which victims do you refer to in your testimony here?”

Kayumi Polleen gulps, then nods, and opens her mouth to sing once more.

Kayumi Polleen’s Further Testimony: The Heart of the Matter

“Our Mother never approved of the marriage,” sang Miss Polleen.

“No; why would she?” sighed Aster.

“And it didn’t matter whom to who;” sang Miss Polleen.

“I can see where this is going-” sighed Yiu, rubbing at her eyepatch.

“Lorenzo Bartok isn’t good enough for them,” sang Miss Polleen.

“No, he wouldn’t be-” hummed Gunther.

“And twenty years hasn’t changed that truth!” snarled Miss Polleen.

“If I can just get her to misstep I can- OBJECTION! Can you explain what you mean by ‘Whom’?” I sang.

“I mean Isadora Dice, Janet Ashtraghi and myself,” said Miss Polleen.

“Add that to your testimony, please,” I said.

“Witness, amend your testimony” said Judge Scratch.

“Our Mother never approved of the marriage,” sang Miss Polleen.
“Lorenzo Bartok to Isadora, Janet, or myself—” scowled Miss Polleen.

“Lorenzo Bartok, no matter how “Magnificent” just isn’t good enough,” shrugged Miss Polleen.

“It’s best to leave bad deals on their shelf!” sang Miss Polleen.

“No matter what I do or how I twist, she’ll still find a way to resist- I’ve got no choice, I must insist… OBJECTION!” I sang.

I slammed both my fists onto the bench.

“Kayumi Polleen, where did you get this baby?” I said.

Presented: Day Old Coffyn

“Wh-wh-wh-what?” shrieks Miss Polleen.

I am unmoved.

“You called your cousin, Diego “King” Dice, last night- and asked him to handle this baby. Why?” I said.

“I, um- I- I had a miscarriage about a month ago and I- I can’t, so, s-so I told Diego to handle her, and um, um, he did,” stutters Miss Polleen.

I narrow my eyes and stare her down. She flinches and shudders in the Witness box.

“Miss Polleen, who told you to “handle” the baby?” I said.

“N-no one, no one told me to—” said Miss Polleen.

“Miss Polleen, your entire testimony has been used to put yourself in direct conflict with Lorenzo Bartok. You implied that your sister, Isadora, is deceased; you stated that Lorenzo Bartok had somehow “dragged both of them down”. Further, you showed a deep and abiding respect for matters of faith, as shown by your contempt for considering ‘oaths’ as merely words. Miss Polleen; who told you to handle that baby? ” I said.

Kayumi Polleen collapsed onto the railing of the Witness box like a puppet with all its strings cut.

Her hair fell out of its orderly bun, billowing down her shoulders. Delicate tendrils of ivy and briar-thorn unfurled and reached for the light and air. A long, strange keening wail comes from her huddled form. Her shoulders shake and twitch, and ugly, wet laughter echoes through the silent Court.

“you really couldn’t just… take my word for it, could you? you just haaaaaad to push . fine. I’ll tell you the ugly truth,” rasps Miss Polleen.
“...there were two...” moaned Miss Polleen.

Aster’s crying again.

“...one born blue...” moaned Miss Polleen.

Yiu’s fingers are digging into her eyepatch.

“...sisters born and sister died...” moaned Miss Polleen.

I can feel my fingernails cutting through the skin of my palms.

“...i’m the only one who cried...” moaned Miss Polleen.

“Why is that, Miss Polleen?” said Yiu.

“...there were two babies cut from the cooling corpse of Apple Coffyn. The living one had the placenta removed, and was given into my ungentle hands; I gave that living babe to my step-cousin, Diego, and the fruit of that labor was presented here in Court today... If I had not done so, that living babe would have been smothered under my grief, and her body would have joined her sisters...” rasps Miss Polleen.

“Where is that, Miss Polleen?” said Yiu.

“...part of my daily tasks are the removal of lobby waste to the incinerator, deep within the secretive bowels of this glittering hell. At the end of my day, I took the bucket holding the gelatinous, rotting remains of the dead babe, and I put it into the incinerator, along with the rest of the day’s waste. The great fires below burned all to fine ash; none of her remains...” rasps Miss Polleen.

“...You are aware of the penalties for improperly laying the dead to rest in a Fae Realm, Miss Polleen?” said Judge Scratch.

“... I am. I had hoped to at least see my damned brother-fiend finally pay for his crimes; reap the foul harvest of his sins manifest... but, I suppose I must settle instead for a meal I will not enjoy and a fire I will not escape...” rasps Miss Polleen.

“Miss Polleen, who told you to handle the babies like that?” I said.

“...who else, DA Portgas? My sister, Janet Ashtraghi. I know not what foul spell Bartok has woven o’er her, nor what promise his forked tongue has dripped into her ear; only that she follows his will, and his will was the death of both babies. Lorenzo Bartok has woven no spell over me, alas for him- and so, though my sister implied it, and though it might have been his will she not survive, the Baby Coffyn yet lives. My vengeance upon him is begun...” rasps Miss Polleen.

Crack! go Judge Scratch’s fingers.
“In light of the revelation here today, Janet Ashtraghi is now added to the Defendant docket; Bailey!” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!” said Bailey.

“See to it that Miss Ashtraghi is escorted into Court with all due haste; and that Miss Polleen is escorted to the Detention Center forthwith. Although her crime is heinous, her sentencing must, alas, wait until the conclusion of this trial,” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!” said Bailey, before directing various Bailiffs and Executioners Kanamuchi and Metsubushi to the fulfilment of Judge Scratch’s orders. Kanamuchi and a squad of Bailiffs leave the Court at a trot, while Metsubushi calmly and gently binds Kayumi Polleen’s hands. Metsubushi escorts Miss Polleen from the Court.

“DA Portgas; Prosecutor Yiu. As it will be some time before Kanamuchi and the Bailiffs return with Miss Ashtraghi, a small recess is now in effect. I suggest you make use of your time wisely,” said Judge Scratch.

Crack! go Judge Scratch’s fingers.

I blink, roll my shoulders, and come to an immediate decision. It doesn’t happen often, but sometimes, my gut will roil just so, and I know exactly what to do.

“Aster- take these over to Gunther and have him tell Yiu that she needs to call Diego Dice to the Stand; he’ll have the evidence for the movement of Lorenzo Bartok’s final payout on the day of the Murder,” I said, quietly.

“You got it,” said Aster, before taking the evidence and trotting off.

I wait; in the Defendant box, Lorenzo Bartok stares straight ahead, like if he concentrates hard enough, we’ll all forget the accusations leveled at him.

Aster trots back, a different file in his hands.

“Okay, boss- quick summary? Dracule Taffeta and Marguerite Lefay were not witnesses to anything; Marzipan the Boomslang, Banana the Python, and Kusanagi the Sword, however, were. Unfortunately, the total of their evidence cannot be used to do more than confirm the presence of four people in the crime scene at the time of the murder. Oh, and- one of the Straw Hats- Genevieve the Green- found a hundred-thousand beri casino chip outside her senior’s room,” said Aster.

“Interesting. That’s plenty, Aster- leave the rest to me,” I said.
Traded: Six TSC Chips, Diego “King” Dice Business Card, Envelope of TSC Chips in All Denominations for Collection of Witness Statements, One TSC Chip valued at a Hundred-Thousand Beri

I’ve nearly figured it out; but who can I call to the stand to make it undeniable… what did Mab say yesterday, her husband sneezes when he’s faced with overwhelming amounts of something he’s not been acclimated to? If I’m right… if I’m right, I can use that to bust this thing wide open.

Vinsmoke Sanji is a big man. The top of his head can’t be more than one eighty cm off the ground, but that doesn’t account for his horns, which have grown another twenty cm, making him loom an intimidating two-hundred cm over most everyone else. He’s got thighs thicker than some trees, all muscle, and a broad chest best described as ‘tortilla-chip shaped’.

His hair is a shaggy, wavy mop of flax-straw tow honey, just longer than the squared off corner of his jaw at the shortest and to his shoulders at the longest. He has scruff and a chinstrap mustache-beard thing, with no real sideburns that I can see.

Then again, having actually gotten close enough to touch him, the real surprise isn’t how much hair you see- it’s how much hair you don’t. Up close and personal, you’ll discover that he’s actually fuzzy, like a particularly enlightened peach or a very large bee. In picts, his normal body hair catches an absurd amount of light, turning his skin the fairest of fair shades- point of fact, he’s actually about the color of French Rose Clay, after it’s oxidized- a pale, milky shade with more blue, green, and red underneath than most people expect. He’s not flat white, even though that’s how he usually pictographs- very, very few people are. Furthermore, his eyelashes and eyebrows are much darker, almost brown or black- probably so you can actually see the damn things.

Speaking personally? He’s a kind man, with a nice smile. He’s a Vinsmoke; mouflon-type horns, making him a Parisian Demon. Today, he’s wearing a pale champagne colored linen shirt and a thin black tie. Interestingly enough, his tail’s not grown large enough that it exceeds his clothing- I guess he’s just a late bloomer, or he’s just got a naturally short tail.

Crack! go Judge Scratch’s fingers.

“Court is resumed. Executioner Kanamuchi has returned with the accused: Miss Janet Ashtraghi. Miss Ashtraghi, you are accused of Accessory to Murder, and Defilement of the Dead. How do you plead?” said Judge Scratch.

“Guilty, Your Honor,” said Miss Ashtraghi.

“I see. Unlike Judge Bartok, I do not accept Guilt as the end of the matter; there is still quite a bit of inquiry to go through. Thus, you are remanded to the Chihiro Town Detention Center, effective at the end of this day- that’s sunset, for reference- and are to be held until that time here, in Court, where us Law-abiding folk can keep a weather eye on you. Executioner Kanamuchi!” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!” said Executioner Kanamuchi.
“Escort the Accused to the Defendants box - preferably into a different cell than the current Defendant,” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!” said Executioner Kanamuchi.

“No Bail-bond is set at this time; the Accused is deemed a flight risk, due to prior arrest records. Now then; Prosecutor Yiu, DA Portgas. Are you ready?” said Judge Scratch.

“Prosecution is Ready, Your Honor,” said Yiu.

“Defence is Ready, Your Honor,” I said.

“Defence, call your witness,” said Judge Scratch.

I nodded once, then looked over at the Straw Hats.

“Defence calls Chef Vinsmoke Sanji!” I said.

I almost never see men do it outside of, like, hunting for deer or something like that… but I swear to all th’Gods, Vinsmoke Sanji stalked to the Witness stand, and glowered at the Court, a plume of smoke rising from his thin cigarette.

The man’s got style.

“Chef Vinsmoke. For the Court Record, please state your place of study and level of accreditation in the Star Ranking,” said Judge Scratch.

“I studied at Le Baratie under Chef Zeff for six years, and gained a three-Star Ranking in that time,” said Chef Vinsmoke, after blowing out a thick cloud of smoke.

“So it doesn’t come up again- please explain the Star Ranking to the Court. I must confess, I don’t quite know what it means myself...” said Judge Scratch.

“Oh, sure. The Star Ranking system is a review system based entirely on the quality of food. Restaurants and chefs alike are awarded stars based on the quality of their food, mastery of technique shown, personality or adherence to style, and the consistency of the food. Think of it as... you can make a cake any way you’d like, but if you put, say, a beef tongue in the middle, it’s not a cake anymore. The stars in the Star Ranking system are coveted because the vast majority of restaurants and cooks receive none at all in their lifetime,” said Chef Vinsmoke.

“I see. And I suppose the individual stars have a specific meaning?” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor. One star indicates a very good chef or restaurant in its category, offering cuisine prepared to a consistently high standard. Two stars indicates excellent cuisine and skillfully and carefully crafted dishes of outstanding quality. Three stars indicates exceptional cuisine where diners eat extremely well, often superbly. Distinctive dishes are precisely executed, using superlative ingredients. A single star is a good meal; two stars is a very good meal; three stars is the best meal you’ve had in your life, even if you don’t like that food normally,” said Chef Vinsmoke.
“And you gained your third star…?” said Judge Scratch.

“When I was eighteen, Your Honor,” said Chef Vinsmoke.

**Crack!** go Judge Scratch fingers.

“**Order in the Court.** Hmph. Defence, Your Witness,” said Judge Scratch, smirking to themself.

“Yes, Your Honor. Witness, please give your testimony,” I said.

Chef Vinsmoke heaved out another cloud of smoke.

“Sure thing, DA Portgas,” said Chef Vinsmoke.

**Chef Vinsmoke Sanji’s Testimony : A Foul Smelling Deed!**

“On Imbolc Day, I was with my wife, havin’ a good time,” sang Chef Vinsmoke.

“Now there’s a style,” hummed Aster.

“A smell of foul things, in a narrow hallway, was the only harsh note in a mood sublime,” sang Chef Vinsmoke.

Wink wonk.

“I smelled rotten eggs, faint but clear, and bitter almonds at the rear of my nose,” sang Chef Vinsmoke.

Now that’s interesting…

“I keep a clean kitchen, so those smells don’t ever appear in large quantities, or my master would know,” sang Chef Vinsmoke with a shudder.

I’ve had teachers like that.

“Naturally, I sneezed. If my credentials still don’t pass muster, we’ve just been wasting time,” sang Chef Vinsmoke.

“**OBJECTION!** You say you smelled rotten eggs faintly, and bitter almonds at the rear of your nose?” said Yiu.

“That’s correct,” said Chef Vinsmoke.

“For the sake of clarity, can you describe why these smells were so memorable to you?” said Yiu.

“Sure. Humans, no matter what their Tribe, are able to smell in about ten categories. Some people smell some things much more sensitively than others; and some Tribes have, er, bred specific tolerances and preferences into their noses,” said Chef Vinsmoke.
“So… you being a Demon-?” said Yiu.

“Specifically, a Parisian Demon, yeah. It does matter, in this instance. For historical reasons, it was of vital importance that every Demon in Paris was able to smell if their food had been poisoned or gone bad; so, even though it’s not such a big concern now, every French Demon has an acutely developed sense of taste and smell. Parisian Demons, in particular, have a very strong aversion to rotted and poisonous food-stuffs, which both smells fall under,” said Chef Vinsmoke.

“Oh, enough of this back and forth- **TAKE THAT!** Chef Vinsmoke, would you be willing to enter into the Court Record incontestable proof of your nose’s sensitivity and discernment?” I said, Done With This.

“Certainly, if you can devise of a method worth the Court’s valuable time,” sighed Chef Vinsmoke from beneath a cloud of smoke.

“Your Honor?” I said.

“Hmm. Considering the evidence used Yesterday, I suppose a small test is in order. Proceed, DA Portgas,” said Judge Scratch.

“Thank you, Your Honor. Bailiff!” I said.

“Sah!” said the Bailiff.

“Please retrieve the following evidence from the Court Record,” I said, before handing off a small list to the Bailiff.

“While that’s being set up, I do believe we have enough time for the next witness. Prosecution?” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor,” said Yiu.

“Call the next Witness,” said Judge Scratch.

I look at Yiu. She looks at me. She shakes her head- what do you mean it’s not enough-!?

“Prosecution calls Doctor Barbarella Vavoom,” said Yiu.

Shit. She told me that first day- initial autopsy reports aren’t worth the paper they’re printed on. Shit shit shit-

And then she walks out.

Fuck.Fuck, shit, and goddamn it all to hell.

**Doctor Vavoom’s Testimony: The Bare Facts**
“Witness, please state your name and occupation,” said Judge Scratch.

“Doctor Barbarella Vavoom, Coroner,” said Dr. Vavoom.


“Thank you, Your Honor,” said Yiu.

I can already tell I’m going to hate every second of this.

“Doctor Vavoom, please go over your completed Autopsy Report for the Court Record,” said Yiu.

“Right. In Case Number 1-5-1-6-1-7-T, the Deceased- Aloo Coffyn and Apple Coffyn, age forty and forty five, male and female; blood registered toxicity well above international standard of health. When tested, contents of both deceased’s whole blood included Biomarked Cyanide, half-life of thirty-six hours; contents of both deceased’s urine contained Arsenic. Probable cause of death: Poison,” said Doctor Vavoom.

“Thank you, Doctor. No further questions-” said Yiu.

“OBJECTION!” I shout, slamming my fist into the bench.

Yiu blinks, then smirks.

“By all means, Portgas- do enlighten the rest of us. What burning question do you have for the good Doctor?” said Yiu.

I stare her down, then snort.

“Doctor, exactly how difficult is it to determine and clarify familial resonances?” I said.

Yiu slammed her fist into the bench.

“OBJECTION! Familial resonances are not permissible-” screeched Yiu.

“-except in exceptional circumstances, such as, Yiu, determining the orphaner of a day old baby! DO NOT PRESUME TO LECTURE ME ON THE LAW!” I roared.

My other fist joined my first, the bench creaking under my weighted rage. I take a deep breath, and flatten my fists into palms, hands, flat on the smooth wood of the bench.

“Doctor Vavoom. My question?” I said.

“...Not my area of expertise, but considering the age of the human, and the proposed separations… you say you want to clarify the resonance as well, not just reveal it?” said Doctor Vavoom.

“That’s correct,” I said.

“Even with best equipment, takes at least twelve hours to collate all data; will be ready soonest tomorrow,” said Doctor Vavoom.

Crack! go Judge Scratch’s fingers.
“While we are under a deadline, I admit, I do despise leaving things unfinished. Bailey!” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!” said Bailey.

“Please escort Doctor Vavoom to her place of work, and ensure that the greatest and most efficient care is taken when the Familial Resonance is revealed and clarified. Please do this after DA Portgas and Prosecutor Yiu have finished their cross examinations- ah, where is my mind, DA, Prosecutor?” said Judge Scratch.

“Nothing further, Your Honor,” I said.

“No further questions, Your Honor,” said Yiu.

“Marvelous. Bailey, scratch that hold and escort Doctor Vavoom immediately. Also, do please return Chef Vinsmoke to the Witness stand, as his testimony is not yet finished. Faster begun, faster done,” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!” said Bailey, directing bailiffs and Executioner Te Yari and Executioner Jutte to the completion of Judge Scratch’s orders.

“Ah! And it seems the Bailiff has returned with both the Evidence DA Portgas requested, and a new Autopsy Report- please enter the new report into the Court Record, would you? Lovely. DA Portgas; Your Witness,” said Judge Scratch.

“Thank you, Your Honor. Chef Vinsmoke, are you ready?” I said.

“Sure,” said Chef Vinsmoke in a cloud of smoke.

Chef Vinsmoke Sanji’s Further Testimony: A-CHOO!

“Chef Vinsmoke, please present your Fugu License to the Court,” I said.

“Sure,” said Chef Vinsmoke.

Presented: Vinsmoke Sanji’s Fugu License (3 Stars)

“Do any in the Court protest the veracity of this license?” I said.

No response.

I nod, and return the license to the chef.

“Chef Vinsmoke, please smell this,” I said.

Presented: Poisoned Glass Spoon

Chef Vinsmoke sneezes so violently, his cigarette stutters in his mouth.

“Uuugh. Rotten eggs and bitter almonds; just like before,” said Chef Vinsmoke.

“Thank you. I have here witness statements from your crew members stating clearly that there were
four people present in the room at the time of the Coffyn Murders. As was stated earlier, even the most modern methods of personal environmental protection cannot protect someone completely from all levels of contamination.” I said.

“OBJECTION! The point being, Portgas?” said Yiu.

“TAKE THAT! The point being, Yiu, that if Chef Vinsmoke were to smell two of the defendants and sneeze, it would be undeniable proof that they had been exposed to both Cyanide and Arsenic within the past day and a half,” I said.

“And which two defendants shall Chef Vinsmoke smell?” said Yiu.

“Lorenzo Bartok and Janet Ashtragi,” I said.

Crack! go Judge Scratch’s fingers. The Gallery continues to shriek and murmur until Judge Scratch takes a long, slow glance over the unquiet masses, their gaze all but boiling with the force of their rage.

“Order. DA Portgas. This is a highly irregular, invasive, and frankly speaking, stupid idea. If nothing comes of it, I will dismiss this case. Are you certain you want to proceed?” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor,” I said.

“Very well. Proceed in your own time,” said Judge Scratch.

Chef Vinsmoke’s Final Testimony: The Nose Knows

“Chef Vinsmoke, please smell Miss Janet Ashtragi’s hair,” I said.

Chef Vinsmoke stepped down from the Witness stand, stalked over to the Defendants, and, after a gentle nudge from Executioner Metsubushi, sniffs Miss Janet Ashtragi’s hair. The effect is immediate; Chef Vinsmoke sneezes violently, almost doubled over from the force of it.

I nod.

“Chef Vinsmoke, please smell Mister Lorenzo Bartok’s fingertips on his left hand,” I said.

Chef Vinsmoke straightened, scrubbed his fingers against the bridge of his nose, and stalked over to Mister Lorenzo Bartok. A bailiff held out Mister Bartok’s limp hand; Sanji sniffed, and… no sneeze.

I nod again.

“Now the right, please,” I said.

Lorenzo Bartok’s jaw clenched under pallid skin. It’s almost like he’s sick, or something.
Chef Vinsmoke sniffed, and sneezed so hard his cigarette flew out of his mouth.

“Chef Vinsmoke; one more, and then I have no further questions. Please smell this Chip,” I said.

**Presented: One TSC Chip valued at a Hundred-Thousand Beri**

Chef Vinsmoke rubbed underneath his nose, before stomping out his cigarette and stalking over to the Witness stand. I carefully open the evidence bag, and hold it up to him. He sniffs-

I am covered in a man’s sneeze. There are flecks of finely aspirated blood all over my body right now, but especially concentrated over my face, right in the freckled cheeks. Blood and boogers, ew, ew, ew ew ew ew ew ew ew ew ew ew ew ew ew ew ew-

“Here, Chef; for your nose,” said Aster.

I carefully close the evidence bag, and stalk back over to the Defence bench, Sue Yiu’s raucous laughter at my expense ringing through the Court.

I take a deep breath.

I hand the evidence back the the Bailiff, and accept a sanitizing wipe. I wipe my face, then my neck, then my hands. I’ll have to shower for the rest.

Crap, if I open my eyes at all for the rest of Court, it’ll just smear the blood around. I’ll just… I’ll just have to use my Knowing Haki to get through the rest.

“Well. As ringing an endorsement as any could ask for. I see before me empirical evidence that the poison in this case was either Cyanide or Arsenic; and I see incontestable evidence that both Miss Ashtraghi and Mister Bartok were, at the very least, exposed to the victims within the time limit imposed by one of the poison’s detectable half-life.

“Unfortunately, neither of you have presented enough evidence to make a ruling in favor of murder for either Defendant, nor have you provided evidence or reasonable doubt in the ruling of a double suicide. Unless a witness appears who can lay serious and unassailable blame at the Accused’s foot, I’m sorry.” sighed Judge Scratch.

“Dammit.” I hissed.

“-But I’ll simply have to-” said Judge Scratch.

“Gods dammit.” growled Yiu.

“Dismiss this case against Lorenzo Bartok-” said Judge Scratch, her fingers raised high and ready to snap.

“**GODS DAMMIT WAIT! ”** screams… the demon from the Daiso? “**Wait! I can provide witness to Lorenzo Bartok’s crimes! At the very least, I can prove he’s lying!”**

“Shut up, boy!” snarls Bartok.
“Fuck you, old man! My accusation: Lorenzo Bartok killed my mother! He killed Isadora Bartok! He’s a liar, and a thief, and he killed those two people, too! He ain’t never stopped gambling-” gasps the Boy.

“-shut UP boy-” snarls an ever more desperate Bartok.

“-which is in direct violation of his Pardon! An’ Miss Ashtraghi’s lyin’ too, if y’all ain’t asked her nothin’ yet! She lives at our house! Her room is under the back stairs!” the Boy roars, ignoring his… Father?

“Hmm. Bailey!” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!” said Bailey.

“Swear that Boy into the proceedings and get him on the stand. I want to hear what he has to say,” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!” said Bailey.

I stare at Yiu- er, as best I can without using my eyes. She lifts her head off the bench long enough to meet my eyes and come to the stomach churning realization that yes, really, every single one of my cases is like this.

“Please state your name, age, and relation to this case,” said Judge Scratch.

“Osvaldo Bartok, fifteen, and… and that no good, lyin’ son of a-” said Mister Bartok.

“Ahem. Lorenzo Bartok,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Yer Honor,” said Mister Bartok.

“Your relation is…?” said Judge Scratch.

“He’s my sire, if it matters,” said Mister Bartok.

“…And your testimony?” said Judge Scratch.

**Lorenzo Bartok’s Testimony: They’re Both Liars**

“Yer Honor, that man an’ Miz Ashtraghi been steppin out with each other since my ma’ died,” said Mister Bartok.

“Order. Young man, do you have proof of your claims?” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor,” said Mister Bartok.

“Well, produce it then,” said Judge Scratch.
Presented: Instaprint Pictographs of an Intimate and Delicate Nature

“I ain’t proud of spyin’ like a damn Peepin’ Tom, an’ I ain’t proud a what I did to get th’ camera what took these pictos, but… but it’s incestuous, is what it is!” said Mister Bartok.

“Hm. Bailey, if you would- ah, yes, thank you. Let me see- goodness gracious! …and these are the time-stamped kind too, flatly impossible to fake without extensive research…” said Judge Scratch.

“Your Honor- Your Honor, please allow the Prosecution and Defence the chance to investigate further!” I said.

“Prosecution agrees; an entire new area of investigation has opened, a new witness has presented themselves, and there is evidence that simply will not be available until tomorrow-” said Yiu.

Crack! go Judge Scratch’s fingers.

“One final question, and then I’ll make my decision,” said Judge Scratch.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Where did you get the camera that took these pictographs?” said Judge Scratch.

Osvaldo Bartok flinches, then sighs.

“I stole it off’a guy in the park, Yer Honor,” said Mister Bartok.

“…You do realize that the punishment for theft while underage is a bit…?” said Judge Scratch.

“I know, Yer Honor. But… even a day of freedom is worth that price,” said Mister Bartok.

“…I see. Well, unless the injured party has some reason for you to not be killed, I expect you know how the rest of this goes,” said Judge Scratch.

Mince Coffyn jerks upright, out of his chair, his tail-tuft puffed out like a cotton ball.

“Y-Your Honor, please wait! I, uh, I don’t- I don’t know my rights in this situation! Please, explain them to me?” said Mince Coffyn.

“Mister Coffyn…?” said Judge Scratch.

“I, uh, I only saw the thief for a moment or two, Y-your Honor, a-and- really, what exactly is an acceptable reason, for, um, for…?” said Mince Coffyn.

“…Mister Coffyn, you can’t just decide to circumvent the Law because you think someone’s cute,”
said Judge Scratch.

“THAT IS NOT THE ONLY REASON!” shouts Mince Coffyn before turning redder than a vineapple. I’m in a play, I’m in a romantic dramedy, it’s the only explanation…

“…Go on,” said a suddenly very amused Judge Scratch.

“Uhm. W-well, um, I… I don’t want to be enemies! And, uh, the, um- the best way to destroy an enemy forever is to make them your friend! I think it would be very difficult to be friends with someone who’s died,” said Mince Coffyn.

Osvaldo Bartok just jolted on the stand. Fuck this, I need to see- argh, argh, blood, come on tear ducts- there we go!

“And you, Mister Bartok?” said Judge Scratch.

“…Hang on, were you the boy from the Ferris Wheel? ‘Bout two years ago?” said Osvaldo Bartok.
(I’ll mix him up with his sire if I keep calling him ‘Mister Bartok’, I just know it...)

“Um…” said a very blushing Mince Coffyn.

“…Show me your ears,” said Osvaldo Bartok.

Mince Coffyn, blushing even harder, pulled the hood of his mantle back, revealing curling tendrils of field peas and long, furry cow ears- also tinted red, because that’s how far his blush goes. The right one has a distinctive nick in it, like a notch.

“It is you!” said a- holy shit, full body blush, and that would explain the… dammit, Oz, you were so close, too…

“Hi, Oz,” said Mince Coffyn.

“Hi, Mince,” said Osvaldo Bartok.

“Y’know, I’d have accepted that explanation if you two didn’t already know each other,” said Judge Scratch.

The things I do for the sake of Justice.

“HOLD IT! Judge Scratch, surely another punishment could be affected here? Death need not be the answer to every problem,” I said.

“HOLD IT! Judge Scratch, surely another way can be found? Every mistake does not require the Sword of Justice to fix,” said Yiu.

Crack! go Judge Scratch’s fingers.
“ORDER. Unfortunately, I just don’t see-” said Judge Scratch.

“HOLD IT! Elphie, what if someone agreed to take the boys on as apprentices? Then, it’d be an in-House matter and the Law need not get involved,” said Captain Whitebeard- when the hell did he get here!?!?

“...Eddy, that’d be just fine, except it can’t be you what does it on account of you an’ me bein’ lovers; and it certainly can’t be me, nor anyone called into Court, because we’d be involved in an unseemly manner. I will not be accused of nepotism, or misappropriatin’ the Law,” said Judge Scratch.

“...Neh, neh, I’ll take all four of ’em,” said- Captain Luffy? -to a chorus of groans and sighs from his crew, no less.

Does he do this sort of thing often?

“...Sorry; all four, you say?” said Judge Scratch.

“Well, yeah. Cuz, see, there’s Ozzy an’ Mince, an’ Mince’s baby sister, an’ th’ Nursie Lady who’s lookin’ after Mince’s baby sister. Ozzy’s a musician, an’ I want more of’em, an’ Mince can bake what Lil’ D cain’t yet, an’ baby’s just a baby an’ needs her brother to teach her about her parents, and Nursie’s lookin after Baby already, and we could use another nurse, too,” said Captain Luffy.

“...As good a reason as any other. Done; Bailey, mark down Mister Coffyn and the Younger Bartok, along with Nurse Mendy May and the as-of-yet unnamed baby-” said Judge Scratch.

“Her name’s Banoffee Buko Canelé Coffyn, Your Honor!” shouted Captain Luffy.

“...That’s a lot of name for a such a small baby,” said Judge Scratch, eyebrows high.

“It’s so she’s got options when she’s bigger!” said Captain Luffy with his arms crossed.

“Very well. Miss Banoffee Buko Canele Coffyn, as members of the Straw Hat Pirate Crew-”

“Canelé! There’s fancy on the last ‘e’!” shouted Captain Luffy.


“Yes,” said Captain Luffy.

“Merveilleux. Now then; in the course of this day, questions I had yesterday were answered. -Well, most of them. Mince Coffyn’s pictograph collection was secondary to the real aim of the theft- his camera. The thief, Osvaldo Bartok, needed Mister Coffyn’s camera to gain pictographical proof of his sire, Lorenzo Bartok, and his aunt, Janet Ashtraghi, engaged in incestuous congress.

“Two poisons were present in the corpses of the Coffyns in lethal amounts; Cyanide, and Arsenic. We have some evidence that the Coffyns were dosing themselves with Arsenic, leaving only the Cyanide to blame for their deaths. We have more evidence that two of the Defendants, Janet Ashtraghi and Lorenzo Bartok, were in the same room as the deceased at the time of their murder, if not involved.
“Most importantly of all, Miss Banoffee Buko Canelé Coffyn was delivered from danger to safety, and rests now in the gentle arms of Nurse Mendy May,” said Judge Scratch with their eyes closed.

“I am not satisfied. We do not know who killed the Coffyns, or why. We do not know where the prize money for the competition they were judging has gone. Though today I was counselled to find lenience, I can find none for murderers. You have the ends of this day to consider your evidence, finish your investigations, and figure this bullshit out. Tomorrow, the Truth is revealed; be it Just or Worthy,” said Judge Scratch.

CRACK! go Judge Scratch’s fingers.

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Added to the Court Record: Poisoned Glass Spoon
Added to the Court Record: Photo of Apple and Aloo Coffyn just after their murder
Added to the Court Record: Contest Flyer.
Added to the Court Record: Judge Registration Folder.
Added to the Court Record: Autopsy Report
Added to the Court Record: Mince Coffyn’s Bruised Wrist
Added to the Court Record: The Coffyn’s Registration at the Sento Hotel
Added to the Court Record: Mince Coffyn’s Receipts
Added to the Court Record: Day Old Coffyn
Added to the Court Record: Vinsmoke Sanji’s Fugu License (3 Stars)
Added to the Court Record: One TSC Chip valued at a Hundred-Thousand Beri
Added to the Court Record: Instaprint Pictographs of an Intimate and Delicate Nature

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DAY 1:

Added to the Court Evidence: “The overpowering scent of bitter almonds in S3:2F.”
Added to the Court Evidence: S3 layout drawing; murders marked with ‘X’.
Added to the Court Evidence: Picture of the Tatami-room Table, still set with food.

Added to the Court Evidence: Crumbs from Empty Plate.

Added to the Court Evidence: Picture of Tarnished Silver Teapot.

Added to the Court Evidence: Flyer for ‘World’s Worst Baker’s Contest’; cryptic note on the back side.

Added to the Court Evidence: Picture of the Two futons.

Added to the Court Evidence: Pouch of Receipts.

Added to the Court Evidence: Sample of ‘Weird Slime’

Added to the Court Evidence: Odd Black and White Feathers.

Added to the Court Evidence: Picture of S3:F3 Balcony.

Added to the Court Evidence: Contaminated Clothing

Added to the Court Evidence: Sanji smelled an overwhelming scent of bitter almonds.

DAY 2:

Added to the Court Evidence: Half of Wedding Photo

Added to the Court Evidence: Whole Wedding Photo

Added to the Court Evidence: Lorenzo Bartok’s Bank Withdrawal Records

Added to the Court Evidence: Surgery was Performed Correctly

Added to the Court Evidence: Safe was Emptied

Added to the Court Evidence: No Cyanide in Placenta

Added to the Court Evidence: Picture of Lorenzo Bartok at the Baccarat Table

Added to the Court Evidence: Wanted Poster for Lorenzo “The Magnificent” Bartok

Added to the Court Evidence: Royal Pardon for Lorenzo “The Magnificent” Bartok

Added to the Court Evidence: Six Teahouse Social Club Chips

Added to the Court Evidence: Diego “King” Dice Business Card

Added to the Court Evidence: Envelope of TSC Chips in All Denominations

Added to the Court Evidence: Day Old Coffyn

Added to the Court Evidence: Collection of Witness Statements (Straw Hats)
Added to the Court Evidence: One TSC Chip Valued at a Hundred-Thousand Beri


Turnabout Faux Au Trois: Third Day Ghosts

DAY 3

“Words on a paper don’t mean a damn thing; and Laws mean even less. No one will care for a stupid thing like this. No one will come. Shut up; your words offend me.”

“Sir! The Law has meaning, Sir. People will care for even the slightest drip of change that the Law promises. And Sir, someone will come.”

“The Law has meaning, Sir, beyond this petty realm of mortal harms and emotional hurts. It is more than mere words on a page. The people will care for it, for reasons even they don’t understand. They’ll come up in ones and twos, sobbing with their children in local libraries and screaming in the cells, begging for something they can’t name. They arrive at your door, your desk, your side, cynical and jaded and full of hope, innocent as children, soft as rain- longing for you to make things right again.

“I believe you; I believe you still, and I will always fight for you’, you’ll say to them. ‘It’s only two thousand beri per case.’ They give you the money without even thinking about it- because you’ve promised them that you would make things right again. For it is money they have, and peace they lack. And they will pay you, sir, they will pay you to have the faith they cannot bear to consider holding in their hearts again,”

“Just shut up,”

“And they have faith in you, Sir, every moment; every breath of you is suffused with unwavering faith- the belief that you, weak, fallible, mortal you, can somehow find the Truth of these matters, can somehow pour untroubled oil on violent waters hungry for their blood. They follow you into the Court, and sit or stand or rest, waiting in their chains, for you to free them- in warm summer rain, through the howling winds of autumn, on a perfect spring afternoon or a dreary winter’s day. They find their reserved seats, where once their heroes and gods sat as they were cheered on by the child that has grown and taken their place. And they will listen to you defend them, with everything you have, and several things you don’t, and it is as if they’d been lit within with sacred fires. The smoke of lies burning away, the stench of truth in the air- the very memories themselves, so thin as to be like gossamer of spiders, why, so thick in the air these things will be, they’ll have to wash their very souls out to be clean again,”

“You can’t prove a gods damned thing, so just- shut up,”

“People will care, Sir; and someone is coming.”

“Y-you’ll never be able to prove that I did a-anything wrong, and- and no fancy trick you use, no twist or truth will ever make me admit to doing something wrong! I’ve done nothing wrong at all! NO ONE IS COMING!”

“The one constant through all the years, all the ages, Sir, has been the Law. The World grew and shrank, heaved and tossed like a child gripped in nightmares; it has spun on like a pinwheel, has toiled on like an anthill, has rolled like barrels onto a barge. It’s been cleaned like a slate, rebuilt, torn down, rewritten, and erased again. But the Law, Sir! The Law has marked the time!
“This Court, my job— even your own denial of fault, your lies, your misdirections and cruelties— it’s all a story that’s been told and told again, all throughout the Ages, Sir. It’s been passed from generation to generation, tearing and tattering and being renewed with each and every telling; it serves to remind us of all that is Good in the Law, and could be so again,”

“Oh, people will care, Sir. For even a second of change, people will most definitely care; and someone isn’t coming. Someone is already here,”

February 6th

Chihiro Sento; First Wing, First Floor, Room 88

If there’s one thing I hate more than being unable to work out how to catch a liar in their own web, it’s the damn fraternization regulations during Court Sessions. Basically, if you’re on a case, you’re celibate- no sex, no kissing, don’t even masturbate if you can help it. I’ve heard a lot of different reasons why from laypersons and people in the system aren’t supposed to have any kind of sexual relations during Court Sessions- everything from “You’re making love to the Law, so don’t be a two-timer” to “Who in the hell has time for that”. Listen, if farmers, who work from before sunrise to quite a bit afterwards can find time for not one, not two, but twenty seven children- Aunt Zippy’s family is *not small* - then a humble lawyer or two can find time for a screw.

So I asked Danelphe about it, and after roaring with laughter for a while, they explained it to me.

“It’s my fault, actually,” they said, wheezing on giggles and snorts.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Well, back in my Barrister days, I may have, ah, fucked every adult and willing man, woman, and otherwise in the area…?” they said.

“…!” I said, very loudly.

“Yeah, Queeny didn’t like that much. So… she kinda, might’ve… banned all barristers from havin’ sex while on a case? It was fuckin’ funny when she did it too, so, I s’pose that’s why it became so ingrained- people remember the punchline of a joke long after the setup doesn’t make sense no more,” they said.

“…I would have just gone with “it makes it easier to focus on the case”, myself,” I said.

“That might not be true, actually,” they said.

“…?” I said.

“I can remember being so goddamn horny I could barely think about anything other than getting a good fucking; honestly, Queeny was just tired of me flirting with literally everyone, all the time,” they said.
“...You stole their hunt, didn’t you,” I said, suddenly aware of why Queen Ariel would have been so annoyed.

“Look, I didn’t mean to except for once and that’s because he was an assassin-” they said.

“Mmm-hmm,” I said.

I left it there, but I’ve been thinking about it now.

When your main reason for going on dates is relaxing in each other’s company enough to go back to a love-hotel and finger each other, you don’t have much experience going on actual, y’know, dates. Like, courting. Romance.

Yeah, I got... a bit less than half a plan. Because, actually, Sue isn’t the only person I’ve ever dated- I go on random dates all the time, just for fun. The best, most memorable ones... honestly, they’re long walks through the city or countryside, along the boardwalk, through the park... Mostly, it’s just talking and learning more about each other on the way.

Now, I’ll never actually say this to her in person until after we’ve settled together some more, but... Suisan is dense as hell.

I mean, she didn’t realize the time I took her to Cafe Lulu, the Adopt-a-cat Cafe in Pumpkin Hill, got her her favorite cake, tea, and helped her adopt a cat- his name is Puddles and he’s, well, he’s alright, I guess? I prefer birds, honestly- anyway, Siusan didn’t realize the Adopt-a-cat Cafe was a date. I realized it about when I was paying for the cat; the cat figured it out before Sue decided to adopt him; hell, even the staff figured it out, but were too charmed to say anything.

Suisan still hasn’t figured it out. She’s... dense.

So.

We’re going on a walking date this evening, because one way or another, this case is going to end today. Well, I say walking date- what I mean is... honestly, it’s up to both of us? How we feel at the end of the day, how much extra time we can finangle away from our offices, whether or not we’re going to have, ahem, coffee or not...

Which reminds me!

I need to text Sue, and see if we’re coordinating our outfits to work day-date night spec, or if we’ll stop and change...

Hey, it’s me

It’s four in the morning

Like u were asleep lol *asleep

Whatever what do you want

We need to coordinate outfits again

It’s a full-formal trial rite
Y
U got your formal blacks?
Y
There you go then
Alright- oh date tonight
Doing what
Ice skating maybe?
Dinner after maybe? Cider or mulled wine before
Cider- no, wait, we’re in RM, sake is cheapest here
Fine, but dinner
...ramen?
Ur not poor or in school, tho?
I’m frugal! And I actually like ramen
Lol fine
...Tilly?
Love you, Suisan
Love you, too, Tigerlily

Before we leave for school, every Portgas learns to make ramen. Mostly so that we don’t earn the love and fear of the local ramen stall unless it’s really fucking good, and genuinely warranted.

Portgas D’s can eat.

Ramen, with it’s combination of “anything goes” and caloric density, is often the perfect food to sate the hunger pains without breaking the bank or working too hard. It’s also cheap enough to make for an entire dorm room- if everyone pitches in, at least- that you can make and keep a pot of stock and the various other ingredients on the stove for the entire semester.

Both Sue and I have eaten our fair share of ramen. Eating ramen doesn’t really tell you much about how to make it, however.

Thankfully, Missus Myrtle, the family cook, taught me- (and my sisters, and Mab, and even Spadey and Asher now that I think about it) how to make a go of a good bowl of ramen. Over seven years later for me, and I’m still learning new little tricks and quirks to make the best bowl- but now, it’s a matter of fine detail, not basics. My ability to access the wisdom of Missus Myrtle, as well as taking several classes on soups, noodles, and ramen at the local culinary school, has proven predictably invaluable.
I’ll break down the cuisine into its basic constituent elements for you- and don’t get it twisted, this ain’t no instant ramen shit.

It starts with soup stock- this is the core of the product, the soul of the soup. Making it involves boiling pork or chicken bones- though often both together, or fish depending on your local- for an extended period. This is to extract all the flavor and collagen from the bone. Different parts of various animals contribute different features to the stock. Blood, feet, gristly bits no one wants- believe it or not, these parts are of paramount importance here. Other savory-imparting ingredients- your mushrooms, your kombu, your dried fishes- also have important roles to play, especially if you seek the more complex flavors found in Seavolk cuisine.

Then, there’s Tare- literally, the sauce. Basically, it’s the shio, miso, or shoyu concoction that takes your soup stock and transforms it into shio, miso, or shoyu ramen. For children who’ve never had ramen before, I usually recommend this be left out; it results in a simpler, more delicate flavor, often sweeter and more tender, even more palatable, to a child’s palate. Harmony being what it is, this sweet flavor does not exist in the dish as any added element, but rather is called to the mouth by the presence of the other flavors and textures in the bowl.

Ramen isn’t quite right without noodles- specifically, alkaline wheat noodles. They have to be alkaline to stand up to the heft of the soup; and they have to be loooooong, as they’re a Longarm invention, not a Merrow or Mervolk one. You can mix the flours- wheat, buckwheat, rye, rice- so long as they come out sturdy against the force of the soup and tasty overall, you’re good. You can make them yourself, or buy them from a grocer, or even buy them from the noodle maker themself if you have a high enough volume of soup or a Portgas to feed.

You can even stop here. It’s soup enough to eat, after there’s broth and noodles in a bowl- but you shouldn’t. Where’s your oil? Or really, a flavored fat that floats on the soup’s surface. You can use lard, clarified butter, tallow, suet, bacon-grease flavored with herbs and spices- all of it flavored with herbs often, and spices rarely. Res ipsa loquitur.

Finally, toppings. What elevates ramen from a fast food to a fast full meal is the toppings- chashu, soft-boiled eggs, seasonal vegetation. Anything you want, really.

I like soft-boiled eggs, beef brisket, squash, and toasted coconut in my ramen. Yuu prefers a more spring-like flavor profile, so it’s daikon, reconstituted sweet-corn, leeks, and spring chives. For our date tonight, Sue and I are going for ramen after an evening of hot drinks and ice-skating. There’s a local rink, in fact- I pulled down the privacy drape so I didn’t disturb Aster, and I’ve been sitting up in bed, texting Sue. It turns out that behind the room’s telesnail there’s a whole sheaf of tourism information, kept up to date by the hotel staff.

The rink I’m thinking we should go to is actually on a direct line from the hotel, to a temple to the local Inari Okami, to the rink I have in mind for our date, to the ramen stall that’ll have something we both like to eat with ramen. There’s even an open air market between the hotel and the temple, so we’ll be able to get offerings for the temple if we want…

Maybe a red scarf?

Well, considering what we did last night, maybe not…
My brother, Del, is the Blue Bomber; he’s a fantastic graffiti artist, and general painter besides. I have a lot of travel time in my job, and right at the outset, there’s just… there’s only so much work I can do without interviewing or being on the ground in the place I need to be. I needed a hobby I could focus on, something… reasonably portable and minimal.

I chose crochet.

So, um, I never meant to be a delinquent, but these things just happen sometimes- no one ever sets out to be a delinquent, I’m pretty sure, it just becomes this… mode you get into. Just like no one really sets out to fail at having a romantic relationship with someone they love, it’s just- love lives and fulltime jobs don’t mix. What do I do for fun? My job. What are my hobbies? Crochet and my job. Where are all my friends? My job.

I… I love my job, I do, I just… I have sincere doubts that giving so much love to something that will never love me back is really right. Sue does too, that’s why- that’s why for Imbolc, we ended up, er, together, and that’s why when things didn’t go so well, I guess… We try. We try our best to be together, to spend our time with each other- because, really, we don’t have all that much time at all.

It’s more than can be said for many.

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February 6th

Chihiro Sento; Second Wing, Second Floor, Room 18

I’m too horny to sleep, but I’m too loud to masturbate in the same room as my sisters.

This vacation blows.

Think about something else, Eleanor…

When I was disguised on the train with Franky, I wasn’t lying. I really do have a strange and deep passion for graves. I can read- several languages, in fact, and quite a few dead ones, and write clearly in them too. I can do mathemagic, but it’s not my favorite; clean thieves live longer, and cooking for myself was so Deb didn’t have to after a hard day’s work. Ofnachigainaku senshin-tekina ugoki doesn’t exist, but I am good with a shield and sword- though, considering my actual skill-set, isn’t terribly useful outside of disguises. I am actually a druid, technically- it’s hard to live in Gobdark like we did without getting good at the Green magics. Really, though, my passion is for necromancy.

What I’m really, really best at is ninja-shit. Sneaking, sabotage, misdirection, disguise… I can do a lot with a simple bandana and a change of clothes, I can tell you that.

I didn’t quite… explain everything about my Dream, though. See, there’s this thing called the Thief’s Cave, a concordance of every great Thief Clan in the World (we call ourselves Clans because Gangs are robbers, not thieves)- it’s where the loot of a million lucrative heists is said to be portioned out among the clans, in order of prestige and blah blah blah.
The point is, it’s a very hush hush meeting, or it would be if every thief even the least bit interesting wasn’t a gossipy busybody, myself included. See, lots of people never know this- graveyards, especially the big, State, open-to-the-public cemeteries? They’re great places to leave secret messages, because you can leave an offering for a dead person and whatever you need to and no one says boo about it- well, how can they?

It’s not like you’re actually doing anything wrong, y’know.

So, so- My real Dream… my real Dream is to be acknowledged as a Master Thief, maybe even the Best in the World- suspected by many, but never ever proven. I’m not there yet, but soon.

I guess… I guess my plan for making that happen is pretty obvious. It’s probable that lots of thieves have tried, and died for their troubles, before me. But, I can’t help it… the loot of a million heists- I don’t need to take much of it, hell, a single handful of gemstones or a priceless object d’art would be enough. It’s… it’s the idea of me, having actually done it- because the security on that loot pile, hah, it’s some of the most intense and persnickety in the history of the World.

Haki-using guards, guard animals, random patrols, tripwires, sensors, magic- no one knows for sure what all is in there, keeping track of all that loot.

I’m going to steal it.

I’m going to steal it because I want the respect of my peers- I want to be a master thief, even though to my knowledge, there’s never been a female one. Hell, other thieves of my acquaintance still burst into laughter whenever I say I’m a proper thief- maybe I shouldn’t have taken on a pseudonym, but goddamnit, I didn’t… I didn’t want Work to follow me Home.

So. I’m just going to steal a reputation for myself, as myself- after revealing my identity as the Cat of the Cat and Mice Clan, and to hell with whoever tries to stop me.

Chihiro Town is one of the biggest Thief Towns in Ryugu Mergyo. Of course it is- this is one of the major endpoints for dozens, hundreds of smuggler’s trails. This is where the things that fall off the back of carts really come from; and this is where I can start getting hard data on the things I need to look for in the graveyards to figure out where the next Thief’s Cave is. See, every Clan has their own iconographic form of code, and breaking those codes is, to thieves, just as much a part of a heist as anything else. It wouldn’t do to steal something out from another Clan, after all- not unless you’re trying to start some shit.

But there’s other stuff that gets talked about in code- gossip, of course. Always gossip. And in that gossip- hints and peaks at where the next Cave is going to be. The Cat and Mouse Clan is known for having some of the most impenetrable code in the World; something that never fails to make Darla puff up in pride, the little shit. I will say, however, that his invention of an entire language to effectively write out ideographic sentences is impressive. It took a long time to really ingrain the letter-sound combinations into my mind, but after five years of using it every day, several times a day, to make notations about what we’re doing, write down what’s been happening- well, some things become second nature.

Master Robin has been fascinated, learning how to read and write our Clanlang. When she asked Darla what made him come up with it, he said it was two things, really- he knew every one of his clan could use a compass to draw perfect-ish circles, and that he wanted it to be jarringly oblique to look at. The fact it also came out really nice was just a bonus. Master Robin… it’s strange, I don’t think she expected a whole class of apprentices, but it turns out each of us in the CM Clan have
something we want to learn from her or something she wants to learn from us. It also helps that our Clanlang is easily disguised- it could be a random arrangement of stickers and circles in metallic pen. It’s not, of course- but to the untrained eye? It certainly could be.

Darla is fast on land- most people think he wouldn’t be, what with the tail and his smaller size, but he is. He can actually slither on his tail like a particularly enterprising snake, and he can use it to coil up and leap much, much higher than most people think he can. He went to a specialty salon near the fancy Daiso Mab took Beatrix-y, and what with all the “being detained by the police” thing, I expect he’s rendezvoused with the others and my sister and brother, and they’re all figuring out what to do from there. Honestly, unless Fern has a Sight of what they need to do, they’ll probably just wait for us on the ship…

I- I can’t believe it took so long for Darla to tell anyone he’s actually a man. I don’t hold it against him- he’s small, and cute, and… and without gettin’ real close an’ personal, I don’t doubt it might have been safer for him to be a tiny mermaid, not a tiny merman…

Lemme see now, what did the others say they were going to be doing…

Ah, right.

Jellybean said she was gonna get some upgrades- she’d been putting it off for years, and with us going into the Line proper, it was only right that she be at top operating efficiency ASAP. Apparently, there’s a massive new upgrade centralized in the Ryugu Mergyo Automata community, and it’s called… it’s called something hella fancy, but on the street it’s known as “Slime”. Jellybean was already in the transitional stage between the Orthodox “hardshell” Automata, and the Unconventional “slime”, something called, fittingly enough “jelly”. Apparently, the advantages of the slime-type body outweigh the potential issues; and even if she does have to relearn how to fight, it’s her body.

Maya needed a full makeover- she said that her old look was fine, but a new stage in her life demands a new look. Mostly, that amounts to a new haircut; she said that she’s getting closer to being over having lilac hair, that her parents opinion of her doesn’t matter anymore. I saw her new style just before I went in for a massage- and after that, things started to go really wrong- but, well. It’s a good look for her. It’s also nice to see her embracing her Pixie heritage, even if she can’t inherit some things.

Hildy actually went to visit the whore-houses that cater to people of her size. She said, and I quote, that it’d been entirely too long since she’d last gotten a proper dicking, and she wasn’t going to waste time on perfume and glitter when she could have meat and potatoes for her holiday. Honestly, I’m kind of jealous of her- I’ve been wanting alone time for ages, but with all my sisters so close by, and my brother Sancho out of school, I just. Bleh. Not the time or place for masturbation, y’know?

Arlinda Rader Haai is with Hildy; apparently, she wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Goddamnit, I really shoulda just gone with Hildy and ARH, I woulda had a great time. Fuck!

As for Quilaby, well. He’s in my pocket, actually; he mostly just wanted to nap where he felt safe, and he feels safe with me. So.
I sincerely hope this court-thing is over with soon- hell, if it ends quick enough, I can probably sneak out to a brothel and get a nice-lookin’ young man to plough my raging sea…

Is it sunrise yet-? Yep.

Thank god, time for a shower and breakfast; maybe food will help…?

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**DAY 3**

**24 HOURS REMAIN**

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**February 6th**

**Chihiro Sento; First Wing, First Floor, Room 88**

In relation to Chihiro Sento, the Chihiro Town Courthouse is about four blocks away from it diagonally, making it just far enough away to be out of sight of the tourists, but just close enough to be in mind of the locals who work at the sento. The Detention Center is another four blocks diagonally from the Courthouse in the opposite direction of the hotel and the angle of the courthouse to the hotel. The three buildings describe in themselves a triangle that the locals call Lawyer’s Row; there are clothing cleaning services, coffee shops, restaurants… everything the lawyer needs to keep working. There’s even a fairly nice park, for if you need to get some natural light during a Court Recess.

There’s a darkness, anywhere the absurdly rich decide to spend time playing. I have to figure out if there’s enough suspicion and unreasonable doubt surrounding Lorenzo Bartok to convict him for murder. Janet Ashtraghi is also under severe suspicion; if it comes down to it, both of them are going to go down.

I’m fairly certain that Osvaldo Bartok’s accusation of incest is completely factual; the way Lorenzo Bartok reacted was too… there’s a thing that happens when your eyes see something, but your mind misses it. That’s what a “gut-feeling” really is- your body recognizing something your mind doesn’t. **I Know** Lorenzo Bartok is Guilty, just like **I Know** Janet Ashtraghi is complicit in his guilt.

Mince Coffyn’s camera was stolen so that Osvaldo Bartok could take pictographs of his sire and his aunt during their incestuous congress. If they are friends- or more, even, but I think they’re just friends- then the pictograph collection that Mince Coffyn spent so much time making should still be fully intact. I have to wonder, though… receipts from the Daiso weren’t the only ones present in Mince Coffyn’s receipt pouch. I know where the money is- what I don’t know, is why Osvaldo Bartok didn’t say he had it.
“Aster, are you awake?” I said.

“...yes?” said Aster from behind the privacy curtain.

“We need to move quickly; there’s something we overlooked yesterday. I need you to find Osvaldo Bartok and give him a Resonance Cascade check, as soon as possible,” I said.

“Do I have time for breakfast?” said Aster, sitting bolt upright and already squirming out of bed.

“You do if you don’t bother chewing it-” I said.

“Smoothie, got it,” said Aster, before bolting for the bathroom.

As he showers, I consider the rest of the case.

Two poisons, but one was present due to mithridatism; Cyanide is too lethal for the practice, no sane mithridatist would attempt it, and if nothing else, the Coffyns were very, very sane. The two Defendants were in the room as the victims at the time of the murders.

What we need now… is this: How did the cyanide get into the victims?

And most importantly of all… why did Lorenzo Bartok let BBCC live?

Because, if I’m right about Osvaldo Bartok, I know exactly how Lorenzo Bartok did this.

Formal Blacks aren’t entirely black; it refers to the base color of the formal Barrister Coat each Lawyer is to wear upon the most important occasions- the swearing in of a new judge, appointment to a Royal Posting, and so on.

My most formal clothing starts with the basic blue jumpsuit with the yellow stripe- they’re my colors, I have to wear them, just as Sue’s colors are actually magenta and white. If we don’t wear those colors, we can’t be quickly identified as ourselves. It’s the same with my hair, and my bells- if I don’t wear them, I can’t be said to be me. My hair is another identifying feature, one that’s more a Royal thing than a me thing. There are… not necessarily specific styles, but the Royals of any country always set the standards of fashion.

For a long time, the style of hair expected from people in the Offices was… well, stupid. Bouffant styles more suited to a dandy or a poppin’ bird than someone who might, in the course of their Duties, need to straight up punch a motherfucker out. Lawyers are the last line of the Law that’s meant to interact directly with people, you see- and in many cases, it’s been a Lawyer who’s called to command the Forces in War. Basically, Lawyers are Generals for the Fae- or at the very least, powerful warriors.

Our formalest formal wear reflects that.

To start, concessions to the weather. I pull on a pair of navy blue sheer stockings, followed by a black long sleeve turtleneck leotard that buttons between my legs where no one will ever see. It’s
meant for dancing, so my underwear- dammit! Off come the stockings and underwear, on go the stockings again, on goes the leotard- and there. Finally. Next come the socks- black, this time, and silk, and stopping just a bit below my ankle.

Aster steps out with wet-combed hair and a determined expression- I dart in, brush my teeth, fix my hair, and apply the makeup that turns me from a mortal woman to an unrelenting avatar of Justice. My skin gleams and sparkles like granite; my eyes are darker and blacker than they’ve ever been before; stark lines of red dusted over with silver turn my resting expression into a fearsome, inhuman visage- female, if it matters. Start at the eyes, and the sharp curve that stops just underneath the center of the bottom of each one; bright, bright red was used here, and a silver dust so fine and delicate, one could be forgiven for not seeing it at all. When the light catches on it, each mark blazes with light-crackling like sticks in a fire. Another line, following the crease of each eye- but the two marks, dusted with silver, do not join together.

I am no soldier.

Two dots to convey the Scales on each cheek; one that coats my top lip, bisects them both and continues down my chin, for the Sword. Red in the corners of my mouth, and across the narrow closing of it. Silver dusted over everywhere the red has touched. The bottom lip is bare but for the red line bisecting it- and a dot pulled to a point in the bow of my lips, up towards my nose. Silver, more silver- and then a sparkling shimmer of gold dust, over the sharp angle of my cheeks, a darker brown to the parts I want pushed back- and there. I am… inhuman, in my coloration. To finish it, I must do what I have not done quite so vigorously before- I must Mask myself.

Masking is something every Fae, from the lowest of the low to the highest of the high, can do. Being in Ryugu Mergyo, I suppose I could describe it as becoming a Noh player without the need of a mask- Kabuki makeup to describe the traits I want, and Noh movements to allow- or in my case, disallow- emotions and such to be imagined where none truly exist. Noh players turn themselves into living statuary with the use of masks and fanciful costumes; I turn myself into the Defensive Spirit of Justice in much the same way, even though my mask is made of makeup and a stalling of my own face.

Even my hairbells, left to ring on their own, will only chime now when I will it.

When I walk out, it’s to Aster fighting to get his diaphanous tabard with red mountain-style marks along it’s hem in the front from twisting around his face. I undo the small knot he forgot he put in to make it easier to pack away, and the whole thing slides down onto his shoulders in a delicate flutter. Considering he’s using a full sized staff today, not his regular cane-size, the total effect, when paired with his boots, is… impressive. Combined with his slightly loosened hair, he’s quite fetching, really.

“Leave your hair loose, Aster; you don’t really have time to fix it. I saw a Jungle Juice on the way to the DC- on that street with the liquor store-?” I said.

“Yeah, I saw it too- see you at Court?” said Aster.

“Aye,” I said.

“Aye,” said Aster.
And with that, he’s out the door.

I hum to myself as I pull on my shoes, wrap them with yellow bracing, and make sure my bright yellow laces are tucked away under the bright yellow wraps.

Finally, I pull the Black on. It’s a heavy pteruges-style skirt attached to a bodice of black feathers, overlaid with silver armor. Once I’ve pulled it on over my hips and tied the ties, I clip on the simple black pouch for my watch and clip its clip into my bodice so even if I miss the pouch I won’t drop my watch. The sunflower embossed into my pauldron, with the sword of justice in the center, is enough to identify me as a lawyer; the Royal chrysanthemums around my neck and on my hairbells and, today, even in my hair, are just symbols of my status as a member of the Houses Portgas and Morgan.

Hanging from my neck is a small cameo-sized bit of something that escapes me now- not quite velvet, it’s too… thick, tough, for that. It’s substantial enough for me to pin my badge to, frankly speaking, and it’s been set on a hinge so that I need merely turn it around to show off the face of my badge- otherwise, it’s just the pin-closure that’s showing.

Finally, I take a yellow rope threaded with gold and wrap my hands. In the old days, Lawyers would wrap their hands with strips of twisted hemp cloth or leather strips. Although it’s commonly thought that Lawyers would dip their wrapped hands in broken glass, that’s a myth… excepting in two fairly well documented cases. Most lawyers dip their hands in water to harden the rope.

Mostly, we use rope because it allows for greater traction in a clinch, more potency to our strikes and blocks, the rope itself is abrasive and able to cut, and of course you never know when you’re going to need to restrain someone. Today, these rope hand wraps are not only stylish, but traditional, and to those who’ve actually seen a DA or Prosecutor fight, fucking terrifying.

There are a few different ways to do it, but this is the way Mom taught me.

Tie four knots in the end of the rope, roughly the distance of your knuckles. The knots are to sit on top of your knuckles, and the end of the rope needs to have enough of a tail you can hold onto it. Grasping the tail, wrap it around the meat of your hand, the distance between the inner web of your thumb and the knife edge on the outside; this is just to lock the tail down for the rest of the wrapping. Then, wrap around the fingers, from the palm of your hand, around the back, and between each finger. Some people start from the pinky; I start from my index. It’s just a matter of personal preference and habit. Take the rope to the inside of your wrist, and wrap it round the back, then again through the notch where thumb and forefinger meet, more than three, less than five.

Depends on you.

Depends on the rope.

For this rope? I need seven.

Clench my hand into a fist to make sure I haven’t done it too tight or too loose or not enough not enough- Wrap the forearm, no tension on the line, around and around until I’m halfway up the bone and the meat is curving away; tuck the line into its own coil, and I’m done.

Final check; DA Tilly Portgas, slightly hot headed logician, isn’t here right now. DA Portgas, Royal of the Law, is.
Leave a message for Tilly, and she’ll get back to you as soon as she can.

When I step out, I see that Yiu is just as I am; armor and ropes and all. Only, she’s a prosecutor, so she has a different badge; and she’s Yiu, so she’s wearing magenta underthings, instead of my navy blue.

February 6th

Chihiro Sento; First Wing Hallway, First Floor

As I walk through the Sento, I become steadily more aware of a certain… susurrus, as the people, the local people who live and work and die here, every day- they pause in my passing, and they avert their eyes, or bow to me, or gasp and stutter and drop their things, their sheets and bedding and dishes, bobbling in their startled hands.

They bow.

A child darts out of their mother’s keeping and grasps my skirt. I stop and turn and stoop myself that I may hear them clearly.

“You’re an okami, aren’cha?” they said.

“Yes,” I said.

“What kind?” they said.

“Justice,” I said.

“Oh?” they said.

“The kind that defends from lies,” I said.

“...eh?” they said.

“A lawyer,” I said.

“Oh!” they said, “If I give you an offerin’, will you give me a blessing?”

“If you like,” I said.

“Mm! This is Mika. She protects me from nightmares. If I give her to you, will you tell me the secret to becoming like you? I wanna be a lawyer-person too!” they said.

“Sure,” I said, gently taking the little doll. I look the child over, consider my options.

And then, I speak.
“This is what you must do. You have to go to school, and do well, and tell your teacher of your ambition; you must study faithfully, and learn all that your teachers teach, and learn it well; you must gain martial skill as well as rhetorical; you must go to a school for law, and learn, and ask for help when you need it. And above all else: you must have faith in those you defend, if you choose to defend them. You must not lie about your intentions; and you must not allow others lies to cloud your vision. But no blessing for such things can I offer, as all of this is within your grasp, even now,” I said.

I handed the child their doll back, and I smiled, and laid a blessing on their head with my hand- not a big one, just a normal one, because every word I said was absolutely true.

And then I walk on.

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February 6th

Chihiro Sento; Cafeteria

Word travels fast, among- among? I’m not bothered much after that, only just, when I pause a moment- no, it doesn’t matter.

My brother is at the table again, and this time when I sit across from him, and Yiu at my side, he takes a look at the both of us and… smiles? I don’t know.

I eat my fish.

Siusan Yiu, my girlfriend and rival, isn’t here either. Prosecutor Yiu, however, is.

“You cannot hope to defeat me this time,” said Yiu.

“What makes you think I am battling you?” I said.

“You always fight me,” said Yiu.

“No, I fight lies; and you do not lie,” I said.

“People need to lie,” said Yiu.

“I am no fool; people need lies to be people. To be the place where freedom, beauty, truth, and love can exist in some kind of balance,” I said.

“Mysteries, legends, fantasy-” said Yiu.
“Yes, I am no fool. They need these things as practice. One does not believe the big lies without believing the small ones,” I said.

“Freedom, beauty, truth, love- Justice and Mercy- these are not lies, DA,” said Yiu.

“No? Then where are they, Prosecutor? Grind the world to dust and sift it through; show me your Love, your Justice, your Mercy. They are but dreams in the heart, and die with the dreamer,” I said.

“Then why persist in this doomed search for a truth that does not matter?” said Yiu.

“Because- it is only by our believing in such things that they become. If such as you and I did not believe in Truth, in Justice, in Mercy and in Faith- then such things would cease to exist. Would you allow such a thing?” I said.

“...I would not,” said Yiu.

Ace, sitting across from Yiu and I, blinks carefully.

“I can’t tell if I’m still high or not,” said Ace, squint-staring at us both.

“Portgas, even if you win; a guilty man will go free,” said Yiu.

“There are worse things,” I said.

“He does not deserve freedom! He deserves to die,” said Yiu.

“Deserves it! I agree; he does. Many that live deserve death; and some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them all, Yiu?” I said.

“I am no Power Overwhelming,” said Yiu.

“Then do not be so eager to deal out death in judgement that is not yours to give. The Dead do not sleep, do not dream; they are as they ever were, and cannot change from their courses. Would you deny the prospect of a good man growing out of a bad one, merely for the chance of killing an innocent for a crime they did not commit?” I said.

“Would you allow the prospect of a bad man becoming only more so, merely for the chance of him becoming better than he was?” said Yiu.

“I think I’m still high,” said Ace, eyes darting between the two of us.

“To what end, then, do you battle onwards towards?” said Yiu.

“Truth, and Mercy, and Justice,” I said.

“You cannot have all three of such things!” said Yiu.
“No? Where is that written?” I said.

“It is a Law of the World, surely?!?” said Yiu.

“We are lawyers, Yiu! If it comes to such things, our oaths and duties compel us to overturn the law and build anew in its place!” I said.

“Truth is stranger than any fiction, unobliged as it is to remain within logical possibilities; it does not change according to our ability to stomach it’s horrors; and it does. Not. Exist. You, yourself, have made that quite clear- so, why, Portgas? Why fight for such a damned lie?” said Yiu.

“...For in the course of my duties, I will always seek the True Justice, but love only Mercy. For, to love Justice-” I said.

“-and hate Mercy is but the doorway to injustice, which I have sworn to destroy. For it is my Sacred Duty to Obey the just Laws of this World; to uphold and guide them, as the World changes, so must the Law-” said Yiu.

“-for I have sworn, and bound myself to the oath, that I will find dark things, and foul deeds, and drag them to the light; for the dark things fear the light, and it is only in the open that foul things lose their power. I will not allow those who perished in despair to be forgotten or ignored; I will not allow those who toiled do so in vain or without due compensation,” I said.

“I will respect my comrades; I will not defend the unjust, nor the undefendable; my means shall ever remain consistent with truth and honor. I will not lie to the Judge, nor my rival in the Court; my personal feelings and experiences will not change my work,” said Yiu.

“I will preserve the secrets of the one I am charged to defend, unless and only if that secret is necessary to their Defense. I will never reject, from any consideration personal to myself, the cause of the defenseless or oppressed, or delay unjustly the cause of any person. This was my solemn vow,” I said.

“I will discover the secrets of the one I am charged to prosecute, unless and only if that secret is irrelevant to their prosecution. I will never absolve, from any consideration personal to myself, the guilt of the wicked or unpunished, or delay unjustly the punishment of any person. This was my solemn vow,” Yiu said.

“This, we swore; before our teachers, and our families; the Gods; and the Powers,” we said.

Ace nodded, and said, “I’m still high as a kite- but I also want to see where this goes. I’ll see you both later,” and then he walked away, shrieking at the trashcan as he went. His crew members seemed resigned to their fate.

Yiu and I are silent for a moment as my brother leaves the table with his friends.

“Your brother is a little odd, Portgas,” said Yiu.

“Yes, but he is also my brother, so such oddities are merely charms to my eyes,” I said.

“Hm. I suppose. I’ve never seen a man make one drag of stinkweed oil last so long before, though,” said Yiu.
“He might just have a talent for it, it’s new to me as well,” I said.

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**February 6th**

**Chihiro Town Courthouse, Skuan Office of Law**

I could go over what we found in the house- the money in Janet Astraghi’s mattress, matching up to the bills the receipt Mince Coffyn kept from the bank stated were issued to him; I could go over the carefully written ratio of cyanide-fluid to butter, strong enough to incapacitate but not kill, and small enough to dissipate within three days, in Lorenzo Bartok’s hand; I could even go over the crumpled pile of poisonous clothing, stuffed down a coal chute no longer in use, deep in the heart of the house.

**Added to Evidence: Stolen Prize Money**

**Added to Evidence: Recipe for Poisoned Butter**

**Added to Evidence: Recipe for Apple Tarts**

**Added to Evidence: Poisonous Clothing from Coal Chute**

I could.

But none of that is as important as the revelation my partner, Aster- and his opposition, Gunther- discovered during their check on Osvaldo Bartok.

Automata, according to all biological checks we know how to make, are just as human as the other Tribes. They are also the youngest of the tribes; they can trace their ancestry and history directly through the centuries, whereas the rest of us get muddled about seven or eight generations back. The only thing we all know for sure: there was a war, and much was lost forever.

But not for them- and the way they managed it was this. Each Automata has within them a physicalized center for the resonance- which, speaking plainly, is an echo of the soul. For some Automata, this physical resonator for the soul takes the form of a gemstone; for others, a card, or a cube, or a droplet of some fluid that is not water. As far as I understand, each enclave of Automata the World over has their own specific style of soul resonator.

An Automata can disguise themselves as a member of another Tribe- they call it “Passing”. And, most importantly of all- an Automata can carry more than one soul resonator. Done properly, it’s nothing more than something like an internal cyst; not painful, not damaging, merely something inside that the body has no use for and cannot interact with. In this way, the collected knowledge of generations can be held and kept in perpetual circulation. For the carrier of the soul stone, or Memoria… while the duty is fairly burdensome, it’s in a more… more social way, than any actual
strain on the body, mind, soul, or magic.

Done improperly...

Osvaldo Bartok, on first glance, is a typical demon man. Horns, a tail, hairy skin and all the rest is details. Except, Osvaldo Bartok is only fourteen- he’s too young for horns that big, a tail that long, and skin that hairy. He’s too adult. He’s too… sexy. He doesn’t match his childhood pictographs - the local primary school was very helpful in providing evidence. Certainly, puberty can account for a great deal of change- but Osvaldo Bartok changed when he was eight years old.

He went early to his part time job, and stayed late; he developed an overtly sexual sense of humor, long before he would ever have the hormonal necessities for him to, as it were, get the joke; Hearb Curree even provided testimony, and pictures, of bruising behind Osvaldo Bartok’s ears. The only way to get bruising behind the ears is choking or blows to the head- and while one fall, singular, can account for some… multiple bruises? For weeks on end? And then, of course, the boy’s skin turned red, so that the bruises wouldn’t show…

Added to Evidence: Pictographs of Bruises Behind Osvaldo Bartok’s Ears

You’d have to be near him often to notice, like Hearb Curree was, but Osvaldo Bartok is afraid of innocuous things- belts, bootlaces, tennis balls and tube socks… oil. He stood behind the counter, after a while, even though before he’d always used the stool; he stopped speaking, stopped looking directly at people, stopped drinking his favorite yoghurt drinks that he’d loved since his mother brought him into the store for the first time as a toddler; he started lying, and stealing, and that’s why Hearb Curree had to fire him- it’s a part of his franchise agreement, if he hadn’t, he’d have lost his store.

Hearb Curree never once called the police, or even filed a report, on Osvaldo Bartok’s habit of petty theft. Mostly because, in the end, Osvaldo Bartok never stole a thing- everything that boy ever took either got returned, or paid for. Hearb Curree bought Osvaldo Bartok a book on maintaining and repairing Automatic Weapons; he remodeled a back room in his store into a sort of break room or dorm, totally illegal, but he did it, and he made sure that the window in that room was up to fire safety code and that the door locked from the inside only- put on a deadbolt, and a safety chain, and a big cross-door bolt, too. Gave the key to Osvaldo, and told him it was his to use if he ever needed it- or not. Never once looked in the room; gave Osvaldo tips on how to install curtain rods, or put colorful paper over the windows- not all of them, but enough to block the view. One way philome, even- they carry all those things at the Daiso.

For all his motormouthing, Hearb Curree is a smart, smart man. He knew that the only judge in town was Lorenzo Bartok; he knew that all the police in town, every train station attendant and check point keeper would be aware of Osvaldo Bartok, and would tell his father if he’d gone somewhere. He knew that all those cops owed their jobs to the Judge; he knew that whatever else was happening, he could not stand by and do nothing.

Reading over the witness testimony Ren got from him, and the way Mister Curee bit his tongue rather than speak on some things, I’m quite sure that my own suspicions and Mister Curee’s are one and the same.
If your wife suddenly died, and you had her soul resonance- listed in the records as a gemstone no bigger than an acorn… and you had a son you didn’t care for much beyond what use he could be put to… a technician, who learned in her school years how the Automatic Memoria works, and how it can be altered externally… and no virtue to speak of…

Why, one can just imagine the terrible things one could get up to.

Evidence- bodies, blood-spatters, the remodeling of bones… these things do not lie.

**Added to Evidence: Systemic, Systematic Abuse of Osvaldo Bartok; Physical, Mental, Emotional, Mystic**

I could go into detail of how this evidence was found. But it’s not relevant to the case; so I will not.

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**February 6th**

**Chihiro Town Court House**

When I look at my sister, the friends that have become her second family… I say nothing. When my sister sees me, in all my otherworldly finery, she stops speaking.

I hear her husband ask her what’s wrong; I hear her reply.

But if I focus on anything but going over the logic, the evidence of this case, I will lose my temper and kill a man and a woman in cold blood. I need to not do that; so.

I marshall my fraying patience, and I take a deep, nourishing breath of cold air, my last before I face the end of all this.

We all enter together. I take my place at the Defense Bench.

I watch the members of the Straw Hats carefully take their place along the bench; Mab and Sanji have, sandwiched between them, all four of the new members of their crew, including a shocky looking Osvaldo Bartok. Osvaldo Bartok is actually seated between Nurse May and Mab, with Nurse May holding BBCC and Mab with a handful of knitting; and Mince Coffyn is sitting between Nurse May and Sanji.

Where before, Osvaldo looked like a stereotypical Demon man-child, it is clear now that he really… isn’t. It’s also much easier to see the familial resemblances- the shape of his face, the narrowness of
his eyes, that’s all from his sire. The rest? Well.

Automata only die when they are killed. And Isadora Bartok? She might have died— but she was not killed.

**Crack!** go Judge Scratch’s fingers.

“Court is now in its Final Session for the Trial of Lorenzo Bartok,” said Judge Scratch.

“The Prosecution is Ready, Your Honor,” said Yiu.

“The Defense is Ready, Your Honor,” I said.

“I see that both Balances are in their formal Black; as such, I shall take up my **Sword**. Please take note that all decisions I make today are absolutely final, and beyond contestation. We seek today the resolution of this dilemma; did Lorenzo Bartok, through action or inaction, cause the deaths of Aloo and Apple Coffyn? Was Janet Ashtraghi part, party, accessory, or unwitting patsy in the conduction of these crimes? This trial, as all others, has been both fair and swift; and these, the scales of Justice, have been true and honorable in their work. Inquiry has brought Evidence; and so Arguments shall be defended, pressed, and torn down, as they must be. We shall now finish this, as all things will end,” said Judge Scratch.

**Crack!** go Judge Scratch’s fingers.

“DA Portgas, please make your opening statement,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor. -In my first year of law school, everybody loved everybody else- we were all studying the law, and the law as a noble thing. We were young things, gripped with love. By my seventh year, it was a rare day indeed that someone, in the night, did not take a knife to their wrists and end things; or even, in some cases, that more throats weren’t slit. People stole exams, hid research materials from the library, and lied- LIED- to the professors. It was assumed that such was merely the nature of the profession,” I said.

“...Ah,” breathed Judge Scratch.

“Later, at my first job- for which I was never paid- I was sworn in by a fool and vouched for by a scoundrel, and at last- at last, I was a lawyer. I believe in the strangling notion that people are innocent until proven guilty. I believe in that notion because I choose, every day I go to work, to believe in the basic goodness of people. I choose to believe that not all crimes are committed by bad people; that desperation can make even the best of the good turn to very bad means for their ends. I know what’s legal; and, more often than not, I know what is right, and what is wrong. I am charged with defending a forest, Your Honor; for this World is planted thick with laws, coast to coast- the laws of men, not God’s! And if they are cut down, and we are the men and women to do it, could we really stand upright in the winds that would blow then?” I said.

“...In over your head, Tilly?” said Danelphe.
“Absolutely!” I said, “-but that doesn’t matter at all! I always am, don’t you see? Every case I take, there’s a hundred years at least of law experience sitting at the opposition bench. **My staff has collectively failed the bar exam no less than thirty-seven times.** And yet- and yet. Alone, outgunned, scared, stupid, inexperienced, and outmaneuvered- I am all of these things, and I’m right. It is not wrong to defend someone who cannot defend themselves; and I am not paid enough to care about them personally. And yet- and yet.”

“...Finish it, then,” said Judge Scratch, taking a long drag of their pipe.

“Every lawyer, at least once in every case, feels themselves crossing a line that they don’t really mean to cross. It just happens. If that line gets crossed enough times, it disappears forever- and then you don’t know the difference between right and wrong. One only knows what is legal; and has no care for what is right. Then, those lawyers become another lawyer joke- another shark in filthy water. ...No matter what happens, I can never allow myself to become that person. At the end of this case, regardless of outcome, I will be taking a full years sabbatical. It’s- it’s too much, Your Honor. I have found this case increasingly personally disquieting, and, considering the conclusion I have come to… it’s just too much ,” I said.

“I understand, DA Portgas; however, you’ve entirely neglected to actually give the Court said conclusion,” said Judge Scratch.

“My apologies, Your Honor. My conclusion is this; Lorenzo Bartok did kill the Coffyns. He, at the very least, is Guilty,” I said.

**Crack!** go Judge Scratch’s fingers.

“**Order in this Court.** DA Portgas… you are aware that you are a Defense Attorney, aren’t you?” said Judge Scratch.

“I am, Your Honor,” I said.

“...At the risk of sounding stupid, what the hell, girl?” said Judge Scratch.

“Your Honor, I have an explanation,” said Yiu.

“-fuck it, lay it on me Prosecutor Yiu,” said Judge Scratch.

“DA Portgas relies on logical theorems derived from careful examination of evidence discovered during inquiry, interrogation, and examination. Although her contract with the Defendant states that she will defend them in Court, the Oath she swore as a lawyer- the Oath that makes her a lawyer at all- supersedes all written contracts. During the course of our investigation, both the DA and I found evidence that is, well… Permission to approach, Your Honor?” said Yiu.

“...Both of you, get up here right now,” said Judge Scratch, pinching the bridge of their nose tight between thumb and forefinger.

I calmly walk up to the Bench, standing shoulder to shoulder with Yiu. Bailey erects a silencing ward, and Judge Scratch is assured of it’s impenetrability.
“Girls, what in the nine hells is going on?” said Judge Scratch.

I looked at Yiu. Yiu looked at me.

Both of us are cringing, because we really wanted to be wrong about this- but it does explain why everything happened the way it did.

“Your Honor… neither the Prosecution or Defense considers the contents of this folder required evidence in the case,” we said.

“At best, it is a convoluted justification for a gambling habit,” I said.

“At worst, the man is a monster who doesn’t deserve to live,” Yiu said.

“At most, it’s another case entirely- and you, yourself, set precedent in Woodlouis V. Derrindoo; so, regardless of the evidence present, neither of us can Prosecute or Defend using the content of that folder as a Basis of Accusation,” we said.

Presented: Evidence of Systemic, Systematic Abuse of Osvaldo Bartok; Physical, Mental, Emotional, Mystic (Unmarked Folder)

Judge Scratch reads the folder through. By the end of it, they look sharper and fiercer than they ever have before- except, perhaps, in paintings. Couldn’t quite capture the tooth-rattling terror, or the sheer unrelenting pain being near them in such an advanced state of rage in dirt and oil though.

“I see. I am to assume that the two of you can argue DA Portgas’ assertion without referring to the contents of this folder?” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor,” I said.

“Yes, Your Honor,” Yiu said.

“Very well; return to your benches, and we will proceed with this trial,” said Judge Scratch.

Yiu and I return to our benches, not quite at a run but if it’d been decorus to bolt we’d have fucking bolted, holy shit Judge Scratch is terrifying. At a gesture from Judge Scratch, Bailey removes the ward and suddenly the entire Court feels the unrelenting, seething, furious pressure of an enraged Devil. The Court, which had been murmuring and whispering to itself while we talked to Judge Scratch goes dead silent. Some people, blessed as they are with weaker wills, faint clean away.

There is a sound like the onrushing of great and hideous wings. Judge Scratch resettles behind the bench, sword in one hand and a small cigarrillo in the other. A plume of blue-black smoke rises from their lips.

clink! goes Judge Scratch’s sword as she exposes the habaki. For those who don’t know, a sword-
person drawing that much of their sword is the equivalent of a gunfighter cocking their gun.

What noise was in the Court dies as quietly as possible, lest it attract the Devil’s eye.

“Defense! Please call your first Witness,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor. Defense calls King Dice!” I said.

The casino GM stalks in, slicked back salt and pepper hair cut high, felt green eyes, and a purple suit with tails. White gloves, and a cigar. He looks like what he is- the manager of an expensive, slightly campy, casino. Look past the felt green, the pointy mustache, the silly coat- those eyes miss absolutely nothing.

“Mister Dice. For the Court Record, please state your relation to the Defendant,” said Judge Scratch.

“Sure thing, Boss. I’m kin to Janet Ashtraghi- her momma married my pa when we were young things; an’ I’m brother-in-law to Lorenzo Bartok,” said King Dice.


“Yes, Your Honor. Witness, please provide your testimony,” I said.

“Fine with me, DA,” said King Dice.

King Dice’s Testimony: Blood, Sweat, and Tears

“Lorenzo likes to play games,” said King Dice.

“No matter what, we can’t dig into the other case to be made,” I said.

“He brings his money and leaves in shame,” said King Dice.

“If we do, Justice for Osvaldo Bartok will be delayed,” said Yiu.

“For how much he lost,” said King Dice.

“We must abstain,” I said.

“Once I tabulated his cost,” said King Dice.

“We must refrain,” said Yiu.

“His only option was leaving his son to take the pain,” said King Dice.

“We can only hope our inaction does not leave him afraid,” we said.
“He was over a million beri in debt, correct?” I said.

“Yes, that’s correct,” said King Dice.

“And there was no way to make a payment plan of some kind…?” I said.

“For that much, which he’d been negligent on paying back…? No. He’d been looking a pair of legbreakers in the eye for at least a week before the murders; and he’d been dodging making any kind of payment on his debts for years before that. The only way he could have gotten out of it was by skipping town, or selling his son into slavery,” said King Dice.

“I see! Court will note that Motive is hereby established for Lorenzo Bartok; a massive debt to the THSC Casino in Chihiro Town,” said Yiu.

“Noted,” said Judge Scratch.

“King Dice, can you explain why you had possession of Banoffee Buko Canelé Coffyn?” I said.

“Sure thing,” said King Dice.

**King Dice’s Further Testimony: Love-Hate Relationships**

“My sister’s in love with a scoundrel,” said King Dice.

“Considering the evidence, we know that’s true,” I hummed.

“For him, she turned my nephew into a mongrel,” said King Dice.

“That’s a bit harsh, don’t you think?” mumbles Aster.

“She fulfilled his every behest,” said King Dice.

“Oh dear,” said Gunther.

“She did his every implied request,” said King Dice.

“Oh, ew,” said Yiu.

“And if they live after this, they’ll both need legal counsel,” said King Dice.

“Damn right,” we all said.

“...So you’re saying that if Lorenzo Bartok had asked Janet Ashtraghi to kill a baby, she would have?” I said.

“I’m saying that, the day I came into possession of the Littlest Coffyn, my sister couldn’t kill another baby. To my knowledge- and Kayumi’s as well- my sister Janet has been impregnated by Lorenzo Bartok once every other year since the death of my step-sister, Isadora. One, two, three- and she couldn’t kill the fourth,” said King Dice with a black look and a half-shrug. His fists are closed so tightly, his forearms are shivering.

“So she- Janet Ashtraghi- brought her to you?” I said.
“Yeah,” said King Dice.

“OBJECTION! Did you at any point consider that foul play might have been involved in Janet Ashtraghi’s acquisition of a newborn?” said Yiu.

“Sure, but—there’s been a sort of… revolving door on the morgue connected to the police station. Everyone knows that Judge Bartok wants things his way, and if you get in his way, he arranges for you to be taken out of his way. I might have known in my gut that my sister had done something very wrong to get that baby, but who was I supposed to tell? The police in Judge Bartok’s pocket?—No. I’m not a fighter; my job is to run a casino, and that’s what I do,” said King Dice.

“Any thoughts as to why Janet Ashtraghi brought the baby to you, sir?” I said.

“...Well, for some reason, because I manage the Devil’s own Casino, most people think I’m a real hard-case. I’m not; I do my job, I fix any problems that come up at work, and then I go home. My sister brings me a baby and tells me to handle it? I know she might have meant for me to leave the little mite to die of exposure, but what I actually did was send an assistant down to the Job Office for a wet nurse and governess. I know jack and shit about caring for babies— I also know there are people who train for every kind of job under the heavens, and child care is a job so hard it’s only your own mother who’d maybe do it for free,” said King Dice.

“Any particular reason you picked Nurse Mendy May?” I said.

“I suppose it comes down to my own experience hiring people for jobs. I didn’t hire everyone in my casino personally, I can’t, there’s too many jobs that need doing and not enough hours in a lifetime. What I can do is hire people along my chain of command who will do the job the way I want it done, to the best possible standard of doing it. Considering the job was really ‘be this baby’s mother’, I needed someone tough enough to look after her no matter what, but also someone who—well, it’s soppy, but, someone who’d love the girl too. Someone who’d make sure she eats her veggies when she grows teeth, and learns to read all her letters, and so on. And, of course— as the old adage says, an Automata dies when they’re killed, and not before. S’why we all know Isadora was murdered—a tumble down the stairs wouldn’t have killed her,” said King Dice.

“I see. Last question; if you were left in charge of your nephew, Osvaldo Bartok, what would you do?” I said.

“Hm,” said King Dice.

King Dice’s Final Testimony: Do What You Can

“It sounds silly in this language but you can’t do what you can’t do,” said King Dice.

Hearb Kurree is staring at the Defendants.

“It’s an adage, but I’ve yet to find a moment when it isn’t true,” said King Dice.

Hearb Kurree won’t look away from them.

“My nephew needs help,” said King Dice.

Hearb Kurree looks so knowing.

“It’s something anyone who’s seen him grow up has felt,” said King Dice.
Hearb Kurree looks so angry.

“There’s a lot of things he needs help to unscrew,” said King Dice.

Lorenzo Bartok can’t look Hearb Kurree in the eye.

“So, you’d send him to school?” I said.

“I’d take him to a doctor, first- see what’s broken, if anything, then what we’d need to do to fix him up. I don’t know much about anything other than my job, DA, but I know he’s not the boy he should be. He’s not content. He should be- but he’s not. After that- well, he’s been in school most of a year now, and he’s got his own thing going, I’d say… but, if it all has to come out into the open, he might have to move. I just… I want what’s best for him, be that here with me or elsewhere,” said King Dice.

“I see. Prosecution?” I said.

“No, I’m good,” said Yiu.

“No further questions, Your Honor,” I said.

King Dice has unclenched his hands. There are spots of bright red at the very tips of his fingers, but not his thumb.

“Hmmph. Dice!” said Judge Scratch.

“Boss?” said King Dice.

“Where were the tokens on the day of the Murder?” said Judge Scratch.

“Our telemetry indicates that the chips were not outside the bounds of the Sento at any time on the day of the murder,” said King Dice.

“No further questions. Get back to work, Dice- and have someone see to your hands,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes Boss!” said King Dice.

And then he’s out the door again, calm and collected as he started. That man wouldn’t make a terribly bad parent; he readily admits that he doesn’t know the first thing about caring for children, and has already demonstrated that he seeks out experts for the rearing of them when child-care is thrust on him. And any man who gets so enraged at the thought of harm to a child he cuts his own hands from clenching his fists is probably worth entrusting the care of one to.

“Prosecution, call your Witness,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor. Prosecution calls Hearb Curree,” said Yiu.
The steady clack of hooves; a demon man, dressed like a merchant because that’s what he is. Shaggy blonde hair and black nails; a small glowing orb that he drops and bounces back into his hand on a sinew string. He stared down the Defendants like if he but could, he’d put his fist through the sternums of their chests and pull out their innards, devour them whole with their pale faces watching. His every movement is so tightly controlled, so suffused with rage, that he’s developed a muscular grace that can only be compared to an antelope or gazelle.

“Please state your name, and association with the Defendant,” said Judge Scratch.

“My name is Hearb Kurree- ah, spelled with a K, please. I am the employer of the Defendant’s son,” said Mister Kurree.

“I see. We are currently ascertaining the guilt of Lorenzo Bartok in the case of a Murder, and nothing else. Please keep your testimony cognizant of this fact, Mister Kurree,” said Judge Scratch.

“Of course, Your Honor. No problem,” said Mister Kurree.

“Mm. Your Witness, Prosecutor,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor. Witness, please give your testimony about the changes you noticed in Osvaldo Bartok. Also, be aware- due to the nature of your involvement in another case, this will be your only testimony in Court today,” said Yiu.

“Certainly. I understand, Your Honor,” said Mister Kurree.

Hearb Kurree’s Only Testimony: Worse Than Anything

“I’ve known Osvaldo Bartok for his entire life. When he was about ten or so, he changed, and not for the better,” said Mister Kurree.

“Enjambment is a technique that’s fairly rare,” hums Aster.

“When his mother was still alive, he was a happy, bright boy. He was always bursting into song, dancing to music only he could hear. After his mother died, he wasn’t the same, of course- but after a good year or so, he started singing to himself again,” said Mister Kurree.

“It’s a technique that takes more care than the regular styles of Court Cant we hear,” I hummed.

“And then his music stopped, and it did not start again until I let him live in the back room of the shop. He would come into work, limping and red eyed and with two shadows flickering at his feet, and I knew, I knew that Lorenzo Bartok, Lorenzo the Fucking Magnificent, was up to his old tricks again,” said Mister Kurree.

“Aha. That's why he had so many wanted posters, I had wondered...” hummed Aster.

“It’s only luck and a Joyless Meadows priest who could be paid off with a pint of milk and a Chocobar that Lorenzo Bartok wasn’t extradited to Ryugu Mergyo proper for crimes against the state. I should have taken action then, but… I’ve never been the kind of person to murder a man in
cold blood, even if I could have gotten a Special Dispensation for it,” said Mister Kurree.

Gods. Joyless Meadows are perhaps the worst, most corrupt clergy in the World- a Death cult with enough money and power to grub at respectability, but no actual substance to make it stick. That explains how Isadora and Lorenzo got married, at least- a Joyless Meadows priest would only care that their fee was paid, and would tell a king to his face that a prince and a pauper were married, end of story… Hm. Maybe they are worthy of some respect- it’s not every priest or priestess who would tell the truth no matter what, and considering they worship a God(ess?) of Death, they have no fear of dying...

“But my bitter regrets and rage is not the point of this testimony. The point of this testimony is a timeline. Osvaldo Bartok lost his mother when he was eight, and his occasional part time job became an actual job when he was ten. He worked for me until about nine months ago,” said Mister Kurree.

**Presented: Timeline of Events Previous to Crime**

“If I could have ensured Oz’s safety, I would have accused his father long ago. But for the sake of this trial, I’ll keep quiet- but there’s one thing I can’t let go of. When Isadora Bartok was murdered in her home- and everyone who kept up with such things and knew the Dice Girls knew she’d have to be murdered by time or an enemy, and so she was- her sister, Kayumi Polleen Ashtraghi, tried to kill herself no less than fifteen times. It was only after her sister Janet had a talk with her that she stopped- she went to work for her brother, Diego King Dice. For a Dice to give up their course, some radical new piece of information must have been given. Nothing else would do the trick,” said Mister Kurree.

“**OBJECTION!** For what reason did Osvaldo cease being in your employ?” I said.

“The reason I wrote on his severance letter, or the actual reason?” said Mister Kurree.

“The truth, please,” I said.

“...Lorenzo Bartok and Janet Ashtraghi scare Osvaldo Bartok, and I know this because they came in while he was working the register and he had a severe panic attack after they left. They didn’t do anything to him there- they didn’t speak to him, they didn’t look at him. For all his notice of them, they barely noticed my stocker. They bought their things, they paid in cash, they left. He couldn’t stop crying for five hours. I stuck a hat on him, and walked him to the L’ecole de Musique, and entered him into their intensive program for aspiring musicians. The next time I saw him, he was dressed like a musician and he acted like one too- the sweet child I remembered was hidden under a shape that wasn’t his, a grin that wasn’t his, a fever he couldn’t sweat out...” said Mister Kurree.

“The shape of him isn’t his shape...?” I said.

“Hell no! He looks like his mother, not… **that!** ” said Mister Kurree.

“I see. For the Court Record, Hearb Kurree’s testimony is fairly extensive, and this is only a summary of what he said in Private Chambers. The timeline he mentioned is consistent with Lorenzo Bartok’s banking records, as well as Janet Ashtraghi’s receipts,” said Yiu.
“No further questions, Your Honor,” we said.

“Mister Kurree,” said Judge Scratch, “This is the only testimony you are permitted to give during this Trial. If the Defendants of this Trial are acquitted, you will be called here again, do you understand?”

“Yes, Your Honor. I understand perfectly,” said Mister Kurree.

He steps down from the bench, stretches his feet and tail, and calmly walks back to his place on the Witness Bench. He resumes his steady staring-down of the Defendants. Lorenzo Bartok still can’t meet his eyes.

Hearb Kurree is the quietest, most angry man I think I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Defense, call your Witness,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor. Defense calls Dr. Vavoom!” I said.

Dr. Vavoom has changed since yesterday: from her sexy clothing to something a bit more armored. She also looks by turns more exhausted and more invested than she did yesterday, and there are two bird creatures lurking on her shoulders.

“Witness, state your relation to the Defendant,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes. Doctor Barbarella Vavoom, Coroner. Judge Bartok is my direct superior; Isadora Bartok was my friend. Janet Ashtraghi was not my friend,” said Dr. Vavoom.

“Doctor; the Defendants are accused of murdering Aloo and Apple Coffyn, and nothing else, at this time. Do you understand?” said Judge Scratch.

“Understood,” said Dr. Vavoom.

“Defence, Your Witness,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor. Dr. Vavoom, please explain what a Familial Resonance is, and what it can be used to do,” I said.

“Yes,” said Dr. Vavoom.

Dr. Vavoom’s Testimony: The Old Song

“I didn’t understand the long answer, myself, until I was in grad school. The short answer, which is a very useful sort of lie, is that a Familial Resonance is the sound your Soul makes when you hit it so’s it rings. Families- used here, scientifically, to mean beings related to each other within one or two generations, example, a brother-sister pair, or a parent and child- have the same sorts of, of artifacts in
their soul sounds. Certain musicians even mimic or stumble onto certain combinations of song-tones that resonate with the soul— it’s why certain people like certain music, they literally hear a part of themselves in the sound. Use of the Soul Sound is millennia old, but actually looking into how it does what it does is only a few hundred year's old. It’s… a very useful sort of untruth. Metaphor. That’s the word, for the music-thing,” said Dr. Vavoom.

“I see. So, in other words, it’s a sort of naturally occuring marker that everyone has?” said Yiu.

“Not just people. Plants, animals, weapons, even rocks and the contents of books. If it can be said that a thing is alive, then that thing has a soul that can resound- so long as you have the right tool to strike it, and the right ears to hear it,” said Dr. Vavoom.

“Ah. So it could be used to, say, determine which of these fossils came from one specific creature when there’s a whole pile of them in the dirt and no other way to know for sure?” said Yiu.

“Exactly so,” said Dr. Vavoom.

“Do Soul Sounds have other properties?” I said.

“Yes, they do. In beings under a year to five years old, the Soul Sound is very impressionable. There have been cases where, in adopted children, the resonance changes to match more closely with the adoptive parents. There have also been cases of resonances recording other resonances- like an echo, that’s a good lay-word for it- when the child in question has been exposed to an extreme trauma,” said Dr. Vavoom.

“OBJECTION! Are you saying that Miss Coffyn’s Soul Sound recorded the Soul Sounds of her parent’s murderers?” said Yiu with a slam of her fist on the bench, shocked.

“Yes. I am,” said Dr. Vavoom.

“Thank you, Doctor. Now, please explain for the Court Record the results of your test on Banoffee Buko Canelé Coffyn’s Familial Resonance, or Soul Sound. Whose echoes are in Miss Coffyn’s soul?” I said.

“Right. The patient is of a good weight, with full lung function; soul sound matches to within ninety-nine percent of her still-living brother, and ninety percent of her deceased parents, which is well within parameters of family. Soul Sound contains echoes, which match to within a quarter-tone of two recorded; Judge Lorenzo Bartok, and—” said Dr. Vavoom.

SPANG! goes a bullet off a large orange shield. Whuuunnng goes a strange blue… pitchfork? It only has two tines, so maybe? Either way, it’s pinning Lorenzo Bartok to the back of his chair, his throat caught between the two tines and his eyes rolling with a mixture of fury and fear.

Dr. Vavoom’s orange shield curls back into the shape of her bird-masked familiar.

clink! goes Judge Scratch’s habuki. No one dares to breathe until Judge Scratch daintily inclines their head in Dr. Vavoom’s general direction, before making a small gesture in a clear motion to continue.

Dr. Vavoom nods.
“As I was saying. The echoes in Miss Coffyn’s soul match two recorded Soul Sounds: Judge Lorenzo Bartok, and Site Safety and Health Officer Janet Ashtraghi. The only way for such echoes to be present within such a young resonance is by way of trauma. I cannot prove that Mister Bartok or Officer Ashtraghi killed the Coffyns. I can prove they were there at the time of the Coffyns deaths. Souls only take up echoes of other souls when their physical proximity - as denoted by bodily proximity - is within one meter. They were there; close enough to notice something was wrong. Close enough to help them, if they were in danger. Close enough that Mince Coffyn, their son, should not have been the one to find the bodies,” said Dr. Vavoom.

“OBJECTION! For what reason do you have two Battle-familiars in Court this day, Dr. Vavoom?” said Yiu.

“My lab was attacked last night. I’ve had thirty predecessors in the past six years, all of them dead in various nasty ways in Office. I can’t apologize for indecorous behavior if I’m dead of bullets. Bullets are the leading cause of death in the cases of my predecessors, you know. Oh- Sorry, Your Honor,” said Dr. Vavoom.

“It’s fine- in fact, you’ve got Special Dispensation to do it again, and with more vigor, should you have need. Bailey, give the Doctor a note- thank you,” said Judge Scratch.

“Neat. I’m having the part for display framed, I think. It’ll be nice next to my diploma,” said Dr. Vavoom.

“Nothing further, Your Honor,” I said.

“No further questions, Your Honor,” said Yiu.

“Dr. Vavoom, please retake your seat on the Witness Bench- but leave your bident if you please. I’ll have a Bailiff return it to you after Mister Bartok is secured,” said Judge Scratch, “Now, while the Bailiff takes care of that, we will have a short Recess. Take a stretch; take a piss. Refreshments can be purchased in the Lobby. When we return, we will discuss these revelations with the Defendants, and come to a resolution on these sordid details. Court Adjourned.”

click! goes Judge Scratch’s habuki as it slides back into the scabbard. The whole Court breathes a sigh of relief.

I need a piss and a snack, in that order. I look over at Aster, who is standing and stretching out a leg cramp. Perfect.

“I want a sandwich and some tea, please. Here’s my money- I’m going to the toilet,” I said to him.

“Sure thing, Boss,” said Aster.
And then I ran for it because my back teeth were fucking floating.

You know, there’s a good reason I became a Clown, of all things- specifically, a Fool with minors in Bardic Performance, and Mimicry (which is the academic word for Miming). Mostly, it’s because I have a thing, in my head? Right, well, it lays out a series of actions I can take, and at the end there’s laughter. I almost never know what the actions are until I take them, and I have to take all of them with proper timing and skill, or the laughter won’t come- which means I had to practice.

Eventually, that led to school- and, well, if I’d never been a Clown, I would have had a great line in Mystic Crafts. I’m not as good as Fern, but she makes straight up enchantments- you have to have a talent for that, it can’t be taught at the highest levels. What I do is the very basics of enchanting, and it’s really more of a hobby. But.

I understand what I’m doing when I do it, and for most of the things Fern makes? She doesn’t. Understanding the fundamentals will get you farther than just instinct alone- but, the things she can do when she does understand, well. The only word for that is magic, I’d say.

Still. When Fern gets one of her Visions, I know that whatever she needs done, she needs to avert a real catastrophe, a disaster, something that could result in the death or destruction of a friend, family member- and now that we’re pirates, crewmate.

Still, it’s a little weird- my sister has never asked me to make anything so complicated before. She brought me the materials for a dream catcher, and a list of dictations for the pattern of the web I was to weave inside the hoop.

The hoop itself is made of vine, three twisted together. It’s not fun to work with, but it’s not worse than, say, bone, or stone. Then I took red thread- silk embroidery floss, actually, and blow me down if Fern didn’t make notes about everything she’s taking from the Workshop and Studio- and I wove a sun into the net, as well as a series of charms that Fern dug out from her backpack. What resulted was something like a sunflower, with glistening beads shaped like fish caught in it’s rays- little golden fish with red faces and blue scaled bodies.

Then I had to make something like… eight extra small, eight small, eight medium small, eight medium, and then arrange them in steadily expanding circles, carefully binding each hoop to the other, eight, three, four, four, three- because all the hoops, bound together eight, three, four, four, four, two then into the largest hoop of all, like a hula hoop but jumbo sized, and bind each outer hoop to the final ring. Eight, three, four, four, four, three.

Lattice weave in murky blue and brown, and beads made of smaller beads, in a spiral arrangement- waterlilies- stitched down, eight, first ring. Second ring, eight again, swimming frogs in rippling waves of blue and brown and green, like light over water. By this point, I was heavily invested in finishing the damn thing, so- tiny golden dragonflies, flickering through bits of gold and brown and murky green, third ring. Fourth ring, turquoise turtles; darkest brown, green and blue, golden yellows. Finally, last ring; cranes, bright red on milk white glass, floating in a flickering sea of red grasses and brown earth and blue, blue sky.

The outer hoop got covered in bundles of feathers, quail and rooster tail and white down from goose-
and then it’s done, and I’m almost blinded by what I’ve made. The last thing I have to add are eight glistening scales of rainbow black.

A mandala- my sister gave me the instructions to make a dreamcatcher mandala.

An eye of God is a votive object made by weaving a design out of yarn, thread, hair, on a wooden cross. Several colors are used, depending on the God being invoked. What most people don’t realize is that a God Eye and a Dream Catcher are two different directions for the same sort of thing.

Dreamcatchers came to Gobdark from the Fae- a hoop made of wood or metal, on which was woven a net or web. There were sacred items, too- feathers, beads. When they began to be made by merjin and gyojin mothers, grandmothers, the feathers got replaced by the scales of fish, and the beads changed from ivory to gold, stone, precious minerals. They’re called gyomō, fishing nets; they catch bad dreams, little monsters, and other evil things in their webbing.

Eventually, they became a common thing. When Mom got sick, I started selling the ones I made for extra pocket money, and, well… if I focus on it, I can make something like thirty in two days. That’s because I work in batches, but that’s not important.

I remember my first mother, my birth mother. She hated me- or, no, I don’t think she really did. I’m not sure she cared. Aki-san- Aquila- she cared. I made a godeye for her when she got pregnant, and when the girls were two years or so, I made them dreamcatchers. They’re gone, now, as so many things are- but I still did it.

That was when Mom became Mom; she gave me my earrings, told me that in her family, they were only given to the son of the daughter- the first son, the first daughter, repeating back through generations. That’s how I became the older brother to the girls; that’s how I became my mother’s son.

My First Mother left when I was ten, and the girls were six; and I never saw her again. She- my first mother- gave me the name Horizonté. Mom named me Herbert; Cece couldn’t say “Herbert” when she was six. She could say “sancho”, which I think she associated with my shoes, which, at the time, were printed with bamboo grasses. Sancho, of course, has a number of jokes attached to it… And most interesting of all, Cece didn’t know me when she came to the Gag, probably because she’d never seen my Face until then. I didn’t know her, either, but… I figured it out on the first day.

As for why I became a Clown, instead of a crafter like I thought I would be when I was ten, it’s really very simple. Unless you gain a very strong following, being a crafter isn’t a job you can make a lot of money in quickly- don’t get me wrong! You can make enough to live on, if you’re a crafter, enough to pay your share of rent, utilities, groceries… but not enough for everything you need to support a family, and your mother dying of white plague. That’s what Mom had; none of the girls can say it, it’s too terrifying, it’s too… close. So many of their friends, so many of the people they knew… so many of my friends, too… The White Plague took them all.

It took Mom.

A crafter works on commission; Clowns get salaries. Fools, who have cultivated talent for Bardic Performance and Mimicry, are employed by kings. Even interning for the local Lords and Ladies gained me enough resaleable swag that I could finance the majority of my mother’s medicine.

Indeed, the only thing my paychecks couldn’t cover was the copay which went to the pharmacists-
everything else, the insurance, the doctor visits, the perscriptions… all of that, I could cover. But I
couldn’t actually pay for the medicine itself.

Not as a student Clown with a crafting hobby. I put down my thread and glue and pretty paints, and
took up quill and brush and honeyed words, and it was only just enough to pay for Mother’s
medicine. Not the rent; not my sister’s school supplies; not even food. Just medicine. On the one
hand, I’m glad there are seven of them; since all of them worked, none of them starved.

On the other hand, it was my own inadequacy that resulted in my sisters being robbed of a
childhood.

Anyway; all things considered, I think I did pretty well, following my sister’s instructions. It’s a nice
dreamcatcher; dunno why she’s having me hang it on the ceiling of the men’s dorm, but I do know
I’ve just fallen off the ladder. Didn’t break anything, thankfully, but there’s- huh. Well, none of the
Mice are doctors, and Fern gets woozy at the sight of blood and internal bits, so.

We’ve got to get back to town now, for a number of reasons- on wolf back. I’ve never ridden wolf-
back before; should be fun!

I return to the bench, and devour the roast beef sandwich Aster got for me. I drink my tea- some
peach blend I don’t care for. I deposit the remains into the garbage can under the bench- Aster
always forgets I don’t like raw onion.

...I don’t think Hearb Kurree or Dr. Vavoom have moved from their spots on the Witness Bench.
The way Lorenzo Bartok and Janet Ashtraghi look, they certainly haven’t stopped staring at the
Defendants.

Piety, Harmony, Dedication, Trustworthiness, Propriety, Sacrifice, Honor, and Shame- these are the
tenets those who swear to protect and serve the Law are supposed to abide by. So far as this case is
concerned, Lorenzo Bartok has managed to break every single one of them. Interestingly enough,
every member of law enforcement- and every employee of Daiso, and every Doctor who trains in
Ryugu Mergyo, which Dr. Vavoom did- has to swear to uphold those eight tenets I thought of. Piety,
Harmony, Dedication, Trustworthiness, Propriety, Sacrifice, Honor, and Shame; these are the tenets
of those who protect and serve.

clink! goes Judge Scratch’s habuki. What noise there was dies silently.

“Court Resumed. Have all Witnesses been called?” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor,” I said.

“Yes, Your Honor,” said Yiu.

“Then we shall proceed to the Calling of the Defendants. Prosecution; call your Defendant of
Choice,” said Judge Scratch.
“Yes, Your Honor. Prosecution calls Janet Ashtraghi,” said Yiu.

In uniform, Janet Ashtraghi could be anyone. It completely covers her entire body, of course, but it’s opaque, too- and having a SH-SO as your partner in crime would cover a lot of sins… but she’s not in uniform. She’s wearing ordinary clothing- the police brought her in on an off shift. She must have grabbed a go-bag and changed into its contents, rather than laze around in her pajamas. I, personally, think she might have made a mix up in her laundry; she’s wearing a date-night outfit, not everyday clothing. Her skirt is has too much sheen; her cardigan is cashmere. The bow is offset just enough to bring attention to her tits.

Lorenzo Bartok, when he’s not staring straight ahead, is looking her up and down like she’s delectable. She’s returning the favor- so, to anyone with eyes, and the ability to see… it’s obvious, what they’ve been up to. And yet- and yet- when I look at the whole of the woman, her adoration of Lorenzo Bartok is… sickeningly obvious. Look at her parts…? Well.


“Guilty, Your Honor,” said Janet Ashtraghi.

clink! goes Judge Scratch’s habuki. The Court silences itself.

“Will you not even attempt to Defend yourself, girl?” said Judge Scratch.

“No, Your Honor. I’ve done Wrong; I will not deny it,” said Janet Ashtraghi.

“...Very well, then. I have no other choice but to declare you Guilty. Do you understand what that means for you?” said Judge Scratch.

“yes, Your Honor. I do understand,” said Janet Ashtraghi.

“...Bailey, have Miss Ashtraghi escorted to Holding while her sentence is processed,” said Judge Scratch.

Bailey bowed, and directed Bailiffs to execute Judge Scratch’s orders. Executioners Te Yari and Mankiri begin to step forwards to escort Miss Ashtraghi away- and right about then, I realize Lorenzo Bartok’s plan.

“My Objection!” I shouted, slamming both fists down onto the bench.

“...Don’t waste my time, DA Portgas,” sighed Judge Scratch.

“Your Honor; if either Defendant is taken to Holding, they cannot be compelled to give true testimony as to the other’s guilt. If Miss Ashtraghi is taken away, there will be no one to-” I
“NO! NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO! I DID IT! I DID IT IT WAS ME IT WAS ME-” screamed Janet Ashtraghi.

Thought so. I meet Judge Scratch’s terrifying eyes, and I wait. While Miss Ashtraghi has her screaming conniption, Judge Scratch raises an eyebrow to me, then inclines their head.

“Executioner Te Yari!” barked Judge Scratch. Their voice carried over Janet Ashtraghi’s screechings like seagull cries over waves on the shore.

“Sah!” saluted Te Yari.

“Separate the Defendants; I don’t want them seeing or hearing each other anymore. Make it so,” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!” said Te Yari, before unfolding her massive wings and placing herself such that her own body blocked the sight lines between Lorenzo Bartok and Janet Ashtraghi. Then, she unsheathed her spear and the sudden baffle between Lorenzo Bartok and Janet Ashtraghi only serves to make her panicked wailings all the more visceral.

“Your Honor, if I may; I believe I have enough information now to reveal the Truth,” I said.

“Go for it, DA Portgas; maybe it'll shut the Defendant up,” said Judge Scratch.

I nodded.

“Some will say the murders of Aloo and Apple Coffyn are the conclusion of events started when Osvaldo Bartok, age eight, observed his mother falling down the stairs after a vicious row with his father- see these Incident Reports, filed the day of Isadora Bartok’s death. Judge Bartok had Isadora Bartok’s death ruled accidental, though it was no such thing. Judge Lorenzo Bartok then invited Janet Ashtraghi to live with them; filling the void Isadora had left behind, as it were. Except Janet Ashtraghi is not Isadora Bartok, and never has been.

Presented to Court: Incident Reports

“In truth, the murders of the Coffyns are conclusions to events that happened four years before Isadora Bartok’s death. It was at this time that Lorenzo Bartok began his “gambling habit” again; when in reality, he was using his known gambling addiction as a cover for his incestuous affair with Janet Ashtraghi. Isadora Bartok discovered his lie, discovered her sister’s lie, and took them both to
task.

“And both Lorenzo Bartok and Janet Ashtraghi had a hand in Isadora Bartok’s death. Lorenzo Bartok pushed her down the stairs, it’s true- but it’s Janet Ashtraghi that ensured the coroner would pronounce the death accidental. What neither had taken into account was that Osvaldo would be witness to it all; and so, a second lie was schemed, to cover their sin.

“Janet Ashtraghi, being learned in the magic arts, decided to hide Osvaldo’s mother’s soul stone in the boy himself. Such a traumatic event would certainly lock, or erase, the memory of another; and putting the soul stone of another into one who is not prepared for the intrusion usually results in the death of both,” I said.

“SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP UP-” screamed Janet Ashtraghi.

“Fortunately for Osvaldo- unfortunately for Janet- the familial resonance was not taken into account. When Janet took Isadora’s soul stone, cut open her nephew, and shoved her sister- his mother- deep inside… they became overlaid, bound, reflected. From that moment onwards, everyone who saw Osvaldo would be able to say that they had seen his mother; because, of course, they had,” I said.

“SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP-!” screamed Janet Ashtraghi.

“No one would have ever known, were it not for the others not taken into account: Hearb Kurree, a Daiso-franchise owner and failed Soul Cutter, possessed of a good and honest heart. Upon meeting Osvaldo before and after the Procedure his aunt put him through, Mister Kurree was immediately aware of a difference- a wrongness in a child he had seen grow up. Diego “King” Dice, Casino GM, isn’t a cold-hearted bastard; he’s practical, above all else. It isn’t practical, selling your family into sexual slavery- you become known as the kind of person who does that to their family, you see, and it becomes very hard to trade favors for favors with the savory sort. Doctor Vavoom, current Coroner for the Chihiro Town OL, is not stupid, absorbed in her work, and does not consider doing her job worthy of bribery. Aster Mistburrow and Gunther Stonedge are accomplished Spirit Channelers, intimately familiar with all manner of soul and soul ailment. Prosecutor Yiu is angered beyond propriety and form when Evil is not properly punished, and will do something about it, gods dammit. And I, DA Portgas, am richer than you will ever dream of being. I’m so wealthy, I can order an entire Automatic corpse, fresh-made and no soul-stone present, in a matter of hours- and it will be done, and delivered, with a complimentary gift free of charge, because I’m richer than you will ever dream of being,” I said.

Janet Ashtraghi heaved and panted as I stared her down.

“Miss Ashtraghi, what’s the code to the safe in Lorenzo Bartok’s office?” I said.

“...I... I don’t know...?” gasped Janet Ashtraghi, confused. She glanced to Lorenzo Bartok, but only saw Executioner Te Yari.

“Miss Ashtraghi, what’s the override access code to every safe in the Chihiro Sento Hotel?” I said.

“Eh- one, eight, eight, eight, three, four four four, three, one- and then you need the key,” said Janet Ashtraghi.

“HOLD IT! Miss Ashtraghi, is this the key of which you speak?” said Yiu.
“Ah- y-yes, that’s it, um- wh-where, uh, where did you get that…?” said Janet Ashtraghi.

“Be it known to the Court that this key was used to open the safe in the Coffyn’s room,” said Yiu.

“Miss Ashtraghi, how do you make shortcrust pastry suitable for a pie or tart?” I said.

“. . . I don’t know,” wheezed Janet Ashtraghi, confused. Her rolling, darting eyes settled onto mine, flicking back from Yiu.

“Miss Ashtraghi, how do you crystallize potassium cyanide?” said Yiu.

“You dissolve hydrogen cyanide and potassium hydroxide in ethanol- erm, potassium ferrocyanide (free from potassium sulfate) is gently heated with stirring, until the crystallization water is completely expelled. 80 g of obtained anhydrous potassium ferrocyanide are triturated and mixed with 30 g of perfectly dry and powdered potassium carbonate. The mixture is fused in a covered iron crucible, until the mass appears clear and is in a faint glow. The reaction is complete when a sample from crucible, taken out with a heated glass or iron rod, looks perfectly white. The crucible is removed from a muffle oven and cooled a little until the evolution of gas has ceased. The fused potassium cyanide is poured into a preheated, crucible-shaped vessel made of iron or silver, with proper care, to prevent the running-out of any particles of iron which have separated in the process of fusion and have subsided to the bottom of the crucible. The mass is slowly cooled to room temperature and transferred to well-stoppered bottle. The potassium cyanide so prepared is pure for most purposes, although it contains potassium carbonate and potassium cyanate, which in the solution in transforms into ammonium carbonate and potassium carbonate,” said Janet Ashtraghi.

“Miss Ashtraghi, what tea do you pair with apples?” I said.

“. . . I don’t know,” said Janet Ashtraghi, shaking her head, “I never knew. I- I never needed to know.”

I nod.

“Let it be known to the Court: Aloo and Apple Coffyn were killed with Cyanide in the pastry portion of their Apple Tarts. Potassium Cyanide is visually identical to table sugar in every way in the macro; when used as a decorative element in a pastry, there is no discernable difference to normal senses. Neither Coffyn was a Chef of any star accreditation; they didn’t have a chance,” I said.

“Miss Ashtraghi, how much money does Lorenzo Bartok owe to the THS Casino?” said Yiu.

“One million five hundred thousand beri,” said Janet Ashtraghi.

“Miss Ashtraghi, how do you make Apple Tarts?” I said.

“Stir together flour and salt; add butter, an egg yolk, and water. Stir to crumbs, and add water if they do not hold together when pressed. Form a ball of the dough, and set it to chill. Cream butter and sugar together until fluffy, add egg and egg yolk with discernment. Stir in apple brandy; mix flour with ground almonds and mix with batter. Roll dough out, fold into quarters, center in tart pan,
unfold dough, press into bottom and up the sides. Dock, and flute the edges; return pastry to chill until firm. Heat the oven to medium temperature, hot but not painful; place a baking sheet inside the oven while it heats. Spoon fragipane into the chilled pastry and spread evenly; arrange apple slices into a spiral, overlapping each slice; from outside, in. Put the tart on top of the baking sheet in the oven; bake for fifteen minutes, or until browned. Reduce the oven heat to warm, and bake for ten more minutes. Sprinkle sugar over the top of the tart; continue baking in warm oven until sugar melts brown. Cool the tart on a wire rack; when well cooled, brush on apricot or peach jelly of good fluidity for an appealing shine,” said Janet Ashtraghi.

“Miss Ashtraghi, how did Lorenzo Bartok get the baby out of Apple Coffyn?” said Yiu.

“He didn’t. I- why can’t I stop myself talking? I- the baby moved on it’s own, it slid out of her dead flesh, and- he told me to handle it, so I took the baby and, and the placenta fell into the empty safe it fell in and- bad luck! I, I, I couldn’t- he would have been so angry. He would have been so angry,” said Janet Ashtraghi, tears rolling down her face and eyes dilated, black and huge and shining in the light.

“Miss Ashtraghi; was he angry before?” I said.

“...yes...” said Janet Ashtraghi, before coughing unrelentingly and- a gout of blood- from her mouth-!

Fuck!

“-pa-ct-” gagged Janet Ashtraghi before choking and puking up more blood-

Bailiffs rush forwards, but it’s too late.

Janet Ashtraghi had enough Automata in her that breaking her Pact killed her. The scent of cola fills the air as the Balibabies wash away the blood; the body got carried out fast enough there’s no shit or piss on the stand. A bucket of water washes away the cola; and a mop takes care of the last of it.

Nothing left but the horrified Court and a grimly vindicated Prosecution.

I blink carefully, unwilling to let my teary eyes muss the makeup on my face. At this point, we have enough to disbar Lorenzo Bartok forever; but we do not have him dead to rights. For a case like this, we want him dead to rights.

Luckily, there is no Statute of Limitations on Murder. Theft, yes- murder? No.

So.
“DA Portgas. Call your Defendant,” growled Judge Scratch.

“Actually, Your Honor; there is one more Witness that can be called. I had hoped that we would not need to go to such lengths, but with the other Defendant now...” I said.

“Deceased, if I know my Oathbroken correctly,” sighed Judge Scratch, “And you're sure this Witness has decisive and unassailable evidence to the Defendant’s Guilt or Innocence?”

“Your Honor, this Witness observed a convictable crime directly; we would be remiss not to hear what they have to say,” I said.

“You are aware that if I find their testimony anything less than correct, the current case against Lorenzo Bartok will be dismissed on grounds of insufficient evidence?” said Judge Scratch.

“I am, Your Honor,” I said.

“...Very well. I will allow it; call your Witness, Defense,” said Judge Scratch.

And finally, somehow, of all the things that could have done it; that little thing, that hint of a person Lorenzo Bartok missed... that drives Lorenzo Bartok over the edge. He can’t stop himself from speaking.

“Words on a paper don’t mean a damn thing; and Laws mean even less. No one will care for a stupid thing like this. No one will come. Shut up; your words offend me,” said Lorenzo Bartok.

“Sir! The Law has meaning, Sir. People will care for even the slightest drip of change that the Law promises. And Sir, someone will come,” said Yiu.

“The Law has meaning, Sir, beyond this petty realm of mortal harms and emotional hurts. It is more than mere words on a page. The people will care for it, for reasons even they don’t understand. They’ll come up in ones and twos, sobbing with their children in local libraries and screaming in the cells, begging for something they can’t name. They arrive at your door, your desk, your side, cynical and jaded and full of hope, innocent as children, soft as rain- longing for you to make things right again.

“I believe you; I believe you still, and I will always fight for you’, you’ll say to them. ‘It’s only two thousand beri per case.’ They give you the money without even thinking about it- because you’ve promised them that you would make things right again. For it is money they have, and peace they lack. And they will pay you, sir, they will pay you to have the faith they cannot bear to consider holding in their hearts again,” I said.

“Just shut up,” said Mister Bartok.

“And they have faith in you, Sir, every moment; every breath of you is suffused with unwavering faith- the belief that you, weak, fallible, mortal you, can somehow find the Truth of these matters, can somehow pour untroubled oil on violent waters hungry for their blood. They follow you into the Court, and sit or stand or rest, waiting in their chains, for you to free them- in warm summer rain, through the howling winds of autumn, on a perfect spring afternoon or a dreary winter’s day. They find their reserved seats, where once their heroes and gods sat as they were cheered on by the child
that has grown and taken their place. And they will listen to you defend them, with everything you have, and several things you don’t, and it is as if they’d been lit within with sacred fires. The smoke of lies burning away, the stench of truth in the air- the very memories themselves, so thin as to be like gossamer of spiders, why, so thick in the air these things will be, they’ll have to wash their very souls out to be clean again,” I said.

“You can’t prove a gods damned thing, so just- shut up,” said Mister Bartok.

“People will care, Sir; and someone is coming,” said Yiu.

“Y-you’ll never be able to prove that I did a-anything wrong, and- and no fancy trick you use, no twist or truth will ever make me admit to doing something wrong! I’ve done nothing wrong at all! NO ONE IS COMING!” shrieked Mister Bartok.

“The one constant through all the years, all the ages, Sir, has been the Law. The World grew and shrank, heaved and tossed like a child gripped in nightmares; it has spun on like a pinwheel, has toiled on like an anthill, has rolled like barrels onto a barge. It’s been cleaned like a slate, rebuilt, torn down, rewritten, and erased again. But the Law, Sir! The Law has marked the time!

“This Court, my job- even your own denial of fault, your lies, your misdirections and cruelties- it’s all a story that’s been told and told again, all throughout the Ages, Sir. It’s been passed from generation to generation, tearing and tattering and being renewed with each and every telling; it serves to remind us of all that is Good in the Law, and could be so again,” I said.

“Oh, people will care, Sir. For even a second of change, people will most definitely care; and someone isn’t coming. Someone is already here,” said Yiu.

“DA Portgas,” said Judge Scratch.

“Your Honor,” I said.

“Finish him,” said Judge Scratch.

“Yes, Your Honor,” I said, “Defense calls Isadora Bartok!” I said.

I never have liked calling up Ghosts to the stand- legally, that’s what someone is when they’ve been murdered but not killed, they’re a Ghost. Mab Boudicca Morgan, my once older sister, is a Ghost; she died. But she was not killed.

Isadora Bartok died; but she was not killed.

Aster walks up to the Witness stand and opens a large bag we placed under it long before the start of the day’s Court session. From the bag comes a sealed jar, and Aster opens that jar- then, he returns to my side. The contents of the jar writhe and seethe, and then the jar itself begins to dissolve- it wasn’t really a jar, more like a membrane- and a thick, viscous puddle of effluvient slime wobbles behind the stand. It is red, thrombus, like raspberry jam in a blob on a white stone floor.

First, a pair of hands, followed by an arm- women’s hands, a woman’s arm, splattering into the ground with a wet, sickly flap; then, the other, and a short jolt, like when you sit up out of shallow water just enough to breathe in new air. The mass jolts and shudders as the woman pulls herself up, together, out-
Through the slime, the long snake black ripple of a spine; here, the curve of a breast; there, the curve of a jaw. The liquidinous slithering of hair slapping against skin, the dripping ooze as flesh folds over itself, slime dripping off fingertips clear as saliva, writhing like tongues- a sharp gasp of pain, and she hunches over on herself, paling from the enraged red to an ashen blue. She grits her teeth, and snarls, and clutches her head, and then she gathers herself and rises again. Hips emerge, and thighs, the long leg bones and the narrow ankles- each and every toe accounted for, perfect in shape and size. Her flesh wavers on her bones; she’s neither here, nor there.

There stands a woman, tall and skeletal and nude; her long black hair is dishevelled, and her one visible eye crackles with rage.

Her name is Isadora Bartok.

She has a story to tell; but we don’t need to hear it, right now.

“Witness, state your name and relation to the Defendant,” said Judge Scratch.

“My name is Isadora Ashtraghi Bartok. I was the murdered wife of Lorenzo Bartok; he made sure of that,” said Isadora Bartok.

“I see. Do you mean he had you murdered…?” said Judge Scratch.

“No. I mean he killed me himself, when he threw me down the stairs and broke my neck at the bottom when I was only concussed,” said Isadora Bartok.

“Ah. Unless the Prosecution or Defense has any further questions, I am prepared to make my Judgement,” said Judge Scratch.

“No, Your Honor,” said Yiu.

“Just one, Your Honor,” I said.

“Go on, then,” sighed Judge Scratch.

“Madame… what do you intend to do after this Trial?” I said.

“...I have every intention of joining the Monastery of the Sacred Chalice. I am not well, DA Portgas; I can barely hold myself together. I know I have a responsibility, to my beloved son- but part of loving someone is doing what is right for them, no matter your feelings about doing so. If the care of my son was given to me, I am sure that he would suffer for it; as would I. ...Captain Luffy,” said Isadora Bartok, turning and leveling her terrible gaze on the rubbery man in question.

“Yeah?” said Captain Luffy.

“Please take care of my son, while he is in your care,” said Isadora Bartok.

“Of course!” said Captain Luffy.

And then, Isadora Bartok did something I didn’t expect; she smiled. For a moment, just a moment, I can see the beauty Isadora Bartok was once famed for- and she was famed for it. No one has been so crass as to say it aloud, but… Isadora was the prettiest of the three sisters, no doubt about it.
Isadora finally turns and faces her son. She tilts her head to the side, and then seems to realize something—then nods decisively to herself. She stands fully upright, and stretches out her hand—and from the angle, I’d say she’s covering his heart with her hand. She presses a lance of Haki through the air, and threads it more delicately than thread of gold through a bone needle, and she grips-something—and she pulls. She pulls and she pulls, and— from the tips of his fingers, the tips of his horns, his very demon-ness begins to recede. An orb of ectoplasm begins to bubble out of his mouth, thick and smoky with touches of red and vermilion.

His skin pales; his hair changes texture, from the sleek brown-black of his father to a more dishevelled, purple affair, much more like his mother’s. The bones of his face shift; his shoulders broaden, his gut thins, his legs get longer and longer. His claws vanish, replaced by simple fingers, delicately arched and articulated. Thick blue-black lines begin to crawl over his skin, like drawings—tattoos of simple black ink, and as I watch, astonished, they shift and crawl under his skin. Finally, all that’s left of what was before is the color of his eyes, as golden as before—but maybe a more rosy tone, instead of the hard brass they were.

The orb of ectoplasm shrinks and firms, shifting over itself like a particularly enraged ball of twine. A crook of the fingers draws the ugly orb through the air, down into Isadora’s hand. She regards it with disdain, resignation…and then she looks at her son, and I am struck nearly blind by the pure love on her face.

And then Isadora Bartok swallows the orb, and her body writhes. Clothing unfurls—a kimono that went through a shredder or a particularly hungry cloud of moths. What it is now…? Hardly anything, just moth-eaten fabric and colors worn away by time. But once… once, it really was quite something.

Somehow, her hair is even more dishevelled, and the back of her kimono drops nearly to the crack of her ass. Two massive wings, like crumpled umbrellas, are folded against the pale curve of her spine; and her obi is tied in front. Ah.

Yep. Isadora Ashtraghi was the prettiest of her sisters; and her son, Osvaldo?

That man is the prettiest I’ve seen in a good long while.

“Well now! Pretty as pictures, and twice as real. Witness, have you anything else to say?” said Judge Scratch.

“No, Your Honor; I’m quite finished with this. Should you have need of me again, I shall be at the Monastery of the Sacred Chalice,” said Isadora Ashtraghi Bartok, accept no substitutes.

“Certainly. Bailiff; please escort Madame Ashtraghi to the Monastery of her choice. Please ensure that no harm comes to her or others on her journey,” said Judge Scratch.

“Sah!” said the Bailiff.

“Finally, we have our decisive Evidence. While unnecessary in most cases, in a case like this, where the Defendant is so highly connected with the Court, the evidence supporting a verdict must be inviolate and substantial. De minimis non curat lex; Orbis mutat Lex mutat Orbis,”
said Judge Scratch.

Lorenzo Bartok looks like a withered husk of a man; fear and rage have made a crumpled ruin of his sinisterly handsome face.

“Mince Coffyn is hereby awarded custody of his sister, Banoffee Buko Canelé Coffyn, as well as those properties, holdings, and assets that remained in his parent’s care at the time of their deaths. Bailiffs will coordinate with those Crewmembers in charge of the Coffyns to the fair distribution, investment, sale, or storage of aforementioned goods. Nurse Mendy May’s contract with the Coffyns is hereby rendered Null and Void due to their registry on the same Crew; Breach payments will be handled by the Court. Osvaldo Bartok is hereby absolved of all responsibility, fiscal and otherwise, to both Lorenzo Bartok and Isadora Ashtraghi Bartok,” said Judge Scratch.

Tying up loose ends; I can see Mab leaning past Zoro to speak quietly to Nami.

“And finally, my Judgement. Lorenzo Bartok is hereby found Guilty of Murder; Apple and Aloo Coffyn may yet live, were not for him. Isadora Bartok may yet have her own body, were it not for him. I sentence him… hm. Here, then, a choice: He may take his chances with the Trail of Wolves; or he may be remanded to the care of the Teahouse Social Club Casino, where they will extract equal recompense for the debts he has accrued,” said Judge Scratch.

Oouf! Death or a Hard Place… The Trail of Wolves leads to the Sea of Monsters, and is full of deadly dangers- and the currents are such that if you go, you won’t come back. And if he goes for the TSC option, he’ll become a prostitute for the rest of his natural life– it’s the only way I can think of that he’d manage to make back enough money.

“...Wolves, Your Honor,” rasped Mister Lorenzo Bartok.

“Done!” chirruped Judge Scratch, “Executioner Sodegarami! Take a squad and escort Mister Bartok to the appropriate area, then send him on his way. Do ensure that there will be no Retrial,” said Judge Scratch.

“Of course, Your Honor,” said Executioner Sodegarami, bowing gracefully.

Yeah, if he’s not dead or dying as soon as he gets to the gate of the Trail of Wolves, I’ll be very surprised.

“Court Adjourned, then,” said Judge Scratch, before fully sheathing their sword.
And that- anticlimactic or not, fun or not, was that.

CASE CLOSED; GUILTY VERDICT

February 6th

Chihiro Sento; First Wing, First Floor, Room 88

Honestly, a shower and a change of clothes can be more refreshing than a trip to a water park on a hot summer’s day. Brush my hair out, put it in a looser style; my hair bells convert back to the bell earrings I usually wear.

I wrote up my notes into a more formal style, and put them in with the Casefile; Sage and Ren are handling it, while Aster and Gunther check over Osvaldo Bartok and Isadora Ashtraghi for any lingering after effects of their forced combination. But me? My presence is neither wanted nor required for the rest of the day- so, I’m taking Sue on that date.

Start with the start; matched set underwear and white fleece leggings, because it’s cold outside. A front moved in during the afternoon, and although it isn’t snowing, it’s certainly much colder. Then, that dress Ren packed for me- white, with floral designs picked out in multiple colors of thread, ombre in density if not necessarily actual color. It’s really very beautiful; I’m glad to have it.

The base of my outfit is basically done- just have to add the socks… and then my scarf, soft yellow and nearly see-through, but warmer than anything. Wrap that over my shoulders, and loop twice around my neck; pin it with my sword and shield scarf pin. I’ll make a note to send Mab hers too, before I forget yet again…

First layer, a jumper; thick wool in cable knit, heavy weight, heavy wear. The hem drops down to just about the middle of my thigh, and the sleeves go past my fingers. A hat for my head; a coat for my back, but I’ll wait to actually put it on; and of course, the best, ugliest, most aggressive boots I have, because it’s much too cold for trainers and I need the grip. Black ice is evil!

That was a hell of a day. I’m glad we didn’t have to dredge up that information about Osvaldo Bartok to get a guilty verdict; some things are meant to stay secret.

Check the purse - wallet, keys, phone, ID, makeup bag, instaprint camera- huh, forgot to take that out since the Beach Date… A white cat purse with a golden crescent between it’s ears. I dunno, they came as a black and white set, and I gave the black one to Sue, and… I dunno, it’s sentimental. -As for my makeup look, a simple vampy black line on my eyes and some lip gloss; a touch of highlighter over my cheekbones, and that’s it.

Oh! Someone’s at the door…?
It’s not Aster, he’s been gone all afternoon- I check through the viewport-hole, and it’s Sue!

I open the door to let her in, and almost fall over with the hot armful of sexually frustrated girlfriend. I kick the door shut behind her, and stagger backwards to the bed.

“Mmmph!” I hummed into her mouth.

“Mmhmm,” hummed Sue.

I gasped as we broke apart, and stared at her. Black fleece-lined tights, a black dress with flowers splattered on like drops of paint; a pink tunic sweater that flops onto the floor, followed by my own sweater, my scarf and pin, my hat. My coat flops onto the ground, followed by hers, a red-velvet frock coat - nngah- with, hah, with black cord details and black lace c-cuffs, nnnghaah- her dress comes off, my dress comes off, my back flwumps into the pillows, a-and-

Wait, we’re still wearing our tights and socks- hers are red - and underwear, wh-what-

“I thought about it, and I realized… you don’t like getting stuff on your hands. I also realized that I don’t mind that at all- but, um… Could we… If I got you off like this-” Sue said, pinning my throbbing plush muff with her own, then rolling her hips just so- aaah!

“If we do it like that, would that be okay?” said Sue.

I gasped and squirmed underneath her, and then I hooked a leg over hers and rolled.

“Only if you don’t mind a little… competition,” I said, grinding myself against her and watching her eyes cross.

When Sue could think again, I was met with a sharp grin and a wild light in her glitter-covered eyes- oh wow, she got that eye-glitter that you use instead of mascara or eyeliner- mmmph!

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When I woke up, it was to the sight of Sue Yiu, resting and sweet in slumber at my side.

Last night… Last night, we didn’t go Ice Skating, and we didn’t get ramen, and uh, Aster had to stay
with Gunther for the night. I realized I don’t like putting my mouth directly onto genitals- but, wouldn’t you know it, Sue was wearing nearly see-through underwear. And there’s the bra, hanging off the lampshade...

To hell with it, I’ll order room service and mail Mab her gifts. Sue’s awake again, and I’ve got enough money to just rent the room for as long as we want; we’re both due a damn vacation...
What's Left Undone

“Sancho, there’s an arrow in your ass,”

“Well, I’ll be motherfucked- so there is. I’d have never guessed that without you, Cece,”

“Sanchooooo-”

“AH! DOCTOR DOCTOR, YOU NEED A DOCTOR-”

“DOCTOR CHOPPER IS A DOCTOR-!”

“AH! Right! Sorry; Nurse G, prep the patient for surgery; Nurse Taffy, prepare anesthetic-”

“Yiss!”

“This panic thing of yours really needs to change, Doctor...”

It warms the cockles of my heart to hear my crewmates being themselves again. This Trial really took a lot out of us all.

Now then. I need to have a word with Nami.

“Nami; we’ve got new crewmates, and we’ve got some things we need to handle for said crewmates. Think we can swing another few days here to settle everything?”

“Hm. Well, it’s still another five days to set the Log Pose according to Taffy, and we did budget for much higher fees for the holiday; if you want, we can stay another week.”

“Cool. In that case, I’m getting everyone all access passes to the resort; we might as well have an actual vacation , if possible. It’s also probably a good idea to make sure we’re actually stocked and in good repair,”

“Sounds good to me. Talk to the kids, you’ve got a certain rapport with them; I’ll handle Zoro, Luffy, and Sanji,”

“...So, everyone else you’re leaving to me, then?”

“Mm.”

“Okay, well, just making sure,”

I roll my neck, and pick my first target- Nurse Mendy May, currently breastfeeding BBCC and drinking a big bottle of fortified water. I think it has electrolytes and vitamins and minerals in it? Anyway- her first. I know a babysitter when I see one.
“Hello, Nurse Mendy,”

“Hmm? Oh, Missus Mab- nice to meet you? Er, I’d shake your hand, but-”

“No, no, don’t get up. I’ve had a talk with Nami, our Treasurer, and we came to the decision that, since it’s going to be just a bit longer before we can actually leave, we might as well enjoy an actual vacation and take some time to get things on the ship prepared for our new crewmates. Any requests, or thoughts about what to do on this resort?”

“Hmm, I, personally, would like a chaise or a daybed, and somewhere I can work on my technomancy. D’you have a forge?”

“We do; Franky overbuilt it, so I’m fairly certain there’s room for a workbench with your nameplate on it. As for the beds, we can certainly work something out, though… mostly, we sleep in hammock-bunk type beds, to accommodate the roll of the ship,”

“Ah! Right, I had forgotten- um, then I suppose I really just want a dedicated changing area, and other baby supplies,”

“Nami, if you couldn’t tell, is expecting; we’ve actually got a bit of everything you could possibly need, excepting a crib,”

“Right- bad luck to fill a house with baby things and risk there being no baby,”

“Exactly.”

“Well, that’s me sorted; as for the resort… I suppose you’ll want me to keep an eye on the Littles, since I’m already engaged in the care of BBC here?”

“Well. Yes,”

“Hm. Sure; I’ll be a responsible adult,”

“Thank you; next up… Mince and Oz. Those two will need some minding, and no mistake…”

“Hm. Make sure to break up their sadness with wonderments, Missus Mab. No one can be sad all the time, it’s too hard,”

“I quite agree. Time to burp her?”

“And change; one in, one out, y’know,”

And I leave Nurse Mendy to it. We’re in a three family suite, more like a large house on one whole side of the hotel’s upper floor. It’s a beautiful room, all done in gold and soft surfaces. We’ve spread out over it like a particularly piratical swarm of locusts.

Nami, supported by a Zoro doing his very best to hover without seeming like he’s hovering (and failing miserably, the man worries like he practices his swordsmanship- with religious zeal and fanaticism), is expla-telling Captain, and Sanji, how things are going to have to go for the next few days. Franky and Robin are listening in- well, Robin’s listening while pretending to read a book, and Franky is going over specs and tolerances with Jellybean, who looks more like a particularly energized and excited slime person than the slightly squidgy robogirl I’ve come to… well, I won’t lie
and say I know her very well, but she gets along with Bryony and Brook quite well.

Speaking of, they’re currently engaging Oz in conversation about music; coaxing him out of his trauma-shell, and also giving him something, anything, to hold on to. Mince, on the other hand, is sitting like an odd goose out while the Girls- minus Sancho, Genny, and Cece- play a pickup game of Grease. Gurry, Mark, and Usopp are asleep; and Buttercream is sleep-guarding Nurse Mendy and BBC.

Mince it is.

“Hey,”
“-oh, um. Hi.”
“How are you doing?”
“...I’ve been better. Um, mostly I’ve been going through my, um, my pictos and putting them in the albums I bought that day… I, uh, I’ve been labeling the new ones, a-and, I...”

I reach out, and put my hand on top of his. He pauses, and I see his face crumple; ah. I tug him up, into my lap, and he curls up on my chest, burying his face in my neck. I hold him close, and cuddle him through the tears and snot.

At some point between the shivers and the wheezing sobs, the Girls not engaged in Sancho-surgery have migrated to our couch, their game of Grease abandoned on the coffee table. There’s a moment of careful consideration, and then I- and the very upset boy in my arms- are gently draped in purring humans, each one finding some new niche to snuggle themselves into.

I… Oh no, Oz looks so left out- c’mere baby boy, c’mere- and now I’ve got him snuggled on the other half of my chest. The drapery of purring Girls purrs harder.

I’ve never been so sympathetically sad, yet so unrelentingly happy, in my entire life. I think I’m… emoting. With my face.

“-would you just- Look! Look at Mab!”
“Hnnngk!”
“Mab, look this way for a… second...”

I look over at Nami, Zoro, Luffy, and Sanji. Sanji is blushing, stricken, grinning and teary eyed. Happy-sad. I want to have kids; I don’t ever want to leave my kids feeling like this. But.. I will.

Zoro is making a high-pitched whining noise, akin to a small cat begging for a piece of chicken. Nami is also blushing, but also starting to cry.
Luffy looks like he just swallowed an entire bag of lemons and the sour is kicking in unmercifully. Gnnghk.

“Okay, Nami; we’ll stay a little longer. Just… can you make Mab stop doing that? I’m gonna cry,”

“S-sorry, Captain; that’s out of my h-hands,”

Franky, who has just caught sight of the cuddle pile on the couch, is now freely weeping into Robin’s shoulder. She’s gently patting him in the face- oh, huh, she was actually reading her book. There’s a general scurrying over my booted feet, and then the Mice- Darla, Maya, Hildy, Jellybean, Quilaby, and Arlinda Rader Haai- are curled up together in the valley of my tits.

If I get any happier, or warmer, I’m going to pass out.

And then Nurse Mendy prods a few of the Girls out of the way to lean against my side with the sleeping BBC, and everything goes a bit heat-hazy after that.

My wife is so goddamn cute. Like- of course, she’s gorgeous, the shape of her eyes, the curve of her mouth- but. Fuck.

Under a pile of kids, she’s fucking beyond gorgeous, she’s… approaching divinity. This is what the Goddess really looks like, in the eyes of man; snot covered, slightly sticky, and flushed with the heat of too many children pressed against her.

If we weren’t already married, I’d marry her again.

-and she’s passed out. I got an echo of her emotions, just before the blackout; too much at once, I think.

Merde!

Mab’s out cold, so I have to do what she would have done… which is compile the list of things to do to settle the estates of the Little Coffyns, and see to Oz. For the Coffyns, it should be fairly simple; I’m quite sure the Bailiffs didn’t let Nurse Mendy out the door without everything she’d need for BBC, but for Mince… we’ll have to go through his parent’s offices and paperwork to find his information.

Chopper will need their doctor’s records; Mab will want the boys’ scholastic records…

Pen with ink in it; bottle of ink I like because it has a dropper and a little well in the top for excess ink; a cheap notebook from the Daiso; let’s do this.

Zut! First things first, I do actually know how to settle an estate. I had to have learned something
before the age of nine, after all… Anyway, settling an estate really has three distinct parts to it.

First, the initial tasks; then the specialized ones; then the cutting of loose ends. The Crew as a whole has been named the Executors of both the Coffyn and Bartok estates, which means I’ll delegate parts of each thing that needs doing to the most responsible adults in this crew: Nami, Zoro, me, Mab, Robin, Franky, Brook, Usopp, and surprisingly, Luffy- but he’s not to be given paperwork, he’s best with people. I’m intentionally leaving the Juniors out because we’ll need them to keep eyes on the actual children, but if we have need of them...

BBC’s the only one who really needed specialized care, which is why we have Nurse Mendy; we need to check for pets, gardens, adult dependants, and employees. We need certified copies of all Death Certificates (as well as the Birth Certificates, mem: Nurse Mendy has BBC, does she have MC or OB?)

We will need to look for a Will or Trust for all the deceased- if there’s a Will, Robin; if there’s a Trust, Nami. We need to collect the mail, which protects their privacy; it also provides clues to property and creditors. We’re going to need their banking information, so that we can pay off their bills without in any way assuming responsibility for their debts- Mab and Nami, I think; we need to secure or sell the residence, vehicles, and all tangible property- things like furniture, antiques, artwork, clothing, jewelry, and personal documents. I don’t know who all has keys to the houses, so we’ll need to change the locks; I don’t know if we’ll be able to secure the residences, so we might have to pack everything up and move it. Shit, I don’t even know if they have horses- but, considering how different Mince and Oz’s accents are, I’ll bet at least one of them does, or possibly did...

We need to notify Credit Card companies and Credit Reporting agencies of the deaths, to protect against fraud; Mab has the best Courtly Writing, better than mine, so she’ll be the one sending letters to Equitax, Excelsian, and Transferush, letting them know that the Coffyns and the Bartok's have died and instructing them in the particulars- no one is allowed use of their names or bank security numbers to apply for new credit.

We need to notify the employers of the Coffyns and the Bartok's; arrange for delivery of the final paychecks, and deposit the income checks into a bank account held in the name of the person’s living trust. Mem: ask the employer to identify the benefits provided by the employer to the person, such as health insurance coverage, life insurance, and retirement plans; free money; Nami.

We need to notify the Bank Security; if any of them were receiving BS checks, we need to notify the Bank Security Administration immediately- let me just start that now, Mab or I will finish it. If any of them were Veterans of War, we need to notify their Regiments- I’ll start that one too.

All of this together is mostly paperwork, and will have to be taken care of in the time we have left; we’ll fill everything out as best we can, and then have everything filed, moved, and so on. Looking over what needs to be done… Chopper, Nurse Mendy, and… Robin, I think, will coordinate getting the various records together- medical, birth, death, and otherwise.

Robin and Nami will be in charge of any Wills or Trusts we find.

Nami, Zoro, Mab, and Franky will be handling banking information, securing the residences, vehicles, and all tangible property of the deceased. Franky and (if he’ll allow it) Fern will change all
the locks; Mab and (if she’ll allow it) Beatrix will secure the residences, or pack them up for storage. Usopp will have to handle any pets or horses that turn up; and if necessary, Mark will handle farm animals, and gardens.

I will write the necessary letters to Equitax, Excelsian, and Transferush; as well as the employers of the Coffyns and Bartoks, if any, with Mab rewriting them in Fancy Letters. If any benefits provided are to be awarded, Mab can route them to the appropriate bank account, I know she has one meant just for the crew… Nami will want to set something up so that the bank sends us regular statements, meaning… we’re going to need a dedicated Postal Officer. And a Banker.

Damn.

And Captain’s going to want them to come with us… well, the Banker can do their work anywhere there’s a secure snailphone, so that’s no problem, but the Postal Officer… that, I don’t know. The one who would know for sure is Mab, and she’s out cold.

Loose ends that need cutting: school and trades. So far as I’m aware, Mince Coffyn had no trademaster, and no school he was attending. I think his parents were grooming him to take over their position, but with them gone, well… I’ll test him out in my kitchen. He’s old enough to learn a trade, and cooking is one that’ll serve him well, if he does intend to go in his parent’s footsteps. Osvaldo Bartok was in school- however, I don’t know which one, nor under what name. We need to track down Hearb Kurree and find out, as well as visit the school for any of the things Oz left behind that he wants to keep… If it’s even so small as a notebook, he should have it. He deserves to have his own things.

For that matter, so does Nurse Mendy May. She has all the marks of an ascetic, but… I’m not sure what kind, nor why a nun would need to take a job. I’ll have Mab feel her out, she does shamelessly nosy far better than I ever have...

This list of notes and decisions is about all I can do for right now; Mab needs to wake up, and the- ah, the kids are asleep too. Well, it’s very nearly the end of a long day; tomorrow will be the first day we’ll be free to do as we please.

For now… I might as well work on one of the tests I need to give Deborah.

Being able to accurately identify and describe the various scents of something are paramount to being a chef, star accreditation or otherwise. Smell and taste are intricately intertwined; when one has a cold, the food tastes off. Smells can also tell you things about your food that taste alone cannot- the presence of certain things, like diseased fruits, dangerous chemicals, improper preparation… these things can be discerned by the properly prepared proboscis.

There are ten categories of scent, each with their own distinctive profiles. It is the job of a chef to know, and utilize, each scent as the product calls for.

Fragrant is florals, perfumes, and anything with a particularly powerful smell- jasmine, saffron, and so on. Fruity means all non-citrus fruits- apple, strawberry, melon, fig, and so on. Citrus means all citrus fruits- lemon, lime, orange, grapefruit, etc. Chemical means ammonia, bleach- anything with an over-the-counter, cleaning product scent profile. Sweet means chocolate, vanilla, caramel, sugar; it’s very easy to overdo, resulting in saccharine, which is no good. Minty is peppermint, spearmint,
eucalyptus, and camphor- sharp, cold flavors that sting and tingle. Toasted is nutty, popcorn, peanut butter, almonds- it’s the smell of the fats after you clarify butter, although you usually don’t want to go so far as burnt (or properly speaking, pungent). Pungent is cheese, cigar smoke, char, anything burnt and edible. Finally, there’s Decayed- rotting meat, sour milk, kombucha and kimchi and shoyu before it’s ready. Some of the most delicious parts of food have to be really disgusting and inedible before they get cooked to be any good.

Ah! One other thing we need- All Access Passes to this resort! The resort was here before the city, and basically everything here can be charged to the resort if one has a pass- thus, every member of the crew should get one. Wait, does everyone even have proper bathing costumes? Franky doesn’t count, he’s always in high-cut bathing trunks… Mab almost certainly does, Nami does, Robin does, Bryony does, Taffy does, Mark does, Gurry does, but I don’t know about the rest…

I… hm. I might as well check with the Front Desk; just because two judges were brutally murdered, that doesn’t mean the World’s Worst Baker Contest has been actually called off, and the cut-off for tryouts isn’t until the weekend…

If it’s still on, I’ll enter Deborah for sure; and maybe Mince and Oz will want to try too? Mince is already entered, but there’s no penalty for backing out so long as you give notice, and Oz might like to do something to get his mind off things…

Alright, it’s been an hour and a half and we haven’t had dinner; naps are nice, but none of the Girls are chubby enough that I’ll accept them sleeping through dinner. Mab gets cranky if she goes off schedule; and BBC is starting to fuss because she needs to eat again.

I stand, crack my neck, and look over all the sleeping Kids, my wife, the Nurse, and the baby that’s getting more fussy and squirmy by the second- shit, she might be too warm too. I put my fingers to my lips and let loose the kind of whistle you’d expect from a kettle or a cab service, not a chef, but here we are.

Deb, bless her Shrimpy heart, bolts fully upright and at attention before my hand has dropped from my lips. Mince and Oz are quick to follow, with Oz blinking blearily and Mince’s hair sticking in every direction. Nurse Mendy is soon to follow, darting off to refill her water bottle and feed the baby again.

“Right. You three- in three days or so, if my calculations are correct, the World’s Worst Baker’s Contest will be held. I follow them with quite a bit of zeal; a double murder is not enough to get that contest cancelled. Mince- I know you’re already entered into the Contest. Do you still want to compete?”

“Ah… yes, sir, I would. I’ve taken the Champion Belt in Batters every year since I was six; I don’t want to give it up now,”

“Alright. Deb?”
“...My yeast-breads are things of horror, Chef. I think I could at least ribbon,”

“I quite agree. Oz?”

“...Um, do we have to serve what we make?”

“Nope,”

“I’m in; I can make a pie, probably without burning off my eyebrows again,”

“Right- wait, again? Nevermind. I actually got triple copies of the intake forms for the Contest- in case you made any mistakes with pen and ink, fill them out with the pencil first, then use pen, yeesh-”

“Hmmph!”

“Shrimp, just because you can write neatly doesn’t mean you can spell,”

“Hmmmmp!”

“...Actually, I might need the second one; Min-min’s got his done already, but I have terrible penmanship, so,”

“Good. The forms are in the yellow folder on the desk; you three go on and fill them out. Tomorrow, we’ll get you started in the Tourney. -Mince, help them fill out their forms, would you?”

“Yes, Chef,”

“Good man, Cuttlefish. Keep Shrimp and Seaweed on the right track; I’ll check on all three of you after dinner. Maybe tomorrow morning, depending on how the night unfurls,”

“Uh- sure, Chef,”

Finally. That’s the first time I’ve seen Oz actually smile; all his chroma turned into a brilliant sunburst pattern of scintillating sparks. I can see Mince looking confused, and Deb explaining my nickname for him while gesturing to his tendrils, and her own while wriggling a leg and flexing it between pink, yellow, red, and white; Oz soon joins them, and they all go over to the desk where I left the Contest forms.

Beatrix kicks herself off the couch, and lets out a particularly phlegmatic gargle of protest a full thirty seconds after she hits the ground. Beatrix, unlike Mab and myself and almost all of her other sisters, and even her brother, Sancho; is a heavy sleeper who does not wake immediately. She needs a bit of a run up to Unblink for the day; a long nap really doesn’t do her much good, but they were all just so tired… She’s sitting up now, eyes still firmly shut, but edging closer to full consciousness with every pernicious grumble.

Mab isn’t sitting up- mostly because there’s a small gang of Mice nestled between her tits, and she doesn’t want to drop them. I grab one of the fancy fruit baskets- which we emptied of fruit days ago- and stick one of the velvety decorative cushions in it, and then a flannel hanky. Then, I carefully transfer each of the Mice into the squashy nest I’ve made for them, which allows my lovely wife to sit upright. Darla- or maybe Daryl, he hasn’t said yet- is a little clingy, but tucks in with the rest when Mab hands me a spindle from her pocket for him to grab onto.
Adelaide snuffles quietly, and then scrubs at her eyes while Cece unpeels herself from a leather pillow, leaving most of her Face behind. Sancho immediately jumps on an opportunity to tease his sister.

Ellie stretches her legs, and patterns and colors and shapes ripple and smear across the whole of her body, every part of exposed skin flashing. Then, she sits fully upright and sneezes, making the haystack she calls a hairstyle fluff out in every direction; a quick shake of the head has it settling down into… Oh! I think she needs a haircut - or at least some barrettes, er, hairpins? Now there’s a thought, and I needed to pick up some things at the Daiso anyway, so- two birds, one stone…

Fern is brightening up, her painted eye mask beaming at everything and everyone as she glances around and grins. Genny, long finished with Sancho’s ass-arrow, wanders over to sit next to her sister. They immediately trade eyewear, and Fern bounces off to collect the deck of cards and consider the room-service menu.

I offer Mab a hand, and gently tug her up to her feet. She rises from the couch, tall and graceful and resplendent in her Courtly finery… although, I think… I swear I remember seeing a cold-weather version of what she’s wearing now…

“Hmm?”

“-Would you go to the Daiso with me? Ah, well, after a movie or something… Ice skating?”

“...Are you asking me on a date?”

“Yeah. We… we won’t really have time in the next few days, so. Carpe that jugulum,”

“Hmhmhmhm. Sure- ah, I should put the warm-layers on, this is just for indoors-”

“I had wondered-”

“No, it’s just indoor gear. I’ll need ten minutes or so, and then we’ll go?”

“Sure,”

And I watch her walk away, because my gods that ass-

Gods my husband is such a pervert. I mean, I say that as a super pervert myself- my husband is a fucking pervert. It’s actually pretty damn great.

Clothing, Mab. Think of the clothing.

Lose cut white trews with a thick, wide waistband that actually rests well above my waist; the crotch is cut low to keep proportions correct. I tuck my pants into a pair of leather boots that have green designs tooled into them, to evoke feelings of joy and prosperity. I double check my makeup: soft
dusky eyeshadow in a shade of purple just about the color of a ripe eggplant (a purple one, not a white one) for wealth, and dabs of gold in the usual places—along the crease of my eyelid, swooping victories under my eyes— for military prowess; delicate stain of bluish purple over my lips, for honor and sorrow. My nose is as long as ever, and my skin… maybe a quick swipe of sunscreen? Winter sun, while feeble, can still burn quite badly… I’ll put some on, and some moisturizer, too.

A tunic embroidered with my personal sygil, various protective symbols, and traceries of crystal beads in flower shapes and petals. It’s a bright white tunic that goes over the bikini-style top I’ve been wearing and rinsing every day. Thick black sari that I usually wear as a scarf, but today it’s a belt pinned with brooches and long sparkling pins of ruby; flipped long over my shoulder and draping soft over my hips, a shimmering saree in the Nivi style.

The nivi is the most popular sari style from Andhra Pradesh, one of the biggest city-states in Fairisle. The increased interaction with the Germa saw most women from royal families come out of purdah in the 900s. This necessitated a change of dress.

Maharani Indira Devi of Cooch Behar popularised the chiffon sari. She was widowed early in life and followed the convention of abandoning her richly woven Baroda shalus in favour of the unadorned mourning white as per tradition. Characteristically, she transformed her "mourning" clothes into high fashion. She had sarees woven in France—Paris, but also in Lodeve and Lyon—to her personal specifications, in white chiffon, and introduced the silk chiffon sari to the royal fashion repertoire.

The chiffon sari did what years of fashion interaction had not done in Fairisle: it homogenised fashion across the land. The chiffon sarees softness, lightness, beauty, elegance, and caressing drape was ideally suited to the Skuan climate.

Different courts of the time adopted their own styles of draping and indigenising the sari. In most of the courts the sari was embellished with stitching hand-woven borders in gold from Varanasi, delicate zardozi (literally gold work, embroidery in gold), gota (applique of zari ribbon), makaish (twisted gold threads to form a dot pattern) and tilla (ornamental embroidery in silver) that embellished the plain fabric, simultaneously satisfying both traditional demands and ingrained love for ornamentation. Some images of maharanis in the Deccan show the women wearing a sleeveless, richly embellished waistcoat over their blouses. The Begum of Savanur remembers how sumptuous the chiffon sari became at their gatherings.

At some courts it was worn with jaali, or net kurtas and embossed silk waist length sadris or jackets. Some of them were so rich that the entire ground was embroidered over with pearls and zardozi.

Nivi drape starts with one end of the sari tucked into the waistband of the petticoat, usually a plain skirt. The cloth is wrapped around the lower body once, then hand-gathered into even pleats below the navel. The pleats are tucked into the waistband of the petticoat.

They create a graceful, decorative effect which poets have likened to the petals of a flower. After one more turn around the waist, the loose end is draped over the shoulder. The loose end is called the pallu, pallav, seragu, or paita depending on the language. It is draped diagonally in front of the torso. It is worn across the right hip to over the left shoulder, partly baring the midriff. The navel can be revealed or concealed by the wearer by adjusting the pallu, depending on the social setting. The long end of the pallu hanging from the back of the shoulder is often intricately decorated. The pallu may be hanging freely, tucked in at the waist, used to cover the head, or used to cover the neck, by draping it across the right shoulder as well. Some nivi styles are worn with the pallu draped from the back towards the front, coming from the back over the right shoulder with one corner tucked by the
left hip, covering the torso and waist. The nivi sari was popularised through the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma. In one of his paintings, the Skuan Coalition was shown as a mother wearing a flowing nivi sari. The ornaments generally accepted by the Hindu culture that can be worn in the midriff region are the waist chains. They are considered to be a part of bridal jewellery.

Sanji goes just a little crazy when I wear mine, and I’ve still got absolutely no idea why - not just the saree, but the waist chains, too. I flip the end of my pallu back over my left shoulder, and tuck the slack over my head like a dupatta. Then I put on my actual dupatta, more like a hijab or a veil, pinning it to my tunic with a brooch Sanji gave to me - it’s got honey bees and amber on it, one of my favorite things, ever - and wrapping it just so.

My bag ties onto my waist just so, and my spear rests against my back like a boney lover. **Everything’s ready to go.**

I flick my maang tikka for luck, and then I step back out. Sanji’s changed his tie- as in, he’s put his tie back on- and abandoned his suit-jacket for a **thick blue jumper** with a deep V neck. He’s also added a heavy coat and a nice ushanka of dark brown-black fur, it’s flaps tied to the top of his head. He stops moving while putting his butter-yellow scarf around his neck, and stares at me with a grin.

I sigh, and calmly walk over to him. I tug the scarf from his unresisting fingers, and gently tuck it around his neck. This close, I can see the little violet specks in his eyes, and the dancing reflection of my own face in his pupils; I can feel the warm wetness of his breath, and smell the lingering stench of his cigarettes. Bleh- cloves, menthol, and a sharp hit of ginger. Violently fresh and aggressive. Bleeeeeeeh; give me a good skunkweed misty with cardamom and cinnamon any day.

Then again, he wouldn’t be Sanji without the stench of smoke…

We bid everyone goodbye; the Girls, huddled around a room-service menu and bickering, wave us off. Sancho, Chopper, Taffy, and Gurry chorus goodbye from their game of poker; Nami and Zoro, curled up together on a couch, smile. Usopp, Mark, and Luffy are… in one of the rooms; Franky and Robin are counting out money; the Mice are asleep in their basket nest; Nurse Mendy and BBC are in a rocking lounger, relaxing in the last of the afternoon sunlight.

A few blocks away from the hotel, my hand tucked away in Sanji’s, I finally remember what I’d agreed to do. I have some concerns.

“Um. I’ve, ah, I’ve never been ice-skating before- my skate club in school was all roller skates. Is it terribly difficult?”

“It’s certainly not easy; like any skill, you’re going to have a bit of a learning curve. About the only thing you’ll keep from roller skating is balancing while in motion; you used quad skates, right?”

“...Are there other kinds of roller skates?”

“Yes. There are inline skates, which are just like ice skates… D’you want me to go over some tips before we get there…?”
“Please,”

“Heh. Alright; well. Ice skates are basically leather boots with knives on the bottom, and they run a size smaller than your regular boots. They need to actually fit your feet- if they feel snug when you put them on, get a size up. There’s nothing worse than trying to skate in too-small skates. Um, you’ll want to tie them much tighter than you think, too- basically all the ankle support comes from how you tie your skates on,”

“And I need ankle support?”

“Very much so, yes,”

“Okay, what else?”

“You need to bend your knees, love; more than you think, really. Um, when you fall- and you’re going to fall- aim for your butt and your sides. Don’t try to catch yourself with your hands; ice has no give, so you’re much more likely to break your wrists or the ice. The rink we’re going to has buckets to help you balance, and you’ll want them to about your bellybutton- I suggest using your fingertips to balance, not your forearms,”

“Alright…”

“Ah, the rink is up ahead- I can give you actual instruction, if you want…?”

“Okay, sure,”

We walk into the ice rink; its… it’s cold, but a warm sort of cold? Thick carpeting; it’s a gym for a very specific set of sports… Sanji pays for our shoes at the desk, and I carefully try out two or three sets of skates until I find a pair that’s just right. Sanji comes back with his own pair of skates and a stack of buckets.

“Alright, so- the door to the rink is over there… are you going to walk in the skates to get a feel for them?”

“That was the plan, unless you-?”

“No, no, best to start now if you- MAB!”

I stood, and almost immediately fell over. Sanji caught me, and I caught the things he dropped, and-

“I’m okay, Sanji- I’ve got the stuff, too,”

“-we don’t have to go skating if you don’t want to, Mab,”

“Sanji, you- I know this is something you’re really excited about, you’ve been reading up on local skating rinks for days now. I want to do this with you! I mean, I make no promises about being any good at it, but… I still want to try,”
“I- well… okay. Um, let me walk you over?”

“Of course! I was about to ask, actually-”

Sanji grins at me nervously, and I smile gently back. I can already tell I’m not going to be very good at this at first- no matter how I stand, I just can’t seem to find my balance, knees bent or not, weight forwards or middle or back; and if I can’t do it here on the carpet, gods only know how it’s going to be on the ice.

“Okay, so. I’m going to leave my jacket here; um, do you want to…?”

“I’m going to say: No. But, um, maybe my bag?”

“Sure! That’s what the lockers are for, they’re beside our seats on the wall-”

“Neat!”

“Mm; ah, let me just-”

Sanji helps me sit down on our booth’s seat, and grabs his skates out of the air from where they’ve been floating. I carefully hang his coat up, and put away our shoes in the little locker behind the table. I take a deep breath, and do my best to stand again. Woo-oo-oo, okay, careful- it’s only slightly like roller skates, mostly it’s not like roller skates at all. Nnnnn! Okay, okay, I’m okay- waah! Thump!

Back onto the booth I flop. Sanji, who was watching me try to stand, blinks.

“Your skates aren’t tight enough- here, let me tie them this time, okay?”

“Sure,”

Sanji finishes tying his skates, stands with even more grace and power than usual, and calmly tromps over to me, before kneeling down and attending to my skates. I had thought I had tied them tightly, but apparently there were three whole handspans of laces hiding in the tongue of the skate. Sanji doesn’t do much to the vamp, but the way the shaft is clinging to my ankle now, I’m quite sure it wasn’t tight enough after all.

“Not too tight?”

“No, it feels snug-”

“That’s just a bit too tight, hang on-”
Sanji loosens the skate, and it goes from clingy to glove, just like that. He knots the laces, ties them in a bow, tucks the ends away so I won’t skate on them; strokes up my calves and over my knees, before looking up at me with a sort of… a calculating look.

“Oh?”

“I think I’m going to get you some knee and elbow pads,”

“Oh?”

“Mm; you were wobbling hard enough, I think you’ll need them- and they have helmets, too, if you know how big your head is…?”

“Ah, do they clean them…?”

“Yeah, every use; so. Padding?”

“I do like being safe, where possible; five and a half punti, or fifty-eight centimeters, love,”

“Be right back, then,”

And I watch my husband’s ass as he tromps back to the desk. He’s adorable. I observe the gliding grace of the people out on the ice rink; it seems in the center of the rink, those people who really know how to skate are skating. There’s even a bit of a line in the very center where the “best” are doing tricks- mostly jumps and spins, very athletic. Out at the edges, the very young are carefully wobbling along under the watchful eyes of their elders- their parents, their grandparents, those who have enough control to go at the pace of those just learning. Most- scratch that, all, all of the couples, they’re all skating in the middle, or showing off for each other in the center.

Sanji tromps back with a net bag of limb padding and a bright pair of helmets. Mine, I think, is-

“Yeah, I got the ladybug one for you; and after thinking about it… it’s been a bit more than twelve years since I last went ice skating, and I always had a helmet then. So, I got the watermelon one for myself,”

“Mm. And… um, I guess this way we match…”

“Yep!”

I smile up at him, and then carefully undo the ponytail my hair is in. I think I’ll leave my dupatta here; just fold that up… loose braid, I think, so I don’t put too much pressure on my head. Mm, this is the right size- strap the buckle, and done! Re-wrap my pallu so it’s more like a scarf, with a little bit of cape down my shoulders, hair tucked underneath; then the edge of the pallu tucks under my helmet. I look over at Sanji, who is carefully tugging his bangs out of his eyes, and I smile. No real reason beyond I love him, and I love when he remembers my favorite things- even though he hates bugs, he remembers that I don’t.

I try standing again, hand on the table this time and holy shit it’s so much better- still a lot of wobble
and uncertainty, but I’ve got significantly more control. Sanji, standing next to me, puts his gloved hand in mine- mittens! I forgot mittens!

“What’d you remember?”

“Mittens!”

“Like these?”

“You remembered!?”

“Yep. Hands out, love, I’ll pull them on for you-”

“Thank you!”

And then, my hand in Sanji’s, I go out onto the rink. I immediately slip and fall directly on my ass. This is a portent for the rest of our date. I cannot ice skate. Tight skates; yep. Nope. Buckets; yep. Nope. Sanji holding my hands and correcting for me; yep. Nope. I fall.

I fall on my ass.

I fall on my side.

I fall on my face.

I fall on Sanji.

I knock us both over.

I fall on small children, who are significantly better than me at skating.

I fall on old people, who are significantly better than me at skating.

I trip over my own self, who is terrible at skating.

I fall on my face again, and crunch blood out of my nose.

I’m fairly sure that some of the sniggering coming from the center of the rink are meant to be making fun of me, but, well, here’s a secret: it doesn’t matter how many times you fall.

It matters how many times you get back up and try again.

I’m starting to loose count of how often I’ve fallen because I fall basically every five minutes- and not a little trip or wobble, this is a full on middle-of-body to ground experience. Every five minutes, Thump. It gets to the point that a small crowd of littles starts following me around and cheering when I get back up again.
Ack!

“Hey, Mab?”

“Hmmm? Yipe!”

“Ooough! Yeah, um, let’s take a break,”

“But- I almost had it that time!”

“Let’s take a break, okay?”

“Okaaay...”

And we- well, I wobble back to the gate and fall flat on my face out of the rink, and Sanji moves like
an exceptionally graceful wind over the ice. I crawl back to the booth; it seems safer. Sanji’s
developed a quirk to his brow and a certain reddish tinge over the bridge of his nose- ah, he heard the
sniggers. I, personally, don’t care- but he does. Hm.

I put in an order for a pair of hot chocolates, some black tea; and a croque madame each, with the
egg and the bechamel on the side-

“Are you ordering food from the rink?”

“Mnhm,”

“...I make these so much better though?”

“Mmm, it’s really hard to screw these up, love,”

“Hmmph,”

“Also, I thought some cheese, some good sliced ham, some burnt butter on bread-”

“You mean caramelized?”

“I mean they burn it until it’s brown and tastier, yeah,”

“Pfft,”

“An egg and some bechamel-”

“Bay-sha-mel-”

“Beh-cha-mal-”

“Pfffffft-”

“Well, I thought some good food would help you calm down about the gigglers in the middle of the
rink-”
“Uuuuugh-”

“...Do you need a hug, Razz?”

“...yeah...”

“Okay, hang on-”

This time, I tromp over to him.

“Budge up,”

And then I’ve wrapped my arms around him- clonk! Helmets! We didn’t take off our helmets! We draw apart and take the helmets off, hanging them on hooks that are on either side of the locker. Then I go back to hugging my husband.

I can feel his traps tremble under my palms.

Here’s a thing about my husband. He carries his stress in his shoulders and back- a lot of it squeezes deep into his spine, mostly in his trapezius muscles. When I can feel them shake and tremble, I know that he’s getting much closer to losing his temper than even he realizes- once those muscles lock up, he’s on a hair trigger.

I inhale deeply and let my cloth covered breasts squish and stroke against his chest. He shudders, and squeaks as I press in further and further; the soft press of my mouth against his neck, and the way he shudders and sighs as I nip my way closer to his ear. It’s when I’m pressing my forehead to his, the long bridge of my nose lined up to his and ready to kiss-

“M-mab, we’re, we’re in public,”

“Mm. Do you want me to stop?”

“Nn-no,”

“Too bad; food’s here, and I’m hungry,”

“Eeh!”

And then I’ve stolen a thorough kiss of my startled husband, to the amusement of our waiter, before darting back around- clomp clomp clomp- and retaking my seat. Sanji looks like he’s been smacked with a large fish and doused with rose-scented ice water.

I grin.
Here’s a thing about me, while we eat our delicious grilled cheese-and-meat sandwiches, French white sauce and fried eggs on the side; when I have to learn a new thing with my body, it takes me about an hour to learn the basics. Every time I fell in the past hour and a half, it was because I was physically figuring out the limitations of my actual ability—the potential.

I sop up the last of the yolk with my sandwich crusts, and give serious thought to sucking the grease off my fingers…but the way Sanji’s looking at me, that might be a step too far for his self control. I don’t know if I’m up for a round of ‘hide the sausage’ with Sanji in the unisex toilet; then again, we haven’t actually managed to have any sex at all for the past three days, and… I’ve got Itches only my husband can really scratch.

Then again again again, if I just take my napkin… and wipe my fingers… a little more, hm, fastidiously than normal… Sanji licks his lips while watching me, and all I can do is smile and rub the top of my nails with the napkin.

Hm. I think I want the comfort of an entire bed, or even a couch.

“...Back to the rink, Razz,”

“Wha- o-oh, um, y’sure?”

“Mmmhmm. I think the second round will be much better, honestly,”

“Because I would be very happy going home and just making out on the couch, I feel like we don’t get enough couch-time-”

“Skaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing~”

I said this as I was tromping back out to the rink, and waiting for him at the door. He sighed, put his hand over his eyes and shoved that libido down, and joined me. I followed Sanji out onto the rink, wobbling at first and then observing and copying what he did- and then we were gliding.

Sanji, no fool, glanced over his shoulder and then picked up speed. I matched him.

A gentle turn at the end of the rink; I matched him again.

Slow swizzle; footwork; and then I’m right beside him. We slowly sway around each other, carefully gliding around other skaters. Dancing—my husband has somehow managed to take me dancing, despite the lack of dance moves.

There’s an empty space that’s not quite the trick center, and not quite the racing lane, and nowhere near the edge… two, actually, and—ah, I see, it’s meant for couples. I glide into the space, wobble a little, and then sweep around and stop. Sanji, following behind me, blonde strands fluttering because we FORGOT THE HELMETS-

“Hey Mab?”

“Yes, Sanji,”
“Try to keep up,”

_-!-

And then my beautiful, sexy, competitive *asshole* of a husband takes off. I follow after him.

Did you know, at my school, clubs were mandatory for graduation? And you weren’t allowed to be in a club adjoining your elective classes, meaning you had to have an interest completely outside of your scholastics. My club was Figure Skating— of course, there aren’t any ice rinks in Fairisle, so we did everything on roller skates. My husband seems to have forgotten this— or rather, I didn’t really explain that all the tricks we did in my school club, we got them out of a textbook meant for ice skating.

Bunny hop to camel spin; crossover and lunge; spirals; chasse to chocktow to combination spins; and then, of course, we start doing the jumps. Here’s where the main difference comes in: Sanji trained for sport; I trained for show.

My jumps are a shitton cooler— and! And! I know how to do backflips!

Sanji does *not* know how to do backflips.

When I do a triple backflip, and I come back up giggling and grinning, and Sanji looks so— hm.

“Sanji, do you want me to teach you how to do-?”

“Yes!”

“Hmhmhm, okay. C’mere— it’s not like doing it flat footed… hmm. How to explain… you ever run up a quarter pipe and do a flip?”

“Uh… inner hull of a ship count?”

“I’ll take it— so, on skates, it’s basically the same except you have to provide all the lift, flip, and land again. Mou, it’s sort of the same as a running flip at a wall, I suppose, but you have to let your body slip out to get it right— and it takes practice, you won’t be able to do it the first time, or even the second. For now, work on getting big air in a bunny hop—”

“A *bunny hop*? ”

“Mm. Spins are Z, which you don’t want— you want X and Y… er, you don’t want movement on your lateral, but on your vertical and horizontal, so.”

“Okay— like this?”

And then with a shove forwards and a bound, my husband is fully three meters in the air and gently landing like a feather. Whoo. Sometimes I forget how godsblessed *powerful* my husband is, and then he does something like that and reminds me.
Whoo.

I skate up next to him and grin.

“Exactly like that. Now, do you need me to walk you through anything else, or…?”

“When should I start the flip?”

“Ah, that. The one thing I can’t teach you- it’s a matter of timing, which is internal. Basically, you need to have your body doing the flip at the apex of your jump- that is, at the highest point of lift, right when you have no weight, you need to be flipping over. Hard to do—”

“Oh! I… I need to do some more jumps so I get a better sense of when that is, exactly, then,”

“Mm. I need to practice my Axels, I’ve gotten rusty…”

And for the next hour, that’s all we do- practice tricks. Eventually, I get comfortable enough for what we in the Skate Club called “There and Back Again”, which is any jump that pleases you, forwards (Left skate air left skate), and backwards (right skate air right skate), forwards in space and then backwards in space. We were twelve and immortal and crazy as a box of cats.

After a while, Sanji does a full backflip at a rate of about one every eight minutes. I watch him work out the most efficient way of doing it, which is not necessarily the most beautiful way of doing it.

Urp! I thought I wouldn’t get motion sick, I- oh, wait, I never ate during club because… ah, shit- Cross the rink, cross the rink, cross the rink, urgurrrp, no, no, no- through the door, to the trash can- Harrrrgh! Blargh!

Eeech!

Puh!

Hurk- gaaah! Ech, ach, puh, puh, puh- bluh!

Maybe if I make myself burp…? Gurp! Hugh- bluh, acid burp!

Hi, Sanji.

“Hi, Sanji. I forgot that skating makes me motion sick- no, stop, it wasn’t the food, you ate it too and you’re fine- Sanji!”

“-- ----!”

“No, you are not going to go yell at the poor cook, you’re going to sit down with me and rub my stomach, ”

“ But-!”
“No,"

“I- fine,”

“Thank you,”

The next half hour, instead of skating, I lean against Sanji and let him comfort me. Having my husband rub his very broad, warm hands over my roiling guts is actually very soothing, and fairly arousing- but, he’s shy, so I don’t act on it much. Mostly I just smile and gaze at him adoringly, which is more than enough to make him sigh and smile and gaze back.

Our rental of the booth runs out before my stomach settles, so… we end up sitting in the lobby for another fifteen minutes. Long enough for my stomach to settle down, thankfully.

“Ach, I messed up our date,”

“Nah. We still have to go to Daiso, remember?”

“Oh yeah- we’d have had to stop soon anyway, huh?”

“Mm,”

“What do you need from Daiso?”

“Well. All the Girls could use barrettes, but especially Ellie- mostly, I think Ellie needs barrettes so she can start showing her face more. However, she’s very shy and doesn’t accept gifts easily-”

“So if we get something for all the girls, she’s more likely to use it,”

“Mm. And there are probably things we can get for Mince and Oz, too…?”

“Mm, we should ask them first, get to know them better… although, Mince probably needs new scrunchies-”

“Scrunchies?”

“Mm, they’re soft and stretchy, so they won’t crush his tendrils,”

“Oh. Hmmm- does Oz need special sunscreen? Or the rest of the girls for that matter?”

“They shouldn’t, but a moisturizer wouldn’t be amiss…”

“Hm. Ah, and… it’s been a while since we’ve had time to ourselves, so, I was wondering…”

“Yeah…?”

“Um. They sell those, uh, do it yourself warding kits at the Daiso, right?”

“Mm. Oh! Oh, yes, that would work- I’d need to do some mathemagic to get everything, y’know, right, but… they do,”

“Well...”
“I think that’s a wonderful idea, Sanji,”

“I’m glad, Mab,”

After that, it’s a fairly nice walk in the twilight to the nearest Daiso large enough to have a good selection of what we’re wanting to get. Barrettes are five hundred beri for a bucket of a thousand; scrunchies come out at three hundred beri (in the rainbow assortment) for a strip of thirty.

Even the warding kit, which is cheaper as individual pieces and a nice tote bag, doesn’t run up more than two hundred beri tops.

A stick of magnesium carbonate chalk, wrapped like a sticky sweet; uncut owl-feather quill pens; standard set of candles (one black, one white, one blue); mini-cauldron with a dropper to stand in for a chalice; sample packs of both herbs and spices, each one about the size of a tin of breath mints; tiny knife that has a lovely pearl handle; I can use wands of alder, hawthorn, or hazel, but considering this isn’t meant to be a permanent working… Bamboo soaked in a tincture of willow fine and hazelnut should be enough. A bit of cloth, to work on; a bell to open and close; and a soother-censer, for the association to fog and mist.

Ah, before I forget why I need these things- wards are the field of magic that deals with the creation of magical barriers and protections. At its simplest and most intuitive, armament haki is warding magic. At higher levels, it can be used to create larger defended areas, as well as screen off areas with less visible and tangible barriers, meant to exclude intangible things- like ghosts, scrying, divination, or hostile uses of haki.

When you add things like runes and crystals into the spell, wards can also be used to create high end locks, mystic encryptions, and even traps. Some Towers treat warding as a part of invocation, while others treat warding as a part of abjuration. However, magic that repulses, expels, exorcises, and contains various summoned beings is, strictly speaking, more closely related to healing, not warding at all.

Mechanically, a magical barrier against incarnate things- beings, ideas, and so on- are much harder to achieve than barriers against insubstantial things- light, sound, and so on. Manifest entities, which have pseudo-real physical bodies, fall somewhere in between, with levels of pain and injury being the defining factor in their ability to overcome a given ward.

Any barrier which wards out Others (ghosts) can reasonably be expected to extend into the Otherworld; thus, it cannot be bypassed by a (relatively) simple shift of Plane. Barriers against the incarnate, though difficult to create, tend to not have such extensions; and, due to an over-reliance on fencing out a hostile intruder’s soul, soulless creatures such as- er, hang on… Okay, more complicated explanation to avoid being a tribist, even in my head.

Incarnate barriers rely on Resonance Theory to work as they do; a certain bandwidth of, hmm, “tones”, is designated allowed or not allowed as necessary. All beings with souls that fall under the “allowed” section pass through with ease; all beings with souls that fall under the “not allowed” section cannot pass. Automata, due to having incarnate souls, emit Resonance at frequencies most mages don’t consider for the soul-sound at all; understandable, considering most mages can’t even detect or feel those resonances without equipment that’s only been invented in the past twenty years. I know I couldn’t, before I ate my Devil Fate.
Destructive, or weaponized, wards- something like the old “Eye of the Basilisk” or “Medusa’s Mirror” wards- damage those who are exposed to them by use of active noise cancellation (ANR), set to the “tones” of the soul-sound registered as “not allowed”. Fairly common and easy to make, although a simple sound-baffle is enough to spoof them. Most mages learn some variant on ‘baku’ or ‘explode’, or even the unbalanced spellequations that result in that sort of thing; even jinxes, hexes, and curses have their roots in wards. If a jinx, hex, or curse is meant to lay quiet… if, in it’s mechanical equation, the spell is written in an {if-this, then-that} format, it is, technically speaking, a ward.

...I’ve just had an epiphany, I think. Science is a way of talking about the universe in words that bind it to a common reality. Magic is a method of talking to the universe in words that it cannot ignore. The two are rarely compatible; mathemagic gets around the problem by being both the description and the thing being described at the same time. It is both reality, and unreality; an image and a form. The code; the code in action!

That’s why I need so very little to get a spell to do what I need it to do, by the by; basically, I’m cheating outrageously.

Anyway. Last is a backpack I can already tell is destined for Beatrix, after I do some small repairs and spiff it up a bit; all the spell components fit in just fine, and that’s that. Last check: a stick of magnesium carbonate chalk, in a holder which is a better purchase at slightly higher price; uncut owl-feather quill pens; birthday cake candles which are cheaper and just as good, in black, white, and blue; mortar and pestle with a dropper meant for liquid medicine, much simpler to use and more versatile besides; sample packs of both herbs and spices, each one about the size of a tin of breath mints- coriander seeds, poppy seeds, dill, mint, and tarragon; then cumin, mustard, cayenne, turmeric, and black pepper; medium sized cruets container for mixtures that need to be sprinkled dry; a cup of pickling salt and powdered sugar in individual envelopes; a tiny knife that has a lovely pearl handle, and a leather thong to put it on; I can use wands of alder, hawthorn, or hazel, but considering this isn’t meant to be a permanent working… Bamboo soaked in a tincture of willowfine and dusted with hazelnut should be enough. I’ll have to check Beatrix’s affinities, but Willow’s a good bet...

A bit of cloth, to work on- it’s a tea towel, nothing fancy; a bell to open and close- it’s made of brass, I’ll probably turn it into one of those, uh, wind-bell things, meant for summertime; and a soother-censer, for the association to fog and mist… a notebook, because I need to write this one down for the girls, as well as explain how to adapt it to, say, a dreamcatcher or a pillowcase…

Oh my gods it’s a tiny vibrator that looks like a piece of sushi. It runs on… hearing aid batteries? No, regular batteries. Oh my gods it’s so cute; and it comes in packs of two! I need one! Yeaaaah!

I- hmmmm. Cockrings. Hmmmm. Why not? Sanji might like it- I’ve nothing bad to say about vibrators, but they aren’t for everyone. Some people are too rhythmically inclined to get the most out of a vibrator- they end up focusing on the beat of the vibe, rather than beating their meat. Others find it’s an overstimulation thing- too much at once, y’know. Oh, hey, buy one get one free- plain old ding-dong vibrator, vaguely penis shaped and one speed only- powerful, discrete, and completely waterproof. It even has a loop in the bottom to attach a string to, for retrieval...

Anyway. Purchase; and we out.
Getting back to the hotel- after a quick dinner- dinner of ramen- it’s nice. It’s nice to walk, glove in mitten hand, with the man I love. Making a spell for soundproofing in our room takes a bit less than ten minutes- mostly because the wand isn’t very good.

Sanji is shy; he doesn’t like everyone hearing him while he has sex. I don’t care; but he does.

“So- what did you buy, Honey?”

“Mm, some vibrators- why, what did you buy?”

“Uhm. Lube,”

“…?”

“I had… I kinda wanted to, um, try… T-try a-anal sex? U-uhm, you st-stimulating me, um, if th-that’s okay?”

“Oh! Of course! Ah- do you really want to do this? I don’t want you to force yourself to do something you’re uncomfortable with…”

“W-well, um. I- I really like it w-when you, ah, when you lick my a-asshole, and I… I want more butt stuff!”

“Hmhmhm-alright! So, um… you’re too tense for me to feel comfortable doing this. To start, let’s get naked, okay?”

“I- u-um, yeah, sure,”

I carefully take off my dupatta and fold it neatly; then, my saree, which I fold and hang over the dupatta so the two don’t get separated. Then off comes my tunic, my heavy boots, my trousers; I unbind my hair so it falls, heavy and cool and red down my back. I sit at the desk and attend my makeup in the mirror, quietly watching Sanji get out of his head watching me.

I clean my makeup off with an oily cleanser, followed by a lemony skin wipe. Hmm. It’s nice to be just me again- the lips will be stained for a few days though, no getting around that. And, of course, my nails are painted the most supernatural blue and covered in pretty yellow star glitters, because Tilly gave me The Eyes and it was super effective, okay? Okay.

Sanji is behind me now, and his fingers are very delicate and gentle tugging out the many pins keeping various pieces of jewellry on the crown of my head. He tugs away the maang tikka, and the crown across my forehead, and sets them in their box just like I would; puts the pins in the little dish I know he saw me tap them out into.

I tug my hair to the side and arch into his hand when he strokes up my neck to find the clasp of my necklace- only- he undoes the clasp of my bikini top too? I clamp a hand to my chest to keep it from falling and tangling in my skirts as Sanji tugs my necklace off of me. He scrubs a scratchy kiss into the side of my neck, which at this point is just an excuse to hear me giggle like a child, and then puts my necklace in with the rest of my jewellry. Another kiss, this time with a wet lick, behind my ear.

Sanji’s hand’s are big and warm and very strong, and he kneads into my breasts delightedly, before
tugging the bikini of beads and metal and precious little fabric away, hanging it on a hanger. I stretch up and out, my wings wriggling with the joy of movement and then CR AMP- *FUCK*- 

S-sanji’s fingers knead the cramp away, noose tight pain turning into echoing waves of pleasure crashing against my back, my spine, my ass, my- aaaaaah- His knuckles dig into the velvet of my spine and *scrub-* aaaaaaaaaah-aah-AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH-

I’m panting and sweating and loose limbed, and my husband is grinning into my hair. My nipples are nubbly and Sanji’s flicking and rubbing one of them with lazy glee. I sigh, and pull myself together, undoing the knot at my hip keeping my skirt on my hips. I’m not actually wearing panties; you’re not supposed to, in this outfit- and especially not in the next one.

My hip chains chime and clink; I see Sanji catch sight of them and flush with excitement. I take my hip chains off, because they’re ceremonial, and put them with the rest of the jewelry. Then, I reach for a jewelry set I know my husband has never seen before. I glance up at him and smirk, and he blinks back.

Then, I open up my special jewelry box.

Sanji squeaks.

No makeup; hair… twisted back in furrows, maybe? No, a chignon; pin in the wire loops, add the bead strings; heavy necklace of shells and silver, chains and flowers dripping down- ah, almost forgot the pasties- off Sanji!

Off!

Bead pauldrons, that attach to sleeves; and then… yup. I stand and flick and stretch, letting my various decorations settle onto my body, and push Sanji back and away because he wants to touch and he’s not allowed to do that yet. A *trio of chains* in belt form that go around my hips, and a *tiny bell* with hearts on it and Sanji is out and out jittering where he stands he’s so horny.

Thankfully, I’m *fully dressed* and ready to get to work in my finest body chains- because he really does like it when I wear jewelry, and he’s yet to say why. It might be like Nami’s thing about piles of money; it might just be he likes the contrast. Don’t know; don’t care, beyond that he does.

Now then.

“Lay down on the bed, Razz; on your back, please. You’ve been very tense all day, so I’m going to give you a massage,”

“Yes, okay, whatever you want,”

“I only hope you don’t come to regret saying that,”

“I’ll certainly come,”

I snicker, and then take out the body oil I got out of our bedside table. This is a very very high-end love hotel, after all; the body oil is both free and actually nice smelling. It smells like… argan, almond, and rose? Bleh, not on Sanji; oh, there’s an orange blossom scented one, much better. It’s sealed tight- I’ll leave it under the lamp to warm a bit.
Some general mood lighting and ambiance would not go amiss… our bedroom is warm, and I set out candles already. Lighting them is a bit of a thought- a matchstick is like a needle because of the sharpness of the flame- and the room is lit with the glow of about twenty small tea light candles, plain white and unscented. I thought about flowers, but about the only ones that don’t give Sanji headaches after a while are orange blossoms and honeysuckle, neither of which are in season- I could use dried blooms, or even oil, but, well… nah.

There’s more to a good massage than just mood lighting, warm oil, and determination; actual technique makes a big difference. A firm pressure that moves the muscles beneath the skin is better than making your partner squirm; taking the time to be gentle, and even; never pushing directly on joints, which includes the spine and the ribs. Tools, like a simple tennis ball or smooth cold-stones, are also helpful, but not exactly necessary.

And anyway, I actually do know what I’m doing; I’ve been planning this out in the back of my mind since Sanji first intimated that he wanted to do butt stuff, months ago.

I turn off the lamp, and the room dims; candles are our only light, now, aside from the fake-moon above.

I open the bottle, my painted fingers gaining a layer of glossy, cold-thick oil from the nubbly, scratchy pot of oil. I set it aside, and carefully rub my fingers together, roving my eyes over my husband. His blushing face, leaning up against the headboard, with his lust bitten lips and his blue eyes glowing with smoky want; his horns, which were covered by cold-weather covers- the cutest thing I’ve seen in a good long while- gleam with rippled blackness, sharp and deadly and very, very lovely; his long, muscular arms, rippled with muscle and dark fine hairs; his graceful hands, scratchy with calluses; his broad, hairy chest, his nipples so tight with desire I could put one of my smallest earrings around it clean, without pinching. The hair on his chest tapers down at his belly button and narrows into a line, thick and dark and wonderful, the way it bursts out into a thick, dense forest of hair that surrounds his cock. And his cock!

Heavy with blood in his arousal, pink at the tip and gleaming, the sweetly sensitive folds of his penis rolling around the very top of his shaft; long, longer than any other man I’ve ever been with, and thick around and not too veiny. His balls are nice too; furry with hair, hard and big and heavy, and the sounds he makes when I- well. The candle light just makes his whole body ripple and dance with spatters of golden warmth.

His thighs could be properly described as thews, and are hairy as all the rest of his body; his knees are oddly beautiful, perfectly formed and faintly wondrous; his calves are round and plentiful, his ankles are… ankles- and his feet, well. I massage them often enough, so I’ve come to appreciate their little quirks, but Sanji does not have pretty feet. He does have a pretty ass, and an adorable tail, and a ridgeback of dorsal velvet that makes his entire body blush and shake when I scratch along it. He still won’t let me really pet his tail, but I’m getting better about not longing to stroke it after a good thorough dicking.

Where to start, where to start… his hands, where else? Well, aside from his feet, but we’re working top down, so actually, I ought to start with his head. Traditionally, for male demons, one starts with the horns.

I start by taking the tip of one of his horns in my fingers, carefully smoothing oil into the rounded edge. I smooth into each ridge with the pads of my fingers, stroking along the long furrow and
smearing the oil into the thick keratinized bone. Sanji has flushed bright red, and his breath comes out in heady snorts as I get closer and closer to his scalp, questing fingers nudging aside his thick hair. Right before I can get to the velvety edge of new growth, the most sensitive part of his horns and, indeed, the most erotic- I stop. I put more oil on my hands. I use a clean knuckle to move the jar closer, and then-

I flick my wings for lift, and carefully climb up to straddle my husband. With my legs spread wide, and my pussy open and just resting on his hot cock, I take hold of his other horn. Repeat the process from the start- tip to scalp, paying special attention to the long furrows of his horn and the way he sighs with pleasure as I rub my bejewelled body against his hairy self.

I indulge myself with his chest hair for a moment; I put more oil on my hands, and then press flat against his lower chest, running my palms up until my fingers are buried in his hair. I close my fingers and tug, gently, gently; Sanji’s hips buck and jerk when I get too enthusiastic. After a few teasing squirms, I’m very careful to only pull hard enough to make his dick throb- which, of course, I can feel. Mmmn, that’s nice.

I stroke my hands over his clavicles, circle around his neck, pretending all the while I have taken no notice of how deeply his fingers are beginning to dig into my ass. Finally, my fingers reach the back of his neck, and I start feeling and tugging again. Sanji lets out soft sighs of pleasure, his eyes blue-black and hazy with relaxation as I tug and rub more, more, more- scratch at the top of his head and then, hah, then take my time to bring him to stuttering release- but not ejaculation, just orgasm- by massaging the velvet at the base of his horns.

During his afterglow, I suspend his head in my hands, rubbing firm circles into the top of his skull in counterpoint to his breaths. Because he didn’t ejaculate, his throbbing cock presses up into my slippery pussy much sooner than I think he thought it would- a bit less than three minutes, I’d say. Not inside, where he wants to go- just up into it, so he can get a taste of the slippery delights in store for him.

I tug and wriggle until we’re both of us flat on the bed; and then with an arch of my hips that summons a deep groan of pleasure, I rise above him. His pleasure-aching cock is now nestling in the crack of my ass, and the soft whimpers of need coming from him are only making me wetter.

I attend to my husbands ears. It starts with just a revealing of them- stroking the hair away, turning his head so I have full view of their graceful curling; and then, the touching, caressing, the pads of my fingers finding every soft nook and cranny he’s hidden. The touch of my mouth makes him gasp and buck again, the soft *pap* of his cock on my ass a counterpoint to the steady nips and licks and kisses I give to his ear. When I blow across lick-wetted skin, I can feel his whole body shiver with delight.

The other ear reduces him to panting and chirrups, not unlike the sounds he makes when he’s deep inside of me; the sounds my husband makes when my pussy clamps around him, smothering the tip of his cock with little cervix-kisses are some of the sweetest and most adorable sounds he makes- sweeter and more adorable, to my ear, than the rumble of his purr when Deborah falls asleep on his chest. Then again, it’s a very different sound for very different contexts… They really rank about the same.

Face time. More oil, warm and, hm, this time I put cold smears of it under the tiny flab of my breasts, to have a stock ready for later- also, it titillates Sanji when I play with my own tits, especially when they’re adorned like this.

Ah, I can’t hold back anymore; I have to let my feelings show on my face. It’s a bit embarrassing, how much I’m enjoying making my husband relax and feel good- but, well, when Sanji opens his
eyes and sees how much I’m enjoying his enjoyment… I almost forget myself right there, almost take his pretty mouth with mine and fuck him into the firm mattress beneath us- but I don’t. No, no-
Instead, I take the warmed oil from beneath my breasts and rub on the sides of Sanji’s face. Through his sideburns, up along the front of his scalp, and then- his third eye. I press there with my thumb for a full minute.

The deep sigh that comes out of my husband as tension releases inside of him… ah, I could listen to just that forever. I do it again because I can still feel the pressure of his tension in him; and while I do, I slowly rub warm circles into his temples. The soft sighs that come out… laden with the stress of days, months maybe, thick and hot and warm against my neck and chin and lips I want to kiss him-

But I want to be intimate more. I slowly lounge down across his body, just out of alignment enough that his helpless thrusting can’t quite reach the entrance of my pussy. And now- his face. I rest myself just so; enough that I can slowly trace the planes and angles of his face with my fingertips. The ridge of his brow, the smooth soft delight of his eyebrows; I trace the curl with a fingertip and let the bubbly adoration flow. There’s no shame, in loving someone; and it’s nothing to be ashamed of, either.

Sanji’s wrapped his arms around me this time, stroking knuckles along my velvety spine. I sigh, and smile, and he smiles back. I cup his warm, flushed face with my cold hands; feel the tension and release of muscles, the hardness of his cheekbones, trace soft skin under his eyes, and the long straight arch of his nose. I trace the line of his jaw, rub in the softness just behind his jaw, right in the top of his throat and below his tongue. Press the ghost of a kiss to his mouth and trace his nose with the tip of my own.

“You’re not going to kiss me?”

“Mm. Not yet; I want to take my time and savor you,”

“A-ah,”

He’s blushing again. I trace a finger over his lips and bite mine in wondrous longing- but if I give in, I’ll end up fucking him into the floorboards, and this isn’t about that right now. He’s still too tense to just go right for butt stuff, though- so.

I pull us both up, and then feel for the small hollows of Sanji’s neck. At my delicate touch, a shudder runs through him, centralized to his hips but vibrating up and down his spine. I lock eyes with him and slowly, slowly add pressure, ensuring his head is fully secure- and when his eyes flutter closed and deep sighs and soft, nearly silent moans start coming out of him, I know that he feels secure. Now to engage the ol’ Devil Fate- and with a soft, slightly different chime because my Dollperganger is wearing a different bell (it’s got little stars on it, if you were wondering), I get on the bed again.

I let myself fall backwards, taking Sanji with me so he’s fully laid out on top of me, and I carefully tug his legs out from underneath him. I wrap my legs around his waist as I straddle his back; I dig my elbows into the space between his shoulder bones. Sanji’s aaaaah comes from deep in his gut, even as I use my upper arms and elbows to keep him from propping himself up. I even go so far as to grab his hands with mine and stretch my arms over his head, all so I can really get at those knots taking up
valuable Sanji-estate on his back. Elbows into those angel wings, lover-man; I even manage to de-knot his shoulder wells, which pick up stress like my bare callused feet pick up lint in the laundry room.

Underneath Sanji, I press tenderly with my thumbs and forefingers into the grooves below his collar bones. Sanji’s eyes shoot open and his breath comes out in a sharp whine as I turn around so that I’m straddling him and facing his ass. Four more of me appear, each with their own chime, and begin working on his legs. I dig my hands into his thighs, and use firm, even strokes from the back of his knee to the beginning of his ankle. Eventually, I’m focused on the tight knots of his outer thighs, and the warm moaning evoked by my tender ministrations to the backs of his knees.

I appear again, straddling his back with my back to myself- electric tingle of wings against wings means that all of me moan which makes Sanji shudder with lust so strong I can smell it; sandalwood and cigarette smoke, thick and hot in the air. I want him.

I want to make him feel good.

I’m still holding Sanji’s hands up over our heads; on his back, I start massaging under his arms, in his armpits a little, little tugs on the hair. He giggles and snickers, and lets out ragged sighs as I move along the lymph nodes and press into the valleys that separate deltoid from bicep and tricep. Particularly when I dig into his biceps and triceps- well, there’s such a buildup of stress in those that it’s right on the edge of painful for him, me massaging there.

I spread his legs with my own beneath, hooking ankle to ankle and pressing calves firm together so that-

Whoops, too fast, he went tense again. I roll off of his lower back, and I let go of his legs with my hands because they’re all massaged out, and I carefully move myself to lounge across his back, the ridge of his velvet scrubbing right between my tits- oh, right, I only have the one set of body chains, and I’m already wearing them, the bells are actually on choker necklaces, not belts…

And then-

I roll-

Us over-

So that the beaded I is on top, and the rest of me are gathering around, admiring a Sanji gone almost lobster red with perverted glee. I sit up again, even as I remain supine and breathing underneath the warm, wonderful weight of my husband; and I glide down so that his cock- angry red and throbbing with desire- is slid up against my ass and pussy again.

I stretch, and roll my hips, and Sanji moans.

I smile, watching his strange expression morph between embarrassment and wanton lust.

Ach, a man’s nipples are enigmatic things. No point to them- men don’t feed babies, after all- but gods, how my man whimpers when I suckle at them! Caress them lightly, and he sighs; gently pinch them, and he bucks; suckle them, and he becomes a panting mess, whimpering and sobbing with pleasure. I draw from him another orgasm, and in the afterglow I take up two things- first, I begin increasing the pressure on the Sea of Tranquility, right in the dimple of his breastbone; second, I start
massaging his hands. He’s so protective of his hands, I hardly ever get to just… pamper them. He’s always using them, you see- but, one of me per hand, that seems just right, I think. It was one of me per nipple, after all…

And me holding his hands above his head is a good compromise, I think. We’ve decided that neither of us like being tied up at all.

“If this hurts at all, you must tell me, Sanji,”

“Nnngh,”

“And if you want me to do harder, or faster, or more; or softer, or slower, or less- you must tell me, okay?”

“Nnn. Nn-hmm,”

“Okay,”

Starting with the pinky, I pinch the tip firmly for a moment. Then I use firm, short strokes with my thumb, massaging up the finger towards the knuckle. Finally, I squeeze the finger all over. Each finger gets the same treatment, on both hands; ending with the thumb. I hold his hand in mine, palm down, and use my thumb to massage the back of the hand. The pad of my hand rolls between the pinky and ring finger; at medium pressure, my thumb slides along the finger bones towards the wrist. Again and again, repeated for each finger; and especial attention is given to the web of his hand, between thumb and forefinger.

I massage his wrist, small circular motions moving from the center out. I hold his hand palm down, interlacing our fingers to stretch his apart; grasp the whole hand in mine and gently push back to stretch the wrist. Tears of pleasure bead that the corner of my husband’s eyes as I slowly and carefully turn his wrists from right to left and then left to right. As I stroke slow and gentle from his wrist to the tips of his fingers, I can feel his cock throb with each stroke.

I fold myself down and kiss around Sanji’s belly button; my tongue dips in and his hips shudder and buck and his whole face snarls like he’s about to ejaculate, and violently, throw me on my back and pound-

I ooze forwards and press my breasts against his face just long enough for him to moan- and then I kneel on his shoulders, to keep him pressed down where I want him. Ow! Pinched myself with my jewellery, fuck- good, he didn’t notice.

I’m not sitting on his face. Not quite; he’s never given me permission to do that, and I don’t want to spring it on him, but… it’s almost impossible to do the broad, crisscrossing strokes on the torso that I’m doing if you’re also sitting on the torso. His tummy is protected by rock-hard abs, each one jerking and squirming under my gentle touch. My kisses to his belly button travel down that happy trail of hairs and along the sharp V his legs meeting his torso- again again again, as the slick of my body on his cock twitches and jerks.

And I just pinched myself- again- on my jewelry. Off it comes, I’m not going for a third-time-lemon. I roll off his shoulders and off the bed, thumping to the ground with a half-surprised yelp.

Sanji sits up in a daze, even as I press kisses and licks onto his hips without actually touching his
penis- I can see it driving him crazier and crazier, even as he stares at me, stroking hands over my bechained body and leaving only bare sweaty skin behind. One of his hands is buried in my swiftly unfurling hair, long red strands bursting from between his clenching fingers- aahn, he’s tugging it like I like, too!

I stretch and luxuriate on the cool carpeted floor, and roll on my side to watch myself undo my beautiful husband. His shy cries become loud and lusty and demanding; I watch myself deny him his ejaculation, watch myself grip and tug on his balls at the moment of overwhelming sensation. I watch beads of precome drip and dribble from the hot red tip of his cock; I watch his muscles flex and become soothed and languid again by the thorough ministrations of my many selves. Eventually, I kneel at the side of the bed with a pillow from the closet under my knees.

The many me cajole and tug and maneuver my husband so that his bladder is just resting on the edge of the bed, and his ass is curved up and out to the air, and his legs, well, those I spread myself with the broad stretch of my shoulders.

A hand sneaks up and presses on his Gate of Origin; and his cock wags and flinches with the sensation.

“Ready?”

“Ah, Mab, p-please, please let me come-”

“Mou… no, you’ll come when I say you’re allowed to, Rasputin,”

“Aaah♥! ”

The penis I’ve been so cruelly neglecting is sensitive along the whole length, of course, but the root of it is especially so. I press deeply into the place where his balls connect to his perineum, tickling, rhythmically pressing, even kneading as more drops of precome ooze out of my Sanji’s cock. His every breath is coming out with a little cry, now; sharp little whimpers and wails of half-thwarted pleasure because I just won’t let him come all the way. I won’t let him come unglued.

I roll the skin of his scrotum between my oily fingers, checking the throbbing firmness of his balls and driving his lust higher and higher. He’s oozing and dripping so much precum now, it’s making my breasts slippery to the touch- the whole of my breasts, not just the valley between them. When I press a thumb to his perineum, I can actually feel him start to cry with lusty pleasure; this, after all, is usually the lead up to me rimming him.

“Sanji, do you still want me to finger you?”

“Aaah- m-m-Mab, ma belle, please, please don’t stop-”

“Sanji, do you want me to finger you or not?”

“Please please please please-”

“Alright,”
I open the bottle of lube, let it warm to my skin, and then press my finger into his asshole. I’m just getting him used to the sensation of being fingered at all; I felt his ass clench at my intrusion before relaxing as the stimulation became pleasurable, not painful. I’m looking for a walnut-shaped (or was it sized?) gland; I know it’s in here somewhere, but not exactly where… maybe if I crook my finger a bit?

The sudden splatter of precome all across my chest and the shrieking wail of an over-pleasured Sanji let me know I’ve got the right spot. I put in a second finger, scissoring them open and shut, stretching out the hole and making that ring of muscles relax, relax, relax. Sanji’s balls juggle and twitch, and every time they make to jerk close to his body so the come can flow, I grab hold of them and refuse to allow it. Two fingers on his prostate, and a flood of precome coats my chest, my stomach, my hips and my thighs; thank goodness for my other hand, otherwise that would have been come.

Sanji is out and out sobbing with pleasure now; I am laid out so that I’m face to face with him, up on the bed, even as I thoroughly explore the depths and stretchy limits of his ass. My Dollpergangers, bereft of their jobs but unwilling to leave the show, have started masturbating each other, kissing with tongues and teeth, even out and out having sex with each other- some of them electing to rub pussy to pussy, others morphing into my male state and scrubbing against each other- even some hetero couplings furiously bleeding off my excess lust, their maddened thrusting and relieved yelps mere background noise to the provocative squelching of it all.

When Sanji manages to blink the tears away, his eyes rove over me, and me, and me again, enjoying myself with myself. The flush on his face, that perverted smile- tch, someone’s slacking off. I admit, I can put on quite a show; but this is about Sanji, not me.

His eyes lock with mine, what with us being nose to nose, and then they roll back in his head as I add a third finger and gleefully molest his prostate. Fingerfucking, that’s the word; I’m fingerfucking my husband. From the expression on his face, I’d say he’s enjoying every hot, slippery, absurd moment of it.

Saa, that’s a good expression on him; eyes rolled back and curved in a grin, mouth dropped open in overwhelming pleasure, tongue and drool flopping out of his mouth as it all becomes too much for him. I can see the sharpest of his teeth, gleaming clean and white in his mouth; I can hear the gurgles of his moans, from deep in his throat.

Eventually, my own overwhelming lust calms again, and my dollpergangers vanish, leaving me, and me, and Sanji in the bedroom- and, surprisingly, puddles of come and lubricity, where various myselfes had various good times.

I sit up on the bed, and move my pussy forwards, even as I press a fourth finger into Sanji’s ass and dig a hand in to tug his hair- and the head attached to those silky golden strands- up, up, up, until his mouth and nose are dead level with my overflowingly wet pussy. Sanji blinks away his tears, sucks back his snot, and after glancing up at me- and holding onto his composure by the very skin of his teeth, considering I’m still behind him- lowers his head to eat. I let him, and his tongue, aaahn, it’s like pure magic.

I let myself come, biting into his ass to stifle the echoed scream of pleasure because that would certainly break the ward- and Sanji’s moan as I bite into him is not helping but oh, what a feeling to have! What a sweet sound to hear!
Finally, I think it’s time; if he’s not too tired out, I think he’s ready. Baby steps, after all- he’s not ready for a straight on male-on-male encounter, I’d say. But fucking his wife and getting fucked by his wife? He’s already done that; this would just be… slightly more literal.

“Are you okay with this?” I said, as I and I moved Sanji back up onto the bed, his painfully erect cock finding a warm and loving home in my pussy, just like it always wanted. “Because, Rasputin, you could just fuck me-”

“-while I play in your ass-”

“-and that would be just fine. But, if you want-”

“- only if you want-”

“-you could fuck me like you like to, and I could fuck you while you do it,”

“But only if you want to, Razz. ...Do you, want to?”

Sanji- Rasputin- My husband- panted and gasped from the relieving pleasure of finally resting his cock in my pussy. His arms crushed me to him, and his hips quivered with barely restrained lust.

“Mab, please, for the love of all the gods, please let me fuck you. Please fuck me. Please, please please please please-”

“Okay. Razz, if it hurts-”

“- or if you don’t like it-”

“-you have to tell me, so we can stop,”

“ Mabinera, please-! ”

And then, for the first time ever, I press my own hard dick into Sanji’s sweet red asshole, sliding and wet and warm the whole way through. At the same time, I roll my hips up and swallow every last centimeter of Sanji’s cock with my pussy. I dig my fingers into his scalp, even as he tightens his grip around my ribs; I press soft kisses to his mouth, even a few right below his lower lip; and I wrap my arms around his shoulders, press my belly to his spine, feel the bottle-brush fluff of his tail curling and uncurling in confusion and tentative lust against my V-lines.

He’s warm and big and tight and hot, long and supple, hairy and rough and hard in all the places that I want him to be; snarling and panting and crying with a confusing pleasure so alien to him it loops back around to familiar.

I press a kiss into the side of his head; I suckle on his adams apple, pressing kisses to his throat. I do my level best to purr, too, even though I really am crap at it.

Sanji doesn’t move, even as I stroke and cuddle and wait, patiently, for him to do something, say something, even if that something is “no, I don’t like this, stop” and if he does that we will-
And then he thrusts up into my dick and down into my pussy, and my anxiety is rendered quite moot.

Keeping pace in a threesome, even if two of you are actually just you... well, in this case, I let Sanji set the pace. My dick thrusts in countertime to his, ensuring that as he pulls up and out, I'm going down and in; my pussy works like I always work it, making sure that each of his thrusts- gnnngh- meets one of my own, and we draw apart together. Keeping these two rhythms going isn't the easiest thing I've ever done, but oh gods in heaven, aaah, please yes, aaaaah-yes, please, yes, don't stop, don't stop- aaah-

Eventually, the massaging and multiple orgasms force Sanji into lying on top of me, clinging and thrusting his hips- well, grinding, really- in a desperate attempt to get some relief from his burning, lust filled cock. Unfortunately for his poor libido, I know what I'm doing.

He won't be able to come with his cock alone, not tonight; I made sure of that. Poor love; he's trying so desperately too, it's adorable and sweet. I am reminded, once again, that I am not the nice twin. His hips shuddering against mine, his face a mess of snot and blubbering tears... it warms something in the depths of the darkest part of my heart.

“M-mab, ple-he-hease, please let me come-”

“Hmm. Alright,”

And then I fuck him into my pussy and the floor below.

I capture his mouth and his pleasure-born screams, fucking into the wet toothy cave with my tongue. I lock his legs with my own and spread them wide, wide open, so that every burning centimeter of his asshole gets rubbed with my own hot dick. I lock our fingers together, lock our legs together locked together we will never be apart-

I thrust deep and hard and with a distinct rhythm that is nothing like Sanji's own; his little yips and wails start to find a distinct rhythm, even as my hungry mouth swallows them down. I adjust my thrusting angle just a bit- bingo! Got him!

The surge of hot precome that spurts out of my pussy is followed by every last burning hot drop of his come; his shivering balls tight against his body, his thighs shaking with every pulse, my dick steadily grinding out more from him than he ever knew he could give... I want every last drop, you see. Every whimpering spurt, every creamy splatter- all of it belongs in my pussy, and I won't let him get away with keeping back even the smallest trickle of it.

Mine; my husband.

When it's over, we're lying in a puddle of wet sheets and bedding. Sanji is almost fully unconscious, purring relentlessly loud and nuzzling his scruffy cheek against my neck. The backwash of sensation from busting my nut knocked me out cold for long enough that he was able to regain consciousness. Damn.
Oh gods dammit, I forgot the vibrators-

“Pffft-hahahahahahaha-”

“What?”

“Th-thahahahat’s what you get upset about?”

“I wanted to see your reaction to a vibrator, Razz!”

“Pffft-ahahahahahaha-”

As I puff out my cheeks and frown, my husband laughs and giggles. After about three seconds, I can’t help laughing too.

After we changed the bedding with the rest of the extra in the closet, we slept the night through. Like, actually slept for the first time in days; very good, very relaxing. Pressed up against my husband, nuzzled in his arms and safe from every danger… nothing is so relaxing and peaceful, to my mind.

We actually slept in for once; and I finally got to wear clothing that isn’t Court Standard, praise the gods. Plain underwear the color of my skin; black floral lace tights, but no bows- I didn’t like the look of them, so I didn’t add them on; no-show socks and a pair of brown oxfords, Sanji, frankly speaking, covets. I don’t particularly understand it- they’re farmer shoes- but here we are… Sideswept faux bangs pinned with a bee bobby pin, in a working woman style- although, due to the length of my hair, I had to put in an absurd number of braids. Last bit is a tunic dress with buttons at the collar; fluttery and warm, in a slate-black color.

Nmmm, aaah-

“S-sanji, what-?”

“I want to rub one out for you, Mab,”

“E-eh? But- I’m, mmmmm, I’m wearing tights and a dress, a-and, and the ward-”

“C’mon, we can pretend to be teenagers catching a moment to ourselves, right?”

“Ffff-aaah! If you’re going to keep rubbing my wing like that, I don’t see why not- nnnnngh-”

“Hmmm. Keep standing up, I’ll catch you if you fall,”

“Hnnnnng-”

“Mm, I always forget how soft and slippery you are here, Mab; your pussy really is a wonderful place,”
“Aaah, your fingers-!”

“Haha, do you like it when I press inside of you?”

“Y-yes, aaah, yes I do-”

“Do you like it when I rub around like- this-?”

“AAAhaaaaahaaaaahmmmmmmnnn-!”

“Mab, I can’t keep doing it if I don’t know you like it-”

“Aaahn, y-yes, yes please keep- aaaah!”

My wings are shoved up against his back, and my pussy is gripped firmly in his hand, the tight grip of my clothing in startling, vibrating conflict with the slippery intimacy, I, I- need-

“S-sanji, Sanji please-”

“Hmm. Hands on the desk, please,”

“Fwuah, okay, nnnnn-”

As soon as I’m bent over, Sanji’s rucked up my tunic skirt and pulled my tights and underwear down around my ankles. When he starts pulling my leg up, I protest with-

“Sanji, no, I’ll stretch out my tights!”

“Hm? Okay, but… it’s going to be a lot more intense if I don’t. You sure?”

“Don’t stretch out my ti-I- aaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAH-!”

*His cock is so big like this! Aaaah!*

Ffffuck she’s tight like this. She’s hotter than normal, too, because of all the clothing; I can see sweat starting to darken her hairline, and her earrings are bouncing in time with her tits. Huh- that’s the vibrator she bought yesterday, the one shaped like a piece of tuna sushi… It’s got a little button on the back, and when I press it, the whole piece of silicone vibrates like nothing else.

Hrm.

Let me just- Aaagh!
Wow!

When I pressed the vibrator to the big slit on her back where her wing comes out- not even directly on the wing- she shoved her ass up and back and came so hard it felt like… like she was out and out milking my dick with her pussy.

Nnngh.

Love my wife; love fucking my wife. I especially love taking her from behind with a mirror in front, so I can see all the weird contortions her face goes through as she comes; and also I get to stroke her wings, which I know for a fact she finds to be deeply intimate and romantic. I…

I won’t lie and say I don’t occasionally find Mab’s wings a little bit icky- I do. The word for it is entomophobia, which is fear of bugs, and I’ve had it almost my entire life. I used to really like bugs, but- no, doesn’t matter. What matters is that those moments when I look at Mab’s wings and feel disgusted- those moments are coming less and less often.

We ended up missing the first half of breakfast, because it feels nice to have sex with my wife and I’m not going to rush a good thing. Mab changed her outfit; instead of lace tights, she’s wearing fleece lined tights in a shade of yellow that sends a curl of masculine pride through me every time I see it.

*My wife is wearing my colors after I fucked her so hard she couldn’t walk! She babbled in Faesh and had to redo her makeup for the day because she was crying with pleasure! Yeaaaaaaaaaah!*

I ended up giving Mab my list of notes from yesterday; over an omelette, rice, and spicy coxsauce, she peruses my notes and makes notes of her own.

From what I can read upside down:

BBC Coffyn is taken care of; the Court provided her information to Nurse Mendy once she was named as Guardian. Mince Coffyn was homeschooled; his parents paperwork should have his scholastic information, along with his medical records.

The real problem, as far as Mab can tell, will be getting a hold of everything Oz will need in the future. She’s going to set Robin on it; she’s got just the right mixture of implacable need for the truth, and unrelenting intimidation.

Luffy and the Juniors are going to have full run of the resort, along with all the Littles. Mab is deeply concerned with letting Luffy be the Responsible Adult, but I take out my own pen and quickly write down that Mark actually *is* a Responsible Adult, and so can presumably be left with the- no, no, Taffy, leave the money with Taffy.

“Good idea, Razz,”
Nurse Mendy does need wardrobe, but more as a welcoming thing, not as a… Anyway, she’s actually under Chopper in terms of Crew command structure. Pets, gardens- Mark would be best for that, but Usopp can actually handle it better than most would assume. Adult dependants and employees; Franky can handle that.

After that, she just goes through my notes- marking here and there- and then nods, once. I got everything?

“Really?”

“Mm. You’re a responsible adult, Razz; congratulations,”

“Pffft,”

Mab spends the rest of breakfast going over the letters I finished yesterday and quickly rewriting them on much finer paper, sealing them, and addressing them properly. She writes out what must be letters of introduction- one for the Bank, and one for the Post Office. The intro letters are given to Luffy, with the explanation of-

“Captain, if you give this letter with the gold stamp on it to someone in the Bank, they have to join our Crew,”

“Neh, why would that matter?”

“We need an accountant; Banks have accountants. If you see someone you like on your trip to the bank, give them this letter. Got it?”

“Yeah. -neh, do we need a post officer?”

“Hmm?”

“Well, there’s a lot of us now, and some of us like writing letters to people- I do, I mean, and we don’t always remember to get letter writing stuff or put it in the box…”

“Mm. Yes, actually- that’s what this black one is for. Same thing as the gold one, but you have to be absolutely sure about your choice, Captain; they get assignments for life. Also, if you pick someone underage, their teacher has to agree or come with; and if someone has students, they have to come too… and don’t worry about space, Franky actually overbuilt the Sunny; he can handle a much larger crew just fine”

“No problem!”

“Cool. I leave it to you,”

Then, Mab started handing out- files, dossiers, really? Damn- to various members of the Fully Adult portion of our Crew. Luffy gets handed a big ol’ sack of cash money, and a simple note- and when he looks over at Mab quizzically, Mab waits for a particularly noisy bit of chatter to lean close to Luffy and say something important to him.
“Their parents died, and we’re the only adults they have to care for them now. Doing what’s left undone for their parents… Captain Luffy, it is not their concern,”

“…so I’m taking all the kids on an adventure as a distraction?”

“Mm- mini-adventures, we’re going on Adventure-adventures soon enough. Well, and also, they need to gel as a group- even though most of them are siblings, they’ve spent the past five years apart. They love each other, in various ways, but… they aren’t exactly friends. I think some time doing stuff together with you would help,”

“Neh, I get it. I’ll do the recruiting with the kids, actually- so they don’t freak out about our new crewmates, too, right?”

“Sounds good to me, Captain,”

My wife really is kind and loving. I’m lucky to have her as mine.

After breakfast for the next few days, us responsible adults attend to the sad business of folding away the stuffs and parcels of someone’s life. Boxes of clothing with no one to wear- I keep a few certain pieces that buzz loudest to my Memoria- those are the things that have genuine emotion attached to them. A hat that actually belonged to every man in Oz’s family, passed from father to son; a cloak of blue feathers, sized to someone Sancho’s size; a pair of spurs that actually belonged to his mother and… need a refreshment on their enchantments, wow.

That’s it for the Bartoks, aside from some quilts I found in their storage under a very old, yet still strong enough to keep the moths away. They’re nice quilts, really- just need to have a backing, batting, and edge added. I can do that. Actually, this flowery one is in pieces, it’s… not finished. Oh, she had such hope - I can see the shape of her wish for a daughter, and she was so sure she’d be bringing one to the world by the time she finished this quilt...

Ach. It’s sad, that’s what it is.

The Coffyns aren’t much better- most of their shit from the hotel room is contaminated with Cyanide, and so not worth recovering. The only things that make it through are things that can be sanitized; a few kimono and yukata make it through, but the obis are beyond recovery. Jewelry- mostly things for the hair, you know- that makes it through too.

The house, for me at least, is… brutally painful. It’s a nice house, freshly renovated; it still has that new paint smell. The moving company the Coffyns hired had just finished putting all their shit- still boxed up- into the various houses. There was a brand new room, just down the hall from the master bedroom, all painted in white and coral and turquoise, with a crib and a changing station and…

Nami sent me to the Daiso for refreshments; and when I got back, the baby room was all packed up. Franky told me that they were keeping everything in it on Nami’s orders, to save on expenses, and I
said that’d be fine- and then I burst into tears.

After Sanji comforted me and helped me calm down, I found another cloak, sized for, eh, a young man maybe? It’s entirely made of peacock feathers, which is only… for… oh dear.

Oh dear oh dear; someone’s up to something. The necklace of teeth- a farspeech focus if I’ve ever seen one, considering the knotwork and the gemstones in the molars- is also a sign… and there it is. Sparrow, sparrow: where do you nest?

Spadey is definitely up to something; the Freebirds and my old Office are intimately intertwined…

It wasn’t all sadness and gloom and the grim detritus of lives cut short, thank the gods- our three Kitchen Kiddoes entered the preliminary rounds of the World’s Worst Baking Contest!

Yeah, that’s still a thing!

Apparently, due to the grisly murder of two of the judges- in reality, taste testers- the contest organizers decided that this year they would implement a new style. They decided that they would use rounds of preliminaries on several different islands around the Line, and the actual contest is to be held on an island yet-to-be-announced. My money is on Germa Kingdom, though, they’ve got the best World-wide broadcasting system.

Picture it: the Alchemist’s Guild Hall had been scrubbed down, but nothing short of replacing every stone could get rid of all the stains. Banners and pennants, specially made for their durability and stain-resistance, turned the grim proto-laboratory into a fairly festive arena. Bleacher-stands had been erected along one side of the long hall, and a stage had been set up on the other, bedecked in small kitchen-stations, each with numbers… but you’ve seen a contest before, haven’t you?

I’ll move on, then.

Picture this, instead: Vinsmoke Deborah, her hair in her normal coiff and bound neatly under a lovely red silk scarf tied in a cute bow at her nape; a creme-white chef coat and a houndstooth skirt, thick with pleats and falling down to her ankles. The very shiny tips of her boots poked out from beneath her skirt; her titanium white apron made her torso long and strange. Deborah stood in a small kitchen-station, reading over a rulebook and carefully considering ingredients.

Mince Coffyn is a different cook and kaboodle. His hair is bound back in a quick, loose braid, fly-aways and dangling tendrils kept in check with a simple green bandana. His chef coat is a hand-me down from Sanji, as his own was ruined in his parent’s murder. It’s meant for a man nearly twice Mince’s height and weight, so doesn’t fit in the slightest; I had to fold it up quite a bit and actually baste-stitch the sleeves in their folds so they wouldn’t get too in the way. His pants were ruined too, so he’s also wearing a skirt- with Deborah’s permission, I turned it into a split skirt, a modernized gladiator affair of four panels. A kilt, perhaps? Mince was carefully examining his implements, and considering the recipe list for this part of the contest.

And finally, Osvaldo Bartok. Oz has pinned his bangs back with a pair of blue barrettes from the Daiso, and is wearing a hoodie and a black pair of jeans under his apron. It’s Osvaldo that opens with the first true astonishment of the preliminaries.
“State your name, please,”

“Osvaldo Bartok; better known to some as Oz, the Great and Terrible,”

“And what will you be baking today?”

“Today-” and his foot broke directly through the stage, sending poor Oz onto his face with a yelp. The crowd laughed; Sanji sat bolt upright with interested attention.

“Au! -I will be baking bread, fuck,”

The crowd laughed again. Sanji told me later that Oz’s choice was considered laughable because most people usually bake sweets. Bread, being so comparatively simple, is usually almost impossible to bake so badly that- ah, right. To be a true Baked Bad, the result of whatever the contestant tries to make must be completely inedible. If the taste tester can taste, chew, swallow, and keep down the contestant’s creation, they’re immediately disqualified. The farther the taste tester gets in their investigation of the Baked Bad, the lower the contestant’s score becomes.

The rules of the contest are fairly easy to understand, but the simplest way to say it is: bake, and do something amazing. Oh, and be sure your baked bad is completely uneatable.

I, personally, was sure that either Oz had a plan, or he was trusting his future to pure luck, which, on our crew, isn’t necessarily the craziest idea ever.

As one of the judges raised their stopwatch, another looked to Oz.

“Mister Bartok, are you ready?”

“I am,”

“Begin!”

Oz sauntered to the shelves of ingredients and began grabbing the things he would need- sugar, flour, salt, a mixing bowl, a measuring cup. He came back to the counter with the sink, not bothering to either rush or dawdle, and set his things out- not haphazardly, but not neatly either. He prepared a few tools- a spatula, a peel, a baking steel. He set his oven so it could reach temperature, the baking steel within. He measured out a handful or so of large-grind maize, presumably for the bottom of the loaf in the oven...

Then, he began to work with his ingredients. He poured water into the measuring cup without looking, added sugar straight from the bag, and then a whole handful of fresh yeast. As he washed his hands- well-

A fell wind blew through the guild hall. It only lasted a few seconds, but it was biting cold and filled with the crackling laughter of a man with a punctured lung and nothing left to lose. The audience, filled with gigglers and chatter, hushed to pure silence and anticipation. Sanji, at my side, tensed even
Oz poured the flour into a bowl. The bowl suddenly lurched violently, the scrape it made as it lurched across the counter hitting the air like a gunshot. Oz watched the bowl slowly rock back and forth until it came to a stop, one eyebrow raised high. He measured a cup of milk, and carefully poured it to the flour- and again, the bowl lurched, moving a full handspan down the counter.

Sanji is out and out wheezing with excitement; I’ve got no idea what’s going on.

Oz watched the bowl. The milk and the flour weren’t curdling, smoking, or doing anything absurd—everything from my vantage point looked the right color. As Oz cracked in eggs, the bowl just kept jumping, like it was trying to go somewhere- and then, a suspicion floated across Oz’s face. When he mixed spices in a small bowl, and dumped the whole thing in, the bowl lurched, screeched on the counter, and shuddered violently.

Oz knew; I could see it in the very set of his face, his eyes, his eyebrows, the curl of his mouth.

He took the measuring cup of unmeasured sugar, water, and yeast.

It had steadily bubbled and spat throughout the mixing bowl’s antics, and from the way Oz strained under it, it must have felt like it weighed nearly all the World. A faint whispering, ‘yakuuuuuuult’, hissed out with each overly-loud pop of the strange brew. The bowl leaned towards the measuring cup, and Oz visibly began to sweat. Then, he poured it in and ducked beneath the counter.

Nothing happened.

After a moment, Oz rose above the counter and eyed the bowl, confused- and then, a realization!

Oz took the spatula, and began to stir the mixture. It became immediately apparent that stirring the mix was much harder than it should be, as if the dough forming unnaturally fast within didn’t want to move. After a few increasingly hard turns around the bowl, the spatula got stuck. When Oz tried to move it, all he managed was moving the bowl.

He let go and stared at the dough in frustration…

...and then the dough moved.

The dough expanded, the spatula wobbling; it moved and rippled in the dough’s grip until it gently booped Oz in the forehead- and then it reared back and thwacked him across the skull. Oz yelped and stepped backwards. The bowl hopped towards him and swung again. Oz dodged and glared at the dough, fingers twitching. The dough waggled it’s spatula in a clear ‘come at me’ manner.

“Is that right? Well, I’ll happily oblige...” growled Oz as he glanced around his cooking station, before laying hands on the only possible choice- the large wooden pizza peel. Holding it at the ready, Oz grinned a deadly smile, and said “Crumb to think of it, I doubt this will go well… for you ,”
The dough rose and glorped into an oozing approximation of an arm holding the spatula. The approxi-arm swung, and Oz met the attack with a respectable block, the corner of the pizza peel turning to catch an edge of the spatula- but no!

The spatula he chose has no edge to grab! In literally any other circumstance, it would be a fantastic multi-tool! (Hmm, I think it’s an Earlywood flat saute when it’s at home, make a note of that Missus Morgan…)

The clack of wood on wood rang out as Oz dueled his dough; the audience stared on in various kinds of silence. I, personally, was examining Oz’s form; he’s an axe fighter, no mistake about it, I recognized that disarming move he tried right at the start. A pizza peel approximates the shape of an axe well enough for him to not be too thrown off, although the weight distribution is very different...

Oz began to smile as he fought, and I understood why. Although the dough was not unskilled, Oz was simply better; the dough was confined to a bowl, and it’s weapon had a distinct reach disadvantage over Oz’s. Soon enough, Oz had the upper hand.

The dough swung wildly, hoping to catch him off guard; Oz responded by ducking and then lunging forwards, bringing his peel around in a fast arc. He struck at the base of the spatula, and with a flick, sent it flying into the air. The spatula clattered onto the stage and stuck at an odd angle, the dough on it not removed by mere blunt force.

Oz clacked the base of his peel to the floor and grinned.

“You fought valiantly, and well, but no mere dough can hope to defeat me; now, to the oven with you-”

The dough placed it’s aproxy-arm on the counter and pushed itself over, landing upside down behind the counter with a splat; farside to Oz, nearside to us. Oz furrowed his brow and nearly looked for the bowl before setting his peel in a guard position and backing the hell up.

From behind the counter, the dough rose, expanding and bubbling. Limbs extruded and morphed, now nearly claw-like in consistency, now tangled tentacles oozing and undulating in a perverse mockery of flesh. An approxi-arm splurched onto the countertop and dug furrows into the food-safe surface as the monster rose up, up, up. The dough grew and grew until it stood at least five times the height of Oz.

No- that’s no mere dough!

The Yeast Beast reached up with a massive, rippling arm and removed the bowl from it’s churning head. It stared at the bowl for a second or two, then threw it away to clatter on the stage, staring down at Oz with hollow eyes. Here and there, speckles of crushed peppercorn and onion powder gave texture to the Yeast Beast’s smooth and slightly tacky hide.

I could see in Oz’s face a clear, (and quite frankly, sensible) amount of terror. I could almost hear his thoughts, even- ‘I just had to taunt a Yeast Beast ’- as his knuckles went momentarily white on the handle of his peel.

The Yeast Beast roared, and the crowd gasped.

Flecks of runny ooz and bits of phlegmy dough spattered onto Oz as the Yeast Beast’s mouth
stretched wide and cavernous- trying to intimidate. Oz set his stance and relaxed, rather than run, and in that moment his fear became determination-

The Yeast Beast swung a massive approxi-arm down at Oz. Instincts took over and Oz dove-rolled out of the way, the stage where he was standing shattering behind him. Again the creature swung; again Oz dodged. Spotting what must have seemed to him an opening, Oz ran for it- but the beast was too quick!

It’s approximal arm lurched out and snatched Oz’s hood, glomming shut around the loose fabric and yanking Oz off his feet. Oz yelped as the Yeast Beast dragged him back and up, and it was only his flailing with the peel- smacking it into the beast’s head, making it momentarily stagger and relax it’s horrible arm- that allowed him to grab onto the fire extinguisher below the sink.

The Yeast Beast swung Oz high to slam him into the ground, but Oz- clever, clever boy- sprayed the oozing limb swinging him up, turning it to ice, and shattered it with a well timed crack of the body of the fire extinguisher!

Unfortunately, as Oz fell, the Yeast Beast’s tongue shot out, swallowing him whole.

For a moment, it felt like no one in the room breathed.

Had Oz the Great and Terrible just been murdered by his own creation?

Was it all over now?

Then, as the Yeast Beast’s massive body oozed and rippled triumphantly: a shudder. A sparkling frost appeared on it’s lips, and then grew and smeared over every centimeter of it’s horrific body, turning it’s eye-watering undulations into the stillness of marble as carved by a man hopped up on amphetamines and existential horror.

With a scintillating crash, nearly musical- I swear, I heard some kind of scale, maybe two- the frozen Yeast Beast shattered into pieces of indiscriminate size. Some were small as peas- others, larger than Oz’s head. Indeed, that particular piece landed on the counter. It was shaped, frankly speaking, like a very provocative and titillating scene from one of my, ahem, books about massage. Then it crumbled apart- but still, I know what I saw.

Oz himself fell to the ground, landing gracefully, the fire extinguisher held at the ready. With a roll of his shoulders, he stood, and carefully set the extinguisher to one side. He stooped, then, picked up his peel, and walked over to the hanging kitchen towels. Standing with his back to the kitchen, Oz calmly wiped the peel clean.

Behind him, as more and more of the dough in proximity to the oven melted from it’s frozen state, the Yeast Beast started to reform on the counter near the oven, angrier than before. Oz, paying no visible attention to the danger behind him, took a large bottle of olive oil and uncorked it, before leaning his peel upright onto the wall.

Then, moving at a brisk pace, Oz walked over to the not-quite formed Yeast Beast and doused it with the entire bottle of oil. Ducking a probing blow from the Beast, Oz darted back to the peel, set down the oil, and-
Turning as he does-

Peel at the ready-

He beat the dough down.

As the brutal smacking and tooth rattling roars subside, all that remains is a terrific mess, a very floured Oz, and an ominous loaf of dough, ready for the oven.

Oz takes a small sharp knife and cuts a simple ‘Oz’ into the surface of the loaf, then opens the oven.

A wave of heat, like the very fires of hell, briefly wafts over the audience.

Oz scatters his maize over the baking steel, then uses the peel to put the loaf into the oven. He sets a timer, and starts cleaning up his kitchen station; he’s actually fairly good at quickly cleaning, making it quite obvious that not only does this happen to him *often*, it’s happened often enough that he’s gotten good at dealing with the fallout.

Indeed, Oz has just finished fluffing the last of the flour out of his hair, and repinned the barretts, when the alarm goes off. He took the peel again, and took his loaf of bread out of the oven; and some feature of it alarmed me, though even now I know not what.

He set it out on a kitchen towel I realize now he must have laid out during his cleaning; and then, setting the peel aside, he carefully laid another atop the loaf. He turned the oven off; he wiped down the peel again and hung it up; he took the cooling baking steel out and dusted away the remaining maize-meal. As the oven cooled, a chorus of tortured moans and squeals erupted from it, punctuated by much louder- frenzied, even- chants of ‘yakuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuult!’

The baking steel, at that moment, could no longer withstand the strain of such a Baked Bad; it cracked into two equal pieces, and as Oz dropped them into the garbage, the baking steel broke further.

Oz shrugged.

Then, taking a serrated knife from the knife holder, Oz returned to his loaf, uncovered it, and sliced it into simple slices. With a careful look at the bread for anymore surprises- but no, it’s done. Oz turned to the judges, nodded once, and announced in a clear, ringing voice, “Finished!”

The sound that erupted from the stands was nearly indescribable- for, it was the sound of nearly ten thousand people shutting their jaws at more or less the same time. The *next* sound, of course, was thunderous cheering and applause, which startled Oz and made his chroma flicker in some of the cutest patterns of embarrassed pride I’ve ever seen.

Sanji and I discussed the round while the judges deliberated; unbeknownst to us, our voices and seats were situated just right enough to pitch to basically the entire hall.

“That was merveilleux! The written play-by-play is truly a paltry substitute for live observation- especially for turnovers like this! Oz the Great and Terrible—”
“He’s a first time competitor, Razz, we can’t expect perfect showmanship- I saw more than a few things happen that could have been simple mistakes… It makes me think he just wasn’t bready for a competition like this,”

“Of course, Honey, he might have no formal training to speak of; but in contests like this, that’s often an advantage. I will say, though, that his very measured pace might be a result of nerves, not lack of speed- and nerves can get the best of us in trouble. His subdoughal technique was excellent, however,”

“I agree, but his overall lack of formality… I’m not sure if that was intentional or not. The musical shattering of the Beast would not have gone quite the same were he not wearing a hoodie- then again, if he weren’t wearing a hoodie, the opportunity to shatter the Beast might not have come at all,”

“True. It depends on the judges, of course; he might get a mark down for that lack of formality… and then again, the judges might find his entire approach very refreshing. I noticed a distinctive Wesern traditional flair to his movements, did you?”

“Oh yes; that particular way he used his peel, right at the start of the dough-el; that’s a very practical move for an axe-fighter, which, as you should be aware, originated in West Blue,”

“Quite, quite. Although, I’m sure he’s going to lose points for how long it took him to subdough the Yeast Beast. Two rounds of kneading, Honey! It’s amateurish!”

“Consider the size of his batch, Razzberry! Even a good lone baker would need at least two rounds to get through all that; only a team could do it in one. This isn’t a team event, and downplaying the sheer amount of work involved in making loaves of that size is simply classist! I won’t stand for it; even zweiback when, it was still wrong! -Now, what do you make of the destruction and fouling of so many of his tools and implements?”

“Well, considering the overall simplicity of his recipe, I normally wouldn’t count them as a deciding factor- but! His spatula, his bowl, his measuring cup, his oven, and his baking steel were ruined in some way during the event. His spatula is actually splintered all the way through- as soon as that dough dissolves, it’s going to fall apart; the same with the bowl, which is shattered. His mixing cup… I’d lay good odds on it imbuing any yeast it’s exposed to with an insatiable bloodlust. You heard the oven, and you saw the steel- normally, it’s much more complicated recipes in this competition that cause such unrestrained damage,”

“Well, you are the expert, I suppose- then again, it’s not over until it’s over; we’ll only know for sure if he’s Baked a Bad when the Taste Tester gives their verdict, Razz,”

“Well, of course- and considering it’s worth half the total score… I just don’t know, Honey,”

“Wait, there they are now-”

The audience cheered as a nervous looking grad student alchemist stepped onto the stage. She looked at Oz, who had put a slice of “bread” onto a small plate with a pair of disposable chopsticks, never actually touching his creation with his bare skin. She walked up to the slice of bread and sniffed it; then, she picked it up and took a bite. Well, she tried; the wince and screech of pain as her teeth sunk into the bread was a good indication of how things were going to go. Eventually, clutching at her jaw, she shook her head and gave the slice a broad lick. Her hair puffed out to twice it’s normal volume, and her face went green and greener and greenest, until finally she turned and
lunged for the garbage, vomiting with everything she had.

The crowd roared its approval.

A woozy voice echoed out from the depths of the trashcan; “iff immebibale”, followed by another splattering sound and a low groan.

“Honey! A numbtonuge and a reversal! The bread is completely inedible!”

As Sanji’s joyous shout echoed, the crowd roared in approval again.

“And see- unless that woman regains feeling in her tongue soon, we’ve lost our first taste tester!”

“As I understand, Razz, it’s a crucial job in the contest, and so pays very well indeed –”

“Mm, they’re only allowed to do two testings consecutively, and they have all health and dental expenses paid. Considering what they’ll have to deal with, I am not surprised- ah! The Judges are giving their feelings on the matter- looks like a five, a five, a five, a five… and a four? Quoi?”

“I don’t know Razz; if that wasn’t a perfect score, I don’t want to know what could be. Still, twenty-four out of twenty-five is a very good score- especially right at the start! The only part left is the time score, but Oz will only be judged on that at the end of this competition,”

“Well- it stands to reason that you can’t judge the speed of a competitor without letting the rest compete. Speaking of, here comes the next one!”

The other competitors actually blur together in my memory; the only ones who stood out were my crewmates. Thus, the next one I remember was Deborah.

“Vinsmoke Deborah,” the judge said, “What will you make for us?”

I could actually see Deborah’s concentration break, and the sudden realization of-

“She’s choking,”

“She is. Oh, wait- there she goes-”

“Oh… I’ll, uh, I’ll make… pancakes?”
Deborah looked around the kitchen-station. No stove appeared; only ovens. Pancakes aren’t, technically speaking, baked goods.

“In the, uh, oven?”

Deborah grinned nervously. I sighed.

“Her confidence is a bit...”

“I’m working on it, I know;”

“Still, Razz, an interesting choice,”

“Mm. There’s no reason a pancake can’t be made in the oven- truly, a baked pancake can be quite nice. Still, they’re riddled with hidden pitfalls, and it’s a real test of skill and overall incompetence to get them just right- or in this case, wrong.”

I can see Deborah sweating profusely on stage, pure regret the only expression on her face. As I understand, her plan was actually to make brownies- most of her practice these past few days has been with making brownies. They were awful; I thought she would do quite well.

Then again… if I’m thinking of it right, oven-baked pancakes should just be pancakes baked in an oven, right?

“Miss Vinsmoke? Are you ready?”

She is not.

“I am,”

“Begin!”

Deborah closed her eyes and- peeking occasionally- began to fill a bowl with what could only possibly be pancake ingredients. There might have been flour, and eggs would naturally follow- perhaps some milk? A little sugar, some butter, a dash of nutmeg. In it went. She thinks it went in, anyway- who knows for sure?

Deborah started to enjoy herself; obviously just doing whatever felt right at that moment with her eyes slowly going half open. It was going well- too well, actually, which is why it was such a relief when her Food Luck Magic violently reacted to what she was doing.
With anything else, Deborah is fairly competent, and with some things—like wildflowers and unbutchered meat—she verges right on the edge of criminal genius. \textit{(It’s a crime to be this good!)}

With baking, however, about the best anyone can say is that she’s never actually killed anyone outright.

The batter in the bowl that Deborah had only just started to stir inflated like a balloon and swelled to nearly twice the size of her head. It lifted out of the bowl and began to float away.

It was sufficiently weird enough for Deborah to open her eyes all the way and watch. She set her mixing bowl aside to rest and did so, sighing with frustration as she watched her materiel float up, up, and away. Considering the penalty for starting over, I understood completely.

Then, Deborah noticed that not all of her batter had puffed up and flown the coop; there was still enough left in her bowl to be a pancake. Deborah began to reach for the bowl when she heard a splurt from above; and when she looked up a wad of batter smeared across her face, covering her eyes, ears, nose, and most of her mouth.

She immediately began to flail and scrape at her face, desperate for air, sight, and hearing. Deborah stumbled around the stage as she tried to remove the batter. It stuck to her like burnt eggs to a griddle. She bumped into the counter and knocked the butter to the floor—and then she stepped in it, slid, and fell flat on her back.

Her boots went flying, as did her socks. They landed with a clatter in the drying rack of the kitchen-station’s sink.

Deborah, after scraping the majority of the batter away, stood on eight wobbly legs. She panted after her near-brush with asphyxiation, and then leaned on the counter so she could better grip the batter that had landed there after the batter-bubble popped. She heaved on it furiously, but a line of it was stuck to her forehead and as she yanked, it all came up and smacked her in the head, before sproing-ing away and yanking her head into the counter. Down she went again, this time one of her many legs smacking into her bowl, sending it spinning across the countertop.

It bonked into the ingredient rack, and the jar of spoons above wobbled and tilted. One large spatula slid free, wedged itself between the rack and a sack of flour, and stuck out at a jaunty angle. The bowl kicked up another hitch of spin, and then vibrated against the rack— and the spoon slowly fell down onto the steadily rotating bowl’s rim. If I counted the revolutions right, at about $33 \frac{1}{3}$ rpm…

And then, quite clearly, as Deborah clamped a hand to the counter and dragged herself upright for a third time, there was the sound of a needle touching a record, followed by static.

The audience, which had been laughing at the basic slapstick, went silent. Deborah stopped struggling with the batter still stuck to her, and turned to stare at the spinning bowl. And then…

And then…

And then, her magnificently weird Food Luck showed it’s true nature.

The sound of music began to come from the spinning bowl; \textit{sweet music} began to play, strings and a harp joined by flutes and then a full orchestra.

Deborah took a step back and slipped. She spun in ever tightening circles, the momentum eventually making it easy to stand on her many legs as she tried to peel her hands away from her battery body. As the music’s tempo increased, so too did Deborah’s oddly graceful spins; as the music rose, so to did the number of slips and slides as Deborah’s many suckers were overcome by the insidious grip of
the butter on the floor.

The music crescendoed, and the batter stuck to her hands again- and she spun, and spun, and spun, the batter rising and falling, leaping out in long strings and then back to her, again again again. Beautiful and strange; and as the music finished, the batter poured from her upraised hands and into a completely different bowl.

At no point did she ever put it on the counter.

Deborah’s face was a picture of pure exasperation.

The music began again; a waltz, and now I recognize the music- that’s entirely the wrong order for that ballet! Deborah lowered her arms and stared at the singing bowl, then shook her head. She looked of a mind to stop the music or die trying- but when she tried to step forwards, one of her legs stuck in a puddle of batter. She pulled on her leg, and her whole body moved; her suckers left little scrape marks across the stage. Deborah turned and spun as the various patches of sticky, sticky dough directed how she could move.

The audience began to sway in time to the music and her improvised cooking-dance. Her sisters, who had started to cringe as soon as Deborah walked onstage, began to cheer her on; even as the tone of the music changed and various kitchen objects started to throw themselves at Deborah’s head, her sisters cheered her on.

Deborah skated backwards in circles on two of her left legs. Two of her right legs were attached by strings of batter to the stage; and as she came around again, Deborah tilted her body at a steep angle and pulled hard. She sailed through the air with a massive grin, spun in a complete circle a good four times, and then landed and slid onwards.

The audience cheered.

As the music quickened, Deborah set herself for the big finish.

She skated faster and faster, making her circles tighter and more elegant; she spun, switching from one side of her legs to the other, keeping the switches even as the tempo grew ever faster. Two legs; three legs; five legs; one as she hurdles a large stock pot and several knives. Deborah’s body raised and lowered as she spun in time with the music, here and there adding a flourish of fancy, slippery, footwork- er, legwork. Finally, the music came to it’s dramatic conclusion.

Deborah stood, braced with a large baking sheet, and orbs of batter pelted into where her face would have been. The batter was now covered in butter- don’t ask me how- and no longer sticking to any part of her. Then, in time with the last eight silent beats of the music, Deborah opened the oven, threw the pan inside, and shut the door.

Deborah set the timer, and took the moment of down time to put all her used dishes in the sink, pick up everything that threw itself at her, wipe down her legs, and put her boots back on. The timer chimed brightly; Deborah put on oven mitts, walked over, and took the pancake out.

After letting it rest a moment, she put it on a plate, set out a nice few pieces of flatware, and smiled.

“Done!” she said.
The audience cheered louder than ever; Deborah, flushed bright shrimp-pink, took a graceful bow. As the audience’s joyous roars died off, Sanji and I discussed matters.

“I sincerely doubt that Miss Vinsmoke knew how to make oven-baked pancakes, Honey,”

“Be that as it may, her performance was truly amazing. I, personally, am not sure how much more I can take, and we haven’t even finished the preliminaries yet,”

“Still… I am astonished and flabbergasted that she stumbled on an approximation of the proper method,”

“Seriously, Razz? That’s how you make them?”

“Oh yes- not all the dancing, and so on, but certainly the spinning. It’s the only way to really bring out the flavor; good, or bad, depending on how things go...”

“I’ll… take your word for it- although, we should probably take the taste tester’s word, because it looks like they’re coming round to see how it is...”

The taste tester is another grad student, this one in a significantly rattier… he looks, honestly, like he got his clothes after they were shot through a woodchipper and into a pile of glue, tar, feathers, sequins, and sellotape. He looks, in short, like a grad student in, perhaps, alchemical philosophy—those people wear whatever they can get onto their bodies. From the lost and found, no less- and at an alchemical guild, that’s whatever no one else wants. Alchemists melt their clothing off almost at the same rate they turn gold into much less gold.

He slices a piece of pancake, sniffs it, flinches, and sticks it in his mouth. He starts chewing, and… he’s chewing… and still chewing- I think he’s actually just trying to open his mouth to spit out the pancake, but it’s too sticky.

“And we’ve lost another one,”

“Correct you are, Honey. Now to see the scores- four, three, four, five, and three. Not bad overall-nineteen, and with a good time score, Miss Vinsmoke may be moving on to the first round,”

“Mm. Oho- and here comes the next one...”

And, finally, there was Mince Coffyn. What I didn’t realize until about two seconds after his round? Mince Coffyn is about as fast as I was when I was his age- which is fourteen. In simpler terms, at fourteen, I was as fast as Zoro is right now when he strikes with all his might.

As Mince Coffyn, regional champion- ah, there’s another thing I didn’t know! For the purposes of this contest, the World is divided into about twelve distinct regions- one for each Blue (four), one for
each Calm Belt (four), one for each half of the Line (two), and I didn’t know that the Red Line (one) and the Sky (one) counted as their own regions too. The World’s Worst Bakers contest doesn’t actually run through the entire world but once every three years or so; in between the Grand Tourneys, as they’re called, there are smaller contests called Regionals.

Mince Coffyn has been the Regional Champion of Paradise since he was about six years old, which is when he was old enough to enter the contest.

Anyway- when Mince Coffyn took the stage, a full three quarters of the audience- and most of the taste testers- roared with approval.

I could see on Mince’s face a sort of breath-taking self confidence. His competition didn’t matter; his audience didn’t matter; his parent’s murder didn’t matter. All that mattered was him, the stage, and the show he was about to give.

Mince came to a halt in the middle of the kitchen arena, adjusted his bandana, and smiled cheerily at the judges. He flicked his hair, once, for dramatic effect and the audience roared with approval; and then his face settled into an expression of pure determination.

“Looks like someone’s ready to go, Razz,”

“He doesn’t act like it most of the time, but Mister Coffyn is actually extremely competitive, and very very good at what he chooses to compete in, Honey,”

I hummed.

“Mince Coffyn, what will you bake for us today?”

“Raspberry Caves,”

As Mince answered, his whole body lowered into a crouch. His hair bristled, and his tendrils curled completely under his bandana. Pure speed- like calls to like. This should be interesting.

“Mister Coffyn, are you ready?”

“Always,”

“Begin!”

Mince Coffyn leapt into action. The stage was a blur of green as he dashed around it faster than most eyes could follow. Dough splattered and crackled across the stage and sugar across the countertop, which promptly caramelized in a screaming rush of flame. A reddish filling flew into the air and fell
back down; as it splattered into the caramelized sugar, the cackling of teenage boys echoed out.

The stage tilted to one side, then the other.

Suddenly, Mince was above the stage, doing a full handstand on his oven. Then he wobbled, tilted, and crashed down into the oven. The rest of the stage collapsed in a cloud of smoke, flour, sugar, and splatters of red sauce.

The oven let out something very like a tortured scream, and Mince lunged to his feet. He grabbed a pair of oven mitts, and as the oven’s scream leaped up into the tortured agony range, it spat out a sheet of cookies. Mince leapt up, caught the hot tray of cookies, and crashed back into the wreckage of the stage.

“Finished! Auuuugh,”

Mince woozily got to his feet again, tray of cookies in one hand and blood oozing from a cut in his eyebrow. He wobbled to the judges, sliding and staggering across the rubble, pausing only to fish out an unbroken plate. He put a cookie on the plate, flung the cookie sheet into the broken oven- which promptly exploded- and collapsed into full unconsciousness.

The audience roared its approval.

As medics picked their way across to rubble to the collapsed Mince Coffyn, Sanji and I discussed what we’d seen- well, in his case, hadn’t seen.

“Merde! He went so fast I couldn’t even tell what he was doing!”

“I could,”

“...Well, Honey, don’t leave me in suspense. Give me the play by play,”

“Hm? Alright- in the sixteen visible seconds of Mince Coffyn’s round in the preliminary of the WWBC- ah, yes, judges, his official time was…?”

The judge holding the stop-watch looks at it, looks at me, and nods, pale and shaking.

I nod back; I thought so.

“Quite; sixteen seconds!”

“Honey, that’s a new record! The old one’s been shattered into teeny tiny itty bitty pieces; it’ll take someone with a lot of time and patience-”
“-and the proper adhesive-”

“-to put it back together again. Sixteen seconds; mon dieu. But- Honey, tell me! What exactly did Mince Coffyn do?!?”

“Saa, I’m glad you asked. In Mince Coffyn’s sixteen seconds of baking, these things happened in this order:

“Mince Coffyn leaped into the air. His limbs blurred, but curiously, his head was perfectly still, particularly his bandana. He turned on the sink, stopping the bottom, before ricocheting off the stage floor towards the counter. He flipped a bowl into the air and caught it on his elbow. Ingredients flew through the air as he grabbed onto them one by one and tossed them towards the bowl. His body and elbow moved quickly, catching each falling ingredient in the bowl, causing them to stack up- but not to mix. Mince then leapt into the air and tossed the bowl onto the countertop. The bowl landed and spun, dropping the ingredients onto the countertop around it. At that point, Mince Coffyn smiled; it seems he was confident in the way things were going.

“Mince quickly combined the ingredients into the bowl; he took a spoon and stuck it out in front of himself. Then, he flipped into the air and spun himself rapidly, mostly with abdominal strength. Electric mixers could only dream of spinning that fast; and that’s how the dough splattered everywhere on the stage. Soon, the spoon caught fire; Mince flung the flaming spoon into the sink, turning off the sink as he did so. The spoon landed in the pooled water with a fssh of doused flame.

“Mince smacked a hand to the counter and shoved himself back towards the rest of his ingredients, leaving his dough to rest. As he rushed over the counter, upside down, he set out another bowl on the countertop. He opened a jar of what appeared to be raspberry jam and flipped it through the air and towards the bowl. The contents of the jar went into the bowl; the jar itself ended up in the sink, with a small assist from Mince’s tendrils. Mince then switched hands on the counter and prepared to arrest his motion; his freed hand reached out and grabbed a bag of powdered sugar. As his motion reversed, he dumped the bag of powdered sugar over the counter, quite a lot of it ending up in the alleged raspberry jam.

“The spoon that landed in the sink had become little more than a slimey husk; as Mince glanced into the sink, he winced. So much for reusing his tool. Instead, he turned his sideways motion into a backflip-ricochet, grabbed a spatula, and leapt back towards the bowl of filling. Beneath his feet, the stage began to crackle with fatigue.

“Once Mince was done stirring the filling, he scraped the spatula on the side of the bowl to try and clean it a little. He then threw the spatula into the sink with a musical crash,”

“Holy shit, Honey,”

“Ain’t nobody can catch these eyes a-creepin’, Razz. -Mince then paused, and took in the rapidly deteriorating condition of the stage, which at this point was heavily dusted with powdered sugar and crumbling bits of dough. Mince grinned, and began to move again.

“Mince grabbed a pinch of dough and smacked it into the baking sheet. He repeated this fifteen more times, pressing his thumb into the center of each ball of dough. He then reached for the bowl of jam, and it slipped out of his buttery fingers. He reached again, and the bowl began to spin on the counter as it slipped out of his fingers again. He reached with both hands, but to no avail- the bowl began to spin faster. Mince got frustrated, and was soon using his forearms, thankfully unbuttered, to grab the spinning bowl. This worked- he was able to grasp the bowl with his forearms. Unfortunately, he neglected to account for the inertia of the jam in the bowl, and it all went flying.
“Mince yelped, darted back then forwards, and grabbed his tray of pressed cookies. He positioned the tray under the falling filling. Raspberry jam fell like rain. Some of the filling landed directly on his tendrils, making him shudder from either the sensation or the flavor. He flicked his hair, sending some of the filling flying, and nearly slipped on the filling that landed on the floor. He then leapt backwards and lunged towards the oven, the stage floor shattering underneath his feet.

“In his dash towards the oven, one of the bolts holding the stage together vaporized under the strain. The stage tilted, first away from the area of largest damage- the assembly area- and then, as that area broke apart, away from the area of largest weight- the oven area, where Mince, the cookies, and the oven were. Mince bounded up the tilting stage, hair streaming behind him and skin blanching from the effects of the filling, before he managed to get to the oven.

“Another bolt vaporized, and the entire stage began to break apart; a chasm opened between Mince and the oven. He leapt and was able to grab hold of the oven, flipping up onto the oven-top and slid the door open. The tray was moved and flipped as Mince lowered his hand and tried to figure out how to place it in the oven from that angle without spilling or burning himself.

“The stage came together for one last gasp.

“Mince flipped up onto both hands as he stuck the cookies into the oven, set the timer, and placed both hands flat on the oven-top. He held perfectly still in a handstand for a good half second- which was just long enough for his sick stunt to very nearly rebalance the entire stage. Unfortunately, the filling on his tendrils had done it’s work too well, and he wobbled, sending the whole unstable card-castle crashing down.

“We all saw the rest- and there’s the taste tester!”

The taste tester is actually one of the TA’s for the Alchemist Guild. Gender? Indiscriminate. Age? Unknown.

“Well, I trust your eyes to see what happens- if that’s what happened, then that’s what happened. I must say, I’m equal parts amazed and confused that Mister Coffyn was able to do all of that in sixteen seconds, Honey,”

“Well, Razz, it’s really just a matter of proper nutrition and practice; I could do something very similar at his age, although it involved folding clothing, not baking cookies...”

“That surprises me, but shouldn’t. Zut! With the cookies done, it’s time for the taste test!”

“Quite!”

The taste tester slowly made their way over to the insensate Mince Coffyn. Mince was being checked over by a very focused Chopper, who was not seeing all the appreciative looks being thrown his way from the female medics he’d lunged in front of.

The taste tester lifted one of the cookies and bit into it. Their eyes opened wide, and they began to scream. They then lunged for the rubble and began to dig through it in an terrific frenzy, until at last they found the remains of a carton of milk. Without fanfare or explanation, they poured what
remained into their mouth, fell over onto their back, and coughed once. A plume of smoke, pungent and chanting in a sibilant unintelligible accent, rose from their mouth and dissipated with a sound not unlike being laughed at by a laying hen.

“Inedible! But- Honey, what happened?”

“I thought so- I was suspicious of the raspberry jam from the start. It’s just a bit too early in the season for that berry, and more importantly for this case, the jam was entirely the wrong color. That wasn’t raspberry jam- that was pepper chutney!”

“Quoi?!?”

“Cínte! It was a Pumpkin Hill specialty, that sacred fire-sauce PeppOW Chutney! The nuns who make it practice Asura style kung fu, making them angry and extra dangerous by equal measure; and it’s said that all the powers of naughtiness and ferocity make each drop of that cruel sauce the hottest hot-sauce drop there ever was. That stuff’s made from near one hundred percent Assburn Hellpepper, which is normally used in Sea King repellent,”

“Holy fucking shit,”

“Mn. I tried it once; it tastes like regret and fear. Saa, the judges are scoring- five, four, four, five, and four! Twenty two, and a five in speed, I guarantee it- making that a total of twenty seven!”

“Mince Coffyn is moving on for sure- any word about if he’s permanently injured?”

“Considering he got basically Sea King repellent on his very sensitive tendrils, I’ll be very surprised if he wakes up within the next three days,”

One of the judges waved for silence.

“Thank you. I will now give the names of the top three competitors that will be moving on to the next round. In third place, with a combined score of twenty-five points, Miss Deborah Vinsmoke! In second place, with twenty-six points, Mister Osvaldo Bartok! And in first place, with a combined score of twenty-seven, Mince Coffyn! Let’s hear it for our competitors!”

The audience cheered in approval; the three winners of this round of competition bowed- er, well, Mince rallied long enough to flop upright and fire off a salute before immediately collapsing again, much to Chopper’s aggravation. Deborah, blushing bright red, bowed carefully. Oz took an elegant bow, before immediately wobbling as he sneezed flour out of his nose.

The judges and competitors left the broken remains of the stage, some of them on stretchers- Chopper just carried Mince, as he wasn’t actually injured, per say- and a cleanup crew of student Alchemists led by at least one full Alchemist each began working on safely bagging, tagging, and clearing away the ruin left behind. Some of the things created this day will be objects of further study, I know it…

“Well, Honey, that’s the preliminary round of the World’s Worst Baker’s Contest. I must say, I’ve
had a marvelous time, and sincerely look forwards to the next round of thrills, chills, and wonderments,"

“Mm. I’d be delighted to accompany you to the next round, Razz… although, I don’t know where that is…?”

“Ah! It says here on the program that the next round is in six months time, in Dressrosa,”

“I assume to let the competitors recover from their wounds, as well as familiarize themselves with whichever recipes are standard for the competition,”

“Indeed, Honey. It’s always a surprise, too- not only what the contest organizers choose to give each competitor, but how those competitors will Bake their Bads,”

“I do enjoy a good surprise, Razz!”

“As do we all, Honey; as do we all,”

I said that, and immediately regretted it, because Captain got his Accountant and his Mail Officer and, uh. The Accountant wasn’t so bad- one mid-ranking junior banker, and his two assistants; one is his Computer- she’s fairly pleasant, actually-, the other is his Archivist- she works part time at a sweets shop, which pleased Sanji quite a bit, he’s been wanting more kitchen crew- and, as the archivist has a younger sister who is in her care, one tag-along. Fine, no problem. That’s four people- woo.

The Mail Officer was a squad leader for the Local Territory- meaning, they were in charge of basically the entire city’s mail? The city of about fifty-thousand people, I mean.

So there’s them, their support staff, their flyers, and their sorters. Oh, and their mascot.

That’s twenty-six people and a large emerald tree boa named Winston.

Captain took the entire Post Office because he wanted their Most Senior Post Officer on his crew, and the rest of the Office followed their Pointe.

And we had to leave the day after the contest, which was the day Luffy gave the Post Office group to decide their fate. You ever try to load enough supplies before going to a contest for possibly sixty or so people, without knowing if your going to have sixty or so people? Because I have. It fucking sucks.

Gods dammit Luffy.
“Mab, seriously, calm your tits-”

“Captain, my tits have never been calmer or more at peace. The left one is named Sitthartha Buddha and the right one is Vardhamana Mahavira and together, at this moment, they are lactating a veritable font of peace and understanding. It’s the rest of me that’s pissed- not because of any fault with our newly expanded crew, no, but because we could have delayed a little longer and given the new crewmates some safer practice in the actual business of sailing. This is unacceptable,”

I am glaring at my Captain over the sail in my hands. I am carefully feeling the structural integrity of the sail, which will determine if I patch, or salvage for other use.

Pressed up against the wall, with varying degrees of injury, are crewmates of mine- some new, some not. They are being attended by our new, erm, “Nurse”, Sawbones.

**Nurse Bones “Sawbones” M’coy** has mauve hair and milk-pale skin- from a lack of healthful sunshine, not actual paleness. Although it might be anemia… She’s sleepy eyed, and wears a pair of real dragonfly wings tucked into her hair as decoration. Plum skirt, white shirt, boots, and a ghost dogfish named Callie. Dark makeup and a necklace of bottle caps; and at her side, in its own carrying belt, a large jar full of squirming, writhing leeches.

(Callie the Ghostfish gets along great with Buttercream, Bubbler, and Pearblossom, which is a good thing. No dog left behind.)

She has been putting leeches on people’s injuries- no one can quite stop her, her movements are too erratic and her hands are too quick. Even Nami got a leech, which… okay, yes, giving blood forces the body to make new blood, which is easier on all the plumbing, but… I have a specially bred leech on my left shoulder. Why?

Well.

Nurse Sawbones believes, very firmly, in the healthful applications of a good leech. I know this because she hasn’t stopped talking about their healthful qualities and adorable features at all as she’s been applying them to the various bruises and some few breaks most of us have. Even Luffy has a leech suckling on the bridge of his nose, because Nami caught him with a straight jab and broke it but good.

Chopper taped it up; and then Nurse Sawbones got him with a leech.

“But- but Mab, it all worked out fine! We got out of harbor,”

“I tell you what, there’s nothing better and more wholesome than a good hungry leech for sickness-”

“Three of our new crewmates don’t know anything about sailing, Captain-”

“-these lil’ fellas are the closest thing to a cure-all you’ll ever find, y’know-”
“-our new Nurses believe in leeches and crystal healing and walking it off-”

“-small, easy to care for, and they don’t ask for nothing but love and a clean bit of water to swim in, y’see?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch an increasingly horrified Chopper and Genny and a deeply resigned Jun Kwan, as Sawbones sticks her hand fully into the roiling jar of slimy blackness at her hip. She pulls her hand out and starts pulling off leeches, holding them to the worst of the bruises on Zoro. The leeches attach.

Zoro, with an expression of deeply stoic resignation, sticks his bruised arm out for better access.

“Why, I use them every day and the last time I was even slightly ill was six years ago, and that’s a fact!”

“How are you not passing out from blood loss?”

“Y’know, lots’a people ask me that, Doctor Chopper, and I’ll tell ya- I dunno. I mean, I always thought it was silly, passing out from blood-loss due to leeches, but… I think that only happens with wild leeches, not my medical sweeties. I do know my bad cholesterol went down, and my blood-pressure’s never been better-”

“Really? Did you keep notes about your use of leeches, or…?”

“A’course I did, Doc! Proper documentation’s half the point of science!”

I carefully turn and stare at the disgusting display, ignoring the leech on Luffy’s face. It’s a good thing I haven’t had lunch yet, my stomach has nothing to lose. I’m even remembering to keep my eyes on Luffy’s, so I don’t have to watch the one on his face inflate.

“Okay, so the leech thing is weird-”

“No, really?”

“But your bruise is already smaller, Mab!”

“Mhm. Yep. Tiffany?”

“Yeah?”

“Alright?”

“Uuh- I’m running low on water, and the rope is starting to fray, but otherwise I’m good,”

“Great- Precious! Daily! Take rope and relieve Tiffany, so she can reaquate her broom,”

“On it!”
Theophania Strideways, Tiffany for short, is stunningly beautiful. The shape of her face, the ratio of her eyes to her nose to her mouth, and where they’re situated on her face—she’s stunning. I can also tell from her hands and neck that about the only places left on her skin that aren’t visibly tattooed are possibly her face, and her breasts. Pretty much everything else is covered in some pretty fresh art, I have to say. Considering it’s winter, and she’s a Post Officer, her outfits are a number of thick sweaters, jeans in various colors other than blue—mostly brown and black—and a thick, comfortable looking beanie.

She rides an artisanal broom I’m fairly certain she made herself; it’s got enough crystals and such strapped on, it’d have to be. Her broom has a thick braid of grass on either side, signifying it’s heavy-lifting capabilities. This is good, because today’s fracas broke the upright rigging of our foremast, which also fucked up the running rigging of our lateen sail.

Things got a little hairy for a second; thankfully, Bryony grabbed the mast with her lasso. This meant that, even though the upright rigging of our mast was gone, the mast itself was not unsupported. It did, however, shred the sails.

After quite a bit of shouting, Taffy got the ship to full stop, and we immediately began working on repairs. I’m in charge of getting the old sail off, the new sail on, and making sure the standing rigging is redone properly because, somehow, I’m one of the only people on our crew that’s ever, ever, done it properly.

I immediately put our flyers to work, each with lines, and their jobs were to quickly and carefully use their ropes to support the mast itself, and to lower the sails down on their spars so I can repair, or in this case, replace it.

“Sail’s no good; we need to replace it. Beatrix!”

“Boss!”

“Go get the spare foresails— all three of them!”

“Right!”

And Beatrix runs off.

As Jun “Precious” Takara-Goldstein and Dolores “Daily” Davenport Mackentry the Fourth kick off into the air, I ruminate on what’s going to have to happen next.

Jun “Precious” Takara-Goldstein is Tiffany’s best friend, occasional lover, and SiC from the Post Office. He has hair like blue flames and ashes, a green-sprouted broom, a teakettle full of sprout-like spell fetishes, a thick blue scarf with black shorts and a grey crop-top. He’s not quite dressed for the weather, but considering his hair occasionally moves like fire, I’d bet good money that he’s not
worried about the cold.

He brought almost nothing with him—none of the Postal Workers did, really. I imagine it’s part of their doctrine—bring what you need, and nothing more—but… I have more than enough space to give them all full wardrobes, and Franky really did overbuild our ship. There are at least a hundred empty lockers that I know of in the dorms, hidden for now because they were not needed—there is a full hall in the bowels of our ship, ready to be partitioned and appointed. I don’t quite have enough bedding to furnish everything and also have changes for laundry duty—but I’m working on it. It’ll be ready by next laundry day.

Greensprout brooms are best at acceleration, though Precious’ lifting capacity is no small matter either; as he flies up, the coiled rope where his pot of spells would normally be, I can see all the muscles in his legs and back straining, keeping his broom from bolting off without him. Then, I can see the reason he’s second in command, or was—he and Tiffany move like two parts of the same whole thing. And, as Tiffany drops down to attend her broom, Precious accounts for Daily’s quirks; as expected, of Tiffany’s right hand.

**Dolores “Daily” Davenport Mackentry the Fourth** is about as far as you could get from the rest of us without actually becoming someone like me, and thus looping back around. Highly educated, driven, already achieved her goal, whatever it may be… She’s low nobility, a family that either lost all their money within the past three generations, or never had much to begin with—noble titles, and maybe a line that keeps producing heroes, or someone married well and the dividends kept dividing. She’s almost completely improperly dressed for sailing, or flying—I say almost because there are a lovely pair of shorts beneath her frilly skirt, which is something at least.

Her hair is long and brown and elegantly curled, and she wears a pale pink hat with silk flowers on the brim. Purple riding gloves, a sky blue flying dress, brown leather boots with three buckles up her calves, royal blue spell-belt with various spells and fetishes attached, a teal crossbody bag, metal bird earrings and a metal amulet shaped like a fish necklace. Her outfit is either carefully calculated, or she has a natural eye—no item is of particularly high or low quality save her boots, which are almost definitely heirlooms. It’s fairly simple to change the buckles on a boot, that it may keep up with current fashions; silk flowers can be changed out, because her hat is of finer make too. Her voice is… she has the same accent as I do, but not like she learned it at pain of a switch to the knuckles; she has her accent by virtue of it being the accent of her entire family.

Her broom is actually just like Genny’s was before she crashed it to splinters—one of the very nice Cloudskipper models, meant for relaxing flights and graceful landings. Take some of the safeties off, and you’ll soon realize there’s a jetstream bean in that broom, which is more than enough to handle the job at hand—that is, supporting the foremost until the rigging is reapplied.

I cannot use my wings to do this, I use too much air; I’ll… hm.

“Fern!”

“Yes!”

“You still wanna see what a mage enchanting an object is like?”

“Yes!”
“C’mere then- you’ll need your full attention,”

“Right away!”

And here she comes, neatly avoiding Mack (Nautilus “Mack” Mackery, Archivist; one of the ones who admitted to knowing blast-and-all about sailing, and has been assisting in the kitchen as a drudge and gofer since we set sail, bless him. Massive pink and red plaid scarf; blue long sleeve shirt; thick black hair in no real style; dishallible plum purple suit of crushed velvet that’s meant for either a shorter or younger man, because it fits his shoulders and not his legs and he’s got the look of a man about to hit a serious growth-spurt; spectator shoes and blue-black socks and freckles on his red brown skin like literal specks of gold,) who is carrying a large tray of blood-strengthening food to the Leeched individuals. Mack’s actually taking to sailing much better than the rest, and seems to derive a great deal of pleasure just watching the various antics of our crew.

Fern dances around Bang (Shirako “Bang” Bhangbhangdhuc, Mack’s assistant Archivist; he’s been taking inventory of the Library so we can actually organize and shelve the damn thing, it’s starting to be a real mess. Thick flannel scarf of such age and staining it’s turned entirely brown, and no scrap or speck of the original color remains; a massive backpack filled with… you know, no one will actually say? Except he only put it down once he was assured that no one would ever go through his locker unless he physically died… white safety boots, sheer grey tights, black pencil skirt, a brown bomber jacket over a red star tee; his hair is cropped very short, and his hat could be mistaken for a fedora because there’s a persistent and very deep crease in the crown. Also, there are enamel pins I know for a fact are from musical concerts- that’s Stabby Crabu, Jonah and the Magpies: Dead Fish Live; some of them are on his hat, and some of them are on his bag… Yumigami Unbound, Tres Fleur, The Bleed… and even more that I don’t know, but he’s made a fast friend of Bryony, so I won’t worry about it,) who is helping Mono and Jun hold down Zelda, who does not want any leeches, thank you.

Yulila “Mono” Dextro, Potioneer; he makes most of the active spells the various Postal Witches on our crew carry. Missing an eye, but the other one from Zoro- also, he’s fairly clumsy, and keeps the majority of his spell fetishes on his hat. I think because it’s easier to keep them there, rather than somewhere he could easily bleed on?

Red sneakers and grey socks; long legs covered over in sticky plasters of many colors; blue denim shorts folded over short-short; a black and white raglan but in the opposite orientation one would expect, a note of humor on a fairly dour man; a thick red cloak with a fine collar and deep pockets full of dried herb fetishes.

He has silver hair and sharp eyes, and one of the sternest resting murderfaces I’ve ever seen; and so far I’ve only seen him wearing the one eye-patch, though he might like more...

Jun Kunwan, Medic; very calm, very gentle, basically an Auxiliary because he has next to no actual medical training- he can follow directions, but that’s about it. Much better at distilling, frankly, which makes nearly no sense, but there we are. Also, he’s significantly stronger than he looks.

Black and white spectator shoes, black silk socks, high-waisted woolen trousers and a brown belt; red turtleneck jumper under a grey chiffon cardigan of loose fit and thigh length. Blue denim backpack with floral pattern and leather seams and straps; half-worn out rabbit plush, no judgement;
an amulet of dangling crystals around his neck. Pink mimosa flowers woven into a pair of hair combs, stuck in on both sides of his head; round lens glasses on an oval face, thick browed and soft eyed, coral pink lips under a snubbed nose set wide.

That face is currently set in a fearsome grimace, because Zelda is strong as three men.

**Zelda Habar**; Mono’s assistant. You know how sometimes you make a friend and you have no idea how, or even why you’re still friends because you’ve got nothing in common and next to no mutual interests? Yeah, I have the distinct feeling that Zelda’s hiring was due to some mix-up in adverts, probably Mono’s ad ending up next to a “we’re hiring” ad for a bakery or a toy store.

She’s basically every maid-fantasy involving a Mink come to life. Glasses. Long, soft hair. Short skirts. Dainty feet. Giant bear paws. No? Might just be me.

Grey mary-jane shoes, pink striped socks, and kiss-pink pumpkin pants under a petal pink overall dress; thick grey turtleneck with straps gently clinging between her paw pads. Black eyes, pink flush on her raging cheeks, cute little ears that are pinned fully back to her skull and a pink cloche hat with a honey-yellow lining is on the deck. As Nurse Sawbones approaches with a bounty of leeches, Zelda’s very upset flailings become hysterical strength, and all three men are flung from her body.

She then bolts, Nurse Sawbones in hot pursuit. Bang, Mono, and Jun lay groaning where Zelda flung them.

Oh, Fern’s here.

“So, Fern; this is a basic rite that every branch of the magic-user’s tree figures out eventually. Witches trend towards wands; Wizards to staffs; Mages to whatever works for them. You’re following my path more closely than you think; I was fifteen before I got formal instruction in magic of any kind,”

“Ah! So I’m not super duper behind, then?”

“Nah; you’re doing great on the mathemagic primers, and as I understand you’ve started reading the Nine Primagicals?”

“Yeah; I can’t make heads or tails of the Illusion one, though,”

“I’m not surprised; every mage has to give up one of the schools to specialize in any of the others, and you’ve specialized in Divination for years now. You’ve seen me pull stuff out of my bag—”

“-things that absolutely couldn’t have fit normally? Yeah, I know it’s not technically magic, it doesn’t feel right—”

“-Yeah, that’s my Devil F-ruit? I think you’d say it?”

“Yeah,”

“Yeah; My magic, on the other wing, feels like this,”
And I breathe in and pulse my magic for a moment.

Fern stands bolt upright and is immediately much more alert and interested in what’s about to happen. Beatrix, who has returned with the sails in a careful stack, nearly drops them when she stops next to her sister. Above, the hovering Precious and Daily bobble on their brooms; Tiffany, filling her broom’s bottle from the hose, yelps in shock.

Bang, Jun, and Mono all sit bolt upright and stare at me; Nurse Sawbones, who has subdued Zelda and is carefully applying leeches to her horribly bruised back, shudders. Zelda, crying underneath her, pauses and stares my way- the shock of my power overcoming her instinctual horror.

Ailbe, Bura, Lucille, the Flight crew, and the Sorting crew all gather around, joining Beatrix and Fern who have decided to sit at my feet. And Captain, being Captain, is right there with them, eyes gleaming with excitement.

I blink placidly, and allow my power to settle down again; closer to the surface but softer, not so insistent.

**Ailbe** (pronounced Alvah) Tonn, Basecommand; she coordinates Flyers with Sorters, and ensures that everyone off-base is in tune with everyone on base. She’s also a fifth-dan practitioner of Fishman Karate, as evidenced by her billowing water-cloak.

Terracotta brown skin, brown ankle boots, white chiffon skirt with narrow pleats ironed in; soft red blouse in thick weight silk; and that billowing chiffon, called water-silk, draped on her like a cloak of living water. Curly blue hair, with white spray at the ends; square-curve glasses and in her hands, a steaming cup of… coffee? Adelaide is either in love with her or wants to be her; one of the two.

**Bura Kada Bura**, Basecom Assistant; if Ailbe is the Heavy, Bura is the Face. And really, at the end of the day, every method of communication relies on crystals resonating with each other; having a crystal witch at hand is probably a good plan.

Blonde hair dipped in blue to ombre; striped modernist swimsuit with a skirt so that in the air it could be a slippery dress; black strappy sandals like Nami used to wear; and a number of crystalline bracelets with various spells dug into their crystals. She’s a fishwoman- I think- but she can just about pass for lanjin, aside from her outright ignoring the temperature. We’re nearly outside the interdiction weather zone imposed by the island, and the temperature has gone from slightly frosty spring to the icicle teeth of deep winter. I’ve been getting all of our scarves, touks, arm-warmer, leg-warmer, socks, coats, jackets, and other warming apparel ready for when things go to sub-freezing. Bura has been dodging my attempts to get her measurements, I think because she thinks she can handle cold air. The thing is, she sleeps in the aquarium, with the horses; and she cannot handle the transition from the warm aquarium to the cold air, not as it gets colder.

**Lucille Starbrite**, PR Assistant; sweet kid, slightly more sensible at the expense of her fashionability. Soft blue boots, pink and black striped socks, soft blue smock dress under a high-cut kirtle of fluttering lavender; a teal surcoat with split tails and elbow-length sleeves, mandarin collar, and Long-Arm style toggle buttons in alternating hearts and stars. A thin blue belt holds it all close to her
skin; thinner blue bangles adorn her wrists; big round glasses on a happy face, thick wavy brown hair braided back and tied with a blue ribbon at the end; and a lavender-blue hat with a jaunty brim and a curling crown.

Honestly, I think it’s just looking at Lucille next to Daily that makes her seem less fashionable—her fashionability is a matter of style, not actual fashion. Their styles are very different; Daily’s a fluffruffle, and Lucille’s a chajo. I will say though, that the heart-shaped amulet at the end of her hat is quite fetching; really ties her whole outfit together.

Hm. Wasn’t expecting quite that reaction, but… Welp.

“Magic is a funny thing, Beatrix, Fern; some people just say it’s haki and leave it at that. Those people aren’t mages; they might be witches or wizards exasperated by questioning, but they definitely aren’t mages. What a mage does is... Science is a way of talking about the universe in words that bind it to a common reality. Magic is a method of talking to the universe in words that it cannot ignore. The two are rarely compatible; mathemagic, the study of the mage, gets around the problem by being both the description and the thing being described at the same time. Thus, at the core, the mage both writes and abides by the Laws of the World,”

“Laws...?”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve discovered by now- Magic isn’t just magic; it’s a thing with rules to it, like anything else. You can’t throw a punch with your thumb inside your fingers; you can’t put a heat spell on a goblet that’s full of a liquid; death cannot be undone; food cannot be uneaten, and so on,”

“Ah,”

“...”

“...Heavy things do not float easily, and if they do, it means something else just got all the weight applied to it,”

“Mm. Collapse any buildings?”

“Once,”

“Mhm. Mine was explosions- they go out, not in; that poor woodshed never was quite the same… Anyway. I haven’t had a particular fetish set since my school days, simply because when I mastered spear fighting, I discovered it made a good enough focus for my purposes. However, since more than half of us are heavily injured, sick, and in various ways, incompetent at sailing, I have need of a much finer focus. Not the finest I can use- that’d be overkill in this case,”

“...What’s the finest you can use?”

“A lace fan, but that’s really for flesh-shaping, not for what I’m about to do here. Observe,”

And then, with a flick of my hand and a Shadow Pulse, the things I need appear; a telescopic stem of adam-wood, thin wooden spokes, heavy-wear double waxed thread, thread-fine wire in adamant-gold and verdant-copper; a strange silver ring, and a pretty piece of lace. Maybe a loop for easy
carrying? No, that looks bad— but then again, I do have the space… One small loop of leather, neatly knotted. Then, another loop of leather, white with a snap keeping them together… The basic bitch ward kit I put together at the Daiso, brown bottles for spells, a star prism… and that should do it.

“Girls. You’re not to do this without proving, to me, that you can do the equations required— or without the supervision of one of our senior witch or wizard crewmates. This isn’t dangerous to you, per say— about the worst that can happen to you is a stonking headache and a distinctive lack of components— but it can be very, very explosive. What’s my rule about explosions?”

“How on the ship unless we’re sparring!”

“Damn right. This spell can be found in the last chapter of the Universum Primagical; and though most people would start there, I found it’s best to start and finish with the Universum. Some insights only appear after a well of knowledge has been dug. -Oh, should I copy them, do you think?”

“…Uh. Dunno, Boss; I haven’t had any trouble so far, but I’m mostly reading geometry texts right now…”

“We’ve got rather a lot more witches and wizards and mages on the crew, now, and I’d rather nip fights in the bud, Stitchkid. What say you, Fern?”

“…Do the Universum first; then, do the others at need, don’t just do all of them. Some of the Primagicals will be very dangerous in the wrong hands, and it’s easy to misplace a book,”

“Alright. This is the spell circle I will be using— if you are within it, please remove yourself before I lay out the salt. Thank you~”

I said this as I used my Shadow to mark out the spell circle. The Girls darted out of the circle, and the other magicians carefully shuffled away; I waited until they were well clear.

Then I sighed.

“Luffy, I know you’re excited, but you can’t be in the circle while I do this, it won’t work,”

“But you hardly ever do your Mystery Thing!”

“I know,”

“…fine…”

“Thank you~”

I carefully turn in a circle as Luffy walked away, because checking is a safety precaution, and then— it’s time. Sugar-salt down; take a stance; pulse.

Deep breath in.
Incantus time.

-Every magic user has an incantus. Think of it like a trigger or a catchphrase that makes magic… not easier to use, but if it were thread, the thread would be less grabby when you’re trying to put it through the eye of the needle, if that makes sense. It makes it easier to thread your magic through the needle’s eye of a spell, I mean to say. Or really, I mean to say: it’s a focusing technique… and it’s a magical thing too, in and of itself.

Incanti get passed down from teacher to student, so you’ll get things like Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo and Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. However, if you don’t specialize your magical school, you have to make one up. Like I did. And if you have to make one up… let’s just say that chanting in tongues is more common than most people think.

“Abracafuckyou alakashit,”

…I never said my Incantus was particularly, um, politically correct. The loud squawk of outrage from Daily and the bark of laughter from Precious make me think that I’m… probably not going to be able to pass my Incantus on to anyone except my student. Ah well.

At least I have an umbrella now. Might be a parasol- but no, it’d be a parasol if I’d made a lace fan, it’s an umbrella. Sturdy, frilly, three whole sizes to it just like I wanted- and more than enough to be getting on with things.

“Alakashit!”

The ship shivers as ropes untangle themselves; the foresails that Beatrix brought leap for their spars, and are soon raised up high; the standing rigging for the mast lashes itself properly, loop after loop of rope tightening properly in rings of brass.

I, having snapped my umbrella open during the working of my magic, give the entire thing a jaunty spin. Then I close it, spinning it around my wrist before tossing it’s massive length up- and catching the pocket version, which will fit easily alongside or even in most cross-body purses. Nice.

“So COOL!” scream Luffy, Fern, Beatrix, the Flyers, and the Sorters- and Neo’s little sister? Damn, when did she get here…?

Neopolitan’s little sister, Bastani Havij, is about… twelve or so, I’d say. Pink winter boots, crisp white jeans with stars on the knee and a high tight waist; yellow pastel striped sleeveless shirt and a pink letterman jacket. Star earrings, pigtails up high, and skin just a little paler than her sister’s. She’s a good kid, but also… not sheltered, exactly. She’s an oddball, certainly- not super athletic, but not driven towards any one thing, either. And her hands have marks of someone who makes things- I’m
not sure what, yet, but I know she makes something. She had a large trunk with “FRAGILE” and “THIS WAY UP” stickers all over it, and it clinked a little when she put it in the hold.

Hmm.

Well, anyway; Bastani “Neopolitan” Sonnati… I actually ended up asking her about her nickname. Apparently, she’s from an old ice cream making family, and everyone in her family is named after some kind of ice-cream treat- her little sister’s name is a kind of ice-cream float. She gave herself the nickname of Neopolitan, or Neo for short, when she got asked if she had one at a fantasy-adventure summer camp.

Apparently, she’d been teased for her vitiligo patches by some bullies in school, and decided to head it off at the start at her camp- and then a lot of the kids she went to camp with ended up in her new school, in her class even, and the nickname stuck. Neo’s a smart woman.

As for what she looks like; she’s a little more intense than her sister, more vibrant; they obviously have the same taste in pastels, but Neo’s skin is darker, and her hair is almost indefinably paler. She has a large white spot on her left eye, with some smaller blotches circling the biggun; red stained lips and coral pink half-moon glasses. Er, spectacles. Shaggy heian-style bangs up front and a long fall down the back- like, absurdly long, mostly because she never remembers to get it cut. White turtleneck crop top, three-quarter sleeve; under a pastel pink technoloquick blazer. Acid wash mom jeans that got patched with muslin underneath and embroidered patches on top, not more denim- except the ones she wore to move in are just torn up. I think she spent most of her paycheck on rent, utilities, food, and her sister in that order. I say that because the newest thing she has for herself is her shoes, and those weren’t new when she bought them- and I know that because the laces don’t match the shoes, she replaced them.

Neo’s an archivist like Mack and Bang, but she worked with a significantly larger and more kudzu-like filing system. So, while Bang’s been inventorying our Library, Neo’s been devising a way to actually organize everything. That’s what those two have been doing for the past… two days, I think? Yeah, two days- Bang and Neo have been organizing the library.

Tiffany, Precious, Genny, Ellie, Fern, and the Flyers have been doing flight maneuvers- apparently, Genny is Legendary among the street racing set, which is all our flyers, mostly because Genny is unbeaten except on accounts of out-right assassination attempts. None of which worked, mind.

Uh, let me see- the Flyers are Brandford, Bobert, Maurice, Pascal, Coco, Sofia, Lynn, and Orville.

**Bradford’s** … not terribly observant, unless he’s in the air. Blond, pasty, always forgetting his glasses on top of his head. Blue striped white shirts under purple vest, a mini-Log tucked onto a watch chain in his pocket; slate grey pants in tall brown boots. He’s also walked into the side post of the galley door no less than fifteen times in the past two days- several times, he wasn’t even going in through the door, he was just walking past, then, *thump*.

Bobert is a fancy man in a color-blocked suit and hat set. Honestly not that interesting to me, though his cat, Muffin, is very sweet and he totally dotes on her, making him reasonably good people to my mind. Hasn’t done anything particularly odd yet, although with the way everyone else is watching him, I have a feeling his particular brand of oddity is going to come out sooner or later. No man wears a glow in the dark suit and has an asymmetrical broom and dotes on a cat he named Muffin without being some manner of fucking weird. Also, his name is Bobert, which is a weird-ass name-
like, he’s got all the markers for being a weirdo, I just haven’t seen empirical evidence of it yet.

Maurice is not a full Mink; one of his parents was, but he isn’t. He actually explained that he needs to have clothing a full size up from what his measurements would say, to avoid crushing his mink. When I inquired as to what his Mink actually was, he said Melanistic Serval Cat, and then hissed like a snake as the washing machine went on.

“**HSSSSSSSSG!**”

“Maurice, it’s the washing machine; that’s the sound of clean clothing wanting to be put into the dryer, or onto the lines… come and see?”

“**Grgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgr-** fffftuck, fine, sure. **Grgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgr-**”

“It’s okay, I’m not great with people touching my wings- we’ve all got our quirks. Although, I can change out the alarm if it bothers you that much-?”

“**Grgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgrgr-** no, no, it just startled me is all. Wow- and, this is where all the laundry gets done?”

“Mm. Bedding, clothing; any repairs or new items get made down here too, and I keep crafting supplies- beads and things- over here as well,”

“This is really convenient!”

“Hmhmhm, I’m glad you think so; I think so too,”

Maurice is alright, really- not well socialized, but nice enough. I mean, I know the top of the dryer is a good nappin’ spot for the cats because I keep finding and disturbing them when I change out the lint catcher- eventually I just made a nice pillow for them and left it there on top of the dryer, which they liked. And then I found Maurice in with the cats on top of the dryer.

So, um, I’m making him a pillow? And a pillowcase with his name on it so there’s no mistaking it for anything else. Maybe a nice blanket too? I don’t want him to toss and turn and fall off the dryer…

Pascal just pisses me off; he wears socks with his sandals!

Let me start by saying that there’s nothing wrong with having your own sense of style. Socks with sandals are not a style. It doesn’t even make sense! Would you wear a swimsuit with mittens and a scarf? No, because it’s fucking stupid!

Yet, every gods damned spring I see these fucking assholes wearing socks with their sandals! Even Luffy doesn’t do that and his entire wardrobe is variations of primary colors! Fuck! Why? Why do they do this to me? Spring is just around the corner, and like a lurking evil from a hundred years of suffering, this accursed charisn’tma returns. When will this horror end? High end, name-brand designers like Lurkberry and Tinbalad have tried to make it seem cool, but it’s not cool, okay, and nothing will make it okay. It’s not even- if your feet are nasty, get a damn pedicure! If your feet get
cold, wear shoes! If your feet get sweaty, lose the fucking socks!

We have slippers for inside and sandals for outside for a reason, and that reason is animal shit! Fucking gods in heaven, why?!

So anyway, Pascal pisses me off- nice guy, good with the animals, but I just cannot look at his feet without feeling irrational murderous rage. So, uh. I try not to look at his feet.

Coco is a stitch-witch; so, I offered her space in the Studio. She was very interested- turns out she’s been doing thing with a pocket sewing kit and craft needles. That’s not good enough- but she also has never actually seen a studio purpose built for sewing like mine. She’s got lots of good ideas, too, she showed me her sketchbook. Unfortunately, she doesn’t have all the skill she needs to make her ideas real just yet… so she’s on the same schedule as Beatrix, learning all the same skills. She comes from a family of shoemakers, and she actually made her own shoes. She already knows how to sew, she just… doesn’t know how to sew clothing, she knows how to make shoes.

Incidentally, Beatrix is getting, well, a confidence boost from having someone who wants to learn from her. It’s also a better test than anything I could have come up with- if you can teach someone how to do something, then you’ve mastered the skill. I saw them yesterday, and Beatrix was talking Coco through a minor meltdown about how to start her pile of assignments…

She also asked me to critique her outfit, which she’d also made herself… so I did.

“Coco, are you sure you want my critique? I don’t hold back, and I don’t coddle; you’ll get the whole truth, as I see it,”

“Yes, Missus Mab- please, please tell me!”

“Alright. Your shoes are lovely; you used a beautiful piece of leather for them, and the purple tint to the black is really exquisite. Do people offer to buy them from you?”

“All the time,”

“Mhm. Your color use is also lovely; a bright crossing of bold yellow and cyan made gentler with red and a purple-black fabric of wool. The ribbons, the bows, it’s all very carefully designed and very delicately stitched. Not terribly durable, is it?”

“No, I have to do repairs almost every day,”

“Mm. And your use of large needles as punctuation, while effective as weapons and accent alike, is a mark of amateurism. There are better ways to convey your status and ability, ways that don’t come off as childish, amateurish, or even poorly crafted. Your overall visual cohesion is quite good, but your craftsmanship is not; your shoes are of very fine quality, as is your hat, and your individual ribbons, particularly the ones in your socks and skirt- the one on the side?”

“…I didn’t make those; a friend of mine did for maybe five hundred beri…?”

“That’s fine; I still can’t do button holes to my satisfaction. I’m guessing they only do small ribbons?”

“Yeah,”
“Yeah- the color matching is perfect, you did a remarkable job. However, it seems while you were stitching, you ran out of the same color thread, and as you ought to know by now-”

“-cohesion in the garment set is paramount, and fine details are a mark of superior craftsmanship,”

“Quite; still, I imagine you’ll be able to learn just as much as Beatrix, so I’ll set up another table for you… we’ll have to pick up a sewing machine for you at the next island, though- no, Coco, yours is meant for domestic sewing… it’ll get the job done to a point, but you really need an industrial straight-stitcher to get a professional standard product, the domestic machines just don’t have the weight.”

“Ah. What about-”

Coco’s fun; lots of questions, doesn’t take offence easily, and has a marvelous eye for color. I look forwards to seeing where she goes with her ideas.

_Sophie_ and Mark became fast friends- mostly because Sophie brought her rabbits. Mark and Usopp built a hutch run for them, and now we have rabbit on the menu because all but one of her herd of rabbits are female, and we _cannot_ keep all of them. Sophie and Mark started talking about supplements, and things just sort of developed from there…

Sanji actually got excited because it’s not often he gets to cook game meat, like rabbit; even sea turtles are rare, because Chopper has them Baby-sweet Peepers that none of us can bear to disappoint… I should explain.

The original Skuan- that is to say, Four Kingdoms of Fae and all it’s protectorates- wild rabbits developed around four thousand years before the modern calendar, in the blue hills of Hyliarobes. Visiting Gastromian (aka the _Purple People_, aka those people who invented tyrian-the-dye-color out of snails) merchants referred to part of Hyliaro as ‘De-laphan-rossa’, meaning ‘blue rabbit skirt’. This was translated as ‘Bestroba’ or as we know it today- Dressrosa.

The scientific name for wild rabbits is ‘oryctolagus cuniculus’ which sounds much naughtier than it actually is, as it means ‘a hare-like digger of underground passages’. Meanwhile, the scientific name for domesticated rabbits is ‘laphan fecundus’, sounds much neater than it is, as it means, basically, ‘rabbits that like to fuck’. Boy howdy, do our new rabbits like to fuck; it’s spring, so not unexpected, but Gods in heaven they fuck more than Sanji and me. They fuck while eating, while pissing, while shitting, while sleeping- as soon as one of the females stops for long enough, the male’s on her with a big, rabbity grin.

Life was peaceful for rabbits until the Roamin’s arrived in Dressrosa during the Second Public war in the second century. Much to the rabbits dismay, the Roamin’s figured out how to farm them for meat and pelts, a practice called cuniculture. Initially, they were kept in fenced off scrublands, but, well… the humble rabbit is known in some circles as the king with a thousand enemies. These circles are mostly academic, as most farmers call rabbits “those bastards” or “dinner”…

Increased trade around the World, and various wars with conquering armies and miles of camp-followers, introduced rabbits to every human-settled Island in the World. Just like rats and roaches- if humans live somewhere long enough, there’s going to be yardbirds and rabbits, too. As I mentioned earlier- they are fecund, bearing litters of six to ten yearly (feed permitting), and have a nearly perfect feed ratio of one to two. They need variable amounts of water- some breeds require nearly the same
amount as a cow (fur breeds, really), while others require the water from their natural feed, (meat
breeds, mostly from Sandy Island).

As for why rabbits became so common around the World… basically, it’s religion. Specifically,
during the Holy Days of the year, a sacrifice to the gods is usually performed. In the old days, that
sacrifice was of a human, picked in various ways- but, during the Reformation, in the Third Age, the
Laws of Sacrifice were amended to include any animal that had been raised in accordance with the
Gods (making it halal) and could reliably scream. Thus, goats, pigs, and rabbits, among others, were
added to the roulette wheel of sacrifice.

A pair of rabbits can produce up to ninety kilograms of meat in a year; a flock, like ours, can produce
far more. I actually saw tears of relief in Sanji’s eyes when Sofie told him that her flock was for meat,
not pets- none of them have names, they’re all numbered, and Sofie refuses to have more than five
adult members at a time. Males, apparently, get culled first; she watches the females for behaviours
she wants or tasty mutations, and then makes the cut.

Most yearly rabbits make the cut, as it turns out- and Sophie has more recipes for rabbit than anyone
really should.

She dresses in the Dressrosa style, which, unlike the rest of her compatriots- with their mixture of
classic business-functional and horror, those fucking sandals- really invigorates my styling eye.
Her hat is black and curled, with flowers and a ribbon wrapped round and hearts stamped on the
brim; plain black and white blouse with puffed sleeves and a cute peter pan collar; and a red pencil
skirt that fits her not quite correctly, to allow for all the movement she does during the day. A
practical touch I wasn’t expecting…

When it comes to fashion, particularly women’s fashion- particularly haute couture- the Grand Line
sets the bar, and Dressrosa is no exception. It seems that every woman on the Line for longer than a
week develops their own unique style, and their own distinctive fashion sense… as well as the ability
to walk for hours in heels on uneven ground without falling once, weapons or drinks or treasure or
cigarettes in one hand and a map in the other.

People on the Line are careful about how they dress, even the most confident and powerful; always
making sure to look nice, as well as being careful about how other people look. This can have
unfortunate effects- I get a lot of side-eye for wearing military style boots on more heavily inhabited
islands, but the ankle support is too good. No one wants to be stared at- and people stare at me a lot,
I’ve got Classical Fae features which just aren’t that common anywhere except Sky Blue. Having
people stare even more because I didn’t feel like doing a complicated hairstyle or wearing my cute
glasses- uugh. Then again, usually when I do that it’s because I’m coming off a battle or just too
busy with what’s going on to notice…

Generally speaking for the Line, if you couldn’t or wouldn’t wear it back in your home Blue, or back
home if you’re from the Line, you can wear it pretty much as you like out in the World. The trick is,
you have to wear your clothing with confidence; women should exude confidence.

Lynn is a Pink Lily Pad Lotus Alraune; when she learned that we only have a salt-water aquarium,
she was fairly disappointed. After thinking about it for a bit, I understood- she can breathe saltwater,
but not for long enough to sleep- apparently, she can do it just long enough to run errands every day,
about five or six hours if she’s moving at an easy pace and less if she’s got some hustle on her hips.
She gets dehydrated if she doesn’t immerse herself in water for eight hours a day, every day. The
best time for that would be at night, when she sleeps- but we don’t have a space she can safely do
that. Franky and Fern are building an addition- a pond with a cover, I think, one that rolls over
during the day and we can all walk across, and then slides open at night.

Until then, Lynn’s been sleeping outside on the grassy deck. Alraune are an unrecognized Tribe-Plantae, or the Plant People. They have floral features- shoots and vines, green skin, leaves and flowers that grow off their body; Mince and BBC Coffyn are, technically, Alraune. They would identify themselves as Trolls, almost definitely- Corsica has a long history of trade with Fiddler’s Green, even before the various wars, so intermarriage of Fae and Demonic lines on that Island is very common.

Alraune tend to become obsessive, which no one- including them- has discovered the reason for. They also have the widest variance of dietary, health, and environmental needs; everything from extreme vitality to almost hospital-worthy delicacy. Lynn is somewhere between the two- according to her, if given a full night’s rest, she can bounce back from deadly injuries; however, she’s very sensitive to cold weather. I only knew she was a Lotus Alraune because she told me outright- on first glance, I’d have thought she was a chestnut. It’s because of her winter helmet-hat, the coolest of all possible pointy hats.

Once we sailed out of the warm Island waters and into the dark cold depths of the Sea, Lynn dug herself into the compost heap- not the fresh stuff, the middle where it’s warm. After a bit of a tizzy when we couldn’t find her- well, we did find her, and Chopper, Mark, and I pooled our knowledge- along with Genny, Sawbones, Taffy, Gurry, and Jun. We all decided to leave her be- feed her, keep the compost going, and cover it with straw to keep the frost off. Water regularly- actually, after the first time Lynn walked in through the ship to the showers to start the day, Sanji and I both decided that Lynn needed a wash station outside so she could get the grime off before walking through the Galley, hallway, and bathroom- nothing against dirt, but compost pile slurry is not normal dirt.

Franky and Fern built a heated shower for her that very afternoon because I really got on them about it and then had the toiletries and bath-linens ready and waiting in an appropriate spot… there’s a spigot and a hose on a concrete pad on that side of the kitchen yard, and now there’s a small shower with hot water on demand and a nice shelf with linens ready to go; even some hooks, for used ones. Lynn likes it a lot.

She’s also indicated that she just needs enough water to lay down in- a kiddie pool would be good enough, she doesn’t need or want a full on pond. This was a great relief to Franky, because it would be a huge safety issue to have an open-ish body of water just on the deck of our ship.

**Orville** - Ori- is another scout; the first scout I’ve ever met who has actually said outright that they’re a scout. I said I was a seamstress before I said I was a scout, and that’s never been not true. Her lookout was the New World, though- so it makes sense. Her job was to go ahead of the other flyers in her cotiere, discover the best routes to and from destinations in the New World, and report back her findings. She’s been inducted into Nami and Taffy’s Navigator’s Club, and I have no doubt she’s being grilled for information, even now.

When she’s not being grilled for those deets, she’s in the Crows Nest, watching the horizon- not that there’s anything to actually see just yet, but I think she’s just building up a habit. Ah, and also, she really loves to garden- when she’s not talking with Nami and Taffy, she’s out enjoying the kitchen garden, or the hospital garden, or the swing…

Ori has short cut hair in no particular style; yellow-green skin, a darker green bodysuit, a pair of leafy green shorts, brown tactical straps, and a green cape so splotched and mangled with color it would vanish in the forest. Gloves and shoes with puffy edges; no real luggage to speak of, aside from a small bag on her back with her essentials.
The day after the Sailing Incident, we’re back in motion; soon to approach the Undersea Passage, one of the Eight Wonders of the World.

The Undersea Passage, or Canal Rex, is an artificial seventy seven kilometer waterway under the Red Line that connects Paradise to the New World. Canal locks at each end lift ships up to Gatun Sea; an artificial sea created in the pre-existing caves to reduce the amount of excavation work required for the canal; and then lower ships into the New World. The ships then rise near the island of Capture, the twin of Twin Capes back in Paradise. S’got its own lighthouse and everything- apparently Taffy got information and a new log-pose back on Fishman Island? Lots of things happened that I just wasn’t aware of, honestly.

There are three lanes of locks in the canal; a small lane meant for fishermen and day-boats, which basically everyone who works at Tsukiji fish market has used at least once- Fern said that it’s actually fairly nice, so long as you breathe water. The second lane is for medium to large ships; everything from ships Going Merry’s size, to ships the size of Whitebeard’s own Moby Dick. The third lane is for military use only, so we’re not taking that one- we’re taking the second lane.

Germa began work on the Canal in the Second Age, but stopped due to engineering problems and a high worker mortality rate. Dressrosa took over the project soon after and opened the canal in the Third Age. It was, and remains, the largest and most difficult engineering projects to ever be undertaken and completed. This passage greatly reduces the time for ships needing to travel between Paradise and the New World; and, unlike the Sea of Monsters, the Drake Passage, or the Straits of Magellan, it’s much safer. About the only dangerous thing in the canal is other ships, and our own boredom.

It takes six to eight weeks to pass through the Undersea Canal; four, if your crew knows their business very well indeed. It’ll probably take us six.

I got into building ships in bottles a little before our parents died. Neo’s always looking ahead to the next new thing, but I’m… I’m a little more old fashioned, I guess. Also, it’s a good hobby for when you don’t have a lot of space to spread out- well, that, and whittling, which I’m fairly good at too. I mean, I made Neo’s **scrimshaw**, and she loves it- says I have a real talent.

I mean, I guess?

But really, I like building ships in bottles. It’s fun! And… it makes me feel closer to Dad, who taught me how to do it.

I actually work out of Mom’s **old tool chest**; Neo couldn’t bear to even touch it, after- anyway. Dad was a regular sailor with the Royal Navy; Mom was a Machinist in the boiler room of their boat. Neo ended up spending a lot of time with Dad’s CO, just watching how he did things when she wasn’t doing her own thing; I spent a lot of time down in the workshops and boiler room, doing just the same thing. To me, it wasn’t weird at all that Neo got **Dad’s mace, Crush**; and I got Mom’s sword and shield, **Hammer and Tongs**. Actually, I spent yesterday painting our **crew standard** onto my buckler; crew pride, yo.

Anyway- the difference between a machinist’s tool chest and a normal tool chest, beyond
appearance, is this. Quality. The drawers in my tool chest, when operated, feel very, very different from other tool chests- and the overall quality of construction is very high, almost absurdly so.

The drawers of my tool chest are sized to precision measuring tools that I don’t want knocking about with larger tools or piled on top of each other. There are two more drawers in the top center; the larger one is specifically sized for a particular book, which is in there- Machinery’s Handbook, the holy book of a machinist’s trade. There’s also a security panel that covers all the drawers and locks them; I’m the only person with the key. All the drawers are also lined with felt, so the tools aren’t abused by the drawers themselves.

I’m actually very lucky that Mom owned all her tools outright, and her toolbox, and passed them on to me- the cost of the tools that go into a machinist’s tool box quickly dwarf the cost of the box itself. As the job of the box is to keep those very expensive tools safe, having a good one is really important.

Mom used to say that her tool chest was an example of the quality she needed to provide every day, and that she expected to receive in turn. Her very career depended on the quality and condition of her tools in a way that almost no other trade does; as such, the quality of the tool chest she used had to reflect that quality.

Anyway. Building a ship in a bottle is a very old maritime artform. Sailors of the past would often create things in their free time- everything from knots and cloth goods, to scrimshaws, to ships in bottles. They didn’t have room for big hobbies, and they didn’t have money for expensive ones- thus, a ship in a bottle, being made of scraps and what would otherwise be garbage, is fairly simple and cheap as hobbies go.

I’m actually finishing one, right now- I’ve set up, with my box and my bottle, in the Galley because I don’t think there’s a table in the shop? And also, more importantly, the Galley has better light.

I started with a bottle; and as with all ships in bottles, the shape of the bottle is what determines the type of ship to be built. I’ve got binders full of research- pictures, crew anecdotes, even the occasional copy of a shipwright’s plans, all for ships I can’t build yet because I don’t have the right bottle. Color is important too; a clear glass bottle is best, although if the glass is pale blue or green, it can be accounted for as well. Amber and cobalt glass, while beautiful, are almost never appropriate- although, there is a new trend in the hobby to put ghost ships in these bottles. I haven’t tried it yet… maybe my next project?

This bottle is borosilicate glass that I actually had made especially for this; it’s nearly as long as my arm, and about as tall as my shoulder to elbow. I’ve treated it to be smear resistant, so it can be handled; and I got it enchanted to be lightweight, so I can move it around by myself. It’s important to fill the bottle just enough with the right kind of ship- not just any ship will do for any bottle, you’ve got to know your tubs and the space they want to fit into as well.

I’ve never used a kit- can you imagine? A kit for something like this? I mostly just use blank piece of wood available at craft stores, and sometimes scraps from the lumber yard. Once I have a piece of a size, I begin by drawing a ship in the size and shape that I want to build.

I drill holes through the wood that will form the upper and lower parts of the hull; then, I use toothpicks, skewers, even disposable chopsticks depending on the size of the hole, all to keep the wood pieces properly aligned during the rest of the construction. Following that, I draw a rough outline on the stacked wood pieces.
Of course, I’ve already done all that– I’m just going over each step of the process to make certain I haven’t forgotten anything.

Once you’ve drawn the outline on the pieces, you need to sand away anything that doesn’t look like the boat. I’m not trying to be silly when I say it; but I don’t have any better way to explain what I do. I generally start with a large fine-grain file, around eighty grit, and move to higher and higher fineness as I go forwards. Don’t be afraid to go back with the big grit and smooth it all down again–there’s nothing worse than trying to get rid of a lump with too fine a grit. Also, don’t be afraid to replace your sandpaper when it wears out! It only costs a bit less than ten beri a sheet; no excuses!

I’ve been checking my finished and assembled- but not fully assembled- boat next to the bottle. It needs to be done at just about every stage of construction, to ensure that the finished piece will actually, you know, fit in the bottle.

Even at the very beginning stages, the hull is already larger than the opening of the bottle. That’s why it’s not made of one solid piece of wood.

Next, the keel and rudder are added to the bottom of the hull. Really thin pieces of wood are easiest to find at craft stores, or very specific hobby shops- think dollhouses, toy stores, and so on. Using a piece of wood that’s already been planed to the proper width saves a lot of time. I used a one-sixteenth by one-sixteenth strip for the keel, and for the rail on the top of the deck.

I find that painting the pieces all in one go, each with their own color, to be easier and better looking than trying to paint several colors on a single piece of wood once the hull is finished. After all, the individual pieces of this ship are comparable to a ten beri coin.

Now, as every maker knows, adhesives are creations of the Devil. They either don’t work, or they work entirely too well. Except for three- tempera, which is made of eggs, paper to paper glue, and wood glue. And of those two, wood glue always does exactly what it says it’s going to do on the bottle- so long as it’s usage directions are followed, of course.

I used wood glue to fix the two top and the two bottom pieces together, forming the upper and lower halves of the hull.

After that, I laid out the mast and booms on the drawing of the boat I wanted to make, keeping in mind how very limited my space actually was. The masts are made of disposable chopsticks I sanded very smooth and straight; the booms are made of disposable skewers and toothpicks. Some of them I sanded down to be even narrower; all of them I sanded to be smooth.

I added a bowsprit to the hull. The bowsprit consists of two parts- the bottom stick, which is inserted into a hole drilled into the hull, and a top stick which is glued to the bottom stick and made more secure and more pretty with lengths of thread, which also get glued down.

Check against the bottle again- this was before Neo joined the crew. Then while we were moving, I did more work.

I glued lengths of thread to the backs of the booms, which will act as hinges. I looped a piece of wire through a very small hole drilled into the bottom of the mast; another hinge. I attach the booms to the masts by the threads I glued onto them. I then drilled holes into the hull- again, very small drill bits, this time only slightly larger than a needle.

In the end, there are five holes behind the location of each mast. The shroud lines and upright rigging will go into these holes. The wire hinge on the bottom of the mast goes into two holes on the hull; it’s twisted into place underneath, and the excess is trimmed away.
I’ve spent this morning doing the rigging. One long piece of thread goes through the five holes in the hull and through the mast, forming the shrouds. Then comes the actual basic rigging; I’ve got a multi-function stand in the third largest drawer that I used to secure the top of the ship during rigging and detail work. The entire thing was held in place by a small vice clamp, because I don’t want to damage the table- and also, we’ve never owned the furniture in our apartments? So it’s not like I could without costing my sister money… Anyway. The lines that will be used to raise the mast are held tight by wrapping them around nails at the front of the stand.

Each mast has two lines going forward to the bowsprit. One line goes from the hull, to the booms, to the top of the mast and then forward. The other line goes from the top of the shrouds directly through the bowsprit, necessitating more drilling. Drilling and threading the very tiny holes in the bowsprit takes a steady hand- and, possibly, a very thin needle.

The anchor, I made just before lunch. I made it by bending a piece of thin wire into the proper shape and dipping it into paint. Additional detail was added by dipping the tip of a toothpick into paint and dabbing it onto the hull and mast. Then, it was lunch time- so, I carefully moved everything into it’s carrying stand, and set it on the couch. I ate lunch and stabbed Captain when he tried to grab some of my bacon rolls, I don’t think so Captain!

Mou, and then lunch was over; after I helped the Kitchen clean up, I set my things back up on the table, and got back to work.

I decided during lunch that the hull will rest in the bottle on top of two wooden stands. These will be made from popsicle sticks and attached to the toothpicks that hold the pieces of the hull in place. Nothing is permanently glued into the bottle yet, so all the pieces can rotate and will fit through the opening of the bottle while attached to the bottom of the hull.

Another test fit; I found I had a quarter inch of room inside of the bottle to spare. I’ve always tried to make the ship fill as much of the bottle as I could- thankfully, I’d already anticipated the need for a more robust stand. I had pre-cut, sanded, and stained two additional blocks of wood to put under the ship in the bottom of the bottle; this raised the bottom of the hull from the glass, and gave the entire ship a more balanced look.

And then it was tea time, so I had to put everything away again.

Even so, today… today, I’m actually finishing everything.

Tea was nice; a red tea I’ve never had before, cheesy bread, sweet cookies… nice. I mostly sat and thought about the work order of my ship in a bottle; and Fernanda, er, Fern? She sat and watched me- so did Mister Franky. I only realized this after Tea, though- mostly, I was thinking very hard about my ship in a bottle.

I helped the Kitchen clear the Galley again; and I set up again, this time for gluing and completion of the ship. Fern and Franky sat at the other end of the table, quietly observing, but I paid them no attention.

Shit, I even finished the sails- I did that yesterday. Missus Mab was super nice, too- said that I was
welcome to any of the crafting supplies in the studio, so long as I marked out what I took on the sheet she showed me.

Once I start gluing, I’m committed to finishing this project; there’s no going back from this. Any mistake I make, I make forever.

Deep breath; check the ventilation.

Let’s begin.

I glued the wooden bases into the bottle, using a piece of sticky tack on the outside bottom to mark where the glue would go to secure the first piece of wood. A drop of glue is used to secure the original stand to the bottom of the hull; then the stand is rotated parallel to the hull in order to fit into the bottle opening.

I use long rods after this point- a piece of wire bent to shape, and a medical probe from a yard sale. I spun the base planks until they were even with each other and then glued them down onto the base.

I secured the sails to the mast or booms; flags, pendants standing in for other bits of rigging; deckhouses are placed. I put glue on the top of the bottom hull, and commit to finishing this thing. I loosen the rigging control lines, lower the masts, and carefully roll the sails around the hull. Then, I slowly feed the top half of the ship into the bottle. Once it’s in, I pull on the control threads and partially raise the mast. I just want them out of the way so I can- just- got it! Just needed to rejoin the two halves of the hull. The glue is fairly fast drying, for wood glue- I secure the rigging, make sure the ship halves are aligned correctly, and let them sit to cure. I stretch.

I set a small egg timer I got just for this, clean up the tools I won’t be needing, make sure I’ve put everything away correctly… and that’s time. Let’s finish this.

I slowly raise the masts, occasionally reaching in with the medical probe to untangle some threads… just take the time to do it right, is what I say. With a little slack in each mast, I guide each deckhouse to it’s position and install it. Then, I tighten the masts back up until only a little, small bit of slack remains in the rigging. A drop of glue on the place where each line passes through the tiny bowsprit; then I pull the lines taught and secure them to the bottom of the bottle with a bit of sticky tack.

While the rigging dries, I secure each sail with a small dab of glue. It’s a tight fit in there, but I make it work. Then, I needed to wait again; set the timer, clean my tools, put things away I don’t need anymore. A small, sharp razor blade on a thin stick; the timer rings, and I cut the control threads from the bottom of the bowsprit. Add a cork; wipe the outside of the bottle; throw away my garbage bits, and… that’s it. Done.

I built a ship in a bottle.

“...Do you want a table down in the shop, kid?”

“Um. Y-yeah, if it’s, um, if there’s room,”

“’Course there is. Fern, show her around?”

“Right-o, Franky-bro! Come with me, Havij, I’ll show you where you can put your things-“
“Ah, just one more thing I have to do- one sec-”

I carefully put the ship in its stand, gluing it down with something I can only hope will bond glass-to-wood. I peel the protective cover off the nameplate; and now it really is done.

*Thus kindly I scatter; the gems drop away. In Memoria-* and there, my parent’s names, and their dates, in warm throated brass. I look it over; yep, done.

“Mister Franky-bro, when my sister sees this, she’s gonna cry real hard. Don’t let her be alone when she does, okay?”

“...sure, Kiddo,”

And then I went off with Fern.

Down in the shop, Fern shows me her work bench, and points out where there’s room for my own--but on her work bench…

“So, um, you make ships in bottles too?”

“Ah, not-quite? I only just got a pair of bottles I like, and one of them is so much bigger than the other… I’ve been stuck on shrinking down the shipwright drawings for days, actually,”

“Mou- if you want, I can help? I mean, I also saw the way you looked at my tool box- if you want, I can help you build one of your own,”

“Wah! Really?!?”

“Y-yeah, sure, um; if, ah, if you want?”

“Oh my goodness, yes!”

“So, these are one of the most important parts of my Studio- these are damage and request forms. Fill one of these out correctly and attach it to your damaged clothing, and I’ll see it’s repaired; fill that one out correctly, and I’ll make whatever you ask for. I’m already in the process of creating a basic wardrobe for all of you- see up there? Each crewmate gets their own rack, and each rack has several seasons worth of clothing in it, waiting to be switched out. I do the switching according to the World Calendar, local weather, and personal preferences that I notice. I notice almost everything physical about everyone- so don’t be surprised if new clothing just appears in your locker; if it’s there, it’s
meant for you, and yes, I meant it for you specifically. If you don’t know what something is, just ask."

"...!"

"Do you repair things that aren’t clothing?"

"That depends on if it’s made of fabric, leather, or lace- in that case, yes, I will. Similarly, I will do cloaks, belts, harnesses… anything meant to be worn on the body, really. Except for shoes- I don’t do shoes. Coco does, though."

"-Yep, sure do."

"But again; you need to fill out the form. It’s not pointless bureaucracy, either; this is how I organize my worker’s work flow. I don’t want to give them too much to do; similarly, I don’t want to give them something they can’t do. This is also how I streamline ship repairs- because I’m in charge of keeping all the sails and rigging-"

"Eeeeh!?"

"-Well, yes, my main job- beyond making sure none of you are naked or in danger of death by exposure- is keeping the sails and rigging in honor. Which brings us here- these are the sail and rigging damage forms. We do sail and rigging checks at every island, and whenever Nami, the Head Navigator, says. That’s what Gurry, Taffy, Mark, and Bryony were doing before we left- with the clipboards, y’know?"

"Ah, I had wondered."

"Right. Now- if you are used to throwing all your clothing into a basket, we have baskets right here- they hang right on the wall, to save valuable floor space. Also, over here- sock pins, clothing labels, and delicates bags. I’ll make this clear right here and now- I cannot guarantee the safe return of your pair of socks unless they’re pinned together. I cannot guarantee the return of your clothing unless it is labelled with your symbol- I have an entire system of drawers devoted to identifying patches, don’t worry about finding something you like. I cannot guarantee the cleanliness of your underwear, brassieres, binders, and other garments, unless it’s in the delicate garment bag when it goes down the chute. We, in the Laundry, will handle all labelling for the purposes of washing, if your clothing isn’t labelled already."

"Holy shit that’s a lot of labels- hey, wait, can you make embroidered patches?"

"Of course; iron ons too,"

"Hot damn!"

"-chute?"

"Over here- see these wheeled carts? These are where all the crew’s laundry ends up. Here comes some now- ah, I see, Robin’s making her bed again-

"Um. Can we have individualized sheets? I mean, it’s fine sharing with Cath, but… we’re different people,"

"Sure- these are the safety pins, take an extra patch, and pin it to your sheets when you change them out. After that, I’ll know that every sheet set going to your bed needs that patch on it. -oh, and girls?"
“Yes, Missus Mab?”

“Once you pick your identifying patch, that’s it; no changing, no take backs. If the both of you want the same one, work it out.”

“Yes, Missus Mab!”

The Feverbane Twins aren’t flyers- they’re sorters. Stacey and Cathey Feverbane are Axolotl Women, which means one of their parents was a Fishman with exposed gills, and the other was something else- my money is on Mink or Long-arm, they’re too hairy for a Lanfolk. Caustic, loyal; they have the look of people who haven’t settled on what they want to be when they grow up.

Stacey, the elder, wears her brown hair down, big hoop earrings, white shirt with flowers printed on, black spaghetti-strap dress, fashion backpack, white silk socks with chunky, strappy heels.

Cathey, the younger, wears her brown hair half-up, no earrings, pink turtleneck sweater with a big scoop out of the front, high waisted denim skirt with a thick black belt, woven grass shopping bag instead of a purse, same shoes as her sister.

Both girls wear glasses; both girls have exposed gills that start at their temples and frill up to about the crown of their heads.

While they’ve been in here, they’ve absentmindedly organized and neatened my shelves- I have a fairly organized studio, but now it’s like… magazine worthy. Hm.

“You two like sorting things out?”

“Yes!”

“Have you considered helping out in the Library? Someone always needs to put books back; and Franky has the same damage and request forms I do, so if you want, say, a book cart...”

“Oooh~!”

And another pair of people get shooed off; patches picked and opportunities on the ship, found.

This is about when Parsley, Mila, Sohei, and Winston wander in. Winston, his green and brown scales a-ripplin’, makes a bee-line for the warm-spot Maurice has curled up in. He must do this often, because Maurice wriggles over and curls up with Winston.

D’aww.

Parsley is a Mink, about two years older than the Suntide Girls- so, sixteen? Seventeen, maybe- the fur knocks off about a year, lookswise. He’s a grey Rabbit Mink, with rough-cut black hair, a purple infinity scarf, grey-jumpsuit, black boots, and a purple haramaki belted with a black belt. Ah, a grey-on-grey striped puffy-sleeve shirt, so it’s actually overalls.
Very intuitive, Parsley- totally willing to poke and prod, and he’s already picked out which patches he wants…

**Sohei** - his name is actually Sohei Speak-Ye-Not-In-Vain (the-name-of-the-Gods is silent)- is over with Parsley. Sohei has used a system like this before, I can tell- he grabs a patch he likes, and starts reading through the various forms. Another Mink- this one, a Big Cat of some kind, very fast because he can’t retract his claws at all; has a bit of an anxiety issue, maybe? Grey pants, blue sleeveless shirt; red foot and hand wraps.

**Mila**, on the other wing, takes issue with basically the entire premise of filling out a form to get her clothing taken care of, picking out identifying patches for her clothing, the whole thing. She accepted the sails and rigging forms… hm.

I don’t think she understands what I really am, although I haven’t actually said… Undyed pants and shirt, blue-grey sash, bright yellow dupatta; blue-black skin, big brown eyes, hair cropped short and gleaming.

And that’s quite enough.

“Mila, I’m the Quartermaster of this ship. Do you know what that means?”

“No,”

“Hm. Two things, really- firstly, my job is the quarters of this ship. Clothing, bedding, other supplies- my job is to make sure that each member of the crew has everything they need to get ready for the next day. Clothing, a place to sleep, soap to wash with, brushes and combs. Secondly, my job as Senior Helmsman is to steer the ship. If Taffy, Bryony, or Mark can’t do it- and sometimes they won’t be able to- it’s my job to do so. If, say, you ask me to do something like fix a button, and our ship is attacked, and I have to steer the ship- I probably won’t remember to get your button. I’ll try- but having a form filled out means that I don’t *have* to remember something like that. Instead, I get to remember things like your favorite colors, what you like your clothing to smell like, if you’re allergic to a detergent, and so on,”

Mila is still looking fairly mutinous. Well, no time like the present to introduce a new crewmate to my own particular brand of oddity.

“Attend!

“I am Quartermaster

“My story is enfolded in the history of this World.

“My Armies; Protecter of Men.

“My forges burned in the Dragon’s Teeth.

“Down frozen, rutted roads my oxen hauled
“the meager foods a bankrupt fool sent me.

“Scant rations for my cold and starving crew.

“Gunpowder, salt, and lead.

“In Ages past we sailed to war in ships my boatwrights built.

“I fought beside you in the deserts of our great South, and West.

“My pack mules perished seeking water holes,

“And I went on with camels.

“I made flags to serve; I repaired them after every battle.

“The patches and crests you wear are my design.

“Since the beginning of all things, I have sought our fallen

“from powdermonkey to captain.

“In war or peace I bring them home

“And lay them gently down in honor.

“Provisioner, transporter.

“In another Age I took you to lands made bitter with strife.

“I brought you tents, your cloth for uniforms.

“When yellow fever struck, I brought the mattresses you lay upon.

“In another Age... like you.

“The Wars of Hell, too. Mine was the first blood spilled that day.

“I jumped into darkness in Raime; Apocalypse: Cancelled.

“Baterilla, Germa, Zou. I was there.

“The sails that filled the gray horizon were mine;

“I lead the endless trains across the beach in endless Ages.

“By air and sea I supported the crossing of the Line.
“Through the deadly jungles I carried my supplies; and yours.
“I crossed the desert again; and when our supplies ran out, I carried on
“Found more and gave them with gladness.

“I am Quartermaster.
“I can shape the course of combat,
“Change the outcome of battle.
“Look to me: Sustainer of Armies; Protector of Men.
“The digger of the last ditch; and the defender of it, too.
“I am the Straw Hat Pirates Quartermaster. -and Mila, if you _ever_ want something for your bunk, all you need to do is write it down on the form, and I’ll get it for you. Among other things, it’s an accounting thing- Nami doesn’t like spending unnecessarily, and Sohei’s going to have an easier time of it if I keep track of what I spend. Get it?”

“...it’s not about me, or you,”
“No. It’s about all of us- incidentally, I saw you like the Ocarina, over there?”
“Oh, um-”
“You can have it, if you want- but I can’t replace it,”
“Eh?”
“Oh! I can answer this one!”
“...Parsley, you have to stop sneaking up on me like that,”
“I would if I could, Mila! But I know why Missus Mab can’t get you another ocarina like that one if you break it?”
“Why?”

I hand Mila the ocarina.

“It’s because the sea snail this ocarina is made out of is super-duper endangered as a specie!”

“... _hey, kid, you wanna learn some cool facts about animals? I think you doooooo. C’mon back here into this completely unsuspicious alley for some absolutely legal dealings~”

“Mila, the Conch is a large marine sea snail found throughout the Line. The shell is the most recognizable part- found in every beach-themed restaurant and store in the World. The actual animal
is a thirty-three centimeter snail with a habit of peeking out at the World a bit like that guy who kept trying to sell us the full set of counterfeit ginsu knives in his trenchcoat, you remember him?"

“Oh yeah! Lemme Hold a Beri man!”

“Exactly!”

“-available cheap, this week only! ”

“Unfortunately for the snail, their shifty ways and general gross snail-ness are no match for the fact that they are completely fucking delicious,”

“-wait, what- ”

“Prized across the Line for it’s lustrous shell and delicious delicious meats, the Conch is now threatened in most of its natural range;”

“-look buddy, are you gonna buy these watches or what? ”

“Some protections are now in place for nature’s scalpers; and it’s hoped that they’ll continue to hawk dubious goods at humanity for decades to come. Of course, that only works if everyone abides by it- and Missus Mab really likes Conchs, so she won’t support the poaching trade;”

“That’s true. Also, quick question- can Winston speak?”

“Yes!”

“Unfortunately…”

“Uh, wait, what?”

“Ah! That will be a great relief for Taffy and Gurry; Banana and Marzipan have started speaking to everyone, not just them, and apparently their conversational skill is a bit… well, lacking. A rival will straighten them out, I think-”

And then Havij bursts in, darting past all of us. She climbs up the wall, disturbing nothing on the various shelves, and then burrows under the hanging clothing. The sounds of sobbing faintly echo down.

What the actual fuck- oh no, I- I can’t just leave her alone- I-

Hm.

I step, and one of me goes to comfort Havij; and one of me goes back the way she came; and one of me stays where I am.

I, where I am, let out a full-throated growl that ends in a sigh as I forcibly shove my irritation away- I’m doing something about it, but I still need to finish this.

“So. I have a Devil Fate; mine is Shadow. I can do a lot of things with it, but to me, the most useful
of all the things I can do is be in more than one place at a time. Do any of you know why Havij is crying?”

Mila and Parsley shake their heads; Winston slithers down from the dryer nappin’ spot and up the wall, intent on comforting the crying girl from his murmur.

*Hang on kid, I'm comin’ for ya~!*

Sohei just looks tired.

““It’s Neopolitan; I’m fairly certain of it,”

“...I think we should sit down. Come on- I’ve got a tea set down here. The tea’s not as good as what Sanji makes, but I’m passable at it. Mila, Parsley?”

“Um- it’s not really our business...”

“Yes it is, Parsley- we’re crewmates now, Par, it’s our business by definition,”

“Oh. Um- sure, then?”

“Come on,”

I lead them over to a small break area, next to the sink- a kitchen nowhere near the size that would be needed to feed the whole crew. I don’t keep food in the upright fridge, either; it’s all dye stuff that needs to be kept cold. Thankfully, the cabinet fridge - which is an entirely different color- I do keep food in, mostly non-perishables I like cold.

There’s a kettle; I fill it with water, set it on the hob and start snapping fingers. Various drawers and canisters pop out, and their contents empty out in specific measured amounts- I don’t keep sugar, flour, or salt in their pre-designated bins because we’re on a boat, but that is where I keep spices and certain extracts and essential oils, too.

The oven gets called into service rarely- but often enough, because Sanji has to bake large volumes of bread and I want like, a few slices of one thing or another and- Hello, Beatrix.

“Hello, Beatrix,”

“Is tea down here today?”

“It can be, but, well, Sanji makes tea for everyone- this tea is really for a hard conversation-”

“Because Fern’s trying to get up to where Havij is and Deborah smelled the cheese and came running, as did the rest of the Kitchen Crew so, uh-”

“Hello, Mab; what are you cooking?”

“...Well, Razz, I was going to make sandwiches but if you want to make something-”
“No, no-”

“Because I don’t have any cakes, I was about to go up and ask you-”

“Oh, well, in that case, I can-”

“Or I could make croissants…”

“Uh,”

“...What did you think the batch roller was for, Razz?”

“Well, now I feel silly; of course you’d use a sheeter,”

“Is that what they call it in kitchen-land? Because I just thought it was a batch roller with a canvas conveyor belt,”

And Sanji grins.

“Yes, Mab; a batch roller with a canvas conveyor belt is also known as a sheeter when it’s used for making sheets of laminated pastry,”

“But I make baker’s croissants, not pastry croissants-”

“Shush; make your magic,”

“Well, fine- but, what kind of cakes are you making?”

“Are you using chocolate?”

“I didn’t plan to, no-”

“And it’s still squidberry season, right?”

“Mm,”

“How about a chocolate and squidberry cake?”

“Oh, that sounds nice- and the other?”

“I dunno, lemon meringue? We always have the ingredients, and it’s not terribly hard to make…”

“Sounds good to me, love,”

I smile at my husband, and take out the small loaves I’ve been baking since the morning; white sandwich bread, focaccia, \textit{pumpernickel}, \textit{black rye} - all the things Sanji doesn’t make because of how long it takes to do it right… also, I’m fairly sure I’m the only person other than him that really craves black rye bread. The black rye is for butterbrod, not tea though- so, slice, and onto the cooling rack for later. Like, tomorrow-later

Oh yes, and a few baguettes and brioches, too, because- BAD!
“Don’t snitch my sandwich fillings, Sanji!”

“Sorry, sorry- what the hell do you put in the olives to make them so good, though?”

“Generosity, kindness, love, joy- fingers out of the- rrrrrgh, -do you want some olives, Sanji?”

“...y’s,"

“Okay,”

And I hand my husband a bowl of olives, which he starts devouring and- wait a second-

“You didn’t eat lunch, did you?”

“...whoops,”

“Hmmmmmmph,”

Silly man.

All my bread loaves are cooled; scones and biscuits in, then. Sanji, finished with the olives and hands washed, is making his cakes. I’m putting together the sandwiches.

Cress and butter sandwiches- softened butter, grated lemon zest, fresh chopped herbs; spread on white bread and topped with watercress and another thin slice of bread; trim the crust on two sides and cut so that each triangle piece only has one crusty edge.

Olive and focaccia; chopped olives, chopped parsley, drizzle the inside of a split loaf of focaccia with olive oil; fill with the olive mixture and slices of provolone; cut into dainty, tasty squares.

Anchovy and lemon butter; softened butter with grated lemon zest; spread on white bread and sandwich with oil-preserved anchovies carefully patted down for their excess, sliced sundried tomato reconstituted with vegetable broth and also patted down, and butter-leaf lettuce that’s just started to grow vigorously. Trim the crusts and save for the pigs or goats; cut into triangles.

Salmon, cucumber, and dill; mix minced dill with softened cream cheese; spread cream cheese mixture on white bread. Sandwich with smoked salmon and sliced cucumber; trim crusts and cut into rectangles.

Liverwurst and onion; Dijon mustard on- Deborah?

“Can I help you, Deborah?”

“...lemme taste that mustard?”

“...sure?”
“Shrimp, are you- Shrimp? Why are you tasting the mustard?”

“Because I have better mustard in my pocket right now; Missus Mab, use this instead.”

“Uh- sure? Let me taste it… oh my goodness gracious! Sanji, come try this!”

“I- sure, hang on- okay, what-”

“Taste this!”

“Mmmph! Mmmmmmm! Wow!”

“Deborah, where did you get this mustard?”

“I make it. Normal store mustard isn’t good enough,”

“I see!”

So good! Liverwurst and onion; Deborah’s special mustard spread on pumpernickel; sandwich with liverwurst and sliced red onion. Slice in halves; these are too good for small bites.

Prosciutto and fig; softened butter and fig jam spread on the inside of a split baguette. Fill with prosciutto, sliced pears and butter-leaf lettuce; season with salt and pepper. Cut into medium-thin pieces.

Camembert and fig; toasted brioche slices cut into fours, spread with camembert cheese and topped with sliced fresh figs and candied walnuts. Give Sanji a light tongue-fucking and spin him back towards his cakes when he tries to snatch one; pick Deborah, Mince, and Oz up bodily and put them back near Sanji when they try the same. Give one to Beatrix when she asks politely. Give one to Sohei for being patient with me and my antics. He seems to like it.

Cheddar and pickled vegetables- in this case, cucumbers that have been lacto-fermented and patted dry; sliced shingle-style and even-odd layered with aged cheddar. Pickle-cheddar-pickle-cheddar; paint the top with a very thin wash of Deborah’s mustard and sprinkle with a little dill; trim the crusts, cut into triangles, press the edges in chopped parsley.

Pate- hm.

“So. Since I’m using two different pates, it behooves me to use two different sour cherry preserves. First, the goose; spread montmorency cherry preserves on sliced brioche. Being the traditional sour cherry of choice, the preserves are a bright, lurid red. Sandwich with goose liver pate; trim the crusts, and cut in squares. Second, the duck; spread morello cherry preserves on sliced brioche. An heirloom varietal, the sour cherry preserves are a dark, almost wine-colored red. Sandwich with duck liver pate; trim the crusts, and cut in squares.
Radish and anchovy; softened butter mixed with minced anchovies; spread on white bread and sandwich with wafer-thin sliced radishes. Trim the crusts and cut into triangles.

And finally, because I have a feeling Havij will like them- Pimento cheese! Softened cream cheese, equal amounts of shredded cheddar and shredded jack cheese, mayonnaise to make it spreadable, and salt’n’pepper to taste. Stir in chopped pimentos; sandwich on white bread; trim the crusts and cut into squares.

Hm. Sanji hasn’t told the Cooking Kids about Pickles and cheese yet.

“Shall I tell them, Razz?”

“I was hoping you would, love,”

“Right, well-”

As my wife begins explaining pickles and cheese and the proper way to set out a tea service to the kids, I consider the same.

Pickles and cheese share a basic origin: the need to preserve the harvest. As such, for thousands of years, the production of both was the domain of women. Before refrigeration, fermented milk and meat preserved essential calories- proteins, fats, and so on; while fermented produce made vitamins available year-round. It’s no great surprise, then, that these stinging, stinking, spicy, and succulent subsistence foods pair quite naturally.

We, on the ship, actually fight scurvy during the winter with various pickles; and it was only when I had close exposure to Mab and her Dairy that I gained any sort of real interest in pickling. It’s a very old-fashioned kind of thing- there are pickles that my Grandmere would have eaten that are just the same as they are now. Even so… Mab’s developing new and innovative ways to combine vegetables and fruits with acid and sugar; vivid colors and intense flavors, combining into marvelous delights for the winter- well, year round, really. Pickles and cheese have a unique position; halfway between cooked and raw, dressed and nude- they’ve been the darlings of chefs for generations.

There are two broad varieties among the brined.

Salt- lacto-fermented- pickles are made through direct fermentation. Vegetables are immersed in brine, where salt-loving lactic acid bacteria convert sugars in the vegetables to acid and alcohol preserving them from the inside out. The resulting pickles tend to have a mellow flavor- though not always, as their beneficial bacterial cultures tend to remain active.

Vinegar pickles- pickles brined in vinegar- make use of secondhand fermentation. Wine or another alcohol is fermented into acetic acid, which is poured onto the vegetables, creating an inhospitable environment for bacteria. Mab uses the dregs of various bottles we go through- lots of honey wine, sake, tinctures and cordials, grain alcohols- she mixes them together, and then pours them over basically every bumper crop of nearly too-ripe vegetable we have. I didn’t realize it, but you can pickle damn near everything- peas, flowers, potatoes. The potatoes are actually quite fun- they’re the
blank canvas of vegetables, and sidle up to every flavor profile you can put in a brine. The only thing is they can’t be pickled raw- a light cooking is required to make them delicious.

Vinegar pickles tend to have a deeper vinegar sting, but can also be very sweet when sugar or honey is added to the brine. They lack active bacterial cultures. There are as many approaches to preserving a vegetable as there are vegetables in total- and for every variety of that one vegetable, all the possible preservation methods can be applied. Sweetness and sourness vary greatly between years, recipes, and processes- so experimentation is truly key.

“The ploughman’s lunch, a meal of cheese, bread, and pickle, was an invention of the post-Flight Skuan government, a successful attempt to get the Fae to eat more cheese after the end of a good century or so’s worth of rationing. The combination became classic during the Winter Wars, as the various diaspora Fae traveled around the World, bringing the young tradition to new places- new pickles met new cheeses, and new people were exposed to the idea of eating them together with some sort of grain. Miso, pickles, and rice, anyone? -The Winter Wars were round-about the Second Age, kids; it was a long, long time ago,”

“Mm- in Germa, the combination of savory cheddar and sweet-and-salty pickle became a staple after refugees from Winter’s Teeth in the Kush came through Raimes; before then, we mostly combined pickles with liverwurst. Not a bad combination; but not the same as milk-cheese, either,”

“Mm- different cheeses go best with different pickles, too. Pickled okra with smoked paprika-smokra- for example, goes best with creamy blue cheese. Pickled beets and an aged crottin; smokra and cambozola, bijou and heirloom red beets...”

“Takuan and chèvre; Limburger and kabees el lift, sauerkraut with melted Jack cheese- hm, mixed-milk triple crème with pickled butternut squash puree... the squash would pull the sweetness of the milk to the forefront, I think,”

“Now, if you were watching me make the sandwiches with pickles, you saw me dabbing them dry. This is because pickle brine will overwhelm any cheese, and most foods too; a soggy sarnie is no fun at all, and wet wedges suck the fun right out of tasting. If you ever set up a cheese plate with pickles, you ought to let them drain for a quick bit- a minute or two if you must be posh, or just dab them off and go if it’s family and friends; and don’t be afraid to take a slice or a dab, rather than an entire pickle to eat with cheese, in order to keep all of the flavors in balance,”

“Ah- but don’t throw out the pickle brine when the pickles are gone! It’s main culinary use is in making more pickles; but you can also use it in sauces, as a replacement for vinegar, in a marinade, to boost the flavor of potatoes, as a part of your bread- or you will when one of you figures out how to control your food luck-”

“Ice-pops, hangover cures... honestly, anything you would use a pickle for, you can use the brine for too. Shoot, I might start making mozzarella and putting them in pickle brines-”

“Oh!”

“Mnhm, I’ll do that. Deb, Beat, you two will be learning with- ah, Fern, you want to learn too?”

“Yes, I quite like cheese- but mostly, I need a plate of all the tea sandwiches, two slices of cake, a thermos of tea, some cups, and a small umbrella,”

“Havij’s not ready to come back out?”
“...Neo really hurt her, Mab. I don’t think she meant to do it; I honestly think she tripped, and Chopper’s got her doing RICE on her ankle, but... it’s not good. I don’t think anyone’s at fault- but I also don’t think it’s the kind of thing that can be taken back,”

“Ah. Well; go deeper back into the closet, to where I keep the shoes. There should be a bench in there; much easier than using an umbrella to keep the clothing clear. As for the food; would you rather have a bento?”

“Bentos are available?”

“Mm- let me see now... this is the thermos you’ll want, it’s got two cups; and a nice honey-lemon-chamomile, to calm down and cut the heavy, sweet, and fatty flavors. Does she want chocolate or lemon for the cake?”

“Two chocolate, please,”

“Right- Sanji; ah, thank you; and into the boxes they go. Now, I’ll send you up with the tea sandwiches, and tea cakes, and biscuits too- Havij won’t be coming down for dinner, will she?”

“...Probably not,”

“Right; more cheeses, cured meats, and pickles, too. Bottom tier is cheese, meat, and pickles; middle tier is tea cakes, biscuits, clotted cream, butter, preserves, and salted nuts; top tier is sandwiches, individually wrapped. Rinse it out and leave it in the sink, or wash it and leave it to dry before you go to bed, Fern- wait, would you rather have a basket?”

“Um... yeah, actually, and some cutlery? Napkins?”

“Right- spoons, picks, napkins, picnic blanket, plates, shawl for Havij, shawl for you-”

“Ah, it’s cold up there, I forgot-”

“A text-enabled phone, if you need help; and the pack it all goes in, which you can keep if you’d like, I think it would work a bit better going forwards- oh, and i’ve got a honey-brown one if you’d-ah, I guess not,”

“Wow! This is perfect!”

“Mm. Off with you, then; Sanji, shall I put the excess up in the main?”

“Please do; we’ll leave you to your conversation,”

“Mm. Send in a round to the Sanitary; I feel that Neo will need some homely comfort just as much as Havij will,”

“Will do, Mab,”

Ah, my wife is so considerate and kind!
By heavens, that was odd; still, with a flutter and a blink, the food is set out on the main galley table, and the majority of the people who came in trickle back out—Deborah only sticks around long enough to give Fern a boost back up into the Wardrobe, where Havij is still hiding.

I set out my tiered cake stand, arrange slices of cake and tart, scones and biscuits, and the many sandwiches as well; platters of cured meat, fresh cheeses, plain black tea, sugar, honey, lemon, cream…

And then I bid Mila, Parsley, and Sohei to take a seat, sit myself down, and pour.

It’s all very quiet for a long moment, and then I speak.

“Our crew operates much more like a family, or a dorm; we each have our own interests, and we support each other in our various dreams and escapades… but at the end of the day, we each do genuinely care about each other, and want each other to be happy. Sohei, please—tell me why Neopolitan made her sister cry,”

“...It’s. It’s hard for me to talk about. Bastani Azmi and Munire were good friends of mine, a-and it was on that friendship that I hired Neo in the first place; I kept her because she’s good at her job, but I hired her because of her parents. Neo… she was on her way to becoming a very successful session musician when her parents died, and Havij was all of eight at the time. Neo couldn’t keep the hours of a session musician anymore, with her parents gone… and, of course, Havij… I’m fairly certain Havij was there, the day the Mutsu sank. Both of her parents worked on it, of course—”

“Gods in heaven! Their parents were Royal Marines?”

“Aye, Sirrah Parsley; their mother was an engineer, and her father was a seaman. Good people; very brave, and very kind. The reason I think Havij saw the ship sink… it’s her reaction to thunderstorms, and as you know…”

“The Mutsu sank due to internal explosion,”

“Quite right. Neopolitan and Havij were orphaned all at once, that day; Neo had to give up her dream job, and take one that was well within her abilities, but in no way engaging for her. And little Havij… she’s never been quite right again,”

“Well, if she saw her parents die, if she saw an entire ship—”

“Battleship,”

“Ouff! An entire battleship sinking due to internal explosion, all witnessed by a child of eight years; yes, even a grown soul would come out strange from something like that. I witnessed a murder when I was five; certainly, I was never the same again,”

“Mm. As for why Neo made Havij cry… frankly speaking, they just don’t gel as people. It doesn’t help that Neo’s fairly clumsy when she’s not got that hammer of hers in hand; today was just a case of Neo being her clumsy self, and Havij trying to work through her grief,”

“Did Havij make something particularly breakable?”

“Missus Mab, Havij’s only hobby is making ships in bottles,”

“Oh shit,”
“Oh yes; and, I’m quite sure that she remade her parent’s battleship… and that Neo broke it, when she tripped over her own feet, as she does nearly once a fortnight.”

“No wonder the poor girl ran in cryin’; Parsley, can’t we fix it or-?”

“Mila… it’s a one of a kind, made to order Art-object. The bottle is completely broken, Sohei?”

“The way Havij was crying, I’m fairly certain of it,”

“Then there’s nothing to be done; the ship was built with the bottle in mind, and without the bottle, the ship is of no use,”

“Ach, it’s a shame- Havij was so excited about working on it, you know? She was overjoyed when I told her she could use any of the crafting supplies she liked- chattered on about her project, what she was going to do, how pretty it would be when it was done...”

“The real shame is that her ship was beautiful even when it was broken; it must have been stunning when it was all together. It doesn’t surprise me that Doctor Chopper had to sedate Neo to get to her ankle; I’ve only seen her that upset on the anniversary of her parents death… and a bit after her parents died. Even when Doctor did sedate Neo, she was still inconsolable,”

“...Well, that’s a hell of a thing. No one’s fault, I think- and if it was… if Neo did mean to break Havij’s sculpture, she has to live with the result of her actions for the rest of her life. Havij is going to remember this forever; and, whether her sister meant it or not, only time will tell if Havij ever forgives her sister or herself for what happened today,”

“Halloo~!”

“Ah, Chairete! Come in, come in-”

“Ah, hello; Sohei, Neo’s turned her ankle, and I’ve come to find Havij and bring her round to check on her sister. She’s a reet canny one, our Havij; no reason to keep her away while Neo’s out. Er- oh, I’ve interrupted, I’m sorry, ever so-”

“Actually, Tellicherry, you’re just in time. Excuse me, everyone; it sits wrong with me to leave Neapolitan alone, and Havij is at the age where dragging her out of a snit before she’s ready will just make her snitting worse than before. Ta, for now;”

“Uh- sure, Sohei,”

“Of course! Our condolences for Neo’s ankle,”

“Here, Cherry- take my seat, and have a nice cuppa,”

“...well, if you insist, Sohei,”

And Tellicherry takes Sohei’s place at the table. She sets a small fruit crate filled with something broken that clinks down next to her on the floor; I can see down into it over the table. It’s full of large pieces of broken glass, the most broken of which are glued to the bottom of a beautiful ship.

That must be Havij’s ship in a bottle.
Tellicherry is a Fairy, like me—unlike me, she’s not a particularly strong flyer, and has no real reason to become stronger. She dresses like an ascetic or a bride—long black braid down her back, bright red clothing… Oh. Nose ring; she’s a devotee of Pyth, specifically. But… she also has marks that… I think she follows all the Fae Gods?

I’ve mentioned before that, although I took Divinity, I very nearly failed out of it. I don’t know much, theologically speaking, about the Gods, or the Faesh pantheon.

Tellicherry does; in fact, I’m fairly sure we’ve picked up a Priestess- or a Zealot- not just another accountant.

I started growing my hair out when I was three years old. At ten, I was bade to devote myself to a god or goddess; I chose Pyth because… well, nevermind why.

My nose was pierced as a mark of my devotion, and for five years after that, I was taught the Mysteries of Pyth the Bull. Katas, dances, songs and secrets— all these things I learned. I also learned double-entry bookkeeping as a matter of devotion; Pyth is the God of Commotion and Order, after all.

I was also picked to become the Mother Superior of our monastery, and so I began to learn the whole of the Pantheon; Acobi, Garmuth, Hense, Lemaign, Micia, Olak, Jevel, Pyth, Roathus, Yudrig, Zul, and Caelya. These are the Gods of the Fae.

I worship all the Gods, as they rise and fall with the turning of the Wheel; but the one I praise above all others is Pyth. I’m only just starting to understand the truth of His Mysteries; the God of Commotion and Order is no child’s toy, and the meaning of Strength is not something a child would know.

(Acobi, the Chastened Maid; the Goddess of Oath and Abandon. No one bound Her save herself; it was the Chastened Maid Herself that designed Her shackles. By Her will are Oaths made binding; and by your own are Oaths bound.

Garmuth, the Crippled Duke; the God of Purpose and Folly. Despite His lack of senses, the Crippled Duke gives counsel to the humble and the Wise. His is the voice which tells you which way to turn, even when no way appears; He is the still, quiet voice, which always speaks the truth.

Hense, the Veiled Widow; the Goddess of Pain and Pleasure. It is said that the Veiled Widow is smiling beneath Her black shrouds, Her body all scratches and scars. The body is Her domain; in all it’s joys and sorrows.

Lemaign, the Mason King; the God of Hope and Despair. Before each battle, soldiers pray that the Mason King grant them high morale, and blight the morale of their enemies. For some reason, he’s also the patron of all Architects.

Micia, the Lorn Mother; the Goddess of Loss and Longing. The Mother who gives birth to all, and waits to greet the dead. The Lorn Mother gave away Her heart, and bears the Stars of the Sky in its
Olak, the Carefree Son; the God of Chance and Whim. He is worshipped by gamblers, risk takers, and those seeking good luck. Alive forever in a single moment, the Carefree Son plays beyond the reach of time.

Jevel, the Tower Keeper; the God of Health and Atrophy. He gives His worshippers longer lives, though He sometimes strikes them down with atrophy and disease. Half the Tower Keeper’s face is that of a youth in His prime, and the other, an old man.

My God is Pyth, the Wakeful Bull; the God of Commotion and Order. He grants greater strength to his followers; his worshippers are warriors, soldiers, archers and architects and blacksmiths, too. The Wakeful Bull, patient and temperamental, treads both road and furrow with the same great strength to His stride.

Roathus, the Gorging Host; the God of Thirst and Plenty. The Gorging Host grows ever larger yet remains insatiable, His eyes awash in tears. There are some who call him The Hunger; but that’s a cult-name, not his True Name.

Yudrig, the Morning Stallion; the God of Impulse and Bravery. The Morning Stallion affects the wishes of all people upon the break of each new day. In older times, he was the God of the Sun.

Zul, the Silent Singer; the Goddess of Truth and Secrets. Her lips drip with blood from keeping secrets and truths locked in Her mouth or resting on her tongue, but never spoken. She keeps the ones that aren’t to be mentioned; the ones that can’t be said, even though She wishes to; and the ones that She hopes someone will ask about, even though She hides them. It is said she sang the World into being, and will sing it’s ending, in time. Zulwood trees are sacred to her.

Caelya, the Boundless Infinite; the Goddess of Story and Song. There is magic in a bard’s song, and it’s called Inspiration. It’s what tells you you’re to fight; and that you’re going to win. She made the words that the Singer sang, so long ago; and it is from her that all Inspiration comes. Acobi is her twin.)

Even now, full grown and out on my own, I still recite the Pantheopaly to myself, just to remember…

“Ach, Havij and Neo have a terrible relationship. They don’t talk to each other; they don’t share.

Is it not said that one good deed begets another? And so I shall help them; I’ve left it alone for much too long.

“I’m not a hero, I must emphasize- even if I’m butting in where I don’t belong, I’m no kind of hero. I just can’t stand to see two sisters fight like this. There’s so little time, in life- none of it guaranteed- and to see them waste it like this… I can’t stand it!”

“What do you mean, Miss Tellicherry?”

“Well, Missus Mab, I mean… I know it wasn’t always like this. Sohei told me a story about how he took the two of them- the Bastani girls- to the beach once. They both collected seashells except Havij was too young to realize what seashells actually looked like, so she only collected rocks. When they got home- ah, I should mention, Sohei used to live with the Bastani’s as a sort of housekeeper? Or rather, he was the children’s governor- governorness being the female form- and it was only after their parents deaths that he became wholly responsible for them both.
I think the real reason Neo became an accountant is- well, twofold. For one, no one else was willing to hire Sohei after the Bastani’s had; there are many in Ryugu Mergyo who do not consider Mink to be, well, people. -anyway, once the girls and Sohei got home, they compared their finds and that’s when Havij realized she fucked up. She demanded Neo give her some of her seashells, but Neo refused; apparently, she got so much saltwater in her eyes trying to find her collection, it looked like she’d had a crying fit at the beach.

Havij fought Neo for the shells and bit Neo’s back so hard she has a scar by her shoulder blade. Their relationship, such as it is, was colored by that day forever more; I doubt Havij remembers it aside from the story we tell her of it, but Neo almost certainly does, and as that was the summer before their parents took commision on the battleship Musu…”

“I see. That is a conundrum… as is what to do with that poor broken memory you’ve got in the box. Pop it up on the table, and we’ll have a look?”

“Alright- I was thinking of kintoki, for what to do with it; although, I certainly don’t quite have the skill for it.”

“I do- and I think that will work just fine; you can help me, if you’d like?”

“I’d be delighted,”

And I smile at Queen Mab. She’s actually very kind, behind that stern exterior. There beats the heart of one blessed by the Pantheon, under that humming breast. ...I wonder if she’d mind teaching me to fly better? I was raised by nuns, so, I didn’t have anyone who could teach me the proper ways...

That was one of the reasons I left, really; Pyth came to me in prayer, and told me that I could not find the right way to use my whole body by chaotically flailing on my own. He said unto me, that I must go and seek a teacher; and when the right one came, they would see me as their student, and teach me what I needed to know.

...Maybe there’ll be something I can teach Queen Mab? I hope so; it would be nice, to be able to help a Queen of my people. Imagine, the Queen of the Fae being helped by a fairy-woman who doesn’t even know how to fly!

I wonder if Tellicherry will tutor me in Divinity? She might- and I’d like, at the very least, someone go over my forms with me.

Parsley and Mila left some time during Tea; they ate, and they drank, they listened quietly- then they shared a telling look, and then they took a tea tray of things up to the Sanitary to “keep Miss Neopolitan Sonnato company in this trying time.”

I took it to mean they were going to go get some more information. I waved them on, and consolidated the Tea service.
“...Do you have anything else to do today, Tellicherry, or were you wanting...?"

“No, not really,"

“Ah, good. You know, I’ve been meaning to speak with Franky about expanding our Altar; it’s not really big enough for everyone to use, and there are things we ought to put on it that we just don’t have room for,"

“Mm- I noticed the ofrenda; I assume our joining of the crew wouldn’t have strained it’s space too much, but getting an entire company of Postals, that’s a bit different,"

“I think it’s a votive offering, not just a regular ship in a bottle- forgive me for being so blunt, but I was never a good follower of any of the Gods, especially Zul,"

“No, no- I think you’re a devotee of the deeper Mysteries, and have been since you were very young; even learning Divinity in college-level classes doesn’t really touch on the deeper levels, you’d need to go to Seminary for that. I’d be happy to talk with you about it, if you’d like?"

“I would- I was going to ask for just that, actually. -ah, she’s calmed down; see, here they both come now,”

“...but Fern, it’s not teatime anymore, I- isn’t it nearly dinner?"

“Yeah, but Missus Mab has a whole fridge full of things we can eat, and Chef Sanji already knows you won’t want to go up to dinner- did I not mention I have the Sight? Because I do, I mean- I don’t wear this eye mask just because,”

“Oh, I see; your True Eyes overpower your physical eyes when you meta-literally open them. By keeping them shut, you keep control over what you See,”

“Exactly!”

“Hm. Have you looked into contoured masks at all?”

“I have, but I haven’t been ready to commit to that level of self-control; there’s enough space behind some of them that I’d be able to open my eyes behind the mask...”

“Well, so don’t make it an issue, then- have a mask for work, and mask for sleeping, and maybe one for everything else- like, um, camera obscura? That’s not the word for it, um...”

“...ka?”

“Well, um, what I’m trying to say is- an artist’s technique where a mirror gets half-silvered, so you can see through the glass to what you’re drawing, and see your drawing at the same time. I think a pair of glasses, maybe like Sancho’s- the ones with the lens in the middle and the frame with the spaces?”

“Oh yeah, the ones that make him look like an owl-”

“Well, what if you had a pair of, um, of bifocals- not actual lenses, but half-silvered and only half-there in your frames? Then, you could look out- ”

“And look in at the same time! Interesting; I have absolutely no idea what would happen, but I want to find out!”

“Cool! Um, have you considered using other kinds of glass for seeing through? Not everything has
to be Quartz; I’ve heard good things about Obsidian, for example,"

“Um… hm. I’ve always wanted to try Pyrite,"

“It might be that there’s an entire world of mirrors waiting for you to look in them, y’know,"

“Mnhm. Oh, we’re here- Hello, Mab!"

“Hello, Fern. You and Havij got hungry?”

“Yep,"

“U-um, yeah, but- wait, how did you get here so quickly?”

“I was already here; and I’m still there. Thank you for reminding me- are you going back?”

“Um- no, I don’t think so,”

“Mm. Good- Dollperganger: Drop Beat,”

“Wha- Wah!”

I reach up and roll my wrist; the charm bracelet I’ve only just started wearing chimes and clinks against itself, and my shadow darts down, smaller and smaller until it’s no bigger than a honeyjacket, smaller still until it’s the size of a poppy seed, and then finally it darts into the Hive, where I keep all of my Shadow Selves when they aren’t being used.

“Is that new, Mab?”

“Mm, it is, Fern; I do best with mnemonic devices, so I was looking at charm bracelets anyway. This one was in the Hotel gift shop, and I suppose Sanji saw me looking at it- they were asking a frankly absurd price for it, but, well… I liked it, and that’s rather rare as far as jewellery goes,”

“He bought it for you?”

“Mm. I think the day we checked out; he only gave it to me this morning, and I haven’t taken it off since,”

“Um… I- I think it really, um, brings a spark of whimsy and fun to your outfit,”

“Hmhm. I was feeling simple, today; sweater dress, tights, and the shoes seemed like enough to me,”

“It’s a very winter outfit, innit? The only real color you’ve got on is the gold of y’bracelet an’ the brown of y’dress, Mab; you certainly do look warm, though,”

“Oh, goodness, I didn’t even ask- are either of you cold? Have I gone over how to use this room yet?”

“Um, no,”

“Goodness gracious- well, sit down, Havij, I’ll explain to you and Tellicherry how things work,”
And then I do. I explain how it works—requisitions, standard wardrobes, the whole lot.

“Cor, that’s bloody useful, innit?”

“Language, Miss Tellicherry!”

I said it with a broad, obvious wink; Tellicherry, who I think is at least a starter-friend now, shortles with laughter.

“Um… so, I’m wondering now if I shouldn’t have a work table or a workshelf or something of the like up here, Fern,”

“How- ah, right. You’re a machinist, not a woodworker or a wright… I dunno, I mean- Missus Mab?”

“Hm. Depends on how small you’re willing to work; some things, I just buy rather than go through the hassle of getting anyone to fabricate for me, simply because the tolerances involved are so monotonous and finicky, I’d rather farm them out than make you or Franky or even Havij, now, lose their blessed minds,”

“Ah. Kind of like how I only learned the bare basics of astrology back ho- erm, back in Ryugu Mergyo, what with the distinctive lack of actual night sky?”

“A bit, yeah. Havij- if you want to learn to fix up the sewing machines, I’ve no problem it. I’d be happy to teach you to sew, as well, if you’d like,”

“…I think I’d, um, I’d like that. Ah… I’m, I’m not angry at my sister, not really; I’m angry that my ship got broken, and really sad, too, because I worked so hard on it, and… and I’m upset because my sister hurt herself. But, I’m not angry at her; there’s nothing for me to forgive, I don’t think,”

“…Alright, Havij; do you want help doing kintoki on your ship, or would you rather leave it to Mab and me?”

“Um… I think I can help without being too sad; but… I want to do something nice for my sister, too. The ship is for me; my next big project is for her.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to restore a saxophone I got from the junkyard; I think I got every piece I could from the yard, and the rest I got for cheap from a consignment shop. Mostly bits and pieces, and chunks of other sax’s that were broken down; I think I’ve got enough pieces and parts and examples to make one good horn, plus all the bits to put it together,”

“Oh my. Well; I quite like your ambition! And… I am to assume that you’re keeping this from Neo, Havij?”

“I am, Missus Mab; not that she’d be shocked, or anything, I just want to surprise her… and there’s no reason for her not to play, now, there can’t be that much accounting work to do,”
“Well- no, not after the first week or so, and we’ll be well finished by the time we get to the first island in the New World.”

“See, Miss Cherry! S-so, um, I think… I think my sister will be dreadfully bored if all she does is, um, is train and haunt the library,”

“I quite agree; nothing good comes of boredom.”

And I stare into the beaming face of a chronically nervous Havij, and I think- my goodness, she’s just like me but shy. This will be interesting to watch play out…

Another cold day under the Sea.

Everyone seems to be settling in more or less easily; and after a few small mishaps, the newcrew has adjusted to using the Laundry system, and everyone has settled into their various routines.

Havij has been hard at work, carefully refurbishing the franken-phone for her sister; oddly enough, getting the monstrous dents out of the instrument was the least difficult. So far, she’s been taking the most time on the tooling of the designs on the Sax; unifying I think three or four different designs, and adding her own little flourishes- without overwhelming the surface of the instrument. It’s tough, because she only has one chance to get the tooling right. She’s been tracing out curves and arcs on the soft brass of the instrument for days and days- it’s only today she’s actually started using the chisel.

Fern, meanwhile, has been carefully taking apart something… old. It’s very old, and missing more than half its parts- which, I suppose, explains why it’s got only half the potency I’d expect from something so old. It still works, is the thing- but just from what Fern’s been taking apart, I can tell it had a significant number of functions that just aren’t there anymore. It’s a Tarot Device; something like what a Computer does, except instead of a person who does complicated mathematics, it’s a machine Haki-built for something like the same job… except, where a Computer mostly works in physics and accounting (that’s what Tellicherry and Neo actually do, they just hold Assistant titles because the pay was better), a Tarot Device works in very immediate Sensing and Probability. I’ve seen a historical example; Bylgja had what’s commonly known now as a Combined Computer Device, a visor, tablet, and vocal relay device set that allowed her to claim tactical expertise over any battlefield.

Fern has parts of each thing- part of a visor, part of a tablet, and part of a vocal relay device. No one thing is whole and entire; the closest is the tablet portion, and it’s missing at least half of it’s vital components. Even so, I’ve allowed her access to the schematics of my Battle Crown; it’s an altered version of Bylgja’s tablet, after all. It’s also a lot easier to add functions, rather than subtract them, I think- or, no, other way around. Thankfully, my schematics also include the schema for Bylgja’s visor and vocal relay (vox).

The Tablet requires Fern learn Runes, which is simple enough; and to use the Faesh Tarot, which is not so simple. Unlike in the other Blues, there is only one spread for Tarot in Sky Blue. That spread is the Four Royal Advisors. (Technically, she could use a regular deck of Grease playing cards; but that’s actually fairly advanced- it’s much easier to learn Tarot than it is to forcibly remember each value for Grease. Of course, she’ll need both to really make full use of her Device, but- baby steps, love.)
Younger people read Tarot as a fortune-telling system; a deck of cards with enough story beats inside to tell any tale that needs telling. This isn’t untrue, mind; a good Seer and the right deck of cards can see far beyond the veil. It can be used as simple entertainment, and to earn a bit of cash. On a deeper level, however, Tarot is also a meditation tool- there are some who say that’s the proper use for it, but it’s just a tool. It’s a particularly multifaceted tool; so long as you put it to work, it will work as it works.

This spread was invented as a meditation tool, a meditation on life- the influences on it, the subtleties, and the paths through it. The cards can tell the future; they can also berate you for ignoring your own advice, or answer an entirely different question.

Using the Four Royal Advisors spread for the first time is a long process. I’m fairly practiced at it, so it only takes me about forty-five minutes to lay it out; and another twenty for a very shallow, surface-level reading. Fern took two hours to lay it out, and another hour and a half for the shallow reading; and that was with lunch in the middle. Deep readings take much, much longer.

“The Royal Advisors were once the kings of each Kingdom of Fae; they were paid handsomely and ate well. These are the coins I use to bind the space before I lay out the cards; and this is the string I keep them on. I use one-beri coins because there’s hardly anything you can buy with them except at festivals; and that’s where I spend them, mostly on games of chance, or handed out to small children, or as offerings to local gods,”

“Okay; ah, was it right that I set some of my lunch aside for the spread?”

“It was; ah, if you only have a drink, be sure to pour four for the Advisors. It’s polite. This spread can also be used for inspiration, when you’re trying to create a story or something of the kind; legend says that the Four Royal Advisors was created by a storyteller,”

The dining table, being the largest in the ship, is clear. Well, it should be, it’s well between services and I got a piece of flexi-glass to keep the spread from being disturbed by luncheon antics…

Anyway. We’re using my deck for this, as Fern hasn’t found a deck amongst the many I have that really speaks to her. I think I know which one she’ll like, though- I’ll offer it amongst a few others I think would suit.

“This is the story of the Four Royal Advisors. After a great war, four kingdoms were united into one. The ruler, both powerful and wise, had long ago learned that no single person could be right, or even choose correctly, every time. Thus, this ruler called upon the four defeated kings, who each had a special talent, to provide her counsel.

“These defeated kings became the Four Royal Advisors; and when the Great Queen needed advice, to make a decision or in the steering of the ship of state, she would call upon them. The five would then debate the issue amongst themselves until an answer became clear. They didn’t always like each other- or agree- but they, all five of them, were bound together in service to their people, the crown, and in the patient study of all Worlds: physical, spiritual, mythical, mental, and mystical. This ritual, in and of itself, is mystical- so do not look within it for a mystic reading. The whole thing is the
mystic portion. You, as the interpreter, hold the mental aspect- there can be no ritual without someone to actually do the ritualized bits, after all, and getting an answer to your question does no good if you don’t think it over, too.

“I shall explain the spread as it expands from you, the reader; firstly, I shall explain the Eye Within the Wheel.

“The First Advisor to the Queen was a physician and a learned expert in all matters of the person; winged with feathers and learned in many things. It is said that the eye is a window to the soul; but it is also an eye. This Advisor could soothe a fever or heal a cough, and could speak to the condition of the Queen, to where the mind stood and how the body influenced it. The First Advisor, the Learned Physician, sees things as they truly are- but only within a very narrow realm.

“The first card, the Iris, represents the self, around which the Physical World revolves as it moves forward. The self moves and the Wheel turns around it; but the World of the single person, your World, remains steady.

“The cards laid above the Iris-self, from two to seven, represent a known and visible life; your current story of existence, the immediate and accessible place in which the self exists. You should recognize these cards and know their story as the Physician knows the workings of the body. As you move forwards from the second to the seventh card, look from the present to the immediate future, to see what is obvious to be seen.

“The cards laid below the Iris-self, from eight to thirteen, are the unseen life; your Mysteries and the forces which drive the events and people surrounding the self. These cards are representatives of the subtext of your story, the true meaning and secret catalysts of the visible life. Learn these, too; understand them if you can. Do not discount them out of turn- just because you cannot see the subtext of something does not mean it isn’t there. There is always something underneath; look behind you from the eight card and understand where your present situation comes from; look ahead to the thirteenth card to see what may influence where you go from where you are. Questions?”

“Let me see if I’ve got this right- two to seven is what I can see; eight to thirteen is what I can’t. Each card corresponds, like, two-eight, three-nine, and so on; what I see has something underneath it, a hidden reason for being. The card in the middle of the eye-shape- the Iris in the Eye- is the best representation of me. Right?”

“…The Iris represents you, right now . Do the spread again in a week, and you might have changed- the cards will reflect it. Then again, there’s more than one interpretation of each card- that’s why you’ve got a small booklet of tarot card definitions, and a very thick dictionary,”

“Hm… is the tablet from my Device just a storage method for the information in my books? So I don’t have to keep it in my head?”

“Hmhm. Yes, so far as I know; and yes, I can give you the schema for how to make something that would do that. You’d have to take a Fae-ish Oath, because the knowledge is technically Secret; but I am allowed to teach you,”

“…Hm. Can you give me the first principles, and let me figure it out from there?”

“-Yes, I suppose. It’d take much longer, though,”

“I think that’s the way to go; it’s not getting there, it’s always the swim that’s most interesting. I’ll figure it out, Missus Mab, it doesn’t matter how long it takes,”
“Hm? Hmhmhmhm- I see what you mean. Well, shall we move on to the next part of the spread?”

“I think so, yes,”

“Right. The Wheel of Storms is the second part of the card spread. The Second Advisor to the Queen was a Scholar and a knower of all things from books and reports; a discerner of moral and immoral, of ethical and unethical, of rules and guidelines; a noble one, a philosopher, but rooted deeply in the world. This Scholar could put the longest name to the smallest beetle, but was tied to the joys and sorrows and lusts and gifts and wonders and horrors of this World. This is no bad thing; the Scholar lives a present and energetic life, and looks outwards as much as inwards. The Queen depended greatly on the Scholar to bring news of the wide World into the narrow considerations of the crown. Even so, a scholar cannot solve every problem,

“The cards descending from above the eye from fourteen to seventeen are the first of the Pillar of Virtues. These are gifts and passions to be proud of; know the four virtues you are shown, that you may be proud of them. Descending from below the eye from eighteen to twenty-one are likewise four cards in the pillar of virtues to know well; you should nourish them, as they are at present only seeds of virtues that may someday exist. Consider how these virtues might grow in your heart, and whether some should grow more than others. Questions?”

“Um- this line of cards, top to bottom in the Storm, is the Pillar of Virtues. Above the Eye, the Pillar is Strongest; below, only just begun. Um… are they stronger nearest to the Eye?”

“In the first half of the pillar, they aren’t. Below the eye, it’s reversed- strongest to weakest again, but strongest is closest to the eye.”

“I see. I think… this pen and diary you gave me, they’re for me to make notes with the Tarot?”

“Aye, if you like-”

“I do. I’ve put each card on the spread in order of draw, and it’s orientation. I’ll try reading it at the end, I think,”

“Alright; that’s your choice. The cards that trail behind the eye, moving towards, through, and away from it on the flat plain from twenty-two to twenty-nine are the pillar of vices; consider what lies in your past, and how it may make trouble for you in the future. Resolve to avoid these vices; or if you can’t avoid them, embrace and understand them. Not all vices are inherently bad for you; some can be useful tools, others useful weapons, and some few can be turned into virtues with a bit of work. Remember them as much as, if not more than, your virtues. Never let them guide you,”

“…”

“The cards which begin to the west and circle with the sun from thirty to forty-nine are the cycle of your life- as it appears now, for who you are now. It is here that you may see the future most clearly, if that is your desire: read the dawn, the day, the dusk, and the night of your life-to-come in the circle. Keep clarity of mind and maintain your Virtues; do not fear what lies before you. All of us travel this path, one way or another,”

“…”

“The Winds closest to the center of the Storm blow the hardest; the spokes closest to the axle move fastest. Sometimes, they both seem to travel opposite of their direction. The cards from fifty to fifty-three represent close personal influences on your life; events or people who shaped your existence, or soon will. These influences may not always be good; mark them and judge for yourself what action,
if any, you should take. If you wish to remove something or someone from this close sphere of influence, set that card aside when you are ready, and act in the coming year to ‘set it aside’ in your life. Do be sure you know exactly what you’re setting aside- suffering, while terrible, is often the only possible way to grow. There are seeds from certain trees and plants that can only sprout and grow if they’ve been, well, baked first. They’re covered in a kind of crystallized wax, and the wax is too thick for the baby plant to break through. Forest fires are terrifying, and horrible to live through- and if they did not come, there are trees and flowers that would never be seen again,”

“...!”

“Mm. The outer spokes from fifty-four to fifty-seven are not yours to control; they represent worldly influences. These cannot be removed or prevented, except by luck or effort; they are the way of the World, and can only be watched for and compromised with. If you wish to change the World-that-is, look to these cards, and prepare for a great work ahead of you,”

“...”

“The Third part of the spread is the Wall; and the Wall has two natures- the Inner Wall, and the Outer Wall. The Third Advisor to the Queen was a constant naysayer: a Cynic, a pessimist, and a faithful curmudgeon. Many people, even sometimes the other Advisors, asked the Queen, ‘Why bother? Why listen to someone who can never say yes?’ To which the Queen replied, ‘Because at the very least I know one person who is unafraid to say no.’ The Cynic may not always see things as they are, or may see the world through a murk of despair- but at least a pessimist can be pleasantly surprised. It is better to know the obstacles you face than to pretend there are no obstacles at all.

“The cards from fifty-eight to sixty-four are obstacles to, perhaps, overcome; they prevent the self and the Wheel of Storms from achieving pleasure and enlightenment. You may know some of them; some may be old friends. Some may be inside you- Inner Walls; some may be outside you- Outer Walls. Not all are surmountable, and few can be conquered alone.

“Then again, some may be new. Many may be linked to the vices, virtues, and influences of the Wheel. Consider how this dividing wall might be scaled, disassembled, tunneled under, or run through- and consider the costs of overcoming such a thing. ‘No’ exists for a reason; focus on the achievable,”

“...”

Fern scratches notes into her book furiously- I think she’s been… yes, she’s been writing down my instruction of her verbatim. That’s not all I’m doing, but; of all the Suntides, Vinsmoke Fernanda has the most aptitude for Knowing Transference. I think it’s because she’s a seer. Think of it like… copying over a book that can access several libraries worth of information, if you think about what you need to know hard enough.

Writing down the spoken words of my lecture only gets the barest outline of it; I’m also giving her the knowledge of how a Tarot Device works, because I used to use one all the time back when I was an Office Lady. I’m giving her the knowledge of the Suits, the Tarot, and an entire grimoire’s worth of spells that can only be used in tandem with a Tarot Device. Of course, it’ll be up to her to actually learn to use any of what I’ve taught her- but the Knowing I’ve given over to her, based as it is on my own Knowing, my own experience… well, there’s a reason Fae are so particular about blood, and I’ll leave it at that.
“The fourth, and final part of the spread is the Tree. The Fourth Advisor to the Queen was a Dreamer, a do-nothing, know-nothing jester who was always changing their opinions and never kept to plans. Their only skills were in making light and making laughter; which is not to say they did not understand seriousness, and solemnity. Where the other advisors made careful studies, the Dreamer acted and spoke on instinct. What many missed on first glance was that the Dreamer did not repeat themselves often; and they did not repeat their mistakes. After all, if there was no laughter, no joy or pleasure in it, could it possibly be the right decision to make? And the point of going the wrong way is to get closer to the right way of doing something. The Dreamer climbed trees, Fern- and often fell out of them; but they said the importance was in ascension, and in falling, and in climbing again.

“The first cards of the Tree are the Branches. They are paired up the Tree from sixty-five to seventy-four, and represent the steps to joy; they are situations, people, events, or learnings yet to come that can lead the self to enlightenment and peace. You may have climbed a few of them, or gone up and fallen back down. Learn each Branch, and consider what tasks are before you to achieve what you seek; not to mention what exactly you do seek, and whether this path will lead you there.

“The final four cards of the spread are the Crown, representing the actual ascent: your journey from the Eye, through the Storm, past the Wall, and up the Tree towards your goal. They are actions to take, decisions you must make, and things you are learning or have yet to learn. Be patient with what these cards reveal to you; only you can say where on the journey you currently stand, and how far you still have to climb. You’ve written down initial words and observations from the cards, as well as their placement?”

“Yes, Mab,”

“Then that’s it for the day; clear up, take a stretch somewhere, and get ready for dinner. We’ll go through your spread tomorrow,”

“Okay, Mab,”

Mm. Transfer-shock. So much of her mind is now bound up in organizing and distributing the information I just gave her, the little little bit of consciousness left is only barely up to the task of getting her through the evening. A less practiced tutor would let her go to bed immediately, but that’s not the best idea; enforcing good habits for her body will allow more of her mind to focus on the information she’s acquired, rather than on what her body still needs.

At this point, we’re actually through the Undersea Passage; time sure does fly when you’re learning new crewmates and weathering emotional upheavals. Anyway; I make sure that Fern eats a hearty dinner, and washes up thoroughly, and goes straight to bed. I let Franky know not to expect her bright and early tomorrow; and then Sanji and I retire for the night.

The morning actually dawns; we’re still underwater, but there’s light now. Ah, this is exciting; I’ve never actually been to the New World before!
The Clicks

“You will fail all of the bank robberies you don’t commit,”

I slide out of bed with a thump, stretch, and remove my sleeping mask. It’s new; I actually keep them in the dorm mini-fridge. Mostly, it’s full of soda-pop, beer, spring water, and pads on chill because some of my sisters like the cooling sensation.

“Don’t let numbers tell you what to do. You are blood and earth, not numbers and chalk. Not anymore,”

I stretch, and after a satisfying pop in my back, open my eyes. Ignoring the scintillating whirl of the infinite cosmos-

“We will be breaching the surface of the Sea at approximately fourteen hundred hours, or two after the noon; it will be sunny, but not particularly warm. Light chance of frogs, with mist predicted closer to the evening hours. Cry baby cry, make your mama sigh,”

Hm. What am I going to wear today? I won’t have time to change any of my clothing for a good week and a half after this, so it has to be versatile enough to last, or I have to layer up. Hm. Maybe a bag? No, I need to maximise space for provisions, I’ll be separated from my crewmates for basically the entirety of that time- so not the skirt; I’ll wear that after the Thing this week. Okay. Overalls, Tights, Body Suit, Wrist Warmers. Socks and Bra I can wear for days on end with minimal washing if any; no panties- scratch that, yes panties; and Shoes that won’t quit on me. That’s clothing sorted- what am I going to need?

I’m going to need my Tarot Device- what, all of it? That would be preferable- how? Gems, pick a deck, Faesh playing cards, a bottle of pickle juice, scrap metal, magic.

Okay. Supplies?

Merjin Canteen; Lockpicks; Ball Bearings or Caltrops; Safety Candle; Matches or Lighter; Component Pouch; Holy Symbol (who-? Tellicherry,); Mess Kit; Rations for at least two weeks; Therma Whistle; Small Crystal Orb (who-? Mab or Franky); Trap Kit. Optional adventuring gear.

Hnn. Okay- shower, wash everything, and then a braid which is not my favorite thing but it will keep everything neat-ish for the duration- scarf? Yes.

Scarf.

I move at a respectable clip after making my decisions; my clothing comes out of my locker and gets tossed into my shower basket; my pajamas are nice, I like them; it is a truth universally
acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be covered in flies; get
dressed, start packing.

New Backpack? Won’t make it.

Old backpack? Too worn out.

Mab? Mab.

“Good Morning, Mab-“

“-! Good morning, Fern, you’re chipper today-“

“-yeah, I’m going to be separated from the crew for about a week starting after two in the afternoon
today and I’ve got to get everything together so I need a Mail Messenger bag, please, and a bag for
spell components, and-“

“-write it down, I’ll have everything on your list ready after breakfast,”

“Thank you. Okay, um- Sanji, I need rations, a mess kit, and a merjin canteen-“

“-yeah, after breakfast,”

“Okay, thank you. Is Miss Tellicherry awake?”

“Crow’s Nest- anything you can tell about why you’re going to be separated from us?”

“Cry baby cry, make your mama sigh, ”

“...pft. That’s not cryptic or anything,”

“Sorry; I’m just a messenger,”

“It’s fine, sweetie. Go catch Franky before he gets out of the Shop-“

“Right! Thank you!”

And then I’m off again.

“Franky franky franky-“

“Wh- waaaaah, woah there kiddo, it’s too early to be so-”

“No time to explain! I need scrap metal, ball bearings, a therma-whistle, and a Trap Kit. Right now,”

“Uh- okay, scrap metal’s where it always is, I’ll give you the standard pound of ball bearings,
therma-whistle- uh, aaah, check my left desk drawer, it’s bright orange; and a Trap Kit- here,”

“Thank you, thank you- um. Hm. Lockpicks?”

“Next to the therma-whistle, if you lose one I’ll make you make me a new one,”
“Gotcha- um, um, mmmatches?”

“Long box, second drawer- take a new box,”

“Kay- where are the Safety Candles?”

“Third shelf, far wall from the Forge,”

“Right- okay, um… what would you take on an adventure that is extremely dangerous? Er, going to be extremely dangerous?”

“…Weapons, rope, a Writing Kit, and… waaaaaaaagh, a mirror,”

“A mirror?”

“Some things can’t be defeated any other way, kid,”

“Okay- okay. Need to write this down- see you at breakfast, Franky,”

“Sure, kid,”

WRITTEN LIST:

Items for Tarot Device:
Corundum Gems, quantity no less than five of Good Quality
Deck of Tarot Cards - pick from Mab’s supply
Deck of Faesh Playing Cards - new preferred to old
A Bottle of Pickle Juice
A Large Quantity of Scrap Metal
Primagical Transfigura

Items for Fern Adventure Kit:
Merjin Canteen, quantity two
Mess Kit
Rations, quantity sufficient for two weeks
Small Crystal Orb, suitable for focus
Component Pouch with full complement of fourth level components
Mab’s Choice
Okay. Okay okay okay- um, um, take the legal pad and the fountain pen and run for the crows nest, cutting it close here- Tellicherry!

“Miss Tellicherry, is there a holy symbol that works whether the maker has faith or not?’’

“Yep! It’s called the Tree of Life. In simple terms, it’s a trunk with seven branches; you can fancy it up more from there depending on faith, but the basic symbol works even without it,”

“Thank you- um, like this?”

“Exactly!”

“Thank you so much- Breakfast!”

“I know-”

I’m already gone. I slide around Captain to sit next to Gally, which is not at all my normal seat but these are desperate times. I tear out the List and hand it off to a passing Mab, and then I start cramming as much food as I can into my body without over-eating or making myself sick.

Weapons? Probably a good idea, yeah.

Shit.

Um, um-

“The regretful frog must quarrel with the skeptical rooster; they shall go together to the Place of Suffering, and they shall drive with the sleeping summoner of death below the frozen ground in the afternoon of the sixth day at the coming of intoxication. ”

“What the actual fuck,”

“Sorry, Gally; I can’t actually control my prophetic effusions-”

“Shit, you’re actually a Seer?”

“I am, yes,”

“I never saw you at any of Madame Shyarly’s Seer Seminars…?”

“I’m a working Seer; I didn’t really have time for that,”

“Aah. So you don’t know how to really use a tarot deck,”

“No, I don’t- I did straight prophecy and bone-rolls,”

“Interesting. Have you found a deck yet?”

“No, I haven’t- I need to do it by today, actually. Oh, um- I sometimes get premonitions that pertain to… not exactly myself, but close enough for it to not matter either way,”
“And you need a Tarot deck?”

“Yeah- I just haven’t found one that clicks,”

“Hm. Clicking is overrated- you just need one which you like the look of, and you can read. I know- here, this is my deck; I’ve got a spare, so don’t worry about giving it back,”

“Oh! Um- the box too?”

“Yep; always keep your cards in a box, or a bag of some kind. If you’re carrying them on you, like your belt or pocket, keep them in a box; if it’s on your desk or vanity or bag, they go in a bag of their own,”

“...are you sure you want to give these to me? I’m… I’m rebuilding a Tarot device, so I don’t… these are really beautiful, I don’t think I can just-”

“If you want to keep that deck for yourself, that’s just fine- but, you still need a deck for your Device, so use this one, it’s another spare of mine,”

“-this is… oh! The old faithful!”

“Ha, yeah;”

When I touch the decks, the only thought running through the back of my mind is “please fucking help me”; all the decks say back is “you are a whole goddamn dumbass bitch, aren’t you”, to which I say “no!”. The Old Faithful just shuffles disbelievingly, but the Maryel snorts and shouts back “BITCH WHAT THE FUCK I JUST SAY” and I said back, in tears “you are so right. I am so sorry,”

“-sorry?”

“They click, don’t they,”

“Yes, they do,”

“...You do realize that Tarot cards were playing cards before they were divination foci?”

“Yeah, but- if I use them as playing cards, I still need a Tarot deck; but if I use one, I only need a deck of Faesh playing cards- oh, here Mab comes with- uh-”

“Right, this is everything- finished your breakfast?”

“Yes, Mab- you packed my bag and everything?”

“Yes, of course; unpack and repack so you know where it all is, and I’ve added a bedroll and some pitons because you’ll need to sleep. Oh, yes, and a flask of strong spirits- some of my personal reserve of bourbon, and a few of my sister’s finer potions in their own smaller vials,”

“Uh-”

“I also have a few tarot decks- you’re quite welcome to have a whole collection, quite aside from the one you put in your device; oh, a Maryel and Old Faithful, lovely choices. I’ve got these for you as
well- [Motherpeace](#), one of the first round decks; the [Collective](#), my first deck that I’m giving to you; [Dark Extract](#), a very abstracted deck, no human figures to speak of in this one; [Wild Unknown](#), a less abstracted, but still quite abstract deck; [Ukiyo-e](#), more for the symbolism, which I think you’ll understand intuitively; [Shadowscapes](#), for something very Faesh because I just couldn’t resist; and the [Dreaming Way](#), because it made me think of you.”

“Th-these are all really gorgeous, Mab!”

“Hmhmhmhm, thank you for saying so; now, here is a new deck of playing cards, it’s got eight distinct suits, as it’s a Faesh deck. As for the Primagicals-”

“Uh-”

“I’ve made copies of all of them, including the Universalis and the Illuse- don’t fuss, you need the information to at least know if an Illusion is there. Here’s your [crystal orb](#), it’s rose quartz, it’s all I have extra of; and it goes in your [component pouch](#), which I’ve taken the liberty of filling with the eight basic components, excepting illusion- lalala, that’s where I put your orb, in the pouch marked with the Illusion magic [symbol](#). Necromancy has a lovely frog skull; Divination is empty for your Device Tablet; [Transmutation](#) has a bracelet; [Evocation](#) has a brass-tipped wand; for [Abjuration](#), a pair of enamel pins, a shield and a sword; [Conjuration](#), an empty wooden cup; [Enchantment](#), aside from your other bag right here, a brush pen. Gemstones are here in this matchbox, and I’ve a half-gallon of pickle juice in this bottle here. I’ve set up your work bench, and- ah, good, you’ve had a look through your pack. Sanji will come round in a moment with your canteen, mess kit, and rations- do try to reassure him, he worries about you, you know,”

“Thank you, Mab; I will,”

“Good! Love you, Fern; Good morning, Gally!”

“Good morning, Missus Mab,”

“Love you too, Mab,”

And then she’s gone in a flurry of tasseled shawls. I blink owlishly, and glance at Gally, who is, to borrow a whiteman expression, flabbergasted.

“Yes, she’s always like that. It’s not you, or me, or the day- she’s just like that, *Flesh of the sinner shall be renewed in blood.*”

“Oh, that’s fair- but why do none of your sisters really react to your prophecies? Some of them are fucking ominous, Fern,”

I pause a moment. I turn, and take in Gally fully.

Egalatine, “Gally”, is a woman with hair the color of ink, nearly plum black, bound up in a bun with a prism-crystal set in a wand. Gauges in her ears, and spots on her cheeks; piercings in her nose and next to her eyes, enormous eyes and a too-wide smile; pointy boots, loose lilac pants, and a thick winter-weight tank top under her many necklaces.
“Prophecy is what you make of it, Gally; people don’t have story arcs. Also, I’ve been prophesying since I was, like, six? So, it’s just not that big a deal, really,”

“If you say so, Fern,”

I smile up at Gally- and then I accept the things Sanji got out for me, and I give him a firm hug around the ribs. He stiffens for a moment in my arms, and then hugs me back very carefully, like he’s scared I’ll break. He lets go a little after I do; and I smile up at my cousin, and I say-

“I’ll be okay, Sanji- No matter what happens, Mab loves you; and you love her, too. Even if neither of you remember, that doesn’t make it not true. Love is not so easily forgotten,”
I also want to know what the fuck is going on with Cece- it’s not my fault I can’t spend so much
time with her anymore! We don’t have the same work or study schedules, that doesn’t mean I don’t
like spending time with her, or that I don’t want to be around her anymore. She’s my sister!

I just… I’ve never seen her bite her tongue so much, or be so guilty about something. I don’t know
what her problem with Phil even is- he’s not a bad guy, and he gives her some really good
compliments, and she tries to return them… maybe she just hasn’t had much practice really genuinely
complimenting people? School was fractious, most of the time…

“-that’s totally something you would wear, Phillip,”

“Thank you, Cecelia!”

I watch out of the corner of my eye as my sister smiles, and fumes behind her smile, and bubbles
with guilt and self disgust; and then she smiles again but wider, and busses her lunch dishes, and
stalks off.

“Phillip, what the hell is going on with you and Cece?”

“...You can’t tell she’s jealous?”

“What,”

“Sancho… you and her spent most every day together, right?”

“Yeah,”

“Well. Now you’re spending most of your every day with me; so, she’s jealous of you, and your
attention, and the time we spend together. I think she just misses you, and the way things were; and
she knows she’s doing wrong, treating me the way she is. I’ll confront her about it if she doesn’t get
over herself in a few weeks, but… for now, I’m just going to let it be,”

“...but she’s my sister! I mean no offence, truly- you are a lovely friend-”

“Thank you-”

“-but Cecelia is my sister!”

“She might know that in her head, but… it can be really hard to understand that sort of thing in your
heart, even when you’re more than half-grown. It’s not all that strange that she’s having such a hard
time- she’s only fourteen, after all,”

“Aoife? I thought you were on night-shift?”

“I was, and then Zoro saw my sword and shield.; Annie’s much happier now, so I guess things
worked out, but… I’m not looking forwards to afternoon drills with Zoro and Taffy,”

“Zoro does seem to be a bit...”

“Heh. Zoro wants to be the Greatest; his teaching of you is part of his way of mastering his own
skill. Trust me, Aoife; as hard as Zoro pushes you, he pushes himself even harder. And Taffy just wants to be sure you’ll come back from fighting at all.”

Aoife - pronounced Eefa- is one of the smallest people I’ve ever seen swing a sword. There’s also a round shield she uses, and the two together are obviously a matched set, but she deflects any questions about her sword, and herself, almost without thought.

Annie is the last of our new crewmates, and not someone I’ve spent all that much time with; she’s shy, bookish, and best at research. Also, apparently, she doesn’t really like being up during the day.

Really, most of my training as a Fool was in social studies. With that in mind, I think it’s best I explain a few things- like why it doesn’t bother me that our crew is more than half female.

Most people dramatically underestimate the economic importance of women and their level of agency. Part of the problem is that when most people think of women, they’re imagining the upper end of nobility and the very rich and famous, not the rest of society.

The average low end farming family could not survive without women’s labor. There is a gendered separation of labor, and yes, men tend to do the bulk of grain farming outside of peak times like planting and harvest- but understand this. Unless they’re very wealthy indeed- read, slave-owners- a family, clan, whatever, cannot live on that.

The women of our crew have primary responsibility for the quail, geese, and doves we own, and thus the eggs, feathers, and meat. Egg money is nothing to sneeze at, and our birds more often than not are the main source of protein, alongside fish and eggs which don’t really count. Further, the women of our crew are in charge of our fruit and vegetable production- and Mab in particular… if she’s not actively doing something with her hands, she’s spinning thread. Now, Mab’s a weaver, but in most cases the majority of the thread she spins would be for sale to the people who make cloth as most men don’t spin.

Ah! And considering our flock of Angora Possums, she’s also responsible for them, and all the shearing and carding of their wool. And she’s in charge of the goats, too- or rather, the goats are her responsibility, no matter if Mark is the one who feeds and tends them. Wool producing animals are important, regardless of their other uses, and there are plenty of court cases where women have stolen loose wool or even sheared other people’s sheep.

Every time we land on an island, according to the Ship’s Log, Mab spends extensive amounts of time gathering information on what can be found in a certain place- wood, nuts, fruit, medical supplies, you name it.

Nami is the one who owns and tends to the tangerine grove on the ship, and she’s the one who okays the harvesting time, and how much to harvest, and what can be made of the fruit- and Sanji obeys her. Mab keeps several different bee hives- sorry, Honeyjacket hives, and a few other hives of things that certainly aren’t bees or even bee-like.

I know for a fact that Sohei, Miss Tellicherry, and Miss Neopolitan are going through the various account books to understand just how much and how often Mab sells off our excess of cheese and butter and honey and eggs and and and-

Mab also makes all the ale, cider, and perry we drink- and we drink a lot.
All the things I’ve gone over just now? That’s all just in the country- and it’s very similar in the towns and cities. A man might be a craftsman or merchant, but I guarantee that is wife is too and that hse has the right to carry on the trade after his death.

Unless there’s a lot of money, goods, lands, or even titles involved, people get a say in who they marry. Really. The average age of first marriage for a yeoman is late teens or early twenties, but the average age of the working poor is more like twenty-seven or twenty-nine. The average age of death for men in both those categories is thirty-five; but with women, if they survive their first few child births, they’ll live to see grandchildren.

(Skua is matrilineal because, well, how could it not be?)

Odds are if your father was a small farmer, he’s been dead for some time before you gather enough goods to be marrying a man. For sure, your mother and grandmother and even stepfather if you have one likely have opinions, but you can have a valid marriage by havin’ sex after saying yes to a proposal or exchanging vows in the present- the old ‘I thee wed’, unless you live in Dressrosa, where you probably need a notary. No clergy required for any of this, by the by- the Gods have no say in Free Will, after all. For sure, it’s better if you publish banns three Sunsdays running in case someone remembers you’re too closely related, but it’s not a legal requirement. The only thing you do need is a mark in the family registry, and that’s as simple as a form-letter with someone you trust- and in the meantime, who exactly can stop you if you’re both determined?

So. The less money, goods, lands, and power your family has, the more likely you are to be choosing your partner. There is an exception, in that unfree folk can be required to remarry, but they are given time and plenty of warning before a partner would be picked for them. It’s less common than you’d think.

If you were born free and have enough money to hire help as needed whether for farm or shop or other business, there’s no requirement of remarriage at all. You could pick a partner or choose to stay single. Do the math again on death rates- it’s pretty common to marry more than once. Maybe the first wife died in childbirth. The widower needs the work and income a wife brings in and that’s double if the baby survives. Maybe the second wife has wide hips, but he dies from a work related injury when she’s still young. She could sure use a man’s labour around the farm or shop. Let’s say he dies in a fight or drowns in a ditch. She’s been doing well. Her children are old enough to help with the farm or shop; she picks a pretty youth for his looks instead of his economic value. You get marriages for love and lust as well as economics and politics, and May-December cuts both ways.

A lot of our popular ideas about how people live tends to get viewed through an academic or pop culture lens, but that tends to be particularly extreme, pedantic, or over-simplified to the point of stupidity.

Real life is infinitely more complicated than what can be told in a story.

It’s somewhere in our second or third week in the New World that people start dropping with the flu.
Neither Tellicherry nor I were particularly worried- and then I reminded us both that Influenza is a big fuckin’ deal in the Lower Blues, and we got very worried very quickly.

Influenza is a viral infection, with mild to severe symptoms of high fever, runny nose, sore throat, muscle pains, headache, coughing, and feeling tired. Fae, at most, feel tired from getting the flu, maybe some fever and sore throat.

Everyone else is not so lucky.

About two days after we got to the surface of the New World, one of the Mice- Hildy, I think- started coughing. Influenza is one of the few well known airborne diseases that can potentially affect any tribe; even though Hildegard, a Tontatta, was the first to get sick, she was able to spread her sickness over almost the entire ship.

The other Mice- Maya, Darla, Jellybean, Quilaby, and Arlinda Rader Haai- soon followed Hildy down with coughs and burning fevers of their own. I was the one who actually moved them to Chopper’s Iso Ward, Franky-built to their size. Well, there was an extra large bed for Arlinda Rader Haai, but…

The Sanitary Ward is not the same room as the one just off the Galley; that’s the Emergency Room, located next to the Galley for perhaps obvious reasons. The Sanitary Ward is on the same deck as the Stillroom, and is kept to the same cleanliness levels. The tontatta have a shelf, built into the wall; it’s got beds, view screens… and me. I’m stationed as their nurse because, well… I didn’t know this before. Hah, learn something new, every day- I didn’t know how very dangerous Influenza is to Tontatta.

They’re so very small… even a slight internal temperature variation can have massive complications. Flu in people younger than twenty almost invariably leads to extremely high fever. I’m keeping their temperatures down with judicious application of cold water baths, which also helps raise their white-blood; but it’s not a permanent solution. Chopper’s hard at work, developing a fever-reducer that can be diluted enough that a Tontatta can safely take it, without diluting all the helpful medicinal properties as well.

Genny dragged some of her sisters in next; first Ellie, then Fern. Fern was let out again, as she wasn’t actually sick, Genny was just overprotective; Adelaide dragged in Beatrix, and checked herself in too; and Sancho carried Cece in, panicked, because she’d collapsed. Her fever was so high… I’ve never seen Chopper so commanding. He decided that the only thing for it was to drain, cool, and return her blood, before she cooked her internal organs with her fever-heat.

It was at this point that Genny took over simplifying and synthesizing the fever reduction medicines, and I took Further Actions. I recruited Tellicherry, Bryony, Mark, and Taffy to my cause- all of us are adult Fae, and so will be affected by the flu the least. Even if we end up catching it, we won’t spread it.

Fae don’t get sick of the flu; at most, we’ll get a little bit tired.

I stopped by the Galley with my cleaning gang, but it turned out we weren’t needed; as soon as the first of our crewmates got sick, Sanji Took Steps of his own. He, and the Kitchen Kids, are wearing hairnets and face masks, and have double examination-gloved their hands.
There’s been a steady stream of okayu, broth, hot and cold teas, and fruit juices- I suppose this is why. Still, I go over the measures Sanji’s already taken, and have my Cleaning Crew disinfect everything with bleach-water. Surely not everything, I hear some future-person cry?

No, motherfucker.

Ev-er-y-thing.

Sanji adds bleach to the wash water, and ensures that everyone knows to take dry dishes only, and if I catch even one of you taking a wet dish off the rack it will go very hard for you, the last thing we GODDAMN NEED IS A FUCKING CHOLERA OUTBREAK-

Sanji is taking this very seriously.

We end up wiping down every hard surface, the leather, the floor, the sconces, special attention to the doorknobs- every. Thing.

The only reason we didn’t mop is that Sanji was having the Kitchen Kids do that later.

We then moved on to the rest of the ship- everything possible to disinfect, we disinfected. Bath House; Lynn’s outdoor shower; bedrooms; Shop; everything. Everything.

It took hours of work.

It also got my mind off the image of- of massive needles in Cecelia’s shoulders, one going in and the other out, and her hot blood coursing out of her with every beat of her heart and dropping down into a chilling vat before being pumped back into her body through a one way valve kept air-tight with saline and it was- it was, there was so much blood, she’s just a girl, she’s just a little girl with lavender tones to her blond hair, and she was so still. So still, and so small in the bed; Chopper sedated Sancho after he picked a hole through his own hand, for the worry over her.

Genny was like stone; Chopper would tell her to do something, and she’d move and do it, no questions or hesitations. Her green dress had a few spots of her sisters blood on it- but she moved like it didn’t matter.

Once the ship was disinfected, Taffy went to work on the Reduced Size Fever Medicine; after giving Nami a very cold bath. Nami didn’t like it, but Zoro was right there with her, shivering in the cold; and neither of them are sick, so I suppose it worked. They’re both wearing facemasks, though; I haven’t seen Nami’s face for about a week, now.

Mark started checking on each member of the crew when he got up in the morning. Bryony is spending almost absurd amounts of time with Brook, Neo, the Feverbanes, and Bang.

I’ve been praying with Tellicherry.

We all face our fear in different ways; Mark, by directly checking on his friends. Taffy, by working to help those in danger. Bryony, by avoiding it as best she can; and me, with stunning amounts of liturgical sparring.
Here’s something I didn’t understand, back when I took Divinity in school. There, it’s taught as a series of dances with lectures about the significance of each movement and step. That didn’t work for me for a number of reasons, chiefly because, according to Tellicherry and, oddly enough, my Mom, no one ever had to explain to me the meaning of the Gods.

For me, there was no need to explain that Pyth is both Order and Chaos, but overall he represents power. Pyth represents strength, and vitality- in all its forms. I understood that the first time I saw an effigy of him; it was in Ultima Thule, in the Hall of Gods.

Pyth isn’t just a bull- he’s every bull, and far more than a bull.

For the Fae, worship- really, any sort of celebration- is built on two things: music, and dance. We call things that aren’t music, music, to make them… normal. We call things that aren’t dance, dance, to imply they can be learned, perfected.

The liturgical dances of the fae- er, hang on. Liturgical dance is a type of dance movement sometimes incorporated into liturgies or worship services as an expression of worship of the divine. Some liturgical dances are more common than others- harvest dances and may pole dances are much more common than, say, ashwinding or driving demons out of fields.

Faesh liturgical dancing is lively, masked (be it with solid masks or with masking makeup) and often heavily costumed. It’s present at every major holiday, and lots of minor ones too. There’s a special dance that opens the Aonach Contae; and there’s a dance that only the Gravediggers learn, for when they close up a tomb for the last time.

The one thing that’s true for all Faesh liturgical dancing- the only thing I ever learned in Divinity, aside from some philosophy and how to research in a very large, very old library (make friends with a librarian), is this: Faesh liturgical dancing offers moral instruction, relating to compassion, faith, and honor for and to all sentient beings. Faesh liturgical dancing brings merit to all things that perceive it.

Apparently, that’s not quite right.

“Well, Mab, you’re not wrong-”

“- hah- ”

“- su - the dances are definitely how most Fae worship. What you’re missing is that the dances are a form of meditation, not just an offering to the Gods. You’re bringing yourself into a state where it’s easier to commune, not just giving of your time, effort, mind, and spirit,”

“Ach, no wonder I couldn’t make heads or tails of Divinity- I was mastering the spear at the time,”

“That’d do it, for sure- susususu- ”

“ -hahahaha hahahahahaha- ”

“-The thing that gets me is, you’ve already gotten about halfway there on your own. As much as I’m a devotee to Pyth, yet marked by Acobi; you are devoted to Zul, yet marked by Micia. Your heart is glowing, Mab,”

“And how am I devoted to Zul, Tellicherry?”

“Your laughing barking cry, Mab; ‘Ha’ is the holy cry of Zul; just like ‘Su’ is the holy cry of Pyth,”
That made me pause— and I paid for my inattention with a nasty kick to the ribs. Tellicherry, devotee of Pyth, is actually stronger than Bryony— Bryony has the strength, but most of her technique went into controlling that strength, not amplifying it. Tellicherry… her strength grew gradually, with her own maturity, and her forms are all built around putting more and more strength behind her blows.

This is just a spar, technically; so my ribs aren’t broken. However, I wouldn’t say no to a leech— oh gods, I just thought that to myself, Sawbones is getting to me… ah, shit, I did grab her leg as she kicked me—

“Woo, and if your battle song isn’t enough proof, my leg is! Au, that’s a lot of blood—”

“Tellicherry for pity’s sake, don’t put weight on it! Hang on- au! - I’ll help you to the Emergency, alright? Put your arm around my neck- on this side, lovey, you’ve bruised the other to near mincemeat, ”

“Su, that’s some of the best sparring I’ve had in a good long while- I remember why I wasn’t allowed to pray with Zul’s initiates, bloody hellfire—”

“Hah—”

“Su!”

“Well, consider this; you’ll get a cool scar out of it, something to praise, um, Hense- cor, nearly called her Widow Thorn for a mo’—”

“I dunno, I feel like if Hense were to appear in mortal flesh, ‘Widow Thorn’ is as good a name as any. The Gods are only subtle if that’s their domain, ye ken?”

By then, we’d staggered back into the Galley, to the stammering and horrified shrieking of, well, everyone, seeing as it was dinner- but of course, I was engrossed in my discussion of theology.

“So- Pyth told you I’d be teaching you? Have I got that right?”

“Eeh, sort of, not really- Chopper, you are a doctor; this needs a nurse at most, Mab missed my arteries, veins, and tendons, and I know that because I can still straighten the leg, and I’ve not passed out either—”

“Oh, yes- those are all surface scratches, it should be like treating a particularly nasty cat scratch. Um, might require a stitch or two, Cherry got me good- which reminds me! Nurse Sawbones, I need the services of one of your fine leeches—”

“Happy to help, just let me get a good selection—”

“NOT AT THE DAMN TABLE, DO THAT ON THE COUCH—”

“Of course, Razz, no need to get stroppy,”
I limp over to the couch, and carefully sit down on it. My late winter tunic comes off with a bit of a wince, and I undo the ties on my boots because my feet are really starting to ache—winter boots aren’t meant for prolonged use, really. I wasn’t wearing pants, either—so, I’m left with a pair of gym socks I swiped from Sanji on accident, my garters and garter belt, my underwear, and my glasses. Ah—

“Well, if you didn’t snap it, you certainly bruised it, Cherry—”

“Ouf, sorry ‘bout that,”

“Ta- ah, here we are, hallo Sawbones—”

“Hello- Oh my goodness, that’s a lovely spread on your ribs, Mab,”

“Mm. Ah, thank you- and do you have some sort of liquid bandage for Tellicherry? I didn’t cut her that deeply, it’s just a lot...”

“Um... yeah, hang on- here we are, new skin—”

“Oh, is... is that from the Daiso?”

“Mm. You can also get it at the greengrocers, the butchers, anywhere you can buy gum, really- pants off, I need to clean your wounds,”

“R-right, um...”

“None of the Gods ask modesty of us, Tellicherry; that’s the dogma of men,”

“...Woo. How in the hell did you fail Divinity, again?”

“I wouldn’t dance on stage when they told me to; the Gods are not for entertainment,”

“Yeah, that would do it... you’d have been better served by a Seminary. One sec- ah, you didn’t cut up my pants, nice...”

Tellicherry slides out of her pants, unzips her vest, peels off her shredded coral arm warmers— and hands them off to me, when I make a grab for them. Down to the Laundry with them— and I’ll get new clothing for when Nurse Sawbones is done.

Ugh, her socks are filthy—her underwear is nice, though.

“New socks?”

“Au! Sorry, what-?”

“Your socks are filthy from our prayer- would you like new ones while those are in the wash?”

“Oh! Uh, sure?”

“Here- no, no, just keep them, I make things like that when I’m bored which happens more often than it doesn’t,”
“Wow! Uh-”
“Clean your feet with these- ah, the leech fell off, Bones,”
“No worries- have some new skin!”
“Au! The sting!”
“Mmhm! That’s the disinfectant- can’t be too careful, y’know,”
“Neh- Mab?”
“Mmyes, Captain?”
“What were you an’ Tellicherry doin’ out there?”
“Praying, Captain,”
“…?”
“Fae prayer can be like dancing- or it can be like sparring. The two are not terribly separated; dancing is the exaltation of the form, while martial arts is the exaltation of force, ”
“...So your entire fighting style is also a prayer? How does that work?”
“Uh... Tellicherry, how does that work?”
“It’s pretty simple- each of the Gods embodies a particular thing entirely. The God I devoted myself to, Pyth, is the god of Order and Commotion; there’s a lot of this and that which can be said about Him, but at his very core, Pyth represents Strength,”

Luffy, clearing off his plate, stands from his seat and puts his plate in the dirty-dish bin Sanji and the Kitchen Kids have started setting up for services. Then, he turns around, and calmly marches back towards us. He sits at our feet, and takes his hat off and sets it at his side.

“Tell me of the Gods, Mab, Tellicherry; I know them not even enough to seek them out to learn more,”

I blink.
I look at Tellicherry, who’s gone very wide eyed indeed.
I look back at Luffy, who’s wearing a nervous and yet earnest expression. Well- it’s not like you ever get told of a real challenge before you meet it…

“This is what I know, Captain; Tellicherry can give you more detail, or perhaps even better instruction. What I know of the Gods is what I know of their Martial Traditions. Each God and Goddess of the Fae was a warrior, reknowned for their strength and skill; each member of the Faesh
Pantheon represents a specific style of fighting, among other things.

"Acobi, the Chastened Maid; the Goddess of Oath and Abandon. Her style is called ‘soft’ nowadays; it involves locking joints, pressure points, soft-tissue strikes, and grapples. In our crew, Bryony practices the style of Acobi, but she has not devoted herself to it fully.

"Garmuth, the Crippled Duke; the God of Purpose and Folly. The devoted of Garmuth don’t fight with weapons or fists; they fight with their words. His style is soft, too; in that a soft word to the right ear can be more devastating than a thousand fists. Bryony practices the style of Garmuth, too- which is why she can’t devote herself fully to either,"

"-?

"These are fully realized martial arts, Captain, much like any named style you could think of- devoting yourself to one isn’t like with Magic, where you pick a path at the expense of another, but do not loose out on all the rest. Faesh Martial Artists must devote themselves fully to their craft at some point, because in a very literal way, their martial arts are a gift to and from the gods,"

"How many gods of the Fae are there, then?"

"...twelve?"

"Twelve; you got it right, Mab. Do go on, I’ve never heard this from a lay-person before,"

"Well, now you’re makin’ me nervous, Cherry-"

"Go on, Mab!"

"Fine, fine. Hense, the Veiled Widow; the Goddess of Pain and Pleasure. Her martial art has to do with sex; and the people who practice it are very good at what they do. That’s all I’ll say about it.

"Lemaign, the Mason King; the God of Hope and Despair. His style is that of the builder- hammers, mattocks, and other tools of trades are his main remit, and the style itself is one of teaching a person how to use their tools as weapons. A pitchfork at speed has just as much stopping power as a spear; and a tool box full of tools has a nasty heft to it, not to mention the sharp corners. The Fogbank Farming styles were born of His Art- and each of those styles, of course, has its own merits and detractions…"

"Neh, the Fogbank Farming styles?"

"Oh, sure- South Maggot Scythe, Gentle Feather, Apisary Backfist- as many jobs on a farm, any farm, there’s a fighting style for it too. It’s how Mark fights when he’s not using his guns,"

"Ah,"

"Micia, the Lorn Mother; the Goddess of Loss and Longing. Doctors and nurses and those who care for the weak and infirm- children and babies, the elderly, people with mental illness or instability- they follow Micia before all others. I learned to fight… well, I’ll get to that in a moment. Chopper fights in Her ideal; Taffy and Gurry fight in her actual; Mendy May is the person on our crew fully devoted to Micia. Mendy May is also the most dangerous person on our crew, because her whole responsibility is to BBC, and there are no lengths to which she won’t go to protect that baby girl,

"Olak, the Carefree Son; the God of Chance and Whim. His is the style of the sniper; because, after a certain distance, all shots are a matter of luck,"
“Usopp,”

“Mm. Jevel, the Tower Keeper; the God of Health and Atrophy. His style has to do with poison, and powerful potions- Taffy, Gurry, perhaps some of our newer crewmates. My sister, Easy- you’ve had her potions before,”

“Eh?”

“Snake Juice,”

“Ah!”

“Mhm. Pyth, the Wakeful Bull; the God of Commotion and Order. Every Fae currently living knows something of His Art. Pyth is the god of strength; and all Fae are strong. Tellicherry is His Devotee; and Bryony was given His blessing at birth. So was Ace. His is the first style any Fae learns, and learns to teach- and for that reason, not many stick with him,”

“...In many ways, Pyth is seen as sort of… a beginner’s god, something easy to understand. Strength, I’ve found, is not so simple,”

“Mm. Roathus, the Gorging Host; the God of Thirst and Plenty. His Art is that of the Battle Mage, and any other magic user who seeks glory. Not an easy path to walk; most practitioners find themselves consumed by their own desires.

“Yudrig, the Morning Stallion; the God of Impulse and Bravery. A God of Brawlers, and those who make shit up as they go along,”

“So... people like me?”

“Yes, Luffy. People like you- but that’s no bad thing. It’s a strange kind of person who feels nothing at all ere the Dawn of a New Day,”

“Shishishishishi!”

“Hmmhmhmhm! -Mah, then there’s Zul, the Silent Singer; the Goddess of Truth and Secrets. Patient, dedicated, resilient-”

“-absurdly hard to stop, nearly infinite reserves of energy, vicious, and the fucking claws -”

“-I’m not that bad, am I?”

Tellicherry looks at me, and then arches back so she can look at her own stomach where my claws raked across her brown skin. There are shiny lines over cuts and scratches across her arms and shoulders, and it turns out she actually did need stitches in her leg, which Sawbones is attending to even now.

“-Pro Tip, Captain: Unless you absolutely have to, never ever spar seriously with a Devotee of Zul. Mab does a lot of things, but she does not fuck around while training, or hold back much at all,”

“...Yeah, she’s scary in a fight. She taught me how to do the claw thing-”

“-by giving you minimal instruction, then walking you through the technique a few times, then
throwing you into a situation where if you didn’t use it, you’d die?

“HOW DID YOU KNOW?”

“Because that’s what devotees of Zul do - they don’t mean you harm by it, it’s just how they do,”

“...was it really that bad...?”

I’m staring at Luffy and Tellicherry, my eyes darting back and forth because I- I didn’t go too hard did I? I don’t- I don’t think I did but- maybe?

“Mab- Mab, you’re my friend! I’m not scared of you! You also take sparring very seriously, and never treat it like a game- that’s really good! I’m glad you’re the way you are,”

“You wouldn’t be a follower of Zul if you were not so driven and forthright,”

“...Thank you. -Right, lastly, there’s Caelya, the Boundless Infinite; the Goddess of Story and Song. Only people with Charisma can learn Her Art; I can’t, I don’t have the stuff. You do, Captain- and you already know. Ace too, and Shanks,”

“Ah!”

“Mm,”

I misjudged my trip.

My neck went stiff the day Hildy went down; my vision clouded with headache the next day; and I got the heat rash the day after that.

I don’t remember passing out. Gally tells me later that I just sort of crumpled at dinner- I’d been eating and turning green, and then I just... slumped. She told me that my skin was so hot, she was almost afraid to touch me; that Sanji had to carry me to the Sanitary, and Genny had to hook me up to an IV because Chopper couldn’t touch my skin without injury.

I don’t remember any of that.

It started with a feeling on my skin like crawling crabs, or little shrimps nipping. Then, a strange clicking sound, like dolphins hunting, that specific squealing warbling click- like, like a bad connection on a snail, staticky and half-present. I remember looking up from my plate, and standing
and walking to the porthole which did not have glass and beyond was a forest-

A sea-

Of reeds-

I was walking through the reeds. Black mud sucked my boots down; the reeds grew taller and taller, slashing at my legs and my arms and then my face as they grew higher and higher. On my belt was a canteen, and my bag of spell components, and a strange holster for my Tarot Device Tablet. My ears ached from the newness of their piercings and everything was tinted a yellowish blue color through the visor.

I followed a sparking trail of thaums, wandering through the murky reedy bog until at last I stood upon flat dirt ground-

Trees-

Forest-

I was walking through the forest. My dusty boots set quietly on dirt and leaf and stone; all around, the sound of birds roosting for the night, buzzing insects, wind through the branches. The breeze suddenly changed, and I smelled the smoke of a fire, cooking food, I heard the sound of quiet conversation. I turned to face the smell, and walked-

Grass-

Light-

I was walking through the glade. My dew-wet boots softly crumpled night-drunk grass and pushed round skipping stones deep into black earth. Ahead of me, there was a ring of stones ringing a pit, and a fire, and a small group- four people, adults I think- I think-

I was walking towards the group. My pack was heavy on my back and my feet ached and everything felt- strange-

“Hallo the camp!”

“-Hoy!”

“Can I come over?”

“Sure,”

I-
Sat down on a stone. It was white, and cool under my travel-hot legs.

**The man across from me** has horns like Sanji’s, and he’s red and scruffy with eyes like embers. His hair is black, and red tattoos crawl across his red skin too red two red-

**To my left, a man and his son** sit, both in- in- braids-

Blue eyed, dressed for silty waters.

**To my right, a man with long black hair.** He has bangles of gold across his upper arms, his forearms and wrists, and he looks- he looks like- Mab?

“What?”

“I said, what’re you doin’ out here, so far away from everywhere?”

“I, uh. I went for a walk and I guess my feet led me here- sorry if I’m intruding, I can leave-”

“No, no- it’s fine you’re here, I’m just… I’m not sure if you can get back, is all,”

“Sir?”

“We four have been here a long time, child, and none of us have found a way back to whence we came,”

“Hm. I can get back to where I came from though- that’s what the fancy face thing is for, y’know?”

“Mm. Sol, Muck, Zaffy- what say you?”

“I say if the boy can find where he came from, good on him,”

“I say we shouldn’t just let him go- who knows what fell thing could fall upon him?”

“I say I’m fucking hungry-”

“I have food! I brought some with me, I can share if you’d like-”

I’m eating a bowl of stew; I recognize my sister, and Sanji, and my own hand in making it. I’m not as good as either of them, few are- but it’s hot, and simple, and filling, and spiced well, and the ingredients are of good quality; and there are no burned bits floating around, either.

The men seem to like it, so I suppose it doesn’t matter that I’m not a particularly great cook.

“You don’t have to eat that fast, mister- you can have a second helping if you want-”

“Kid, are you sure you can share food like this?”
“Of course I am! -otherwise I wouldn’t have shared at all, see,“

“Smart; where’d you say you’re from, again? I’ve never had a stew quite like this before...”

“Don’t think I did, mister- I came from thataway, if that helps any,“

I hook my thumb in the direction of Home, and I know it’s the right way because I can see it through the screen.

The men look at each other. Demon Guy has curling eyebrows, and a strange black faceguard that spikes in the front between his horns. Father and Son ate their stew as fast as they could without being rude- and Father gave Son another portion before taking for himself. A large white snake is wrapped around Son’s arm and shoulder- not a python like Banana, something else.

Long-hair blinks his golden eyes, and carefully chews on a piece of reconstituted meat.

I finish my stew, and use a piece of flatbread to wipe my bowl out before using a handful of snow to do it again. The snow is thick on the ground, cold and white but there are no stars or moon to light the banks of rolling whiteness, only fire.

“It’s time for me to go back now. You could all come with me, if you’d like,”

Three men look to the fourth, with his strange black crown and his curling eyebrows and his ram’s horns, and he looks back at them for a long moment- and then he says-

He says-

“I think that’d be best,”

I was walking through a glade. Behind me walked four men, each with a pack on their backs.

I was walking through a forest. Behind me walked four men, each with a pack on their backs.

I was walking through a bog. Behind me walked four men, each with a pack on their backs.

I was walking across the deck of the Sunny; Hekate-chan and the Littles were nibbling on syrup. Lynn was rocking a sobbing Mince, and Deborah and Oz were curled up together, backs pressed against the wall. I walked through a side door, into the Emergency; I walked past Sanji, smoking a thick blue cloud, arm wrapped around a shaking Mab and teeth snarling; I walked past a shaking Mab, eyes welling brightly with tears.

I walked to a bed in the Emergency Room.
Gally was standing to one side, holding my backpack and component bag. My completed Tarot Device was flexed wide open, shining and shimmering and glowing over my head.

Genny was taking my pulse.

Chopper was doing chest compressions.

I stared down at my own bloodless lips; Chopper switched out with Genny, to keep my chest pumping.

I leaned down and pressed a breath of air against my own blue lips-

-and breathed out-

-and then breathed in again, my heart roared in my ears and I coughed out a wad of phlegm and my eyes rolled and I gasped out-

Out-

“Don’t hurt them; they’re friends-”

-and then all was darkness. I know nothing more.

It’s not the most obvious thing, what with my love of leeches, but I’m a researcher, not exactly a medical doctor, or even a nurse. I list myself as a nurse because it’s easier; I’ve been burned too many times to just blindly trust that my research will remain mine, and that others will respect my work.

As near as I can figure, there are two kinds of flu- aside from all the various strains, I mean to say that there are two distinct mega-strains of the virus. The cold-resistant version is more common than the heat-resistant version, because there are (so far as I can tell) more dehydrated cool areas in the world than there are hot-wet areas.

As for why there’s a flu season… that’s a bit trickier. Usually, it comes up right around Samhain; and if you didn’t, people give you dirty looks. It always seemed odd to me that a virus that propagates in a host with a dependable incubation temperature of thirty-seven Celsius, cares if it’s freezing and snowy or warm and sunny- because flu comes in winter, not summer. That oddity bothered me for years- and finally, I just did a study on it.
The flu, also called Influenza or the Two Week Affliction, or sometimes confused for a Common Cold, is a viral respiratory illness. A virus is a microscopic infectious agent that invades the cells of the body and makes a being sick; unlike bacteria, viruses are not, strictly speaking, alive.

The Common Cold has over two hundred variations, mostly rhinoviruses, and shares all the minor symptoms of the flu- cough, sore throat, and stuffy nose. However, flu symptoms are more severe, and quickly incorporate high fever, cold sweats, full body aches, headaches, exhaustion, and even flux of the anus and throat- that is to say, diarrhea and vomiting.

The flu is highly contagious. Adults are able to spread the virus one day prior to the appearance of symptoms and up to seven days after symptoms begin. Influenza is typically spread via the coughs and sneezes of an infected person. Around 200,000 people in Ryugu Mergyo are hospitalized each year because of the flu, and of these people, about 36,000 die. The flu is most serious for the elderly, the very young, or people who have a weakened immune system. Pregnant women are at particular risk; Nami’s been kept at thorough distance from the afflicted for her own safety, and her baby’s as well. Mendy May too, because if BBC gets a cold, or the flu, we’ll all be miserable.

Until I joined up with the Post Office Service, I’d never really worked with children or youths in my age-range; a huge, weird shock, after years in environments where a ‘young’ patient was forty years old. My impressions are as follows.

From birth, until probably a year old; essentially, the human is a small adorable breakable but quick-healing animal. Handle accordingly; gently, with affection, but rely heavily on the caregivers with no real expectation of cooperation or competency. Nervous mothers cannot give their babies shots. Don’t ask them to.

From the first to second year; essentially, the human hates you. They hate you so goddamn much. Smile, coo, soothe all you like; they hate you anyway, because you’re a stranger and you smell wrong and you’re scary and worst of all possible things, you’re touching them. There’s no winning this, so just get it over with as quickly and non-traumatically as possible.

From the third to the fifth year; the human is becoming human. Thus, they are nervous around medical things, but possible to soothe. Easily upset, true- easily distracted from what upset them. Telling appropriate jokes, accurate reading of interests, and offering stickers are key management techniques. Simple symbols, glitters, and metallics are hot sells.

From the sixth to the tenth year; the human is becoming interesting, even so far as really genuinely cool. I didn’t realize that this was the age humans gained their distinctive interests and general opinions. Around this age, a human is fairly outgoing, extremely curious and eager to learn. Absolutely no babytalk; instead, flatter them with how grown-up they are, teach them some Fun Gross Medical Facts, and introduce potentially frightening experiences with “hey, you wanna see something really cool?”

From the eleventh to the fourteenth year; the human varies in maturity and predictability. They can be very childish, or very mature- or rapidly switch from one mode to the other. At this point, they’re basically fully human and mostly adult… just a really sensitive and unpredictable adult. Do not offer stickers- but they might grab one anyway. Just let them.

From the fifteenth year onwards; the human is an adult with varying levels of life experience. Treat the human as an adult who needs extra education with their care- so, basically like a regular adult who hasn’t gone to the doctor very often. Keep parents out of the room as much as possible, unless they patient wants them there. At this point, you can offer stickers again- they’ll probably think it’s
funny. Also, they’ll want one; because, deep down, everyone wants a sticker.

I didn’t know that extremely high fevers in children is anything over thirty-eight degrees; and I didn’t know that at thirty-nine, they start having seizures.

I am not a nurse meant for… this. I was no help; even with my leeches and my knowledge. So… I went outside.

I heard what Fern mumbled- “don’t hurt them; they’re friends”. I didn’t understand until I saw the four men- strangers, being very carefully regarded by an extremely thorny Lynn and a very frightened Kitchen Trio- but…

Well, the leader of the group, the one the other men are deferring to has huge horns. He’s talking to… golly, but he sure looks like Mab… are they murmuring in… Ratian?

“Ubi sumus?”

“Nescio,”

Yeah, that’s Vulgar Ratian, from… I think the Mauilic area.

I know Ratian- the Modern form, of course, and also the Ecclesial form… but the only spoken Ratian I know is from Byblios, where the old Beetle Scholars used to dwell…

Nothing for it, just have to- well, I’m not great at talking to people, but, well, Lynn is getting thornier and thornier and… now’s not a good time for fighting.

“Hi!”

“-hm? Oh, hello! Sorry to intrude- do you know where we are?”

“Yes, I do- you’re on our ship, in the New World on the Line- Lynn, it’s fine, they’re friends of Fern’s-”

“ They appeared out of nowhere and I don’t trust them, Bones, so- ”

“-Ah, sorry to appear so suddenly. Um- there was a boy; we were somewhere strange, and a boy with long taw hair came and led us out. Pray, have you seen him?”

“…Did he look kinda like a frog?”

“…Yeah, a little bit. Mostly the tongue,”

“Um- yeah, I think you all need to come inside. Come, come; Lynn, Kids, y’all come on inside where it’s warm. I know none of you finished your dinners- and it’s getting dark, so we can’t stay out here. I’ll send Miss Robin out to sit watch; come on, now,”
And, with a bit more shooing and cajoling, I manage to get the Kitchen Trio and Lynn off the frosting ground and back into the Galley. The four men tromp in after them, scraping and knocking dust and muck off their boots as they go through the door. Lynn, waiting for the men to go through before going herself, scrapes her bare feet clean of clumps of mud and dirt.

So that's what the metal thing next to the door is for; not sure about the beetle though, but I'm sure it'll become clear eventually.

In the Galley, the Kitchen Trio is quickly clearing and consolidating dishes under the watchful smog of Chef Sanji. The Red Horned man is carefully looking all around, and- hm. Chef Sanji and the Red Horned man look really similar too.

Well, Mab's... not here, so... I'll do it? I guess?

“So, um, I, uh... please, sit, have some food, we have, ah, we have drinks- clean water, soft beers, stronger...?”

“Ah, sure- where should we put our packs?”

“Um- I.”

“Your packs can go on the leather couch for now; please, take your ease at our table,”

I didn’t know Chef Sanji could speak Ratian- Maulic Ratian, but Ratian all the same.

Hm, four packs, all leather- the smallest comes from the Faery Man, then from the younger of the dread-heads, then the older dread-head, then the Demon Man. Freed of their packs and seated at the table; Deborah comes into the Galley laden with cheese, pickles, and delightful alcohols.

She sets them out on the table, and I watch each of the strange men see her face, blink, and look at each other.

Beatrix and Mab come in, and I watch each strange man blink in curiosity and confusion again.

Hmm.

I got Fern a warm blanket from storage; and I picked up Beatrix from where she was shivering on top of the dryer with the cats. Does no good to hide out, in the dark, shaking with fear; Deborah’s just as scared as you are

I was gone for less than five minutes.
How in the hell did (a very confused and absurdly polite) Udoroth of the Smoking Vine, General Portgas D. Solitaire (enjoying my fucking pickled fish eggs), and the White Snake Winds (THEY ACTUALLY EXISTED? I THOUGHT DANELPHE WAS JUST MAKING SHIT UP) get in our Galley!??!

FUCKING GRAND LINE BULLSHIT!
Really Really

It’s not something that gets considered often, but setting up thirty four new beds at basically the drop of a hat is not particularly easy. It’s doable - especially if you’ve already got all the dorm spaces, beds, and bedding (nearly) to set it up- but it’s not easy.

Adding four more people doesn’t really help matters.

With that said, it’s my job, and I wouldn’t be good at my job if I didn’t, you know, enjoy my work.

Before sending everyone to bed, I gave our Four (Young) Old Men knowing of the Modern Vernacular, and the Modern Languages. They took it well- except for Solitaire, who nearly headbutted me when I gave him the knowing , fucking jackass.

To start with, the actual layout of the Thousand Sunny. I might have gone over it before, but I find it’s helpful to go over these things repeatedly so that nothing gets forgotten over time. Also, I don’t often go into all parts of the ship- most of my time is spent in the Dairy, the Studio and Laundry, the Galley, the Grass Deck, and my bed.

The Thousand Sunny is a two-masted three sailed brig sloop, a fairly large ship that relies on the skills of Nami and Taffy to move at her fullest speed. She has six decks, three of which ride above the waterline; the rest are below.

Starting from the top: the Crow’s Nest Observatory is the highest room on this ship. It is a round room, outfitted with a circular bench, under-seat shelving for books and quiet hobbies, a number of spyglasses, a snail named Loudspeaker, an actual loudspeaker, and the base of our flagpole. It is the duty of whoever is on Crow’s duty to check that our flag is in good repair, and to keep watch on the horizon for other ships, interesting and important phenomena, and islands (or, it must be said, things that might as well be islands).

One floor down from the Crow’s Nest Observatory- well, if it was a house, it’d be a one story with a finished attic. The ‘attic’ is the actual Crow’s Nest; the rest of that building is the Gym. That’s Zoro’s domain, actually- he’s really very good at figuring out weaknesses and old injuries in a person, and devising a work-out schedule that will build up a person’s physical strength without injuring them unduly. He’s actually very serious about it, and has several books about massage, physical therapy, and exercising- and he’ll even tell Sanji that a certain person needs this, this, and that in their diet to compensate for whatever he’s having them do.

The next highest room on this ship is actually the Library- Franky’s original plan was to put the Main
Head and Bath House on the upper part of that area, but I reminded him that any burst pipes would flood the library. Robin overheard this conversation, and smiled in that special way of hers, and Franky blanched whiter than some yogurts; then he changed the layout. It turned out that simplifying the piping for that area meant we could have a bigger and more comprehensive Aquarium, which I’ll get to momentarily. Also, we were able to have more than one toilet area- which, while annoying to clean, does mean we don’t have to go above deck every time we want to take a piss or a shit.

The Library is Robin’s room; she has full and total responsibility for every book in it, and it’s upkeep. She’s the one who decides when we need to get rid of periodicals, which books we can sell off for new ones, and… ah, she also comes and finds you if you’ve taken a book without signing it out or returning it when you said you would. Scary lady. Chilling smile. But, she’s happy doing it, so… what can I do, but return my books on time?

Under the Library is the Main Head and Bath House. The Main Head is one of the first areas where several Taffy-nooks and crannies are, as well as a laundry chute. It’s a large toilet area, with a pedestal sink, mirror, shelf for morning toiletries, and a rack for clean towels and clean clothing. There are baskets that can go into the Bath House, as well as soaps, combs, brushes, washcloths, scrubbies, and bath toys. Because I care, and Sanji likes little rubber duckies, and I can’t actually take a long soak with him without risking my life.

The Bath House is a bath house- bathing showers, soaking tubs, everything one needs for a bit of good clean fun. There are also little stools, because people get tired standing and squatting, I suppose.

Just across, I suppose, from the Bath House is the upper entrance to the Aquarium. There’s a lower entrance down in the Soldier Dock system, and a side entrance that opens out into the Sea- for the dogfish and the seahorses, you see. Adjacent- port-stern side- to the upper Aquarium entrance is a Fish Cleaning Station; Deborah does a lot of work there. It’s tiled, has its own hose and cool-box, and it’s also where our main ice-making machine is. For obvious reasons, the cats also hang out around the area. It’s also graded to drain off the back of the ship, in an effort to keep fish filth from, you know, stinking the rest of the ship up. It… mostly works, actually.

Downstairs, upper deck, starboard side stern, is the main kitchen garden; herbs, small veggies, and some berries are grown here. This is also where part of our aquarium is; mostly, this is where hydroponic growth is done, as the air-valve system didn’t take up too much space and Sanji can hold his breath for a very long time. Deborah also does most of the gathering, because she can breathe underwater- however, Mince and Oz seem to be getting better at it as well. This is where the outer side-door to the Kitchen is, as well as the compost. There is also an outdoor shower, as well as Lynn’s winter bed, which are new.

Downstairs, upper deck, port side stern, is the rest of the garden; poisonous and medicinal herbs, pop greens, the possum shed, the pig pen, and the goat pen are all back here. This is also where the outer doors to the Dairy and Stillroom are.

Then there’s the Grass Deck, or Grazing area; mostly, the goats hang out here during the day. They’re getting very fat- it’s going to be lambing time soon, and then kids. And then, kid dishes! Mark works out in the Barn, which is out on the Grass Deck, along with some of our new additions- Adelaide, especially, has fallen in love with the horses.

Ach, I’ve become bored- here, then, a quick bit of shorthand. Our ship is basically a floating, self-sufficiency possible, castle. With all that implies- grounds, hidden passages, a supporting farm and smithy, horses, the whole thing.
Mah, I’ve lost the thread- ah, that’s right. Dorms. There’s one deck devoted to habitation; the deck below it is devoted to crafting, and the one below that is storage and medicine.

Deck two, the Hab Deck, is all dorms that have been cleverly sealed off until needed; men on port, women on starboard, unless you’re a guest or married, in which case you get a stateroom.

As I said before, preparing thirty four beds- well, thirty eight- isn’t terribly easy. It’s doable- considering I did it- but it’s not easy.

The first problem is one of volume- quantity has a quality of it’s own, mainly that of overwhelming. As soon as Captain told me how many people he’d invited to join, I was opening up the closed off rooms in the Hab Deck and airing them out. I was getting sheets and mattresses and pillows out of flat-pack storage, and fluffing them up; I was making sure I had enough ‘boring’ bedding to cover each bed. Then, I was putting each mattress on the beds, checking the bedlines for soundness, sheeting, blanketing, pillowing- one pillow per bed, if you want more fill out the appropriate part of the requisition form-

And then, of course, the amenities. Making new people feel welcome and comfortable in, let’s be honest, your home, is a skill all it’s own. Lots of people think my job is easy; it isn’t.

Lots of people think my job is unnecessary; it isn’t. The things I do have worth; they are important.

Sorry, I- Solitaire is… dismissive.

Anyway, a proper room for a new person- before they’ve settled in enough to start changing things, at least- is just a very nice hotel room, like a five-diamond hotel room. The bed-area of a shared dorm room ought to be clean, well organized, and quiet enough to facilitate sleep.

We have the best bed frames Franky can make within the parameters of a dorm room- sturdy without being stiff, hard wearing without being ugly or institutional, simple without being cold. He does good work.

The mattresses on each bed- even the older ones, with crewmates who’ve been here longer- are not old, lumpy, scratchy, or saggy. However, they might be too soft for some people, which I can’t really remedy until we get to another island... I routinely pull mattresses out of general use and refill them with feathers, patch them, and make sure they’re still in good overall shape. In our guest rooms, we actually have air mattresses, not feather beds- probably because we can also turn them into gaol-rooms at a trice. Nice gaol-rooms; clean, well appointed, impossible to escape...

Beyond clean bedding, fine bed linens- and comfort items such as soft or firm mattress toppers, a selection of pillows, cozy down comforters, extra blankets, and snappy flat ironed pillowcases can make a nice bed into a very fine experience.

I was aware from the start how many potential berths Sunny could sleep; and so, I made sheet sets, and at least one spare sheet set for each berth. Thus, our new crewmates all have clean sheets for a week; and then they can change their own beds, and I can wash their old sheets, and so on. The Mice, even, have their own berths and clean sheet sets- but I actually use a miniature portable washing machine and dryer for their clothing, because their fabric goods are just so small. I don’t want to lose anything in the bigger machines- so, I got a smaller one and use that. Well, I already had
it, I just use it more now.

Each bed actually has a number on it; one is Luffy, two is Mark, three is Usopp, and so on; and I mark each sheet set, and preferred bedding, with their bed numbers. Down in the laundry, there are smaller baskets with the number system marked on; I fold clean linens into the appropriate baskets, and replace them in the linen closet that each dorm room and state room has. The linen closets have numbered shelves in them; thus, it all becomes a game of matchy-matchy in the end.

Each dorm has a long row of hooks, all rated to hold a frankly astounding amount of weight- a full pack or a grown man is no problem. There’s also a bench underneath this row of hooks for pulling on shoes, sitting, and other things. There are lockers- no more than six to a room, meaning there’s no more than six people per dorm room; and each locker is sacrosanct.

The lockers are also- until now- totally empty of all defining marks. Which is not to say they can’t be defined; in fact they have a slot for a removable plate. Well, that’s where I put their patch-symbol, once they’ve picked it.

Every crewmate has their own symbol, including me; and it makes it easier to find and file things if I already know who has what, and how many. And yes, it’s all written down in a book; I try to make sure each crewmate has a basic selection of various things, but… some things are easier than others… I also try to make sure that things that are no good get quietly replaced.

Ah, hell, might as well explain it- my policy is that I will do my very best to get my crewmates their clothing back from the laundry… excepting socks, which, unless they’re clipped together with that person’s specific sock clip, are in the hands of the Gods. This goes for bedding, linens, and other things- so long as it’s labelled with basically your name or symbol, I’ll make sure it gets back to you. Unlabelled things vanish.

Every article of clothing that goes through the Laundry gets tagged- and the patches and tags are for laundry purposes, really. The patches tell me where I need to put clean clothing; the tags tell me how to, and how not to, wash a certain something. There are these constant piles of dirty clothing that gets sorted according to wash instructions and filth level; and I want all my friends clothing to last them a good long time, so… part of that is making sure to wash it correctly.

In order:

Luffy has a monkey patch on all of his clothing, right by the tag. This is also what tags all his linens, his bedding, and- aside from the number- is how I tell his clothing from, say, Usopp’s. His sock clips also all have that particular monkey- and he’s the best one out of all of them to clip his socks together correctly. I think it’s because he doesn’t actually wear socks all that often- it’s such an occasional thing, he just incorporated clipping them together into basic sock procedure.

Zoro has a tiger patch on all of his clothing, right by the tag. This tag is special because it’s not iron-on, it’s embroidered in; one of his very few but very vital specific requests. It turns out the reason he only wears the one haramaki is that all the ones I made for him have iron-on patches, which make him irrationally uncomfortable. He clips all his socks together fairly regularly, but his socks are also
easy to tell from everyone else’s. No one else wears knitted thigh-highs but Zoro.

Nami has an orange patch on all of her clothing, right by the tag—except on her baby-bump swaddles, which have the patch in the middle of the top rail. The only thing she absolutely insisted on was that the orange had to have a leaf and actually be orange; otherwise, size, texture, and so on didn’t matter to her. She used to clip her socks together religiously, but as it’s gotten harder and harder for her to reach her feet, she has to rely on Zoro doing it for her.

They do get clipped together fairly regularly, it’s just… I know Zoro gets distracted by his fiancée, and I wish them every happiness, I just… clip your socks together before you get hot and heavy, dammit!

Usopp has a small lizard patch on all of his clothing, right by the tag. He actually picked his patch out the fastest, after he saw the pitiful selection of reptiles and amphibians I had a the time.

Sanji has a sea turtle patch on all of his clothing, right by the tag. Interestingly, so do his suits—however, his suits are almost never washed in the washing machine. I have to “dry clean” them, which isn’t actually dry at all, but it’s not like the washing machine either.

I have a honeybee patch on all of my clothing, right by the tag. Even my leather pants have this patch on them, once I found the right glue…

Chopper has a cherry blossom patch on all of his clothing, right by the tag. He actually almost picked the four-leaf clovers, but started tearing up. I hugged him for a little while, and when he was able to stop crying, he picked the cherry blossoms instead. I’m… not sure why, but… I mean. I guess clovers have significant memories attached to them…

Let’s speed things up.

Robin is roses. She likes flowers.

Mark is anchors. He mourns his sister still.

Taffy is fangs. She has no illusions about herself.
Bryony is **lips**. She’s developing in an interesting way.

Franky is **blue stars**. Of course it is; the man is bursting with civic pride.

Brook is **treble clef**. What else could it be?

Gurry is **starfish**. His favorite animal, apparently.

Deborah is **ruby**. She likes the shape.

Eleanor is **cat**. Subtle.

Fernanda is **eye**. Subtle.

Genevieve is **checkered flags**. Actually, quite subtle.

Adelaide is her Fishman Kenpo school’s symbol- the Coral Palm. It’s actually a palm tree, but… the **Coral Palm** is that important to her. I’ll talk more about Adelaide later.

Beatrix is **rabbit**. I wasn’t expecting it of her, but it’s a very interesting symbol- I saw her drawing it over and over in her sketchbook, so I made up a project for her. When she gave me her logo, I knew it was her symbol- and I do hope she doesn’t resent my presumption...

Cecelia is **smiley face** - a very particular smiley face, that shows it’s teeth, but not it’s eyes. She’s a clown, and no mistake.

Horizón- Sancho- is **owl**. Three clowns on this crew, Gods in heaven preserve us...

Ah- because the Mice are so small, their patches are actually non-water soluble stamps. They each have their first name initial in a circle, stamped somewhere unobtrusive- Darla, Maya, Hildy, Jellybean, Quillaby, Arlinda Rader Haai- D M H J Q ARH. Smaller things, like their shoes and other articles of clothing, are just numbered; and, because they’re so small, I can actually give them each their own individual clothing chutes.
Speed this up again.

Mince; pure speed and beauty. BBC; she’s just a baby. Mendy May has hidden depths. Oz is not terribly serious and stoic; don’t let his appearance fool you. Sohei; a gentle soul. Tellicherry; a simple soul. Neopolitan; self-confident, perhaps proud. Havij; wants to be like what she thinks her sister is, but knows who she is better. Bones; surprisingly dutiful. Tiffany; mysterious. Precious; into dinosaurs. Daily; she liked the shape. Mack;... he likes the Grateful Dead, which is a subtle mark against him, but is otherwise fine. Bang; he took about eight hours to narrow down his choices from fifty to five, and then another day to pick one of those five. Mono; a declarative soul. Jun; a comrade. Zelda; very subtle, dearie. Ailbe; perhaps it’s a matter of a lack of self-actualization, not subtlety. Bura Kada Bura; my case in point. Lucille; she liked the ‘by hand’ look. Bradford; he needs all the help he can get- I’ve resolved to sew every marker in the ‘upright’ position, just so he has something in his favor. Robert; he may be misgendering himself. Maurice; cute, but self-depreciating. Pascal; this man is odd. Coco; hahahaha- but also, hm. Sophie; oh, she’s part of the Knot Guild, interesting. Lynn; this woman is aggressive as hell. Orville; oh my god she’s adorable. Stacey; a horny twin virgin on the same ship as a White Snake, lovely. Cathey; no, no, why would a pair of sexually frustrated young women in the same confined area as two of the most legendary lotharios in the history of the World be a concern, that’s just silly. Parsley; surprising depths. Mila; a mage of some sort, but not anywhere near her mastery. Philip; he’s going to break Sancho’s heart, and Sancho will break his, and I must bite my tongue. Aoife; a defender. Annie; shy, but very observant.

I have a board; each person, once they’ve chosen their patch, gets an example-sample of their symbol glued to a magnet and stuck onto the board, with their name and number written alongside. Every person also has a list of every single item of clothing that they owned before they met me, and that list includes items that I think they might want or need in the future- a good winter coat, for example.

And yes, one of the main things I have Coco and Beatrix doing is ironing and stitching on each patch to the clothing of the person in question. Why stitch if it irons on? Well- adhesives tend to ruin the flexibility of an article of clothing, the literal flexibility of the fabric. My patches have a water soluble adhesive; the stitches give the Stitch Kids practice using the sewing machines, practice color matching, and practice craftsmanship.

And… if the Old (Young) Men stay for long, which, knowing our Captain, they will, I might as well offer them their pick of patches as well. Ugh.

I’m thinking about all of this in order to not think about what I’m doing right now. Right now, I’m standing in the middle of the Galley, in my pajamas, making Shitwhack Honey Tea because I’m starting to get a sore throat and I just Cannot.

Nope.
Flu Season hasn’t quite left yet, and the recipe for Tea To Fix What Ails You was taught to me by my sister, Easy, and while I could call it Breathe Easy Tea, I actually remember the recipe by calling it Shitwhack Honey Tea. Like everything Easy brews up, it has miraculous properties— even though it, technically speaking, contains no actual tea.

This tea is as caffeine-free as anything can be, but always check provenance and ingredients, just in case. It won’t knock me out— hell, it won’t knock anyone out.

But it will make you feel better.

Equipment:

A Bigass Pot, which is why I’m in the Main Galley, not the Small Galley; a working stovetop; those lil’ cloth sachets we use for wassail; a stir stick of some kind. I’m using a long-handle honey wand.

Recipe:

About a pint of clean sweet-water; a large cup of cider, apple or birch; half a lemon’s juice; a whole shitwhack of honey, as local as possible- our bees provided a good strong flavor last year, thank you Mark; three dry tablespoons of chamomile; three dry tablespoons of rooibos; a teaspoon of crushed cloves; a teaspoon of cinnamon, or one small cinnamon stick in shreds; a double pinch of nutmeg; and a dash of cayenne pepper, or white pepper.

Bring the water to a simmer and add chamomile, rooibos, and spices to steep. It’s done in about five minutes, and steep it longer to get that tea-ish tar which, if you have the flu or any kind of nasal effluvium, is really all you can taste anyway. Once the tea is fully steeped, add the cider, lemon juice, and honey until completely dissolved. Drink all of it over an hour; continue making new pots until you have no need for them, or you pass out.

It’s maximally effective if you gargle warm salt water first, then drink— and I would, if it wasn’t Quiet Hours.

Hmm—? Oh. Beatrix, and— ugh, Solitaire. Well, no matter. Deborah, too— Adelaide… Genny— hm. All the girls that aren’t sick, I think.

“Hey girls; want some tea? Solitaire?”

I receive a general round of nods; I pour out tea, and we all settle, in our pajamas, around the Galley table.

I slurp my very hot tea, and let the soothing magic work on my throat. The girls slurp their tea, and perk up in various ways.
“Can’t sleep?”

Deborah nods for all her sisters; Beatrix has laid her head down on the table, but her eyes are wide open.

Solitaire just shrugs.

“It’s too quiet for me to sleep easy, dear delicate sister,”

“Hmm. ...Would you like to hear some family stories, then?”

“I would, yes,”

“Alright… do you want to hear The Yule Pheasant Fiasco, The Half-brained Dog, or The Passenger?”

“...Why do they all sound like Tenpenny Dreadfuls?”

“Because our family is weird, Solitaire,”

“Hmmph. I can hear all of them, yes?”

“Sure,”

“Haaa- The Half-brained Dog, then,”

“Right-o. The dumbest dog I ever met was a secret genius.

“When I was five or so, Aunt Medjool called Ultima Thule and told me that since I was the strongest of that particular generation’s Fae kin, I got the honor of naming her new puppy. Unfortunately, she called at about dark-and-cold in the morning, long before breakfast. I was in the grip of a mighty growth spurt, and all I could really focus on was the concept of breakfast; so, when Aunt Medjool asked for a name for her puppy, I said ‘Porridge’. Aunt Medjool, bless her, named that Lab puppy Porridge,”

“Question- what’s a Lab?”

“Ah- let me see now… it’s a cross between a cocker spaniel and a hound. Basically, the happiest, stupidest, most friendly and ever so slightly useless hunting dog you ever did met. They developed webbed feet in about the third generation, so they’re dedicated water retrievers now; not completely useless, but better as a companion than a working dog. Which is to say, they’re better for the soldier returning from war than the boy joining the thundering horde. Good dogs; good friends,”

“...are they cute?”

“I’ve yet to see a really ugly one, so- yes, quite handsome as dogs go. Porridge was a lovely golden color, about this big~”
And I gesture with my hands, tea steaming on the table.

“-and for the first few weeks, he was a regular idiot puppy, clumsy in his quick-growing limbs and doing his best to be a good dog. Then he sort of… just kept doing that? And getting weird, too. Porridge would run up stairs just fine, but refused outright to go back down; he’d trot up to people diagonally. His smoothest gait was at a forty-five degree angle- like this-”

I make an L shape with my hand and point down the forty five- and Solitaire nods, understandingly.

“-and his feet, after a half-year period of tripping, crossed over each other like a line-dancer’s.

“Porridge was not a smart dog. If his dishes were moved, he wouldn’t be able to find them again until he was walked to the new location several times. He had a long-standing feud with the stop sign at the end of the drive, lunging and snapping at it every time he had to pass it for walkies. And, of course, he’d walk off Aunt Medjool’s back verandah which leads directly into their koi pond every summer, for two weeks, without fail.

“It wasn’t all bad, though; Porridge enjoyed his life. Aunt Medjool’s husband, my Uncle Nicolas, likes to play the accordion after his third round of drinks at family occasions. Every previous dog has either hidden under the porch, or in one case, growled menacingly until he stopped. Porridge loved the accordion, and would howl along with it, tail wagging happily. Aunt Medjool breeds the Morgan horses, and while they mostly hate all dogs and tried to murder any of the other dogs that came around, Porridge could walk right up to them, lick their noses, and even approach foals.

“Uncle Nicolas joked that Porridge only had half a brain.

“At around eight years old- not a puppy anymore, but not old, either- Aunt Medjool noticed that Porridge was walking into corners and furniture, mostly on his right side. She took him to the veterinarian, which is a dedicated and trained animal doctor; and they realized that Porridge was actually blind in his right eye. There’d never been any damage to it, mind- it was a well formed eye, it just… didn’t work. So, they took a scan- ah, a kind of drawing made of light and sound- of his brain, wondering if there was internal damage, invisible from the outside.

“As a matter of fact, Uncle Nicolas was right.

“Porridge’s right hemisphere- the side of his brain that controls the left side of the body- was normally developed. The left hemisphere, which controls the right side, was literally about the size of a walnut. He literally had only half a brain to work with as an adult dog.

“The veterinarian said that it was an absolute miracle that he was alive at all, but he didn’t seem to be in any pain. Animals are like that; so long as the injury doesn’t kill them outright, they take the view of life having sent them a blow… and then they move on, and enjoy life.

“Aunt Medjool commissioned my Mom, and she made him a padded right-side face mask because if he couldn’t see out of that side anyway, they ought to protect it.

“Porridge lived to be an astounding twelve and a half, half-blind, half-brained, and friend to all-
particularly the horses.

“That’s The Half-brained Dog.”

I take a long sip of my tea. The girls, now wide awake, seem to remember they even have tea. Solitaire blinks at me for a long moment, and then takes another sip of his tea.

“The dog literally only had half a brain?”

“Mhm,”

“...That’s possible?”

“Not only is it possible, it’s something he learned to live with,”

“Damn, that’s weird,”

“Mhm,”

“Alright- uh, tell me... The Passenger,”

“Sure,”

I take another long drink of tea. I get up, refill my mug, and return- and then turn right back around with the girls mugs, and then again with Solitaire’s.

Mmm. Piping hot tea.

“A good while back, I had to ride up to Pumpkin Hill instead of taking the train about four times a year. This meant a three hour journey by train morphed into a three day ride- a day and a half to get there, and the rest to return.

“One time, on the way back home, I saw something very strange- I had stopped to camp just off the road; it was a rest stop, with two waystations directly across from each other on opposite sides of the road, and nothing else but forest and empty road for kilometers- miles- in either direction. It was about the witching hour, and the place was deserted. The waystation I chose, and it’s outdoor campsite- it was the middle of the summer, I didn’t really want to be indoors- it gave off your regular stranger’s house in the middle of the night vibes.

“The one across the road however... did not. It was a Shell-Peace station, and the whole thing looked abandoned. The paved walkways were badly cracked and had grass and weeds growing through; vines and branches overhung the roof. Some of the hitching posts were ripped out and lying on their sides, and the entire waystation had a disturbing slant to it’s roof.

“Also, all of the lights inside were on- even though most of the windows were boarded, the inside looked well stocked. Like the cashier had just gone into the back for a second and would return at any time.
“That was my first indication that my return trip would be a bit stranger than normal,”

I pause. I slurp my piping hot tea.

“I don’t think I fell through to the Otherworld. I have been there before; but I hadn’t fallen yet then, not ever, and so I don’t think I did. I rode on the next day, and passed Double Death Tree, where a local lich had finally met the Unmaker; and I forded the River of the Dead, what comes down from Lake Hylia. It’s a cold, dreary river that’s claimed more people than most wars.

“The Dead River Crossing also has my very favorite way station, perhaps ever. It’s horrifying appearance belies a wonderfully stocked specialty pickle store, and some of the nicest crows I’ve ever had the pleasure of giving scritches to. So long as one minds their manners, doesn’t go under the structurally compromised parts of the overhang, and brings along a piece of wrought iron if you want to explore around the area, it’s safe as houses.

“I use this, for preference; this is actually a bottle opener my cousin Saoirse made- she’s one of Aunt Medjool’s daughters, if that matters,”

“-that opens bottles?”

“Mm. So long as they’re capped, sure- ah, you’ve never seen one. Hang on- Beatrix, could you go get a bottle of mead from the Small Galley? Thank you, lovey- no, I’ll finish the story when you get back, shoo, shoo,”

And off Beatrix trots. Good girl, that’un.

I yawn, hand over my mouth. Solitaire finishes his tea, and stretches. I finish my tea and roll my neck. Beatrix returns with a bottle of mead.

“Thank you- you’re chilled, have a blanket,”

“Thank you, Mab,”

“Mm- right, and this is how it works-”

“Blimey! -ah, smells like mead,”

“It should, my sister made it- have a bit?”

“Ta,”

“Right- mmph, forgot how good this year was… -The Dead River Crossing waystation had some of the finest pickled sheep eyes I’ve ever had the pleasure of eating. Every time I passed through, I’d buy a good handful and toss my loose change into the tip jar, to avoid the curse. I had to do that trip every quarter or so for about seven years, so I got very friendly with the cashier; and his answer to ‘what’s new with you’ was always fuckin’ incredible. In the back of that waystation, there’s a
shambling shave-ice store that I never did see open, but Garrick- the cashier- he told me that his
sister, Nina, made her own syrups. The flavors were very interesting too, more medicinal than
herbaceous- horehound, hyssop, valerian, plantain- but then again, I suppose she must have done a
brisk business, to keep such odd hours.

“Always stopped at the Dead River Crossing waystation, y’see; it was the last safe waystation until
you got back to the foothills of the Dueling Peaks, before you make that eastern push towards
Tiffany Harbour. Garrick always remembered me because I’d show up at nearly the same time each
year on the same days; and I remember making a point of being friendly. Nice man, Garrick;
recommended quite a few books about beekeeping and gave me the recipe for his pickled eyes,
which was very kind.

“I wandered around the back a few times too. There was something that lived under the dumpster; it
had eyes that glowed in the daytime, and ate corks and bits of tumbleweed. It had an aura of
immense chaos and power- and loneliness. I usually fed it a bit, and kept quiet company with if for a
few hours before I had to move along. I only fed the crows, mind- and they’d follow me, escort me,
really, to the Old Stable at Dueling Peaks; which is where the character of the roads changed. There
was also a large black stoat that lived under the back verandah of the Dead River Crossing
waystation; he was always sunning on the weather-grey boards, every time I was there for seven
years. His muzzle was fully white, and he had arthritic joints, and a fairly cheery disposition- he’d
very gently take a raw sheep eye from my palm a little slower each time, but otherwise showed no
signs of aging at all.

“It’s a nice waystation, Dead River Crossing; however, the Old Stable at Dueling Peaks is the only
place I would ever pick up a rider if I needed one. Most people who have to ride cross-country often
will tell you to put something on the back of your saddle to keep anything from climbing on with
you- a box, or a plant, but never a toy or a doll as those are ripe for inhabitation. Most of the time,
that advice is perfectly sound- things Unseen like to sit in unoccupied seats, but most of them don’t
actually want to leave their places, and get very upset if you accidentally ‘kidnap’ them. The ones
that climb into your saddle while you’re in motion are rude and wicked pranksters, at best.

“Sometimes, however, you’ll find one who needs to get out of town. On certain roads, you want to
have something, anything, else with you on the horse- as a horse is basically just a large hairy couch
on stilts with anxiety-”

“Hahaha- yeah-”

“Well, it can be helpful to have something other than you and an anxious stilt couch on the worst
roads. The road between the Old Dueling Peaks Stable and Tiffany Harbor is some of the worst
Gods-damned road in Fiddler’s Green. I’ve ridden over most of it- and it’d be one thing if it were just
potholes, a distinct lack of proper waystations, and poorly marked turnings. It’s not just that- it’s also
dangerously exposed. I suppose it happened around your time… you know that Queen Ariel ruled
the Sky, yes?”

“Yes- ah, I suppose the oddness of the Sky Islands just became… home?”

“Well, yes… and no. There are some things you expect, on a skisland; the ground is never quite
steady, there’s a faint rocking motion, proportions become guidelines- and the Wind is ever-present.
The Queen’s Road- Lacuda, the area’s known on older maps; between Dueling Peaks and Tiffany
Harbor is dangerous because no one cares about it. There’s been no cumuloforming to shift the wind
a bit; and no one’s bothered to maintain it. No one goes out there to live; and nothing good comes
from it. Every time I’ve had to use that road, there’s been a white-out blizzard or hurricane-force
windstorms down every accursed inch of it. The only real indication of where the road actually is are
little glowy-eyed statues shaped like cats, because that’s how old the fucking road is,”

“Ah! The Demon Road!”

“The very same. The pace of that road is about fifteen miles per hour because the wind is ready and willing to flip you, your horse, and all your pride into the thorn bushes that line it on one side and the ditch on the other, because fuck you that’s why.

“Most of the time, I could find a convoy or a large merchant’s cart to stick close to and ride in the half second of exposed road in their wake. That year, I was on my way back to Tiffany Harbor, and it was shaping up to be another nasty whiteout ride with nary a cart in sight. I didn’t have money to stay at the Dueling Peak Stables, and it was getting quite late- I didn’t want to be stranded if they closed the road, and I definitely didn’t want to pay the fine if I got caught sleeping in the stables with my horse.

“I sure as hell didn’t want to ride down that fucking road alone.

“I stopped in the Dueling Peaks Stable, an old place that’s survived by sheer dint of forgetting to roll over and die. It’s a silent and lonely place at the best of times; unfriendly people, deeply encrusted filth, and an aura of misery so pervasive that it fair chokes the smile from your heart. Just after sunset in the ass-end of Winter, twenty-three degrees below freezing, is a world overwritten with despair. I swung off my horse and was immediately filled with the compulsion to be literally Anywhere Else. The thing about the Dueling Peak Stables is it’s got some of the only hot springs for miles; and that water is some of the only potable water for miles as well. I started watering my horse, checking her hooves- I prefer mares because they don’t become damn fools around stallions, quite the opposite- and then I took the coiled blanket off the back of the saddle, freeing up the pillion seat.

“Alright, here’s the deal-” I announced, leaning against a hitching post and staring out at the whirling snow and dust, towers of cloud-white stone bristling against the blue-gray sky. Dark shapes moved in the corners of my eyes; and strange eyes glistened in the darkness; and I looked far into the distance, considerately away from the horse, which was grazing on oat-fodder. ‘You don’t want to be here, and I don’t want to ride this next bit alone. I can take you as far as Tiffany Harbor if you get me through this. It’s a nice port town; they have trees, an’ a Inexplicably Good Tofu place that does nice takeaway. I’ll let you ride with me, but you have to get off there. Deal?’

“I waited, staring at the darkness and Nothing Else, listening to the horse chew and swallow until there was a soft scuff, and the jingling creak of something getting up on the saddle. Riding at night is no picnic of course, but this was a goggles on and brace sort of ride, seeing pitched small because wide-range would have only confused me. I couldn’t yet differentiate between the stuff in the wind, the wind, and the ground- not at a distance, anyway. The wind barreled into us in random gusts, occasionally shoving me, the Passenger, and the horse into the thorns or the ditch almost before I could correct our balance. My heart throbbed like a rabbit’s right before you break it’s neck; my chest ached from the cold air; my throat was thick with bile and fear.

“I never looked at the Passenger, out of courtesy. Things Unseen remain so for a reason, after all. I got the impression of something tall, and light, and very warm; their face was long, and their chin dug into my shoulder on the worst of the gusts. Their arms wrapped fully twice around my waist, like a Long-Arm; and their legs were scratchy against mine. They smelled of roasted pumpkin, and they were just as terrified as I was- but hot DAMN if the horse didn’t stay on the road, in spite of the ice; there was no oncoming traffic, all down that road; and we even made good time in some places.

“We rode into the Inexplicably Good Tofu place at the edge of Tiffany Harbor, and I got off the
horse, hitched her, and slid down the hitching post. I put my head on my knees and cried for a good long minute.

“Ta,’ I eventually managed, gasping on the bitterly cold air. ‘You were very helpful. I’m gonna get takeaway, d’you want a Mapo Owfu to celebrate?’

“That would be nice,’ it said. I don’t know how to describe it’s voice, other than slightly crispy.

‘Lovely, I’ll leave it on the stump there for you’ I said, rising to my feet.

“I came back with the takeaway, left them it’s spicy tofu, and after a crispy ‘Ta, lovey’, we parted ways. I switched horses at the Portgas Stable, and was back at school the next afternoon,”

I take a long drink of my mead. It’s a nice vintage; very good honey that year. The girls are wide-wide-wide eyed, and each of them have completely forgotten their tea.

“Mm. Girls, drink your tea,”

They blink, and nod, and drink their lukewarm tea.

Solitaire takes the mead and pulls straight from the bottle.

I nod.

“D’you still want to hear about the Pheasant Fiasco, or is that enough for tonight?”

“Tell me the pheasant story, Mab,”

“Right-o. So, this story takes place around Yule. Normally, I tell this story then, but this year was weird. So, one Yule yonks ago, my Great Grandma on Aunt Zippy’s side was reminiscing about Yule in Floria, and how they used to have pheasant for Yule. However, things being how they are, what with the Florian Succession, they’d never be able to just purchase a pheasant for Yule feast.

“Well, shit ‘Gail,’ goes my Great Grandpa, ‘them woods over yon hill are full of pheasants, I’ll get you one.’ So, Great Grandpa, Grandpappy, and a dubious relation called ‘Uncle Popeye’, went out with their bows to get Great Grandma Abigail a pheasant for Yule.

“They’re gone for much longer than it takes to hunt a single pheasant. According to Aunt Zippy, they were basically expecting great-grandpa, grandpappy, and uncle to be gone for a few hours and come back with a store-bought roasting chicken and apologies. Instead, they came back eight full hours later, covered in mud and frozen ice- and surprise! They have a pheasant. Great-grandma gives them a lecture about staying out so long and worrying, but agreed to dress the bird for tomorrow’s Yule feast. Thus, the traditional Florian Roasted Pheasant was secured.

“Great-grandpa and Uncle Popeye retire to the living room, to drink, talk, and warm up from the cold- when suddenly, Great-grandma screams from the kitchen.

“TOM!’ she bellowed as literally every male over majority leapt to their feet, because literally all of
them were named some variation on ‘Thomas’ for three generations by that point- ‘THERE IS NO ARROW HOLE IN THIS BIRD! WHICH ONE OF YOU IS TAKIN’ THE PISS?’

“They both looked horrendously sheepish and eventually admitted that they hadn’t had much luck finding pheasants in the woods and were about to go to the store to get her a chicken, when they… tripped over the pheasant.

“Then what were you three idiots doing in the woods for eight hours?” said Great-grandma.

“We weren’t out there for that long- Uncle Popeye started before Great-Grandpa decked him. Great-Grandma and Grandmammy had to menace Grandpappy with wooden spoons, but eventually, taking pity on the increasingly mortified Grandpappy, the brawling Uncle Popeye and Great-Grandpa stopped and took off their oversized hiking boots to reveal bandages.

“As it turns out, they’d only been hunting for two hours before literally tripping over one, and they both reflexively aimed at the ground and… shot each other in the foot. That was not the pheasant they’d brought Great-Grandma; that Yule pheasant came from the Hospital grounds, where Grandpappy had tripped over it after carrying both Great-Grandpa and Uncle Popeye in to get their feet seen to,”

Solitaire blinks.

“Alright, so- how are you related to Popeye?”

“Ah, well- Uncle Popeye is my Great Great Grandmother’s First Husband’s cousin’s son,”

“... First Husband,”

“The First Husband is the whole reason my Aunt Zippy’s family immigrated from Floria in the first place. So... about two hundred years ago, he decided he didn’t want to be the father to nine girls anymore, so he went out for a pint one night and fucked off to Pumpkin Hill without actually divorcing Great-Great-Grandmother, or even telling her. For a few years, she thought he’d been killed and dumped in the Tems, which I guess happened in Fiorelle in those days, and shortly remarried. Second Husband fathered two more daughters with her, including Great-Grandma.

“About six year’s after he’d fucked off to Pumpkin Hill, First Husband wrote to Great Great Grandmother for money. This was a problem because despite fucking off to another Blue, they were still married; Great Great Grandmother was committing bigamy. Despite pleading her case before the courts that, ‘Really, y’all gave me his death certificate when he didn’t turn up after a month six years ago’, they fined her an outrageous amount of money and only commuted her prison sentence because ‘her brood would place undue strain on the orphanage’- yes, really.

“Second Husband, who was a halfway decent man that only beat her sometimes, died suddenly of stabbing in a Pub fight. Great Great Grandmother was left up shit creek, no paddle, ten girls, and nobody willing to hire a bigamist maid.

“It was at this point that Great Great Grandmother tried to woo First Husband back to Floria. She even went so far as to pay a painter to make Erotic Nudes of her to remind him of what he left. That was an exciting Spring Cleaning, going through an old box and finding those,”
“-uh-”

“Despite Great Great Grandmother’s heartfelt efforts and bountiful curves, First Husband remained in Fairisle, enjoying his new life of running credit scams, bootlegging, and racketeering. After another four years of this nonsense, Great Great Grandmother got the money to ferry herself and her brood across the Blues to Sky Blue, where they weren’t so uptight about the sex lives of domestic workers and she could probably get a job.

“They almost came on the Titan, a ship said to be unsinkable-”

“-Oh gods-”

“-Yeah, that fucker sank; anyway, we found the tickets for passage on the Titan next to the nudes; but at the last moment, Great Aunt Jessie caught Measles, forcing everyone into quarantine and saving them all from a dusty, locust-infested death. They instead came on the next boat, and had to pick up some of the survivors- but anyway, the most important thing was that everyone got lice and had to be shaved before entering Fairisle waters,”

“Harsh,”

“Quite. Once in Fairisle, Great Great Grandmother found out ‘First Husband has actually, legit died, for reals, please come identify his corpse and also he owes the Court like D500 in fees so-’ to which Great Great Grandmother goes ‘fuck you’ and moves to the Inner Sky with her daughters and her new Muscovy husband. She started a farm, ran her own feed store, and was fairly happy until her death at the age of forty-eight.”

“...Wait, so how… how did your Great Grandmother know of your Uncle Popeye at all?”

“Hell if I know,”

“Boss, why was your Double-G Grandmother’s sexy nudes just tossed into a box? Like, what?”

“Oh, no, it was a box of family albums and unsorted pictographs; the sexy nudes were in a plain brown wrapper tucked in with the Yule Pet Photos- yeah, it was a tradition for a while to dress up our pets in Yule decorations. The Sexy Nudes were right between Grandma’s pictures of The Alleged Dog, Spooky, wearing like seven Yule streamers and a bunch of glitter. She had this ability to vanish even if you were looking directly at her, and she made noises like a child being murdered every Spring without fail. I’m pretty sure she was actually a fox, but Aunt Zippy insists she was actually a cat- oh, and on the other side, it was all pictures of Grandpappy getting smashed on Great Aunt Jessie’s Coffeeballs,”

“Hang about- the Tems isn’t in Fiorelle! It’s clear across the country, what-”

“Whoops, sorry Solitaire. Um… so I learned this story when I was about eight, and I distinctly recalled that particular phrase as ‘Great Great Grandmother was certain he’d been thrown into the Tems’. The actual phrase is ‘Great Great Grandmother was certain he had been thrown into the Tems like his brother, who ran afoul of several criminal organizations while running cons in Londinium and while we are not sure who actually did him in, it was still a big affair to travel down from Fiorelle to Londinium when they fished his body out with the eels,’; thus making ‘thrown in the Tems’ a family phrase for ‘murdered due to gambling debts and quite possibly being an asshole’. When I asked why Great Great Grandmother even married First Husband, I was informed that the deaths of both her parents set her up with a rather thriving bit of domestic service, so she picked First Husband for his mustache,”
“Mab, this is very important to me: how do you make Great Aunt Jessie’s Coffeeballs?”

“You’re not going to like it, Deb,”

“I must know,”

“Okay, take note- you’ll need a whole package of vanilla wafers or shortbread cookies, smashed into a fine powder with either a rolling pin or by repeatedly slamming the taffin on the counter whilst darkly airing small grievances; half a bag of ground walnuts, or pecans, smashed whilst grimly airing Really Big grievances; three cups powdered sugar, maybe more; a couple of tablespoons of cocoa powder; a glass of coffee for balls, a glass for you- you can also substitute Rum, if you feel like it; a cuppa honey, probably like a teacup? I’ve only ever made these after watching Great Aunt Jessie do it, don’t give me that look- and water,”

“How much water?”

“Enough,”

“…”

“Ouf, that face- you look just like Sanji when I explained some family recipes to him. I’ll show you, if you’d like?”

“…Now?”

“Maybe for tea; anyway, sift ye dry ingredients whilst drinking, stir in the wet whilst yelling; shape into, like, ping-pong balls and roll ‘em in powdered sugar or cocoa powder or a mix of both, it’s your life. Hand ‘em out to friends, family, and neighbors until they forgive your mistreatments in writing,”

“…Are they really that good?”

“Mm. Are you girls going back to sleep? It’s five; I can cover for you, if you’d like…?”

“No, Missus Mab- it’s best I go kick the boys awake and start the day. I’ll take a nap this afternoon; I’ve only got two services today,”

“I just get irritable when I try that, Boss; I’ll start warming up the irons,”

“Right-o; Adelaide, are you going out to the horses?”

“I expect so; doesn’t matter what I did, they’ll be expecting me at the same time as always,”

“Genny?”

“Back to bed, I think; oh, good morning, Mark,”

“Mornin’, all- bit early for some of you, innit?”

“Mmmph,”

I’m treated to the sight of a sleepy Mark, scrubbing sleep from his eyes and getting a bowl for oatmeal-
“Solitaire? The Galley is the most busy place on the ship; if it was too quiet, you could have a kip on the couch, there?”

“...is that really alright?”

“-Yeah, Mister Solitaire; so long as you stay out of the way, it’s fine. Chef won’t kick you out, and I’ll keep the boys from pranking on you,”

“...Thank you, that’d be nice,”

I’ll ask for his patches after breakfast- no, tomorrow, I’ll ask tomorrow.

I start getting dressed by coiling my hair up; Sanji didn’t sleep well either, and neither of us were really in the mood for more than a quick bit of kissing this morning. Pins and- done. No makeup today, just sunscreen; charnellements and my Charm Bracelet are all the adornment I need. Perfume; honeysuckle. Smokey stockings, and low-profile garter belt to hold them up; thick sweater dress with a deep V neck; lace blue toms shoes; and a lace shawl.

Back to decorating dorms; if you don’t know intimately who you’re dressing a room for, less is more. More space; more comfort; more welcome- thus, resist the urge to fill the lockers with loose objects, or cover shelves with stuffed toys. Keep only the most useful items, like an up to date calendar, a mini-fridge, and a quiet clock.

Lots of people don’t feel comfortable sitting on beds; and there are lots of crewmates who just… can’t. Robin is one of those- she cannot sit on a bed unless she’s getting in or out of it. Luffy is much the same. Thus, both the mens and womens dorms have seating areas- and as the Dorms increase in size, so do the seating areas. At this point, actually, I’m considering making a dedicated lounge room for each side of the dorms… I’ll talk to Franky about it.

Lighting is important for several reasons- chiefly, without adequate light sources, humans go crazy. There’ve been extensive studies done- first we get sick, then we get crazy, then we die. Secondly, it’s important to have a light to read or do daily tasks by- some people don’t like getting dressed in the liminal between the Bath House and the Head, and some people have little habits that don’t fit anywhere but their Dorm. The seating areas have over-shoulder lights for reading or stitchwork, small night lights in unobtrusive areas just dim enough that closing your eyes blocks out the light but bright enough to not trip and die, and each vanity- one per dorm room, work it out- has a patch of magnifying make-up and blemish mirrors, with their own lighting. Because I care, and Franky could.

The lockers serve as more than just hanging and folded clothing storage, a place to put things you’d normally have on you but not right now- they’re… basically the most private space on the ship. I only put things into the marked lockers- I don’t take things out, and the only time I actually looked at the interior is when they were being built. Devil Fate Bullshit. With that said, there’s also a long row of- I’ve said this before.
Each dorm is also outfitted with paper, pens, pencils, scissors, tape, hankies, and a hair dryer. Each dorm has a phone and a notebook for the phone, just in case. The dorms only have skylights, so privacy isn’t an issue beyond normal roommate things- which I expect them to work out, and if they can’t, then they talk to me about it.

On this ship, there’s only three rooms Luffy is absolutely, on pain of a slow and vicious death, Not Allowed Into, I Mean It Luffy.

Number One is the Pantry, which is kept secure by a security code, a key, and a secret key that only Sanji and Deborah know the exact specifics of. I think it’s like a switch? Basically, even if you have the key and the code, if the switch isn’t in the right position- or possibly sequence of positions- you’re not getting in. I think Robin and Nami also have access? And I mean, there’s not a door yet invented that could keep me out- I’d logic through the switch part fairly quickly.

Number Two is the Dairy, which is kept secure by a door, a small clean room, and another door which leads to the workroom- and a whole bunch of specialized runes. Technically speaking, if Luffy did all the right things in the right order, he could go into the Dairy. He wouldn’t be able to do more than taste a few things before getting the boot- and his comprehension and obedience to complicated subjects goes about as far as ‘thumb on outside of fist’ and ‘be aware around trains’.

Number Three is the Smokehouse, which Luffy tries to break into once a week. This is usually when Sanji lets Deborah cook or plan a meal, as he’s reminding his Captain why stealing food is a bad plan. She’s gotten much better at it; and she’s really starting to integrate her basics, which is always fun to see.

Emergency Evacuation procedures, on order of Zoro, actually, get practiced about once a week; the closer Nami gets to dropping that Barrelchest of hers, the more nervous he gets. With that said, it has made Franky really think about how to indicate exits for the crew, without allowing an enemy the same insight. Havij, apparently, has more than a few ideas, as does Fern- they’ve been debating it incessantly, and I’m quite interested in seeing the two of them settle on something, so I don’t have to hear the same argument in it’s seven-bajillionth mutation.

I miss the girls; I miss them being around. I miss Cece’s terrible jokes, and her seething envy of Philip; I miss Fern’s dire predictions that have nothing to do with us; I miss them, and I’m very worried about them. Cece has the flu, of course; but Chopper’s not sure what Fern has, exactly, the tests aren’t yet concluded...

The first thing to do today, of course, is make sure everyone got the tour- and take the Four on a tour as well. Perhaps Captain will make a ruling on just what they are to the crew, but either way I can show them some things- common areas are common for a reason, after all.

I’ll ask Robin to pick a few books she thinks they’ll each like, sometime this afternoon- I know she has an idea of it.

I’ll show them which instruments are currently without Owners; certain things I can just give away,
while others will need Nami-wrangling.

Honestly, the worst thing about refurbishing the dorms was cleaning them- we haven’t actually opened up the empty rooms since Sunny was built, aside from my cursory dusting two years ago. Not good.

It’s actually easiest if I start with my legs. I have eight, and they all have minds of their own; pulling on control top pantyhose and then a wide-strap camisole does a lot to make my form more… humanoid. Wrangling my legs into the pantyhose is always a chore, though; still, it works, and it doesn’t put too much pressure in weird spots, so… it’s better. The camisole is there to make sure I don’t overheat too easily- oh, I grabbed the strawberry one, cute.

Then, I pull on my boots - the dry pair, anyway, my other two are airing out still. Slide those down the rack… and pick a shirt for after lunch … and done. Skirt goes on without a hitch, and this one has pockets; and my jacket is in the Galley.

Last is my hair- no makeup other than sunscreen and no jewelry, either. Simple style today, I’m not feeling my usual. My headwraps are in the Galley too- time to collect the boys.

I don’t actually need to get them out of bed; they’re self sufficient in that regard. It does help, however, if I poke my head in their room on the way to the Galley, to make sure they’re not getting distracted.

We actually all wear the same kind of shoes- steel toed, well fitted, absurdly ventilated… grippy; houndstooth trews for the boys and a full length skirt for me, cut so it moves; undershirts, wide strapped camisoles for me and plain old tank-tops for the boys in a variety of colors and patterns; those two… Oz is going to wear a band tee again, because I don’t think he has any actual sense of self yet, so he’s relying on others to assume a self for him. Mince, on the other hand, has a very boring sense of style - he himself isn’t boring, but his style is very… basic.

Of course, we each have our weapons.

Oz’s weapon is a battle axe he can play like a guitar; he showed it to me in it’s Battle Forme, and it’s very red. In Alternate Forme, it’s a guitar pick; he can use it to cast spells and ‘augment external Love usage’ whatever the fuck that means. When he’s working, he wears it as a pair of barrettes, the so-called Civil Forme. They go on one side of his head, clipping his floppy fringe out of the way.

Mince has tattoos; one around each upper arm, and one around each ankle. Apparently, they help him focus his Demon powers into ludicrous speed. I’m… skeptical. Firstly, I doubt that’s all they do; secondly, I don’t think it’s his limb tattoos that give him his speed; thirdly, there’s a tattoo on the small of his back that he didn’t know he had? So uh, I think someone’s told him a bunch of lies, probably. The design itself is odd- a blue circle, kind of like a rainbow? And a symbol for the sun; and an apple tree. And there’s a space, in the middle- like there’s a big part of it that’s just… missing. Mince has been drawing out our crew symbol- the one on our flag? I think he’s going to finish it with that, or have Mab do it for him, she did say she’d give anyone who wanted a tattoo…

As for me, I’ve got a variety of quality leather bandoliers in which my throwing knives reside when I’m working; around my waist they go, under my coat- reachable by clever slits in the fabric- and
that’s the end of it.

Good, the boys are awake- Chef Sanji said that we’re to start work as soon as we get to the Galley, no matter if he’s there or not. The Month menu is written out on the fridge, on the other side of the big list of what’s actually in the fridge, and how much of it. At the end of every service, we have to count and update the content list. I’m okay at it, nothing I haven’t done before; but Mince is a beast at it. Alls he has to do is look in the pantry for about half a minute, and he knows everything about what’s in it. It’s really something else.

The Month menu has a special magnet attached to it; well, two, actually. The first one gets moved down each week, signifying where we are in the month. The second one pins the next-day’s menu to the door- special recipes we might not know, specific instructions, and so on.

Wait- shit! Today is Sancho’s birthday! I know he won’t say anything about it- but I also know his actual favorites, not what he says they are. He says his favorite breakfast is miso with rice, but that’s Cece’s favorite; he actually likes chocolate chip pancakes with banana filling in the stack.

Hm… It’s Sous’ Pick today for one Service, which means… Right!

“Okay, Mince; I need to know if we can make pancakes for breakfast today,“

“Uh- sure, lemme look-“

“Oz, please set out the dishware for the Early Bird Special; Mark will be back in from the barn at any moment, and he’ll be hungry,“

“Roger dodger-“

“...Um, Mister Solitaire, do you want me to wake you up when it’s breakfast time?“

“...please,”

“Okay, I will,“

“-don’t touch me to wake me up. Just call my name, okay?”

“Yessir, no problem,“

“Deb, we’ve got enough pancake fixings for breakfast- and what’s with-?”

“Mister Solitaire gets the Anxiety when he tries to sleep somewhere too quiet; he’s sleeping here for now because-“

“Gotcha. I’ll start measuring out the pancake mix; do you want me to grill them too? It’s about the only bread-like thing I can cook with skill,“

“Please do. I’ll handle the bacon and the sausages; Oz, you’re on egg duty, and you’re to set out the fish, cheese, veggies, and fruit,“

“On it,”
And then the world goes a bit… well, blurry.

If there’s one thing I can say about making bacon for a crowd, it’s that having a large oven and a cookie sheet works wonders. It’s even better if you’ve got one of those roasting pans with the holes in the bottom so’s you can let the bacon grease drip into a catch-sheet below while the bacon crisps up, but it’s not strictly necessary.

Ovens are best for very large batches of bacon. Firstly, cover your cookie sheet or catch sheet with alumina-foil, so as to improve cleaning; then, arrange your bacon strips in a single, non-overlapping layer. Put them in a hot oven until golden brown and crispy. If you want them extra crispy, put them on a rack before baking. Thick cut bacon tends to take longer to crisp, and burns at the edges easier.

Let the grease cool a tick, then pour through fine muslin or cheesecloth and strain out the crunchy bits; this grease is what Oz is going to use for scrambling eggs. I have a very different method of making scrambled eggs, but Chef’s never asked me to make them, so…

There are five main components to a Galley- well, a restaurant, but we work in a Galley. Cleaning and Washing; Storage; Food Preparation; Cooking; and Service.

The Cleaning and Washing area is between the Storage and the entrance; it has appliances, the laundry chute, the compost bin, and the garbage. There is a three-compartment sink, a warewashing machine, and several movable drying racks. During Service, it’s one of our jobs- ah, Oz’s today, nice- to keep pace with the dishes that pile up. We only have so many, after all; and no one should not eat because we don’t have something for them to eat off of.

The storage area is actually two or three places- non-food storage, cold storage, and dry storage. Non-food storage is disposables, like alumina-foil, plasti-wrap, waxed parchment paper, unwaxed parchment paper, cheesecloth, and so on; cleaning supplies; and clean dishes. The cleaning and sanitation chemicals are stored in the lower cabinets, generally below the sink, so as to not contaminate the food, food equipment, utensils, dishes, or disposables.

Cold storage is where we keep anything that needs to be refrigerated or frozen. Luffy’s not allowed into the cold storage room, the smoke house, or the dairy; and I’m pretty sure the only reason I’m allowed in all three is because I’m the Sous Chef. Technically, I guess the smoke house is part of dry storage; it includes all nonperishable foods and other consumables that aren’t needed daily. There’s actually a trap door in the ceiling that opens onto the deck; making it simple enough to put new stock into its place before we use it.

The food prep area has access to the sink for washing produce, cutting areas, and mixing areas—really it’s a long counter that gets split more or less evenly, depending on the meal. We section it off into processing raw foods- breaking down whole animals into cuts of meat, cleaning and preparing veggies for cooking prep, and so on- and a section for sorting foods into batches- chopping meat and veggies, mixing salad dressings, mixing spice mixes, preparing things for pickling, everything you can think of. It’s on the side nearer to the non-perishable storage, the cabinets and things, which makes it easier to grab fresh dishes, prepare plates and platters, and move them to service or cooking efficiently.

The cooking area is along the back wall of the kitchen; a range, a salamander oven, a rotating
The service area is the final section of any kitchen, but especially a commercial kitchen. It’s located in the very front of the kitchen, technically right on the pass-through; when we do buffet-style, it’s where we display food for self-serve. It’s also where we stack up used dishes during a service, because we only have the one sink. I’ve been looking through the mail order catalogues, and there’s a really cool new thing- something called a sanitary dishwashing machine? The one I’ve got an eye on is one meant for medium to high use; it has a very high rating for water conservation, and it comes bundled with a sprayer attachment for the sink, one of those overhead high pressure models I used to use. I think it might help with our metal dishes; we have a lot.

Our galley has a zone-style layout. It’s set up in blocks, with major equipment located along the walls. The sections should follow the order for increased flow, but I think Franky got confused about a few things, or Sanji never expected to have kitchen minions to boss around. Silly- of course he would, with a crew this big! I will say, it’s nice to work in a kitchen where the center is completely open; it means there’s always a little bit of space to get through, and Chef can keep a good eye on everything happening.

The one thing I don’t like isn’t anyone’s fault, really, just more of that shortsightedness- this kitchen was really designed for Sanji to work in, no one else. It’s all built so that he doesn’t have to stoop much, and barely has to move to get everything done. For the rest of us, it’s not so simple- part of my issue is that I’m short. I’m short, and my legs aren’t as strong as his; so, I have trouble lifting roasts into the oven without straining my back or burning my arms. I’m not scared of a few little burns- but they aren’t a few, and they aren’t little. I haven’t said anything because I don’t want to be a bother, and I know what’s going on, and I’ve put in a requisition form for overarm fine-handling oven mittens already- so, really, it’s no big deal. I haven’t burned my coat at all, or my skin, but I can feel the burns underneath- I soak them in cool water for hours when I train, and I know how to treat burns, so it’s fine. I will say though, I’ll be very happy when my overarm sleeves are ready; working with the ovens as it is is not a fun time.

Oh, yes, and every day at the end of the day, we have to clean the kitchen until it’s spotless. We’ve all started getting into the habit of spot-cleaning, just so there’s less work to do.
“Good morning, Chef!”

“Shrimp, are you ever not in a good mood?”

“Yes, but not right now,”

“Of course. Seaweed and Cuttlefish?”

“Oz is on eggs; Mince is on pancakes; and I’m handling bacon. I was going to do the pickles and the fruit for the oatmeal, but—”

“No, I’ll handle that and the pastries, keep working with the bacon; while it’s baking, go ahead and set the tables for service. Also, the guy on the couch—”

“Mister Solitaire gets the Anxiety when it’s too quiet and he’s trying to sleep. He’s not in the way, and I’ve promised to wake him for breakfast, so—”

“Fine. Your oath, your follow through; Oz, scrape after every batch, clean utensil, no exceptions; Mince, let them go a little longer before flipping, we want a nice, even brown—”

“Yes Chef!”

“No, Deb, that’s enough bacon for now; switch to sausages—”

“Yes Chef!”

Mister Solitaire doesn’t relax when he sleeps. Most people do— even my Cece and Sancho did, when they came back from school during break times. When people sleep, everything they are fades away into dark nighttime, and their faces go slack and sweet like children.

Mister Solitaire isn’t really asleep; I can tell these sorts of things. He is, however, tired— it’s like all the life got lived right out of him, like he’s afraid to sleep for fear of going too deep and dying.

He’s like I was, after everyone but me and Miki got taken by slavers during that school trip— still going forwards, After, but… not right.

I was just learning to cook simple breads in Home Econ when it happened, and we had all plumped for a trip to the Tukda Museum, a notable market group for rice. We’d all decided as a class to start with something dead simple— pancakes— before moving on to something a little hardier, rice. I’d mastered the flipping and the mixing of the batter, and Miki was my study partner- she promised to teach me how to do inclusions in the cakes. After that trip—

-hiding in the rafters be quiet, Miki, or they’ll find us; a bottle of poison on a string around my neck, and following the slavers back to their ship in the quiet dark, the two of us not even eyes in the darkness, vengeance burning in our hearts; Ellie’s the better sneak, but I’m no lazybones about it; a single drop of what I’ve got is enough to kill a Sea King, much less a man; they were stolen and scattered long before I figured out who took them; records memorized and burned, and—

After that, I did two things. Firstly, I made a vow, an Oath with my sister-friend, Miki; Death Before
Chains. The other… I would find them. I would find every last one of my friends, my classmates-Kaylee-Carol (The Twins), Ava, Zoe, Bad-Luck Ahn, Stellie, Vivian; Miki, and me. There were nine of us in Home Econ, and our teacher, Miss Shermer.

I only found Miss Shermer on accident; she was why I kept working for Missus Seedle at all. I needed an alibi, an opportunity- after all, people go into anaphylactic shock all the time. Peanut oil is tricky; and although she had no proof, that was the day I got moved from waitstaff to kitchen drudge.

No one liked Mister M------; boorish, braying jackal of a man, and poor Miss Shermer had to sit there and pretend she was desperately in love with him. Bastard.

I… couldn’t look her in the eye. I couldn’t let on that I was doing something about it- not while he was still alive. Still, I planned it out very well- got Fern to pick the most auspicious day, got Ellie to make a distraction nearby to tie up the hospital’s response team… and after I made my move, and Mister M------ was choking on his own throat, I looked right at Miss Shermer and gave her a tiny, tiny smirk- of the kind I used to give in her class, right before a small prank sent Ava to screeching.

And Miss Shermer… she smiled. She screamed and carried on when her ‘husband’ died, as was proper; and then, she took a set of keys from his lapel, and saw him carted from the restaurant, and she left.

She runs a school, now, for ‘proper young ladies’; and she came by to visit my mother, before she died. Mother gave her the notes and books that allowed her to be a successful courtesan; and, after that… well, I never did see Miss Shermer again, not under that name.

Missus Seedle was a lot of things- but if there was one thing she was very good at, it was social politics. She knew what Mister M------ was doing to Miss Shermer, just as she knew that I had done something about it, because I held Miss Shermer in the greatest of respects- but she couldn’t prove it. And, she knew that Miss Shermer was kindly disposed to the restaurant; and would perhaps become more kindly disposed to her in particular if my station was elevated.

All my classmates except for Stellie and Vivian were with Miss Shermer- we had a quiet evening in the back of the kitchen after hours, once. We caught up on things- I told them of Miki’s death, and my own vengeance for it.

According to them, Stellie and Vivian weren’t gone- just sold on, to a man in Dressrosa. Gods alone know if they made it, or were still there- but it’s a start. None of the girls were in a position to see the man who bought Stellie and Vivian; but they did notice some things.

Kaylee and Carol are tigershark fishwomen; and they noticed the man who bought Stellie and Vivian smelled like sea turtles and money, sweat and shit- and now that I’ve been to a hotel with a casino in it, I know that that particular combination means casino. The sea turtle smell is an artifact from when they wash the money.

Ava is a half mermaid, a selkie like me (even though I’m really not)- and she noticed that the man was wearing some sort of uniform, livery almost. Like he was important, or went on behalf of someone important. He carried a set of seals, and something stamped red, and the ink on the letter he showed Mister M------ to buy Stellie and Vivian, it was… gold. Not yellow in color- it was actual, literal gold.

Zoe noticed something else- the man wasn’t really all there. He was there enough to do his job; but his eyes were glossy, glassy, like… she said he smiled, and smiled, and there was nothing behind it,
not even emptiness. Like it was just painted on, a shell- and it frightened her to see even that.

Ahn’s got the worst luck of anyone I’ve ever seen; but this time, her misfortune was my gain. She tripped him accidentally as he was leaving, and in punishment, he seared marks into her skin- said to Mister M----- that if ever he fell behind on his payments to the Boss, Ahn would be collateral.

*That mark is a smiley that’s been crossed out.* And next to it, another- one I still can’t really figure out the meaning of. What does G, T, and a Star have to do with anything? Still- I wrote down all their observations. For Ahn, I cut a portion of skin away, and replaced it with skin cut from one of my thighs, where it’d grow back the quickest; and that skin I cut from Ahn, I leathered, and tucked away in my journal. Morbid, maybe- but now I know exactly what I’m looking for.

The only thing I don’t know is what exactly I’m going to do to them that took my friends, or if they’re even still alive.

Ah, breakfast time-

“Mister Solitaire! Mister Solitaire, it’s time to eat-”

“-Thanks, boyo; I’ll be right up,”

I don’t think the Out of Timers know the Girls are, well, girls. To be fair, they don’t have womanly figures yet, and they do have very strong, almost masculine features. However.

I can see it starting to rankle. Beatrix, in particular, is losing her sleepy patience and starting to get what I can only describe as coldly furious- it’s not just the misgendering, it’s the disregard for what she does.

Hm. ‘Bought time I taught her the magic, then. I might as well initiate her into my particular brand of faith as well- there’s no time or place sacred to Zul, because all times and all places are sacred. There is no special ceremony; and it’s no secret how it happens. A conversation; a choice; a clasping of hands. Anything else that happens is up to you- these are the only things Zul requires.

From the corner of my eye, I see Tellicherry jerk straight up in her seat and then settle down for a good show. She acts like she’s never seen an Initiation Unto Zul before...

“Beatrix, no sewing today- we’re doing combat training, and it’s about time for your initiation,”

“Yes, Boss. -really, you think I’m ready?”

“Your shears; and I wouldn’t have said if you weren’t,”

“-!!!”

“Hmmhmhm, you didn’t think I’d keep working on them forever, did you? Don’t worry about the
color- so far as I can tell, they were actually always like that, just too worn out for it to be visible. The quality of the metal itself has been raised to weapon-standard, and I had to talk to Mom about how to get the spellwork onto the new blades without breaking them- metal or spell- which is what took so long,”

“...they feel so light!”

“Hmhmhm, a properly balanced blade does feel quite different; so. Training? Initiation?”

“Yes please!”

“I thought so- mmm, drills, I think, then some sparring, and then I’ll teach you a thing or two. But first, we might as well start with the boring bits-”

“Training can be boring? How?”

“Oh dear. -Yes, Beatrix; training, in fact, can be dreadfully boring, especially when it’s foundational. Exercises in patience and craftsmanship, for example-”

“Oi!”

“Am I wrong, though?”

“...no...”

“Mhm. I do believe you understand the foundations of our Art well enough, which means we can move forwards to the basic aspects of the Martial part of it,”

“-Wait, what? Since when do sewers have a martial art?”

“Well, Solitaire, since when has sewing been Sacred to Zul?”

“Uh-”

“-Beatrix, remember this. The true basics of building strength and ability have nothing to do with a named attack, and everything to do with simple skills and knowledge. The way you stand, the way you eat, the way you breathe; and other things that aren’t so easy to see, like your true limitations and your full strength. These are that which all things are built upon; the base. Basics. Get it?”

“Sort of...”

“Think of them as life lessons- things your parents would have, should have taught you, if they’d been able,”

“oh,”

“Mm. At the beginning, I distinctly remember you asking what the point of learning to hand sew, clean fabric, and so on even was- what do you think the point of it was now?”

“...Don’t dismiss the menial things. Before one is enlightened, they must boil water for rice; after enlightenment, they must boil water for rice. The laws and rules don’t change just because you did. Also, the skills that make you good at a menial task are the same skills that can save your life; clean clothing doesn’t carry scent, or wear out so fast when it’s mended, and making sure everything is neat and organized makes it easier to get the things you need faster- medicine, books, weapons, anything,”
“Mm. What else?”

“...Food is important. Even if you have the best teacher, and the best guide to train, if you’re not eating the right things you won’t get anywhere. The body runs off food like a fire runs off fuel- be it wood, coal, or grass, whatever; no fuel, no fire. The body needs all different kinds of food to function properly, especially when it’s under stress. Eating the same kind of food all the time will sicken, weaken, and exhaust the body; leading to sickness, weakness, and disease. -Do I have to learn how to cook for myself?”

“Yes,”

“Uuugh-”

“Steady on, I had to do it too,”

“Fiiiine,”

“Hmhmhm. Right- I shall be lecturing you about Magic, this morning. You will also, incidentally, be learning something very important about the goddess, Zul, whom you have indicated a resonance with and a willingness to follow. First, tell me everything you know about magic,”

“Um… well, I know there’s magic in words- that’s all a spell is, really, it’s words written special so’s the World can’t ignore them. All words are magic words, if you mean it hard enough. Some people have, like, allergies to certain kinds of magic? Like, I’ve noticed that no Seafolk is ever entirely comfortable around fire, and fire’s about the simplest spell there is. And there are five types of magic, and some people are suited to ‘em more than others,”

“Hm. Last one’s wrong. All words are magic words if you mean them hard enough. A spell is just a word or series of words written specially so the World can’t ignore them. And yes, some people do have allergies to certain kinds of magic. As for affinity- and fire- nope. Wrong,”

“Huh?”

“Fire is Magic, so don’t doubt your senses- but fire is not a spell,”

“...What is it, then?”

“In the basic sense, it’s Evocation; just with flint and steel, rather than a fingersnap and funny word,”

“Oh. Do people not have affinities, then?”

“Not quite; people have places they’re more comfortable drawing their magic from. It does not mean, by any stretch, that they only have one kind of magic. For example, Sanji and Deborah. What can you tell me about their magic?”

“...Sanji draws a lot of his magic from fire, but not everything. Deborah’s mostly water, with a lot of lightning. She never pulls on lightning except when she’s fighting or trying to make a meal out of nothing, though,”

“Mm. I think you’d be served well by starting at the beginning- finish your bacon, first,”

“Kay,”

I finish off my tea, and put my dish on the stack being passed around. Beatrix does the same.
Solitaire settles in, because he’s a jerk; but I ignore him, because it irritates him to be ignored. Petty? Me? No, I’d never do a thing like that.

I pluck a single hair from my head. It’s long, and bright, bright red in my fingers; and then I shift it in the light, and it turns jet black, like ink-filament does that. I wind it around a small stick of wheat-straw, until it’s wrapped well round and no longer dangling. I hang the wound-straw in the air by it’s shadow, and then I wait for Beatrix to focus back on me. Luffy has appeared at her side, eyes wide and eager to learn more about the Mystery Power.

“Magic, in its most basic form is the energy generated by existence; in other words, the Will to Be. Haki is what it’s most often called, by those coming to it from a strictly martial perspective; they’ll also tell you there’s only three kinds. Rubbish. Haki-Magic- is in everything. Grass, stones, the air you breathe, the food you eat, the water you drink. Most things do not produce enough magic to even sense, but powerful things like mountains, storms, and certain islands are, and do. Every living thing produces enough magic to sense-even if some things, like viruses or fungi, are so damn tiny you’d need to train a lifetime to sense them, or near enough.”

I pulse my magic, and the stick dissolves into pure white light. I flick my fingers, and it settles between us, gently radiating that pure white light.

“Nature regulates itself with five forms of magic; and Humans, with seven. There are different magics to each living thing, of course-sometimes on an individual level, and sometimes with species,”

As I speak, the orb of magic between us releases seven orbs, two of which immediately start thinning into toruses of living vine and metal, respectively. As I continue my explanation, I gesture to each orb, which obligingly flares or flickers in it’s own way. Greenish grey like a mossy stone; cobalt blue and black in the middle, like two inks mixing; a bright ember of a sphere, flickering and fluttering with it’s own rhythm; twisting and moving, ever coiling over itself, white and green and empty of color but for the dust it stirs; and a crackling ball of shifting flashes, dancing lights...

“Each of these magic types has a place in the body they like to rest in,”

“Wait, wait- what do you mean, rest in?”

I huff in amusement. Seems he couldn’t hold back his interest long enough, our Solitaire.

“Each of the elements that balance nature also balance living beings. They saturate and hold dominion over certain systems in the body. The magic in these systems remains dormant, for the
most part, until a living being attempts to consciously draw on their magic for the first time,”

“...Neh, so everyone has five kinds of haki? Why did I only train three?”

“No, you trained all five- you’d mastered one already, I accidentally helped you with that, and I began you on the last of them,”

“-?”

“Most people are born with one of the paths already open, or find one kind of magic easier to use than all the others. Mine was Lightning- or the Claws, as I taught you, Luffy-”

“-Oh! Wait, but lightning- the claws- is really dangerous! I cut myself with them if I’m not careful!”

“Well, yeah. Hang on, I’ll explain that in a moment- but the reason I taught you at all, Luffy, is that using only one kind of magic, following only one path throughout your life causes the others to atrophy- decay, degrade, wither,”

“Eep! That sounds really bad, Boss!”

“That’s why I’m going to teach you how to find and draw on all five of your internal magics before even starting you on arithmancy and mathemagic. Keep in mind,”

I look over the rim of my glasses, so that they blaze white in the light cast from the mystic orbs. I can feel Beatrix’ full attention on me, even though I can’t actually see it.

“Training all five of your internal magics in one go means that it’ll take five times longer for you to learn, and five times the effort to master; not to mention all the other training you’ll be doing, and the Art. Are you sure you want to get into this now? There’s no rush,”

“...I’m sure. It’ll only make me better to learn, so I want to learn,”

“Alright. I’m going to warn you now, so you don’t complain later- this will exhaust you in ways you didn’t realize you could be. You’ll be worried and tested, every step of the way; traps and tricks will spring out of nothing to fright you. You’ll be tired and hard worn six days out of seven, and you’ll constantly feel like there aren’t enough hours in those seven days. You’ll hate me; you’ll hate yourself; and you’ll grow, painfully and by centimeters. For a good long while, training will be your whole life; and once I have taught you, once you’ve begun this path, you can’t unlearn it. It’s yours, forever,”

I pause, and Beatrix looks at me, through all the strange lights of the magic between us.

“It will make you stronger in ways you’ve never dreamed of. At the end of it, it may well be that you can’t relate to your sisters in quite the same way as before. Are you really prepared for that, Beatrix?”

“I am, Mab,”
The look I give my apprentice is heavy with pride. A smirk dances over my lips, before I master myself again and nod, sharply.

“Let’s get started. You know the mental aspect of this already; it’s the same state of mind as when you spin thread, or put in a straight seam,”

Beatrix nods carefully.

“Do that now, but instead of reaching for needle or thread, reach into yourself. I’m going to show you the kind of thing you’re looking for and where it comes from; if you need help, I will provide it. All you have to do is find it in yourself and draw it forward; wake it up, and let it settle in you, lively. Are you ready?”

“It seems complicated, but I can try,”

“We start when you’re ready,”

“Understood,”

I watch as Beatrix shifts in place, losing the tension in her shoulders and slowing her breath. Her eyes whirl with feeling- and then those feelings drain away too, as she finds and steadies herself in that cool quiet place where thread is spun and fabric is made and mended.

Solitaire and Luffy have both shuffled away, giving Beatrix all the space she needs.

I wait until Beatrix nods, a good moment longer.

I gesture the earth sphere forward. There’s a sound like the grinding of stone on stone, the clack of dice and the snapping of bones. My voice echoes.

“Earth magic is the seat of strength, and is defined by its endurance and stability. Earth is the solid thing on which you rest; the blackest black of a mine in the deep; the gentle swell of fields and the rasping crush of sand; the crushing weight and fire of the meteor; the dizzying height of a cliff; the ravine full of gems and the quiet grave. Earth is the floor the house is built on; earth is the bone that does not break. Solidity, pressure, stillness; look in your bones, and find it there,”

I press the ball of magic into Beatrix. It touches her lightly, just a bare drop of my power that rolls slowly out across her ribs, her arms, her legs, every bone of her body- lighting her gritted teeth with witchfire.
I watch as Beatrix furrows her brow and looks within, trying to find the energy I told her of.

Her eyes snap open and her shoulders- arms- she braces herself on the table and wheezes. She’s not dropped out of her trance, but she’s not right.

“Think of your battles, Beatrix; when you almost lost,”

Beatrix’s eyebrows furrow, and her shoulders roll back, defiant.

This time, I can feel her reaching, and so reach for mine as well, matching her pace.

There’s nothing at first, just the quietude of my own soul; then… something. An echo of my footstep against a wall of stone, the potential of something more. We reach for that echo, try to draw it out—but that is not the way. Patience- Beatrix thinks it through.

Magic is alive, in it’s own way. I basically said as much; so, the magic wants things done a certain way. If you want to draw on an element, you have to work with it, not against it.

“Strength. Mab said strength, and the battles I almost lost; how to do it? Sparring with my sisters, pulling up energy I didn’t have because I couldn’t lose, not again- clawing down, digging deep-”

We dive, and come at it from underneath; pull on it with all our might the way we would if there was nothing left but we needed more anyway.

I’ve already done this, so for me it’s just an echo; like hearing a rock crunch, like seeing where the cracks popped open to let it come out.

There’s a rumble I don’t hear or feel with my physical body as something inside of Beatrix roars awake. Vibrations echo through the Galley- the Ship- like an earthquake, which is flatly impossible at Sea but Magic-

It pushes out and rolls, grinding like stone on stone.

Beatrix gasps, and snaps her eyes open wide. There’s a certainty to her eyes, a sureness even to her sitting posture that wasn’t there before.

“How do you feel?”

“Sturdy; like all the force in the World couldn’t move me now, with mountain granite for bones,”
“Mm. You got it on the first try, Beat; I needed three,”

“...”

“Hmmm?”

“It felt weird; not painful or nothin’, just kinda weird. Was that all there is to it? I thought something more would happen,”

“Hmmhmmhmmhmmhmm! Without any prior training in magic, you woke your earth magic- and you did it as soon as you knew how, where it takes most mages years to figure it out.”

“Wha-?”

“Prodigy. The word to describe what just happened- I found a prodigy,”

“Um. M-maybe, or maybe I just have a, a knack for... this... S-so, um, so this... this steadiness, this footing that won’t shift underneath me, a strength I can be sure of... that’s really mine?”

“Oh yes; and no one can take it from you,”

If I ever find the fucking asshole who taught my apprentice to doubt herself, I’ll kill them where they stand.

“What’s next- water magic, right?”

“Yes; and where’s all this energy at the start of the day, hmm?”

Beatrix sends me a teasing glare for my friendly dig, and then melts back into her light meditation.

I gather my thoughts, and begin.

“Water magic is the seat of understanding, and is defined by its adaptability and flow. Cold and dark, falling into water and sinking forever; endless flowing currents, the roaring of a river as it wears away stone, a mirror that reflects only the truth; the womb and the wave. Wet; Cold; Flowing; water magic rests in the blood,”

This power is heavy like earth, but quicker; liquid, moving, hard to grasp. It is not earth. Focus on the blood; not your heart as it beats, but the pulse of it’s beating, the rush of energy flowing into and out of it. As I recall, the magic hides between beats, and slips through your grasp when you reach for it.

“Understanding, but what kind- of water? Of magic? Of myself- of myself, who am I- no, what... what do I understand? Swords, though I’m not great with them. Hunting and gathering; it kept me
and my family alive. I understand Boss, because Boss is like me- but I never tried to understand those things, I just do … let it come to me."

It starts as a trickle I could barely feel, then a torrent, a bursting flood; the crashing of waves so fierce, I can feel Nami and Zoro snapping awake because- but no, the Sea is calm. That’s just Beatrix. The magic crashes through her like a flash flood, pinning her self against herself until the pressure is so high she’s holding back screams. It smells of ocean air, petrichor and mold; I can see chicken skin all over Beatrix as she shivers.

Another gasp- this one wetter.

“Alright?”

“I feel so- clean! Like, like all the things I don’t need have been stripped away and will not return, I feel- there’s more to this, I can feel it, there’s so much more to this. Boss, what’s the next one? -wait, no, the order of this… what’s the reason for the order of this?”

“Clever girl. Yes; the reason for this order is stability. Magic has rules, same as anything else; and earth is the most stable, the best foundation, which is why I started you there. It’d be different if you’d managed to consciously wake any of your other magic- and no, Fishman Karate isn’t quite the kind of magic I mean,”

“Mm. Earth doesn’t want to move; and like bone, it supports and is good at supporting everything else. Water then… stabilizes? Buffers? It keeps balance, makes sure one element doesn’t overrun the others; water can stop fire or lightning or wind in its tracks, where earth would be scorched or broken or worn away. Earth and water like working together, too; and although it can’t stop earth, it doesn’t need to, right? Water rests on top of earth without being confined. Um, I think- right? Did I get that right?”

“Exactly right; water bends where earth breaks- earth stands firm where water bends. Water smothers fire; earth contains it. Earth grounds lightning; water defines it’s spread. Water moves with wind; earth moves against. Have more confidence in yourself, Beatrix,”

“R-right!”

“Hm- Water magic is the arbiter, the same as earth magic is the foundation. It protects the more volatile elements from each other and ensures that all five work harmoniously together. Water is in constant contact with the other four, the same as blood touches every system of the body. Now, you tell me- what’s next?”

“Fire,”

“Yosha-”

I flick my fingers around to bring the fire orb to the fore; Beatrix melts into her meditation.

“Fire magic is the seat of will, and is defined by its passion and intensity. Warm and bright;
sunlight’s harsh-gentle gaze, the call that all the World heeds come Winter’s end; the heat of
the hearth and the inferno of the crucible, the flare of two eyes meeting and the agony of a
kiss; the wild thing eating it’s own ashes, the seed from which life grows again. Burning, hot,
dancing; it rests in the gut and throat, ”
When I let the fire magic go through Beatrix, she shudders and then- chirrups.

“What is- what? Warm, but empty without- missing something, missing-? Willpower. Fire needs
fuel, a spark; what feeds will, I don’t… what does it want- oh. What do I want-?”

The will to overcome shall urge us on; to face the World beyond the break of song; the favored of the
Gods arrive at dawn- we shall rise again…”

“Pull it all together; every desire I have- and feed the fire-”

The energy always sparks in the stomach, like a pilot light in a furnace when you throw fuel in. I feel
it flare to life in her, roaring up through her throat and- her skin turns red like Sanji’s- aw hell-

“You two, back the hell up right now-”

“Woah!”

“Fff-au-”

Beatrix’ fire expands like a bomb, pushing heat into and through every cell. A corona of flickering
flames, now blue, now purple, now settling somewhere between, cloaks her shoulders. The flames
and the shuddering eventually cease; and slowly, slowly, the red fades from her skin, leaving behind
only a thick red stripe across her nose. It’s different from Sanji’s; not as clean and tidy, more like…

hundreds of tiny dots only making a streak across her face by dint of being so close together.

She comes out of her meditation- but the mark doesn’t fade. Like… freckles, almost, but mystic.
Magic freckles.

Cute.

“I feel like I could swim for miles, like I should, like any obstacle I face next would be worth it. I feel
like I could fight the World and win - but, um. Brr,”

“Hot stuff, huh; and when it leaves, you’re colder for it. It takes experience to draw on just enough, I
will admit…”

“The hottest- and that… that makes sense, I suppose. Also, my face feels… odd,”

“Yeah, you’ve got a Mark; it’s nice looking, if a bit, well… here, have a look,”

“-? I thought only Mom had that…”

“Mmm, no, I think it’s a Vinsmoke thing, not an individual thing; and it doesn’t surprise me that waking up your fire magic woke that part of you too,”

“Eeh?”

“It’s like a generator, or a motivator- Fire magic is the amplifier. It’s responsible for pushing magic outwards and increasing the energy that lies dormant within. It’s no surprise to me that waking your fire magic woke your Mark; it amplified something that was always there, after all,”

“Is that why it’s in the middle?”

“Yes,”

“Cool beans. Wind next, right?”

“Right,”

Beatrix nods, melting away. I smile.

“Wind magic is the seat of change, and is defined by its swiftness and unpredictability. The gale which crushes the World down; the storm that shakes the heavens; a tempest of feeling, a breeze that cuts to the quick; the gentle teasing tug of a kitestring in your hand; the grinding of mountain to dust, the cooling of sweat, the breath of life. Intangible, ease, movement; it rests in the lungs and the diaphragm,”

Beatrix… giggles, as the power courses through her and fades. And then, she hums-

“Fritzy was the radi sorta worked and sorta doesn’t like the snowy out the window was the fuzzy on the sleen; and snorey-borey were the little toys up on the floory and the neighbor kids were always kinda mean- We take a syllable, the funnier the better and we say it till we make it be a wordights  ; lexicon of beg and borrow- Idioglossary are oh, isn’t it the bestest thing you ever ever heard? ”

As Beatrix bursts into peals of laughter, the magic whirls through her body and out, into the room. It twirls in giggling spirals, and a song emanates from it. I had no idea this much frivolity and, well, joy lurked in the heart of Beatrix- or Deborah, whose giggles are echoing from the kitchen as Beatrix’ magic nuzzles against her. Good, I had no idea how to teach her to have fun… then again, I might have to as there are some things I just won’t be able to teach her unless she can enjoy a game.
Change is movement, and the unexpected- and sometimes pain- and I did not expect Beatrix’ magic to manifest as a fun, joyful, *nostalgic* song about her relationship with her sisters and brother.

I can see it settle inside her- the urge to jump when others might stand, to leap before she thinks; to dive into the unknown just to see what’s there. The air briefly smells of summer and storms, before dissolving back into Beatrix’ laughter, sweet and precious and ringing like windchimes. If she choking on it a little, here and there, how could she not?

Surety, clarity, and incentive combined with impulse is a heady concoction; a sensation of being able to fly where others would fall, the taste of storms on your tongue and the feeling of thunder over every tingling hair…

“Somehow, I’m less surprised than I thought I’d be,”

“Boss?”

“Deep breaths, Beat, take your time,”

Beatrix heaves, and her eyes light a shade of vermillion I’ve only ever seen in gemstones.

“Wind makes stuff move; it pushes, it… it wants to go and never, ever stop. Right Boss?”

“Again with the questions when you’ve already gotten it right- but yes. Wind magic is the dynamo. It shifts everything into motion, helps magic flow the way it’s supposed to,”

“Why was it so much easier than the other three?”

“There’s two things I can think of, B; wind itself wants to move, it wants to be used. And, you might just have a knack for it- certainly, it would explain some of your self-made sword-drills...”

“Those are really just some of Mom’s dance moves strung together, I don’t think they’re for fighting at all...”

“Don’t be so quick to judge- shashka sword forms are deceptively elegant,”

“Hmph. Lightning now, right? And then I can learn to use magic,”

“Lightning; and you will not be using lightning magic for a good long while,”

“What?”

“Lightning magic isn’t like the others- look at the orb,”

“...It seems angry and lost, directionless, trying desperately to get free of what confines it- but also like letting it go would be the very last thing you’d ever do...?”

“Mm. Lightning magic is the pinnacle- it’s what Armament turns into when you think about it long enough. It’s the hardest of all magics to master because it possesses the most dangerous properties of all the other magic types, as well as a few nasty properties of its own. People who claim to have mastered lightning really only know how to build it up and let it loose in a defined way; channeling it...
properly… of our crew, Nami’s the closest to it, and she’s a full Master Weather Mage. Lightning is as unpredictable as wind, as damaging as fire, as adaptable as water, and as indomitable as earth. Further, it is the very essence of life- it is by lightning’s touch that life is begun… and ended,”

Beatrix’ eyes glimmer in the arcs of light sparked off the orb of Lightning between us.

“So it’s the strongest?”

“No one magic is strongest,”

“It’s… the most dangerous?”

“No, all magic is dangerous. Lightning is the least forgiving. If you make a mistake with earth, you’ll be jittery and maybe need to drink a lot of milk; water, you’ll be dehydrated, fatter than normal; fire, you’ll be depressed, listless; wind, you’ll lose your breath, your imagination for a time. All of these things can be recovered from, in time- if you work at it. If you fuck up with lightning magic, about the most merciful thing that can happen is you get some minor nerve damage that heals in a year or so; most people just die,”

“….Definitely the most dangerous,”

“Hmmm. That’s why I’m giving you a less dangerous form to start with. You’ll have to decide for yourself if you’re really ready to die for this; as your teacher, it’s my solemn honor to keep you alive. Lightning doesn’t give second chances, Beatrix; if you take one misstep, make one wrong turn, your own body’s electrical currents will be knocked out of alignment. Electricity is what sets the pace of your heart, and keeps your brain and spine and nerves working; it sets the pace for every cell in your body,”

“Neh…?”

“Think of it like irrigation ditches in a field, Luffy. Every living person has a big network of them, and water- electricity- moves through the ditches in very specific ways, as that person lives. Learning lightning magic wrong is like being struck by lightning- or, in this analogy, terrible flooding. If the field is alright is one thing- but Luffy… what happened to the ditches?”

Luffy looks… scared. For Beatrix.

“So. You’re not touching this one in its fullness for a good long while. You’re going to learn static electricity, which while startling, is much less… less. It’s a lesser form. Build it up enough, and you could still put someone in a world of hurt- but it probably won’t be you. Observe my fingers-”

And with a wriggle, I dismiss the orb of Lightning, drawing it into a thin fine thread and earthing it deep within myself. Another day; another lesson. Not today- she is not ready. As the burning white thread of lightning flows back inside of me, thin wispy cracklin’s of energy dart and flicker over my palms, my knuckles, dancing across my fingertips.
I’ve mastered this- oh, about a year, year and a half ago. My clawtips are sharp and invisible and only where I need them to be; but step it back...

It starts transparent, little lightnings dancing over sharp edges and scales. I step it back, and my fingers **blacken**, **tip to knuckle**, drifting **black** like ink. Step back again, and **crackling jewels** appear on my second finger bones, held in place with fine traceries of filamental **black**. Step it back again, and fillegree of **black** wraps around my **fingertips and wrist**, lacy chains of lightning arcing back and forth. **Again**, more filament; **again**, a pair of gauntlets, this is where I was at the end of school; **again**, the knucklebones, middle of school; and finally… **clawtips** again.

Go around the world, and end where you began.

“Give me your hands, Beatrix,”

“Okay, Mab,”

I lace our fingers together, press palm to palm.

“**Lightning magic is the seat of power, and is defined by duality**-”

“Is that what makes it so tricky?”

“Yes; it is easy to understand one, or the other- but both takes a bit of doing. Without peace, magic cannot be controlled; without chaos, magic cannot exist. Without wrath, you do not move; without serenity, you do not rest. You need both to be whole; and the point of greatest power lies between two states. Positive-negative; yang, and yin. Do you truly understand?”

Beatrix’ left hand tightens around mine; anger is easy. Rage- at circumstance, at prejudice, at the cruelties of illness- oh yes, there is a whole world of things to be enraged at. She knows this.

Beatrix’ right hand softens in mine; peace comes too, often right in the middle of great rage. The crisp crunch of cooked sausage; the sight of frost before a snowfall; the color of the turning leaves; the smile of your sister; the little things that make life worth living. She knows this too.

“I see. Teach me, Master,”

“**Lightning magic is the seat of power, and is defined by duality and potential. Oppositional forces in balance; the twitch of muscles firing in sequence, the bolt which flies true towards its aim; the strike, relentless; the destructor; the creator; the line of connection across eons, if need be; the web of thought which leads from music to wandering amongst the stars; the decision made before the mind can make it. There are some things that don’t exist without lightning; there are some things that can’t exist without lightning. Sharp, dry, shifting; it rests in the spine,”**
I curl my fingers over, press the tips of my claws into the soft space between each finger palm to palm; and then I lift my palms away, and draw my hands away, and between my fingers and the empty space between forefinger and thumb, Beatrix’ own basic clawtips emerge. They’re different from mine in one immediate way- mine are meant for slashing, poking holes, digging and climbing. Beatrix’ claws are for gripping, cutting, tearing, grasping- curved where mine are straight, and wickedly hooked. Mine are meant for action;

“This magic is the catalyst,”

“Does it… is it meant for pain?”

Beatrix stares at her claws, their blackness reflected in her bright red eyes.

“No. A claw is meant for many things- a tool is for what you use it for, nothing more or less. A needle can sew, or heal, or torment- it all depends on you, and what you decide to use it for. And pain is not the true meaning of strength—”

“What is, then?”

“…Hm. I have every confidence you’ll figure it out by the time we’re done training together,”

“It’s going to hurt, right?”

“Of course, it’s training,”

“So pain makes us stronger,”

“…No, but it’s what made you stronger,”

Beatrix frowns.

“But, Master Mab- I’m not strong. Not yet,”

“That is not the kind of strength I was talking about, Beatrix,”

“… -you said there were seven magics that govern humans, but we only did five?”

“Animate beings are balanced by another two, yes. Metal and wood; they’re active in your body whether you like it or not, so no need to go looking. They flow through your entire body, your entire magical core and channels, and are the types of magic most martial arts rely on- including Fishman Karate,”

“So- what do they do? What are they like?”
“Fundamentally, they’re very different for all they’re in the same place. Wood is the seat of the spirit, and is defined by emotion. Metal is the seat of the body, and is defined by reality,”

Beatrix just looks at me.

I smirk, and then nod.

“Wood magic is the seat of growth, and is defined by adaptation and discovery. A curious strength in the root of a tree; a memory of the sun; patience in all the turnings of the Wheel, resilience in the face of destruction; self-healing, eternal life; vitality and virtue; the seed, the wish, the promise; a love that does not vanish, only unfolds larger and larger still. Changing, forming, fertile; it rests in the body,”

Beatrix nods; I continue.

“Metal magic is the seat of inspiration, and is defined by endurance and transformation. Solid, liquid, gaseous, plasmatic; hard, shiny, malleable, fusible, ductile; conductive vitality; of death, life; of night day, glory from sorrow; of grief, joy; of dust, gold; of the storm, strength for the morrow; of ferocity, subtlety; of rage, calm; comfort forsaken for truth; the wound is where the light shines through you; a coin to trade, a blade to fight, a kiss to remember, a drop of blood to swear by. Changeable, formed, vital; it rests in the mind,”

“...really?”

“Really,”
Should I Stay or Should I Go

Dear Dream Journal,

I had the nightmare I can’t remember again- not the one that’s loud and bright, the memory-dream, but the one that means Others.

I’m a machinist, and my weapons are a sword and a shield. Even though my skills lay more in the making of such things, I am no stripling with them- Mom and Dad wouldn’t allow that. That said, here’s a thing I don’t know how I know: named, physical weapons cannot be carried in dreams. You can carry a seeming of the weapon; you can even carry a memory of it so powerful it’s next to nearly the same damn thing- but they are not the same thing. The only exception is starmetal, which comes from Beyond, which is further than the Otherside.

Hammer and Tongs are physical weapons; and anything with its own Name has its own Will to Be. They are not, however, starmetal weapons- simple steel and yronwood, which while sturdy in their way, are useless to me in a dreaming-pinch...

I’ve written this out of order- sorry, Journal.

Here’s what I know: my skill is called Dreamwalking. I got it from my Dad’s side of the family. He gave me a journal that’d been passed down for generations, with observations and notes from every Dreamer in our family, and a lot of information about the Others. You don’t need an active teacher for Dreamwalking if you’re a Dreamer- in fact, having a teacher just makes things harder. It’s a personal skill, with personal interpretation being more valid than what any outer force can tell you. Then again, I’ve found a basic grounding in Psychology and Ethics to be very helpful navigating some of the weirder dreams I’ve been through...

Dreamwalking is a powerful art held under Divination as far as magic goes- but unlike Seers, who are more like computers (like Neo and Miss Tellicherry) in that they use powerful predictive algorithms and huge data sets to make their predictions, Dreamers use intuition and interpretation, and their predictions often have nothing to do with the future. Seers see the future, the present, and the past as it happens in the physical world most of all; Dreamers see the future, present, and past as it happens in the spiritual and emotional worlds.

I cannot use the same tools as my friend, Fern, to do my thing. They will not work for me as they do for her. This is because Fern makes her predictions based on hard, solid datum- facts, observed phenomena, even if she herself didn’t make the observations.

I don’t.

My skill is all about dreams- well, really it’s about minds. Everyone is connected to something I’ve started calling the Sea of Shadows, or the Black Sea, a force or a place where every dream goes when there’s no one to dream it anymore or just yet. Missus Mab is the Ruler of Shadows; that’s what her Devil Fruit, the Kage Kage, means. That’s what it does- meaning Mab has dominion over a much wider range of things than just shadows. I think she knows it- and I think there are some lines
in the sand she won’t cross. Once you start raising the dead, it all goes downhill...

On the other side of the Black Sea, there’s what’s known as the Otherside. The Otherside is the place where everyone (so far as I know) goes when they die. It’s where the Others were imprisoned during the War of Creation. Time does not exist in the Otherside; nor does Death; nor does Law. It is wholly beyond the reach of the Gods- who themselves are more than half dream.

The Four Old Men that Fern rescued… they’ve been trapped on the Otherside for a long, long time.

Perhaps my thoughts will come to greater order and clarity if I write out what I know about dreams, Journal.

There are two kinds of dreams that can be discussed: Dreams, which are defined here as ambitions, or Directed Wills; and oneroia, which are the “regular” dreams a being has as it sleeps. Anything that possesses the Will to Be can dream, because if you have the Will, you are, in essence, alive- and all living things have a period of rest, or dormancy. No being can be wakeful through their entire life, it’s not possible. However, it is entirely possible to keep a being asleep for far longer than they would naturally remain so- but if this process goes on too long, the being in suspense eventually self terminates. -Note: Refer to ‘The Structure and Interpretation of Dreams, Fraud’ for more in depth detail.

Oneroia, forthwith referred to as diminutive-d dreams, are a succession of images, ideas, emotions, and sensations that usually occur involuntarily in the mind during certain stages of sleep. Due to their very nature, dreams have a strange magic of their own, and are connected to various realms of power- the Otherside being only one, with merely the most recorded instances of such.

No one is entirely sure of the physical purpose of dreams; the best explanation, the best scientific hypothesis I can consider is that dreams serve as a sort of organizational purpose, a pressure valve, even a re-organization system. -Nerves and fat- that’s all a brain is. Nerves are like wires in a house- they’re rated for a specific amount of voltage, a certain amount of use before they need to be replaced. Dreams might, perhaps, be the body’s way of checking the nerves of the brain for stress and soundness. It may be that dreams help the mind organize the previous day’s proceedings, even store them properly- or dispose of them, should duplication occur. The mind abhors chaos, spontaneity, even newness; thus, it fits every day into a pattern, and resists changing that pattern except by increments.

Dreamwalking isn’t interpretation- that’s work for a Shrink or a Journal like you, not someone like me. I don’t draw deeper meanings from the dreams I experience. I must, due to the very nature of what I do, draw literal and literary meanings from what I experience.

Dreams have a curious logic of their own; surreal circumstances, illogical proceedings- it all seems perfectly normal, even obvious.

Unless you are a Dreamer- unless you, in a very literal way, can enter into the dreams of others and change them as you will, unless you can return to the physical world with tangible, workable items that have no other explanation for existing- then you cannot take your dreams as anything more than fart noises and dust in sunbeams. Amusing, beautiful; but not particularly weighty.
As a final thought before I relate my latest dreamwalk to you, Journal, I will say this: dreams can have varying natures. They can be frightening, exciting, magical, melancholic, adventurous, lustful, sexual, disorienting, even cruel- but one thing is always certain. The events in dreams, unless the one dreaming is a Dreamer, are outside the control of the dreamer. Lucid dreaming is only sometimes possible for the average layperson.

Dreamers can only dream lucidly- which is not to say that I remember every part of my dreams, far from it! I only mean I am self-aware, whether I remember the circumstances of my dream or not. I do not dream without knowing I am dreaming; I cannot be coerced into making deals or bargains; I cannot be lied to; I cannot be stolen; I cannot be imprisoned.

It’s a funny thing, dreaming- inspiration, desire, creativity; confusion, revulsion, rigidity. There is no yang without yin; there is no yin without yang. I am the axis on which both spin; and no Other has any power over me.

Is it any wonder, then, that my friend Fern- who is a Seer, not a Dreamer- got her soul trapped in the Otherside when she used magic she didn’t understand to free four men from a horrible fate?

Journal, as you well know, my friend Fernanda is terribly ill; however, what I might not have made clear before is that her illness was made increasingly worse in increments, and that her collapse the other day was actually a result of her body being separated from her mind, her soul the only thing connecting the two. It is a tenuous bond, and as the days go on, it grows weaker.

Something must be done; and I, as the only Dreamer with a mocodium of knowledge in this situation, must be the one to do it.

During the early days of Fern’s sickness (which was more than just a single day, that’s just when she was sick enough to collapse- she was sick for a few days before that), I would fall asleep, dark-dreaming every night underneath my sister Neo’s steady log-sawing, and I would… well, wander. I’ve been able to do it for a long time; it was easier, or maybe I was used to the dreams, back in our old apartment building… I get a lot of interference here, and it’s hard to get all the details straight.

I remember a marsh land, a sea of reeds with thick black mud, empty of all living things- for even the reeds were dead and yellow, and the mud was only dirt and water, no living humus to give it stench. I remember a forest of white birches shattered from the chill of winter, their mighty trunks broken from within and their withered branches grasping at a grey and blackening sky. I remember a clearing in that forest, and in its center a cruel ring of jagged stones softened only by snow and ice, and the burned out ashes of a fire in the center, bones it’s only fuel.

Beyond the clearing was a path; beyond the path, a gate of bone; and further still, crouched on the hill like a vampire frog on it’s branch, windows glistening with malice, was a manor house.

I say again, nothing in that foul place lived.

Except for something… Else. There was a Courtly one who came and spat insults at me- and then
spat something else at me, some-thing that could not keep it’s shape and only repeated words… we fought, and I injured it gravely. I was woken by my sister’s feet hitting the floor of our Dorm, and so I did not know then what had become of the creature.

Dearest Journal, I thank you- you have allowed me to put a name to the creature that I fought near the Dead Manse. I will now create an entire article for the subject, created from various notes and details scattered throughout.

Aberrations are beings with bizarre anatomy, strange abilities, and alien mindsets- more so than can be accounted for by differences in tribe, culture, faith, or gender. They are the descendants of those poor souls taken as Changelings so long ago. Even mild exposure to the Otherside has strange effects; a lifetime of exposure to a place where the only enforcement of the self is the self leads to… well. So far as I can figure, Aberrations have no real Form, from which their self-Image daren’t deviate; they can take on any shape and act in any way. Unaffiliated, they tend to be mischievous pranksters; treated with kindness and care, they become wondrous allies; kept with cruelty and fear, they become deadly tools.

The creature I fought, I do believe to be an immature Hagunemnon; hagu being the ancient word for formless, and nemnon meaning no center. A formless being, without a center; normally, I would be wary of such a creature being loose in a dream I must return to. However, I grievously wounded it, and it’s master, an Other, left it for dead- I remember that clearly. Perhaps there is an opportunity, here… But what can bandage a being with no set shape?

I read the schematics for the Tarot Device on a whim- and lucky that I did! Fern drew out the schematics for the new and revised Tarot Device; and there it was, crystal clear. Fern neglected to include a Sound Gem, nor a Compiler. Nothing in her device would protect the autonomy and sanctity of her mind, or her soul- thus, as her friend, it behooved me to go and retrieve her from whatever trouble she’d managed to land herself in.

On closer inspection, it was not her soul stretched so taut, but her mind, a revelation that significantly shortened the amount of time I had to prepare. Minds are fragile, more so than spirits- a broken spirit can be repaired with time, while a broken mind… that is not so simple as time and support from friends and family.

It is enough to know that Fern had returned her body and mind to the physical world when she returned with the Four Old Men from the Otherside. They were trapped in, I suppose, an eddy- a still place in the river of time. Their imprisonment alone would have left marks; but they were tortured, too, quite severely.

I have boring hobbies, not boring books.

The Four Old Men… they don’t believe this world is real. They can’t- they’ve spent too long on the Otherside, been tricked too many times. There are cracks, of course- the longer we all act as ourselves, with moments of pure stupidity and gracelessness, the easier it will be for them to believe that this is real, that we are real, and not ghosts or strange things come to fright them.
That’s when the real problems are going to start, I think- and yet, what else can we do?

I, like Fern, make lists when I don’t know exactly what to do.

Fern’s Soul is currently in some manner of Distress; it is being kept from her body against her will.

The longer her soul is outside her body, the less likely she is to recover from her illness; it has been one full day so far that she has been Without.

If I take too long to retrieve her, Fern’s mind is at terrible risk of damage.

I need more than a night’s sleep (defined as twelve hours) to get to where she is being kept; I can only sleep twelve hours unaided.

The safest draught I can make will make me sleep for eighteen hours, a very long time indeed.

I will need supplies for her Rescue; and I will not be able to take my sword or shield.

I took the day after Fern’s collapse to do research in the Library; Necromancy, hexes and cantrips, the Universum Primagical- I think that’s what it’s called, I just went by color- and… her familiars.

There’s no familiar I know that would allow their Person to come to harm; and so I spoke with Buttercream and the Sweartoads. All four agreed to help me on my Quest; the toads gave me their toadstones, which they had been growing all their lives. I set them in a plain armlet, and clasped it around my upper left arm. Buttercream gave me a lesson on how to be unwavering- taught me a secret I will not share, even now, as it is between her and I. She gave me a gift; told me that it could not be taken back, or worn out- that I would always, in my time of need, have the power and strength and savagery and innate wildness of an adult female Great White Wolvark at my disposal.

As for my other, less fanciful supplies: a large mug of warm milk and honey to be consumed before bedtime; a small phial of powerful sleeping tincture, filched from the stillroom; a warm hug from my sister, because I love her; and a conversation with the Four Old Men. Well, more of a promise, really.

“She didn’t build it right,”

“What-? How did you get into this room-”

“All the dorms are connected on the inside, the outer doors are for peace of mind. And Fern- that’s her name, Fernanda- she didn’t build her Device correctly. She accidentally left out the Soundstone, and the Compiler. She’s trapped,”

The men looked to each other with pure horror in their weathered faces.

“I won’t ask any of you to come with me; it’s scary, on the Otherside, and you were trapped there a long long time. I will ask that you watch my body; make sure I’m kept safe as I sleep, and am not awoken from outside. I need to wake myself up, understand? Otherwise, Fern could be lost forever,”
“Boy, you don’t- you’re too-”

“I’m going. Tell me now, Mister Udoroth- why was the whole of that land dead? The marsh, the forest, the glade, the path back to the manse- all of it dead. No living thing, not even a bug or the stench of the earth- why?”

“...A mill, boy. That manse- you saw it? Down in it’s basement, there is a mill. It’s a terrible thing; mud in, bricks out, fide - we did not know, ‘ow could we?”

And Udoroth begins to cry.

“We tried everything to destroy it; our weapons broke, our fists broke, and always it loomed and laughed-”

“Enough, Udoroth!”

Solitaire is… pressing his fist to Udoroth’s forehead? And Udoroth is calming, he was becoming frenzied.

“Boy, I’ll tell you the horror of the mill, and spare Udo from it- if you put a living creature into the damned thing, you can get nearly anything of value back. But you cannot get back the life you traded away- for what? For gems? For gold?”

So that’s what it is. Something for Nothing; one of the Otherworld’s foulest bargains at work. My weapons on the Otherside are just memories and metaphors- and they won’t be strong enough to face down the thing that is keeping my friend captive, that hurt these four men. Only a real, tangible thing could do it- only something literal, an unbreakable resolve, could destroy something the Others wrought.

Only something real could break such an agreement.

The original terms for the Others were the Seelie and the Unseelie. The Seelie reigned in Spring and Summer, and were neutral at best, and terrifyingly good; and the Unseelie reigned in Fall and Winter, were neutral at best, and horrifically evil at worst. In those days, the Fae were the Aos Sí, the People of the Mounds; and the Fae, the Fae Kingdoms, they were beholden to the higher courts of the Seelie and Unseelie.

In those dark days, before the first age, at the bidding of the Courts, the Fae were the enforcers of terrible bargains and contracts- the terrible reputations that the Fae still have even now is in direct consequence of their serfdom under the Courtly Ones. They stole farm animals, soured milk before it could be used for cheese or butter, murdered families, and swapped people for changelings- particularly children. The habit of the Orcs, of referring to their women and children as entirely female, and weak, was truly an effort to stop the Fae from stealing their children for the Courtly
Armies.

We know now that some things considered terrible, terrible ideas have nothing to do with the Courtly Ones; Fae mounds are burial tombs, of course it’s a terrible idea to build on that land or take that gold. Going alone into a marsh is a stupid idea for physical reasons, not just mystic ones- crazy shit lives in liminal places like that.

It’s the Others who like to play with time; the Fae consider time to be one of the most sacred gifts of their creation goddesses, and would never impede it if they could help it. A Fae will never, ever trap you in time- to them, it is anathema, an abomination unto the Gods and the World. The Others, on the other hand… even if you gained egress from their dominion, you would invariably find that centuries have passed- and likely crumble into dust at the cruelest moment… or, even crueler, live out the natural span of your life bereft of everything and everyone you ever knew or loved.

Most importantly of all, the Others cannot make anything themselves- not art, not science, not children; nothing. The Fae are absurdly fecund, often producing upwards of five children per pregnancy- some Lines are known for throwing less, or significantly more- and have a love for art, and the creation of it, bordering on obsession. If there is an art, it can be guaranteed that there’s a Fae somewhere who has dedicated their entire life towards the mastery, or production, or exploration, or preservation, of that art. The only things a Fae truly fears are these- milk, breaking oaths or contracts, and being trapped.

The Others are different- the cannot make their own children, that’s why they forced the Fae to steal children, or steal them themselves. They cannot love in a way we understand- or rather, they cannot love in a nourishing way, as it’s wrong to say that the Others do not love. They love; but as an owner to a slave, or a miser to their wealth.

Elves, Giants, Automata, Alraune- Trolls, Nokken, Dullahans, Tiktk, even Geisterdamen- all of these tribes, these nations, are things that came after the Others. They have no real connection to Them, other than occupying the same sort of societal niche.

The Others are monstrous because they are, fundamentally and undeniably, inhuman. The kindest of them are neutral to humanity; and the worst hate and despise us with everything they have. Entire families have been wiped out for daring to walk across an Other’s road; and making bargains with them is a terrible, terrible idea.

There are a variety of superstitions that developed to keep Them away, or to pacify Them. The ones that work are fairly simple- women, women’s vaginas, menstrual blood, and milk are anathema. They can’t bear even the sight of such things, they’re so powerfully anti-Them; which is why they made the Fae spoil milk so long ago… Again, They can’t create. They can only twist and pervert what’s already there- the average Fae has a fairly strong mein for mischief and humor, but also knows when a joke isn’t funny . Mischief, not malice; Fae, not Other.

Salt, salt water, iron, cold iron, and bells will mortally wound Them, for a slightly different reason; magical ones I’ve never really managed to get a straight answer on.

Old as anything, long forgotten; and horrifying. Don’t be fooled by their presentation- amazing, beautiful, graceful, magical- but underneath something hungry and wrong and utterly inhuman. For Them, empathy as a concept is as alien as the idea of blue as a number- which, if you’re measuring light, it of course empirically is . They hate Order, reality, truth; their sense is literal nonsense, the stuff of dreams and nightmares.
Fae are sometimes called the Fair Folk; this is because that is what they are. If you make a deal with a Fae, they will uphold the letter of your agreement- and they will negotiate with you what a fair exchange is. They do not lie, they do not cheat, and they don’t tend to be particularly interesting individuals. Missus Mab is an extremely typical example of her Tribe, and Mister Solitaire probably is too, under all the trauma.

They are called the Courtly Folk; this is because it’s the only translation of their original name that made any kind of sense, back when we went under the control of the Tenryuubito. That’s not what they are; that’s not what they do. But, the caprice, the careless malice, the cruelty and stupidity and evil- all of that is quite obvious, if you only take a moment to think on the name They demand Themselves be called.

As for the mill? Or perhaps The Mill? No, just the mill-

Anything They do ‘for’ a mortal or that a mortal takes from Them must be returned in kind, and by their standard. This is often fatal, or worse. It could be their hospitality, food, or aid- and They are always the ones who determine the exchange rate. They will do their best to trick and trap mortals into unfair bargains; and the words ‘thank you’ are insulting and alien to Them. Words and feelings are not equal to actions; and few can recognize good intentions, much less choose to act on them.

The mill has to be the work of the Others. What else- who else would be so pointlessly, extravagantly evil?

I took a deep breath, and turned to Udoroth. He shrank away from my wolfish stare, and tears bubbled anew at his eyes.

“Did you ever try cold iron?”

For a long moment, Udoroth was silent- he started to answer, and then stopped himself, confusion warring with hope.

“What’s cold iron, boy?”

I grimaced- as I thought. Cold Iron was rare, a thousand years ago- gold is easy to work with your hands and a stick, silver and salt go hand in hand, copper and tin together make bronze- but good cold iron, starsteel , that’s a different kettle of fish.

“Cold iron is from Beyond the Otherside, and worked by Smiths and Machinists and Sewers-” I say, arms akimbo, “-and it is mortal, permanent death to any being from the Other Side, any being with no mortal form of it’s own, at least. Did you try to destroy the mill with that?”
Udoroth slowly shook his head. I nodded. There’s one more thing I need, then- needles, nails, and my good tack hammer. Maybe my alarm clock for bells? No- I won’t have space for the bandages. I’ve decided- honey, cobwebs, or mud; as I’m using the honey with the milk, and it’s too cold for mud, I’ll be using cobwebs… which means I need to make a stop at the Studio. I looked at the men- the thought of going through the ship, safe as it is, by myself… considering where I was going next, the whole thing made me deeply uneasy.

“Well one of you walk with me? I need to get some things from the rest of the ship, and I don’t want to go alone,”

“It is safe here, boy,”

“Not for me, Mister Mukhtar; not this night,”

The men looked at each other; they looked scared. And then Udoroth snorted like a bull, and said-

“Are we men or not?”

And then he stood, and rolled his neck, and said-

“After you, boy,”

“My name is Havij, and I’ll thank you to use it Mister Udoroth,”

“-hm? Aye, if you say so,”

I just sighed, and started for the Shop; that’s where my tool box is, after all. The men followed me down; and they all let out quiet exclamations of shock and awe when the saw where all our things get built.

“Boy, are you sure you can take that hammer? ‘Tis a very fine box- surely it will be missed?”

“Considering it was my mothers before it became mine, I’m sure there will be no problem with it; and we don’t really count the nails, either,”

My tack hammer is an heirloom; not very pure, but pure enough to hold lesser iron to it, and to be covered over in square markings. The nails are basically shite; steel enough to glimmer and be heavy in the hand. I take five.
Mister Solitaire blinks, and cocks his head.

“I’ll say again, Mister Solitaire- my name is Havij, and I’ll thank you to use it,”

“Aye, of course;”

And finally, the Studio; the entire room is an Oath to Order and Truth, a mysterious wonder beyond my grasp- except for some things. The men stop dead at the threshold and don’t dare step further.

“Boy- Boy, what are you doing? That’s women’s business, come back-”

“For pity’s sake, Mister Zaffir, I’m a girl- girls turn into women when they grow up, you know! And you can all come in, just don’t touch anything but the floor-”

“Hang about, you’re… a baby woman? Is that what a girl is?”

I pause, one of the larger plain hat pins in my fingers, and stare at all of the men who, until this very moment, didn’t know what girls are.

“...Are you telling me that the reason you’ve all been calling everyone younger than you ‘boy’ is because you didn’t know that immature women are called girls? Is that what you’re saying?”

Solitaire looks particularly awkward.

“You have to understand, we only know of women at all because of our mothers, and the, ah-”

“Whores and washerwomen and cooks who follow armies, obviously, what of it?”

“Well, they’re all adult women, not, um, unblossomed-”

“Oh. So you’ve never met an unblooded woman, I see,“

“Sorry, what?”

“The difference between a boy and a man is often internal change; the way he sees the world, the way he carries himself. The difference between a girl and a woman is much simpler; it’s blood.”

“...What?”

“Her moon blood? Her first bloom? ...menstruation…?”
I blink, staring at the four men who have no blessed idea what I’m talking about. I could just not tell them, but also I don’t really want to… I do like explaining things. Stalling? You betcha.

“Well, better come in all the way- yes, in, all of you. What if you have a daughter, hmm, and need to explain what’s happening to her? No, in, come along, yes, all of you- grab a stool, they’re for sitting- thank you,”

After setting the spidersilk extruder to extrude the kind of silk I need, I’ve gathered a pair of cotton balls, a bit of red string, a small sachet with a drawstring closure, and two lengths of pink string. Then, I carefully roll over a mannequin, er, dress form? Lock it so it doesn’t move, and pin everything on in more or less the right place.

“So, I’m going to assume you all know absolutely nothing. Men and women each have a half, and when those halves are put together, they make one whole baby- or possibly more, but we’ll start with one. Men keep their half in their testicles- their balls-”

“Ah-” “Okay-” “Oh-” “Huh-”

“And women, who also have to, erm, put the baby together in a bed so it can survive out in the world, have their half here, in these. On me, they’re here-” and I point to the middle of my hips from the front- “-but generally speaking, a woman’s ovaries- yes, eggs- are here. A woman has many many more eggs than she can ever put to use; she often becomes too old, before she can use them all,”

“But what about the blood?”

“Right, sorry- the pouch, here, it’s where women keep babies before they’re born. Before that, however, it has to be prepared with a special bedding- and that takes about a moon’s turning, or a month. If there’s no baby-seed to use the bed, however, it has to be thrown out,”

“...Really?”

“Yep,”

“Girls become women based on their ability to provide beds for babies inside their bodies?”

“Legally, yes,”

“...Are you a woman, then?”

“I will be, quite soon,”

All the men are frowning.
“You’re much too young for women’s business, Havij.”

“You’re much too young for those shadows in your eyes, Mister Solitaire; but we are as we are,”

I take the hat pin in hand again, and sigh.

I really, really don’t want to fight a ghost, or Other. But, it has my dear friend in it’s loathsome clutches- and so, I must free her. And there’s not enough time now to get my alarm clock, damn it all.

As for that fucking mill- the thought of even being in the same room as it makes me feel uneasy.

“Are you all absolutely sure one of you won’t come with me? I- I’m scared. I don’t want to go alone,”

The men look at each other; Solitaire and Udoroth argue fiercely but silently, as Zaffir rolls his eyes and shrugs away Mukhtar's restraining hand.

“I have no idea how you’ll be getting there, but- if you’ll have me, I’ll go,”

“Zaffir-”

“Father, it is wrong to send a girl- a woman- off where a man fears tread! If I go with her, perhaps she will return,”

“It will kill you-”

“It’s killing Fern now, Mister Mukhtar. That might not matter to you; but it matters to me! -Zaffir, if you go, I cannot say if you will return again,”

“I understand; I’ll go,”

“We’re all going, Zaf,”

“Ser?”

“Muck, I well remember the horrors you faced last time, in that place; so, you will stay behind and guard us all. Solitaire, Zaffire, and myself shall go with young Havij. Aye,”

“Aye, ser,”

“Havij; have you enough supplies to ensure our safe passage?”

“Aye,”
“Right; lead on, then,”

I blink, then nod. I gather the things I needed from this room- the hat pin, the bandaging in a small fliptop jar, a plushie bag that looks like a squidberry- oh, it’s meant for a mermaid, the inside’s waterproof; and then all five of us, after making a quick stop by the milk fridge for a half-pint each of plain whole milk, and the little pipettes of honey- and even though Mukhtar isn’t going with us, he can still have milk and honey. Mab’s started putting little carry-along sacks so that there’s less chance of broken glass and milk on the floor come morning. Anyway, after that, we all end up back in their dorm room; it’s not gotten that homely feeling yet, although it does have that homely smell of man-stank and feet…

I suppose I should mention, although it’s only now that I’ve noticed at all- all of the men are wearing nightshirts, and my nightgown is actually also a nightshirt of slightly finer quality. I’m also wearing house shoes and a bathrobe. I don’t think the men really got the extent of their amenities… I’ll tell them before we go, so they know when we come back.

“Okay- um, first we need to double up the beds-”

“Sorry-?”

“Well, we’re not going anywhere awake; and you’ll need to be touching me to go where I go-”

“Oh-”

“And these were really meant for one or two occupants, not four- although they can hold four up, of course, it’d just be a very tight squeeze-”

“How do we double up the beds, then?”

“Ah, there’s clasps- like this-”

And then I’ve done it very quickly and they’re staring at me again.

“I helped put these together from storage, so- what?”

“…”

“Right, well- behind this wall there’s larger mattresses-”

“…”

“Unless you’d rather tie the two smaller ones together…?”

“Larger mattress?”

“Thicker mattress toppers, firmer mattresses, thinner bedding, more pillows in a variety of styles… you did listen when Missus Mab told you all what was in your room and where everything could be found, yes?”
“Um,”

“She’s the quartermaster! Always listen to the quartermaster! Gods preserve me from the stupidity of men-!”

As I go to the dorm closet, pop it open, and pull out a veritable stack of pillows for ammunition, I hear the men behind me squeak and yelp in shock. Then, as I turn and begin pelting them with pillows- to their further yelps- I let loose my tirade about their arrogance and stupidity contributing to their own obvious discomfort; I could smuggle an entire regiment in the bags under their eyes for goodness sake; how dare you assume that the words of a quartermaster, whose entire job is to see to the rooms and clothing of every person on this ship and several other things aren’t important, what is wrong with you- and then I’ve run out of pillows. I’m heaving with emotion, my sleeping cap quite askew, and- oh, huh, the men took cover. I keep breathing loudly, but throw my voice so they can’t hear me walk forwards and pick up four more pillows.

I let my breathing calm, but keep waiting patiently- when they finally peek back out I bean each of them with a nice goosedown.

“You are stupid! Stupid men! You were bad and you should feel bad!”

“...Sorry, Miss Havij,”

“Yeah, sorry Miss Havij,”

“Sorry, Miss,”

“Won’t happen again, Miss!”

I nod, once, sharply.

“Udoroth, pick up the pillows we’re to sleep with, unless you’d prefer- oh, right, horns, would you rather have a nice headrest? -right, you’ll have to size it for yourself; Zaffire, come pick a good mattress for the bigger bed, and some bedding too; Solitaire, please hold the milk while I help Zaffire with the mattress- thank you, no, don’t drink it yet-”

The bed is prepared quite quickly after that- a very firm mattress, with a conforma-foam topper; the nice, slippery silk sheets- very cool to the touch; a half-thick pillow for me, I don’t like feeling smothered.

The dorm closets don’t just have extra bedding, of course- they’ve got extra toiletries, and various other sundries a person might need and not want to go all the way to Mab to get. I show Solitaire the sleeping caps; and I show Udoroth the headrests. I also pull out one of the quieter white noise makers, because I cannot stand to sleep in a silent room, I’m too used to Neo’s snoring.

I prepare the milk and hand it out, and carefully climb into the bed with the lid on so I don’t spill-
"The draught is quick; I find it best to be in the bed ready to sleep before imbibing, just for safety. Ready?"

"I am, yes- just drink it and lay down?"

"Be sure you’re touching some part of me as well, but yes, that’s all,"

"...right, and the reason for the milk is…?"

"I like milk,"

"Not everything is a plot, Sol,"

"Yeah, yeah-"

I drank the milk and honey draught, and laid down. I remember being wrapped up in two pairs of very large and firm arms, and someone’s legs entangling with mine, and then I was truly asleep.

When next I was aware, I knew these things: Solitaire had enacted a great personal sacrifice to get us all through the gate; all three of my toadstones had given of their essences to keep us alive; we four together became an army which routed the occupying forces which fell dead to our might; and I was deeply uneasy at the thought of using the Other’s mill at all, much less again in the cases of Udoroth and Zaffire- Solitaire had refused to use the mill, more power to him. The strawberry bag was heavy with something that occasionally squirmed; it rested lightly on my back, the being within having been abandoned and cared for- perhaps for the first time in its life, abandonment had lead to care, and kindness.

I was also sure that nothing would ever compare to heaving dead and rotting corpses into the mill- nothing, not even the strange texture of the Aberration’s skin or the expression Solitaire made when he looked back at his locks, black and shining in the dusty path where the Other came to fright us and found itself frighted instead... I came to, again, just in the middle of a tirade about throwing the stack of corpses into the mill; how the greedy fucker had best not spit out my prize just yet…

Solitaire flatly refused to help haul the bodies; he had already given his pride, I could not ask more of him. He stood by the door and watched with a carefully emotionless expression, blank in shoulder and stance as the trail of blood and rot next to him grew thicker and thicker.

Finally, I was finished dragging, my back and shoulders and arms burning with exertion. That’s half the job done; then, Zaffire and Udoroth helped ferry the bodies up to me; and I threw them down
into the cruel depths.

All I can do is hope that it works; either it will spit out cold iron, or explode after being asked to create a fatal object within itself. Either would work; and even if the cold iron doesn’t break the mill outright, it will deal it a mortal blow- and besides, cold iron is valuable in itself.

I took the first corpse from Udoroth, and heaved it into the intake funnel. I jerked my eyes away before I could see it greedily sucked down, a number of obscenities becoming a litany as I settled into the rhythm of take and throw, again again.

The mill seemed to listen to my furious prayer; it stood silent but for the eerily smooth way it swallowed up the bodies I threw in, sucking them down into nothingness. I couldn’t see down into the intake funnel, and I didn’t want to; instead, I focused on what I knew cold iron to be. The spiraling squares; the iridescent sheen; the coldness, the weight, it’s honor and faith…

Suddenly, I was done, smeared with blood and filth and wheezing for breath. The toadstones burned against my upper left arm. I called up the last of Buttercream’s gift, and snarled at the mill, a deep basso rumble from deep within my chest lending my words a gravitas, a weight- a realness to them that nothing, not even the misty qualities of the Otherside could transcend.

“Cold iron. Now,"

Even as I growled the words I couldn’t help but consider the possibilities of a chunk of cold iron, unworked by mortal hands. It didn’t have to be such, after all; it could be a pendant, a piece of armor, a sword, a hammer- I could see it then, the head perfectly flat on the striking side, the lozenge shape, the handle long and perfectly balanced and wrapped with sharkskin and secured with fine silver pins, the spiralling square dancing up and down the head-

For just a moment, I was caught fully in the teeth of that fantasy, wielding that hammer, using it to build wondrous things- and then I blinked, and my eyes fell to the tack hammer in the loop of my overalls. I already have a hammer, a good one, faithful and true- my mother’s before me, and her’s before her, and back and back- I built my toolbox with that hammer! Mom built my crib with that hammer! No star metal hammer from any other place could ever match that pedigree!

I forced the vision from my mind.

I focused stubbornly on an unadorned ingot- I imagined the solidity of it, how cold and heavy it would be in my hand, how certain the destruction of the mill would be once it was realized. I will not be swayed!

I began to approach the mill, my every movement becoming slow and labored- like walking directly against the current. My jaw clenched; I could hear my teeth squeak against each other with the pressure of maintaining my thought. I slowly lifted a hand and struck forwards, cracking a clenched fist against the cold, pitted flank of the machine.

My eyes fell shut; my mind was filled to bursting with the thought of what I would have from this foul thing. My skin split across my knuckles. My nails dug into the meat of my palm.
Hot blood trickled out across my fingers and down the side of the mill. It sighed, and the pressure on me stuttered.

I could hear, faint and higher than the background noises of the forge and the men breathing- a sort of humming, high and buzzing like a mosquito- no, lower now, discordant. Like something deep inside this monster has gone terribly askew.

A hand pressed against my shoulder- I glanced over, to find Solitaire, eyes rounded with terror and shaking, pressing against me in, in- support, I think. Another came to rest against the small of my back- Zaffire, and then on the other shoulder- Udoroth. All the men were shaking, stiff bodied with fear and determined to support me-

I ground my fist harder against the mill, pressing almost to the point of pain, and then beyond it, knuckling into the cold side of the mill and drawing my lips well back- I closed my eyes. Forced the image of the ingot to greater and greater clarity. I imagined the texture and the full shape, the dimensions, the heft and weight.

It felt almost like I was pushing against something alive, like a cold sluggish throat was beneath my fist and I was slowly squeezing the life from it; like my mind was stretching outwards to encounter- something- but no! No!

In my mind, the ingot dropped into my hands and I almost dropped it from the sheer weight of the thing; pure star metal is equal in density to gold, though it is not gold. Such a little thing, and yet so very heavy; cold as if it had just come in from beyond the stars. I could feel the imperfections of the untempered, unworked metal, the jagged edges poking into my flesh.

The mill shuddered beneath my hand; groaned; squealed like a wounded beast. For a moment my concentration shuddered too; the ingot took on a crimson cast, fabric, blood, white linens going wet and warm and sticky-black with blood and mucus-

I bore down further, tightened my fist and pushed harder still. The sting drove splinters through my mind; I imagined them as silvery and iridescent and spiraling squares, a heavy little ingot of metal from beyond the sky; clenched my hand around the ingot and knew it was as solid and cold and dry as ever. I knew it to be the only real thing, manifesting within the depths of the machine; the king of all metals, cold iron!

Deep within the mill I heard a peculiar knocking noise, and then a grinding squeal. A howl of mechanical agony and the scraping rattle of bearings crumbling and seizing. Something went ping ; something else spanged; and several things went pop all at once. I felt the boundaries of the mill, of my mind, flex and shudder alarmingly.

The men wrapped full arms around me, their shaking fear becoming entwined with their resolve, respect for me; faith in my power, young and untested- and ignorance can do what experience cannot.

The mill and I and the men and the bodies were never strictly physical; but now there was no illusion that they ever were. My thoughts bled together with what the mill was doing; the metal under my knuckles acquired jagged edges for a split second, wild animal patterns rippled across the funnel before vanishing, blood trickling from the spout below before turning to dust as it fell-
The mill howled. It screamed. It writhed and thrashed but could not escape the inexorable forwards momentum of it’s own design and my unwavering desire.

And the mill howled. It howled like a wounded beast from an alien place, an Other place; lost from its pack and its life and everything it had once known. I pushed my fist forward and saw that the mill was shivering- open eyed now, I could see right through it, into its dizzying heart.

And there, within, a light.

It was bright; searing, almost, but colored wrongly. I have seen Fernanda’s soul; I have seen the souls of every member of my crew. That is not Fernanda. My eyes cannot be fooled.

I forced myself to stare and push forward, feeling a sort of stretching within myself as I did, a lengthening of my metaphysical presence, fist pushed out and blood dripping into the space around me, suspended as fat red marbles in the middle of a bizarre silvery space.

The light flickered like a strobe; jagged and panicky and shrieking, my ears vibrating and aching from the noise, from the deep sort of ugliness I could feel around, squeezing and scrabbling against my very soul, emanations of terror and malice and evil.

I gritted my teeth so hard I thought they might shatter. I imagined the ingot in my hand, fingers tight around it because it is a large chunk of metal, too large and almost too heavy for my one arm to support it; cold metal cutting into my fingers, the weight- the potential.

I picked my hand up.

The light screamed.

I smashed my fist down again with every fiber of willpower and love and goodness I could muster.

Have you ever missed a step going down a set of stairs and nearly tripped? It was like that, but over my entire body, my whole soul, the full expanse of my mind- the bright and silver and cruel clear shrieking vibrating noise and unrelenting evil pressure all vanished at once, leaving only a dim basement and three men holding me up and gasping for breath.

My right hand, the hand I used to hit- because of course, I’m left handed, that’s the hand I use to hammer- but my right hand is bleeding. The skin on my knuckles is flayed down almost to the bone, and the blood oozing from the split is dark red and shining. My fingers are outstretched, held just at the tip of a large brick of patterned metal. I can feel its imperfections digging into the bruised flesh of my palms; the coldness creeping into my bones.

That might be blood loss, actually-

I blinked from the cold iron in my hand, to a greasy dark stain on the stone, to a vaporous mist rising faintly from where the mill once stood- and to two glass orbs perhaps the size of sheeps eyes. One was covered over with cracks and threads of silver that hurt my eye, burnt black and crumbling. The other, almost lazily golden, shot through with shimmering sparks of light; bound with barbed silver
threads, and singing faint but clear.

I know **that sound**; I’d recognize Fernanda anywhere.

As I bring my hand holding the heavy brick of cold iron closer, the uneasy light in the cracked orb flickers, and shudders away from me; Fern’s soul sings louder. Quick as a snake, my hand darts out and crushes the black orb.

As I pull my hand away, the room is utterly silent but for the dreamy tones of Fern’s soul.

It’s as if the whole of life rushes back from where it was hidden under the snow and ice- a great onrushing of sound and feeling, plants growing and dying; the manse around us falls to ruin, and the basement becomes a low place in the ground, festooned with thick soft sweet smelling grasses and blooming flowers.

Fern’s soul sits on a bare stone- perfectly centered in a place where nothing grows, though a few hardy mushrooms have begun to circle and a brave attempt by some moss is being made to correct that. I carefully wriggle just a little bit, and reach out with my unmarred left hand.

I dip three fingers in my own blood, from where it’s dropped across the starmetal.

And then, as I speak, I tap my bloody fingertips to the golden orb bound with silver thorn-webs.

“Fernanda; you have my protection in this place; there are no conditions for such, as we **are** friends; **go home**, ”

With each touch, Fern’s soul glows brighter and brighter, the song of it growing louder and more exuberant- and then, finally, it vanishes from the prison, glass and web no match for the sheer unctuous ooze of her. My blood is iron, and cold iron, and salt, and water- and one is enough to wound mortally a thing of the Otherside. All four together can break even the strongest of enchantments, the most deadly of traps; bound together in love, they can even break a curse of the blood.

And then I crush the trap under my brick of starmetal- in the very far distance, I heard the sound of a scream of thwarted malice- and then it was all very, very bright.

When I woke, it was because of several things together. My sister, calling for me in increasingly panicked tones; a deep ache in my right hand; a strange loosening feeling in my hips, along with an unfamiliar sticky wetness- but most of all, Solitaire’s cowlicky hair jamming itself up my nose, I’m going to- sneeze-

“**ACHU! CHU CHU CHU!**”
Gods and Goddesses, but I hate sneezing. Ugh- and what the hell is on my thighs? I- Uh. Hm. I see.

Well, it’s a good thing I’m sitting up already- yes, hello- the strawberry bag is full and the one within is sleeping- needs a bath, though, we both do-

“Good, um, morning? Is it morning?”

“It is, Miss Havij; and how- you’re bleeding-”

“Well, yes, I’m a woman now-”

“-my h-hair-”

“-ugh what- blood-?”

“Morning, all! Lovely slee- is that blood?”

“Right, bathroom time- yes, up, no use sitting around, up up up-”

“Uh- wasn’t that bag empty last night?”

“You do realize if you get dunked on in a dream, you get dunked on for real, right? I mean, how else are you going to explain Solitaire’s hair-”

“ My haaaaaaaair-”

And with some prayers to the minor Gods of Annoyance, Grogginess, Pesting, and Shouting- I’ve chivvied the four men into the head with clean togs and enough blistering swear words to make my sister roar with laughter.

I give each of them their own basket for toiletries, and then fill those baskets with clearly labelled this and that- shampoo, conditioner, soap, washing rags with the scrubby side and the softer side, lotion, combs and brushes and for the White Snakes, tubs of beeswax- although-

“Do you two want help with your hair? Because I’m very sure help can be provided...”

“Um. Actually- if you can get us help, that’d be fantastic,”

“Right- make sure it’s well washed and lightly conditioned-”

“- my haaaair-”

“Chin up, Solitaire, it will grow back; Udoroth, please keep an eye on him, he’s taking it very hard,”

“Right, Miss Havij; ah, and get that hand on ice before it swells up!”

“Of course!”
After a thorough shower, hair scrub, condition, and lotion- and a warm and gentle bath for Bubby, a much better name all around, I’ll use it as short for Soap Bubbles. It makes a cute little bubbling sound when I give it cuddles and stroking affection; and it likes to play with the bubbles on the soap bar, so. A name.

Lotion, oil, check the wounds and put in some ointment, new bandages; the bag’s dry now, wipe off the inside and back in where it’s safe. Abby’s probably hungry- I’ve no idea what it eats, but I’m going to find out today at breakfast. It was looking oddly at my ruined boxers- like it wanted the blood and bits. There’s a tally for the ‘not an Other’ column; Others consider period blood to be deadly poison.

As for me- pads. Hm. Sanitary supplies are- here-

“Hi..?”
“What are those for?”
“So, you know how a woman’s body throws the bedding out when there’s no baby?”
“Yeah...”
“Yeah, that’s the blood,”
“Ah. So- those catch it?”
“Mm- it’s a very powerful magical reagent, and can be used to put nasty curses on people. Keeping it all contained in these pads- which Missus Mab neutralizes and cleans herself- is best. Also, I’m too young for a cup, so- pads,”
“They’re kinda pretty,”
“Yeah, they come in all kinds of styles- Missus Mab makes them in all sizes for all the women here, as well as these kinds I know my sister likes- ah, but they’re of no real use to men, sorry,”
“Nah, it’s fine- oh, Solitaire, your hair looks much better-”
“It’s still short, Udo, and- huh, fancy rags?”
“They’re reusable and hygenic,”
“Fair enough- ah, what do we do with-”
“Laundry chute- there, that handle-”
“Gotcha,”
“Breakfast time, I think,”

All the men perk up at my declaration. I lead them all to breakfast, and am only mildly annoyed by their banter; and apparently I’m one of them now? Doesn’t matter- I’ve got some idea of what I’m going to do with a small piece of this starmetal, but the rest... I dunno.
I’ll think of something.

Dearest Journal;

Bubby likes to eat, in no particular order: cheese, milk, honey, rice, oatmeal, blood sausage, creamed spinach, oysters in oil, olives, mold, grease, burnt things, salty water, sunlight, dirt, eggshells, blood (dried, fresh, and congealed), pumpkin seeds, cat food, dog food, rabbit food, possum food, dove shit, nails, washers, pencil shavings, lint, dust, poppy seeds, crumbs, onion skin, the nasty water at the bottom of the trash can, soap, rags, furniture polish, and outside dirt. Abby really loves outside dirt, and can be entertained for hours with a dirty bootscraper.

I think he’s a Trash Goblin; that’s what his diet is starting to make me believe, anyway. On the one hand, that’s good- I know how to discipline and nurture him, and he actually has a gender and a reproductive cycle- he’s definitely a baby, by the way.

On the other hand, he’ll eat anything. Teaching him to not eat certain things is going to be a challenge- but it’s not impossible. I’ll start with lemon juice and warm soapy water, and see how he responds- the more irascible and stubborn he is, the higher the vibration level I’ll have to go. Hopefully, it won’t come to Rose Oil and hot soapy water, but one never knows...

Chopper figured out vaccinations during the night; and he administered them with Nurse Genny’s help this morning. Everyone who could get one got one- so, now, he’s hard at work ensuring that the people in the Sanitary recover.

Taffy finished the improved fever reducing medication, and began administering it this morning with my help; although the Mice’s fevers didn’t rise to absurd peaks last night, giving them a little help is only for the best.

Nurse Bones discovered that Fern had two maladies, not just one- her soul was missing, and she had fungal meningitis, which would account for her earlier symptoms. However, if I’m understanding Fern’s current stats correctly, her soul just returned to her.

I’ve absolutely no idea how; I haven’t had a chance to scour the Otherside for it.

“Jun- your shift?”

“Yes, Missus Mab- Stats?”

“Thirty nine degrees steady; seventy five bpm, much closer to where we want it, and it was not an abrupt shift; fifteen breaths per minute, much better; one fifteen over seventy five; glucose levels steady at eighty mg/dl.”

“Urine output?”

“Fifteen thousand milliliters, increased at the same time as her heartbeat; I adjusted her intakes wider to account for her increased activity-”
“-mmmnnngh-”

“-ah, I need to reapply her vaseline, the cannula is very drying-”

“-mmmmmaab?”

“Fern? Fern! Fernanda, you’re in the Sanitary Ward; you’ve been unconscious for-”

“-the men, the men I found, are they okay?”

“Yes, they’re fine- you have fungal meningitis, Chopper’s already eradicated it from your body but you still have to recover from your fever-”

“-don’t be too hard on Havij, I would have been lost without her. Also, go make her ice her hand, she’s going to ignore it and it’ll just make things worse-”

“-Fern-”

“Tell my sisters I’m going to be okay, because I am; and leave Nurse Jun to care for me! Go have breakfast and take a nap, you look dead on your feet! Shoo, shoo!”

I throw up my hands, hand Fern’s chart to Nurse Jun, and walk away- after double checking on the mice, who are all recovering fairly well, thanks to Taffy’s fever reducing medicine, yes, Fern, I’m going, for pity’s sake-

I shower, hand a short list off to Beatrix, and dress for the day. A color blocked striped sweater dress - the last one before the season change, and not a moment too soon- my charm bracelet, charnellemonts need a polish soon, hair in plaits and pinned up out of the way, smoky tights, kung fu shoes, and a touch of royal blue on my lips. Lovely.

I stop in the Emergency just off the Galley before breakfast, and get together the things I’ll need for the RICE- rest, ice, compression, elevation- a compression bandage, and a sling. Ice can be gotten in the Galley, and she’ll be resting her hand anyway, Havij is left handed-

And there she is now. Her hair’s not in her normal hightails- she must be in severe pain, though her fascination with that lump of unworked starmetal is perhaps a reasonable distraction. I was the same with moonsilk, as I recall…

Right, ice.

“Morning, Sanji-”

“Morning, Mab- mwah-”

“Mmm- I need a kitchen towel in the bottom of one of those buffet pans, with ice and water; Havij has bruised her hand rather badly, and I want to reduce the damage before we have to get Sawbones involved-”
“Say no more- OZ!”

In a twinkling, a pan of ice water with a thick towel on the bottom has been delivered to Havij’s right side. I calmly step back over to her, ruck up her sleeve, gently take her right hand in my own, and put it- carefully- into the ice water.

Brr. Cold.

“-thank you, Missus Mab,”

“Quite alright; and I am here to tell you that after breakfast, I shall be wrapping that hand and putting it in a sling, to remind you to leave it be and *rest*. Ah, shall I also do your hair?”

“Um- well… actually, would you? I was going to ask Neo, but she’s never been good with hair, and Miss Tellicherry hates touching other people’s hair, gives her the willies-”

“Right; ah, I see. Fern left instructions?”

“Yes she did; oh, Missus, can you arrange help for the White Snake’s hair? And Solitaire needs a trim, or maybe some shaping; and I think Udoroth needs a straight razor, he’s just confused by the safety razors-”

“Of course; you’ll be helping them with the reintegration?”

“While Fern’s banged up in the San, I rather have to, don’t you think?”

“Hmmhmm. Nice outfit- do come by this afternoon, I’ll give you a care package,”

“…?”

“For the monthly visit dear?”

“Oh! Thank you, Missus!”

“Mm. You lot, help her with her breakfast, alright?”

“Yes Missus, no problem, “

**Bodysuit** of petal pink, **cropped blue jacket** with wide bell sleeves and a front zipper, **short overalls** with black bats in asymmetric print with a black choker, **ombre tights** of blue to lilac, and **work boots** with lace accents.

Havij is cute- and now, wearing clothing that fits her more closely, I can see she’s just short, not actually all that young. She’s maybe fifteen or sixteen, not twelve like I was thinking before- a late bloomer, I’d say.

And that’s a Trash Goblin in her strawberry backpack- a very young one, maybe a day old. I’m not going to ask where it came from- there are some things it’s better to not know. Considering how very gentle Havij is with the tiny thing, I’m confident it’s got a proper caregiver.
As for how to style her hair… taking into account all the time drift… buns have always been a particularly practical style, with men usually having only the one, and women having as many as can be fit on their head. Space buns, then.

Mm, pancakes!

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I’ve been working out the flight schedule for the crew for days, now.

I can’t just use the one I made back at the Office, it has several severe conflicts with everyone else’s schedules. Nor can I simply allow my Flight to make their own training regimes- some of them, like Mack and Bang, will end up undertraining because they’ll be distracted by just being in a new place, exploring new interests, and making new friends. Some, like Precious and Daily, my right and left wings, will end up overtraining because they won’t consider certain aspects of their new employ- they both consider themselves very good fliers, and they are, but Precious is an excellent gardner, and Daily loves keeping track of things like fashion trends and personal styles. If I leave them to themselves, they’ll ignore their other talents and interests in favor of training things they think aren’t good enough. Some of Daily’s best memories, I have no doubt, involve developing the sartorial selections of my Lead staffers… and of course, some of my Flight just don’t know how to train at all, like Aoife, Phillip, and the Feverbane Twins.

We hadn’t actually been deployed yet, you see- and though I had gained some notoriety as ‘Tiffany of the Ashen Plain’, I had only just formalized the Left and Right positions with Precious and Daily. I haven’t really had a chance to iron out everyone’s bad habits, or even gel my Flight into a cohesive unit. That might be a blessing in disguise, though- with so many more personalities, there’s more opportunities for socialization and skill transferral.

It honestly all comes down to condition and psychology. Muscle doesn’t keep without active training; and broomstick flight requires serious muscle. Some of my Flight can train together just fine; and some of them can’t even practice maneuvers together without supervision.

Me, Daily, and Precious can all train alone or together (disregarding my earlier points, this is pure scheduling), or be the trainer, of anyone in the Flight. Daily has first choice in training Lucille, as they are a Pair; Mack and Bang can’t train with any of the unwinged because they have a multitude of bad habits that don’t harm them, but will harm anyone they try to teach.

Mono, Zelda, Jun, and Sawbones are actually some of our toughest flighters; if they weren’t, they wouldn’t be able to do their jobs as effectively. They’re so strong, in fact, they really only get the most out of teaching, training against myself and my wings, or with each other.

Ailbe and BKB have completely different fighting styles; Ailbe actually has arranged her own training with Adelaide, while BKB is training with Bryony. As for flight, neither of them will ever move much past the pleasure stage- they can do tricks, they can do all the things I’d expect from the average flyer, and that’s about it. To be fair, they don’t need to do more than that- and neither has expressed a desire to do more than that.

Bradford, Bobert, and Maurice are trouble when they’re all three together- just two of them is alright,
but some foul alchemy of their personalities together means that they cannot train together effectively. Too much bickering, not enough work.

Pascal is still severely depressed- his grief is no longer debilitating, but it’s still quite present.

Coco found a teacher for her real passion, fashion; and possibly a teacher for her Martial Art, Needlepoint. I’ll let Mab know about her martial art, that seems like good synergy to me…

Sophie, thank the Gods, has settled in quite cleanly. She’s working with Mark on the various Farm chores, and seems quite happy. I wish I could say the same for Lynn; Winter always hits her hardest, and the fluctuation of light Up Top is not helping her at all.

Ori’s going to go stir crazy soon, I can feel it- there’s only so much I can do about it, unfortunately. She’s also starting to eye one of the Oldmen, Mukhtar I think; so long as she keeps her energy confined to sex and not pranks, I’ll say nothing about it.

The Feverbanes have shown a remarkable talent and interest in the Library- and just being around more than each other every day has started to sharpen their differences and pull them out of each other, which is a blessing.

Parsley’s depression is receding more every day- soon, he might not have to fake his exuberance, which will be a relief for Mila. Mila, of course, has to be turfed out of the Library every mealtimeshe’s never had access to so many magical books and resources, and it’s a little like-… she hasn’t internalized that they aren’t going anywhere.

Gally has started to tend the garden- I saw her taking soil samples this morning. Good; I’m very glad to see her start extending personal boundaries and taking on responsibility.

Phillip is going to break Sancho’s heart, and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it other than give him a pamphlet on the code of conduct for Fools, which I know he won’t read. Sancho cannot make permanent romantic bonds without breaking his Oath to Jocularity; and no matter if Phillip does or doesn’t have the necessary plumbing for baby production, Sancho is forbidden from reproducing intentionally. Sancho cannot be what I know Phillip wants; and from what I can see, Sancho’s never felt the way he feels about Phillip before. They don’t know; and even if I tell them, they won’t listen. What the hell can I do?

I suppose I’m really most worried about Aoife and Annie; Aoife because she still hasn’t really shown us in a meaningful way who she is or what she wants. Annie because she’s so socially anxious she switched schedules with Aoife, in an effort to get away from people.

Mm, these are good pancakes.

I must say, however, that the addition of an entire Garage specifically for the use of us with brooms is a marvelous thing- I had thought that we’d have to build our brooms en plein air, but no, we have a dedicated workspace.

Flight brooms aren’t as simple as a smooth stick with a water bottle and a bundle of curated straw. To fly one, that might be all you need to know; to break it’s limits, maybe a little more. Building one is much more intense. You need to know herbalism- not just for your homeland, but all across the World. Every bespoke broom maker- hell, even the off the rack broom makers- have what’s called
an illustrated color herbal. There are regional, national, and international conventions- which I’ve been preparing myself for months, now- where generations of broom makers come together to share hand-made copies of their color herbals.

Oh-

“Hi?”

“What’s that?”

“Uh- oh, right, I forgot you’re a nurse- this is an herbal meant for broom makers,”

“What’s an herbal?”

“It’s a book that’s basically an encyclopedia of herbs; mine is illustrated, which I did myself-”

“...Can I buy one?”

“No, you have to make it yourself; that’s part of the Method. -I was going to go to the Dressrosa Herbalism Convention- you could come with me if you’d like...?”

“...It might turn into an ‘all the medicals’ kind of trip. Are you sure?”

“Yeah! Herbcon Dressy is always a hoot- the more the merrier!”

Steps to make a broom: purpose of broom, choosing materials, infusion of decoction of magic for basic functions (handle and bristles), introduction of elixirs for intermediate functions (handle, bristles, bottle), salves for complex functions (handle, bottle, seat), varnish of sirip and tincture and wax (all parts), extraction of extraneous magic (all parts), final check and rebalance (all parts), final sealant (all parts); dry fit, wet fit, curing, first flight test, tweaks; finishing.

Sugar Rush- Genevieve- she maybe knows how to do half of that, and all the best racers make their own brooms. It’s astounding to me that she got as good as she did on, so far as I can tell, her mother’s broom.

I never thought I’d ever actually meet Sugar Rush- frankly, I thought the rumors of a kid in a frilly dress thrashing the Alley Cat Circuit were just rumors. Genevieve “Sugar Rush” Vinsmoke is an unholy terror on the streets; give her a broom and a time to beat, and she’ll do it just for the satisfaction of it. I also never thought she’d have such an interest in making her own broom- the one thing everyone agreed on was that Sugar Rush flys a rackracer- a broom that came off the rack some twenty-on years back and was almost purpose built for street racing.

Genevieve also has OPINIONS about the various flyers in my Flight- and Mab, which doesn’t surprise me, Missus Mab is one of the most technically proficient and beautiful flighters I’ve ever seen. In the sunlight Up Top, Missus Mab’s brown battle gear turns orange and yellow, with hints of black and violent red- and every time she goes up, Solitaire gets a little twitchier and more… longing? Interested?

Fuck it, I need a list- Mab, Usopp, Taffy, Gurry, Bryony, Mark, Deborah, Fernanda, Genevieve, Beatrix, Hildy, Quilaby, Tiffany, Precious, Daily, Lucille, Mack, Bang, Mono, Zelda, Jun, Sawbones, Ailbe, BKB, Bradford, Bobert, Maurice, Pascal, Coco, Sophie, Lynn, Ori, Feverbane
Twins, Parsley, Mila, Gally, Philip, Aoife, Annie, Solitaire. These are all the names of all the people I know for certain can fly, with varying levels of skill.

Sorting out this list... Mab, Usopp, Taffy, Genevieve, Hildy, Daily, Precious, and myself are the best flyers on the crew. Not all of us can teach, however- Mab can, I can, but I know Daily can’t, and while Precious technically can she’s a very specific kind of teacher which not everyone responds well to. Hildy and Usopp really ride more than fly- and while they can teach their skills... well, Hildy’s just about the size of my thumb, and Hekate-sama has OPINIONS about who is allowed to take lead on her. Taffy is special- I only knew about Fairies, as far as Fae go, but apparently there are four different... nations? I think? And each nation has their own specific way of flying. Taffy has legitimate wings- like, bird wings. So far as I know, she’s the only person on the crew who does- and while she can explain an absurd number of technical details, she can’t actually fly with a broom. She has promised to teach anyone who wants to learn how to fly our Sailwavers (that’s what they’re called formally, apparently), which I know I’m interested in...

The good flyers- not the best, but usually good enough- are Gurry, Lucille, Mack, Bang, Mono, Zelda, Jun, Sawbones, and Ori. Gurry doesn’t have wings, but apparently he got a cloak made special so he could? Which. Okay, let’s get real- it’s basically Goals to have a boyfriend who would do that. Also also, he’s sorta... scared shitless of heights? So. Goals. Lucille is the only person I know of who has ever reacted positively to Daily’s teaching style, so I’ve left it to her. Mack, Bang, and Mono all actually went through Flight Camp together, so they all have the same habits- thankfully, they’re good habits. Zelda was a courier; her flight speed is YES, and her overall skills are very unadorned, free of the superfluous. Jun was training to be an EMT- his flight skills are absurd, but he forgets that he doesn’t have the lights or siren, so he gets himself in a little trouble sometimes. Sawbones is used to transporting research materials, which are often delicate; she’s a very graceful, smooth flyer, no hard stops or quick twists. Not someone you’d expect to be good at flying, frankly- and yet, I’ve never, ever been able to tag her. Ori is best at distance flight- and her salves for saddle sores are second to none.

The Average flyers are Bryony, Deborah, Fernanda, Beatrix, Quilaby, Bradford, Bobert, Maurice, Pascal, Coco, Sophie, and Lynn. Bryony is a Syrene, another of the nations of the Fae; and where Taffy and Mab have physical wings, Bryony and Mark (I’ll get to him) have metaphysical, or magic, wings. Bryony’s wings are like Gurry’s, except Bryony has no motivation to get that astonishingly athletic with her wings. Deborah worked delivery for a restaurant- she’s fast, careful on her turns, and absurdly good at smooth stops. That’s about all she can do, though. Fernanda cheats outrageously with her Seer powers. Beatrix used her flying as another tool for hunting down thaumaturgic reagents, so basically she flies like an owl or a bird of prey. Quilaby is different- according to Eleanor, he can actually blow massive mucus bubbles with a mixture of lighter-than-air gases and use them to float around. Actual steering is something he’s still working on- she has high hopes for some sort of fan-fin system, but figuring out the right materials to use has been tricky. Bradford, Bobert, and Maurice were in the same Flight Camp, a different batch than Mack, Bang, and Mono- and where Mack and them had a quality teacher, Bradford and them did not. Thus, the Chav Trio have all the same shit habits, and just reinforce each other in them. Pascal is so quiet and bland, I hardly have anything to say about him- that goes double for his flying. Coco’s previous job involved cross-city and cross-country flights; she’s best at those, not the more acrobatic maneuvers required by an Active Post Flighter. Sophie worked as a veterinarian for the RMSPCA- Ryugu Mergyo Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals- and she’s genuinely skilled. Lynn is the worst of the Average flyers, and it’s only her rigid adherence to proper forms and habits- keeping your broom in good repair, getting it serviced every ten-thousand leagues, always checking your water level before each flight, and so on- that keeps her out of the Mehs.

The Mehs are Mark, Ailbe, BKB, Feverbane Twins, Parsley, and Gally. They use their flight in less interesting ways, and can’t get serious air all that often. Mark is a Djinn, the fourth nation of the Fae,
and that means he can’t actually fly unaided in some way—he’s better at running so fast he looks like he’s flying, or swimming in the same way. He can, however, jump and just sort of… hang. Weirdest thing I’ve ever seen in my life, I’ll tell ya… Ailbe and BKB are heavy, and slow, too. They don’t like going fast, and they’ve never had to, so I suppose it doesn’t matter. The Feverbanes actually use their gills to fly in air; it’s this really cute little fluttering around their heads, and then they hover off the ground for short amounts of time. Parsley used to be one of the best fliers in my group, but after a severe crash he got a nasty series of injuries and a paralyzing fear of the kind of complicated maneuvers that caused the crash. This lead to his depression, which is only just starting to get better due to Mila; I actually brought Mila in specifically for Parsley—she’s very good at rehabilitation and support, which is what he needed, even if he didn’t want it. Gally can’t keep her concentration levels up properly if she’s too far away from a solid flat plane, and that’s a critical skill if you’re trying to fly. She’d be good at steeplechase though, so it’s not all bad.

Mila, Philip, Aoife, and Annie have next to no flight skills at all, making them Poor flyers. Mila…it’s tricky. I got her from the job board down at the Employment Office, and she’s never failed in what I’ve needed her to do— but I’m not sure if she can move past her initial training to learn all the tricks and things that make a Postal Flighter really sing in the air. Philip and Annie have minimal air time, though they’ve passed their book-based testing; they know how to theoretically care for a broom, can name all it’s parts and so on… and Aoife hasn’t. Aoife doesn’t know how to care for a broom, and she certainly doesn’t know how to fly— but I think that’s because she’s one of those people who never quite adapt to a broom. Which means, of course, she probably needs wheels, not a broom at all…

As for Solitaire… him I can’t get a read on at all. I know he has wings— or at the least, the same kind of wingslits, I know what a Fairy’s back looks like when they’ve retracted their wings. He’s got the same overall build as Missus Mab— huge chest, long limbs, big eyes, big nose, wide mouth, the whole thing. He has an arrangement of four wingslits, with the same long furrow of fuzzy black hair down his spine. His is thicker, and rather than the green-iridescent sheen of Mab’s spine fuzz, his shimmers an absurdly bright and almost obnoxious shade of blue.

Hnn-

“Morning, Bryony!”

“Mmrph. Morning,”

“Headed for bed?”

“After eating, yeah,”

“Nice,”

Bryony’s sleep schedule is a roulette wheel of inconvenience; she’s awake when we’re asleep, and she’s groggiest when we’re all waking up. She’s also my bunkmate— I have the bunk just over her, actually.

There are five major rules to being a good roommate, and it took me several rounds of housing
situations to internalize them.

Firstly, be humble. However special you felt back home, in group housing you’re an equal player. Go in with an attitude of ‘same same’; your peers will get turned off immediately if you come in like you’re so much better than them. I have no goddamn idea about any of the intrapersonal details about the senior members of the crew- but Bryony wrote me out a cheat sheet, so long as I return the favor for the daylight hours.

Secondly, generosity is not just a virtue for temple. If one of your roomates needs something- your help, a chore switch, advice, whatever- do it. Share and give of yourself; and be assured there will be a time when you need them. Bryony kicks off the bedcovers in her sleep, and when she’s uncovered for too long she has terrible nightmares; it’s easy for me to take a quick detour back and cover her up again, and also I’m always forgetting some damn thing on the vanity, like a hair pin or a periodical I was reading before bed.

Thirdly, participate in group activities. Bryony has something she calls Late Night Jams; I’ve gone once, and holy hell her voice is spectacular. Brook, Sancho, Cece before she got sick, Arlinda Rader Haai, Oz, Neo, Mack, and Bang all together make up one of the most interesting and diverse music making and appreciating groups I’ve ever hung out with. Just the immense energy they bring each other- Lindy, because Arlinda Rader Haai is way too much to say each time and she seemed really… excited? To have a nickname? Anyway- Brook loves what are known now as the Standards- back in his day, when he still had flesh, the standards were just popular songs. He’s also a massive resource for music I didn’t even realize existed- and he can play songs that have been lost to time. Sancho’s a musical genius- he’s got these cards with musical tones on them, and he shuffles them, and then he just… writes a song. Or a symphony. Or a tango, or an opera, or- just, genius. Cece helps Sancho refine his work- and she’s no slouch about writing either. They play a game with the note cards, where they lay them out in a random row and make wildly different songs, then play them at the same time to see what sticks. It’s the craziest shit I’ve ever heard, seen, lived through… Lindy loves opera; Oz loves alternative rock; Mack loves Grateful Dead, which is a bit… and Bang loves everything that’s happening right now, he loves… basically all music everywhere? All the time?

Study groups are your friends. As we settle into roles and spaces on the ship, it becomes clearer and clearer that each and every one of us has a unique skill that we excel at above all others. Luffy is absurdly good at understanding motivations; Zoro knows how to be a swordsman, and all that means; Usopp can shoot and ride and hunt and gather; Nami knows the weather and maps; Sanji can cook and kick and has impeccable manners; Mab can sew and use a spear and fly and knows how to do all the things that make polite society deeply uncomfortable; Chopper knows medicine; Robin knows books and research and how best to rob a grave or kill a man quietly; Mark knows guns and animal handling- how to train them, how to feed them, how to keep them happy- and how to be self confident; Taffy knows stealth, and very subtle humor, and how to use a sword (which is not the same as being a swordsman or woman); Bryony knows restraint and communication and singing; Franky knows how to build and how to move past an addiction safely and how to find a limit without breaking; Brook knows music and moving past trauma and faith; Gurry knows the quality of light and mercy and forgiveness, strength in adversity.

All the Suntides have their own skills- Deborah knows how to be creative; Eleanor knows persistence; Fernanda knows discretion; Genevieve knows resilience; Adelaide knows defiance; Beatrix knows ferocity; Cecelia knows compassion; Sancho knows honor.

The Mice have skills too- Darla is gregarious; Maya is discerning; Hildy is meticulous; Jellybean is definite; Quilaby is strength; Lindy is choice.

Mice Coffyn is Generosity and Honesty; BBC is potential, innocence and Joy; Mendy May is
Kindness and Loyalty; Oz is Friendship and Hope.

Sohei is responsibility; Tellicherry is faith and fortitude; Neo is care; Havij is determination…

But for me and my Flight, the best I can do is less metaphoric skills. I can teach anyone who wants to know how to be organized, how to build a broom, how to keep wildly conflicting personalities in check and on point.

Precious knows how to take his time; he enjoys his life, and the little wonders in it- the smell of rain, fresh fallen snow crunching underfoot, the taste of the first ripe apple of fall, light through the trees, the sound of windchimes in summer… the warmth of a cat’s purr under your hand… the way it feels to smile after crying.

Daily *loves* fashion- she loves color, and being pretty, and making other people *feel* pretty.

Lucille, she loves finding new fashions in old places- lace patterns made large, colors revived, buttons becoming the focal point and not the detail.

Mack likes to organize; Bang likes to curate; Mono likes solitude; Zelda likes noise.

Jun likes gardening; Sawbones likes… ugh, leeches.

Ailbe and BKB like to train- dancing, karate, spicy foods… they love to compete, I think, more than train.

Bradford has determination; Bobert has no shame about who he is; Maurice is much stronger than he looks (and his fur is so soft ); Pascal is absurdly gentle for a man with such potent resting bitchface; Coco loves making something out of nothing- she loves to repurpose things that others would throw away, she loves… she loves to recycle, reuse.

Sophie loves rabbits- keeping them, cooking them, making things out of their pelts…

Lynn actually loves to dance- she hardly ever has a place she can dance safely, but it’s one of her favorite things.

Ori is gutsy; the Feverbanes are organized; Parsley (the more he recovers) is becoming more genuinely exuberant by the day; Mila is protective. Gally is calm; Philip is gentle; Aoife is loving; Annie is trusting.

I haven’t seen enough of the Old Men to make more than surface distinctions- Solitaire is fairly vain, taking a great deal of care in his appearance; and he hasn’t entirely come back from whatever War he fought in. Udoroth is triggered by condescension and cruelty- and the more time he spends around people, the better he becomes. Mukhtar is come back from the War, only to find his son nearly full grown and him at loose ends. And Zaffire? Zaffire, rather desperately, wants to be something, anything, other than what he is.

My point is, each person on this ship has something they can teach you, if you take the time to learn.
Oh, yes- and fifth. Do your damn chores, and do them with your assigned group. It doesn’t matter if you made the mess, or if you’re used to a different schedule- coordinate and collaborate.

I know it seems like I did a lot of work- and truthfully, I did. I just didn’t do it all at once until the very end, when I didn’t exactly have a choice; I’ve been gathering the materials for years, now. Which reminds me-

“Do you think it’s a good idea to have everyone keep their toiletries and bathroom things in a box in their dorm, or is that too much?”

“...Bathroom? Y’mean the Head, Missus Mab?”

“...Sanji...”

“...”

“Sanji, have you been letting me call the ship’s head a bathroom this whole time?”

“...I thought it was cute...?”

“UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUGH- ”

“FFFFFFFFFFT-”

“YOU’RE THE WOooooOOOOOOOOooooooorST-”

“FFFFFFFFFFFFFT-AHAHAHAHAHAHA-”

As I pout and scowl, Sanji bubbles with laughter. It takes a moment to shrug off the embarrassment, but when I do I find I’m giggling with him. That is pretty funny- and I’m also kind of relieved that the things I’ve not remembered are still so small.

Havij’s done with her breakfast- best do her hair before I forget.

“Havij- do you want an updo or a downdo?”

“Up, please.”

“Okay- mm, and when’s a good time to corner your sister into a trim?”

“Lunch, I’d say- she always takes an hour for it, but only needs fifteen minutes to actually eat-”

“Nice. Okay, tell me if I pull too hard-”
Space buns are actually fairly simple, you just need discreet hairpins and possibly some same-color hairties. I have both.

Comb it all out fine and snag free; part down the middle; hightails; spin the tail end around the base, close to the scalp, until there’s a bun. Pins to secure- lots of pins, her hair is feathery. Repeat on other side. Comb her bangs and baby hairs, and wrap her hand which is less bruised but still quite sore-yes, you need the sling, hush.

“All done- hm, that’s what I’ll do today. Bryony, before you go I need a shipwide broadcast please-”

“Roger, Ro-aaaaguh- R-roger,”

“*If I could have everyone’s attention, please; today and tomorrow, I will be giving haircuts, piercings, and tattoos. If you want one of those, or even all of those, please come to the Galley, Grass Deck, or Studio. First Come, First Serve; Absolutely No Complaints, please- okay, Bry, that’s it-”

“Gotcha,”


I press Solitaire’s face into the fine wood grain of the table, keeping my fairly nasty submission hold tight and cruel.

“Sanji, do you want yours now or at Tea time?”

“Now’s fine, Mab,”

I step back from Solitaire, and reach behind myself and pull out a clean roll of hair cutting tools- scissors, combs, and so on- while keeping a firm, unyielding hold on Solitaire, to the shock and yelps of… pretty much everyone who hasn’t seen me do this before, like, thirty eight people, woof. No, thirty seven, Solitaire’s closed his eyes and he’s growling- *no you don’t*-

“Now, you four; I’ve noticed that your old clothes aren’t in good repair, or even particularly clean. I can fix that for you, but not without knowing what kind of patches you want to be identified with- here, I’ve brought a selection I think will suit-”

I lay out a tray full of choices as Solitaire hooks an ankle around mine and drags us both to the floor; I roll, twist like a snake and dig my fingers into the short spikes of his hair, twist and slam him into the floor-
I calmly sit and wait for the three Old Men at the table to look away from the scrap on the floor. I actually clear my throat a little, to speed things up.

Udoroth recovers first, and looks over the selection before picking out a small black bowknot, good choice; Mukhtar picks a white sparrow on orange ground; and Zaffire picks chubby bears. I quietly hmm, as Solitaire starts making a sort of chittering noise which means he’s getting frustrated, I can feel it- ah, this one, he’d like this one. A black diamond; perfect, for the Black King.

“Now, I know each of you is having an issue getting into the rhythm of semi-ordinary life, so I’ve decided to give each of you a posting on the chore board. I do expect your chores to be completed by the end of each day, and I sincerely hope-”

“What do we get for doing our chores?”

“I’m glad you asked, Udoroth. Complete your chores faithfully, and you’ll not only get an excellent sticker of your choice-”

And I fan out the stickers, making sure to haul Solitaire up long enough he gets a look too before suplexing him backwards- the men who are sitting are also quietly perking up, because my stickers are fucking choice –

“-you’ll also get to read my fuckhuge collection of pornography to see which ones are reasonably accurate, fun, and relatively stirring; and which ones I need to let go of, or possibly burn,”

“SOLD!” shout all four men- well, Solitaire sort of groans it, because I tagged his crotch and I’m not letting him out of this Shrimp Hold until he taps-

Udoroth is beaming; Mukhtar and Zaffire glance at each other and grin. OW FUCK- SOLITAIRE YOU LITTLE SHITWAFFLE-

“So. Udoroth- your chores today are over on the chore board, but to start, why don’t you go ahead and ask Deborah how best to play with Goblynn and the kittens?”

“Uh- Sure!”

“Mukhtar, Zaffire; you’ll be working in the Library today- Robin’s in charge,”

“Gotcha,”

“I’ll handle Solitaire- which reminds me. Beatrix!”

“Boss?”

“You’re sparring with me and Solitaire today! Pay attention to how he fights; he’s much better with broadswords than I am-”
“Yes Boss!”

“Right, off you trot- no, don’t worry-”

I smile at the three men as I lock my knees around a lunging Solitaire’s neck, twisting in mid air and slamming him into the floor again.

“Me an’ him are just bonding, is all; it’s a Portgas-Morgan thing.”

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I dunno why, but people here always do a double take when they see me and the Cook, Sanji, near each other. We don’t dress nearly the same- he’s always in fine linen or wool or silk trews and matching waistcoat and short overcoat, a colorful button up shirt and a fancy silk ribbon ‘round his throat, one of those smoke-paper rolls lit and glowing from between his lips and his blond hair is surely longer and silkier than mine has ever been…

I’m wearing a [black linen tunic in the Orcish fashion](#), of finer and more beautiful make than any I’ve worn before- more fit for a king than me, but that seems to be common in this time- as does it’s length, being well above my knees, above my crotch, even. The tunic is soft to the touch, and drapes elegantly, and the red embroidery is so vibrant I would almost swear it to be flames caught in fabric, not simple linen threads at all. My trews are [supple red leather](#), butter smooth and finely stitched; my socks are the finest wool, not even slightly itchy; and my boots are still my boots, but the Miss called Coco, I think, has been eyeing them and my feet quite aggressively.

My hair is much longer- I had no idea so much length had gotten tangled in my sanitary sootgrease, and washing it out- at Solitaire’s urging, the man is a vanity-fiend- has left me with shoulder-length hanks of soft, flaxen waves. That stuff- conditioner?- in tandem with the soap, shampoo, works wonders- and the combs and brushes! Truly, this is an age of wealth and miracles.

“Miss Deborah? May I have a moment of your time?”

“Meurs bâtard, meurs- ah, sure? One moment, let me just- [DÉBUTEZ LA SALOPE PAN](#).”

I can feel my eyebrows rising as the young woman hisses fouler and fouler curses at something burnt onto the griddle she’s cleaning; honestly, it reminds me of my battalion, really a nostalgic sound- and then she’s finished cleaning, and walking off into a small closet…?

And now she’s come out, and she’s not dressed like an undercook, she’s dressed like… I’ve no idea. A light [red woolen tunic](#), quite a bit larger on her than I’d thought she would wear, but still quite short as everyone seems to wear these days; and a wide… dress? But no, it only goes to her hips-[skirt](#), it’s a skirt, the distaff of trews is skirt. Interesting.

She’s also carrying some sort of Lisk- a scaly beast with vile feelings towards anyone who isn’t the
young woman currently holding her. Following Miss Deborah’s careful steps are five of the cutest kittens I’ve seen—obviously the Lisk’s, considering the size of their ears, and the authoritative ‘come here’ cries the dam is making. Around one of Miss Deborah’s arms is a strange basket—it’s got some sort of hinge in the middle, and a lid. I’ve no idea what that’s for.

“This is about your chores, right?”

“Etiam, Miss Deborah; what am I to do?”

“Well, it’s like this—this is my catfish, Goblynn.”

“Well met, fair Goblynn,”

Goblynn glances at me, then dismisses me as unworthy and cuddles up under Miss Deborah’s chin. I can see now what I took for a thick tail is really a tail with long finned legs—a Cat-fish, as she said, and not really a lisk at all.

“I’m going to tell you this now—she doesn’t like being touched by anyone except me and *sometimes* my brother, Sancho. She doesn’t like to play with anyone except for me, my sisters, and Sancho. If she curls up next to you, don’t touch her; if she looks like she wants to play, don’t invite her to. She lies, and she is cruel; and her very favorite treat is the blood of innocent cat-loving people, who just wanted to enjoy her company.”

“Um,”

“You’re job is to take the box of cat toys I’ve gotten ready, prepare them according to the directions I’ll give you, and then hide them all over the ship—stick them behind and under furniture, in nooks and crannies, anywhere you can’t reach easily. That’s for Goblynn—if she doesn’t get enough enrichment in her environment, she starts making her own. If our ship had rats, I’d let her—but it doesn’t, so I don’t.”

“...how will I hide them without her knowing where I’ve put them?”

“I’m taking her in for her yearly veterinarian visit with Mark and them today, so she’ll be kept inside all day; you’ve got all day to hide the toys. As for her kittens—enough, Goblynn—it’s time to start separating them from their mother. They’re all weaned—she’s just got separation issues,”

“Ah,”

“There’s a basket with a lid; you’re to put the kittens in the basket, and keep the lid shut while I take Goblynn to the Vet. When I come back, I’ll help you scatter the toys, and help you teach the kittens about the new toys too,”

I nod, and then take the basket she hands me. It’s got a one way trap door, and a hinged lid that locks from the outside; inside, I can smell fresh catnip and see a thick pad of bedding in the bottom.
“So, go ahead and set the basket down wherever it’s stable- good, now pick up a kitten,”

“Sure-”

“So, that’s Boo; he’s got a hiss like a snake and absolutely huge paws, so I’m pretty sure he’s going to be both massive and terrifying, hence the name-”

“Hehehehe-”

“That’s Princess; she was born with partial laryngeal paralysis, making her mewls sort of-”

“MWAOU -”

“Um,”

“Yeah, she’s got way too deep a voice for a fluffball her size, but what can you do? - and that, for obvious reasons, is Mustache-”

“Pffft-tahahahahahahaha-”

“He’s got a very lovely mustache!”

“-hahahahahahaha-”

Deborah is grinning at me as I carefully push Mustache, with his very fine white mustache, pffffffff, into the basket with his siblings.

“That’s Grr, she prefers growling and purring to other forms of vocalization with humans-”

“She’s softer than Boo,”

“Yeah, and I can’t figure out why other than maybe Boo growing webbed feet later?”

“...This is a kitten?”

“Paws and tail in proportion to the body; look at the ears and face-”

“Holy shit, why is- she- so big? ”

“Sometimes, like people, kittens just come out in size: fuckhuge. Anyway, her name is Pickle -”

“Ha,”

“Shush; and it’s probably best if you just hold her, she’s very docile,”

“I can see that,”

I like Pickle, even if she is about the size and weight of a small ballista rock. Deborah nods once to me, and I nod back- and then I sit down with Pickle the kitten to wait. A short while later, Pickle, who has been laying in my arms and purring, looks up to me and pats my chin with her paw. I look down at her, and she lets out a tiny mew.
I say “Yeah?”

And then she lets out the longest, squeakiest, most adorable mew I’ve ever heard a cat make.

And then she lets out a little squeaky mew and that’s it, I have to have this cat, I love her.

I think I’m crying a little. Gods, this cat is fucking adorable.

“So, would your roommates hurt her?”

“Wh-what? Sorry, um- could you repeat that, Deborah?”

“Sure. The guys you’re rooming with- would they hurt Pickle?”

“No, never,”

“Okay. Three roommates, right?”

“Yeah,”

“Have you ever had a pet or companion animal before?”

“A small sea turtle, and a few lizards, yes,”

I can see the Cook, Sanji, twitch from where Missus Mab is cutting his hair. I glance at him, and he looks- odd. Confused? Perturbed?

“Do you have any pets now?”

“No- not since I was a child,”

“If she takes ill, what will you do?”

“Uh- well, if it’s something like a small scratch or grumpiness, I’d wait and see; if she’s sneezing or throwing up or her shits smell particularly foul, I’d take her to see Mark,”

“How active are you? Like, will you have time to play with her every day? Will you teach her fighting skills?”

“Uh- I should be able to play with her at the beginning and end of each day; and I don’t see why not, she’s going to be massive,”

“If it turns out she has no heart for battle, what will you do?”

“Accept her choice and love her anyway,”

“What do you expect from her?”

“...to be a cat? I- what’s this about?”

“I’m deciding if you’ll be an ethical pet owner- so far, all signs point to yes. You still have to ask her...
mother, and decide if you’re keeping her name, but otherwise… I think she likes you,”

Pickle, the cat in discussion, has climbed my chest and wrapped herself around my neck and shoulders like a particularly warm and fluffy scarf. I fucking adore her.

“So, since you’ve never had a cat before, I’ll tell you about the toys- pass the kitten basket, we’re going to the Aqua Lounge,”

“The Aqua Lounge… that’s the room with the terrifying water wall, right?”

“I find it very soothing, myself- and you should take a better look at the sill, the glass is thicker than your arm is long.”

“I know that in my head, but my heart still stutters every time I see a live fish longer than I am tall swimming past...”

I follow Miss Deborah into the terrifying, yet oddly soothing room. Seeing all the fish moving beyond the impossibly clear glass, watching seahorses in the distance grazing, seeing little schools of squiberry plants gently sculling past- it really is astounding. Terrible, yes- and good, too, because sometimes there are young mermaid women in the window too, which is always nice.

The room is a huge, vaulted thing, the wide post of the mast dead center; the floor is tiled in black and white, jointed wood I think- very beautiful, actually, next to the deep red leather of the long round bench seat just under the terrifying window of blue ocean. Under the seats are what appear to be uneven siding, in a fine dark wood with rippling grain; Deborah puts the basket on the bench seat, crouches, and- ah, sliding doors, they’re storage.

A box full of things that rattle, click, and jingle- she shuts the storage with her booted foot and opens up the basket of kittens, who all bound out after a moment of hesitation.

Deborah takes a seat with a sigh, and pats the space next to her, not occupied by the box of toys or the basket of kittens. I sit next to her, Pickle asleep on my shoulders.

“Pickle’s asleep?”

“Yeah,”

“Mm. Cats spend a lot of their day sleeping, but playing- or, for working cats, hunting, is important too. It’s more than just a way for a cat to pass time; they use it for exercise, developing and maintaining skills, mental challenges, and satisfying their hunting instinct when they’re a companion. Your Pickle is going to need a lot of play time; she’s a big girl, and she could really hurt someone if she’s bored, even now;”

“Is that what the box is for?”

“Yep. This box is full of cat toys, which keep cats from thinking your hands or just any old thing is
worth hunting and play-killing; and not every toy will do,"

“How much playtime does Pickle need?”

“That depends on quite a few things- for one, her metabolism - er, how fast her body uses the energy from the food she eats, how much she needs to sleep; what kind of toys she likes; how well she gets along with her siblings, all kinds of things. What’s important to remember is that all cats need to play, and if they don’t they develop two big problems; either they become overweight, which causes a whole host of medical problems- or they become destructive, because they’re bored. A cat with behaviour problems is usually a cat with enrichment issues- hence why I need your help hiding all the toys for Goblynn to sniff out. -as an aside, enrichment is why I think all those old stories of werewolves have them being slavering monsters.”

“Um-”

“I mean, have you met Buttercream, Bubbler, and Pearblossom? They’re not good boys-”

“Well-”

“-Because they’re good girls!”

“Pfft- actually, you’re probably right. I’ve seen some of the toys for the lovely Wolvarks; I have no doubt that proper use of them could alleviate some of the suffering of those pitiable souls afflicted with the Curse of Lycian,”

“Hm. So, don’t be fooled by the number of toys in this box- there’s really only seven different types of cat toy. Catnip toys; feather toys; wand toys; puzzle toys; swat, chew, and claw toys; mechanical toys, which move on their own; and cooldown toys, which aren’t really toys at all but get sold in the same areas. All the stripy mice are catnip toys- they’re very firm, and stuffed with catnip. Goblynn loves catnip; her litter so far has been too young to react to the herb, so I don’t know if they’ll like it or not. Some cats don’t,”

“Does the age of the herb matter?”

“Good question- I’ve never been able to keep a cat away from a catnip plant long enough to tell, so, probably,”

“Pfft,”

“Right. -um, you can also use catnip oil if you want, it’s easier to put into solution and spray somewhere you want the cat to be… Ah, feather toys are things like this, - it looks kinda like a mouse, although there are lizardy ones too, and mechanized ones- they’re all built to move like wounded birds. They’re made of a ball that bounces very well, something inside that rattles, and a bunch of feathers,”

“Okay,”

“You can also make things like fishing lures without hooks, to use as wand toys. Goblynn doesn’t care so much about these, there aren’t many birds native to Ryugu Mergyo, and the ones that are could give her a hell of a fight even injured- that said, I’ve got no idea who the sire of her litter is, so I don’t know if Pickle or the rest will or what,”

“Okay- should I hide some of the feather ones anyway?”

“Like, five or so- she doesn’t care to play with them, but she likes finding them, so I try to make it be
a little treat for her,”

“Got it,”

“Cool beans. As for the kittens, they like to bat them around- so go ahead and throw one for them if you feel like it. These are wand toys- it’s a stick, a string, and something to hunt and kill at the end. All cats love these at least a little bit; and if you want someone to play with your cat, like a child or someone you don’t know, this is the toy to use. The distance between your body and the cat’s business ends allows for full force play without scratches,”

“I see; ah, and the toy itself invites chasing and pouncing, does it not?”

“It does, yeah. Now, puzzle toys- they come in two distinct varieties. The first is the mystery box type- see, it’s this box one with all the things in it?”

“Oh! Ah, I see- the cat can put their paws in, but not their face- I assume these are best used in tandem with some sort of reward?”

“Mm. You can use food-treats or catnip depending on what interests your cat. This kind of toy is very useful for keeping your cat interested and engaged, even when you’re not there; it also gives them something to think about. Now, this one-”

“That’s not a sculpture?”

“Nope! This is actually a kind of feeder. I noticed it in Goblynn, Boo, and Grr- Mustache and Princess don’t do it, but Pickle might… Um, what I mean to say is, our cats have predispositions to eat too quickly. This leads to bloating and vomiting, if we don’t limit their eating speed-”

“Ah, that’s what all the spikes are for!”

“Exactly! These are also useful for older cats; it helps to engage their brains and keep them from getting complacent.”

“I see- sort of like how people who always learn something end up staying young longer?”

“Exactly like, actually. Okay, so, these are swat, chew, and claw toys- these crinkle balls are some of Goblynn’s very favorite swat toys; go ahead and crunch it,”

“Wow, that’s… really satisfying, and aaaaaaau, Pickle-”

“She likes those! Go ahead and throw it for her-

I do. Pickle bounds off of my shoulder and lunges for the crackly ball paw first- and the ball, so light, ah! I get it!

“It’s so light, the slightest touch from the cat sends it flying!”

“Yep! Now this, and some of the other large stuffies in the storage here are chew toys- and these are really dog toys but Pickle likes them for cooldown- see, here she comes, these trout are her favorite-”

“Good to know-”
“Mm. I’ve also seen her playing with the squid one, but she mostly sleeps on it. Claw toys we don’t have to put out, but we do have to check to see if they need changing- you know how the lower part of the mast in the Galley, the part under the Altar and the countertop is covered in cork?”

“Yeah,"

“That’s because it’s a scratch toy; it’s large enough that each cat can reach all the way up and pull down, which is how they keep their claws from getting overgrown or dull,”

“Ah; so we check to make sure we keep ahead of needing to replace the cork?”

“Mm. Mechanical toys move on their own, and can be anything from something like this bracket, which attaches to the wall, to this ball which rolls on it’s own and changes direction randomly. Goblynn likes some of them, but they don’t really hold her attention- Boo and Grr, however, adore them,”

“I see,”

“So, look up high- see all the shelves with little egg things and tiny armchairs and couches on them?”

“...Actually, yeah; what are those?”

“Those are cool down toys. Cats are introverted; they don’t like extended social interaction the way dogs do. That’s fine; but they also don’t want to be left out or excluded. The toys up high give the cats somewhere to retreat to without actually leaving the room, and are designed to soothe them, rather than excite them. They’re also in socially significant areas- places where we gather up in groups, or where people spend lots of time,”

“I see; should I put some of these up high for Pickle?”

“You’re going to need to talk to Franky about suitably reinforcing a shelf in your dorm room; like you said, she’s going to be huge,”

“I thought you said that,”

“Oh! Uh… maybe? Whoever said it, it’s still true- Pickle’s going to be a big girl,”

“...A big pickle?”

“Oh my Gods, no,”

“A Big Pickle!”

“Noooooooo-”

As fast as Cece was down with illness, she’s up again, and well- Chopper actually discharged her, she’s so healthy and recovered. The ports in her shoulders were removed the day after Sancho’s birthday, and that was nearly a month ago; and though she’s a little creaky after so long abed, she joined everyone for chores without much of a hitch. She also seems to have settled back into her skin- whatever issue she was having with Philip and Sancho, she’s let it go now, or resolved it, or something.
Mah, Solitaire on the other wing, is still not quite... he's not well. If it wouldn’t shock him worse, I’d send him home to Mom and Auntie, but... He’s strong, for one; he’s smart, for two; he’s afraid, for three; and he doesn’t trust me, for four.

One of those would be enough, but all four means I’m the only person on this ship who can stop him if he has a flashback, and I’m the only person on this ship he won’t ask for help. Beatrix is not pleased, but it’s not her job to make people trust me- it’s mine. And trust isn’t something you’re given, not in a lasting relationship- it’s something you earn.

As all the snails on our ship start sobbing like babies, setting off BBC and sending all the officers into the Galley at a panic- Bryony’s in her pyjamas, it’s the middle of the night for her, nearly tea time for us- I consider if the distress signal we’re receiving is really worth our trust.

"-Bryony, can you- thank you, that was really annoying-"

“Neh, why were all th’snails crying like babies-?”

“It’s a distress signal; merchant ships use them when they’re in trouble, and morganeers use them to attract merchants to prey on,”

“So... either way it’s an adventure?”

“Hang on, Captain- we can’t all go,”

“Eh?”

“The Mice and Fern are still quite ill; the Four Old Men haven’t been invited to our crew; and correct me if I’m wrong, Nami, Taffy, Robin- but are there any islands rumored to be nearby?”

“No, Mab, there aren’t- the island rumored to be closest to this side of the canal is a place called Tuckleigh, a trading post of sorts,”

“Tiffany; can you send someone up and out? I want an eyes on view, I’m getting conflicting information from my sensory web-”

“No problem, Mab, I’ll put Ori on it-”

“Luffy, you make the final decision: are we answering the call?”

“Yep, Captain’s orders,”

“Okay, Nami, Taffy-”

“Already on it; Taffy, were there coordinates-?”

“Yis, I am calculating course adjustment as we speak-”

“Second question; who’s staying behind?”

“Hm... we need to leave the sick people here with doctors who can care for ‘em, and we need people who can protect the ship, too. I haven’t sparred with everyone, but- Zoro, Nami’s gettin’ real annoyed with your hoverin’, so you’re goin’ and she’s not. Gurry will go; Mark and Bry will stay,
Mark to protect the ship, and Bry’s too sleepy durin’ the day—"

“thank you captain, aaaugh—”

“I’m goin’... me, zoro, Nami stays, Usopp stays, Sanji, you’re not going; Mab, you’re going; Chopper stays; Robin goes; Mark stays; Taffy stays; Bryony stays, Franky goes; Brook?”

“I’d prefer to go, Captain; the worry would wither the flesh from my bones— if I still had any! Yohohohohoho, skull joke!”

“Shishishi, okay- Gurry’s going- can the Cook Trio go, Sanji?”

“Yes,”

“Then they’re going; Ellie goes; Fern stays; Genny needs a broom before she goes—”

“I’ll handle that, Captain,”

“Thank you, Tiffany; um... Beatrix goes, Cece an’ Sancho stay, Adelaide goes, the Mice stay, Mendy May and BBC stay, Sohei stays; Miss Cherry and Neo go; Havij stays; Tiffany, Precious, Daily, Lucille, Mack, Bang all stay; Mono goes; Zelda goes; Jun stays; Sawbones goes; Ailbe and BKB have’ta stay because Bry won’t be awake until sundown; Lynn, Ori, Cathey, Aoife, Annie, Solitaire and Udoroth all go- everyone else stays. Neh- you guys are on my crew, right?”

“...Yeah? I mean, we would’a asked to leave if we wanted, Captain,”

“-! Udoroth, when did you get here?”

“I’ve been here since breakfast, Deborah; Pickle fell asleep, and I didn’t want to wake her...”

“Fair enough- do you need a weapon?”

“That would be quite nice; Solitaire too,”

“Um...”

“Mono and Zelda will handle disposables; Mab, where’s the armory?”

“I’m glad you asked...”
Dreameater

End of Winter, Guto River Crossing; A Journey is a collection of hoofsteps, one after the other

Dear- Lovely- Dearest Journal,

I suppose I should begin by stating clearly at the start that I am no pony, as the Sisters would call their subjects- a pony is rigorously defined in literal fashion as anypony who is fourteen hooves or below; I am, at my withers, very nearly nineteen hooves. Thus, I am more properly defined as a horse- note the lack of prevailing ‘w’!

Particularly, I am (really, my entire clan is,) what is called a Coldblood, or Draft. This means that, well aside from my stature, I am- despite being a mare, and quite beautiful I might add- known for a number of things. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly for any descendants reading this journal, Coldbloods tend to steady any line we’re introduced to- indeed, Saddle Arabians in particular have been known to seek out a prospective mate from the colder north, my homeland, when their bloodlines- which they keep rigorous track of- become too crossed and fractious. A coldblood can be any of the three tribes- unicorn, pegasus, or earth pony; what is true of all coldbloods is that we are generally large, much larger than the average pony. We tend to be heavily muscular- not in a grotesque or ugly way, merely that we tend to be strong in our bodies. Our hooves are large; our patience is long.

My name, Journal, is Meadow Surprise. I am a bay, with a harsh red sheen to my mane and tail. I do not currently wear shoes of any kind, and though I had some misgivings at the beginning of the journey, I must say that not needing any of the files or clippers to keep my hooves in proper order is a great relief, and a great savings on weight in my cart.

I have left my home of Trottingham some six weeks past, and have been steadily making my way south. I have in my possession a cart, which I have been using as a base for a lean-to as I travel; it holds my entire business, as well as my personal possessions, and my beehives. One cannot, of course, keep bees as pets- then again, they are not entirely wild creatures either, not so long as I’ve had them.

I suppose it started with my cutie mark- I had been watching a swarm of bees turn the hollow trunk of a tree in the overgrown back of our yard into their hive, and it was fascinating. Each day I would spend a good hour or longer observing- and it seemed to me that each hexagonal cell of beeswax was marked in a this-or-that fashion. Slowly, slowly, I gained a sense of the purpose of the bees- how each cell was marked out for a specific use, and how each level of the hive had its own purpose. I was also learning to knit, at the time- and then one day, almost as if in a dream, I turned my head and found my mark.

My cutie mark is two balls of black and yellow self-stripping yarn, one larger than the other; in the smaller ball, there are two knitting needles stuck in a bit like antenna; and on either side of the pair of yarn balls, a single hexagon of bright yellow. It looks rather like a honey bee, though one made of knitting supplies and abstract shapes…

Well. On that day, I discovered two things- firstly, that I had several small, seemingly disparate knacks for a few things, that being: making soft goods, such as knitwear, lace, or cuddle buddies;
making cheese; making pickles; and keeping bees. There are some things made easier by the horn upon my head; and there are some things that simply must be done by hoof, not because there’s not a spell to do the job- or even because I can’t do the spell, I certainly can- but rather… there is a quality to an object that cannot be replicated by spell. There are instructions a spell is simply not smart enough to interpret; and…

Here, let me explain.

Knitting instructions and spell matrixes are basically the same thing. A knitting instruction, after all, is the written instructions of how one goes about making a certain piece. There is usually a picture or description of what kind of thing should be left behind, provided all the instructions are followed correctly, and all the necessary basic properties of a good knitted object are present. Similarly, a spell matrix is the written- or physicalized- instruction of how a spell is to be cast. Most spells come with a description or warning about it’s use, thus allowing the forward thinker to divine the purpose and method of the spell in question- intention, is the word I was looking for.

Knitting something, and casting a spell are both matters of intent. It need not be a powerful intent- keeping warm in the cold, a light in the darkness… I find that the simpler solution is often better. I could cast a heating spell to keep warm- or I could take the time to knit myself a fine set of legwarmers, and a heavy shawl, and a scarf, and a hat that I can tie around my throat. I could cast a mage light; or I could light a candle.

Then again, I suppose the devil is truly in the details- there are times when clothing is not practical, but a spell is; times when a flame is a terrible, irresponsible danger- but a tiny firefly of mage-light is not.

Ah, I suppose I should explain the actual- right. Well. I have been banished from my clan lands in Trottingham; and I am now making my way to Equestria, in hope of a better life for myself and the one(s?) soon to be in my care. To start with, I aim to get to the Griffonstone Bridge, where, if all goes well, I will cross and enter the very edge of Equestrian territory. If I have enough money left over, I shall get a ticket to the farthest interior of that pleasant country I can- but I doubt it will be so easy.

The light is fading; and my quill is less than sharp. I shall write again when I am in more stable accommodations.

Best Love, MS

Crossed the River, First Day of Spring; Bebotherance and Condemnation to Greedy Griffons!

Well, Journal, my worry was well founded- crossing the Griffonstone Bridge from the Griffon side was an exercise in politic and frustration. I suppose it’s really my fault- I did not expect such high tolls for crossing a bridge, nor the need for bribes. Even so, I only now have enough bits to go to the
Crystal Empire or Vanhoover without crunching into my savings and fresh-start monies.

Bah! Enough of this pity party!

I am currently resting in a very fine traveler’s stable, with my cart as is proper. Across the walk, there seems to be some sort of altercation - I am quite pleased and sure of the runic protections laid into the bones of the stable, so feel no worry leaving my cart be and sticking my nose in where it isn’t wanted.

Ah, Journal, I am glad I had a look! I never could stand for anyone being mistreated for something they’ve no control over - one cannot control their tribe, nor their coloration, nor even if they be a zebra or otherwise.

Taffeta Dracule - though she prefers Taffy- is a zebra, one of the Travelers I do believe, though I would need to put my glasses on and double check the stitching on her saddlebags to be sure. She stands at the average fourteen hooves, and has a curious dun tinge to her stripes. There is something distinctly wiggly or snake-like concerning her cute stamp- like a snake with wings, wrapped around a stick, I think. Odd, but no more than my own cutie mark- as for the mare herself, once well away from her tormentors- who I will not describe more than boorish, cowardly, and entirely too sure of their strength when with their fellows (a sure sign of a coward)- she is proving to be a kind and gregarious soul.

She has not been off-put by my taciturn nature, nor my resting expression (which has often been compared to a scowl). Indeed, after enjoying a fine dinner of oats, sorghum, barley stalks and dandelion leaves, (with a sprinkle of my own necessary supplements), we have decided to be traveling partners for as long as our roads intersect. We have also decided, after I voiced my lack of bits and general concerns, to go to Vanhoover, not the Crystal Empire- and, as it turns out, Taffy is a doctor. Specifically, she is a midwife, learning how other cultures and other bodies go about the business of birth.

Quite frankly, I am put greatly at ease having her along.

It’s getting late, Journal; I’ll write again soon.

Best love; MS

Twenty First of March; Pegacast for Slightly Cloudy, no scheduled rain

Dearest Journal; Taffy is a Traveler! What fantastic luck! Further, she has several coupons for our journey ahead- and has agreed to pool her bits with mine, that we may make them stretch farther. (Just a note, Journal- Travelers are Zebras who leave Zebrica to explore the world, broadening their knowledge and mastery of a particular subject, art, or science. They have flowers, vines, and medicinal herbs embroidered into the carrying straps of their saddlebags as a good luck charm; Taffy’s are fern, ivy, dandelion, and willow, with flowers of pea, rose, and lily.)

Our itinerary is as follows; we will board the Mail and Freight leaving Griffonstone Station at Three-thirty AM for the Crystal Empire, where we will have approximately twelve hours of layover; then, we will board the Sparkling Continental from the Empire to Cloudsdale Station, where we will
connect with the Vanhoover Limited (Canterlot to Vanhoover round-trip daily), thus getting us to Vanhoover.

Apparently, Taffy’s older brother, Hawkeye, works in the Vanhoover General Hospital as a surgeon, quite necessary occupation for the seaweed farmers I’m informed.

Taffy says that Hawkeye is much kinder than he appears, and will let us stay with him for a good three months- at which time, with luck, we both will have had a chance to make some good money, and will be able to continue into Equestria.

-I’ll continue my musings later, Journal, I’ve got to help the porters load my cart onto the train-

It’s Still March; Ugh

Journal, Railcars do not agree with me. Taffy is very concerned- she says that she can find a remedy for me in the Crystal Empire, but if it doesn’t work, we’ll be walking to Vanhoover. Apparently, being absolutely sick to one’s stomach is no fair exchange for convenience- and I seem to have made a fast friend in Taffy, as she absolutely stomped my queasy objections flat. I at least managed to talk her into going as far as Cloudsdale- walking from the Empire to Vanhoover would surely be a deadly enterprise.

I’ve been resting in the nice sunlight, on the blessedly firm and unmoving ground; Taffy saw to my cart’s resettling on a different freight car, and scolded the porters into helping me off the train car and into this park where I’m resting now. She’s gone to get me something to settle my stomach, and has decided to spend our layover making a remedy for my motion sickness- and here she is now.

Goodness, but what a difference a hot infusion of herbs and spices can make in one’s lookout! I’ve left my saddlebags with Taffy; she was quite insistent that I do my best to stick to my original itinerary, and that she did not need my presence to make a proper cure. Fair enough- on to the wonders of the Crystal Capital!

Hearthstone City is a wondrous place, a shining beacon of warmth and light for all. The Crystal Ponies are glimmering and wonderful- even my duller colors seem mysterious and grand in the gleam of the crystal wash. I have seen innumerable wonderments, and am filled with delight- aha!

My first stop on this layover, a dye and knitting shop- I walk away, saddlebags heavy with dry dyes of fantastic color and vibrancy, new skeins of wool, and a fine selection of buttons. Some are simple colors; others, magical in nature, adding a touch of crystalline sheen to this or that. Some are additives; beads, notions, clasps, books and instructional scrolls… and now, for the souvenirs.

I have had it as a habit since my very smallest youth, that any place I go- excepting, of course, the great outdoors- I will take some small things as souvenirs. A number of things catch my eye, the first being a delightful garden of crystal succulents- and, after some inquiry, I walk away with a small
portable garden that will keep its beautiful crystalline shape and coloration well outside the Empire, provided I feed it the appropriate mixture of gem shards (a small pouch of which I bought, and the ratio of mixture and feeding schedule is included as well).

I have already begun collecting jewelry for my child- my clan, the Surprise clan, has a bit of a habit of collecting rocks, but my particular branch collects adornments. I, personally, have a collection of over a thousand unique hair pins- and for my child, I have decided to collect combs, as I want the pins too much to share- and so, I will get my child something of their own, and for myself, pins!

I bought a hair pick, and I’m not sure why- it’s a lovely piece, made of wood and soft on my lips, but... Well, perhaps Taffy will like it? Her mane is long, and I’ve noticed her irritation when it gets in her eyes… And if I buy a small grab bag of blank crystal shards, and I use my graver’s tools, I can put a small spell into the pick- nothing fancy, mind, just a simple set of nested spells to clean, style, and bind her hair up into… well, considering the pick itself, I can get away with four styles total. I’ll have to discuss which styles with Taffy, but that shouldn’t be too bothersome, and I see no reason why it shouldn’t work… so that’s sorted, then.

I bought a mane comb, but… I’ve no idea who for. Perhaps a friend I haven’t met, yet- it is a fierce looking thing, yet stark and plain. I understand why no one bought it before me; there’s a certain harsh quality to it that some ponies would find off putting. I, personally, found it rather refreshing- like the first bath of spring in the stream after a long, mucky winter… Ah, I’ve made myself sad.

For my foal, a silver and crystal mane comb with pink and white daisies adorning it. Cute; unisex; and sturdy enough to be a foal’s mane comb for generations.

For myself, a set of twenty crystal and pearl mane pins, obviously meant for someone’s wedding- but at that price, the wedding must not have come to be. A shame for them that ordered them; a bargain for me that bought them! The salesmare was so pleased to move the stock, she threw in a pair of shawl pins for good fortune.

And finally, for us both- a crystal suncatcher with a series of nested spells meant to create a formless sort of music. I think we both(?) could benefit from such a thing; and the spells make slightly different music each time, so it shouldn’t ever get boring… and in the sun, it scatters a multitude of rainbows and glimmers, so even if the music doesn’t help, it will be nice to look at.

I must say, a walk through the capital of the Crystal Kingdom did me a wondrous good. Taffy’s remedy served to settle my stomach further- and, after a fine repast, we boarded the train for Cloudsdale in high spirits.

I shall inform you of the efficacy of the remedy soon enough, Journal.

Best Love; MS

I hated her, you know? I hated Missus Mab for a good long while- not for any real reason, more’s the shame of it, but because I wanted her to be Uná, and she was not.
Una was outgoing, talkative, and energetic- but Mab is reserved, stoic, and fairly phlegmatic. I suppose Una and I got on so well because we were the same kind of person- we fed off of each other’s enthusiasm, we could talk together for hours without ever becoming bored, we’d bicker and fight but all in good fun, and we always made friends in whichever camp we were assigned. I never have more fun than at a good party, or with a group of friends… and for a long time, my very worst fear was being alone.

I think I knew the first day that Mab wasn’t Una- for one thing, her face hardly ever moves. I have to remind myself continually that she’s not Una in a temper- she’s Mab, and that’s just her face. She spends a lot of each day alone, does our Mab; she doesn’t like being the center of attention, she doesn’t like putting on a show. Her regard is shown through her actions- making tea for me that night I couldn’t sleep, even though I’d been treating her so dismissively…

And then, of course, she gave me a proper thrashing when I was out and out disrespectful- and Una never took me to task that way, probably because I never gave her reason to. I think the seed of my kinder regard towards Missus Mab was planted the night she made tea for me; and it began to grow when she gave me a proper and rightful thrashing.

There are five things I look for in a teacher- and, so that I don’t make any mistakes later, I’ll say so now. Mab is a good teacher- not the best, not perfect, but good.

She likes her students, for one thing; she likes to teach Beatrix, and she likes teaching me. She’s filled with enthusiasm and infectious joy for what she does, what she has to share; and that passion, that unrelenting wonder, the… she’s never so happy, that I’ve seen, than when she’s been teaching me or Beatrix something and we get it right.

Mab has been teaching me how to fly with my wings; and she’s been taking Beatrix through the basics of martial arts and magic. For both of us, that means how to fall, muscle conditioning, how to eat, how to breathe, how to care for our equipment (wings, in my case, and a more embarrassing moment I’ve yet to live through), things to watch out for, anecdotes…

Mab knows exactly what she’s talking about- she knows magic in ways I didn’t know it could be known. I didn’t know that each of the Haki powers was outright magic- and that each Haki power corresponds to some part of the self. Armament is of the body- and while it can be applied to non-physical things, it’s a power of the physical world and will always be strongest there. Observation is of the mind; and the King’s Disposition is of the spirit. Each Haki can be applied in each realm of being, but they are strongest in their original area. Totally new information for me- and makes several things that made no sense to me before make total sense now.

Mab also knows mathematics- or mathemagic, as it’s called now. She’s a master of math, actually- and according to her, the role of a math teacher is to look over a student’s work, find the holes in their logic, and teach them how to not make those same mistakes anymore. I already understand the basics, called arithmagic- one is one, one and one is two, one less one is none, one set of one is one. She said, hah, she said that mathemagic exists at all because once, long ago, some bastard wanted to write down how many of whatever they had- and numbers, thus invented, have been causing nothing but trouble for everyone ever since.

...I like her. I like that she cares- about me, about the quality of my learning, about my work, about me flying… And I especially like that she takes the time to make sure that each of her students- me, and Beatrix- get an equal amount of time with her, even if that means she can’t get to things she wanted to do for herself. She spent four hours with me one day, just helping me understand a complicated sequence of wing-turns- we went well into lunch, and… I just.
Everyone thought I wouldn’t be able to fly, you see. My cousins, my brothers, my mum- all of them thought that, with my anxiety, I’d never get the wing strength or the **knowing** of the wind in my wings to fly at all.

Mab said “Bullshit. Solitaire- do you *want* to fly?”

And I said “W-well-”

“I’m not asking if you think you can; I’m asking if you want to fly. The answer is yes, or no,”

“...Yes. Yes, I want to fly,”

“Then I will teach you; and if it takes a day or a lifetime, I will make sure you learn how to fly, Little Brother,”

...I never had a sister- a big sister, who has absolute faith in me… It’s funny. I never expected to get a teacher for flying at all, much less one who trains me honestly, and truly, and will not stop- not until I do it right, but until I cannot do it wrong, which is an entirely different beast.

The worst sorts of teachers are the ones who don’t do these things. They don’t like their students; they’re bored by their subjects; they don’t know what they’re talking about; they only teach some students and not all of them; and they give up.

Mab’s not like that.

And by her example, neither am I.

Mab doesn’t know enough about broadswords to teach anyone more than the very basics of using them. She’s been teaching Beatrix the anatomy of her swords; how to properly care for them, how to hear their voices- but me?

I’m teaching her more practical things.

“Again. You’re so fucking slow it’s actually painful for me to watch,”

I scowled as Beatrix pushed hard for me again, eyes narrowed in focused concentration and **hair tied back** in a bun and sweat being caught by a scrunched headband of indigo. She’d been trying to get past my defence for a good hour by then- and at least her base of strength was nothing to sneeze at. She’s only getting stronger and more steady, with longer strikes and more graceful movements- yet, even now in the second week of our training, she still has too much hesitation in each of her movements.

I block each blow of her two broadswords with my one, easily and without strain. No, this won’t do at all.

I can’t help wincing as Beatrix trips over a knot in the grass, for the third time this session, resulting in an ass-over-head roll in the muddy earth and a nasty thump against the mainmast.
I sigh and rest my blade against my shoulder as I wait for Beatrix to right herself again. The only real improvements so far have been increases in stamina and refinement of form- Beatrix can last a full forty-five minutes against me going half-speed, which is leaps better than two weeks ago; her reflexes are becoming more naturalized and unthinking, and her general strength is much higher.

I say general because her actual martial strength is not just her physical strength alone- and it’s only occasionally that one of her peace-bound blades lands more than a sting against my skin. It’s not just me, thankfully (and yet, not); if it was me she was having trouble fighting, I’d have to give her a gentle let down and I’m terrible at those- but no. Even against her sisters, or other members of the crew, sparring… I cannot say that I am pleased with the way she’s being overpowered, especially by Aoife and Coco.

It’s not like Beatrix lacks the skill to push those two back- they’re weaker than her- it’s that, well, she always subconsciously holds back in spars. The others, well… Zoro’s a sink or swim teacher, and Taffy doesn’t know enough about teaching to catch Aoife and Coco’s bullying… but it’s not quite bullying either, it’s exclusionary in nature… At best, Taffy catches and corrects Beatrix’ form, but… it’s a very good thing that I’m teaching her.

Normally, I wouldn’t have gotten involved. Arrogance is always present in every population; if I try to stop every case I ever see, I’ll never get anything else done. Aoife and Coco are in for a rude awakening anyway- Zoro might not be a particularly affectionate teacher, but he does not approve of unfounded arrogance. Aoife’s casual and cruel condescension and Coco’s posturing to try and stay in whatever group she perceives as being well regarded… That won’t help them for much longer, I’d say.

This time is different, though- for one, I’m crewmates with Beatrix. For another, she’s my student now, not just Mab’s- and so, any slur against her is an affront against me, especially when she continues to loose so abysmally against people I know for a fact she could defeat.

“Let’s take a break.” I groan into the air before tromping across the grassy main to a long bench by the door.

Beatrix rolls herself to her feet and follows after me, muddy faced and miserable. We sit together on the wooden bench; I put my thoughts in order as Beatrix washes and dries her swords, and then her face- her clothing is so mucky, I can hardly see the pretty flowers on her stockings, or the color of her strange tunic-pants combination… Her indigo headband is alright, as is her cowl, but her arm warmers are soaked through with mud, as is her tunic-thing, and her pretty black socks with the yellow chamomile flowers on; even her shoes, waxy and water-proof as they are, haven’t managed to escape the mud.

“What do you think the problem is, Beatrix?” I enquire once we’re both settled, clean enough, cool in the shade and sipping from mugs of cool switchel.

Beatrix fidgeted in place, fingers tight around the mug in her hands. She’d firmed up a little over the past two weeks, but she still finds it difficult to meet anyone’s gaze straight on- especially mine.
“...problem?” She mumbled, sounding uncertain yet resigned- and more than a little surprised to be spoken to at all. I couldn’t blame her; this was the first time I’d actively sat her down during one of our daily training sessions and talked to her.

“With you,” I clarified bluntly. One thing Mab and I share- we say what we really mean, what we really think, and to hell with the consequences. “You’re improving; everyone’s noticed, especially with how fast it’s been. But you’re still getting your ass kicked in group spar, and I know you can at least thrash Aoife an’ Coco as you are right now- so. What’s the problem?”

Beatrix didn’t exactly flinch, but she did crumple, folding in on herself at my frank assessment and hunching low and small, shoulders tight to her ears and arm over her stomach. That’s quite enough of that- I reach out and whack her upside her pretty head, only just hard enough to startle the gloom out of her.

“None of that-” I snapped. “I agreed to teach you, which means I won’t be quitting you until you’re at least at my level, maybe more- and I’m equal to Taffy. Anything less than that is an embarrassment to both of us. So, thrice I ask- why can’t you do the same things you’re doing here with those two kicking you about in group spar?”

Beatrix grumbled a little, shifting nervously before finally looking nearer to my face and blurting out- well- “I get angry, okay!? I spent most of my life up ‘till now fighting with everything I had, and… and they call me- they say things to me and I just- I get so angry- I don’t want to kill them, not really, and people die real easily, and… they make me so mad, I just- I forget the things I’ve been learning with you,” she stuttered out, ending with her eyes locked on mine.

I stared her down, and then narrowed my eyes- curled my hand into a fist and swung for her. I moved slow enough for her to see but fast enough she wouldn’t be able to do anything but use the reflexes I’d been beating into her bones- and low and behold, react she did. The smack that rang out as Beatrix blocked my fist was even more satisfying than I thought it would be.

The wide-eyed look of astonishment on her face as she realized what she’d done? That’s gravy on the steak.

“Forget my perky ass,” I snorted derisively as I lowered my hand and uncurled my fist. “You didn’t use those instincts of your’n for a good month and a half, so they got rusty and flabby. Now you’re trimming up again, learning new reflexes, and you won’t forget those, not the way Mab an’ me teach ‘em; they stay with you for the rest of your life once you’ve learned ‘em. You best come up with a better excuse than that, Beatrix.”
Beatrix stared at me for a second longer before her gaze shifted to her own hand as if she couldn’t believe what it had done.

“I guess… I guess I just… can’t…” Beatrix mumbled at last, brow quirked in what I knew to be self-directed frustration.

I waited a moment.

“Why not?” I prompted, when she made no move to speak further.

Beatrix tugged and itched at the dirt dried onto one wet arm warmer, looking so deeply conflicted and miserable- like a soggy turnip, honestly… well, even I felt a bit guilty for a moment, for tripping her into the mud so many times these past two weeks. Then I shook the guilt off; if anything, I was going easy on her. The bath rooms have very hot water, and Mab makes good soap- so it’s not like she stays filthy for all that long after training; and, of course, I always call a stop to our training sessions when it looks like she’s hit her limit.

My teachers had done no such thing for me; they pushed me above and beyond, with deceptively mild insistence. Wartime was a perpetual winter, all year round thanks to enemy weathermages; we’d all considered ourselves lucky if it hadn’t rained or snowed. The soap was either a handful of grit or some lye-water to get rid of a persistent stench, and the water ran from slightly warmer than tepid to breaking up the floating chunks of ice- if we got a chance to bathe at all, that is.

“They always say things,” Beatrix confessed at last, voice ragged with exhaustion. “Not just about me, and my skills, or even my studies; they say things about Missus Mab, too, how she’d be… she’d be better off without- without some whore’s brat tainting her reputation…”

Beatrix looked utterly miserable by the time she finished. I studied her for a long, quiet moment-listening to doves coo, and to the rustle of grass in the cross-deck breeze- before asking offhand, “Do you agree with them, then?”

Beatrix’s head jerked like I’d struck her- her eyes blazed vermillion then a sort of unbelievable red I’ve only seen oozing out of a man’s slit throat before. “They- They said-”

“Beatrix,” I snapped, “I’m not asking what they think; I don’t give a good gods-be-damned about what they think. I asked what you think. Do you agree with them or not?”

Her hands clenched, tight enough that her knuckles turned white; her shoulders shook with tiny tremors, the kind you get when you’re only just holding yourself back from movement. Her eyes blazed like coals in a fire- and still, she could seem to find any words.
Holding back won’t help her now; press, and see what comes out. “Because, see, if you do, then I gotta say, there’s no point in me teaching you at all, and there’s no point in you being Mab’s apprentice. You’re more ignorant than your average person, and the daughter of a whore to boot-right? Right,”

I ignored the hurt and the distress that surfaced on Beatrix’s face, focusing instead on the undercurrent of deep, unrelenting fury that I could scarcely sense behind all the uncertainty and fear.

“People will always look down on you for something you can’t change,” I mocked viciously, “And since you agree with them, you’re fate’s practically set in stone. Either you’ll get a one way ticket back to whatever whorehouse your mother died in, or you’ll die of something everyone knew was a danger, ignorant and unwanted, just like they said you are. Self-deficient, basically; only good for other people’s use. Isn’t that what you are? Scrawny, weak, nervous to the point where you can’t even look anyone in the eye for more than a few seconds- how in hell do you expect to be respected when you act like a fucking mouse all the time? You’re scared of your own shadow, aren’t you? No good for anything but errands and making money in your sleep; useless for anything else, isn’t that right? I mean, I guess Coco and Aoife are right- you should just go back to you’re ma’s whorehouse, maybe the madam will take pity and-”

I very nearly smiled when Beatrix’s tolerance audibly snapped; her whole body caught aflame, and she literally launched herself at me, open handed and full of bile as tears of rage flooded her eyes and a snarl turned her fearsome.

“THAT’S A DAMN LIE-” she roared, not seeming to care that her blows were glancing at best- and then, the true nature of her power made itself known. The reason I have to teach Beatrix- the real one, beyond our shared weapon choice- is this: if Beatrix went for Mab like she’s going for me, Mab would crush her instantly. But she wouldn’t be able to do it cleanly- Beatrix would take one of Mab’s eyes, at least. Neither of them want that- but I was training with Una when she was Mab’s age; I’ve forgotten more about dodging wild claws than the both of them have learned about making them.

“THAT’S A LIE! I CHOSE TO BECOME A THAUMATURGIST, AND MAB CHOSE ME TO BE HER APPRENTICE! I STAYED BECAUSE I WANTED TO! I’M GOING TO LEARN WHAT SHE HAS TO TEACH ME, AND I’M GOING TO BE THE BEST, AND ANYONE WHO SAYS OTHERWISE CAN DIE MAD ABOUT IT!”

I bat aside her flailing claws, taking care to not let her cut me too deep; I stare her right in her blazing red eyes as I challenge her again; “Your words don’t match your actions, Beatrix, so who are you trying to convince? Me? If I didn’t already see the potential in you, I wouldn’t have agreed to train you no matter what Mab said or did to me. You tryin’ to prove your tormentors wrong? Why would they care? And why should you waste your valuable time right now caring about what they think?”
I lean back, shift my weight forwards, snag one of her delicate wrists and turn-lock-lift-pull-release her into a very soppy puddle of mud. She lands with a very wet sort of *whumpf* feeling, flat on her back and breathless. Mud splatters everywhere, landing in little droplets on her tearstained, rage-reddened and frustrated face.

“The only one you have to convince, Beatrix- the *only* one you have to convince, is yourself. The only thing holding you back from doing that is your own fear. Fear of failure- fear of letting your family down, fear of disappointing your teacher, fear of realizing that you really *are* as worthless and weak as they say you are.”

Beatrix had managed to sit up, but was taking a moment to catch her breath- good, the lesson on choosing your moment finally sunk in past the layer of mud and self-sabotage. I roll my throwin’ shoulder, stalk over to her sitting in the mud, and flick her in the forehead; I glare fiercely at her tearstained face.

“Get rid of that fear. It won’t help you get strong like you want. Right now, whether you’re on offense or defense, I can still sense the hesitation in your blade, your feet, your stance. You don’t have any real desire to actually hit what you’re aiming at when you attack; you second guess whether or not you should move your fucking feet; and when you defend yourself, you’re so afraid of getting cut that you trip yourself on knots in the grass that don’t actually exist. How is any of that going to help you?”

I pause, watching my student digest my harsh lesson with a strange expression on her face; part confusion, part ebbing rage, part curiosity.

“You lack conviction,” I said at last, and for a moment, I heard the echo of Una and my own swordmaster, thrashing us to the very edge of death to help us find our own strengths. “You lack resolve, and maybe that’s just you, or maybe it’s years of letting the petty cruelties of life grind you down. Either way, I don’t care. If you want to get strong- really, truly, limitlessly strong- you need another mindset. Get rid of the one you have now; it’s full of too much fear and not enough reality. When you attack, you should think ‘I’ll cut them’; when you move your foot, you should *move your foot*; and when you defend, you should think ‘I won’t let them hit me.’ No in-betweens, no take-backs, no thinking ‘my sword won’t be able to cut them’ or ‘I’m scared of getting hit’, no wishy-washy moves. That shit just holds you back.”

I scowl down at her as I lean over her, and she stares up at me, wide eyed.

“I can help you with your reflexes and your speed, improve your stamina and your accuracy, help you refine your sword style and practice special techniques- I can even teach you the true meaning of strength,” I said, straightening my back and softening my face and voice into something slightly less… abrasive. “Everything else? Your determination, your *Will to Overcome*, your strength- to
find your own strength as a swordswoman, all the truly important things that make or break the kind of person you’ll become… those are things only you can decide, only you can teach yourself. No one else,"

The only sounds are the continued cooing of the doves, some soft goaty bleatings- no, wait, that’s Franky sobbing about something being, and I quote, suuuuuuuuuupaaaaaaaaah-!; the crossbreeze is a little warmer than it was before.

I am silent; so is Beatrix.

I don’t mind silence, is the weirdest difference between me and Mab; if I’m in a room with a group of people, I’ve no problem with keeping my mouth shut. Mab, on the other wing, seems entirely incapable of being silent for longer than ten minutes- unless she’s working, of course.

I work my jaw for a moment- it’s a little sore, actually. I’d just said more in the past two, maybe three minutes than I had since I was about ten years old, especially all in one go. The only people I really talk to nowadays are Havij and Mab- Havij is content with grunts and questioning glances, and Mab accepts one word replies and carries the entire conversation on herself. (This holds even while she’s teaching, because she finds six or seven examples of the same concept and just keeps giving me new ones, or new twists on them, until I start implementing them myself. Really, just- astonishingly good at teaching.) Usually, it’s not talking I’m doing with Havij; Mab talks enough for five whole people; and I’m usually barking orders at Beatrix… as for the rest of the crew- Hell’s belles!

Those fucking meddlers! They’re all hiding around, watching us train even though they know Beatrix hates being watched like a show- goddammit! I can’t even be sure of how long those assholes have been eavesdropping on me and my student, either- could have been the whole session, could have been just seconds- Gah!

I make a sound a bit like when Udoroth steps on one of the dog’s squeaky toys at three hours after midnight because he needs to piss; a squeak, and a muffled curse. Why do I make that noise? Well, a pair of cold, muddy arms are wrapped around my waist and a hot little face is pressed hard to my chest- aaagh, water’s soaking through my vest…

Wait, this is- Beatrix, she’s… hugging me?

I freeze, still shuddering because I fuckin’ hate dirt- but- what the actual flying fucklet?

“Hooooi!” I yelp, alarmed, trying to get her to let go of me without actually touching her. Where’d the shy girl who couldn’t even look at me go? “Gerroff! What am I, a cuddle buddy?”

“The cuddliest buddy to ever bud,“

“Uuuugh,”

“You walked right into that one, my man.”

She’s not going to let go anytime soon- aw, hell, she’s crying. She’s not letting go any time soon.

I pat her back gently, panicking because- uuuugh, snot, snot on my chest, ew ew ew-
“Beatrix, either let go or tell me why in hell you’re getting sNOT on my chest—” ew ew ew ew fucking Gods make it quick- oh thank the Gods. Beatrix let go of me, praise be to all that is good, but while she seemed embarrassed as she argh argh argh blew snot and blood out of her nose directly onto the ground with just her fingers, she stayed huddled by my side. She looks so much more relaxed now- more relaxed in my presence than she has been at any other time over the past two weeks.

“...Do you think I can?” Beatrix finally said, staring directly at me, blood dripping down over her lips and her bright red Mark like Udoroth’s somehow still visible under a liberal coating of drying dirt and muddy chunks. Her red eyes weren’t frustrated or coal-like intense, they were hopeful; her messy muddy hair flopped pathetically over her indigo headband, and I only know it’s indigo because the mud didn’t get into the folds.

Look at Beatrix’s eyes- so hopeful.

I roll my eyes and glare at her. “Did my words go straight through the empty space where your mind should be, just- in one ear and out the other? Does it really fuckin’ matter what I think?”

“Yes. It does,” said Beatrix, point blank and so honest it made my teeth sting. For this one moment, I could see the potential Mab must have seen; for just a split second, I can see Udoroth, standing where Beatrix is. The resemblance is gone as quick as it came; Beatrix blinks and averts her eyes from mine- then her eyes come right back to me, and her nervous expression firms. “Your opinion is important to me. Do you think I can? If I find my resolve- do you think I can be… something?”

I snort. “Like I fuckin’ said already, I can see your potential. If I thought you weren’t worth training, I wouldn’t waste three hours a day training you. Since that’s exactly what I’m fuckin’ doing, you’re not going to - you will. Got it?”

For the first time since I met her, Beatrix smiled. It’s small, and more crooked than I would expect from someone her height and age. It lights up her face and makes her fierce muddy self suddenly, inexplicably beautiful; and it’s obvious from how open and genuine it is, well, Beatrix doesn’t smile unless she means it.

I snort again, and shove her shoulder gently- back towards the bench, where she left her swords.

“If we’re quite finished with this feelings jamboree, get back to work. I expect you to kick some ass in the next group spar, so you’d best start telling your anger and self-doubt to fuck off. You’re getting better every day; there’s no reason to hold yourself back, understand?”

Beatrix scratched a chunk of dirt off her neck, then nodded vigorously; she picked up her swords, and then yelped and got into a proper stance, fucking finally- I’ll keep frighting her until she can’t do anything else when faced with an enemy, that’s the whole point of learning to do it right until you can’t do it wrong-
“Start your fucking running kata drills!” I growl at her. “Your stamina is so fuckin’ weak it makes me wanna pitch myself into the open jaws of a damn Sea King. If you don’t finish all thirty in the next ten minutes, I’m making you do wind sprints.”

I wait for her horrified yelp to turn into sweat effort; and then, I turned my gaze.

“Keep going,” I barked when Beatrix glanced over. As she continued her work, I casually mosey over to the mainmast. I halt about a half step away, consider my next move, and then my more impulsive side wins.

Dracule Taffeta is getting a piece of my damn mind.

In one aggressive burst, I leap and crack my wings down in a rush of air, coming level with Taffy where she’s lurking, wide eyed, on a nook of the mast, and bring my foot directly into the soft meat of her gut.

She pitches over, and crashes onto the deck. Beatrix yelps.

I roll over, and land light as a feather on the ground. Taffy shoves herself up and pukes everything out of her stomach.

I crack my neck.

“There are a few things I just can’t stand,” I said with deceptive mildness. “Liars, thieves, murderers—often, a reasonable justification can be found for those things. Spies and peepers, on the other hand...”

Taffy locks wide yellow eyes with me, little dribbles of saliva and puke still running down her chin. I look her dead in the eye and smirk viciously. “I can’t stand them most of all.”

On the Train to Cloudsdale Station, Five Days in One Entry

Dearest Journal,

Taffy’s remedy worked a treat, and we’ve been on the train to Cloudsdale for a good twelve hours or so— the whole night, praise Luna, though I will say that the bed was both lumpy and small.

It will be quite a while until our first stop, in the Unicorn Mountains— it gives everyone a chance to stretch their legs, as well as repair anything needful of repairing. I, myself, am repairing something-
really, considering it’s state, I’m actually making an entirely new one.

My Aunt Ravel and her special marefriend, Zipper, are the ones who helped me leave Trottingham after the- This pattern is my Aunt Ravel’s, and I’m making a new one as a comfort for myself. Aunt Ravel and Auntie Zipper gave me a plaque for my studio, wherever I end up settling down- it’s a simple bit of cross-stitching on a wooden frame, meant for hanging on the wall.

It says:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain.

If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,

Or help one fainting robin,

Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

My Aunts wish me, and my foal-to-come, a better life than could be found for us in Trottingham. My Aunts have not lived their lives in vain- and so, I can only hope that I won’t either.

The original shawl was pony sized, at seven hooves long by sixteen and a half wide; that is, pony hooves. My hooves are several times bigger than that- but the proportions of the shawl will be correct if I use the same numbers.

The exact gauge of the yarn used is not critical, but it works best with a one-hoof, or ten centimeter, gauge. The finished fabric ought to be light and airy; use a mohair yarn, or any of the pegasus yarns, to give it a cloudy, light, and fluttery frog. This is a fairly easy pattern, requiring one skein of appropriate yarn, measuring to a length of (three hoofs a leg; three legs a yard) two hundred eighteen yards at one hundred grams per skein- or, in my case, as my hooves are three times the size of an average pony, you must triple the amount of yarn, and expand the pattern.

I will be using three skeins of self ombreing seventy percent mohair, twenty six percent wool, and four percent silk, or six hundred fifty four yards of one color yarn in that distribution of fibers, at one hundred grams per skein.

I am using size fifteen circular needles, at least two hooves long- and yes, they are sized lengthwise to my hooves, the size chart of needles refers to it’s gauge, or width around.

I will write out the instructions as I have them written, and then elaborate on their meaning.
CO 7 sts.

Garter:

Row 1: K2, yo, ktend (8sts)

Mark RS with pin.

Repeat until half yarn used; end after working a WS row.

Eyelets:

Row 1(RS): K2, yo, k1, (yo, k2tog) to last 3 sts, k3.

Do not worry about extra plain stitches at end of row before last 3sts; just knit.

Rows 2, 3, and 4 : K2, yo, knit to end of row.

Repeat 1 - 4 until twelve yards of yarn remain. End after plain row.

(If preferred, switch to plain garter stitch in center after working five or six eyelet rows for solid border at top edge of shawl.)

BO loosely; weave in ends.

Shawl does not need to be blocked; wash and lay flat to dry if needful.

In elaboration:

Cast on seven stitches.

For the garter portion of the piece:

Knit two, yarn over, knit to end (it should be eight stitches).

Mark the right side with a pin.

Repeat the first two steps until half your yarn is used; end after working a wrong side row.

For the eyelet portion of the piece:

For the first row, knit two, yarn over, knit one, yarn over, knit two together to last three stitches, knit three. This pattern is fairly forgiving; extra stitches at this point will not matter in the completed piece. Simply knit two together, or knit until you come to the last three stitches, and follow instructions...
from there

For rows two, three, and four, knit two, yarn over, knit to end of row.

Repeat the four rows in order until about twelve yards of yarn remain. End this section on a plain row of stitching.

Bind off loosely; weave in ends with appropriate crochet hook or needle.

Blocking not necessary for this piece; wash and lay flat to dry if needful.

Blocking is the process of stretching a knitted or crochet piece, allowing it to take its actual shape and revealing the stitch pattern. I chose to make this piece on the train because it doesn’t require blocking; there’s no room for it on the train anyway.

As for the fact that the above pattern is sized for a pony, not a horse, that’s where resizing comes in.

Firstly, one must swatch the pattern with their yarn of choice to see how the fabric will behave once made. It’s a very important step in any knitting project; any time you start a new pattern, use a new yarn, or break in new equipment, it’s always best to do a swatch. Arithmetic can only take you so far; actually having something knitted in your hooves will tell you more about what can and can’t be done with your knitting or crochet pattern than anything else. It will tell you if you need to wash and block; it will tell you if you need to adjust your gauge, or even if your skills aren’t there yet.

I recommend swatching at least a hoof’s worth of fabric for an accurate measurement. Once you are satisfied with your swatch’s feel on your frog, you need to figure the number of stitches per row you will need. You do this by counting how many stitches per row you have in your one hoof swatch.

I cannot, for the life of me, write this out- I’ve never been able to. I can explain it in pony; I can demonstrate it. I can even walk somepony else through it, if need be- but I cannot, for the life of me, write it in words.

Frankly speaking, knitting and crochet aren’t things to learn from books- you have to do them to understand what’s happening.

However, I have managed to finish my new shawl, and just in time- we’ve stopped in the Unicorn Mountains for an engine switch, and the weather without is brisk! My new shawl pins and shawl prove their muster immediately, in the sharp gusts of wind. Taffy, poor mare, shudders with every gust, until I placed my hefty self between her and the prevailing- this seemed to work quite well. A purchase of hot apple cider for both of us kept us in high spirits while the engines were switched; and I was able to purchase a new almanac for the year, with broad weather forecasts for the wide country of Equestria, and the climate notes for each major city- oof!

If I’m reading the almanac correctly, the weather is going to be worse in Cloudsdale Station- I’ve been before, and it’s always foggy and cold there, excepting around the Summer Sun. Hm. And it’s going to be worse still in Vanhoover- it sleet’s there nearly every day, when it’s not foggy or windy. Oh, yes, I bought a tourist guide for Vanhoover for Taffy- she seemed curious, and then very apprehensive as she read more of it on our next few days of travel. I, myself, purchased a Cloudsdale Station guide for myself- we traded them after reading, thus avoiding buying two of the same book.

One of the many perks of having friends.
I busied myself thusly, during our ride south: I took measurements of her legs, from knee to pastern, measured her barrel and chest… I even got Taffy to pick out a manestyle she likes from my stylebook, so I could start on her manepick.

As for her other measurements, after deciding on a pale undyed wool, I began work on a set of warming garments for her- an infinity cowl, a shawl much like mine, and a set of four leg warmers that button up the side to obviously separate them from the lingerie styles of socks, which cover the hoof and go up to the elbow and stifle, front and back… Perhaps she’d like a hat as well? A chullo, I think; and I’ll make another cowl for her brother, and a hat as well.

According to Taffy, her brother Hawkeye is a good two hooves taller than her; that’s enough for me to make a judgement about how to resize the pattern. Taffy actually has a set of pins for a shawl and scarf or collar- a gift from her brother last Hearthwarming; she’s just been putting off getting things to actually put those pins on, as she didn’t need them.

Silly mare; still, it’s always nice to have another project to work on while I’m waiting.

I don’t mind setting certain things to stitch with a spell; cowls and leg warmers are basically rectangles, and those can be woven by spell just fine. It’s just telling a mage hoof to repeat a certain series of actions a set number of times- nothing I can’t do by hoof, but I need to begin working on the manepick.

Nested spell manepicks used to be commonplace during the Three Tribes era, but after the Unification, they fell out of favor as Unicorns began adopting Earth Pony and Pegasi methods of mane care.

There are three basic spells that go into a mane pick; a spell to clean and condition the mane, a spell to detangle and section the mane, and a spell to style it. I’m etching the spell matrix for each spell into a discrete set of gem shards, and carefully inlaying them in the smooth wood of the manepick.

First, the cleaning and conditioning spell in shards of turquoise, as both stone and spell fall under the school of health; second, the detangling and sectioning spell in shards of carnelian which isn’t as good as amethyst but the look of the manepick has just as much importance as it’s effectiveness- and further, zebra manes tend to self section along the stripes. Both stone and spell fall under the school of peace, by the by…

As for the third, the styling spell itself in a combination of citrine, aventurine, and moonstone- the first two for just her mane, the last for the mind underneath it. Combined, stone and spell fall under the school of wonder.

Tie off the loose ends of every spell you cast; never, ever, leave them open.

I presented Taffy her new set of garments, as well as her mane pick, at breakfast today. She was overjoyed to receive them; apparently, she budgeted for traveling, food, accommodations, and medical supplies- all of which are totally necessary for a mare traveling alone. Me giving her warmer garments was a huge relief to her- she hadn’t been able to save enough money to commission or purchase a set and keep up with her itinerary.
I do enjoy doing things for others, especially when it’s needful; ah, Journal, we’re pulling in to Cloudsdale station for a two-day layover.

Best Love; Meadow Surprise

Cloudsdale Station, Early Spring; Day Trip to the Ruins of Delphi

Dearest Journal,

Taffy and I took accommodations in Cloudsdale Station when our train from the Crystal Empire finally arrived, well after sunset. We had agreed during the ride down that we would take the opportunity to go on a day trip to the famous Ruins of Delphi, where the pegasus poet Delphinus Wake used to perform plays and poems that are still performed today.

Cloudsdale is often considered to be the oldest of all pegasus cities, chiefly because while it’s skybound portion is still in full use, it’s land based districts are all given over to farmland, woods, and ruins. It’s mostly tourists like myself and Taffy who go and explore them- as most pegasi, sorry to repeat a stereotype- but most pegasi have little lasting interest in affairs on the ground. Why should they? They’ve wings, and all pegasi can manipulate the weather… saa, I’ve gotten off track.

Day tours through the Ruins of Delphi cost about eighty bits a pony; the high price is due to two things. Firstly, the tour provides trail shoes, which are not cheap to replace and someone will always either lose or ruin one, even if they’re my size; and secondly, they provide a full meal for something like thirty ponies, which doesn’t include the tour guides. I’m not so far along that I can’t go on the walking trail, and Taffy is very excited to see a Tourist Attraction.

However, before we went on the Ruin trail-tour, we went to the museum.

The Archaeological Museum and Library of Delphi shelters an extensive collection of artifacts- scrolls under careful preservation spells, ancient pegasus weapons, and astonishing objects, from urns to votives. All the items in the museum and library were unearthed during excavations at the Delphi Ruins, it’s vicinity, or were donated by local families seeking to preserve and share their legacy with others. It’s located on the Station side of Cloud’s Hillock, adjacent to the archaeological site, on the modern side of the little train-stop town.

The ‘Equestria Must See’ guidebook my Aunt Zipper gave me lists it as one of the top must-see museums in Equestria, mainly because of the breadth and quality of artifacts it includes. The permanent exhibition alone covers over a thousand years of art and upheaval, from the ancient Musteri Era to the Hurricane Renaissance.

Taffy and I spent a good three hours on our feet, wandering through the museum while it was open, admiring the ancient artwork of the pegasus tribe. Then, we went to the gift shop, for souvenirs! Well, the shop had the usual items- totes, quills, ink pots, posters; but, having read Aunt Zipper’s margin notes on the Ruins of Delphi, I plumped for a pair of mare’s sun hats- a cute one for Taffy, and a very broad one for myself; the touristic part about them was, of course, the styling, which was in ancient pegasus tribe fashion… or sweetgrass country fashion, as there are only so many shapes that fit well on a pony’s head and shade their face from Celestia’s sun. I also bought us both over the
neck water bottle holders, and the medium size bottle of water which are, according to Aunt Zipper, large enough to be worth carrying but not so large as to make carrying them a nuisance.

Aunt Ravel’s margin notes were about the most iconic Delphi souvenirs—our sun hats, for one; blue eye protective jewelry, believed by pegasi since ancient times to ward off windigos; a string of komboloi, more commonly known as worry-beads—Aunt Ravel wrote that nothing else held a chill-spell better for a teething foal, and that the strings only break when the one who wears them daily dies. Grim, but good to know; the last two items are actually three items— a Build Your Own Weather kit, and there’s a child’s version and an adult’s version; and a free catalogue for getting refills and other Weather Factory products, and I bought an adult’s version and the catalogue because it’s free—and finally, Pegasi folk art reproductions, and reproductions of famous objects d’art.

I bought, in order, our sun hats; a blue eye suncatcher for myself and a cuff bracelet for Taffy; a set of turquoise worry beads; a Weather Factory approved Build Your Own Weather Kit for adults; and a big yarn bowl with it’s own lid.

After our quick exploration of the Delphi Museum, which keeps the strangest hours I’ve ever had the misfortune of reading, Taffy and I joined our tour group and enjoyed a long, leg-stretching walk through the Ruins of Delphi.

It’s best to pace yourself, visiting a place like Cloudy Hill. It’s the site of an ancient city, ruined, true-but, if you give yourself time to really take in the scale of the ruins, if you let yourself absorb the wonders around you… well, once I got Taffy to slow down and just look, to see, her eyes went wide and her jaw dropped— because she could see it too.

The shadow of the ancient city of Delphi, rising above the quiet hills and valleys in the sunny lee of Cloudsdale; the echo of poetry and plays in an amphitheater, sunk into the good earth and o’ergrown with weeds; the ringing majesty of the winding vistas where wildflowers grew over bloody fields…

As it happens, Taffy has a camera— it’s one of her only just for fun expenses, getting film and having it developed whenever she stays in one place long enough. She and I took a series of beaming photographs of every beautiful site we saw; ruined columns, echoing hills and valleys, glad-hearted forests and winding trails up towering hillsides.

We lunched on alfalfa sprouts, wildflower blossoms, soaked beet pulp, rice bran, and garlic blossoms. Hearty fare, and good for sensitive stomachs; and then we had a long wander back to the station, Taffy and I, enjoying the cool yet bright day.

We slept again at the station, quite well worked from our lovely excursion; and then we boarded the train again for Vanhoover.

Best Love, Meadow Surprise

Vanhoover; Are you sure it’s still spring? It doesn’t feel like spring,

Dearest Journal,
Not much of note happened on the ride to Vanhoover, aside from a steady increase in dreary skies and stoicism in our passengers. Taffy took to wearing her legwarmers as soon as we get back across the Unicorn Mountains, and added her cowl when it began raining; by the time we actually got to Vanhoover, she'd added the shawl, and the hat I'd finished knitting for her.

I myself was well pleased with my shawl and not much else; and, once I retrieved my cart from the porters, I followed Taffy who herself was following a carefully marked map of the city.

Vanhoover sits on the west coast of Equestria. It’s the largest city in the county and, as a result of it’s coastal location, is a very important port. It’s climate is incredibly unpredictable by Equestrian standards; dreary weather is always on the verge of returning, and the wind here likes to play tricks.

It’s a popular city to live in because of it’s very mild winters- something about proximity to the oceans and the Unicorn Mountain Range blocking cold fronts from the city… Snow only falls on average, eleven days in Vanhoover; it rains and fogs much more often, so much so that the Weather Crews here put out percentage warnings rather than hard weather options. They always make an effort to keep the summers dry, sunny, and reasonably warm- especially as the Summer Sun approaches. It’s also usually warm enough for any sort of costume come Nightmare Night.

Historically an Earth Pony city, Vanhoover is still mostly earth ponies- that’s usually what you’ll see on the street, alongside innumerable immigrants- camels, sphinxes, zebras, cows, sheep, goats, boars, yaks, and so on. There’s always work here for someone of strong disposition; so, this is a popular city for immigrants from Saddle Arabia, Yakistan, and even Minoa- all of which have native populations of equines, alongside their more foreign natives.

I’d happily stay here if it didn’t remind me so strongly of Trottingham.

Ah, Taffy soon took us through a side street into one of the many villages that Vanhoover swallowed as it grew; until, at last, we came to a fine townhouse. Taffy went up and met her brother- and then, the two of them helped me secure my cart in the carriage house built into the side of the townhouse.

Hawkeye Dracule is a zebra of different stripe than his sister, Taffeta- and I do mean that literally, no Zebra has the same stripe pattern as another. I also mean that metaphorically, as it takes a very particular kind of pony to be a surgeon- not a magisurgeon, a surgeon , as many of the unicorn magic based spells work as advertised on ponies but not other equines, even, much less those such as camels, yaks, and so on.

His job is to cut somepony open, fix whatever’s gone wrong, and then close them back up again. His specialty is tummies- he knows more about the digestive system of any creature on four legs (or two) you care to name than he knows about current events.

Point of fact, the only thing he knows anything like his trade is music- apparently, the doctors and nurses and surgeons in the operating room play records while they work.

He liked the cowl and hat I made him; apparently, it’s always in danger of being dreary in Vanhoover, and having a nice warm cowl-and-hat set at the ready is very good. He said he hasn’t had time, what with his working hours, to go get a set for himself- so me giving him a set as a gift…

It’s getting late, Journal; I’ll write more tomorrow.
Vanhoover; Oh, it's actually very nice out right now

Dearest Journal,

Vanhoover is far too expensive for my taste. It’s a large metropolitan city, the most welcoming of all Equestria’s cities- but… the downtown core is large, and offers an affluent arts scene, diverse foods, and innumerable sporting events.

It’s bounded by ocean and mountains that result in a moderate climate, allowing outdoor recreation year round.

The housing market in Vanhoover is the fastest paced in the country, and crime rates are higher than nearly anywhere else.

Hawkeye owns his house outright- and the only reason he can do that, Journal, is he’s a very busy, very good surgeon who works two hundred and sixty five out of three hundred sixty five days in the year. He doesn’t take vacations except the mandatory ones; he doesn’t get sick; and, were it not for his best friend, Longshanks Rojomane, and his marefriend, Heron Vondergeist, he would spend every off hour he has either sleeping or puttering around in his house.

According to him, the city has grown twice, noticeably, since he’s lived in it- and he’s lived here for fifteen years. -Oh, yes, this year he told us that Winter Wrap Up was late, something about a Weather Team strike… and if what we entered the city in under, a wet miserable sky and gloomy light… if that’s every winter…

I can’t stand it.

All the positives you can think of for living somewhere don’t matter if you don’t like it- if the rhythm of the place, it’s mood, do not agree with yours, then nothing- not even the presence of your family or a job or a school or an opportunity, can make you happy if you stay. I’ve spent far too much of my life grey and miserable to live somewhere grey and miserable, not permanently at least.

Enough of that- let’s see, I have not yet written about my cart yet. It isn’t a particularly good one- and it’s one of the things I actually set aside a significant portion of my savings to upgrade. Vanhoover, aside from being a metropolis, is one of the few cities where one can get nearly anything built to spec. I came to Equestria with what is, frankly speaking, a covered wagon- good enough for Trottingham, but as I will be spending a great deal of time on the road soon, I need something better.

I actually really like Hawkeye’s vardo, a stately and well cared for bowtop vanwain with crisp purple and magenta paisley designs painted on its sides, and cheery minty-green flowers around the door. Hawkeye let me borrow one of his books from Zebrica- it’s a book all about Traveler’s vanwains, and I’m truly grateful for his generosity.

The Zebrish vardo has evolved into one of the most advanced forms of travelling wagons; they’re
prized for their practicality as well as their aesthetic design and beauty. There is no more iconic or recognizable Zebrish symbol than a highly decorated vardo- excepting perhaps their masks, or the habit of their shamans to speak in rhyming couplets.

A vardo is typically commissioned by families in lieu of a cutiecinera, by a newly risen master of a craft, or by a newlywed couple, from specialist coach builders. Building a vardo properly takes about three to six months, using a variety of woods- including oak, ash, elm, cedar, and pine. Vardos are prized by all equine travelers for their overall design and beauty, as well as their practicality. The general design of all vardos evolved over time and were named after the home’s owners, for their traditional style (Ledge), for the town of its construction (Reading), or for the name of the builder.

There are six design types. They are known by various names, but are perhaps best called the Reading, the Ledge, the Bowtop, the Brush, the Burton, and the Open-lot.

Bowtop vanwains are typically pulled by Zebrish Travelers, or by anypony lucky enough to be given the van upon the Zebra’s decision to put down roots; they’re the most iconic, and I’m least interested in them. There’s the Brush, which is nearly extinct now- often used by brush, broom, rush, and wickerwork makers; the Burton, which is often seen in circastics or with travelling showponies; and, the most modern of them, the Open-lot.

Being individually built by vanwrights, no matter their origin, no two vans are exactly alike. They vary according to use intended, customer requirements, available funds, materials used, skill and location of builder, and the time period- even the time of year the van is built plays a role. With that said, all vardos have certain exterior features in common, and with few exceptions the interiors conform to a set plan or layout. Thus, though there are many kinds of vans, the Zebrish vardo is always one-roomed on four high wheels, with a doorway (possibly with a door in it) and moveable steps in front (the Brush-style vardo being the only exception), sash windows, a rack called the cratch, and a pan-box at the rear. Only minor variations in design occurred after the Unification, with the exception of the Open-lot which was built in response to a general lessening of pegasi-xenophobia and a rise in inter-tribal marriages. Homemade vanwains, literal ‘peg-knife wagons’ tend to be along the same lines as the professionally built wagons, because the general design of the average vardo is just so perfect for what generally gets asked of it.

It’s also not uncommon for a traveler using the vardo to add or remove features of an old wagon, remount a body on underworks other than its own, or replace unsound wheels by ones that differ in weight, size, or structure from the original, thus altering the proportions.

Hawkeye actually had to go back to work about our second week into staying with him- apparently, he’s a bit of a workaholic. To be fair, most doctors- good ones, I’d say- are. Therefore, Taffy was the one to show me the interior of her brother’s vardo.

It actually belonged to their parents, who were lost at sea; they died right around the big shift in Zebrican culture that allowed orphans the option of keeping some of their parents larger possessions, rather than burning them all up as was custom.

Before I go into specifics, I must mention that neither Taffy nor her brother Hawkeye are particularly special, as zebras go; their parents were humble pots-and-pan sales and repair ponies, and their vardo was a pot-cart before Taffy went off to school. The only repair Hawkeye’s had done on it, according to Taffy, is fixing a few broken pieces of decorative filigree and getting new gargoyles.

The interior of the wagon has an atmosphere of snug homeliness, and the Dracule van is of very fine quality, giving it all a regal splendor. Almost everything a pony would need is to hoof. Even in
winter, Taffy was never cold; the fire in the stove, if built up with the windows closed for half an hour (counted by candle-flame, no less!) will so heat the rails near the roof that they will be too hot to hold. Taffy has fond memories of baking cakes and cookies on the roof-rails in tins, and her brother getting them down for her once they came in from the cold.

Inside the vardo, the cabinet work may be either dark red polished mahogany or stained pine, and the walls are grained or scumbled in light golden brown. The Dracule van has had a long, adventurous life, and so most of the original wood finish has been painted over- but Taffy showed me the patch under the walk rug where the original finish has been protected these many years.

The internal layout, which varies only in the proportions from van to van, has not changed for a thousand years. The basic needs of the resident, after all, are still the same- and in such confined space, there are only so many sensible ways to meet those needs.

The entrance of the Dracule vardo is frontal and half-doored, to allow cool summer air into the van. Through the door on one’s immediate left, you will find a tall, narrow wardrobe and beneath it a small cupboard, generally used for hoof-picks, coat brushes, and wing-combs (along with a variety of hoof oils and conditioners). The stove stands next, and is always on the left as you enter- for on that side the chimney pipe is in less danger from roadside trees.

From a point about six hooves above the top of the stove, the fireplace is boxed in to form an airing and proofing cupboard. On the front of this cupboard and above the fireplace is a brass-railed shelf; and next to the stove is the offside window, beneath which is a locker seat for two. The Dracule vardo’s offside seat is large and plush enough for a guest to sleep on, a useful feature- as I understand it, Longshanks Rojomane went traveling with the two off and on for years before Taffy gained her apprenticeship and Hawkeye went to medical school, at which point the vardo was in ‘Shanks care.

When Taffy looked into the storage beneath the offside seat, she discovered all her family’s photo albums, neatly tucked away- and she sighed. I spent a good half-hour helping her move the small shoebox full of unsorted photographs, as well as the several albums, into the kitchen. I then helped her sort through the photographs, making sure to take notes about the average- and not so average- measurements of them. We made a plan to go get actual albums the next day; and, when Hawkeye didn’t come home that night, well…

Taffy loves her brother, I know she does. Taffy also has no patience for his emotional constipation, and refuses to allow him to forget their shared past. I understand both sides of the argument, and refuse to involve myself beyond helping as a friend would- supporting her in buying new albums for the ones that are falling to pieces, and helping her make sense of the shoebox full of photographs, ranging from her and her brother’s foalhood, to her great-great-great grandparents wedding photographs.

As it turned out, I was able to help put the various photos into order, not by person to person- but by their clothing. I even managed to separate some of them out by year, and labelled them with approximate dates- with Taffy’s permission and some special archival ink from the Crystal Empire.

Even Heron Vondergeist, Hawkeye’s marefriend, helped out- she had been moving in with him when we came to stay for a while, and once she noticed our little project, she immediately started helping. She cleared off a shelf in the living room to put all the finished albums on, bought new albums as more and more pictures were curated and labelled, even helped put each photo into an album… and, of course, when Hawkeye finally came home with his friend, ‘Shanks, she talked him through the meltdown he had at seeing his parents again.

Taffy was barely out of diapers when her parents died; she doesn’t really remember them. Hawkeye, on the other hoof, had just gotten his Cute Stamp, and dearly loved his parents. He’s got a lot of
trauma associated with these pictures- apparently, it was tradition in his family, before his parents passed, to go through the collection and tell stories about those pictured.

It was several days before Hawkeye calmed down enough to talk about the pictures; and longer still before he began sharing stories with Heron and Taffy about the people in the pictures. I listened in and dutifully wrote down the names and important details about each pony pictured.

That’s been the evening’s occupation for the past month or so, Journal. Ah, let me finish the description of the interior of the vardo before my candle burns too low-

To the right, as you enter, there is a bow-fronted corner cupboard; the top part, usually having glass or mesh doors, is used for storing perishable food and in the finer vardos, enchanted with cooling or stay-fresh spells. The cupboard below is for non perishables, utensils, and dishes, usually metal or wood.

Opposite the stove there is another locker seat, usually containing those cooking things that do not see often use or are too unwieldy or fragile to have out every day. Of a cold winter’s day it is good to sit at this seat, lean back, and rest your frozen hooves on the brass guard rail on the front of the stove; it’s also a nice place to dry out after a hard rain. Next to the seat, further in, there is a bow-fronted chest of drawers- this is where clothing, writing supplies, and other sundry goods are kept when not in use.

Filling in the back of the vardo is a two-bunked bed; the top bunk just below the rear window, and beneath are two sliding doors. These in the daytime shut away a second, less open bed-place in which foals sleep. Light is supplied at night from a bracket lamp above the chest of drawers, the surface of which is used as a table. More light may come from candles, or spelled gemstones.

After helping Taffy reconcile with Hawkeye, and their shared memories, the both of them decided to help me procure my own vardo- theirs being entirely too small, I could just about fit my head and shoulders through the door, but no more than that. As it happens, Hawkeye’s best friend, Longshanks Rojomane- Shanks, as he prefers- knows where a very high quality van could be procured, provided I have the funds. I do, as it happens- which is how I ended up meeting one of my cousins, Ace Spade- Ace, for short.

I also made a new friend, Mark Merryweather.

I’ll write more tomorrow, Journal; my eyes are starting to sting from the smoke, these are not good candles.

Best Love, Meadow

Galley and Van Builder’s Company, No.7, Garage 1; Purchasing A Vardo Today, Hooray!

Dearest Journal,

I mentioned yesterday that I made a new friend and met a cousin of mine. The two events are not
unrelated.

Ace works as a mercenary, in the employ of the Whitebeard Company; they’re known for their honor, their just dealings, their strength, and their commitment to the stallion they call ‘Pops’, Rich “Whitebeard” Guard of Newgate- apparently he began going grey in the whiskers as a foal, and the nickname stuck.

I suppose I ought to say it now- I’m a Master-level Spellweaver, which is not like other forms of magery available to a unicorn. A spellweaver literally weaves spells into fabric- a dying art, to be sure, but… well, I can’t help but brag on it a bit. In this day and age, spells usually get put into crystals or wood, or merely cast, and that’s fine- but if the crystal breaks, if the wood burns, if the caster looses their concentration, the spell falls apart, sometimes quite disastrously. A woven spell, on the other hand… well, think of it like this. Even if you put a great big hole through the center of a piece of fabric, it’s still a piece of fabric- depending on how quickly and carefully you patch or repair the hole, it can still be used for its intended purpose. After all, a scarf will still keep you warm, even if there’s a big hole at the end of it.

Similarly, even if there’s a big hole in the physical structure of a woven garment with a spell woven in, the spell will still work- not as well, and not for as long, but it will still work. Guardspony cloaks, most every saddlebag, yokes, baby things- all of these are bread and butter for the spellweaver.

Anyway, after helping my cousin in a way I know he’d be mortified to learn I wrote down- ask me in pony, if you want to know- I gained an invitation to meet his Pops, and get a contract with the Whitebeard Mercenary company as a contracted Spellweaver- they go through saddlebags and gun holsters like you would not believe, according to Ace. For a spellweaver such as myself, this represents an opportunity for steady, easy work- and as there will soon come a time where I will be unable to do much at all on my hooves or off, I need to secure such things as I can, as they come, now.

I explained the bare bones of my circumstances to Ace, and after talking him out of going after- well, I talked him out of it, as that really would be much too far to go for something like this. I did accept his offer of being the foal-to-be’s godfather, so that’s one thing settled- I know if anything happens to me, Ace will care for the one to come.

As for Mark- he’s the clerk who helped me get through all the paperwork needed for the purchase of my new home.

To start with, he helped me narrow down what I’d like my home to look like- warm colors, like my shawl and coat, with a sharper blue color to make the other colors pop and laugh lively. I needed something large enough for me, in a design that would resist tipping even on very uneven roads and terrains; something I could pull at my full speed, which is a comfortable run for most ponies. After a long discussion about what I’d need- somewhere to store my supplies, somewhere to sleep, somewhere for my foal-to-be to sleep, a table, all the necessary- a model began to take shape under Mark’s clever hooves, made of heavy cardstock and colorful paper and glue. For me, heavy decoration is not so important as strong, sturdy construction; leaving the decorations rather plain will allow me to set a variety of spells and enchantments into the wagon myself- I’m a unicorn, and a master spellweaver at that, what else would I do?

As for my secondary goal of keeping the price within reasonable limits, without sacrificing sturdiness or comfort- well, that meant the local pine, oak, and elm would see heaviest use, and the finer woods of mahogany, ash, and teak would have to be gone without.

Most of the actual work in making a wagon for someone my size has been done already- while the Galley and Van don’t make such large vans often, they’ve done it enough to have all the jigs and
things necessary for it already- as I understand, that’s half the work right there.

Then, the actual undercarriage was built- the wheels, the yoke, the stairs, the breaks- and there, the first enchantment I made! I linked a pair of shoes to a crystal which I set in the breakwheel, and I left myself a way to change the alignment of the spell from shoe set to shoe set- thus, when I do a specific pattern with my hooves, the spell engages the break, and the entire van slows down to a halt. I also, after some research and conversation with the fine stallions of Galley and Van, added a way to put my vardo into parking position without bending over or even getting out of harness, if need be.

The foreman for my van, Frank Starbuck, is very interested in the sheer number of spells I can learn, even more so in the set of books I found in the local library- a set of dusty tomes meant for the itinerant unicorn traveler, to lighten and ease their way. The majority of them are meant to be cast on vans and vardos after they’ve been built- but basic spell theory is a spell is more powerful if it’s put into an object at the time of its creation.

Anyway, I’ve gotten a lovely set of crystal lamps put onto the back porch, with double spells of dimlight, foglamp, and bugs-b-gone on them; and, as soon as it’s finished drying, another pair will go in front.

I was quite liberal with my use of cushioning and steadying spells in the base of the van; so much so that taking it on a preliminary run ‘round the yard with Franky on left him faintly nauseated- apparently, I went too far. I toned them down until he could tell he was moving, but only just- even when I pulled flat out, as hard as I could, he still barely felt a thing. The brakes also work a treat, and my new roadshoes are getting nicely worn in.

The walls are of box construction, insulated quite well with cloudy cotton batting, and I put spells in for insulation- a simple cantrip usually used for lunchboxes, but it scales remarkably well, hence it’s inclusion in the old unicorn wanderer’s guide. Without the spells, leaving the box out in the sun made the air within quite stuffy, even with the lack of window panes and solid doors; with them, even Taffy, who is still shaggy with her winter coat, felt quite at ease.

When the subflooring went in, so too did the first sound dampening spells; I don’t particularly like the sound of creaking wood as it travels over roads, and even Taffy seemed quite delighted by the change. Apparently, there’s nothing worse than a particularly heavy groan from the axles in winter waking one up when they’ve no reason for it. The bed structure, when it went in, got positively inundated with softening, quieting, and insulating spells- so much so that one of the apprentices, Fern something-something, fell asleep and couldn’t be found for a good four hours one day.

Cute filly; I didn’t know a fern and a hammer could be someone’s cutie mark, but who am I to judge?

The roof got soaked in anti-smoke and dust spells, because those rafters are where I’m going to be storing most of my unworked skeins. The purlins have little rows of outstretched hooks, shaped quite like antlers; I like them rather a lot.

The window and door jambs got the first half of the windcease spell put into them; and then, when the doors and windows were added- three windows, one on each side and one above the bed; one split-level door- the second half of the spell was added. The wash pan was included free of charge, since I’m doing so much of the enchanting and heavy horsepower jobs myself. As each new piece of furnishing was added- the drawers, the stove, the cabinetry- I added various spells that were of use. Soft-close spells, firebreak spells- as soon as the first layers of varnish went on, so too did the firebreak, the waterproofing (for the wood), protection from wood rot, fungus, and woodworm; each successive layer got it’s own bevy of spells, all quite the same. The roof got it’s own treatment of powerful anti fungal and waterproofing spells, right alongside the shingles, caulking, and so on.
Next came the fanciful designs, which I did not ask for- but apparently, when you help tear out loathed stumps, haul massive carts of wood, clean and mend all the curtains, and are gently encouraging to the young apprentices when they have meltdowns, you gain the adoration and respect of the stallions working on your vardo. Every time I look at my home again, one of those silly stallions has added another intricate piece of something, somewhere- Starbuck’s the worst, as is his apprentice, Fern, always finding little places to add yet more delicate carvings.

I think Starbuck’s been snitching from my personal design book, as well as taking cues from my cutie mark- why else would I find sunflowers where the lightest yellow’s going to go, and goldenrods where the darkest biting yellow is going; cosmos and coriander winding around the doors and windows, that’s Taffy’s influence; mint along the red parts, and even a small planter box, full of… well, mint is nearly unkillable, so… and coneflowers! All across the roofline! Hexagons and winding sinuous shapes- someone’s seen my drawings of bee dancing, and all of the dances are versions of ‘welcome home’- these stallions are s-so silly, so very silly-

Sorry for getting tears on you, Journal. Ah, they’ve also put in iconography of Vanhoover- frogs, hawks, hard edged curves and swerves… It’s all very beautiful, and it’s being painted beautifully, which means I can finally add the last few touches- a spell for health, a spell for love in the home, a spell for safe travels… and then, today, it’s done.

The nights are still cold enough to need a warm blanket; and down nearer the coast, the winter hasn’t actually ended, as they’re on a slightly different schedule due to the water. Thus, for the purposes of field testing, I’m to take my mostly finished vardo to the seaside for a vacation. I’ve a list of things to do, and a list of things to look out for that can be changed; and, for the sake of checking the ride of the interior, I have to take friends with me.

I, personally, think that everyone just wants Hawkeye to take his bucking vacation already; Taffy came with me to most of my vardo building appointments, because she’s very interested in this part of her culture. She also began to complain, at great length, about her brother not taking his vacation time seriously.

We all got tired of it about the third day in, and it lasted the entire five weeks it took to build my vardo, even with all the added fancy woodwork. So. I’ve made a plan.

First, I talk to Heron and Shanks, to get Hawkeye packed and to get supplies for my vardo; then, I talked to Taffy, to make sure he wouldn’t have a bad reaction to my plan; and then I talked to his superior at the hospital, who was also quite exasperated by Hawkeye’s resistance to actually taking a break.

Then, today, I kidnapped him. He’s actually on my back as I write this, and is sulking quite adorably. I’ve invited Heron, Shanks, Taffy, Frank Starbuck, and Mark Merryweather to come along on our beach trip- Starbuck agreed so long as young Fern and his other apprentice, Carrot Sundae, could come along. I agreed, of course- it’s always fun to have young ponies along on a beach trip, they seem to get more out of it.

Ah, time to go get Taffy, and purchase a stove- a relatively quick errand, but, well, Hawkeye’s vardo needs a new stove and neither of the zebra siblings know how to purchase one. I do- and I don’t mind teaching them, as I buy my stove and insert for my vardo.
The type of stove you need depends on what you’re doing- if you’re going about with a vardo, you need a stove; if you’re just by yourself with saddlebags, you need a saddle stove. The two are only interchangeable in basic applications. Which type you need is determined by the space available, weight restrictions, and what you’re willing to cook. Stoves are large, heavy, and require a lot of wood or charcoal to burn steady- but, they can do everything a home stove and oven can do, accommodate standard kitchen cookware, and are very durable.

Saddlebag stoves are designed to be efficient. This could mean they’re efficient for their size and weight, or just use fuel extremely efficiently. Some saddlebagging models are designed solely to boil water, while others can simmer and cook food. Most saddlebag stoves are not that stable even flat, and tip over easily. The saddlebag stove is a useful tool regardless- perfect for boiling water quickly, or creating a small amount of heat as needed.

I have three pots (a two quart saucepan, a two and a half hoof saute pan, and an eight quart stock pot), a low skillet, a large metal bowl with a hole-y lid, various utensils, and a number of baking things- sheet pans, muffin tins, and so on. Thus, I need a stove.

There are six key features to consider when purchasing a new stove: weight, the stove door, fit and finish, positioning, safety, and fuel needs. Each thing has some bearing on the safety of the stove, it’s fuel costs, or the amount of heat it can give out.

Weight is determined by the weight of material that stove is made, as well as from the size of the stove. For some ponies, shopping for a stove by weight is a reasonable way to choose, especially if you’re saddlebagging or hauling a smaller wagon. However, for long term use, weight is not the best method of selection. Lighter weight stoves are lighter because they are either smaller in terms of dimension, made from thinner gauge materials, made from lighter materials, or some combination of all three.

Some ponies use thinner gauge materials to make their steel stoves lighter; this can be very dangerous, as when the material making anything is too thin, you run a higher risk of failure. For stoves, this means warping, and failure to perform in severe conditions. Finally, a lighter stove may produce less heat than you need to keep warm in cold weather; and in worst cases, can be the cause of a fire or smoke inhalation injuries.

My first piece of advice to the zebra siblings, then- do your best to choose a heavy stove, one that has thick walls and suits your purpose- be it saddlebagging or vardo living, or even for home use- the same list of things still applies. The most important thing is to have the right stove for your uses, and build a fire in it properly.

The second thing to consider is the stove door. It’s important to look carefully at the door of any new stove you’re considering, since the design and fit of the stove door can make or break your stove. The door must be high quality, with a tight seal- airtight is best, as it give the most control over your fire, adds years of use to your stove by preventing overheating and reducing warping, and keeps the quality of flame high. A cheap, poorly made door allows air to leak into the stove, which makes controlling the fire within almost impossible.

A proper stove door will help your fuel burn cleaner, as the process of turning dry wood to charcoal is much faster with a well-fitting door. A proper door will also create enough turbulence for the fire to draw properly, and recombust the hot gases released by the wood as it burns.

My second piece of advice- a heavy, well fitted door is safer than a thin flimsy one. The door to the stove does more than keep the fire in; it helps direct airflow, keeps smoke from filling the area, and keeps the stove from warping.
The fit and finish of any potential new stove is important to see first-hoof, before you buy it. You must be able to trust the stove with your life; did the craftspony take care with their work? Did they use all the safety features they ought have? The door must have a high temperature gasket, to truly be airtight; there must be a baffle, to spread the flame across the top of your stove evenly and keep it from going directly up the stove pipe; you must be able to damper your stove to a low flame without smoke coming from the seams; and least important but not unimportant, you must like the look of your stove. You’ll be living with it a good long while- you must like it, like standing in front of it, like what you purchase.

My third piece of advice- be conscious of the crafting that went into the stove. It’s more than just aesthetic and personal preference- it must be a well made piece of equipment.

The position of the stove is important too. It must have proper clearance from combustibles- at minimum, six hooves all the way around, on all sides, or if it’s against a wall, there must be a fireproof insert behind and below it. If you have a storage box for kindling or charcoal, it must either be far enough away from the stove so as not to spontaneously catch flame, or be enchanted to keep the contents within from taking on too much heat- I, personally, am going to be going with the second option, as I’ve already put a cold-spell on my perishables cupboard. If you’re using your stove in a tent or a camp, put it in the center.

Fourth piece of advice- fire safety is important no matter what!

Fifth piece of advice- FIRE SAFETY IS IMPORTANT NO MATTER WHAT!

The andiron is a horizontal bar that is used to support the logs that get fed into the flames. Very important to keeping a fire going all night long; the andiron allows for air flow through the burning logs. The stoker is used to hook, rake, or push burning materials in your fireplace. Not every stick burns up cleanly; that’s what a tool is for. The bellows allow you to deliver controlled gusts of air to specific parts of your fire; increasing the flames without you losing your breath or getting your face too close to the flame. The shovel allows you to move piles of burning material, or piles of ash, in your fireplace. Tongs, like the stoker, help you move burning logs in your fireplace or stove. Finally, the broom is for sweeping bits of ash and soot back into the fire, and sweeping ash out when everything’s burnt out.

As for actually building a fire, it is best to keep a supply of tools available at the site of the stove. Highly flammable things, such as dried grass or oilpaper; wood shavings; kindling, like twigs and small sticks; small pieces of cordwood; and a way of striking a flame, such as matches, spark-stones, or a candle-lighting cantrip. Keep these things in a box, well away from the open flame when a fire is struck; and replace them after each new fire started.

To make a fire, separate a full hoofull or two of dried grass or full sheet of oilpaper. Bunch and compress them, and lay them on the bed of the fire box just in front of the door. Lay a few half-hoof strips of wood shavings on top of the flammables, and place several pieces of small kindling wood or dry bark on top of the shavings. Finally, a piece or two of cordwood split to about a half hoof diameter on topmost. Open the vent as far as they’ll go, and light the fire.

After the cordwood ignites and burns for several minutes, add one or two larger pieces of wood. Be sure to flip and bunch the burning debris together before adding the larger pieces. Keep the air vents open for several minutes or until the larger pieces are well ignited; then, adjust the vents according to the desired heat output of the stove.

At night, when it’s time for bed, banking the fire is a must especially when the following morning promises to be bitter cold. To do so, one must let the logs in the wood stove burn down to the coals; fully open the flue, and use a fireplace shovel or similar tool to rake the coals to the center of the
stove; place one or two small logs on top of the coals; completely cover the logs and coals with ashes from your ash pail. The wood stove should be dark once you’ve finished; then, turn the flue down so it’s mostly closed- you’ll want a little air to get through, but not too much. In the morning, open the flue, and scoop as much of the ash as you can back into the ash bucket. The wood you had placed on the coals will now probably be gone, and in its place should be lots of glowing coals. Rake the coals forward, and place two or three logs behind the coals. The coals will relight the fire; and thus, a successful banking is performed.

Sixth piece of advice- learn to build a fire properly! There are six tools you’ll need- an andiron, a stoker, bellows, hot coal shovel, tongs, and broom. A fire is not just a pile of sticks set ablaze; building one and keeping it banked at night requires practice.

By the end of my purchase, I’d picked up Shanks and Heron, the both of them laden with heavy saddlebags. Shanks had all the food and toiletries I’d asked him to buy for me- I gave him money and a list with little ticky boxes next to each item, and he showed up about halfway through my calm explanation of how to purchase a good stove, eyebrows high under red bangs. Heron joined us after I’d purchased the stove, reapplied the stickyback charm and firmly stuck Hawkeye to my withers, and returned to the building yard for my vardo.

Ah, Ace added himself to our outing- apparently, he wants to keep an eye on me. Sweet, silly stallion…

Installing the stove, and the charcoal box underneath, and the ash pail with it’s own lid, and all the stove tools, takes a bit less than half an hour- the door wasn’t hung quite yet, you see, and wouldn’t be until all the final tweaks had been attended.

My seat cushions and mattress are all clouds- literal clouds, actually. The perks of being a spellweaver- weaving a cloudwalking spell into three seat cushion covers and a mattress cover is simple enough, and with the spell, store bought seat covers and bedding is just fine- or, in my case, using what I brought from home- for my bed, at least.

Proportionally, each seat is fully large enough to comfortably sleep an average pony; and my bed could sleep a group of six, with plenty of room to spare. I’ve got a few projects, and the majority of my things- but I won’t completely move in and settle until my vardo’s finished.

As for what I actually asked everyone to pack- well, Journal, that depends on the type of trip you take as well as how far to your destination, and what you’ll be doing when you get there. Before departing, one must of course check the weather schedules for where you are, where you’re going, and the route you’re taking- should be fine weather, but there’s a chance of cold fog as we near the coast. Even if the forecast is perfect, one ought be prepared for sudden storms and unexpected winds.

Once we arrive, I expect I’ll be setting camp securely before I even consider leisurely activities like exploring tide pools or making sandcastles. We won’t be camping directly on the beach, but rather at a campground a half hour or so away from the beach, clear of the stony shore.

For food, though we all have dreams of beetroot tartare and herb salads on the beach, those aren’t practical options when living in a vardo by the shore- sand gets into absolutely everything, after all. One-pot meals of tubers and beans, chilis, pasta dishes- these, fruit, small cheeses, pickles… things that can be prepared in a covered pot or not at all are best.
Sand will still get into absolutely everything, however.

First on my list, a tarpaulin that can attach securely to my vardo, along with stakes to securely anchor it into the ground, and another tarpaulin for groundcover- I almost asked for stakes, but two tarps and some rope should be just fine. I also asked for sleeping mats, and an extra blanket.

Lamp crystals, flashlights, bug repellent- incense, and stuff we rub into our coats- as well as sunscreen are always a must at the beach. If you’re staying past sunset, that’s when all the bugs come out- and beaches are always much darker than they seem. I purchased some folding chairs myself, ones meant to fold down very very small indeed, as well as a beach umbrella with sand anchors. Sturdy trash bags, a small broom to sweep sand out of the vardo… nothing I’m bringing can’t be brought out.

I’ve unloaded my kettle, and my tea pot; my set of wooden bowls and plates; my four cooking knives, a chef’s knife, a small paring knife, a long serrated bread knife, and a carving knife. Nothing goes through giant radish roast better, after all. Then there are my baking tools- mixing bowls, measuring spoons and cups, mixing utensils, spatulas, baking pans and trays, parchment paper, piping supplies, pastry brushes, little bowls… a cake stand, and a small box of toothpicks. Then of course there’s my multi tool, complete with knife, can opener, basic pliers, and corkscrew. We’ll be gathering driftwood once we’re there, but we’ll need to take along firewood and charcoal for the journey there and back…

As for food and water- my water jack, which saw me through Trottingham, is still in nearly new condition, and still enchanted to weigh nearly nothing and hold far more than it should. I’ve made pickled lemons, for a pickled lemonade one of my penpals from Golia taught me, very good for hydration; Shanks got the food for a variety of one pot meals, as well as a multitude of fresh fruit, loaves of bread, veggies good for sandwiches, fruit, milk, eggs, butter, flour, sugar, spices, vanilla extract, yogurt, tea, salt… I, myself, got refills of my particular mixture of supplements, to keep healthy.

Everyone is to bring a swimsuit, broad brimmed hat or flat hat that covers the neck, a lightweight rain or wind jacket, quick drying towels, your warm winter articles just in case of a sudden storm off the sea, sunglasses, toothbrush and toothpaste, sea-safe soap, sunscreen, bug repellent, and whatever medicines are needed.

Oh, yes- as for toys… frisbees, balls, snorkeling gear if they’d like, life jackets if they can’t swim well… and a camera if anyone wants to record precious memories.

Ah, yes- and I told the bees of our upcoming beach trip. They seemed quite exuberant- I assume to taste the lovely new beach flower flavors.

Ah, Journal, everyone’s finally finished packing and running off to get one last thing- I’ve only to put Hawkeye to bed in the vardo as he’s fallen asleep on my withers, and then we can be off. I’ll write again once we’ve either stopped for the night or have arrived.

Best Love, Meadow
crewmate onto a ship too small to fit all of us that need to go is a new one on me.

“-Do we really have to do this, Fern?”

“It’s this or let Stacey try it on her own- she won’t make it back if she goes alone, Havij. You’ve got what you need?”

“Yeah- I finished the Starmetal Weapons a few days ago; I’ve got my weapons; and we’re all wearing battle gear.”

Mab makes things for us long before we ever indicate a need- and apparently she makes battle costumes first. Havij is in a purple raglan with three-quarter sleeves, black modesty shorts with roses on them, purple suspender skirt that’s got weird… it’s sturdier than it should be, to move the way it does. White knee socks and purple jelly shoes finish her clothing- she’s a sword-and-shield fighter, she needs to be lightweight more than anything.

I’m wearing… well, I started with my black tuxedo striped green tights, followed by a dark green v-neck romper; thick black socks and a pair of hightops I’ve been wearing every day anyway; as for my Tarot Device, well… the finished Device, in it’s dormant state, looks like a pair of hair pins, a simple pair of stud earrings, a thin cloth choker necklace, and a strange little green booklet. What goes on my body goes on my body, the hair pins keeping my hair smoothly back from my face…

I’ve been spending the past month uploading everything in the Primagicals into my Device- and I finished it all up last week. I’ve got a portable basic mystical library on my hip, and I’ve already got most of the other spells I wanted loaded in…

I’ve still got everything I needed back when I was rescuing the Old Four- I’ve got my component pouch, which got redesigned to be less whimsical and more functional. I’ve got my crystal orb in my Illusion pocket, the frog skull is in Necromancy, my Device tablet has its own dedicated pocket on my hip, leaving the Divination pocket open for incense and a small number of six-sided dice; I traded Havij my unused transmutation bracelet for her Toadstone Armllet, which we both were quite pleased with; it turns out my Evocation wand is special- hopefully I won’t have to use it’s battle form, but one never knows; I traded the enamel pins I never used for Abjuration to Havij so she could make a small form for her weapons- I actually made a collection of charms for Abjuration myself, which resonate with me much more than the pins ever did; I carved myself a new cup for Conjuration after breaking the old one- same style, just new; I have brush pens, chalk, and waxy crayons for Enchantment- the bag gets left at home; two gourd-shaped bottles on either side of the spell bag, with… special things in them...

There’s Gally. I really hate it when this shit happens-

“Okay, what the hell- what the actual fucking hell is going on, here? Because Captain told us that we were to stay and protect the ship-”

“It’s more than they can handle, Gally- if we don’t go now-”

“You can’t know that, Fern-”
“Yes, I can-”

“Fern-”

“Gally, they’ve been gone five days now! Five! They haven’t called, they haven’t sent anyone back- something is wrong . Stacey had a twin thing this morning; I’m getting nasty omens; and Havij is sleepy. She’s a Dreamer , Gally-”

“Shit. Shit, shit shit- okay, okay. I don’t have any fancy clothing like the rest of you, but I can’t let you go without going-”

“You totally do have a battle costume, though- Coco, you here?”

“Yes,”

“HOLY FUCK-”

“Show Gally her battle costume, help her get ready- would you, please?”

“No problem; oh, and I found Bryony’s too, much lighter than you’d think-”

“Nice. Did you get her lasoo?”

“You’re going to have to do that one, companero- I can’t even look at it without starting to sweat, and that’s across a room,”

“Shit.”

“Oh, the rope? I can get that-”

“Eh?” “Really?”

“Sure, I have to move it all the time anyway, it falls during the night and I always have to pee-”

“That’s you then- explain the plan to her, would you, Coco?”

“Sure thing; c’mon, Gally, let’s get you set-”

Coco’s managed to transform from stitch witch to rag ninja - with a giant needle and thread sword , ready to stitch her enemies into bloody pieces. The Needle Sword, Nuibari, is the first Starmetal weapon Havij made- more a proof of concept than an actual anything, she mostly made it to see if she could make a sturdy piece of starmetal with a mortal-sharp point.

She can.

Stacey , in bike shorts , a tank top , and an island-print button up worn like a jacket, puts another flurry of kicks and punches into the air; the metal on her hands and feet gleams with cruel promise. The Grip and Climbers, Paws and Claws , are the second Starmetal weapons Havij made; really, they’re meant for navigating the Otherside’s weirder expanses, not necessarily fighting, but when the roll of Starmetal weapons came out, well, that’s what Stacey picked. Her gold tipped head-gill wing things slice through the air- I think she can fight with them, too, even though they seem so delicate…

Havij remade her sword and shield next, after Neo broke them sparring; Hammer is still Hammer, but with a harder edge and some indefinable difference in balance I have to accept on faith. Tongs,
on the other hand, became Anvil- the shield is much heavier, and it’s round where before it was more… kite shaped? I think? I don’t know much about shields- I do know, however, that she can throw it like a discus and it comes back to her like a boomerang. It’s all very cool.

Holy gods and beasts of heaven, Gally! I- I need to take it in pieces before attempting to process it all in one go.

Start with the hair- it’s a quiff, higher and more aggressive than any I’ve seen with long tresses left to trail down her back, festooned with gently clinking lengths of crystal and chain. Then it’s body chains intermingling with some sort of crystal bikini top, a belt with long tassel-chains dripping over her thighs, chains and crystals that cling to her thighs, crystal shin guards that flicker and spark with their own inner light, white crystal shoes that are flat and dainty; crystal armbands, crystal gloves, over a tiny blue bikini, a crystal bikini what the fuck; and… a strange sort of wand? It looks more like an arrow...

She looks like… I don’t even know, a crystal elf warrior? Extremely sexy?

Double check we have everyone- there’s me, who’s feeling increasingly underdressed for this event; Stacey, who looks like she’s about to crawl out of her own skin, or possibly go to a fight-club themed barbeque; Gally, who took sparkling crystals as the main part of her battle attire and not the embellishment; Coco, the literal scrap ninja with a needle for a sword; Havij, who is wearing those enamel pins like collar pins, and will draw her sword and shield as needed; and Bryony, who is being changed into one of her many, many battle costumes holy shit that’s how big her tits are what the FUCK - and that’s, uh, h-h-hello-

“H-hey, Usopp-”

“...”

“We’re doing a rescue mission, if you’re not here they’ll hurt Nami and her babies-”

“...”

“...Do you really want to go on the island where the wasp women are coming from?”

“...Wasp women?”

“Yep,”

“Like, they eat sugar-”

“And lay their larva in living hosts. Wasp. Women.”

“Ah; yeah, I’ve got I-need-to-protect-Nami-disease- wait, wait, why won’t she be able to protect herself?”

“... there’s a new world coming, just around the bend; there’s a new world coming, this one’s coming to an end; there’s a new voice calling, you can hear it if you try- ”

“Okay, that’s enough- and I assume Mark will be helpful too?”

“Very, so long as he’s in the water- they won’t follow below the water,”
“Got it. Go get ‘em, kid,”

“Thank you,”

And then I’ve darted forwards and wrapped arms around Usopp’s middle. He huffs out a breath, then wraps arms around me, hugging back. He’s warm, and he smells like gunpowder and burnt things. I get a vision, as we embrace.

This is what I see.

It’s the humming that gets to you-

The color of the sky is orange and red as the sun sets across a strange city built of mud and stinking of blood and fluids and rotting meat it stinks and stinks in the burning heat of the ash-fall and the stink fades only under the snow-

The sound of the sea fades to the cracking of fire caught sticks of breaking trees in the winter of bones crunching underfoot what is this place-

It’s the humming that gets to you-

A white city grown like brain-eating fungus from the skull of the cold brown dirt-

Sweat and sugar-water and honey mixed with bile drip down fountains that run with blood and shit and sewage waters, pooling in a deep hole a pit of hate in the earth where no good thing grows down down in that dark shape there are- there are-

Humming that gets to you-

Mouths stretched wide and screaming drops of red blood painting wet clean trails across their lips their chins their throats their sagging breasts their bulging stomachs squirming and wriggling as they desperately claw and dig at the crumbling sides of that hateful pit so deep so foul it’s always in darkness but unbearably warm the stench so rank and vile-

Shapeless faceless women with- not penises those aren’t- they stab into living creatures and thrust their eggs inside food and board provided-

They stand on each other the wretched ones stand on each other because below are the ones- who-changed-

Humming-

Chewing chewing all day long-

The crunch of something crisp and firm in teeth warm and heavy steady steady moaning agony from those below and- they’re too tired to scream the wretched are too tired and desperate to scream they can only just see the light and smell the clean air above but they can’t reach it-

They chew and chew and melt skin and skin keeps nerves bundled together and they scream and they scream and their voices break so they only moan or reach desperately for-
Let me out-

Let me out-

Let me out let me out let me out-

A chorus of hums in the unlight and the stink-

A foul curse on the wind, the Court is having it’s fun at what cost at what cost- we were made of clay at their whim, and their first broken oath to us a crime and rage and burning we took the ash and put it in a fruit and buried the fruit beneath the waters and swore our vengeance forever more-

Crawling in their skin and bursting out squirming shapes lost to the sludge of despair below their warped and bubbling bodies crushed under too many- things- a stone sunk the fruit into the sea and this stone is our bones and those bones fall to dust under the jaws of the- things- anger and buzzing rasps of a thousand thousand susurrating wings wearing away the limestone bones of people fated to- become-

Aren’t they pretty with their humming laughter and their joyful songs no-

Their hair falls out in clumps, fell out as muscles dissolved and melted and twisted in her body, their brains are- crystals- only human looking now, only people at the very edge; at center, they are not human at all-

No no no no no-

Workers to reproduce; queens to rule. They will allow only one queen per hive; and they care for-

For-

A monster-

Mother-

They’ve run out of incubators; they hunt, now, a great blackening swarm rising into the sky as the moon rises- the raw burning ache of a body betraying itself and bones boiling and moving to without creatures pushing from flesh and hungry for the whole of the world armed and grown and sprung upon the unknowing world whole and wholly furious- cessation the one you are is no more you are not yourself you’re someone else who-

Who-

Who-

Who are you- now-

Are you a person? Or a monster after all?

Twisting cracking gurgles and the screams shut tight in throats that have no cords to vibrate-

The moon rises- and in it’s light… something awful.

Below the fluttering horde, the discarded remains of hundreds- thousands- people torn open, their bodies gone flat under the lack, their faces screaming screaming as the Queen commands her spear
black and foul and her hair gold as honey-

The queen is not human her every movement is subtly wrong her arms and legs are not moving the way the joints and segments say they should be her torso is too long her neck is too short her eyes are too big and her she is not enough of any one thing and far to much of everything else she’s only pretending not a woman only pretending and she- hungers-

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Fernanda, stop wasting time. They are coming. They are coming.

I’m crying. I push back from Usopp, and stare him in the eyes.

“You have to protect Nami. Five days is too long to have no contact at all, and Sanji’s not well- it has to be you, Usopp. They’ll come at night- don’t let them take her, don’t let them touch her. Once we get Bryony into position, we’ll be able to kill all of them- but don’t let them get close before then, don’t… you have to protect them, Usopp. They are coming ,”

“…I will. Go, Fern; I’ve got this,”

I nod, dry my eyes- I turn and take in my team, Team Rescuers. Stacey’s wearing an asymmetrical piece of crystal armor now; it must not hinder her fighting style too much. Everyone else is either unaware of the danger, like Gally, or ready to throw down, like Havij and Stacey, or out cold, like Bryony.

I walk over to Shearwing and let Gally put a crystal pendant over my neck. It matches ones everyone but Gally is wearing; I can feel the strange buzz of an Illusion, oil slick and grating to my senses, draping over me.

I look at Gally; she smiles, taps a stone on her chest, and nods.

Ah.

“Last check- do we have everything?”

“I’ve got my sword and shield-”

“Arrow and armor-”

“Stealth and needle-”

“Paws, claws, and a bad attitude-”

“-and I’ve got my spells; we’ll get Bry where she needs to be before she wakes up. Okay; Team Rescuers?!”

“Ready!”

“Let’s Go!”

-------------------------------------------------------

Early Spring, a bit wet honestly; Whitecliff has so many tidepools
Dearest Journal,

Whitecliff Park is located near West Vanhoover’s Horseshoe Bay Neighbourhood; perhaps half a day’s steady trot. It’s a Marine Protected Area of about fifteen or sixteen hectares, and is currently home to more than two hundred marine animal species. It’s a place known for it’s extensive trail of tidepools, and for the sea lions that sunbath on the beach during the summer.

We arrived about a week after leaving Vanhoover proper, set up camp, and slept the night away to the soft rushing of the shore. Hawkeye settled- begrudgingly- into enjoying his vacation after we well and truly left city limits. Apparently, there’s a law that makes it so that any doctor entering city limits for any reason that wishes to practice must be cleared of all diseases, infections, and lingering magics for two full weeks before they can legally attend any medical affair- Vanhoover’s a city of immigrants, so it does make some sense. There are some truly nasty diseases in Saddle Arabia, much less Phynx; no one wants La Gripp!

I’ve finally settled on an appropriate hobby- and previous Journals well know how easy it is to let my work become my life. Take note, future reader! Do not let work become everything you are, and everything you do! Take the time to make the time for a hobby- even if it’s something very dull, like stamp collecting or growing extremely large vegetables, you must have a pastime that pleases you for no other reason than: it pleases you.

My hobby is watercolor sketching- particularly of the natural world. I will first detail my kit; then, the wonderful times I’ve had painting what’s around me.

To start with, the paper- do not begin with the cheapest watercolor paper! Even mixed media paper would be better than cheap watercolor paper… Use the most expensive watercolor paper that your budget can afford. Your paper is one of the most critical deciding factors in the quality of your finished product. Get a journal of watercolor paper- one from a company known for fine products, like Mole’s. Get a big sheet of very fine watercolor paper and cut it down to the size you need, or fold it up into a book. But this is not somewhere to save your money.

Secondly, the brush- for sketch work, a brush pen is truly essential. It holds a reservoir of water or ink inside it, and is absolutely perfect for traveling. Your final product depends less heavily on the quality of your brush; the quality of your skill can make up for the lack of quality in a brush, but only to a point. It’s okay if you don’t have the ‘perfect’ brushes right now- good brushes are expensive, and are easiest to collect over time.

Thirdly, the paints- and here, I am torn. For some things, I prefer liquid watercolors; for others, paint pans. Different approaches for different things- but the one thing I won’t skimp on is vibrancy. You can always water down a paint, Journal- but you cannot build it up forever, as there comes a point where your paper quite literally spits your efforts out at you. Concentrated liquid pigments also require a palette to use correctly- pay attention!

As for actual kit, in order- a zippered pouch from the hardware or feed store, large enough to hold your journal or paper and board; an eraser of good quality, a bit better than school quality but would not be out of place there; a fountain pen that won’t leak, and probably a refill for the pen; a pencil and a sharpener, or a mechanical pencil; refillable brush pens, sometimes called water brushes; paper napkins, paper towels, or a small cloth- and moist towelettes or wet wipes, as the pigment always stains if not cleaned promptly; a journal or sketchbook with the appropriate paper; and the paints, which can be a watercolor pan, or a full on set.
The first week into our group vacation, the fillies- Carrot Sundae and Fern- were already quite bored. By the second week, they were annoying each of the group in turn by following somepony around and spying on what they were doing- Heron and Hawkeye on their dates, Starbuck and Mark on their hiking trips, Taffy during her dance practice…

So, before they could get to me, I decided to teach them how to paint and draw- more so than their drafting courses would have made them.

In this case, since I don’t ever venture farther than a half-hour’s walk, I felt it prudent to make actual painting satchels for the girls, as well as put my own in order. Firstly, their saddlebags- one day, after Mark and Taffy lost their tempers and chased them up and down the beach for several hours, the girls were well asleep long before their normal time. I took the liberty of emptying their saddlebags, taking proper measurements of their backs and flanks, and pulling out my bolt of ripstop canvas, and my bolt of plain white canvas (ripstop color changes with a minor spell and setting wash) and sewing machine. I put quieting spells on my machine when I went to college; I needed to be able to sew at any time, without disturbing my roommates.

All sewing projects start with a pattern- the girls are big enough for standard saddlebags, ones meant for adult ponies, which saves me the trouble of drawing a new one. A simple do this, then that spell has the fabric ironed flat and cut cleanly, notched and pinned for sewing; then, the actual stitching of the satchel-style saddlebags, which went quietly ignored by the slightly disgruntled members of the group. The girls had passed out underneath my bed, where I was calmly longueing as I put together their new saddlebags.

Carrot’s saddlebag is a cream color, to play against the orange of her coat; with a lovely bit of applique over the magnetic closures in the shape of a beautiful orange float, the same as her cutie mark. Fern’s applique of a fern branch and hammers is no less beautiful, particularly on a pale mint ground.

The little beds under my bed have tiny shelves on either end- I carefully set the girls things from their old saddlebags away on these shelves, and then put their new, finished saddlebags on the little hooks where their old one’s hung. Then, I pack their old ones away in my mending box; I’ll fix them up, and give them back if they ask- but I don’t think they will.

Carrot and Fern are city girls- they’ve never really been on a vacation before, and they’ve never really had nothing to do, either. Carrot, at least, has a few novels in her bag- but Fern has nothing so diverting.

Thus, I feel no shame in giving both girls a full watercolor kit- journals with their names in my neatest calligraphy on the inside covers, empty palettes I fill with twenty four colors and let dry before packing; pencil cases, each with a fountain pen and pen refill, mechanical pencils, regular pencils, a pencil sharpener, brush pens, small cloths, and moist towelettes; and a note from me, informing them that they’d be spending the next few days with me as punishment for their misbehavior these past two weeks.

I also made sure to impress on the group how very miserable the girls would be with me- as neither of them had shown any real interest in exploring tidepools, and flatly refused when I offered to teach them to sew or knit. After much griping, and some protests from Starbuck, the group agreed to leave the punishing of the girls to me.

A proper punishment isn’t fun, and it isn’t something anyone wants to experience. Thus, painting was never the actual punishment- no. My punishment was this- the girls had to, by the end of the
day, apologize to everyone they’d hurt these past two weeks, and they had to mean it.

I announced their punishment at breakfast, to the horror of the girls; and I explained to them that their actions had hurt everyone, and that the only thing they could do to be forgiven was apologize- and that, as it sometimes happens, an apology might not be enough. A pony should do their best to do right; and if they do wrong, that is their choice, but they might not be forgiven for it.

Then I took them off and taught them how to paint with watercolors- just the basics, of course. I doubt much of the lesson sunk in, but that was the point. I packed lunch for all three of us- and so, that day, it was like this: Me, the Girls, and their own remorse, observing the antics of those strange creatures that dwell in tidepools.

At dinner, they both apologized to each person, individually, and were so heart-weary they could not even enjoy my strawberry-rhubarb crumble. They ate their sproutburgers and hayfries; and then they went to bed, miserable and contrite.

As an aside, all the others seem a bit… in awe of me? Somehow? I suppose they thought that I’m a soft touch. I’m not; I’m responsible, is what I am, and I don’t expect adult behavior from children, for another.

Ah, Journal- I might never understand it.

Best Love, Meadow
Dearest Journal,

It’s been quite a while since we last had time together, hasn’t it? Well, in the time we’ve been apart, only a few things of note have happened: I’ve expanded my portfolio of watercolor paintings to include sunrises and sunsets and seals basking on the stony shore, and I’ve discovered a love for teaching, and I’ve painted my first two students painting their own paintings.

Neither of them want to learn how to make any sort of fabric good, and that’s alright- I’m just glad I got to teach them how to do something I know how to do.

Fern Woodsmoke and Carrot Float have distinctly different eyes. Fern has a very photographic eye, an eye that sees the world exactly as it is, no more, no less. She got bored of painting about the second day in; and so, Taffy took her under wing and taught her to use a camera.

Carrot is all about abstraction- she’ll lift her wings and gather up a nice cloud, and then paint up there. The best of her work came with the first really nice spring day, when the water was finally warm enough to swim in; a beautiful painting of splotches and streaks, resolving into dancing waves and laughing ponies enjoying the beach.

Tristan Vinsmoke is a Prench national, who joined the EQ Royal Militia’s Foreign Legion to get Equestrian citizenship, as he couldn’t buy it nor prove relation to a Equestrian native in good standing. We knew each other for five years before- We were friends, best friends. And then he had to leave.

The only things I could think to give him at the time were my Magazine Illustré de Science Biologique posters, the one that was rejected, not the one that was accepted - well, I gave him a copy of that one too. I gave him a lot of things, come to think of it… and he gave me everything he could, and be a part of the EQRM. I gave him… almost everything. Not my heart- I was never quite brave enough for that, but… I gave him everything else.

He gave me… everything I wanted, everything I needed. A reason to smile, every day; someone to tell my day to, someone who wanted to hear every stupid detail, and listened to everything I ever said. He gave me his company and his time; his thoughts and his feelings, everything he could say about his day without breaking the law of the Army- His wing over my back; his shoulder against mine; the smoky smile of him...

We met because he wanted to speak prench with someone, and I needed a partner to practice my prench with. Tristan was the pony who answered my advert in the paper; and for five years, he and I were best friends. He’s from the prench city of Maresille- the only place in Prance that feels like Curacao, not Prance. He speaks curacan almost better than prench, does Tristan...

Five years- that’s how long a pony needs to join the EQRM Foreign Legion to become a citizen. Tristan only had four years left, but he took another year of duty to get bonus money- so he said, at least. I think he really did it so he’d have more time with me, and money to get to somewhere in Equestria- somewhere called Canterlot Village.

He even gave me a forwarding address…
Journal, am I being a coward for not writing him? How would I even word that letter? ‘Dearest
Tristan, sorry to spring this on you, but remember that Hearthwarming where we warmed each other
up all night? Haha, turns out my Estrus was the week after that-’ no, that’s terrible. ‘Surprise, it’s a
foal?’

‘Tristan, I need you, please-’

I wish he was here. I wish we were together. I wish, I wish- well, wishing won’t get me anywhere,
but a letter might. ‘Should I even attempt it at all? There’s every chance he’s moved on- that he’s
found someone else, someone prettier than me, someone… Someone more Harmonious. Not like
me.

Not like me.

-You know what? I will write him a letter. I just need a permanent address first, so he can actually
send me a reply- and possibly, I need to be an actual citizen of Equestria, to avoid deportment. At the
very least, he deserves to know that I- that we, that the Little Bobbin exists, and I am caring for them.

There’s nothing wrong with enjoying looking at the surface of the ocean, of course, except that when
you finally see what goes on underwater, you realize you’ve been missing the ocean party the whole
time. Staying on the surface of anything is like going to the circus and staring at the outside of the
tent.

I really don’t know how to explain my connection to the sea, except I think it’s because in addition to
the fact that the sea changes and the light changes and ships change and what’s in the tidepools
changes and the smell is different every day- I think, I think it’s because we all came from the sea. It
is an interesting biological fact that all of us quadrupeds and bipeds have in our veins the exact same
percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood and
our sweat and our tears. We’re tied to the ocean; and when we go back to the sea, whether it is to sail
or to watch it, we are going back from whence we came.

In a very literal way, we are going home.

I- arrgh. I want fish! I want… I want… I want Moules Marinieres!

A quick head count, and possibly an explanation. Hawkeye and Taffy are Zebras, who eat meat
more often than any other equine; Heron Vondergeist, Longshanks Rojomane, and Carrot Float are
pegasi, and have cultural acceptance of eating fish; Fern Woodsmoke, Frank Starbuck, Mark
Merryweather, and Ace Spade are earth ponies, and while there’s no stigma to eating fish, there’s no
real tradition of it either; and there’s me, Meadow Surprise. Unicorns don’t eat fish, or any meat-
unless they’re from Trottingham, where often the only options during the winter are fish and
seaweed.

In the two years since I’ve been introduced to the world of meat-eating, I’ve eaten a rather
astonishing amount of flesh. Gamebirds, pig, kine, and ostle; even some very odd things, like duck
and quail.

However, I’ve not quite embraced les fruit de la mer and this constantly mocks me on my epicurean
adventures. (There is one cousin of mine, and she will eat anything except honey. Just the one thing-
and it’s honey! I keep bees! Why would you keep that detail to yourself for years, Maud? Fuck!)

My issue with seafood isn’t an aversion, or a dislike of the flavor; it’s a reaction to Tristan’s leaving and my falling pregnant. It’s a vaguely nonsensical thing, to freak out at the taste of fish because that’s the last meal I had with Tristan before we- before-

It’s a strong, abrupt, illogical reaction. I actually saw a hypnotist for it in Vanhoover; because I want to eat fish, indeed, if my suspicion about the tribe of the foal I’m carrying is correct, I need to eat fish. I got a professional to trick me into eating fish without becoming frightened or disgusted. Seeing a doctor- or something like it, for when you’ve an ailment is only sensible.

The only seafood dish Tristan ever taught me successfully is a mussel dish. It’s a gateway fish, as mussels are some of the only fish I- and most other ponies barring those with allergies or religious or moral objections- can stand to eat in anything like large amounts. The batch I cooked in Trottingham suffered from a poor state of mind while I was eating them- as I know I cooked them correctly, or I’d have never been able to leave at all…

The batch I made at Whitecliff was one of the tastiest I’ve ever cooked. There was an hundred-percent success rate with the local mussels; not a single one came home popped, or refused to open after cooking- they were unbelievably savory-sweet and respondent to July Chili’s mariniere broth.

For those who were a bit nervous of eating moules, the traditional side is frites; I made waffle-cut versions and deep fried them in a heavy cast iron pan Taffy and Hawkeye gave me as a vardo-warming gift, along with a crusty sourdough bread, and a dry honey wine I’d made at ho- in Trottingham about eight years ago. Every bite was wine, shallot, and butter-drenched; with every morsel past my lips, my quiet melancholy over not being with Tristan, not knowing if he was alive or dead or if he would ever want to speak with me again, see me again… it all faded from my mind for that evening, and with them came a promise that one day, maybe even soon, I would have some kind of closure.

Moules à la Marinière

*Fresh Mussels Steamed open in Wine and Flavorings*

Recipe from July Chili’s *Mastering the Art of Prench Cooking*

A stock pot with cover, though it works alright in other pots

2 cups light dry white wine, or 1 cup dry white vermouth

½ cups minced shallots, or green onions, or very finely minced white onions (sweet yellow onions are too sweet, and red onions overwhelm the flavor of the mussels- but if it’s all you have, please use them)

8 parsley sprigs

½ bay leaf

¼ teaspoon thyme

⅛ teaspoon pepper
6 tablespoons butter

6 quarts scrubbed, soaked mussels (by this I mean give them a few hours in fresh water to get the sand and dirt out of them- they’re filter feeders, and the sweet, delicate flavor is elevated when cleared of the seas silty flavor; that said, I’ve noticed earth ponies prefer a slightly siltier taste to their food. Keep in mind who you’re cooking for, I say)

½ cup roughly chopped parsley

Bring all but the last two ingredients to a boil in the pot. Boil for two to three minutes to evaporate most of it’s alcohol and to slightly reduce it’s volume.

Add the mussels to the kettle. Cover tightly and boil quickly over high heat. Frequently grasp the pot, clamping the cover down, and toss the mussels in the pot in an up and down herky-jerky motion so the mussels change levels and cook evenly. In about five minutes, the shells will open and the mussels are done.

With a big skimmer (Tristan called it a spider for some reason), dish the mussels into wide soup plates. Allow the cooking liquid to settle while preparing the rest of the dinner service; then ladle the clarified liquid over the mussels, sprinkle with parsley and serve immediately.

If making in the traditional French style, use whichever Frites recipe suits your taste- baked, bought, waffle, curly. That said, for a lighter dish, or if you’re serving somepony who isn’t familiar with la mer , hay fries are fine.

The dessert was clafouti, one of the few baked goods I didn’t know the recipe of by heart before I met Tristan. It’s his very favorite, any time of year- but really, it’s a spring dish of red fruit, egg heavy and filling. It’s made by pouring an eggy batter over fresh fruit or rhubarb; this then is baked into a sweet, vanilla-scented custard that is firm enough to serve in slices, but soft enough to eat with a spoon- or directly off the plate, I don’t mind.

Traditionally, it’s a cherry dish; but as I get further into Apple-country, the price of cherries gets from merely fair to exorbitant to not worth the bits, as the quality inevitably goes down as the price goes up. So far as I can tell, cherries only get good around Dodge Junction in the Appleoosa region, anyway.

When roasted in the oven with just a few spoonfuls of sugar, the rhubarb becomes soft and slightly caramelized while retaining it’s signature tart flavor. The pieces retain their shape during roasting and baking for a pretty presentation, and then melt like warm jam as soon as you take a bite. Rhubarb is also good for stretching a small amount of strawberries, or increasing the pectin output when strawberries aren’t available. Strawberry-rhubarb pie is a particular favorite of my cousin Pinkie- she always loved the color, of course.

I always remember wondering why ponies think her favorite food is cupcakes- or even rock candy. In some ways, those are her favorite foods- but really, her favoritest foods are what ponies who love her make for her, with their own hooves. Bonus points if it’s actually good.
One of the best things about clafouti is eating the leftovers for breakfast the next day. The custard firms up as it chills, becoming ever-so-slightly chewy. I usually save a few slices in the fridge because I only made it for myself- but this time, if I hadn’t made four with the express purpose of breakfast tomorrow, there’d be none left at all.

A short note about heating ovens:

A low oven is warm enough to nap on in the winter, or hold my hoof quite near the coals for seven to nine seconds- or until dinner, if I’ve nothing better to do, or a bit of a chill. Honestly, the only reason I pulled my hoof away from the coals at this stage was because I was bored. I entertained myself for the first few seconds by thinking about bee dances, or rolling on sandy beaches, but that loses appeal after a short little while. I gave up after fifteen seconds or so, because I’m a busy mare and I can’t afford to hold my hoof over hot coals all day. I guess if the oven is warm, it’ll cook something eventually- which is the whole point of low-slow cooking, anyway. Whatever.

A medium oven is actually, y’know, hot. This is about where young fillies and colts start getting told to not go near the oven for their own safety, though with a mit or grabber I feel it’s probably fine. I can hold my hoof to the coals for about five seconds, at which point it definitely feels hot on my frog, though I think I could hang on longer if I have someone to impress. At this point, the heat isn’t so much ‘painful’ as it is ‘annoying’. Like a little rock in your shoe, or a burr under your saddlebag- definitely ‘there’, but not a stop everything and fix this situation. My hoof does feel hot at this point, though- and heat’s what we’re using to cook with, right?

A high oven is very hot. This is where fillies and colts are not to use the oven, at all; and some of my less responsible acquaintances are also not allowed. As I extended my hoof to the coals, images of sizzling eggs and popping kernels of grain dance across my wincing eyes. The words ‘high’ and ‘heat’ in big, angry, cartoonish letters also entered my mind, just before I instinctively withdrew my hoof from the coals. This is, without a doubt, a hot oven- just the thing to get a good crust on a loaf of bread or quickly crack open a stonehull pumpkin. Now we’re cooking with charcoal! But seriously, two seconds on the hoof is more than enough.

If there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s that doubling a recipe is much simpler than modifying a knitting pattern. The original recipe for Clafouti, as learned at Tristan’s side, serves four to six, and I will write it here.

Clafouti

A *French dessert of red fruit* (cherries; strawberries; rhubarb) and egg custard

This recipe serves four to six ponies.

*For the rhubarb:*

2 cups (8 ½ ounces, or three long stalks) of diced rhubarb
For the clafouti:

½ cup (2 ½ ounces) of granulated sugar

3 large eggs (chicken; refer to the egg conversion chart in *The Joy of Cooking* if chicken eggs are not available)

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 cup (8 ounces) whole milk

½ cup (2 ½ ounces) all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon lemon zest

A pinch of salt (sweet things only taste amazing when you add salt! Do not skip this step!)

Set a medium-low oven.

Combine the rhubarb with the sugar and cinnamon in a small bowl and set aside to dissolve the sugar and begin extracting rhubarb juices.

Spread the rhubarb in the bottom of an two by two hoof baking dish or a two and quarter hoof pie pan. Roast uncovered for fifteen to twenty minutes, until the rhubarb is soft and the juices are bubbling. Allow to cool until the rhubarb is just warm to the touch. (Leave it in the pan it was cooked in!)

Whisk together the eggs, sugar, and vanilla. Whisk in the milk. Whisk in the flour, lemon zest, and salt. (Always sift the flour, otherwise you get clumpies!) This batter can be prepared up to half an hour ahead of time.

Pour the batter over the roasted rhubarb and bake for half an hour to forty minutes- still in that medium-low oven, please. When it’s done, the clafouti should be puffed around the edges and a toothpick or skewer stuck in the middle should come out cleanly. It’s perfect if the middle is still jiggly, and the edges will collapse once the clafouti starts to cool.

The longer it cools, the more set the clafouti becomes. For a loose pudding-like dessert, serve while still warm from the oven. For a firmer custard, allow to cool to room temperature or serve chilled. For fancy occasions, sift a little confectioner’s sugar over the top just before serving.

Leftovers will keep if refrigerated for up to a week. Don’t freeze custard.

Dinner, and the breakfast that followed, was a wonderful affair- the friendship I felt that night was truly magical. It lead the the most clearheaded weeks of that leg of our journey together, the most lighthearted I had been in a good long while; and so what I will end my entry with, Journal, is thoughts about the sea.
It is so colorful- silver and black at dawn, green and burnished orange at noon, darkest blue in the evening, black at night. Sometimes it looks almost red, like fire or a blood orange’s fruit split open and oozing. Sometimes the sea will turn the color of bits lost in the field, uncovered by the tender frog of a foal one summer and spent in a day on trinket-treasure. Right now, Journal, the shadows of clouds are dragging across the sea-water, dark dapple patches of grey, and patches of sunlight are touching down everywhere. White strings of gulls drag over velvety waves like beads.

In this time, in this moment- it is the very finest of all the things I have ever seen. Sometimes I catch myself staring at it and forget my duties- to myself, my craft, the foal inside me and the stallion who helped me make it, to the world and my companions… It seems wholly big enough to contain everything anypony could ever need to feel.

Best Love, Meadow

Mid Spring, lightly raining; On we trot to Old Vanhoo-ver-ay, hurrah- hurrah-

Dearest Journal,

Ah, a warm rain- there’s something deeply revitalizing about it, Journal. It damps down the dust of the road, and cleanses the air and the spirit of all things that may foul it. The breeze that comes after is cool and refreshing.

Heron and Hawkeye don’t actually want to spend the whole of their shared vacation time at the beach- so back to the city we all go.

Well, we’ve left the beach well behind us- and, as it’s been six weeks or so of Hawkeye’s fourteen off, and the seals were getting boisterous and preposterous and, to be honest, a bit rape-y, we decided to return to the city. -Carrot and Fern laughed it off, but I’m quite sure that nearly getting molested by amorous seals is nopony’s idea of a good time. If they start having nightmares, I’m certain, of course, that Princess Luna will advise them the way they need to be- I can only hope that they take that advice, if they need it, and that, whoever they share with takes their concerns seriously. There is no such thing as a minor trauma- if it hurt you, it hurt you, and let no one say it did not.

Coming to a decision, I decided I would not buy the runner needed for my vardo’s walk; I would make it, and lay it after a thorough cleaning. As the finishing would be a full month, as well as making all the final renovations and letting the vardo settle after it’s first trip, I would have just enough time to get it done.

Unicorn rugs, whether made in the tribal style or the city style, are all hoof-and-spell knotted. The weaver (or spellweaver) ties the material (be it wool or silk) around the warps of the foundation using one of several different knots. Each rug is made to a design; some designs are copied from intricate plates several thousand years old, repeated faithfully as their carrying surfaces wore out- others are from the weaver, inspired by their surroundings and way of life. To best show this design, a variety of colors are used to form the necessary patterns. After each row of knots is complete, a weft strand is tightly packed between the newly completed row and the one which is about to begin, keeping each knot firmly in place.

Depending on the skill of the weaver, one rug can take between about four weeks at the fastest,
ten years at the most intricate; either way, the eventual owner will gain a unique work of art which is not only practical, but extremely durable and beautiful besides.

The tools and knots used in the weaving of Unicorn rugs are as follows:

Warp and Weft: The warp refers to the vertical strands running up and down a rug. These are vital to the structure of the rug, as the knots are tied to them. The wefts are also placed between them in order to keep the knots in place. The fringe of a rug is the tied loose ends of its warp. The weft is used in order to keep the knots in place. Before and after each row of knots the weft strand is passed through the warp and combed and beaten down, compacting the row of knots and creating a tight structure.

Cotton is used for both warp and weft in most rugs; however, some use wool, and intricate silk rugs often use silk as both foundation and pile.

Pile refers to the material or fiber used in weaving the rug. The main materials of Unicorn rugs are wool, silk, and cotton. Sometimes camel, rabbit, or goat wool is used as well, but this is getting rarer as the art of spellweaving dies out.

Wool is the most common material in weaving Unicorn rugs, mainly because it’s soft, durable, and cheap. Camel and goat wool are undesirable for colorful patterns, as they do not take dye well. The wool shaven from only the shoulders and underbelly of a lamb on it’s first cut is highly prized; this is when wool is at it’s finest, and is often used in conjunction with silk. Wool is best used for all kinds of rugs, be they wall hangings, floor coverings, or bedding.

There are two kinds of natural silk, and one synthetic. Silkworm cocoons are cheapest near mulberry plantations, which are very rare in Equestria, but are fairly common in Neighpon, Golia, and China. Spider silk is a protected thestral artisanal product, and can be very expensive in large amounts. Synthetic silk, made with amber and an adapted pegasus spell, is easiest for the Unicorn weaver to get their hooves on, but can be very finicky. Of all the natural fibers, silk is both very fine and extremely strong. However, as it’s not as thick as wool, it isn’t quite so durable; and, because of it’s fine gauge, it’s often used in the weaving of intricately detailed work. Silk is best as a wall hanging, or the topmost part of a rug-stack bed.

Cotton is generally used in the foundation of rugs. However, spellweavers use it to introduce white details, set spells, and create a contrasting color and texture. Mercerized cotton is particularly good for barriers and blessings.

The material used in making the rug- wool, silk, but never cotton- is treated and dyed prior to the knotting process. There are conflicting views about rug dyes: tradition says to only use vegetable dyes, while alchemical dyes only fade when the magic does, which is almost never.

Both dyes have their merits, and both are best at a certain look. Natural dyes provide a more natural palette; alchemic dyes are brighter, more vivid, and all around more lively than natural counterparts. However- some natural dyes are more vivid than alchemic dyes; some alchemic dyes are more color-fast than natural dyes.

And there are some colors that only come in one type- natural or alchemic, there’s only the one kind
that can make a certain color.

Before the actual process of making a rug can commence, the rug must be designed by hoof by a skilled artist. City- or, now that I think about it, Tower might be more appropriate- style rugs are produced from detailed design plates or cartoons: a life-sized paint by numbers showing which color of material to use for each knot. Tribal, or Family, rugs may use this method to create standard designs- indeed, various bloodlines have specific, secret patterns used only by them. There’s even some historical evidence of familial marks, that is, heraldry, finding it’s origin in the family rugs- anyway, although Family rugs can have standard designs, many of them are created from the imagination of the weaver. For this reason, family rugs have more ‘errors’ than their tower counterparts; then again, for some ponies, ‘errors’ are really ‘features’, and among collectors, highly prized.

Most Unicorn rugs are pile-woven, the knots tied by hoof and spell to the warp strings. Two factors are important when discussing knots- knot density, and knot type.

Knot density is the main factor that determines the overall frog of a rug- the way it feels. KPSQ is the measurement of it- the number of knots per square quarter-hoof. This is done by counting the number of knots in a quarter-hoof down the warp and across the weft, then multiplying these figures together.

KPSQ doesn’t really figure into the true value of a rug in Family style; it does in Tower style. In Family style, because it relies on the weaver’s memory and is mostly done by the still nomadic tribes of the Unicorn Mountains… hm, how to say this… Family items are valuable because you made them for your loved ones, because you made it from memory, because you made the dyes with the plants you could find and what you had, because the love and care you wanted to show your family got caught in the threads and wool and is there warm and lovely forevermore. Rugs with high KPSQ take longer to make, and since the Family style came from nomadic origins, it’s more important to finish the work within a season- usually summer, or winter, depending on if the rug is a gift or for the home- than it is to make it, well, intricate or particularly dense.

Tower rugs don’t have the same history. They started as ways of shoring up the cracked walls of the very first Unicorn Towers; thus, being thick and dense was not only desirable, but required. As architecture improved, the density of a Tower rug became a feature- and they eventually moved from being wall hangings to floor coverings. Originating in the old region of Maregolia, which became simply Golia during the Unification, the Tower rug migrated south and west along the old Spidersilk Road, to Equestria. Once there, the intricate silk wall hangings became the preferred floor coverings of stallion mages hoping to attract a mare, or mares getting ready to foal. A good, thick, silk Unicorn rug was, is, and remains, one of the most comfortable beds available to a unicorn- for several reasons, actually.

Mainly, it’s the horn- when we moved away from headrests during our Tribal days, we relearned the reason why we keep our horns from touching the ground too often. It’s all to do with magic, and quite too much to put in a Journal entry this long- suffice to say, Pegasii have magic of the Sky and the Weather; Earth Ponies have magic of the Land and the Growth deep inside it; and Unicorns have magic of Sea and Void. And, of course, Communion keeps them together- we feel it as Harmony. The six innate pony magics only barely get along with each other, and that only due to the prevailing force of Communion.

Some of the classical Elements get along with each other without Harmony- the Sky, the Land, the Sea, even the great Commotion before the Coming of the Two wasn’t enough to separate them.
However, Weather, Growth, and Void were absent until the Ascendance of Harmony-ponies literally could not grasp these innate qualities until the levels of communion were high enough.

The types or styles of knots are bloodline specific, favored by one family or another and used in particular ways depending on preference. Different areas- and the two main styles- use slightly different techniques.

The Snaffle, or Asymmetrical knot is used by the Ire, Spice, Torque, Camellia, and Crock families extensively in their rugs. To form this knot, yarn is wrapped around one warp strand and then passed under the neighbouring warp strand and brought back to the surface. With this type of knot, a finer weave can be created.

The Grade, or Symmetrical knot is used by the Torque, the Surprise, and the northern Ires. It’s also very common to find in rugs from Saddle Arabia, Yakistan, the Griffon Empire, and Zebrica. To form this knot, yarn is passed over two neighboring warp strands. Each end of the yarn is then wrapped behind one warp and brought back to the surface in the middle of the two warps.

The Jog knot can be seen in the rugs of Coral-Sand, a branch clan of the Ire. This knot can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical and is usually tied over four warps, making the weaving process faster.

After the rug knotting process is complete, the pile is very long and uneven. The pattern is only vaguely visible from the front side of the rug- from the back, however, it is still fully visible. This is when the rug is checked against the design or cartoon, to ensure accuracy. Different weavers have different standards for the level of ‘mistakes’ they’ll allow to go into their rugs. I actually allow quite a few- so long as they don’t compromise the effect of the spell I’ve woven in, all the mistakes I inevitably make are really features.

Once the weaver is satisfied with their product, the pile is carefully clipped and shaved to the correct height. This shows the design to best effect, and creates the desired texture. The rug is then washed, to ensure coherency in the spell, no color runs later in life, and the removal of excessive dye and debris. Some rugs are so thick or intricate- or filthy, things happen- the process of washing is repeated several times.

Finally, the rug is blocked to ensure no shrinkage has occurred during the wash, and to align all the knots correctly. Once finished, the rug can be used for any number of things.

The tools for a Unicorn Rug are divided into Spells and Hoof Tools. Every Hoof Tool has a Spell counterpart; every Spell, a Hoof Tool. Some things are easier with a Hoof Tool; others, with a Spell.

The first spell every spellweaver has to learn (and here I’m using the definition ‘a series of actions performed correctly’, which is the original definition) is the Count Set spell; this spell keeps track of ever knot tied to the warp in a row, to be checked against what is called a Set List. This list is usually on the plate of a rug- ah, right. The main design, the fully colored and life-sized version, is for actual design work- checking colors, checking fit, layout, and so on. The work design, or plate, is a much smaller document or object, maybe one to four hooves square- and it’s purpose is to keep track of which knots to use, in which colors, in what amount… They look like knitting instructions, with a small palette of colors. They also look something like kitchen floor tiles.
The Count Set spell counts each set of knot-color against the Set List- and you don’t actually need a Count Set spell, just a magnifying glass and patience.

Anyway.

Comb - this tool/spell is used to slide and beat down the weft between rows of knots. This is necessary to secure the knots into place, before a new row can be started.

Hook - this tool/spell is used for two things- separating the warp strands while tying a knot, and then pulling the yarn through the warp strands. The spell can also be used to cut the yarn after each knot is tied.

Spindle - a spell/tool for spinning prepared fiber into thread, then yarn, then rope.

Scissors - a spell/tool used to cut many things- in this case, it’s used to cut the long or uneven pile as the rug is woven.

Plate - used as a reference when weaving, the plate show the weaver what colors to use, and the pattern. Different from the cartoon or full design, as it’s meant to be used directly by the weaver, not as a planning guide.

The Loom - a spell/tool meant for weaving. This is the spell that takes the longest to learn, or the machine that can be most intimidating for new weavers- it’s really very simple. Horizontal Loom is the simplest version of the spell, and the simplest machine. In machine form, they’re mostly used by nomads because they can be dismantled at the time of migration. In spell form, they're used as the Mastery test for a few specific reasons- firstly, once you start a Loom spell, it can only be completed by finishing the weaving; secondly, the more complicated and large your rug is, the more magical energy you must have to complete the work. I’m a master not just because I can design, and create a beautiful rug- I’m a master because I can weave a fairly complicated series of spells into a rug meant to hang as a tapestry down a hallway.

Most unicorns- even ones with cutie marks related to magic- can’t do that.

Rugs made horizontally are generally small, either because it’s the master’s first try or because it needs to be finished within a season, which is when migration begins for the nomadic ponies. It’s also fairly difficult to weave large rugs on this kind of Loom, as it relies on a bar-system to structure it; in practice, it’s very similar to a frame. The distance between the parallel side bars defines the width of the rug to be woven on the loom, and the distance between the parallel top and bottom bars determines the length.

Weavers tend to lay on, or roll across, their rugs as they’re being woven- especially when using a horizontal loom. This is because of tradition- and also, it’s fun.

Vertical looms are meant for tower-style rugs, and their assembly is more complicated than horizontal looms. There are three kinds- fixed looms, which cannot be moved about a room or from a location; bunyan looms, which require a pony and an assistant to use properly; and the roller beam loom, which is used to make extremely long rugs.

Ah, Journal, sorry for being so pedantic- I’m practicing writing out explanations, so I can see if I’d actually be good at teaching. I think I might have a knack for it, but, well- having a Special Talent doesn’t mean you just get to slack off and not practice it. I might be good at writing out, creating,
instructions- that doesn’t mean I’m actually good at teaching someone else how to follow them. You’d think one would follow the other… but, well. That’s generally not the case.

I actually had a talk just to that effect with the girls on our way back to Vanhoover- really, a discussion of what cutie marks even mean.

I told them how I got my cutie mark- and then I told them that, because I had a special talent for writing instructions, I found it very hard to actually get a job anywhere. I didn’t have very many friends- because I got my special talent quite early on, and became very bossy- especially when it wasn’t warranted.

And I told them that my talent only became useful when I’d learned enough to understand the point of instructions- they’re meant to be helpful. Instructions exist so that, when somepony isn’t there to help you directly, you are not left without any help at all.

-Your talent is what you pursue. Your talent is not who you are. You can change your talent, if you really want to. If your talent doesn’t satisfy you, do something else!

I truly wish somepony had told me those words when I was younger.

Fern’s special talent actually has nothing to do with building- it’s to do with design. She got her cutie mark when she realized, all at once, that a bridge was going to collapse within the week- something about the way it rattled when a cart went across it, about how it felt beneath her hooves… She was evasive on the subject of what she did after her revelation, but she told us that only two ponies were killed. And then she was very quiet, and could not look at Carrot at all until Carrot reached out and hugged her.

Fern’s cutie mark is a fern frond between two crossed hammers- but I wonder if it isn’t more like a laurel? I wonder if her special talent is actually noticing the most stable and enduring parts of a design, their form, their function- and how they can fail anyway. Just because something has always been done a certain way doesn’t mean it’s the right way- or even the best way. I wonder if she might not have secondary talents, subservient to her main.

I, for example, am exceedingly good at writing instructions. It’s my main talent. My secondary talents are for following directions, testing directions, filing (so I can find the directions again), creating systems of logic (which is all a spell is, once you add the magic in)...

And as it turns out, Fern is good at more than just Best Design- she’s good at picking proper materials for a use, at finding areas where trouble will brew, at… streamlining. When I asked her if she’d ever built a boat, she said no- and then looked very contemplative, before diving for her sketchbook and scribbling furiously.

Carrot’s special talent also has nothing to do with building- and it’s not really about cooking, either. When I got a good look at her cutie mark, it wasn’t really a food- not really a carrot-juice float, like I thought. It was really an ice cream cup full of little things- nails, screws, tiny gears- in an orange fluid I know to be rust remover, all with a balled up cloth on top and a pair of tweezers standing in for a straw.
Carrot’s special talent is a bit complicated, but once she explained it, it makes perfect sense that there would be many ponies of a similar stripe to her. Basically, she makes things so that other things can be made, or fixed. She’s not necessarily the one who makes a nail or a screw, though she will if it’s of a strange size or not available anymore; she’s the one who makes the tool to make a nail or a screw. She’s the pony you need when you need a new handle on your favorite tool, a new gear for your pocket watch, a piece of artisanal glass that’s meant to be a pair… her actual job title is Machinist, and what she actually does is make and repair machinery. Machinists fix trains. They make sure lights work, and that stoves fire, and that wheels turn. They make the tools that those who make need to do their work- she serviced my sewing machine because, and I quote, it was making a weird clicking noise that sounded like trouble to her. Apparently, it threw a gear.

As for how she got her special talent- oddly enough, it had nothing to do with making a machine at all. Her story is this: after her parents died, her sister, Saffron Sundae, and her could not be in the same room together without fighting- physically or verbally. It got so bad that Foal Protective Services (FPS) was seriously considering separating them.

As Carrot explains it, the real root of their conflict was a silly fight they’d had before their parents had to leave and do whatever it was they did- a fight so silly they’d both forgotten what was being fought about, only that they’d done it… and the last memory either filly had of their parents was of being punished, and resenting them. Carrot remembers saying ‘Love you; see you later’ as was her custom; and she remembers her older sister, Saffron, not doing so, out of foalish pettiness. Or maybe she just forgot.

And then their parents didn’t come back.

Saffron couldn’t forgive herself for it- not until Carrot fixed… and here she used a word that I’d never heard, ofrenda, but I understood the meaning quick enough. An altar, where those who’ve passed can be remembered and cared for- something like that exists in every culture, I think. Some way of remembering those who’ve gone.

Carrot rebuilt her family’s ofrenda after her sister, Saffron broke it; and she told her sister to forgive herself for being so mad at their parents. That the whole point of being a family is that even when you’re angry- even when you hate each other, you still love each other.

‘The only thing that can’t be fixed is death,’ she said. ‘Fern was not at fault for the bridge collapse; she did everything she could, including blocking the bridge with her own body- but they didn’t listen to her, even though her cutie mark was all but screaming. It’s no one’s fault except maybe the bridge builder’s and the ponies who were supposed to keep it repaired that it collapsed and killed my parents- and.’

And then she choked on her words and shook. Fern was the one to hug Carrot that time.

I think I know what happened, but I can’t be sure unless she says it aloud- and if I’m right, well… it can only do her good to say it plain, like putting a hole in your hoof to let an abscess fester out faster.

I said to both of them- ‘You have to face it. Whatever makes you run from yourself- fear of failure, agony, whatever it is- you have to face up to it. If you don’t, you’ll never know a moment’s rest again- it will keep chasing you, until you fall. And you will fall. It might be frightening; you might not want to feel the way you do, but- it’s okay to think about it. It’s okay to talk about it. Indeed, you have to; you have to face it to let it go.’

Carrot heard me- she didn’t show it then, she was too caught in her remembered terror, but my words reached her.
As it turns out, Journal, Carrot saw her parents die when the bridge collapsed; and she still can’t tell her sister about it. So far as Fern could say, when Carrot began sobbing after saying what she saw in my vardo, *that was the only time Carrot had ever cried about it.*

When somepony leaves your life, those exits are not made equal. Some are beautiful and poetic and satisfying- acceptable, as much as such a thing can be. Others are abrupt, unforseen, and totally unfair. But mostly? Mostly they’re just unremarkable, unintentional, clumsy- and normal.

A silly fight between sisters; parents laying down the law of the house; a habitual goodbye, and a petty refusal to do it- and a disaster. A broken shelf; a broken heart… and a revelation: *it’s not over unless I’ve given up.* A broken thing is still a thing- a broken heart can still feel, a broken shelf can be repaired, a mistake can be forgiven.

We didn’t really do anything after Carrot’s tears that day- other than me keeping to the schedule of the trip back to Vanhoover.

Carrot ended up wedged into a warm pile of her best friend, Fern, her teaching-Master, Frank Starbuck, Taffy, Heron, and Hawkeye- on my bed. Ace and Mark took over doing the other necessary things- making lunch, telling me to stop for lunch and have a rest, making dinner… Mark actually baked a carrot-cake for Carrot, and it actually got a laugh out of her, which relieved all of us. When she started to apologize to us for throwing all her problems on us, I gave her what-for.

‘An abscess in your feelings is just as painful and dangerous as an abscess in your hoof. Opening up, letting the nasty part out, and getting the care you need afterwards- those are the steps you need to take, for the sake of your health. Don’t apologize for being injured, Carrot; and you’re not the one who gets to decide if your friends care about you when you are, or even how much. Now shush, and eat your cake; you’ve had a long day, and I’d rather you go to bed than stay up when you’re tired,’ I said, staring at her.

Carrot blinked watery eyes at me, and then nodded. She ate her cake, and washed her face at the water jack- and I heard her pause on the porch, before clattering back down the steps.

‘Miss Meadow?’ She said.

‘Yes, Carrot?’ I said.

‘I think you’re going to be a really good mom.’ She said.

And then she pressed a hug into me, from her neck to mine- quite too fast for me to hug back- and was gone in a flurry of flailing hooves and embarrassment.

I’ve been blushing about it for days, Journal.

Ah, there’s Vanhoover on the horizon- time to stop writing while I walk, and pick it up; I’ll write more later, once we’re all settled again.

Best Love, Meadow
Dearest Journal,

We’re back in Vanhoover, dearest! I’ve just finished moving all my things into my vardo, unpacking, organizing, and putting away- I’ve unrolled my bed carpets, hung dish towels and curtains, put my shoes and my hoofpicks and my horn swivel away in the cupboard- I’ve sold my old cart, and sold quite a lot of honey, and told the bees that I’m headed off to Canterlot for some paperwork- would they please look after the vardo while I’m away?

The bees, after a bit of internal debate, agreed- provided I did not intend to live in Vanhoover.

As I do not, we came to an agreement.

Heron and Hawkeye are getting in all the dates they can’t when Hawkeye is working- neither Taffy nor I see much of them, although they’ve been kind enough to let us continue to use their house. Shanks went on a different sort of holiday, one where he and his… stallion friend, is the term I think, Beck, go on tours of various breweries and distilleries. Apparently, Shanks is something of an alcohol connoisseur. Mark signed on with the Whitebeard Mercenary Company as an accountant; and he made some sort of deal with Ace, some kind of stallion’s agreement.

Frank Starbuck reconnected with his colt-hood sweetheart, Robin Go-Lightly on our way back; and after encouragement from both Fern and Carrot, he extended his holiday to take advantage of Robin’s presence. She’s a traveling historian- along with her work-partner, Lovelace, and her apprentices, collectively called ‘Cat’, one filly whom Fern knows very well, as they are sisters, and ‘Mice’, a collection of ponies of all tribes and ages- she’s been scouring the world for interesting historical artifacts.

When Robin and Starbuck met back up, we gained new travelling companions, and… I got a new friend, I think. More on that later.

Oh, yes- and while all of this was happening, I took a day trip down to the Pie Rock Farm, Journal. I can’t remember if I wrote about the reason I needed to go visit my Pie cousins, but basically- I need proof that I’ve got family in Equestria. It’s a grim and dreary place, not somewhere I really liked being. It takes a very specific kind of pony to enjoy a rock farm, and I’m not one of them- not quite.

My Pie cousins who still live on the farm, however, are. Uncle Iggy and Aunt Quartz were very kind; my cousins? Well. They’ve got their quirks… honestly, Maud was the nicest of them.

Remember her, the one who doesn’t like honey?

I did get advice for my crystal terrarium, which had been doing not at all as well as I had hoped- Uncle Iggy repotted it for me, and taught me as much as he could about how to actually keep it fed. Gemstone shards are more like candy or treats- a crystal succulent prefers lava rocks, shale, and an assortment of granite pebbles. Of course, a crystal terrarium is really meant to be cared for by an earth- pony, not a unicorn- then again, I’m going to Ponyville, where my cousin Pinkie Pie lives, so… I’m sure I’ll have help.
Why Ponyville- other than my cousin Pinkie, I mean?

Well.

Equestria is giving away more than a thousand historic castles, farmhouses, and monasteries for free in an effort to breathe new life into its disused public buildings.

Under a new scheme from the Office of State Property, these ancient buildings and domiciles are up for grabs to entrepreneurs who promise to transform them into tourist destinations- and not flashy ones, either. The ancient properties are found along seven historic routes running the length and breadth of the country of Equestria, with some being found in the Crystal Empire, and others in far off Appleoosa (neither of which are technically Equestria proper). It’s hoped that the initiative will create new interests for the hundreds of travelers, hikers, pilgrims, and tourists who use the routes each year.

The only requirement is for an applicant to submit a proposal outlining how they intend to transform their preferred building into a tourist attraction. Specific preference is being given to those under middle age.

About five hundred years ago, there was a monastery-school of unicorn spellweavers near what is now Ponyville, the village surrounding Princess Twilight’s castle. It had massive grounds, and edged right up to the Everfree Forest- indeed, one of the reasons the Everfree doesn’t run right up to the Bucephalus Brook is the presence of the old unicorn spellweaver’s Web-wall, an ancient construction of crystals, plants, and stacked stones.

I think, I think- I think I’m going to start a school, Journal. A school for anyone- anyone who wants to learn to spellweave. I’ve had a business plan for one for a good long time, updated and changed as I learned what was and wasn’t realistic… and I think…

Well, I’ll have to see if it’s even possible, first. But… so far as I can see, there’s no reason any-body-pony, donkey, camel, minotaur, griffin, sphynx, yak, diamond dog- anyone can learn to weave. Can’t use a spell? Use a tool.

I’ve actually traveled all over the world, Journal- mostly to learn about different kinds of weaving, and different traditions of spellweaving. I can make an example of just about anything you could care to think of- from Unicorn Blessing Rugs to Minoan armor-cloth to Adamant Faithful Story-pelts. I want to share that knowledge, if I can.

But first, I need to go to Canterlot and get the deed for the ancient property. Can’t do anything at all without that.

When I told my friends my plan, everyone was startled, but then- the fillies, they seemed very enthusiastic, asking me all sorts of questions- what kinds of classes, could anyone join, what about fees, is it a boarding school- I laughed, and answered as best I could.

My friends got more startled as I outlined more and more of my business plan to the joyful girls- I have a list of classes they’d need to learn, and a list of people and agencies I’d need to contact to get a proper number of teachers for them; of course anyone could join- equine or not, weaving goes across the world as a form of art; fees and boarding would depend on the property I’d get, and how decrepit it actually was, as a bare field is very different from, say, a crumbling tower or a broken castle.
What if it doesn’t work out, Journal? Well- Honey’s very popular in central equestria- I could probably get by as an artisanal honey-producer, and that is a secondary option. There are some dyes and processes that require beeswax; so, the bees were always going to be a part of my school.

And yes, I do have a logo- it’s a fat ball of yarn with a honey wand and a needle stuck into it.

Ace is arranging our transport to Canterlot by train; Taffy has decided to go along with me, as she needs to do something in Canterlot anyway; and Hawkeye is fine with my beehives taking up space in his postcard of a backyard. Lovelace has also invited herself along.

I feel I should make note- Mark Merryweather is a Seapony, and Lovelace is a Changeling.

Mark is the color of cow’s milk, a sort of off-yellow color with patches of orange and black scales- he looks rather like a calico cat my Auntie Zipper used to have, or a koi-fish my Golian pen-friend wrote me about, but that’s not quite right either… he’s got a curious mixture of icthyan and equine features, which together create a whole that is not unpleasing- but is also not to my taste. He’s handsome, I suppose, as far as stallions go- strong front legs, muscular tail, his mane gleams like burnished clay… but it’s not him I want. His prosthesis, a sort of harness for his tail end which cups under his hips- and yes, Journal, Seaponies have hip bones, even if they don’t have back legs- is a sort of leg arrangement. It’s got his cutie mark, a sunflower, stamped on each metal flank, and he wears a pair of special shoes on his front hooves to keep his back hooves moving. As I understand it, there’s a complicated arrangement of spells and, yes, implants, that register how his body is shifting and translates various movements into movements of his prosthetic legs.

He told me, when I asked, that about the only thing he wishes were better on his prosthesis was the sock- because, apparently, he has to wear a special tail sock so that the metal and straps keeping him upright and able to move about on land don’t chafe his scales. I made him a better sock, a spellwoven sock- the spell in the sock, being actually in the fabric and not so ‘leaky’, won’t interfere with the spells on his prosthesis.

He likes it.

Oh, and as for his cutie mark, it’s an anchor with a ribbon tied around it. Something to do with the sea and a memory, I’d say.

Lovelace, as I said, is a changeling- instead of pegasus features, which always put me in mind of a pony who’s coat is always ready for a random weather change, add the features of a moth. She’s dusty, for one thing- always covered in a thin, fine coating of iridescent scales that, when the breeze hits just right, flake off like dust. If she rubs up on something the wrong way, she’ll leave a sparkly streak of dust behind. She has the most luminous eyes I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting- glimmering pools of black, like looking into a purple midnight sky. She’s also, for lack of better descriptors, fuzzy - like one of my bees.

Fuzzy legs, fuzzy chest and withers, curly hair, long thin feelers that, as I understand, are another set of eyes and ears at the same time… Well, she was hesitant to go to Canterlot, as the high mountain city of the Unicorns is a cold place, in more ways than one.

I made her a very fluffy coat- well, a vest, it doesn’t have sleeves. Lovelace laughed to see it, but hasn’t taken it off once on this train ride.
She’s a very sweet mare, with perhaps the loveliest singing voice I’ve ever had the luck to hear. Her job is a historian- but, interestingly enough, the changeling method of keeping history is oral, not written. She sings histories- and her songs are… well, Changelings lived lives of danger and turmoil for a long, long time, and the songs reflect that.

She sang a folksong for us on the ride up to Canterlot; it was beautiful, if a bit bizarre. And frightening.

*Look into my eyes and it’s easy to see- one and one makes two, two and one makes three- it was destiny!* 

*Once every honey doesn’t need a song when the sun doth shine and the moon doth glow and the grass doth grow-!*

I didn’t understand everything she sang… but then again, I don’t think I really needed to.

Oh, yes, we’re on the train right now. Canterlot station- we’re here! Sorry, Journal- I’ll get back to you soon, we’re about to pull into the station and disembark.

Best Love, Meadow

You ask me if I can forgive myself?

I can forgive myself many things. For where I left her. For what I did. But I cannot forgive myself for the year that I hated my sister-friend, when I believed her to have run away, perhaps to Sea. During that year I forbade her name to be mentioned, and if her name entered my prayers when I prayed, ‘twas to ask that she would one day learn the meaning of what she had done, of the dishonour that she had brought me, of the red that ringed my eyes.

I hate myself for that, and nothing will ease it, not even what happened that night on the mountainside.

I had searched for nearly four years, although the trail was long cold. I would say that I found her by accident, but I don’t believe in them. If you walk the path, eventually you must arrive at your fate.

That was later. First, there was the valley in the backstreets, the grime-caked bar behind the flower-sellers that sat like a stone against the pink concrete like a stormcloud on the dawn’s horizon, cold and grey with copper roof going to green with age.

There was a girl outside the bar, flat on her ass and rolling a marble between her outstretched legs. She didn’t see me approaching, and she didn’t look up until I said, “I used to do that. I got mine from soda bottles and won ’em off rich little boys. I’d wash ’em, then play with them again- baseball, blood knuckle.”
She turned. She looked shocked, as if I had appeared out of nothing - and I had not. I had swam and walked many miles, and had many more to go. I said, “I move quietly. Is this the bar of Toloi Cruickshank?”

The girl nodded, drew herself onto her webbed feet and her full height, which was maybe a hand taller than mine, and she said, “I am Toloi Cruickshank.”

“Is there another of that name? For the Toloi Cruickshank that I seek is a grown woman.”

The girl said nothing, just shoved her grimy hand into a pocket under her skirts where her fingers clicked more marbles together.

I said “Your mother, perhaps? Would she be Toloi Cruickshank as well?”

The girl was staring at me with honest confusion.

“What are you?” she asked.

“I am a merwoman, but a woman nonetheless. And I’m here to see Toloi Cruickshank.”

“Why? And why are you so... small?”

“Because I have something to ask your mother. Women’s business.”

I saw a smile start at the tips of her lips.

“It’s not a bad thing to be small, young Toloi. There was a night when the Crows came knocking on my door, a whole troop of them, twelve men with knives and sticks, and they demanded of my mother that she produce me, as they were there to kill me, in revenge for some imagined slight. And she said, ‘Girl, run down to the Daiso and tell your Aunt Crim to come back to the house, that I sent for her.’ And the Crows watched as the girl ran out the door. They knew that I was a most dangerous person. But no-one had told them that I was a merwoman, a slight one, or if that had been told, it had not been believed.”

“Did the girl call you?” said the girl.

“It was no girl,” I told her, “but me myself, ‘twas. And they’d had me, and still I walked out of the door and through their fingers.”

The girl laughed. Then she said “Why were the Crows after you?”

“It was a disagreement about the ownership of property. They thought what they had bought was theirs. I maintained the Crow’s ownership of the property had ended when it washed ashore and came home with me through the Red Gate.”

“Wait here,” said young Toloi Cruickshank.

I sat by the kerb and looked up at the bar. It was a good sized bar: I would have taken it for the bar of a brewer or a trader, not of a legbreaker. There were bottle caps in the gutter and I picked them out with my leg and cleaned them in the clear water sluicing from the gutter, and skipped them across the street, one by one, into the storm drain. I have a good eye and a better arm, and I enjoyed rattling the caps over the cobbled street and into the water below.

I had thrown a hundred caps when the girl returned, accompanied by a tall, loping woman. Her hair was salted with white, and her face was sharp and wolf-sharkish. There are no wolfsharks in those
alleys, not any longer, and the bearfish have all gone too.

“Good morning,” I said.

She said nothing in return, only stared; I am used to stares. I said, “I am seeking Toloi Cruickshank. If you are she, say so; I shall greet you. If you are not she, tell me now, and I will be on my way.”

“What business would you have with Toloi Cruickshank?”

“I wish to hire her, as a guide.”

“And where is it you would wish to be taken?”

I stared up at her. “That is hard to say,” I told her. “There are some who say it does not exist. There is a certain cave on the Foggy Mountain.”

She said nothing. Then she said, “Tolly, go back inside.”

“Aow, Mum-”

“Tell your father I said he was to give you some fool. You like that. Go on.”

Expressions crossed the girl’s face—puzzlement, hunger, happiness—and then she turned and ran back to the grey bar.

Toloi Cruickshank said, “Who sent you here?”

I pointed to the road as it bustled beside us on it’s winding dance through the city.

“What’s that?”

“Road.”

“And there are many who cross it.”

I did not know her then at all, and never knew her well, but her eyes became guarded and her head cocked to one side.

“How do I know you are who you say you are?”

“I have claimed nothing. Just that there are those who have heard that there is a cave on the Foggy Mountain. And that you might know the way.”

“I will not tell you where the cave is.”

“I am not here asking for directions. I seek a guide, and two travel more safely than one.”

She looked me up and down, and I waited for the joke—about my size, my clothing—but she did not make them, and for that I was grateful. She just said “When we reach the cave, I will not go inside. You must bring out the gold yourself.”

I said, “It is all one to me.”

She said, “You can only take what you can carry. I will not touch it. But yes, I will take you.”
I said, “You will be paid well for your trouble.” I reached into my pocket, under my obi, and handed him the pouch I had in there. “This for taking me. Another, twice the size, when we return.”

She poured the coins from the pouch into her huge webbed hand, and she nodded.

“Silver.” she said. “Good.” Then, “I will say good-bye to my husband and daughter.”

“Is there nothing you need to bring?”

She said “I was a reaver and then a legbreaker in my youth, and both travel light. I’ll bring a rope, for the mountains.” She patted her knife, which hung from her obi, and went back into the grey bar. I never saw her husband, not then, not ever. I do not know what color his hair was.

I threw another fifty caps into the drain as I waited, until she returned, with a coil of rope across her shoulders like a vest. And then we walked away from a home too grand for any reaver or legbreaker, and we headed west.

The mountains between the city and the coast are gradual hills, visible from a distance as gentle, purple black blue, hazy things- like clouds or smoke or banks of mist. They seem inviting. They are slow mountains, old tired things of the kind you can walk up easily, like walking up a hill- but they are hills that take a full day and more to climb. We walked up the hill, and by the end of the first day we were cold.

I saw snow on the peaks above us, though it was high summer.

We said nothing to each other that first day. There was nothing to be said. We knew where we were going.

We made a fire, from dried seacow pats and a dead seaweed bush: we boiled water and made our dinner, each of us throwing a handful of rice and a fingerpinch of smoked fish into the little pan I carried. Her handful was huge, and my handful was small, like my hands, which made her smile and say, “I hope you will not be eating half the rice.”

I said I would not and indeed, I did not, for my appetite is smaller than that of a full-grown woman. But this is a good thing, I believe, for I could keep going in the worst of times on nuts and berries and leavings that would not have kept a bigger person from starving. I have grown now; so this may not still be so.

A path of sorts ran across the high hills, and we followed it and encountered almost nobody: a tinker and his mule, piled high with old pots and pans, and a boy leading the mule who smiled at me when he thought me to be a lady, and then scowled when he saw me as I am, and would have thrown a stone at me had the tinker not slapped his hand with the switch’d been using to encourage the mule; and later, we over took an old woman and a man she said was her grandson, on their way back across the hills. We ate with her, and she told us that she had attended the birth of her first great-grandchild, that it was a good birth. She said she would tell our fortunes from the lines in our palms, if we had coin to cross hers. I gave her a scuffed beri, and she looked at my palm.

She said, “I see death in your past and death in your future.”

“Death waits in all our futures,” I said.

She paused, there in the highest of the high lands, where the summer winds have winter on their breath, where they howl and whip and slash the air like knives. So close to the sea, you could stick
your hand through and feel the crushing weight of darkness above. She said, “There was a woman in a tree. There will be a woman in a tree.”

I said, “Will this mean anything to me?”

“One day, perhaps.” She said, “Beware gold. Silver is your friend.” And then she was done with me.

To Toloi Cruickshank she said, “Your palm has been burned.” She said that was true. The old woman said, “Give me your other hand, your left hand.” She did so. The old woman gazed at it intently. Then, “You return to where you began. You will be higher than most other women. And there is no grave waiting for you, where you are going.”

She said, “You tell me that I will not die?”

“It is a left-handed fortune. I know what I have told you, and no more.”

She knew more. I saw it in her face.

That was the only thing of any importance that occurred on the second day.

We slept in the open that night. The night was clear and cold, and the sky was hung with stars that seemed so bright and close I felt as if I could have reached out my arm and gathered them, like berries.

We lay side by side beneath the stars, and Toloi Cruickshank said, “Death awaits you, she said. But death does not wait for me. I think mine was the better fortune.”

“Perhaps.”

“Ah,” she said. “It is all a nonsense. Old-woman talk; it is not true.”

I woke in the dawn mist to see a stag, watching us, curiously.

The third day we crested those mountains, and we began to walk downhill. My companion said, “When I was a girl, my mother’s working knife fell into the cook fire. I pulled it out, but the metal hilt was hot as the flames. I did not expect this, but I would not let the knife go. I carried it away from the fire, and plunged the blade into water. It made steam- I remember that, and how it burned my nose to breath it in. My palm was burned, and my hand curled, as if it was meant to carry a sword until the end of time.”

I said, “You, with your hand. Me, only a little woman. It’s fine heroes we are, who seek our fortunes on the Foggy Mountain.”

She barked a laugh, short and without humor. “Fine heroes,” was all she said.

Rain began to fall then, and did not stop falling. That night we passed a small croft-house. There was a trickle of smoke from its chimney, and we called out for the owner, but there was no response.

I pushed open the door and called again. The place was dark, but I could smell tallow, as if a candle had been burning and had recently been snuffed.

“No one at home,” said Toloi, but I shook my head and walked forward, then leaned my head down
into the darkness beneath the bed.

“Would you care to come out?” I asked. “For we are travellers, seeking warmth and shelter and a place to rest. We would share with you our rice and our salt and our wine. And we will not harm you.”

At first the man, hidden beneath the bed, said nothing, and then he said, “My wife is away in the hills. She told me to hide myself away if the strangers come, for fear of what they might do to me.”

I said, “I am but a little-woman, good man, no bigger than a child; you could send me flying with a blow. My companion is a full-sized woman, but I do swear that she shall do nothing to you, save rest in your house, and dry ourselves. Please do come out.”

All covered with silt and slime he was when he emerged, but even with his face all begrimed, he was beautiful; and even with his hair all tangled and greyed with silt it was still long and thick, and lustrous black. For a heartbeat he put me in the mind of my sister friend, but that my sister friend would look a woman in the eye, while he glanced only at the ground fearfully, like something expecting to be beaten. A merman of seahorse kind; soft and curvy, like a maid.

I ate my fill. He had no appetite. I believe that Toloi was still hungry when her meal was done. She poured wine for the three of us: he took but a little, and that was with sweetwater. The rain rattled on the roof of the house, and dripped down the corner into the pool we all rested our feet in, and, unwelcoming though it was, I was glad that I was inside.

It was then that a woman came through the door. She said nothing, only stared at us, untrusting, angry. She pulled off her cape of oiled sacking, and her hat, and she dropped them in the pool below us. They floated like corpses on the bottom of the harbour. The silence was oppressive.

Toloi Cruickshank said, “Your husband gave us respite, when we found him. Hard though he was in the finding.”

“We asked for no more than respite,” I said. “As we ask of you.”

The woman said nothing, only grunted.

In the high lands, people spend words as if they were golden coins. But the custom is strong there: strangers who ask for respite must be granted it, though you have blood feud against them and their clan or kind.

The man—little more than a youth he was, while his wife’s hair was grey and white, so I wondered if he was her son for a moment, but no: there was but one bed, scarcely big enough for two—the man went outside, into the sheep pen that adjoined the house, and returned with rice cakes and a dried ham he must have hidden there, which he sliced thin, and placed on a wooden trencher before the woman.

Toloi poured the woman wine, and said, “We seek the Foggy Mountain. Do you know if it is there?”

The woman looked at us. The winds are bitter in the high lands, and they would tear the words from the unwary’s lips. She pursed her mouth, then she said, “Aye, I saw it from the peak this morning. It’s there. I cannot say if it will be there tomorrow.”

We slept beneath the water of that cottage. The fire went out, and there was no warmth from the heating stones below. The woman and her man slept in their bed, behind the curtain. She had her
way with him, beneath the sheepskin that covered that bed, and before she did that she beat him for feeding us and for letting us in. I heard them, and sleep was hard in the finding that night.

I have slept in the homes of the poor, and I have slept in palaces, and I have slept in trees and ditches and fields beneath the stars; I have slept underneath the bed of working whores, and would have told you before that night that all places to sleep were one to me. But I woke before the dawn, convinced we had to be gone from that place, but not knowing why, and I woke Toloi by putting a finger to her lips, and silently we left that croft on the mountainside without saying our farewells, and I have never been more pleased to be gone from anywhere.

We were a mile from the place when I said, “The Mountain. You asked if it would be there. Surely, a mountain is there, or it is not there.”

“The Foggy Mountain is not as other places. And the fog that surrounds it is not like other fogs.”

We walked down a path worn by hundreds of years of sheep and deer and few enough men.

She said “They also call it the Smoke Mountain. Some say it is because the mountain is really the smoke from hell, rising from the depths below. And I do not know the truth of it.” Then, “‘and what is truth?’ said jesting Pilate.”

It is harder coming down than it is going up.

I thought about it. “Sometimes I think that truth is a current. In my mind, it is like a current that flows through the sea: there can be a hundred twists, a thousand trickles, that will all take you, eventually, to the same place. It doesn't matter where you start from. If you follow the truth, you will reach it, whatever path you take.”

Toloi Cruickshank looked down at me and said nothing. Then, “You are wrong. The truth is a cave in the black mountains. There is one way there, and one way only, and that way is treacherous and hard. And if you choose the wrong path you will die alone, on the mountainside.”

We crested the ridge, and we looked down to the coast. I could see villages below, beside the water. And I could see high black mountains before me, on the other side of the Sea Bubble, coming out of the silty mist.

Toloi said, “There’s your cave, in those mountains.”

The bones of the earth, I thought, seeing them. And then I became uncomfortable, thinking of bones, and to distract myself, I said, “And how many times is it you’ve been there?”

“Only once. I searched for it all my my sixteenth year, for I had heard the legends and believed if I sought I should find. I was seventeen when I reached it, and brought back all the gold coins I could carry.”

“And were you not frighted of the curse?”

“When I was young, I was afraid of nothing.”

“What did you do with your gold?”
“A portion I buried and I alone know where; the rest I used as groom-price for the man I loved.”

She stopped as if she had already said too much.

There was no ferryman at the jetty. Only a small boat, hardly big enough for three full-sized men, tied to a trunk of coral on the shore, half dead with white and sharp with salt, and a bell beside them both. Bronze it was, with a smooth handle, still shiny with disuse.

I sounded the bell, and soon enough a fat man came down the shore.

He said to Toloi, “It’ll cost a bobu for the ferry, and three pennies for your girl.”

I stood tall. I am not as big as other women are, but I have as much pride as any of them. “I am also a woman,” I said. “I’ll pay your bobu.”

The ferryman looked up and down, then he scratched his beard. “I beg your pardon. My eyes are not what they once were. I shall take you to the mountain.”

I handed him a ten-beri coin. He weighed it in his hand. “That’s tenpenny you did not cheat me of. Ten pennies are a lot of money in this dark age.”

The water was the color of slate, although the sky was blue, and whitecaps chased one another across the water’s surface. He untied the boat and hauled it, rattling, down the shingle to the water. We waded out into the cold water, and clambered inside.

The splash of oars on seawater, and the boat propelled forward in easy movements. I sat closest to the ferryman. I said, “Tenpenny. It is good wages. But I have heard of a cave in the mountain across the water, filled with gold coins, the treasure of the ancients.”

He shook his head dismissively.

Toloi was staring at me, lips pressed together so hard they were white. I ignored her and asked the man again, “A cave filled with golden coins, a gift from the Northies or the Southies or from those who they say were here long before any of us: those who fled into the West as the people came.”

“Heard of it,” said the ferryman. “Heard also of the curse of it. I reckon that the one can take care of the other.” He spat into the sea. Then he said, “You’re an honest woman, Akasenko. I can see it in your face. Do not seek this cave. No good can come of it.”

“I am sure you are right,” I told him, without guile.

“I am certain I am,” he said. “For not every day is it that I take a salt-bitten reaver and a little Akasenko woman to the Foggy Mountain.” Then he said, “In this part of the World, it is not considered lucky to talk about those who went to the West.” We rode the rest of the boat journey in silence, though the sea became choppier, and the waves splashed into the side of the boat, such that I held on with both hands and all my legs for fear of being swept over and away.

After what seemed like half a lifetime the boat was tied to a long jetty of black stones. We walked the jetty as the waves crashed around us, the salt spray kissing our faces. There was a humpbacked man at the landing selling mochi and dried plums and fish cut down their spines and smoked until they were almost wooden. I gave him two beri and filled my obi with all three.

Ahead, rising like a wall, there was the Sea Bubble; and along the path, a gate of blackened horn.
We walked through the gate, and through the Sea Bubble, and onto the Foggy Mountain.

I am older now, or at least, I am no longer quite so young, and everything I see reminds me of something else I’ve seen, such that I see mostly nothing for the first time. A pretty girl, her hair ink-black and yellow in the light, reminds me only of another hundred such girls, and their friends, and what they were as they grew alongside me, and what they looked like when they died. It is the curse of age, that all things are reflections of other things.

I say that; but my time on the Foggy Mountain, that is also called, by the wise, the Smoke Mountain, reminds me of nothing but itself.

It is a day from that jetty until you reach the black, smoking, mountain.

Toloi Cruickshank looked at me, half her size or less, and she set off at a loping swim, as if challenging me to keep up. Her legs propelled her through the water, which was blue, and all fern-weed and anemones.

Above us, shoals of threadfin shad and blueback herring were schooling, glimmering white and silver, hiding each other and revealing and hiding again.

I let her get ahead of me, let her press on into the wild waters, until she was swallowed by the shifting, silty haze. Then, and only then, I swam.

This is one of the secret things of me, the things I have not revealed to any person, save to my Mother, and my sisters, and my brother, and my sister friend Miki (may the Bubbles cradle her pour soul)- and my chef, Sanji: I can swim, and I can swim well, and, if I need to, I can swim faster and longer and more surely than any full-grown fishwoman or merwoman; and it was like this that I swam then, through the silt and the sweetwater swells, taking to the low current along the black-rock ridges tipped as they were with yellow sea-shells, yet keeping below the reach of branching coral fingers.

She was ahead of me, but I spied her soon, and I swam on and I swam past her, on the low current, with the brow of the hill between us. Below us was a sweetwater current. I can swim for days without stopping, or sleeping, or taking any sort of respite. That is the first of my three secrets; there is one I’ve yet to tell, and one I have revealed to no woman or man currently living. My siblings have guessed my unspoken secret; but I cannot bear to indicate if they've the right of it or no.

We had discussed already where we would camp that first night on the Foggy Mountain, and Toloi had told me that we would spend the night beneath the rock that is called Man and Dog, for it is said that it looks like an old man with his dog by his side, and I reached it in late afternoon. There was a shelter beneath the rock, which was protected and warm, and some of those who had been before us had left a leavings pit behind, shells and fins and scales. I swept the sleeping shelves clean of silt, and set out the things I had bought from the humpbacked man. They swelled in the water, and their scent swept out across the purpling seagrass.

It was dark when Toloi swam into the shelter and looked at me as if she had not expected to see me that side of midnight. I said “What kept you so long, Toloi Cruickshank?”

She said nothing, only stared at me. I said, “There is sheepshead, swollen with seawater and smoked, and the sand will warm your bones.”
She nodded. We ate the sheepshead fish, drank wine to warm ourselves. There was a mound of fire sand and seagrass, piled high in the rear of the shelter, and we slept upon that, wrapped tight in our kimono.

I woke in the night.

There was cold steel against my throat- the flat of the blade, not the edge. I said, “And why-ever would you kill me, Toloi Cruickshank? For our way is long, and our journey is not yet over.”

She said, “I do not trust you, Akasenko.”

“It is not me you must trust,” I told her, “but those that I serve. And if you left with me but return without me, there are those who will know the name of Toloi Cruickshank, and cause it to be spoken in the shadows.”

The cold blade remained at my throat. She said, “How did you get ahead of me?”

“And here I was, repaying ill with good, for I made you food and a place to rest. I am a hard woman to lose, Toloi Cruickshank, and it ill becomes a guide to do as you did today. Now, take your knife from my throat and let me sleep.”

She said nothing, but after a few moments, the blade was removed. I forced myself neither to sigh nor to breathe, hoping she could not hear my heart pounding in my chest; and I slept no more that night.

For breakfast, I stretched the mochi to tenderness, and sliced the plums to get the stones inside them out.

The mountains were black and grey against the roiling white of the shoals above. We saw black rays, huge and ragged of wing, circling high above us. Toloi set a sober pace and I swam beside her, taking two kicks for every one of hers.

“How long?” I asked her.

“A day. Perhaps two. It depends on the currents and the fish. If the shoals come down in two days, or even three...”

The shoals came down at noon and the world was blanketed in their shivering scales, worse than rain: the faint stench of fish shit and piss came with them, and we were buffeted by waves of silt and sour water soaking through our clothes and our skin; the rocks we swam past became treacherously light, tilting and swaying and crashing with the movement of the water. Toloi and I slowed in our ascent, swimming carefully. We were walking up the mountain then, not swimming, up seagoat paths and craggy sharp ways. The rocks were slippery and green with algae: we walked, and climbed and clambered and clung, we slipped and slid and stumbled and staggered, and even in the silt, Toloi knew where she was going and I followed her.

She paused at a current that splashed across our path, thick as the post of the Red Gate. She took the thin rope from her shoulders, wrapped it about a rock.

“This was not here before,” she told me. “I’ll go first.” She tied one end of the rope about her waist and edged out along the path, into the rushing water, pressing her body against the smooth-worn
stone, edging slowly, intently, through the sheet of water.

I was scared for her, scared for both of us: holding my breath as she passed, only breathing when she was on the other side of the current. She tested the rope, pulled on it, motioned me to follow her, when a rock gave way beneath her foot, and she slipped on the smooth stone, and fell into the abyss.

The rope held, and the rock my legs and suckers clung to held. Toloi Cruickshank dangled from the end of the rope. She looked up at me, and I sighed, anchored myself firmly, and wound and pulled and hauled her up and up. I hauled her back onto the path, winded and breathing curses in tones of awe.

She said, “You’re stronger than you look,” and I cursed myself for a fool. She must have seen it on my face for, after she got back her breath (wheezing and coughing like a seal), she said, “My girl Tolly told me the tale you told her about the Crows coming for you, and you being sent into the fields by your ma, with them thinking you were off to find your Auntie and not yourself at all.”

“It was just a tale,” I said. “Something to pass the time.”

“Is that so?” she said. “For I heard tell of a gang of raiding Crows sent out to Gobdark a few years ago, seeking revenge on someone who’d sunk their ship and stolen their slaves. They went, and they never came back. If a small woman like you can kill a dozen Crows… well, you must be strong, and you must be fast.”

I must be stupid, I thought ruefully, telling that child that tale.

I had picked them off one by one, like rabbit lobsters, as they came out to piss or to see what had happened to their friends: I had killed seven of them before my Mother killed her first. We buried them in the circus lot, where no one played and no one lived; put coins in their hands and stones on their chests, to weigh down their bodies that their ghosts might float freely to the Bubbles, and we were sad: that Crows had come so far to kill me, that we had been forced to kill them in return.

I take no joy in killing: no man should, and no woman.

Sometimes death is necessary, but it is always an evil thing to kill another being like yourself. That is something I am in no doubt of, even after the events I speak of here.

I took the rope from Toloi Cruickshank, and I clambered up and up, over the rocks, to where the current came out of the side of the hill, and it was narrow enough for me to cross. It was slippery there, but I made it over without incident, tied the rope in place, came down it, threw the end of it to my companion, walked her across.

She did not thank me, neither for rescuing her, nor for getting us across; and I did not expect thanks. I also did not expect what she actually said, though, which was: “You are not a whole mermaid, and you are ugly. Your mother: is she also small and ugly, like yourself?”

I decided to take no offense, whether offense had been intended or no. I simply said, “She is not. She is a tall woman, taller than you, and when she was young- a bit older than me, but not much- she was reckoned by most to be the most beautiful woman in the world. The bards wrote many a song praising her purple eyes and her long black hair that shines golden in the light.”

I thought I saw her flinch at this, but it is possible that I imagined it, or more likely, wished to
imagine I had seen it.

“How did she come to have you, then?”

I spoke the truth: “She wanted me, and I came as first of a set of seven sisters total—seven in one go. She would not give me up; and she would not let me give up. She said I would be the wisest and kindest of her daughters, and I would always return to her, no matter where my life takes me. And I have.”

The shoals began to lower, once more, and the world blurred at the edges, became softer.

“She said I would be a good sister; better than she ever was, to her brothers. And I have done my best to look after my sisters—who are, save one, if you are wondering, quite normal. And I hardly ever have to thrash sense back into them.”

“I beat sense into young Tolly,” said older Tolo. “She is not a bad girl.”

“You can only do that as long as they are at your side,” I said. And then I stopped talking, and I remembered that long year, and also I remembered Miki when we were both small, sitting together at the bus stop with dirt on our faces, she looking at me as if I were the strongest and wisest woman in all the world.

“Ran away, eh? I ran away when I was a lass. I was twelve. I went as far as the court of the King in the Clouds, the Father of the current King.”

“That’s not something you hear spoken aloud.”

“I am not afraid. Not here. Whose to hear us? Black rays? I saw him. He was a fat and ugly man, who spoke the language of the air breathers well, and our own tongues with difficulty. But he was still our King. And if he is to come to us again, he will need gold, for vessels and weapons and to feed the troops that he raises.”

“So I believe. That is why we go in search of the cave.”

“This is bad gold. It does not come free. It has its cost.”

“Everything has its cost.”

I was remembering every landmark—climb at the whale ribs, cross the first three currents, then walk along the fourth until the five heaped stones and find where the rock looks like a seagull and walk on between two sharply jutting walls of black rock, and let the slope bring you with it...

I could remember it, I knew. Well enough to find my way down again. But the silty fogs confused me, and I could not be certain.

We reached a small glade of seagrass, high in the mountains, and drank sweet wine, caught huge white creatures that were not shrimps or lobsters or crabs, and ate them raw like sausages, for we could not find any fire sand to cook them, that high.

We slept on a wide ledge beside the frosted seagrass and woke into shoals before sunrise, when the world was grey and blue.
"You were sobbing in your sleep," said Toloi.

"I had a dream," I told her.

"I do not have bad dreams," Toloi said.

"It was a good dream," I said. It was true. I had dreamed that Miki still lived. She was grumbling about the fuckboys at the meatpacking plant, and telling me of her time in the hills with the horses, and of things of no consequence, smiling her wide-toothed smile and tossing her hair the while, inblack and golden like my mother’s, though they were no relation.

"Good dreams should not make a woman cry out like that," said Toloi. A pause, then, “I have no dreams, not good, not bad.”

"No?"

"Not since I was a young girl."

We rose. A thought struck me: "Did you stop dreaming after you came to the cave?"

She said nothing.

We walked along the mountainside, into the silty mist white and cold, as the sunroot behind us lit up. The mist seemed to thicken and fill with light, in the sunlight, but did not fade away and I realized that it must be a cloud, sunk beneath the waves. The world glowed. And then it seemed to me that I was staring at a woman of my size, a small, dumpy woman, her face a shadow, standing in the air in front of me, like a ghost or an angel, and it moved as I moved. It was haloed by the light, and shimmered, and I could not have told you how near it was or how far away. I have seen miracles and I have seen evil things, but never have I seen anything like that.

"Is it magic?" I asked, although I smelled no magic in the water.

Toloi said, "It is nothing. A property of the light. A shadow. A reflection. No more. I see a woman beside me, as well. She moves as I move." I glanced back, but I saw nobody beside her.

And then the little glowing woman in the air faded, and the cloud, and it was day, and we were alone.

We climbed all that morning, ascending. Toloi’s ankle rolled and twisted the day before, when she had slipped at the current. Now it swelled in front of me, swelled and went red, but her pace did not ever slow, and if she was in discomfort or in pain it did not show on her face.

I said, "How long?" as the dusk began to blur the edges of the world.

"An hour, less, perhaps. We will reach the cave, and then we will sleep for the night. In the morning you will go inside. You can bring out as much gold as you can carry, and we will make our way back off the mountain."

I looked at her, then: salted hair, grey eyes, so huge and wolvarkine a woman, and I said, "You would sleep outside the cave?"

"I would. There are no monsters in the cave. Nothing that will come out and take you in the night. Nothing that will eat us. But you should not go in until daylight."
And then we rounded a rockfall, all black rocks and grey half-blocking our path, and we saw the cave mouth. I said, “Is that all?”

“You expected marble pillars? Or a giant’s cave from a gossip’s fireside tales?”

“Perhaps. It looks like nothing. A hole in the rock face. A shadow. And there are no guards?”

“No guards. Only the place, and what it is.”

“A cave filled with treasure. And you are the only one who can find it?”

Toloi laughed then, like a seal’s bark. “The coasties know how to find it. But they are too wise to come here and take its gold. They say that the cave makes you evil: that each time you visit it, each time you enter to take gold, it eats the good in your soul, so they do not enter.”

“And is that true? Does it make you evil?”

“No. The cave feeds on something else. Not good and evil. Not really. You can take your gold, but afterwards, things are,” she paused, “things are flat. There is less beauty in a sunbeam, less meaning in a song, less joy in a kiss, less wonder in a mage’s spell...” She looked at the cave mouth and I thought I saw fear in her eyes. “Less.”

I said, “There are many for whom the lure of gold outweighs the beauty of a sunbeam.”

“Me, when young, for one. You, now, for another.”

“So we go in at dawn.”

“You will go in. I will wait for you out here. Do not be afraid. No monster guards the cave. No spells to make the gold vanish, if you do not know some cantrip or rhyme.”

We made our camp, then; or rather we sat in the darkness, against the cold rock wall. There would be no sleep there.

“You took the gold from here, as I will do tomorrow. You bought a bar with it, a husband, a good name.”

“Aye, and they meant nothing to me, once I had them, or less than nothing. And if your gold pays for the King- or the Queen Over the Water to see us and rule us fairly and bring about a land of joy and prosperity and warmth, it will still mean nothing to you. It will be as something you heard of that happened to a woman in a tale.”

“I have lived my life to bring the Good King back.”

“You take the gold back to them that rule. Your King will want more, because Kings will always want more. It is what they do. Each time you come back, it will mean less. The sunbeam means nothing. Killing a man means nothing.”

Silence then, in the darkness. I heard no wolvarks: only the wind that called and gustes about the peaks like a mother seeking her babe; like a sister calling for sister; like a lover weeping in the night.

“We have both killed men. Have you ever killed a woman, Toloi Cruickshank?”

“I have not. I have killed no woman, no girls.”

I ran my hands over my obi in the darkness, fingers seeking and smoothing over birds and flowers
stitched in thread gone grey with oil and dirt, the memory of love. I smoothed my fingers over the handle of my switchblade knife, smooth and cold. I had not intended to ever tell her, only to strike when we were out of the mountains, strike once, strike quiet, but now I felt the words being pulled from me, would I or never-so.

“They say there was a girl. And a thorn-bush of coral.”

If I said another word, I knew, she would be silent on the subject, and never speak on’t again. So I said nothing. Only waited.

“They told me the ostles of the lowlands were strong and lovely, and that a woman could gain honor and glory by adventuring off to the south and returning with the fine red horses.

“So I went south, and never a horse was good enough until on a hillside in the lowlands I saw the finest, reddest, loveliest horses that a woman has ever seen. So I began to lead them away, back the way I had come.

“She came after me with a stick. The horses were her lord’s, she said, and I was a rogue and a knave and a thief- all manner of rough things.

“But she was beautiful, even when angry, and had I not already a young husband I might have dealt more kindly to her. Instead I pulled a knife, and touched it to her throat, and bade her stop speaking.

“I would not kill her- I would not kill a woman, and that is the truth- so I tied her, by her hair, to a thorn coral, and I took her knife from her obi, to slow her as she tried to free herself, and pushed the blade deep into the earth.

“I tied her to the thorn coral tree by her long hair, and I thought no more of her as I made off with her horses.

“It was another year before I was back that way. I was not after horses that day, but I walked up the side of that bank- it was a lonely spot, and if you had not been looking, you might not have seen it. Perhaps nobody searched for her.”

“I heard they searched. Although some believed her to be taken by reavers, and others believed her run away with a tinker, or gone to Sea. But still, they searched.”

“Aye. I saw what I did see- perhaps you’d have to have stood where I was standing, to see what I did see. It was an evil thing I did, perhaps.”

“Perhaps?”

“I have taken gold from the cave of the mists. I cannot tell any longer if there is good or there is evil. I sent a message, by a child, at an inn, telling them where she was, and where they could find her.”

I closed my eyes but the world became no darker.

“There is evil,” I told her.
I saw it in my mind’s eye: her skeleton picked clean of clothes, picked clean of flesh, as naked and white as anyone would ever be, hanging like a child’s puppet against the thorn-bush coral, tied to a branch above it by its black-golden hair.

“At dawn,” said Toloi Cruickshank, as if we had been talking of provisions or the water, “you will leave your blade behind, for such is the custom, and you will enter the cave, and bring out as much gold as you can carry. And you will bring it back with you, to the mainland. There’s not a soul in these parts, knowing what you carry or where it’s from, twould take it from you. Then send it to the King Over the Water, and he will pay his men with it, and feed them, and buy their weapons. One day, he will return for us lost souls. Tell me on that day that there is evil, little woman.”

When the sun was up, I entered the cave. It was quiet in there. I could hear the soft rush of water on stone, of sand over sand, and I felt a wind on my face, which was strange, because there was no wind inside the mountain.

In my mind, the cave would be filled with gold. Bars of gold would be stacked like firewood, and bags of golden coins would sit between them. There would be golden chains and golden rings, and golden plates, heaped high like the china plates in a rich man’s house.

I had imagined riches, but there was nothing like that here. Only shadows. Only rock.

Something was here, though. Something that waited.

I have but three secrets- one I have said; one, it is easy enough to guess; and one that lies beneath all my other secrets, and not even my sisters or brother know it, although my twin Eleanor knows as there are no secrets between us, truly, and it is this: my mother was a mortal woman, a Demon and the daughter of Demons, but my father- our father, excepting my brother who was not born of my mother though he is her son all the same- our father came to our mother from out of the West, and to the West he returned by sleeping roads, when he had tired of sporting with her. I cannot be sentimental about my parentage: I am sure he does not think of her, and doubt that he ever knew of us, of me. But he left us with our gifts of magic, and me with a body that is small- dainty hands and flat breasts, fine features and fine hair, dainty legs and tiny pink suckers all down them- and fast, and strong; and perhaps I take after him in other ways- I know not. I am ugly, as mermaids go, and my father and mother were both beautiful- though, concerning my father, I only have my mother’s whispered words, and only once when I came home in tears at being called ugly in school again.

Perhaps she was deceived.

I wondered what I would have seen in that cave if my father had been anything other than what he was.
You would be seeing gold, said a whisper that was not a whisper, from deep in the heart of the mountain. It was a lonely voice, and distracted, and bored—and, at my entrance, intrigued. It sounded like—no, not like my mother. It sounded like a voice I could have heard, had things been different—like a voice I’d never heard before at all.

“I would see gold,” I said aloud. “Would it be real, or would it be an illusion?”

The whisper was amused. You think like a mortal woman, child, making things always to be one thing or another. It is gold they would see, and touch. Gold they would carry back with them, feeling the weight of it the while, gold they would trade with other mortals for what they needed. What does it matter if it is there or no if they can see it, touch it, steal it, murder for it? Gold they need and gold I give them.

“And what do you take, for the gold you give them?”

Little enough, for my needs are few, and I am old: too old to follow my sisters into the West, too old to take the Dreaming Road. I taste their pleasure and their joy. I feed, a little, feed on what they do not need and do not value. A taste of heart, a lick and a nibble of their fine consciences, a sliver of soul. And in return a fragment of me leaves this cave with them and gazes out at the world through their eyes, sees what they see until their lives are done and I take back what is mine.

“Will you show yourself to me?”

I could see, in the darkness, better than any woman born of mortal man and woman could see. All my sisters can. I saw something move in the shadows, and then the shadows congealed and shifted, revealing formless things at the edge of my perception, where it meets imagination. Troubled, I said the thing it is proper to say at times such as this: “Appear before me in a form that neither harm nor is offensive to me.”

Is that what you wish?

The rasp of sand on stone. “Yes,” I said.

From out of the shadows it came, and it stared down at me with empty sockets lit with glowing motes of weeplight, smiled at me with wind-weathered ivory limned with grime. It was all bone, save its hair, and its hair was black and gold, and wrapped about the branch of a thorn-bush coral.

“That offends my eyes.”

I took it from your mind, daughter of my house, said a whisper that surrounded the skeleton thing. Its jawbone did not move. I chose something nearly like what you loved. I chose something like your Miki, as she was the last time you saw her.

I closed my eyes, but the figure remained.

It said, the reaver waits for you at the mouth of the cave. She waits for you to come out, weaponless and weighed down with gold. She will kill you, and take the gold from your dead hands.

“But I’ll not be coming out with gold, will I?”

Will you?

I breathed, and listened to the blood rushing in my ears. I thought, a moment, in the darkness. I thought of Toloi Cruickshank, the salt-grey through her hair, the line of her flat mouth. She was bigger than I am, but all women are bigger than I am—shoulders, spine, breasts, hips, all of her.
Perhaps I was stronger, and faster, but she was also fast, and she was strong.

*She killed my beloved*, I thought, then wondered if the thought was mine or if it had crept out the shadows into my head. *My beloved died because a reaving woman found her. Took her knife and took her horses and took her honor- what else was she to do but die?* Aloud, I said, “Auntie Whispers, is there another way out of this cave?”

*You leave the way you entered, through the mouth of my cave.*

I stood there and did not move, but in my mind… I was not an animal in a trap, not exactly. I was more… more like beating rice to rid it of chaff and split it to cook; ideas tossed up high and let to fall down and be caught again, the least of them blowing away like dust. No fear and no hesitation and no regret. No. None of those, not now. Not ever again.

I said, “Auntie Whispers, I am weaponless. She told me that I could not enter this place with a weapon. That it was not the custom.”

*It is the custom now, to bring no weapon into my place. It was not always the custom, niece. Follow me,* said the she-thing of my house in the skeleton shape of my Miki.

I followed her, for I could see her, even when it was so dark that I could see nothing else.

In the shadows it said, *It is beneath your hands.*

I crouched and felt it. The haft felt like bone- perhaps a rib from a whale. I touched the blade cautiously in the darkness, discovered that I was over something large, almost like a sword- but more like a paring knife than any weapon. It was thin at the spine and thinner at the edge, sharp at the tip and the pommel. It would be better than nothing.

“Is there a price?”

*There is always a price.*

“Then I will pay it. I ask two other things, Auntie Whispers. The first… won’t you come with me, into the light? A journey too hard for one alone is made easier by two together.”

*Live through your battle to come, and perhaps I shall.*

“Then the second, and last… you say that you can see the world through her eyes.”

The glowing motes in those empty hollow sockets flickered, and then the whole skull nodded.

“Then, Auntie Whispers- I ask that you tell me when she sleeps.”

It said nothing. I felt a hand- and though it looked like a skeleton, it felt warm, hard as bone but gentle, gentle, touch the strands of my hair that had fallen out of my tenugui. The warm hard fingers tucked my hair behind my ear, and stroked down the side of my face, down the side of my neck, rested on my shoulder and squeezed. It said nothing. It melded into the darkness, and I felt alone in that place- but not uncared for, nor unwelcomed, nor unloved.

Time passed. I followed the sound of the rasping sand, took a water swollen plum from my belt, and ate it. I ate half of my last mochi, breaking it in half and then working the half until it stretched and squished and then chewing it in small bites until it dissolved into nothing at all but a sweet-sour taste and a sticky film on my teeth. I slept and woke and slept again, and dreamed of my mother waiting for me as the day turned to night and the seasons changed, as I grew and she withered away; waiting
for me just as I had waited for Miki, waiting in the painful space of not knowing - waiting for me forever.

Something, a finger, touched my hand: it was not bony and hard. It was soft, and humanlike, but ever so just too cold and too light. *She sleeps.*

I left the cave in the blue light, before dawn. She slept across the cave, catfishlike, I knew, such that the slightest touch would have woken her. I kept my weapon in front of me, a bone handle and a beak-like blade of blackened silver star-steel, and I reached out and took what I was after, without waking him.

Then I stepped closer, and her hand grasped for my ankle and her eyes opened.

“Where is the gold?”

“I have none.”

The wind blew cold on the mountainside. I had danced back, out of her reach, when she had grabbed at me. She stayed on the ground, pushed herself up onto one elbow.

Then she said, “Where is my knife?”

“I took it,” I told her. “While you slept.”

She looked at me, sleepily. “And whyever would you do that? If I was going to kill you I would have done it on the way here. I could have killed you a dozen times.”

“But I did not have gold then, did I?”

She said nothing.

I said, “If you think you could have got me to bring the gold from the cave, and that not bringing it out would have saved your miserable soul, then you are a fool.”

She no longer looked sleepy. “A fool, am I?”

She was ready to fight. It is good to make people who are ready to fight angry.

“Not a fool. No. For I have met fools and idiots, and they are happy in their idiocy, even with straw in their hair. You are too wise for foolishness. You seek only misery and you bring misery with you and you call down misery on all you touch.”

She rose then, holding a rock in her hand like an axe, and she came at me. I am small, and she could not strike me as she would have struck a woman of her own size. She leaned over to strike. It was a mistake.

I held the bone haft tightly, and stabbed upward, striking fast with the pointy beak of the paring knife, like an eel. I knew the place I was aiming for, and I knew what it would do.

She dropped her rock, clutched at her right shoulder. “My arm,” she said. “I cannot feel my arm.”

She swore then, fouling the air with threats and curses. The dawn light on the mountaintop made everything so beautiful and blue. In that light, even the blood that had begun to billow and soak into her garments was purple. She took a step back, so she was between me and the cave. I felt exposed,
the rising sun at my back.

“Why do you not have gold?” she asked me. Her arm hung limply at her side.

“There was no gold there for such as I,” I said.

She threw herself forward, then, ran at me and kicked at me.

I ducked and dropped the too large paring knife from my hands. I threw my arms around her leg, and I held on to her as together we tumbled off the mountainside into the current.

Her head was above me, and I saw triumph in it, and then I saw black water, and then the valley floor was above me and I was rising to meet it and then it was below me and I was being dragged to my death.

A jar and a bump, and now we were turning over and over on the side of the mountain, the world a dizzying whirligig of rock and pain and sky and curses, and I knew I was a dead woman falling, but still I clung to the leg of Toloi Cruickshank.

I saw a leopard spotted ray in flight, but below me or above me I could no longer say. It was there, in the dawn light piercing through the silt and gloom of the deep sea, in the shattered fragments of time and perception, there in the pain. I was not afraid: there was no time and no space to be afraid in, no space in my mind and no space in my heart. I was being dragged with the current, holding tightly to the leg of a woman who was trying to kill me; we were crashing into rocks, scraping and bruising and then…

...we stopped. Stopped with a force enough that I felt myself jarred, and was almost thrown off Toloi Cruickshank and to my death beneath. The side of the mountain had crumbled under the force of rushing water there, long ago, sheared off and scrubbed smooth, leaving a sheet of blank rock, as smooth and as featureless as glass. But that was below us. Where we were, there was a ledge, and on the ledge there was a miracle: stunted and twisted, high above the kelpline, where no kelp has any right to grow, was a twisted yronwood kelp, not much larger than a bush, although it was old. It’s roots grew into the side of the mountain, and it was this yronwood kelp that had caught us in it’s grey-green arms.

I let go of the leg, clambered off Toloi Cruickshank’s body, and onto the side of the mountain. I stood on the narrow ledge and looked down at the sheer drop. There was no way down from here. No way down at all.

I looked up. It might be possible, I thought, climbing slowly, with fortune on my side, to make it up that mountain. If it did not crumble beneath my fingers. If the current was not too hungry. And what choice did I have? The only alternative was death.

A voice: “So. Will you leave me here to die, bangtail?”

I said nothing. I had nothing to say.

Her eyes were open. She said, “I cannot move my right arm, since you stabbed it. I think I broke a leg in the fall. I cannot climb with you.”

I said, “I may succeed, or I may fail.”

“You’ll make it. I’ve seen you climb. After you rescued me, crossing that waterfall. You went up
those rocks like only a bangtail like you could’ve, with your legs and your suckers.”

I did not have her confidence in my climbing abilities.

She said, “Swear to me by all you hold holy. Swear by your king, who waits over the Sea as he has since we drove his subjects from this land. Swear by the things you creatures hold dear- swear by dreams and smoke, by shadows and shark skin, by dice and silence. Swear that you will come back for me.”

“You know what I am?”

“I know nothing. Only that I want to live.”

“I swear by these things… by dreams and smoke, by shadows and shark skin, by dice and by silence and sunbeams through silt. I swear by green hills of seagrass and standing gates of stone. I will come back.”

“I would have killed you. I had planned to kill you, and take the gold back as my own.”

“I know.”

Her hair framed her face like a salt-greyed halo. There was red blood on her cheek where she had scraped it in the fall.

“You could come back with ropes. My rope is still up there by the cave-mouth, but you’d need more than that.”

“Yes, I will come back with ropes.”

“When?”

I looked up at the rock above us, examined it as best I could.

Sometimes good eyes mean the difference between life and death, if you are a climber. I saw where I would need to be as I went, the shape of my journey up the face of the mountain. I would have to climb up pressed flat against the stone as the current bore down. I thought I could see the ledge outside the cave, from which we had fallen as we fought. I would head for there. Yes.

I blew on my hands, to warm them and clear the dust from them before I began to climb. “I will come back for you,” I said. “With ropes. I have sworn.”

“When?” she asked, and she closed her eyes.

“In a year. I will come here in a year.”

I began to climb. The woman’s cries followed me as I stepped up and crawled and stuck and clung and hauled myself up the side of that mountain, mingling with the cries of the rays, closing in on the stink of blood; and they followed me back from the Foggy Mountain, with nothing to show for my pains and my time but a knife I cannot use for cooking nor fighting and an Auntie who has gone home now, and I will hear her screaming, at the edge of my mind, as I fall asleep or in the moments before I wake, until I die.
It did not crumble, and the current pulled and pressed at me but it did not throw me down. I climbed, and I climbed in safety.

When I reached the ledge, the cave entrance seemed like a darker shadow in the noonday sun. I stepped to it, and entered.

“Auntie Whispers, are you here?”

_I am, my niece._

“I have done one part of what I set out to do.”

_You have, and your first battle is won. She that fell was the last to carry a piece of me; and she will be dead soon._

“Will you come with me?”

_I will come with you, niece._

I took my Auntie Whispers cold, thin hand, and drew her into the light. She was not a skeleton at all, merely thin and weary and old, her hair nearly white and her eyes a filmy blue from cataracts. We turned from the little hole in the mountain, turned my back on the mountain, and from the shadows that were already gathering in the cracks and the crevices and deep inside my skull, and I began to lead my Auntie home, away from the Foggy Mountain. I left the Smoking Mountain behind, to return in a year.

There are a hundred roads and a thousand currents that would take us back home beyond the Red Gate, far to the West, where my mother and brother and sisters and home would be waiting. On my red legs, and my Auntie’s see-through fins, we swam for it.

I returned as I said I would to the Mountain; but I never could find that cave again.

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Canterlot Village, at the Base of Canterlot Mountain; It’s much nicer than I thought it would be, I shouldn’t have skipped visiting so many times…

Dearest Journal,

Canterlot Village is the quintessential small town outside a big city- just far enough to not be worth making a suburb of the city itself, but not so far that ponies who work in the city but can’t afford to live there can’t make the commute. It’s a village of rolling foothills and pretty rowhouses.

A place of blue saddlebags and heavy collars. I can understand why I skipped visiting before; it’s too much like Trottingham.
Trottingham is a small village of maybe eighteen hundred head, and that means… well, consider this. Growing up, green through bridle grade school had an overall enrollment of about one hundred ponies. I have almost no interests in common with the ponies I grew up with- the only thing I really paid attention to was the weather, because it changes what the bees do- and everyone on Trottingham pays attention to the weather. We have to, it’s an island in an uncolonized area- it’s rare to ever see pegasi in Trottingham.

That’s probably why I kept flirting with him, looking back- I like pegasi, I like their wings and the way their eyes are just a little bit bigger than most other ponies. I like that their coats and manes are just slightly greasy to the touch; I like the smell of their feathers, the length of their whiskers, the weird suction-y feeling of their hooves on my sweaty flanks…

There are almost no pegasi on Trottingham. What few there are mostly concern themselves with Militia business, Griffins, fishing, and sports. I like science, and art, history and mathematics; I read poetry and I work very hard every day. For me, growing up… I didn’t really make genuine friends.

I was under the impression that I was just weird, and not really part of the herd- right up until I started correspondence school with my Aunt Ravel’s encouragement. She and Auntie Zipper put me in contact with a number of ponies- I signed myself up for penpals all across the world in an effort to learn different languages, I got several jobs for magazines and printing companies, and once I’d saved up enough, I went off to see the world.

The world is big, and beautiful- more full of wonders than I can describe here but briefly. Did you know, Journal, that Golia is called the Cradle of Equinity? I can believe it- something about that sea of grass, caught between two rivers and so near the sea… I felt quite as if I could see forever, as if I could run forever. My Golian penfriend, Moda, let me stay with her for a month. I’d never felt more welcomed anywhere- not even at my home in Trottingham, which, supposedly, was meant to be the most welcoming place I could be.

Home is where your heart is- but my heart hasn’t been in Trottingham for a good long time, more so after I met Tristan than before.

I’ve got it on my list- before I’m finished, I’m going to go to Mareseille, and I’m going to see all the beautiful things Tristan told me about in our conversations.

I swear I will.

But- truly, I did think I wasn’t particularly likeable until I started making penfriends.

There are pros and cons to living in a large village. Crime is almost never something to worry about, and you can forget to lock your door- or even leave the keys in the lock on the outside for hours on end. It’s safe for foals to wander around on their own, and everypony looks out for each other. The school is small, and classes are usually about twenty or so, meaning any foal will get a lot of attention. The area tends to be fairly rural; one only needs to walk for a ten or twenty minutes to be surrounded by fields and woodland park.

And if you move to a large village, you’ll always be an incomer to most ponies. I wasn’t actually born in Trottingham; I’m not, as so many took such pains to remind me, actually from Trottingham. I didn’t make any real deep friendships there- well, except for Lami, but she doesn’t exactly count as she’s also marked ‘outsider’. I had to go to Griffinstone Pleasant to do my shopping, which wasn’t much bigger than Trottingham but so much friendlier- and if I wanted decent selection in the shops, I had to go much further west.
Large villages, in some ways, are perfect for what I want— a safe place to raise a foal— but I truly doubt my foal will want to stay in a village. As soon as they become an adult… what will there be for them? Who will be their friend?

...Who will be mine? It’s not enough to have a cousin— I need friends of my own, too. Maybe I should move to Vanhoover, even if it’s so expensive and the weather reminds me of all the worst parts of Trottingham...

Guilds have existed since Roamin’ times, and possibly even earlier— the Roaming Herds were the first surviving instance of a culture of ponies that had a written language; they were preceded by numerous cultures around the world. Linguists have traced folktales, colt and filly stories, myths, legends, and even certain nursing rhymes back much further, back to when ponies had more than one toe-bone in our hooves— that’s several thousand years. The Great Clamour only eradicated about a hundred years or so of history; and there was quite a lot it simply couldn’t touch. Chaos and Order are matters of perspective.

A guild is an association of craftsmen, artisans, or skilled labourers who share a common skill or profession. The guilds that emerged out of Unified Ponyland helped shape the feudal system that was in place at the time by creating a skilled working class which consisted of free ponies with expertise in specialized trades. It’s not easy to do a number of things lots of ponies take for granted— cooking, baking, making candles, rugs, charcoal, parchment, quills and sofas… all of these things and quite a few more require extensive training to make a pony who can even attempt their production. To make a pony who’s good at making these things, you need a pony who’s been well trained to train them— often for five or six generations. (If you want a good archer, you start with the grandsire.)

The guilds, and the unions that grew out of them, give commoners enough clout to thrive in a society where knights, dames, and the nobility hold most of the power. The farmer, the baker, and the candlestick maker of that famous nursing rhyme were undoubtedly all guild members.

A very significant aspect of guilds is the apprenticeship system. A master craftspony— like Frank Starbuck, as an example— agrees to take on a filly or a colt as an apprentice, usually after they’ve gotten their cutie mark. The yearling would live with the master, and the yearling’s parents are expected to pay for their training— not their room and board, but the master’s time, and supplies for the yearling, are supposed to be paid for by the parents. Things have changed quite a bit in recent years— for one, the government now matches parental fees, or even exceeds them in certain circumstances. For another, the master craftspony has to go through foster parent certification, to ensure that they’ll provide proper care and housing to their prospective students. A yearling and a fully grown pony are not the same at all— and though Carrot and Fern were stunningly mature in a lot of ways, they were both still children in a lot more. Finally, and most importantly, the apprentice owns what they produce, and are to be credited for what they work on— meaning, if they win a prize for something they make, they keep the prize money; if they work on a production piece, they are to be paid like any other working pony; and if they make an innovative design, they get most of the royalties for their work.

These funds are kept and managed by the master craftspony, and part of their job is to teach their apprentice how to care for their money. As the apprenticeship lasts for ten years or more, this allows for deep personal bonds to form; and it allows the yearling time and space to grow up, make mistakes, and change in a relatively safe environment that isn’t with their parents.

Once an apprenticeship is over, the apprentice becomes a Journeypony and can now work for a direct wage. That journeypony will then save up their wages to buy or set up a shop of their own,
and work to complete their guild’s requirements to become a master craftspony.

I belong to the International Guild of Spellweavers and Clothiers, Journal- they’re combined because so many of the woven spells can be translated into embroidered stitches in clothing, and are useful either way. Oh, yes- international guilds.

Membership in a guild is required in order for a pony to do business in a region- the guild will handle your licensing and various fees, and as they set prices and standards for their member’s products, the quality of a guild-verified producer is guaranteed. Guilds also protect any secrets of their particular trade- in my case, where to get some of the things I use for my creations, certain color mixes, certain spells… Guilds also take on civic duties, such as caring for widows, orphans, and sick members. Guilds became unions during the Rise of the Commons; both guilds and unions will advocate for wage earners and service providers as well as craftsponies and artisans.

After all, you cannot demand a labor or service or product or art from somepony and then degrade them for providing you with it.

A guild will always have an enormous impact on the economy of the territory it covers. Whether that impact is beneficial is a topic of heated debate, even now. Still- it cannot be denied that guilds provide skilled workers in a variety of specialized fields, keep an economy healthy, and allow the working class to prosper.

These organizations can offer experience and resources to anypony willing to meet the requirements to join- and they can be an ally, a training ground, a proving field, a client; a competitor, an adversary, even the ultimate destructor. If the Guild of Fishers hadn’t based themselves in Griffonstone, Trottingham would have an atmosphere that’s friendly to pegasi. But they did; and Trottingham doesn’t.

In my cousin Ace Spade’s case, the Whitebeard Mercenary Company belongs to the Guild of Adventurers; neither bad nor good, and surprisingly in demand.

There’s a few things a guild needs to function properly.

Firstly, it needs a charter- the list of rules and values outlining the guild’s purpose and scope. The local government keeps track of all the guilds so as to keep taxes appropriate and ensure that their constituents are provided for in all needful areas- thus, every guild is required to have a charter on file with the various local, state, national, and international legal scribe files.

There are about eight key elements that must be present with any well-written guild charter- and if you’re say, starting a school that teaches a trade, like, oh, spellweaving, taking a look at the necessary properties of a well-written guild charter is probably a good idea.

First, the name of the guild (school) must be listed. There aren’t many requirements for the name, and in most places it can be as creative as the guild would like it to be- but it can’t be anything illegal. No Thieves Guild (though such a thing has, historically, existed); if you put such a name on the charter and send it in, it almost certainly won’t be approved, and you’ll probably end up in jail.

Second, the main location of the guild (school) must be listed. This should be specific down to the city or village level; for example, it’s not good enough to say that your guild is located in the Barony of Blueblood, but it would be acceptable to say that your guild is located in the village of Canterlot (which is not the city of Canterlot), in the Barony of Blueblood. You can probably move your guild (school) later on if you need or want to, but such changes usually have to be approved before they can be actioned.

Third, the purpose of the guild should be listed. This requirement follows the same restrictions the
Guild name does- nothing illegal allowed. Essentially, when you’re forming a purpose for a guild or a school, you need to think about why you decided to start in the first place. Do you want to help others with your skills? Do you want to go adventuring? Did you want to provide a service? Any of these things can be a legitimate purpose for a guild; and teaching others how to do these things is a legitimate purpose for a school.

Fourth, the guild should have its own set of bylaws. These bylaws conform to the laws of the land in which the guild is chartered. Bylaws specify what requirements there are for membership, as well as what is required to remain in the guild. They may also specify any relevant items specific to the guild- ex. In Ace’s guild, there’s a bylaw about how spoils, treasures, and acquisitions are to be divided among the party.

Fifth, the guild should have provisions for the choosing and removal of guild officers. Guild officers are those below the guildmaster that help in the administration of the guild. Guild officers include assistant guildmasters- a pegasus named Marco Polo (he’s got a winged pineapple as a cutie mark, and there’s something distinctively… peacock-y about his wing-feathers); communication regulators- an earth pony called Ricecake Winterfield; cooks- a unicorn called Thatch, of all things; as well as guild scribes, outfitters (Icy Iron, a beautiful… unicorn. I know they’re a unicorn, and that’s about it), and so on. In most guilds, the officers are chosen either by the guildmaster (he really does have the largest, whitest mustache I’ve ever seen), or by a vote of the members of the guild. Guild officers are removed in much the same way, though of course each guild is free to create its own policy.

My cousin Ace is actually an Officer in his guild/mercenary company… or maybe I’ve completely misunderstood the equish I heard that day, it is not at all like trosh and I have to remember that- Ace Spade is the Second Division Commander of the Whitebeard Guild; and, so far as I’m aware, the Second Division is the Accountant’s Division. Ace is in charge of receipts and money- and, actually, just about every member of the Surprise clan is good with numbers. Yes, even Pinkie Pie, now that I consider it practically- she wouldn’t be able to throw as many parties as she does, and have them be as good as they always are, if she wasn’t so good at accounting.

I noticed on our ride up to Canterlot that Ace has a very long mane for a stallion, almost as long as a mares; and that he really has no idea what to do with it. When I was at the wainwrights, getting my vardo, I bought a set of eight two-pronged hair combs off one of the junior apprentices. They’re beechwood, sealed with a mane-safe oil I have in my vardo and carefully inset with the Gems of Harmony: Agate for Honesty; Pink Opal for Kindness; Pietersite for Joy; Red Ruby for Generosity; Sapphire (Blue Ruby) for Loyalty; Yellow Turquoise for Friendship; and Lepidolite for Hope. They’re quite possibly the plainest spelled mane items I’ve ever made- but Ace has a very odd sense of style, and he wouldn’t wear anything fancy in his hair. I know this because I asked him. I also know that the real beauty is in the gems I chose- each one is special in some way, be it cut, clarity, or some other feature I can’t remember the name of.

I also asked him what kind of style he wanted, and he replied ‘buns’. So. I gave him a stacked bun style- I think it will really show off the various highlights in his hair. Ah- so, as near as I can figure, every member of my clan has the same basic coloration- we’re all bays. The basic formula is that our manes and tails are always the same color, and always a color darker in tone than our coats. Ace is no exception.

He’s a unicorn- have I written this down? No, I haven’t- right, he’s a unicorn like me, he was actually born in Canterlot- ah, my guild bylaws prevent me from getting letters of recommendation from any family member who’s also in a guild (farmers aren’t in guilds; they’re in unions- lovely loophole). His mane is extremely bushy, because I think he doesn’t know how to condition it properly- it must collect static like nothing else. I also don’t think he’s gotten a mane cut in a long while- it’s got that ragged edge to it.

Hm. When I asked him, he said that he rarely has the time for an involved mane care regimen- at most, he’s got the time for a wash-condition and brushing. I nodded- and asked if he could add an oil
to his combing or brushing.

He hummed, and then said ‘Probably, but- I’d need a mane cut first, I’ve been putting it off because I didn’t want to go to a stranger for it—’

‘That’s reasonable; when are you getting it done?’

‘Ah- probably this afternoon before I report back to my guild. You could come with me?’

‘Mm, I’d like that- I’ll even have your mane pins ready.’

‘Cool beans!’

Ace’s mane is dark red-brown, brighter where the sun has bleached it or where it grows lighter naturally; it’s shiny and wavy, underneath the overgrowth and road-dust. His coat is a dusty sort of terracotta, and his cutie mark is a fireball. Or possibly a comet, I’ve not gotten quite close enough to make a clear distinction.

Hell, it might even be a firework.

You know, I haven’t actually had a mane cut in three years- I’ve always kept it a bit long, to keep my pin collection in circulation, but… I don’t know. Maybe I feel like a little change. Mmn- nope, no change, just a wash and a trim, same as always.

I also let the hooficurist oil my hooves, which gave them a lovely lustre.

Ace looks much better- and the spelled pins do their job very well, he looks like a totally different stallion with them in. I saw at least three mares and a stallion trip over themselves when he walked past. I think he looks quite nice, myself.

Especially with his new glasses! Oh, Journal, when I learned he wasn’t even wearing contact lenses- ooh, the scolding I gave him! Breaking your glasses in a fight is no excuse- that just means you need to get better glasses, and better at dodging! Silly stallion, with a silly stallion’s pride...

*Sumus plus quam unum sumus seorsum* - *We are stronger together than we are apart*

Those are the words painted onto the lintel of the Whitebeard Adventurers Guild (or is it a mercenary company? It’s unclear, and I feel really awkward about asking… I’ll just listen and see if someone- but they have a motto?)

As I followed Ace into the guild hall, a hush- wait, hold on. Taffy and Lovelace went sightseeing in Canterlot City; Mark is with me and Ace, because he’s finalizing his Guild contract- okay. As I followed Ace and Mark into the guild hall, a hush fell over the ponies within. It got quiet enough that I could hear Ace and Mark quietly talking-

‘-and this is the hall. Mostly everyone comes through here eventually, and it’s open all hours. The fire pits on either side are always stoked- oh, right, um… there’s a water-garden out back, I’ll make sure you get a key for the back door.’

‘Nice!’
'Haha, yeah- Namur will probably challenge you to a race, so- heads up, I guess. Ah- I’d need to double check how many Divisions there are, but the ones based in the hall itself indefinitely are First, Second, Fourth, Sixteenth, and Twelfth. That’s Administration, Accounting, Feed, Quartermaster, and Communications. I’m the Commander for the Second- that’s why I hired you, by the way-’

‘I was wondering, but it makes sense now that you’ve told me-’

Meanwhile, across the hall:

‘Is that…?’

‘Can’t be, he never wears glasses just around, says they make him feel like an egghead-’

‘If it’s Ace, I never knew his hair had so much color- ’

‘It’s him alright; I’d know that cutie mark anywhere-’

‘So- I’ll be stationed with Miss Meadow?’

‘That was my plan. Knowing her plan, it’ll take at least six months to get everything she wants done; not to mention collect all the files she’ll need to get started, set up various permissions, and so on-’

‘Sure, sure. So- I’m helping her run her business too?’

‘You can if you want to- your job from our side will be keeping track of expenses and products gained, so, if you have enough time to help her out, go for it.’

‘Cool!’

I let them outpace me and walk into the Second Division office by themselves. I’m not joining the guild- I can’t, not and also become a master craftspony- guild bylaw. Ugh.

Journal, I’m tired- there’s a nice couch right in a sunbeam, and I feel like a nap. I’ll write any new developments, don’t worry.

Best love, Meadow

Dearest Journal,

I fell asleep on Tristan Woodsmoke at the Whitebeard Guild of Adventurers and now he knows I’m pregnant and- it’s all a bit- shouty. At the moment.

I’m hiding behind Whitebeard’s desk. Well, under it. It’s a very large desk, very roomy. M-more like a picnic table. The scarf I put around Tristan’s neck- I made it for him, to protect him, and only he can remove it.

So, um. Ace and Mark probably won’t be able to kill him.
I- Oh dear.

I have to go stop Mark from drowning Tristan in the pond out back, have to go-

-Meadow

I’m really glad I’m close enough to Udoroth to press close to him like this. He really is just like Sanji-
as soon as he realized I’m afraid, he started hugging me.

I just wanted to have an adventure. I spent so long grinding myself away, trying to keep up with my
sensei’s demands and the dojo’s requirements and my fees and my dues and getting just a little bit
more, scrimping a little bit more- so I could pay the charcoal bill on time this month, please, gods, let
me have enough-

I was happy, at first. When we got the message from somewhere, someone out on the sea calling for
help- I was really happy, because when Captain said we’d answer the call, it meant- well, it meant I
might get to go on an adventure.

The plan the bigjobs worked out over the month it took to get here was simple- the people Captain
said would be going to help out whatever we’d find were split up on teams, and each team was set so
that the people on it could work really well together in everyday matters and in a fight.

The first team to get worked out was Ori and Genny, as TEAM: Overwatch. Their job is to stay way
high up in the sky, and watch for approaching ships, dangerous animals and terrain, and keep us all
connected together. Ori has really powerful Observation Haki- she can observe down to fleas
underneath leaves in a forest, all the way to oncoming storm fronts two islands away. Ori is also
really good at using a snailboard. Genny, meanwhile, is big and strong enough to do all the trick
flying that might be needful to keep them both safe- and Ori, herself, isn’t without power in the air.

As the first TEAM, they were the first ones to actually see this place- it’s an island that’s been cut in
half, and one half is still a little bit on fire, and the other half is frozen. There’s a big tower in the
middle of the split, and that tower had a bunch of letters and numbers I don’t remember except that
they looked like ‘Punk Hazard’ all together.

Their report back about what this island looked like determined the setup of the rest of the TEAMS-
Sneaky Bitches: Robin, Mab, Annie, and Cathey- they’d find all the secrets; Adventure Times:
Captain Luffy, Adelaide (that’s me!), Udoroth, and Sawbones- we’d have a good time with Captain;
Scrawny: Solitaire, Lynn, Gurry, and Ellie- they’d steal all the things ; Brawny: Tellicherry, Neo,
Mono, and Zelda- they’d break what needs breaking; Sword and Sworcery: Zoro, Beatrix, Brook,
and Aoife- they’d pick fights; and finally, Service and Sacrifice: Franky, Mince, Oz, and Deborah.
They’d be preparing relief, if relief could be prepared at all.

The plan was, we’d split off in our teams, explore the island, meet up at the tower in the center, and
help out whoever needed help.

We lost contact with TEAM: Sneaky first; there was lots of shouting, and something falling a long
way down, and then nothing at all. Then Sword and Sworcery snuck into some weird cult meeting,
and we lost them, too- Scrawny and Brawny scattered like silverfish in the light, and I don’t… I
don’t know what happened to Service and Sacrifice. I don’t know where my sisters are, or if they’re
okay; I don’t know where my friends are, or if they’re even still… alive.
The message we got was an encoded cry for help- ‘Help! Help, they’re killing us!’ How were we to know that the one who sent it… the one who sent it was the Queen of Wasps?

There’s a lot more than straight punching that gets taught in a real Karate Dojo- and my style, the coral palm, was developed in direct response to incursion from the Otherside during the War of Separation, during the First Age.

The hits I make, the forms I can one day use- they’re meant to strike Others back into their world, forcefully remind them that this world is not theirs.

There’s twelve things to notice about a person, to tell if they are Other; twelve things to notice, to see if you have been trapped by an Other. They are much like dreams, when you sleep- and learning to be aware in a dream is the first step towards being able to directly battle an Other.

The first is simple- check their reality. Their hair should not move unless they move; their image should not differ from their form. If they have lived long, time should have an impact on them; if you cut them, they should bleed.

The second is continuity. We might blank out the parts of our life that don’t matter- the time we spend doing work, wiping our asses and brushing our teeth- these moments don’t necessarily matter - but. We remember doing them. I remember getting up to brush my teeth after a late night snack yesterday; I remember adjusting my quality waraji before pulling on my nice new aijiro tabi and tying them on.

I remember making sure my mizusagi embroidered hakama lay correctly over my kokushoku- shironeri striped kimono, tucking a blessed rosary into my mizuiro obi stamped and painted with fish and waves for luck; the shelf where I keep my geta and my socks and my other shoes, the way to fold and unfold my hakama so they don’t wrinkle, the shelves where my kimono sleep- I remember the way I did my hair.

April is the last month of spring; the style of kanzashi is trailing soft pink sakura mixed with butterflies and bonbori lanterns, signaling the approach of summer. Cherry blossom viewing at this time of year is a big thing in Ryugu Mergyo- everyone gets at least a full day off to do it. Kanzashi consisting of a single silver (or sometimes gold) cho made of mizuhiki cord are also common- since I had the most public job, my sisters always made sure I had the prettiest kanzashi. But for them… I always made sure their cho kanzashi were new, not old.

My kimono is all in appropriate weight, in colors I wanted to wear- but my hair is all about the month of spring, and sakura viewing. It’s a stacked bun style- the only one I can do without help. No birabira, shidare, or Ogi, because they annoy me. I don’t quite have enough hair for kogai, so that stayed home; but I have enough for the sukashibori keeping my hair in it’s style, and for a green tama; at the crown of my head towards the back, a sakura branch comb.

Here’s a secret about my sisters: we’re actually three sets of twins, and an odd girl out. The pairs are Deborah and Eleanor; Fernanda and Cecelia; Beatrix and Genevieve- and me, Adelaide, is the odd girl out.

How do I know this for sure? It’s simple, really- I’m the only one of my sisters with two-tone hair. In dim light, it looks blond; but in full sunlight, it’s ink black. Deb couldn’t look me full in the face for a good week, when we first Surfaced.
I keep my kanzashi, and the precious picture of mom before she got sick, and a very old picture of her with her brothers, in the box of keepsakes next to my bed- I remember it all, and all the steps it takes to get from waking up to dressed to here, watching the Queen of Wasps- Mother, they call her, or M- gloat over- over-

The third catch for an Other is environment. Other’s main battle tactic is to never, ever come at something head on until whatever they’re coming for can’t escape- to that end, they manipulate the environment, distorting it such that one would trip on flat ground.

The fourth is the people around. If you’re talking to someone who’s been dead for years- without the indication of a genuine Seer that you’ll be speaking with that person, that’s a sure sign of Others.

The fifth is your self image. You know what your body looks like- if it’s looking indefinably wrong, you’ve got Others.

Sixth is your strength and abilities. Are you suddenly super weak, or able to speak languages you’ve never heard? Others.

Seventh is everyday habits. If you need to twist a key in a lock three times instead of once, as is normal, then- Others. Or, possibly, shitty lock- but usually Others.

Eighth is being able to read. Others hate the written word- they get trapped in written contracts more easily than anything else. If you suddenly can’t read, Others are around.

Ninth is a sound compared to grinding, ringing, or mosquitoes buzzing. If it’s accompanied by a creeping sense of paranoia or unease, it’s Others- not an actual, you know, sound.

Tenth is a smell- something like the smell of burnt things, or rot without growth, the taste of soured milk and the color of bruising… Others.

Eleventh is the presence of deals that are too good to be true. Others love them a good used boat to sell.

Twelfth is hard to quantify, but… there’s a gut feeling, a sort of danger-sense you get when you train long enough. In the strongest of warriors, it’ll go off for any danger to the self, no matter the source. It’s not foolproof- but it can alert you to something being undeniably wrong. There are lots of curses floating around the world, left over from the last great incursion of the Others into this world- some people are extremely sensitive to them.

The Wasp Queen has the seeming of a woman with brown skin and gem-red eyes; her hair is short and yellow like pollen. Her body is covered in stripes like battle paint, and her limbs are armored in strange liquidinous black not-armor, because it moves too easily. She’s otherwise nude- and if it weren’t for- for- the Wasp Queen isn’t really a woman, and she didn’t really give birth to all her daughter-soldiers, and they aren’t really women either.

Other’s rely on perception to form their physical natures in this world- and the current perception is that Bees and Wasps are female creatures. The awful, awkward, things fluttering around this enormous room, keeping Captain’s head above water and the rest of him in a tank I can smell the brine of from here- the things that held Missus Mab down while the Queen took a trident and- they are Other.
They are too thin, and they do not have mouths- they cannot eat, or clean themselves, or anything at all like a real, living creature.

The Wasp Queen stabbed Missus Mab with a trident and she’s been pinned through her chest to the floor and bleeding but now she’s not even bleeding she’s not breathing and I’m-

I’m scared-

I’m so scared-

I’m so scared I’m crying, even as Udoroth holds me to his side and the man in the leopard seal hat takes my offered hand because he’s scared too-

But. Even as the Wasp Queen gloats, even as a giant screen on the wall begins showing some kind of advertisement and then cuts to my sister Beatrix being dragged into some kind of- of- closet?

Even though I’m scared like I’ve never been before…

My style of karate was built and tested and perfected specifically to kill Others. I proved my mettle against the entire class at my old Dojo; my teacher made me her personal successor, nevermind my birth status.

I’m scared and this is scary- but when the Wasp Queen, who tricked us and hurt my family and possibly killed Missus Mab says “Who would dare face us now?”

All I can do is say “I will.”

And when she stops and stares at me, all I can say is- “I’ll fight all of you,” before I stand, shrugging off the restraining hands of the men at my side, and step forth.

I don’t know how long I can fight; I don’t know if I’ll survive. But I have to do this. Honor isn’t about making the right choices; it’s about dealing with the consequences of the choices you made. I chose to learn a style of martial arts meant for fighting Others; I chose to master it to the level I have; I am the only one here who has a real chance of threatening them, because Missus Mab is indisposed and Captain Luffy is trapped and Udoroth has too much trauma and Seal Hat Guy is attached by a chain around his neck to the wall.

And Sawbones threw herself down a trash chute.

I can see Robin, crying on the other side of the room- she’s got a chain around her neck too, just like Seal Hat Guy’s. Annie’s unconscious- there’s blood on her hands and blood on her mouth and a big drying mat of bloody hair on her head, and her glasses are gone, too.

It’s only me left who can fight; so, it has to be me that fights.
“I THINK IT’S TIME FOR M TO CHANGE HER LIFE! GET READY EVERYONE: THE SHOW’S ABOUT TO START!”

Ow! No no no no-

“Stop it- I don’t want to change how I look, I like myself the way I am-”

“SHUT YOUR WHORE MOUTH YOU LITTLE PIECE OF SHIT- I don’t know *what* the Mother could have possibly seen in you, you little freak, but you’d best be grateful for this opportunity- Fucking- Let me go-!”

“YOU FIRST!”

I finally break away from the woman, shoving myself back away from her as far as I can, right as a door of some kind, glowing with that unnatural, jittery blue light, slams shut. Fuck. Now we’re both trapped in here.

I squeeze farther away from her, her stomping hooves, her massive haunches- I don’t want to get kicked by her, and I don’t want her to turn on me in here, I’d hate to have to kill her- Ugh, but her shouting is getting really annoying. I wish literally anyone else on my TEAM was good at this kind of thing- I’m barely passing as a follower of the mysterious ‘M’ as it is, but Brook’s a skeleton, Zoro’s terrible at lying, and Aoife flat out refused- said she’d spent too long pretending, she wasn’t going to start again now, which. Fine.

So that leaves me- and Captain said to figure out who was calling for help, so…

Shit, she’s stopped yelling-

“I don’t think anyone can hear me! UUUUGH! I’ll have to power down the Gate; I’ll get demoted for sure,” she says, lower body shifting and bunching with extreme agitation.

She whirls around, staring me down with fanatic outrage and spittle-flecked fury. I don’t hide my reaction, a flinch, and use it to mask the fact that my cower back into the walls isn’t a cower at all. Her ears are flexed with so much aggression, and her eyes are so narrowed with rage, I don’t doubt she can’t read my face at all, nevermind that I’ve shaken my bangs in front to act as a screen. My face is the one thing I’ve never really practiced at controlling- I was always out working in the middle of the forest, so it didn’t matter.

Because I’m Mab’s faithful student, I catalogue her clothing with my eyes, even as I listen to everything she says and implies with my ears-
“You must be **SO FUCKING PROUD** of yourself you little shit.”

Black halter top, likely from a bikini or swimsuit, not fitted well to her but not off the rack; inherited, old deodorant stains in wear pattern not congruent with the size and pitch of her armpits-

“The presentation is ruined, ”

Long brown hair, sleek and shiny, features that would be on the elfish or dreamy side of beautiful if she weren’t screaming. Her ears are dropped down in line with the curve of her head and the stretch of her neck; her face is lowered towards mine, and she’s even backing up so she can lean and stare even more; I keep my gaze lowered, and do my best to cower away from her aggressive stance, but we’re *trapped* - if she rears, I’ll have to gut her.

Does don’t bluff, or fight mock battles; and those hooves are wicked weapons.

“I’m so **sick** of dealing with the *trash-shit* followers of Mother-”

She has hazel eyes, and a small snubby nose; her lips look soft and pink. High cheekbones, graceful features; slim fingers, almond shaped nails. Hard black hooves on long legs, rippling muscle bunching under soft, luxuriously gleaming brown fur- the tan of her belly is the tan of her skin.

“I’ve dedicated **years** of my life working towards a position under the **Elite** - only to watch them waste every opportunity on ugly failures like **you!**”

She’s leaning so close I can smell her breath, her hands digging into her hips leaving scratch marks and bruising behind. Her breath smells of peppermint, green-leaf crushed, eggs, bacon, a little bit of blood- normal deer smell, with a hint of toothpaste. I could count her eyelashes, if I wanted- they’re thick, and brown as her hair, and her eyebrows are perfectly shaped for her face. Her lips really do look very soft; no cracks, no peelies, they even glitter faintly with some sort of sheen-dust.

She’s wearing a **necklace** - oh, it’s meant as a name tag. It’s made of wood, stamped with a name across the center front bib- P-R-U-D-I-T-H is the spelling, I can’t pronounce that without help- and in her ears dangle a pair of wooden earrings that must go with the necklace. There are marks, rank insignia and awards I think, closer to her neck- nothing but her name on the center bib, but on either side…

On the left, three chevrons, a star, a diamond; on the right, a flower, a bird, and… something? No, f-Mab told me this, they’re called… feat-hers? Fe-tsu-eru- feather. Her earrings are different- they’re key cards, I’m almost certain of it, even if they are made of wood.
“But at the end of the day, it’s alright. You wanna know why?”

I shiver as she leans back up to look down on me with total superiority. I stare up at her through my bangs, and watch her reassert that haughty demeanour that dragged me away from Zoro, Aoife, and Brook who was behind the tapestry- the unyielding grip of her hand on my arm and the sharp crack of her hooves on the tiled floor-

“When we get outta here, you’ll go back to living your worthless life. You’ll stray from the path Mother so kindly set out for us and end up in- in some heathen place, whatever you pathetic worthless shits dream up in your freak cabals,”

I’ve been pressing back as hard as I can against the wall; her standing back up, sufficiently appeased by my cowering, let me rise a little too. My arm shifted, and struck something behind me- I only saw this side of the room for a moment, but it looked like pictures, glowing pictures with rocker switches beneath each one, and- I picked a switch, I think.

I heard it click.

“An’ you know where I’m gonna end up? Can your pathetic little shit-mind even fucking guess where I’m going to go?”

I take a moment to swallow, and swallow my rage down- and then I speak.

“P-paradise?”

“That’s right; good job! Maybe one day, you’ll actually have something intelligent to say- but I doubt it. After all, I’ll be looking down on pitiful worthless freaks and miserable failures like you from Paradise- ”

She jerked to a stop, and I could smell- medicine, bitter and syrupy. The expression on her face twitched between rage and shock, before becoming… torpor? A drugged stupor, nodding- thin trails of something blue dripped down her sides, curved around her front and plip-plip-plipped onto the floor between her front legs. She held perfectly still; hardly even breathing.

What-

From somewhere, music began to play.
There were strange arms with little little clippers at their tips bending forwards and back like spiderbird legs, pinching and snapping things off of her body, her clothing and her jewelry, her hair - a long snake like a vacuum came and sucked them all away, spat out her jewelry which fell between my feet - I could almost hear the words of the song, but I was too busy picking up the fallen key cards and keeping myself out of the way to pay attention.

Different arms with, with, cutters, bright blue lines of light piercing through her flesh and bone, cutting her into an organized shape, a pattern, neatly bisected and clipped along lines I don’t don’t understand-

Her right eye wells with tears that fall down her face, even as the rest of her proves incapable of movement. The place where my blood was taken, my left forefinger, stings. I’ve shoved myself as far away from her as I can, truly cowering now - crouched back against the wall of this horrible place, key cards clamped tight in one hand and mouth clamped shut by the other, don’t puke I always close my eyes when I puke and-

I need- to see- this-

Her skin falls away first, followed by layers of fat and muscle. Her brain and nerves and eyes and oh Gods, no no, don’t vomit- oh Gods they didn’t get her back half, the cutters just sliced away the parts of her that didn’t fit- my form, they’re cutting according to my form, everything else is deemed ‘extra’ so they’re just cutting it away-

With a soft chime I can barely hear over my panicked breathing, barely notice over my shaking vision and hand clamped tight to my mouth, oh god don’t throw up- the floor opens, and all the pieces of her all the things ‘Mother’ decided didn’t fit- they’re abruptly funneled into a, a, a meat grinder with some sort of incinerator at the bottom, and I can smell v-venison and something like pork being pasteurized, flash cooked, and I can hear a belt running, the churning thump of of meat being carried away-

No-

The p-pattern I understand now, the pattern was for her nerves and eyes and brain it, ‘Mother’, it didn’t want anything else so it cut it all away nerves shaped like a stick figure with spheres for eyes oh Gods-

Her pupils are huge and there’s a spike a needle SOMETHING IS IN HER BRAIN- the thing in her brain is holding her up-

ew-

ew-
The music is different.

I don’t think I care.

oh this is so gross-

A ring of buzzing blue light drops down from the ceiling and spiderwebs of something like silk but not it smells wrong it’s wrapping her wrapping around her nerves like her skin used to myelin sheaths but they’re gone now being replaced by something- something that’s supposed to be better the whole point of this ‘Heaven’s Gate’ bullshit was that the people who go in come out better that’s what all the cultists said but I-

I can see bones and pseudo-blood vessels because oxygen bonds to iron and that does not smell like blood and her head- is- cracking-

No-

A skeleton but she’s too big she’s- no no no no-

Down and up goes the ring weaving on fake muscles over the fake bones fake fingers fake toes no webbing no fins no cartilage ribs fake fake fake rising up fake fake fake what

What

What

What the hell is this- she has my face as the ring comes down again it lays out that fake fake fake blank white skin like bleached paper like plastic fake fake fake why does she have my face that’s not my jawline what the hell is this-

I can see her brain crushing up against the top of her skull and blood is starting to ooze down her eyes are going dim and starting to roll back in her head the cutters come back again and shoot pinpoint holes through the side of her head and scoop away chunks in little cone shapes their points facing towards her brain and smaller, specialized rings come and- and spin and tug out and repeat the movement of their bigger selves until ears animal ears like- like a mouse - grow out of the sides of her head and-

I’m crying and pressing myself as far back as I can into the side of the room and-

What the hell is this bullshit-

Lenses go into her eyes and with her head tilted back like that I can tell she’s got no voice box no way to speak unless they give her one no wonder no one who’s done this speaks of what happens- spider arms stretch her pliant mouth open and show all of her teeth as not-blood and chunkier somethings start to drip further down her face they took away her pupils why would they do that
It doesn’t come off it doesn’t come off they put something in her mouth and down her throat and over her nose and it doesn’t come off it looks like like the teeth of a mouse what the hell is this- oh Gods there’s blood everywhere- this is- thIS IS-

THIS IS FUCKING BULLSHIT.

I LEARNED THIS TRAINING WITH SOLITAIRE: WHEN I’M REALLY AND TRULY ANGRY, I SMILE. I LEARNED TO USE MY SHEARS BETTER; I LEARNED TO FIGHT FOR REAL. I EVEN LEARNED A SPECIAL MOVE FOR EACH OF MY SWORDS- THEY’RE DIFFERENT, LEFT IS DIFFERENT FROM RIGHT-

FUCK-

AS THE COURTLY MACHINE APPLIES FINISHING TOUCHES TO MY BRAINCRUSHED DOUBLE, I STAND AND SWALLOW DOWN THE LAST OF MY BILE. I PUT THE KEY CARDS INTO MY ZIPPERED POCKET AND CLOSE IT TIGHT; I’LL BE USING BOTH HANDS FOR THIS.

I REACH FOR MY SHEARS WITH MY OTHER HAND, TAKE A HANDLE IN EACH PALM AND CLICK THEM APART. I DON’T SPIN THEM- NO NEED FOR FLOURISHES THIS TIME.

I’M FAR TOO ANGRY FOR THAT.

SHE HAD A NAME AND A DREAM AND FRIENDS AND THEY MADE HER BELIEVE THAT HER DREAM WAS WORTHLESS UNLESS SHE FOLLOWED A MOTHER THAT DID NOT LOVE HER AS A REAL MOTHER WOULD HAVE; AND THEY MADE HER BELIEVE HER BODY WAS UGLY WHEN IT OBJECTIVELY WAS NOT; AND THEY MADE HER BELIEVE THE EXPERIENCES AND VALUES OF OTHER PEOPLE DIDN’T MATTER AT ALL, WHEN THEY’RE THE ONLY THING THAT PROVES YOU’RE NOT THE ONLY BEING IN THE WORLD.

THEY TOOK MY BLOOD AND SHOVED ME IN A BOX TO DIE.

THEY HAD THE AUDACITY TO BROADCAST THIS ATROCITY TO THE WHOLE WORLD AND EVERYONE IN THIS WRETCHED PLACE.

I CAN FEEL MY SISTER ADELAIDE CRYING; I CAN FEEL HER RESOLVE; I CAN FEEL HER TERROR.

I WON’T FORGIVE THEM!

I WON’T FORGIVE THEM FOR KILLING P-R-U-D-I-T-H’S SOUL BEFORE KILLING HER BODY; I WON’T FORGIVE THEM FOR STEALING OF MY BODY AND TRYING TO MURDER ME; I WON’T FORGIVE THEM FOR SHOWING THE WHOLE WORLD
THEIR INHUMAN UGLINESS RATHER THAN CURLING UP IN A HOLE AND DYING LIKE ANY CREATURE WITH COMMON DECENCY WOULD HAVE...

AND ABOVE ALL ELSE...

ABOVE ALL ELSE...

“I WILL NEVER FORGIVE ANY OF YOU FOR MAKING MY SISTER CRY!”
Dearest Journal,

So, there are a few things that every spellweaver gets good at over time. The first is, simply speaking, lifting immense amounts of weight. Every rug has to be washed, stretched, washed again, and washed - well, as many times as it takes for the dye process used to stop expelling excess in the wash. Or to take in the appropriate amount of dye.

Wet fabric is about, eh, six times it’s dry weight - doesn’t matter much when it’s something like a cape or a hanky, but a whole unicorn rug, even rolled up for transport, weighs the same as a fully grown unicorn - often the same as the unicorn that wove it. Or, in whatever case, the same weight as the weaver.

I can work eight wet rugs at the same time.

Lifting three adult stallions who are fighting each other in a pond - along with quite a bit of pond water - then separating them out, gently letting go of the water without letting go of the stallion, and resisting the urge to shake, twist, or otherwise do any of the things I would normally do with a rug.

It’s only past the first trimere that a mare begins to feel the cravings associated with pregnancy. My mother craved blackstrap molasses, orange-blossom honey, sour cherries, pickled limes, eggshell meal, and barley when she was pregnant with me, my sister Spangle Surprise, and my brothers - my older brother, Spadille Surprise, and my younger brother, Solitaire Surprise. I had my first real craving a while ago - moules marinières, after all, is not something a unicorn wants to eat unless they’ve grown up in a mixed family.

Right now, I want onion soup. There’s a misconception most ponies have with onion soup - that the flavor comes from the onions alone. The sweetness, the caramelization, the softness as it hits the tongue - that, indeed, comes from onions. The complexity of flavor, however, comes from the stock. Mostly, it comes from mushrooms. Lots of mushrooms are slimy to the touch, soggy, and a bit lonely - all they need is the thick, creamy soup of joy to become tasty.

I completely ignore the audience I’ve gathered, and I carefully set each stallion equidistant apart, well out of my way as I step in the kitchen, and firmly in the air - and then I set to work. To start with, a roasting pan - and in them, I set out full size potbelly mushrooms, along with... well, basically every kind of mushroom they have in this kitchen that is edible and won’t clash with each other terribly... plus all the ones I like. Add in some kombu, walnuts, ripe tomatoes, malted barley, stale bread rinds, stale cheese rinds... Cut everything into small pieces to increase the surface area, which means more browning and more flavor.

Then, cover everything with a healthy dash of soy sauce; crush some dried mushrooms I like the
taste of into powder, and just- yeah, a nice semi-wet slurry of flavor right there.

One whole head of peeled crushed garlic- just a little, to really amp up that surface area; a small bushel of onions, fine diced; carrots; celery; fennel; leek; season with salt and pepper- then bake it in a medium oven for about an hour.

Once the grilling is done, everything in the pan needs to simmer for a good four hours- or, if you have a pressure cooker, like this kitchen does, two hours. Don’t use a pressure cooker if you don’t know how!

Scrape all the roasted goodness into the pressure cooker, and then add three liters of water in the roasting pan and then into the pot to get all the little stragglers- oh, and add a trussed bundle of herbs, bay leaves and thyme (and rosemary, it felt right), to boost the flavor. Oh, and a little bit of mustard, for some kick. Just a little salt- correct it after the cooking, if you please…

Bring the pressure cooker up to it’s highest setting, then lower it to nearly the lowest and let it go for two hours.

Then, menace the very startled members of the Whitebeard Adventurer’s Guild into giving you, your friend, and your, um, Tristan, some privacy for a private conversation. I do so love my hairpin collection.

So, Journal, apparently none of my Equestrian cousins know how to properly wrangle their manes. This has lead to some alarming misconceptions, the most pertinent of which is that if a Surprise clan member’s mane is sleek and well behaved, they are in dire emotional distress. This is not true.

Firstly, our manes are always extremely curly- Ace is actually semi-constantly either in or on the edge of an emotional disaster, which is why his mane is wavy while also being so short. I haven’t gotten a mane cut in… let me count it properly… goodness, fifteen years. I thought it was less than that, but that was my tail, not my mane.

I have what’s called Heteronomia, a strange magical disorder where my mane and my tail have completely different curl patterns due to external damage to my internal ley lines. My mane is as curly as any other member of the Surprise clan; my tail is pin straight, and always has been. I actually carry a picture of me as a foal for situations just like this, as new schools, new teachers, and government officials always need more than just my word that yes, my mane and tail are supposed to be like that, really.

As for how my ley lines were hurt… Aunt Zipper says my mother was in a very bad accident, and it broke something in her mind; she was sane just long enough to give me the first of her milk, and then she tried to hurt herself very badly, and had to go live in the hospital. I visited her twice a week, every week- right up until she died of heartache, the medical term for what happens when a pony physically, mentally, or emotionally can’t fulfill their special talent.

My mother, Pineapple Surprise, during her moments of clarity, taught me how to care for my mane properly, gave me recipes to bake, taught me songs she would have sung to me as a filly… all sorts of things. Her cutie mark was a boomerang; and the only reason I know how she got it was because, after her death, my Aunt Zipper (Zipper Ripstop, nee Surprise) was finally free to tell me.

As far as I could make out, through my Aunt’s garbled telling (she was so sad, after my mother
died), Mother got her cutie mark by creating an entirely new form of logical progression. Circular reasoning is when you begin with where you should have ended, and work around until you come back to your initial conclusion, ignoring everything that doesn’t fit. Mother’s new form of logic is called Spiraluar Reasoning- whereby you come to a new conclusion by starting with a conclusion you want.

It’s actually very useful for bringing disparate pieces of research together, or understanding trends in history. Mother’s in the books as the philosopher who invented this particular method of research. She’s also in the books as the philosopher who went mad after tampering with forces far beyond her control- while heavily pregnant with me. So far as I could ever figure, from reading her confiscated notes, looking over her experiment logs, and the injuries she got immediately after that final, disastrous experiment, Mother was trying to predict Chaos.

Journal, I don’t know what she was thinking, or why that was her answer to whatever was plaguing her- but I do know that her experiment broke her mind. It was that break that made her heartache so profound; and it’s not like my cousin Pinkie’s bipolar disorder either, that’s managed with diet and magi-medication…

I don’t know, Journal. I suppose, for the sake of simplicity, it’s easiest to say it plain- I am always of two minds about everything, everything there ever is. Part of me wishes to react with spontaneity; and part of me wishes to react with routine. For most ponies, that’s normal; for a Surprise, it’s always one, or the other.

But not me.

Ace didn’t know any of that; Tristan did; and Mark is mortified to learn it, mostly because it’s a Seapony thing to not know so many intimate details about another pony without being intimately involved with them.

Ace also didn’t know that the length of a Surprise mane dictates so much of it’s curl- the sheer weight of the hair stretches the curl out, and I haven’t had a serious mane cut in fifteen years, and I actually sleep with curlers in my tail- yes, really. Tristan posits that I’d be adorable no matter what my mane and tail looked like- I rebut with the simple fact that I absolutely hate being stared at like an exhibit at the science museum, and, inevitably, that’s what happens when I have a shortcut mane and tail.

‘You’d still be cute, though,’

‘...hmph.’

To finish the broth, vent the steam from the pressure cooker- either using your magic, or wearing heat-safe mitts- before sieving the broth of all the solid pieces, first through a fine metal mesh strainer, then again through a fine cheesecloth.

Then you need to set aside the broth, and prepare the onions. How much diced onion do you need? It’s like making creamed spinach- if you look at it and think to yourself, ‘fuck, that’s way too much’, you’ve got just about enough for a small group. As for actual amount… eh, five or six kilos should
do it. Using the same pot I made the broth in, I caramelized the onions, right until translucence and a bit of browning; sprinkled in a bit of salt to get even more moisture out, and then pressure cooked on low for twenty to thirty minutes. Once it’s done, maybe a little sugar and baking soda- like, a teaspoon each- to speed up the caramelization. Stir and cook until it looks deep brown, like a particularly chunky-onion caramel- like the candy, that’s why it’s called caramelization. Then, deglaze the pan with white wine and brandy- one for brightness, the other for deep, intense flavor. Four spice mix (pepper, cloves, nutmeg, ginger), and they only have fresh of each so use much less, fresh spices are strong. A pinch of flour to thicken it- any would work, I’m partial to rice; and then, add the stock.

Pressure cook it for fifteen to thirty minutes.

To finish- dish it out in a large ramekin, top with slices of a nice baguette, and then cover the bread with grated cheese- any good melt-n-crisper will do, but I’m using white cheddar because there’s lots of it. Put it in the oven- any temperature is fine, so long as it’s not cold- until it’s nicely charred.

While that’s going, set out bowls and spoons for the guys and myself, because I can’t actually eat all the soup I just made- oh, yes, and actually set them down, Ace is turning a bit pasty, whoops…

Serve with a careful admonishment to not eat too quickly, you’ll burn your tongue.

The tables in this part of the kitchen are metal, and polished to a mirror finish- and I find I have some sort of internal distortion of time, looking into the metal mirror, reflecting back my own face and the darkness of the ceiling above me… because, well, when I look at myself in the mirror below me, what I see is my own breath misting across the surface, and then-

-pool of blood, the panicked shouting of my friends-

Here’s a bit of theology for you, while I bob and weave and SERIOUS PUNCH through this crowd of screaming Others: the followers of the Gods, they fall under certain… I dunno, types?

Acobians are always restrained in some way- physical, spiritual, mental, they’re either virgins too afraid to explore, hidebound traditionalists, or deeply analytical.

Garmuts are always gossipy, and their actions are easily emptied of meaning.

Hense (and her husband, Pan), created the Maenads and the Maena.

Lemmings are anxiety ridden disasters, inflicting profound suffering on themselves at every turn.

Micians can’t let anything go- they hoard physical objects, and secrets, and grudges- bringing them up like they happened just yesterday.
Ola’s are not responsible- you can let a child play with them… but *never* entrust a child to their sole care. They try- heaven knows they try, they just… can’t. Their primary god, their own nature- children need structure, and Ola’s cannot provide it.

Jevellrys are indecisive.

Piths are reckless, and often bring pain to those around them.

Roats are awash with greed, lust, desire- and they are never satisfied with what they have.

Yudrig’s have terrible self control.

Zul’s are gullible.

Caelya’s talk too much, drink too much, can never make a home in one place...

I threw myself into this fight without once questioning if I could win; and at my back, Neo and Franky roar their own defiance. Fighting Others is tricky, and depending on which god you follow, you can have an unbeatable offence- or a terrible weakness.

I don’t know where the Kooky Kids are, and I’m very- I need to focus, but I can’t help but worry that I’ve either hurt them in my fighting, or that they’ve been separated from us and- I can’t be taken in my the lies of the Others; I move too forthrightly, my god moves too forthrightly.

I don’t know if it’s the same for cooks. I don’t know the Small Gods as well as I do the Pantheon; and for those who serve, the Small Gods often become more important than the big ones.

I don’t know the small gods of the kitchen.

I don’t know if Havij is okay- she’s a Dreamer, I know that now, she’d never stay out of a fight like this...

I do know I’ll be okay. Mab, on the other hand… she’s in just the right position to either be caught in the Other’s trap… or break free, break the Others, break them- forever. Or at least as long as this Age lasts.

Pyth says that the Others bring unwholesome Chaos to this world- that they find our Order and our acts of Creation to be Chaos and Destruction, and that we are, forever, indelibly opposed. He says that his followers must make a choice- not every one of his followers is strong enough to fight the Others, but all of his followers are strong enough to face them. Some sutra say that the Others cannot be truly defeated; others say that they are only defeated in death.

Pyth says that the Others can only be defeated if they are faced.

-I see my mother’s face, reflected back at me; a strange, young, bright version of her, unmarred by life’s pains and disappointments.
This isn’t real. I am not my mother- and whatever dream life the Others could give me...

Others… the only thing they’re good at is twisting the truth, lying. The only power they have is the power you give them; the only advantage they have is the one you don’t take.

An Other’s ability to lie is so powerful, they can ambush someone like me- stab me in the chest with a trident- and I’ll believe it. But it’s not true, and I follow Zul.

What does that mean? I don’t know, exactly- I certainly can’t teach anyone else to follow Her.

Just because something isn’t a lie doesn’t mean that it’s not a deception. A liar knows that they are a liar; but one who speaks mere portions of truth in order to deceive is a crafter of destruction. It’s easy to tear down a fantasy with portions of truth- and humans need fantasy to be human at all. It’s not like some kind of pink pill to make life bearable- no; humans need fantasy because without it, we become animals, we become… less.

Children need little lies to internalize big truths; a doll is not really alive, but it can teach you how to love something else, how to be loved by something else. No human is born knowing it is loved; it must be practiced. We have to learn to believe the little lies, so we can believe the big ones.

There is no grain of justice, or mercy, or duty, or anything of that sort in this world- it does not grow in any field, it cannot be harvested, and yet: are there not shortages and gluts? Do the people not come to cry out for these things when they are absent? Do these things not sprout in the strangest of places, at the awkwardest of times, in clear defiance of all reason and sense?

Grind everything down to the finest pieces and sift through it all- you’ll never find a single mote of mercy, a speck of justice. And yet, even the worst of humanity goes around pretending it exists. We act as if there is an ideal order to the world, as if there is some… rightness, by which all are eventually judged. Zul says there is not- but, she also says that it is only by our belief in that rightness, our faith that the world isn’t… this, that we cannot let it be this… it is only by believing that such things can become.

Faith will not move a mountain; it will make someone who can. It will make a person who, in a room where a conspiracy of silence is maintained unanimously, speaks a word of truth like gunfire. Someone who says what they think, and is not ashamed to say it.

Children and half-wits point out that the emperor has no clothes- but a half-wit remains a half-wit, and the emperor remains an emperor- and, to the Other’s horror, children grow. They become more than they were to start. Other’s can’t do that- or if they can, it is akin to unmaking who they were. They are as they are- they don’t grow, they don’t change, they don’t layer on the years and the year’s changes like skin on an onion- and changing, for them, is just another kind of death.

Zul says the truth is always something that is told, not something that is known. Fae are told they can fly- before then, we do not know. If there were no speaking or writing or sharing of Knowledge, there would be no truth about anything. There would only be what is.

Zul says, things break easily when they’re held together with lies; truth is eternal, adamant,
unbreakable and divine.

Zul says, above all, don’t lie to yourself. They who lies to themselves and listen to their own lies come to a point that they cannot distinguish the truth within, or around, and so lose all respect for themself and for others. Without respect, they will cease to love.

I say: Whatever dream life the Others could give me is only something I could give myself.

It’s time to wake up. Dreams are nice- but I won’t settle for anything less than the real thing. True life only; accept no substitutes.

Echo theory goes like this: If something exists, it exists in every possible way there is for it to exist. Every action rings out; takes itself, goes out into every world that can support that action being taken.

There is a world- there are many worlds. In all worlds that have the right two people, they always fall in love- and no, time and place and living or dead and war and strife and wealth and gender and and and- if they exist in the same universe, they will learn of each other first, and then begin speaking with each other, and then they will fall-

Hard and fast, soft and quiet, moments or lifetimes or seconds or a brief, grieving silence-

In love.

My master is a very good teacher- she did her best to teach me enough, to prepare me for learning the basic-most parts of her Art. Even now, covered in blood and shattered crystal slivers, heaving with sweat and my swords burning hot and icy cold in my hands- even now, I can’t help but think:

In every world where such an atrocity as what has been done here exists, and I, too, exist, I would always bring ruination and death to the fount of it.

I will always destroy the evil work of the Other. It is a part of who I am.

I will not abide such horrors in this world; I will not allow it.

I roll my shoulders and carefully walk through the carnage my fury wrought- here, a man torn in two, his guts a cruel mockery of ribbon on the floor, his blood all turned to ice in his veins and his
skin black with frost; there, a woman dismembered and strewn against a wall, soot and burnt and ashes disfiguring all but a hand, tipped with pink lacer and sparkling bangles. Another; another; another.

Counting myself and my friends- Zoro, Brook, and Ii-pho (EE-faa, spelled A-O-I-F-E)- there were one hundred and fifty people in this room before. Now, there’s only four.

When we were brought in here, they closed the doors behind us. High above, I can see video-snails shivering in terror, their eyes wide and fixed on what I have done. In the cold, strange silence, I can hear a deep, echoing thrumming- and I can see, through a crack in the door, an army of black and yellow shapes advancing with fury.

“They’re coming. Y’all best be ready for round two,” is all I can say.

And then, they’re through the door- and my swords find flesh again.

When I open my eyes for real, it’s to see Adelaide getting the shit kicked out of her.

I could pause and fix my chest; I could make myself neat and pretty. I could do a lot of things.

What I actually do is pretty simple.

I stand, leaving the lie on the floor where it belongs. I take two steps and then move. I shove my fingers in the Wasp Queen’s left eye, and tear it out. And then- and then, while she’s screaming bloody murder, I toss the eye in my mouth and chew.

She stares at me in horror as I chew- and that horror turns to rage when I spit the mangled mush of her eye out onto the floor.

She lunges for me, one working eye streaming with tears. I bend under her blow before catching a flailing leg and cutting her foot off at the ankle. I put her foot in my mouth and chew.

Her blood splatters, pink and smelling faintly of manganese.

Another blow- another piece of her torn away, this time part of her hip. I spit, and chew again.

A hand.

Spit.
Chew.

An elbow.
Spit.
Chew.

Two wings.
Spit.
Chew.

The other foot.
Spit.
Chew.

The other hand.
Spit.
Chew.

Her left breast.
Spit.
Chew.

Her right breast.
Spit.
Chew.

The whole right arm.
Spit.
Chew.
Part of her thigh.
Spit.
Chew.

Her knee and shin.
Spit.
Chew.

Her liver.
Spit.
Chew.

Her lung.
Spit.
Chew.

Her other eye.
Spit.
Chew.

Finally, she’s a head on a ruined torso, one arm left to her and screaming curses at me- the distraction of my brutality afforded Adelaide a second wind, which was half the reason I did it at all. Best to end things decisively.

I spit. Juices that taste of dust and rotten milk and burnt hair and the color of agony ooze down my chin.

I stretch my open hand to her. I close it into a fist. I twist my fist and pull it sharply to my waist. She screams.
I open my hand to reveal the fluttering, pulsing heart of her within.

“KALIMAA,” is what I say as I crush the Wasp Queen’s heart to bloody pulp.

I feel it, as the Other known in this World as the Wasp Queen dies forever- a snap, like the closing of a door or the breaking of a string under immense tension. She’s truly dead, now. I stretch, rolling my shoulders up and out, the three holes through my body filling with chittering shadows and thick black honey before sealing- flesh and bone once more.

Ugh.

My hand’s all bloody now. I shake some of the pulpy flesh off, but- no, I’ll have to wash it. Urgh.

“...M-missus Mab?”

“Yes, Adelaide?”

“...Do you have any lock picks?”

“Certainly. Here you are- I’ll get Captain out, why don’t you help Robin and Captain Trafalgar,”

“Y-yes, Missus, right away,”

I toss Adelaide the roll of picks, and I saunter over to Captain without much more than a glance at his captors.

“You three have about seven seconds to haul him out before I loose my temper again,”

They ignore me. Well, I tried.

You know, it’s funny- Others and Humans, physically speaking, are about equal. The difference, scientifically speaking, is our plane of origin. I just think it’s a neat little tidbit- it makes no difference for how easily I tear their wings from their backs and their limbs from their bodies and use one’s head to disorient another while tearing the heart out of the third.

All three die by my hands.

I haul Captain out of the tank of salt water with his head and neck and shoulders and waist, until he can climb out himself. Then I wash their pink-strange blood off of me in the salt water. It dissolves like it never was.
Left hand; right hand; mouth; feet. Done.

I stretch again, roll my neck, and sigh.

Much better. I’ve no idea what happened to my jacket- it was a nice jacket, brown leather and shorter than I’d expected I’d need to wear… as for what I’m actually wearing- kung fu shoes and socks and wraps; old fashioned Muscovy pants; an acid washed denim button down crop top, quite backless; and my belt, with it’s lotus blossom buckle. My hair is in a high ponytail, and I have the most nostalgic feelings (my own or perhaps inherited) with it all loose and pulled back like this.

Concerning those in the room with me- Robin is wearing black hiking boots, floral colorblocked leggings, a bright yellow bodysuit (which is marvelous against her skin, and will only look better in the summer, when her tan improves), and a hooded cowl with the nose and mouth coverings (as well as hood) currently lowered.

Adelaide is in a wonderful kimono and hakama, very pretty- the most modern touch being her hair, which is in a stacked bun style. She reminds me very much of a striped eel catfish.

Annie, I’m worried about- not her clothing, her mod-weave shawl, neutral bodysuit, knee high socks, and black oxford heels are all just fine, and her glasses aren’t broken- but her skull might be. I’m too keyed up to check. Fuck.

Udoroth looks like a Muscovy trader from the edgelands. Furry leather hat, long yellow coat over a dark blue tunic, black pants and tall wrappings over tall boots… the works.

Trafalgar Law has changed his hat; otherwise, he looks the same as he ever did, just with a veneer of maturity scraped over that burning trash fire of a personality. Some of the things his sister has told me… eugh.

Oh- oh no, Captain-

“You’re soaked, Captain- it’s much too cold for that. Do you want the red one or the black one?”

“Uh-”

“Shirts-?”

“Oh! Red one,”

“And do you want khaki or denim?”

“…can’t I wear a skirt? Mark wears skirts an’ you don’t say nothin’!”

“Mark doesn’t use kicks in his fighting all that much, and he’s always wearing something underneath. There are perverts everywhere, Captain- do you really want anyone other than someone you gave permission seeing all your bits?”

“…noooo...”

“Khaki or denim?”
“...Can I have hakama?”

“I have denim hakama, yes,”

“Yes!”

“Pockets?”

“...Pockets?”

“Lucy Locket lost her pocket; Penny Pincher found it; not a beri was there in it; only ribbon ‘round it—...You’ve never heard that?”

“Nope,”

“Okay, well—this is a pocket, Adelaide’s got one on her I think—A! What do you keep in your pocket?”

“Mostly full-size bags of dried salty-spicy shredded squid, Missus Mab; uh, a small coin purse, a sewing kit, an’ a comb… why?”

“Captain didn’t know tie on pockets were a thing—So, Luffy, you want a pair?”

“Hell yeah!”

“Alright- I can fill them with snacks if you- yeah, okay, I’ll fill them with snacks for you...”

“...Can I have socks? My toes are cold, Mab,”

“Sure thing- d’y you want tabi so you can wear your sandal’s?”

“Yes,”

“Okay- here—”

“Sakura...?”

“It is April, Captain,”

“Oh yeah! -My coat’s too wet, isn’t it?”

“Afraid so,”

“Uuugh-”

“There there; scarves aren’t so bad-”

“Uuuuugh-”

Captain is a big silly bag of beans and he always makes me smile when I’m feeling low. He does it intentionally, I’m nearly certain of it.

Hmm-?
“Sorry, what was that?”

“I said I really want to find the rest of our crewmates, Missus Mab! I’m worried about them, and my sisters, too, ”

“Hm. I, personally, am quite worried about Sawbones- she took a dive down that garbage chute, and I’m very concerned that her soft-body LCD ruptured:”

“- don’t even joke about stuff like that!”

“Who said I’m joking?”

“Noooooo –”

“Mm. She was breeding extra large ones in anticipation of this trip, too-”

“Nooooooooo-”

“Wait, wait- Bones has bigger leeches now?!?”

“She surely does, Captain,”

“...How is she not dead from blood loss already?”

“Mystery. Bones has Mystery Blood,”

“...I guess, but you shouldn’t just say it like that...”

“Well, how else am I supposed to say it-? Oh, hello, there’s a control panel- let’s see if I can make it work or not...”

I can. As it turns out, I should have probably turned the broadcasting parts off first, but we can only move forwards with our lives through time, not backwards.

Every cook has their weird little quirks. Chef will not begin his work without first folding his towels a very specific way, and stacking them six high and three wide, no more, no less. Every service, he does this- and if he’s not used them all during service, he checks them for splatter and refolds and restocks them.

Chef also enforces Tape Rules; I made it easier on myself and my juniors by commissioning Fern and Havij to make a combo tape-dispenser and sharpie-holder that we can move around as needed. We all carry sharpies and little knives to write on and cut the white, one inch wide tape; and we all have to re-label the shelves on occasion, too. There’s a protocol for cleaning the cambros and the deli cups, and it’s my least favorite job. Oz loves organizing and labelling shit. Every time we get a cool new bottle of something from the daiso, he’ll wash it out and use it elsewhere...

I won’t go in for work without my cooking chopsticks, my pocket knife, a small offset spatula, and a bench scraper.
“Deb, what you’ve made is one of the most insanely horrific baked bads I’ve ever had the misfortune of seeing with my own two eyes. At no point in your rambling, incoherent creative process were you even close to anything that could be considered a ration. Everyone in this room is now worse for having been exposed to it.”

“A simple yes would have done me fine, Mince,”

“I dunno, Min- it’s pretty impressive that she put so many ingredients into a dish and it came out tasting like nothing.”

“Oz, I’m not so soft you can’t tell me the truth- it’s garbage, and not at all what we were going for,”

“Deb, I’m going to say this one more time and then we’re catching hands- for pure, vacillating awfulness, for superior incompetence, for ignorance and bad judgement- in short, for a true, genius talent for unmitigated catastrophe, you stand alone. Mince and I abide in the halls of mediocrity, but you reach further to the realm of disaster. Only you can make a poultrygeist by accident, and bake it off into a ruinous bread bowl that spits live explosive hazelnut bombs; and only you could have scared off a slavering horde of Others with the sheer awfulness of your hideous creation. It can’t have been easy- you started with good ingredients, a well-tested recipe, excellent equipment, an organized mis, and repeated opportunities to save the situation, I think. But you, Deb, with that ruined touch of true malefic genius, swept aside those obstacles with unerring precision, and out of gleaming order wrought pure and unending chaos. DOWN!”

Tape rules go like this; everything that happens in a professional kitchen grows out of the fertile soil of tape. Tearing tape in our kitchen is grounds for serious punishment duty- deboning quail, cleaning grease traps, sanitizing sinks, the works. Chef will stop service entirely if he discovers the Tape Rule hasn’t been followed correctly.

The tape has to get cut with a pair of scissors or a knife in a straight line, with a small tab folded over for ease of removal. On this label should be written the product name, the current date (including year!), and the initials of the person who packed the container. The label, once properly made, must be affixed one inch from the top of the container, always perpendicular to the open edge of the container. Bottles get the same treatment, except their labels are to be vertical. The shelves of the pantry are to be labelled in the same manner, with general product category instead of specific product- excepting staples, such as rice. Tape is to be no larger than one inch wide, no exceptions; painter’s tape is preferred to masking tape. The color of our kitchen tape is white. It’s cheapest, but it makes Oz flinchy if he looks at it too long, so I’m going to suggest we switch to blue- we don’t cook much blue food, after all.

Laid out like that, it sounds crazy- but, like my sister learned being apprenticed to Missus Mab, good organization is critical in all endeavours. Missus Mab is not a cook; and she doesn’t use tape in her Dairy. She says it’s because the adhesives release a noxious fume that can- and has, in her experience- ruined the taste of a cheese. All of her labels are paper with quick-glue, or wooden tags, or government-style sliding slats in their own holders. This is because everything in a Dairy has to be sanitary- and for that to happen, everything in a Dairy has to be sanitizable.

Which means everything- including the labels- can be removed, cleaned, and used again.

The big takeaway? Hard complicated work requires mental clarity. If your mind is cluttered with teetering piles of garbage, dirty work areas, and other such junk, you won’t get very far at all.
For Chef, the way we treat the tape is an indication of our quality control. Each prep station has a bus bin for dirty containers; if the labels in the bins haven’t been removed, it’s because one of us is rushing or nervous- and it’s something Chef always looks for. Chef says that paying attention to how we treat our tape is practice for paying attention to the quality of our food, including the final presentation.

I roll through the open space between two heavy counters, barely escaping the cruel shrapnel of a hazelnut bomb. Shards of shell and nut-meat smoke in the open space- but I’ve made it to the pantry.

“DEB, THE BREAD-BEAST IS ANGRY!”

“Three ingredients and a pre-prep-filling, how did you cause all of this with three ingredients-?!”

“I told the both of you not to let me bake first!”

“Don’t look at me, Mister Hangover was distracting me!”

“Oh gods please let my death be swift- ah, the color of the dish is a bit off. Also, I think it’s lethally poisonous to most forms of organic and inorganic life, and will provoke allergic reactions in Germa Poisonfeather Birds,”

“You could have interjected at any time, Mister!”

“I did, I told you to tell her not to put in that much- urgh- salt- hrrrrKKK-”

“EEEew- shit! DEB, THE VIOL-AU-VENT GREW TEETH AND IT’S HEADED RIGHT FOR YOU-”

“I CAN SEE THAT, THANK YOU CAPTAIN OZBIous-”

There’s a fairly direct difference between a failure and a fiasco. A failure is simply the non-presence of success. Any fool can not succeed. A fiasco , on the other hand, is a disaster of mythic proportions. A fiasco is a folk tale told to others that makes them feel more alive because it didn’t happen to them . I’ve done a little bit of damage to the kitchen- I tried really hard not to! It just… sort of… happened. Just me trying to bake increases the flammability of concrete; the non-reactive countertops stood no chance at all.

“Deb, when you bake it’s not just bad, it’s supernatural. When you step to bake, shit goes so wrong- it’s like you turn off the magic and turn on the wrong,”

“Bad rhyme, Oz, try again,”

“Dammit!”

“Baked Chicken, Deb- how did you manage to turn baked chicken into this? You’d better hope this doesn’t happen on the Sunny-”

“Shut up, Mince! I thought it only happened to breads and pastries! And the recipe was clearly
labeled as Chicken Vol-au-vent,”

“Baked is in the fucking description! Flames burst from the oven like tears from a salamander! The baking dish was melting! And the portal the fumes were forming gave me a bad feeling—”

“It was a tiny portal, and the chanting wasn’t *that* ominous—”

“Dammit all to shit, Deb- baking bad is not supposed to break the world like this!”

“Lucky for us all, I’ve done this often enough that I have an SOP for just such an occasion—”

“Oh no—” “Oh no—” “Oh no—”

“**Oh Yes!** Just look at that blackened crust- there’s only one thing for it. I’m going to make a big mess of wow-wow and douse that fucker in it!”

Wow-wow sauce is a fairly simple construction of matured suicider, pickled cucumbers, capers, my specialty mustard, dead-ripe mangoes, puree of fig, grated Wahoo (which is a type of durian that’s been packed in chili powder, sugar, and salt), anchovy essence (though smelt or sprat will do in extremis), asafetida, a healthy portion of sulfur and saltpeter, squidberry juice (unfermented if you please), and very large amounts of smoked paprika, Mangala Red Python Chili (which has to be hunted via harpoon), and Vampire Frog Venom, for body.

When these ingredients, plus of course salt and fresh-cracked black pepper, and a quantity of water to ensure proper mixing, are combined in a clean glass bowl, it results in a fairly safe if *pyroclastic* sauce to be used on anything you’d like- provided it doesn’t contain any charcoal, or burnt-black parts. Wow-wow sauce contains most of the ingredients for gunpowder, save the charcoal, after all.

Oh, yes, and it’s best to never eat it straight- it’s a terrible journey to Flavortown. On a scale of one to ten, ten being the most revolting and one being almost edible- you know, if the alternative is starvation- wow-wow sauce rates the use of exponents. Food does not absolutely need to taste good to keep someone alive; but to keep someone from committing suicide, it does need to taste better than wow-wow sauce. Thus, wow-wow sauce is to be used only in extreme flavor emergencies, or when a baked bad gets out of hand. For safety purposes, it can only be stored in cold-rooms; and it is only fit for consumption while condensation still runs down the side of the bottle.

This is a very oddly stocked pantry- I’ve got all the critical ingredients, and a bowl to mix it in… and of course, I never leave the ship without a healthy supply of mustard.

As Mince, Oz, and Mister Hangover do their best to distract the Chicken Violauvent from peppering me with ballistic hazelnuts, I mix the horrific concoction. Baked bads are funny- they can only be destroyed in three ways: they can decay, like going moldy; they can be eaten; and they can be rendered inert. We don’t have time for the Violauvent to go moldy; we don’t have a Trash Goblin or a sacrificial diner to eat it; so, Wow-wow sauce. It’s the only thing I’ve ever found that renders a baked bad inert.

I’m going to save my friends- by mixture, by maceration. By the seat of my skirts, and the pockets beneath.

Eventually, my horrific concoction comes together into… *something*. What that something is defies all description. It doesn’t rest in the bowl so much as hunch malevolently, hating all that would be eating and being hated by all with working noses…
I take a wooden spoon and portion out the sauce into little paper service cups- like you put ketchup in? And then the Chicken Violauvent notices me, and screeches through the air on its hideously blackened puff-pastry wings.

“Hey chicken-shit! Eat this!”

And then I pelt it with as many servings of wow-wow sauce as it takes for the natural disintegration properties to take real effect. A bit after the Chicken Violauvent splatters into the garbage with a weak cry of vomitious fury, I realize that this is the first time either of my boys have ever seen me use my battle skills in an actual battle.

No time to tease them about it, though- we’ve got Others incoming. I pull out a brace of Vorpal Blades from my vambraces, dunk them in wow-wow and throw them true. Others melt from existence like beef fat on a griddle.

I adjust my ponytail, tug my skirt down and make sure my shirt hasn’t come unbuttoned; re-tie my ribbon, and throw one more knife- gotcha!

Mince looks like what he is- a jock that forgot to cut his hair and stole a scrunchie off my sister and is wearing his father’s peacock feather cloak without considering the fact that it’s longer than he can really comfortably wear. He’s thrown his cloak over a chair in the corner while we fought the Viol Au Vent, presumably to save it from stains- leaving his green ivy tattoos open to the frigid air.

Oz looks like a glam rocker that got the spirit of going incognito, but not the actual reality of going incognito. He’s hung his jacket on a hook, as well as his hat- leaving his sparkly hair pins, and his Destiny Pick, open for all to see. His chroma are fairly writhing with nervous energy- black lines curl and twist as colors dance and spark between and through and over the lines. With his sleeves shoved up like that, his arms are a scintillating explosion of color, ever shifting with his emotions. Oz doesn’t really like showing much skin- yep, there he goes, pulling his sleeves down again.

As for Mister Hangover- he’s tall, gangly, pale as milk with blue traceries visible in his skin- veins, I’d guess. He’s got the tone of skin that would burn in the sun, burn and blister and peel away, only to burn again- I don’t think he freckles. A fluffy bowl cut that’s grown out and been cut back with haphazard hands, thick and black and wild at the edges; purple lips in a pointy face, wide yellow eyes that gleam faintly green when the- wow, I’m much too close to him, excuse me.

“Sorry,”

“I-it’s fine. Um. Did you find, ah, find what you’re looking for?”

“...You have green eyes,”

“U-um,”

As the blush chases the milk-pale tone of his cheeks away, I’m suddenly struck by the horrifying
realization my friends from school tried to tell me so long ago.

Shit.

He’s wearing a tiger striped jumpsuit, a black sleeveless parka, and shiny black boots. There’s something silver, around his neck- it smells like the ocean and gods in heaven I’m much too close again-

“Sorry,”

“Um,”

“What Devil Fruit did you eat?”

“Ah… you can tell so easily?”

“I can smell your necklace - the ocean is pungent,”

“Oh! Oh, I see- um, well…”

“We sure cooked the hell out of this kitchen-”

“No, doesn’t track; maybe something with heat? ”

“Eh, feels derivative. So… she likes him?”

“You have to ask?”

“You can’t control it!”

“I can, just… not while I’m unconscious. I was coming to the kitchen for a late night snack, when, well…”

“Ah. So… these are your pajamas?”

“N-not, ah. No. I fell asleep at my desk,”

“What’s your name, anyway? We can’t keep calling you Mister Hangover, not knowing you’ve been accidentally poisoning yourself.”

“Oh. Um. I’m- I’m Linus. Linus Clown,”

“Eh? But- Missus, isn’t the Venom Venom in Impel Down somewhere? I would have thought that after all the riots, and it going dark...”

“Ah- Linus Clown didn’t eat the Venom Venom, Adelaide,”

“Eeh?”
“Hm… If there’s a paramecia of a certain kind of thing, there’s also a logia of that thing: if there is a fruit that can bestow the properties of a substance, can emit a substance, control a certain thing- there also exists a fruit that turns someone into that very substance. Luffy, our Captain, isn’t actually made of rubber- his fruit is a paramecia, not a logia. Thus, while his body has all the properties of rubber-literally, literally, metaphorically, and mystically- it’s not actually actual rubber. If you cut him, he bleeds blood, not rubber-tree sap- which is what rubber is, in it’s basic-most state. My fruit, the Shadow Shadow, isn’t classified as a logia, paramecia, or zoan- it’s much older than those classifications, and it doesn’t really follow the rules accepted as standard. Am I a mortal woman with the properties of a shadow? Am I an actual shadow? Do I control the shadows? The answer to all those questions is yes,”

“But did you start with those powers, or…?”

“Dunno,”

“Eeh!?"

“It’s not really important- what does matter is this. Languages are not the same across the world, no matter what the World Government likes to say. Doku Doku- that literally translates as poison poison, or venom venom, and in my own native language, neither of those things are the same. Venom is: if I bite you, die; poison is: if you bite me, die. That’s different. More importantly, young Mister Clown didn’t eat a fruit that does either of those options- he ate what I’d call the Toxic Toxic, which is… hrm… I am the death of all things; none shall escape me. Very different,”

“Um,”

“Interesting that he can’t control it unconsciously- speaks to a deep seated insecurity of some sort,”

“UM,”

“Hmm?"

“Ellie is fighting a harpy,”

“Ah?"

“Right there!”

“Oh my goodness gracious-”

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Here’s something that most people don’t realize about demons. All of them, every last man, woman, and child, has the potential for limitless, unceasing rage- the kind of rage that allows Sanji to set himself on fire without being burned.

I’ve never been really, truly angry- at least, not that I remember. I must have done, as a young child… but as I grew, I found fewer and fewer things to really get my irritated attention focused, and after a certain point, even the effort of irritation was just… too much. I didn’t get angry when my mother was refused access to a doctor; I didn’t get angry when they refused to prescribe the treatment necessary to, if not save her, make her remaining life worth living; I didn’t even get angry when they kicked me and Genny out of medical school for thefts we didn’t do.
No.

I got even.

Doctor’s won’t see your mom? Genny became good-as, and saw to our mother. Doctors won’t give you the medicine your mother needs? Beatrix found the things those medicines are refined from; Deborah refined them; Genny administered them. School kicks you out for stealing shit everyone knows was stolen by World Nobles? Steal the shit from the World Nobles yourself.

Can’t find an outfit that works with your natural chroma? Ask for help- and Mab made me a battle suit of my very own.

The style I use to fight- and what informs the rest of my life, as it’s really a lifestyle choice- came from the Fae, originally. No other tribe has ever approached war with such an attitude of ruthlessness; it’s a knife fighting style meant, quite specifically, to kill people quick and quiet. It focuses on angles of attack, not weapons- the theory being, no matter what weapon you use (a knife, a sword, a spear, your fist,), there are only so many weak spots on a human body to exploit. Learning to defend those points along certain angles of attack is more effective than learning whole separate forms for certain things. New weapons get built all the time- but human bodies haven’t really changed in the general form in millions of years.

I’m wearing soft black shoes that make no noise when I step; long, thigh high socks held up with a garter belt because I cannot wear tights, the chafing is too much; a black sports bra; a navy blue jumpsuit; navy blue arm sleeves; and fingertip-less gloves.

My cold weather gear is a heavy hooded cowl of fur- it used to be an animal’s pelt, their head, in fact, and then Mab cut it to fit and lined it for me; a face mask of bright orange that doesn’t catch light indoors- it only reacts to sunlight, and even then there’s a rune stitched in that lets me turn that off if I need it- and reverses to white if necessary; and my Thief’s Mask, something I finally had the time to make.

Thieves don’t show their faces; we’re known by our Thief Names, and our masks. I did a lot of weird ass shit to be recognized as ‘Orange Cat’- I only lacked a good… hm. Debut? Anyway- a Thief’s Mask is bound to the thief, and cannot be used by anyone else- there’s a whole ritual for passing them on to successors, you can’t just take on a name. Well, you can- but you won’t get the benefit of the mask. What that benefit is?

It makes your face unvisible. That’s it. It doesn’t sound like much- but, even if someone watching you knows for a fact who you are, without being able to see your face, there’s no direct proof that it’s you. And good thieves never get caught.

My mask, in it’s resting forme, looks like cheap Daiso rhinestone body stickers- the kind Decorator girls wear in excess. I wear a descending line of them, smaller and smaller, along the traditional cat eye shape right beside my eye. Putting my mask on is as simple as a thought.

“Where are you, little fish-girl? Is the ‘Catch of the Day’ hiding in the snow?”
Snow falls thicker, whiter, begins to blanket the room in unyielding cold. I stay behind the pillar, and watch as the harpy floats on her green wings. Each flap produces another stiff breeze laden with heavy snowfall; the floor is already shin deep in the noisy whiteness.

The insults being thrown at me, while terrible, aren’t… I don’t care about her opinion, so they have as much meaning as farting noises do.

A fighting style isn’t how a person actually fights- there’s more than that. To become as I am is no simple thing; many skills were learned and mastered before I was anything like as capable as I am. Some skills, I just don’t have- I’m nowhere near finished learning, after all. There are eighteen skills; the first, and paradoxically, easiest to start but hardest to master, is spiritual refinement.

Seven elements, to spiritual refinement- knowing yourself, knowing the world, understanding fate, harmony, empathy, clear eyes, and love. Some people never manage even one of these things- and they aren’t even on my path. Some parts are easier than others. Some, I’ve barely started on- I’d never left Ryugyu Mergyo before I joined up with the Straw Hats- what do I know of the world?

The second is unarmed combat- fighting with no weapons, sometimes conflated with social combat, but really that’s it’s own thing. My mother taught me the latter- and scrapping with my sisters, and later, alongside Deb and Addie, taught me the former. The three forms- strike-blocks, holds, and movements- are what makes up unarmed combat. I’m best at holds and movements; if I don’t want to be held, I will not be. If I don’t want to make a sound, I won’t.

I don’t know much about swords except how to break them.

I don’t know much about staffs except how to use them as anything other than fighting weapons.

I don’t throw my knives like Deborah does- she’s got the fancy magic knives that return when you throw them, I’ve got something else.

The closest I come to spear (or sword) fighting is with Spit (to get the point across); not a sword, not a spear, something in the middle. Spit’s at home- I was worried about weight.

Don’t use naginata.

Don’t use kusarigama.

I do use fire and explosives- Usopp taught me a lot so I could adapt what I’d been using under water for the open air. Air and water are not the same- and an ink bomb in water is a very different thing to an ink bomb- or rather, ink bullet- in air. In air, I have to use gunpowder and explosives. There are defensive and offensive forms of my bomb and bullet tools- some are meant for hurting and injuring a foe, while others are just distractions.

There are about seven disguises that can be used at any time, in pretty much any place- a monk, a soldier, a merchant, a crafter, a farmer, a performer, or just a passerby. I’ve mastered all of them for my age range- I can do younger easily, and a little older passably- and my gender, and my opposite gender, which is fairly easy while I’m still unblooded. This wasn’t a spying or recon mission, so I didn’t pack any costumes.

Stealth and entering methods are my best skill, and I say that without overwhelming pride or hubris. I am the best that I’ve ever met at getting into places I’m not meant to be. This, above all else, is
There are five methods to use for stealth and entering. More than five- but the other ways are derivative. Timing and the correct moment to move. Analyzing a defence and locating a weak point. Finding the weakest part of that weak point in the defence, and the best method of putting pressure on it. Using an object to distract attention from the weak point. Concealing all sound from your position that would give you away- including the absence of sound, which can be it’s own giveaway.

For example, the easiest way to move across a snowy field is to not move across the surface at all, but below it; Slink Like The Eel beneath the chest high crust of falling snow, using your Water Techniques to change the snow into water, to make it into ocean water, and quietly swim through it-silent, serene. She’s very quick with her limbs, but not at all quick in defending her own body- Logia who aren’t used to being hit by people who can hit them, and I’m one of those people because I cheat outrageously, generally don’t defend their bodies. They defend in such a way as to make attacking, countering, easier. Get inside their guard, and prove you can hit them, and they don’t know what to do.

The best moment for this attack is when she’s still, hovering over the snow-fallen thickness of the field. My knives- Tooth and Fang - are what I’ll use to put pressure where it’s needed. Move Like The Eel. Under snow, icy tunnels- in those tunnels, seawater and me.

I slide silent, serene. Wait for it-

Horseback riding is actually quite fun; learning to shoot stuff on horseback, less so. Caring for horses? No worse than caring for a dog- even down to washing and feeding, because I’ve had many jobs. Used to work at the race track, where dogs would race- and the owners of those animals are particular about what supplements to use, and what gets fed to whom.

Water skills- what do you think Move Like The Eel is?

Mother taught me strategy- how to fight one on one, defeating many, defeating bigger and stronger enemies, destroying economies, using current events to my advantage, political scheming… everything.

Conning- not so great at the Confidence game, but I’m better than most.

Escape and Concealment- the best I’ve ever seen.

Meteorology and Geography are the last pieces to my puzzle- being able to navigate a place on my own is vitally important.

“- sleep forever in my snowy kingdom!”

There is a faith, for those like me. I don’t follow the twelve gods of the Fae; I don’t follow the Small Gods of Hearth and Homestead; my gods are not nameless, their works not Automatic; there is no roof to dance upon, no green peaceful place, no cessation. When I die, I will be transformed, a shadow in a sea of darkness.

The Gods of the Demons are all Gods and Goddesses of Death; the many-fingered cults of the Death God are all Demonic in nature. Demonic, as a language, has about thirty or forty different words for
‘death’- which, when explained, means that the death of something animate and inanimate is different, and the manner of it’s death is important; when it dies, both in it’s own life-span, and in a more general span of time (usually the year) matters too. For comparison, Faesh has about the same number of words for “you’re welcome”, everything from ‘come and lie with me (sexually)’ to ‘you’re not welcome at all (go away)’ to ‘I owe you my very life (do with it as thou wilt’). Fae and Honor go hand in hand.

The Demonic Pantheopaly has Twelve Gods.

Bhaal, the Vengeful Murderer. His brother was killed by a rival; and killed so thoroughly that Bhaal tore his own name in half and gave it to his brother to hold on to, and swore that the one who slew his kin would die by his hand. Upholding his promise dyed the sunrise red, and brought poor Neftis to tears. Deborah follows Him.

Set, the Half-Rotted Brewer. His brother swore vengeance in His broken name; and holding half His brother’s name was not enough to let Him survive. He made the best of it, as was His nature, but His very thoughts can sour milk and rot sugars in water. He is the God of Brewers and Cheesemakers, which is the source of unending frustration to sommelier’s and cheesemongers alike.

Kelemvor, Judge of Souls. They are robed in every color and masked in mirror-white; and their duty is to weigh the Soul of the Dead, against the Heart of the Living, against the Duty as laid down by the King of Hell. Though impartial, They are not unkind- always, They offer some method of exoneration for those whose Soul could not measure equal to the Heart and the Duty. It is the burden of every Demon to know that the Heart and the Duty are only balanced by the efforts of the Soul. They are blind, and often wield a Sword- the Faesh version of Them depicts them as a sword alone, with scales balanced atop. Neither version quite captures the heart of the Judge- Justice is neither a person, nor a sword.

Loviatar, the Furious Lover. She loves the cold sweat that breaks out across her face when she bites into a piece of fruit. Her vagina spasms with pain when Her Husband enters her. All of Her children have died within the year of Her birthing them; She has a new child every year. She is allergic to fruit. There is a strange, visceral satisfaction to poking a bruise or stretching out a cramp or taking a piss after much too long or fucking a cock (or cock-like substitute, silicone and rubber are gifts from Miss Lovin’ and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise) too big for you. Some things can’t be explained with words, only felt. Spanking doesn’t sound like fun, and then you actually do it and holy shit no, not the time for fetishes.

Myrkul, the Reaper. A kind God, He is the one who ushers a Soul from it’s body and Onwards. He is not the cause of Death- merely the One Who Reaps. HE TALKS LIKE THIS IN ALL TEXTS WHERE HIS WORDS ARE RECORDED. He is fond of Faesh Food; His completely normal horse, Buckeye; His household and worldly servants; His many apprentices, and tricking them into doing his job so he can go out dancing, or drinking, or having wild orgies; Marriages that are the result of or result in Love-Matches; Life, without which He would have nothing at all to do; and Small Cats, which are wonderful any way you approach them. The Great God of the Germa Kingdom; the Protector of France. Does not enjoy parties or general revelry Himself- though has never stated a preference for His followers to follow on the subject of partying.

Anubri, the Herder. The Night Howler; the Runner, the Chaser of Night. Her Divine relationship with Myrkul is complicated; He ushers a Soul from it’s body and Onwards. She guides a Soul from Onwards to Beyond. Their personal relationship is much simpler: they are married, and happily so. She talks like this in all texts where Her words are recorded. She is fond of Faesh Food; Her
completely normal horse, Walleye; Her household and worldly servants; Her many apprentices, and sending them to spy on the world of the Living, as she’s significantly more organized than her Lord Husband; Marriages that have good, equally binding and rewarding contracts on both sides; Life, without which she would have no purpose; and Large Cats, which are majestic and magnificent, especially when they act like Small Cats.

Shar, the Measurer. She is the one who gathers up the memories of the living of the Dead; She is the one who measures the empty space left in the wake of someone’s passage. Her tears are crystal gems of impossible strength and beauty; she is long past weeping tears of sorrow.

Neftis, the Mortician. She is the one who poured the Sky apart from the Sea; it was her tears that made the Sky so cold, and the Sea so salty. She taught humanity how to have funerals, to put those whose souls escape the care and guidance of Myrkul and Anubri if not at rest, at least at peace.

Talona, the Witch. She is the one who usually ends up killing people, if not outright, then via complications. Poison, Disease, and Autoimmune Disorders are all under her domain, as are Baked Bads.

Arawn, the Farmer. He harvests all the food, and all other things that are to be harvested, at this or any other time. He is also the God of the Battlefield Dead.

Ploutorex, King of Hell. He made the Soul of every Demon that there ever is to be; and He wrote their Purpose in his great Infernus Biblica, in marks of living fire. Kelemvor makes the initial judgement; He makes the final judgement.

Hael, Queen of Hell. Her hills are where we go when we die. Her charges are women, children, and the dishonorable dead; no one is below Her care. Her garden is said to have every medicine that ever existed growing within- and every poison too.

Here’s some theology I came up with myself. We people exist because the Gods ran into problems that they could not surpass. The Gods exist because we people ran into problems we could not surpass. The Gods gave us our souls and our meaning, in this bitch of a life- with the surety and faith that, whatever they could not do, we could. And vis-a-vis.

Faith doesn’t move mountains- it makes people who can. Be that person mortal or divine- it still made a person who can do what you could not.

“You’ll never defeat me!”

I’m in position, and so is she.

There are nine cuts that center someone like me, so we can do what needs to be done. I’m not like my sister, the Crimson Wave; I’m the Orange Cat, we’re different.

I’m ready.

I take my knives in my hands. I coat their sharp edges in seawater, harden it to be cold and sharp as the knife it covers. I coil up like a spring and kick against the floor with my eight legs. The world blurs white.

I rise up like a shark after a seal, and my eyes meet the harpy’s. They’re big, and yellow, and wide-wide-wide with shock.

My hands move.

When I jump like this, I’ve got air-time of about three seconds- one second rise, one second hang, one second fall. In the moment between my hang and my fall, I’ve cut the harpy twelve times- in spars, I usually only go for ten because I’m not trying to kill anyone.

That’s not the case this time.

I fall, and glance up, and see bright red blood spurt from all her soft places- her throat, her armpits, her inner thighs- and then I’m headfirst into the whiteness, molten wet in my headlong rush and down in my seawater tunnels.

She crashes into the snow, choking on her own blood. I watch as the snow turns pink, then red, and then- and then- I rise, and shake away the frost coating my clothing.

Rin, hyo, toh, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen. Power, energy, harmony, healing, intuition, awareness, dimension, creation, absolution. Rin, hyo, toh, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen.

I crunch through the snow in my leather shoes, finally coming to where the harpy woman is laying, blood oozing from her in slowing streams. I cut her with seawater, so her wounds couldn’t heal- no power is unbeatable, no matter what, or who, has it.

She’s dying, now- my karambits were sharp enough, and I swung hard enough, that- her guts, her guts are out. I watch her whimper and shiver, try to get away from me but she’s lost too much blood. She suffers.

I flick my hand and draw out a sharp blade of water, twist and freeze it cold and sharp and stinking of the sea.

I end it.

My left hand receives; my right hand emits. Link them together and make the hand sign for each mudra- rin, hyo, toh, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen.
Rei, shin, chi, ko, tei, gi, jin, chu.

Say a prayer for the dead, and consider what each mudra means.

Rei. Honor calls for careful moderation when dealing with others. If we lose this sense, we rush headlong into chaos. Honor isn’t about making all the right choices; it’s about dealing with the consequences of your choices.

Shin. Faith flows from an open heart and is exchanged between friends and enemies alike. It is the root of our convictions and guides us to our goals. Faith is what makes people able to move mountains.

Chi. Knowledge is useless without deep reflection. This reflection is essential in the pursuit of understanding. When you understand something, it can be said that you truly know it- but to know is to never cease to learn.

Ko. True wisdom is passed on from one’s parents and grandparents and elders. Rely on those who came before to show you the way. Wisdom is knowledge that is hard won, coming after enlightenment and tribulation.

Tei. The affection between brothers is what breeds their understanding of each other. That understanding allows us to be ourselves, and accept our fate. Some of us Suntides- that name really does fit, somehow- some of us are meant for quiet lives of peace and duty, like Adelaide. And some of us- Deborah, Beatrix… me… aren’t.

Gi. Duty… to remain firm in one’s responsibilities, in each and every aspect of life is a great burden, and a terrifying prospect. Bravery and responsibility go hand in hand; bravery shows one what is right, while responsibility gives one something to fight for. The courage born from a sense of duty is unbreakable.

Jin. Justice is a kind of compassion, to both the living and the dead; to care enough to give one’s own life in service; to sacrifice for their sake…

Chu. Loyalty is what keeps you coming back. To give one’s whole self for the good of another; to focus on a goal with all of one’s concentration.

My hair came loose from it’s tie, and I take a moment to lower my hood, take off my mask, and bind my hair back again. I put the hood back on, orient myself, and move on.

I’ll talk to Miss Tellicherry, and Missus Mab, and even Mister Zoro- and Miss Robin, too. I can’t- I can’t stop thinking about her eyes. Before now, I’ve always killed people with garottes, or poisons, or not at all if I could outrun them… I never… she was so scared-

“-Has she always been that fast?”

“Ellie? Yes. Strong, too- see how the harpy lady’s guts all came out?”

“Oh my goodness,”
“Yeah. She won’t leave her to die like that, though—she’ll end it like you and Mister Brook did during the Battle for Mermaid Cafe,”

“-I can see that, yes. And the hand signs?”

“Ellie’s really private about her religion—it’s something different from normal worship, I know that. Taffy probably can talk to you about it, or Gurry-san?”

“Hm. I think I will ask, thank you,”

“You’ll probably have to talk to her— it’s hard to notice if you didn’t grow up with her, but she was deeply conflicted about killing her foe. She’s not like Deborah— Deb doesn’t really… forgive,”

“…I understand. Oh my, is that Genny?”

“Holy shit, it is!”

The Enemy is Up.

The sky is orange sherbert as the sun considers poking over the horizon. Streaky wisps pretend to be clouds above as billowing veils of mist wreathe the shore below. As I push myself and my broom faster, harder, more elegantly, the abrupt shifts of blistering heat and bone-crushing cold fall away to so much noise.

I pop and spark and flurries of golden chitin-scales fall Below. My broom pops and sparks between my legs as flurries of powdery magic stream behind me. Bullets pop and spark as shots fly through the air. Sweat pops and sparks as it drips into a cut on my cheek. My muscles burn.

The Enemy is Up.

I twist through the air and drop dizzy fast as the droning of wings darkens the air around me. I kick and twist and slide through the air faster— dash through spaces only just large enough for me. Shards of ice in the air become daggers at my passage; veils of mist become walls. My hunters cut and shatter against my efforts.

The wind claws at me. It cannot get a grip on my jumpsuit or my boots or my facemask or my scarf or my helmet. I don’t have time to bind my hair more than my helmet is doing; the wind is unmerciful in tearing at it. It’s going to be so tangled when this is over.

The Enemy is Up.

I don’t have any weapons except what I can make out of circumstance and surroundings. No potions; no spells; no tools. Ori has the ones I brought— darted into the frozen forest when this all started at sunset, and I only get glimpses of massive conflagurations, writhing green plants, the occasional shriek. I have to trust that Ori’s okay; and she has to trust that I can handle myself. We both know that if we don’t meet up on the beach we came onto this island on at dawn, the other ain’t coming.

I whirl through cliffs of ice and jagged stone. My hunters shatter around me— I am unharmed. I dart quicksilver through frozen trees and drifts of snow. My hunters gut themselves on branches, drown
in open air. I dance through the roiling troughs of the sea-surface. My hunters drown in the cold sea depths.

The Enemy is Up.

I fly down, and build up speed in the open sky. Clouds whip past and around me in streams of color-orange, red, yellow, purple- as the dawn moves ever closer. My hunters are fewer, now- merely thirty, where once were three thousand. I dart out to sea again, through the great cross cut in the island. The wind blows at right angles to itself and a pillar of snarling mist and wind and water and fire devours fifteen of the thirty hunting me and I am not harmed. I fly faster and faster and below me the howling of wolvarks echoes. I dive down to their hurtling snarl in the waves, and my hunters meet their mouths- one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.

There’s the beach- and there’s Ori. I fly down and fast to her and she reaches into my bag and pulls out- shit-

The Enemy is Up and behind me and I dive through the opening Ori gives me and I hear the screams behind me and there’s no one chasing me at all. I slide to a stop on a pillow soft dune. The ocean is quiet. The sun rises.

I used to be able to fly all night long- but, well, I’ve not needed to for months, now. Everything is a skill- and without practice, I’ve lost the ability.

I fall. I’m asleep before I hit the ground.

(I became a doctor for my mother. But… really, I was born to race. I would die to win.)

Holy shit, I had no idea Bryony was this strong. I’ve basically been making sure the hundreds of lost souls following our progress- children, preteens, weird amalgamations of plants and animals- don’t get hurt by falling debris as Bryony takes the “what wall?” approach to dungeoneering. Gally, cackling sexual iconoclast that she is, has been singing her arrow through the Others that come to kill us.

I’ve been aiming Bryony by calling out “left”, “right”, and “forwards”; not much for me to do, really, until we get to the waterway and build the flotilla.

Flotilla?

Owfuck-
Everything that happens next blurs together in my head into one long, exhausting, painful memory. A memory of pain. Gally told me later that a chunk of wall cracked me a good one in my head—totally chance, one of the few things I can’t See is a twist of Luck.

I don’t remember when we found the Feverbanes, or the Wano Kids, or the Wano Samurai Man, or even Sawbones and her Leech Friends. I don’t remember sailing back to our ships, or the Island exploding with fire—a volcano— or it suddenly stopping with a hiss as thousands—literally thousands—of plants and animals burst into being. I don’t remember passing a city of mud filled with screaming Others, burning alive in my sister Genny’s potion fumes. Gally told me all about it, but I don’t actually remember any of it.

The only thing I remember is the song that Bryony sang while everything the Others wrought in that place came to ruin.

I also remember someone going shuro-ro-ro-ro, but they stopped because Bryony got very angry and knocked them out cold with a punch to the jaw.
Do you need to get off an island that’s aggressively sinking into the sea? It’s best to understand the mechanics of what’s happening.

Normally, islands that are natural or, properly speaking, Land-forme, don’t sink without severe damage being done to their underlying plate. Islands that are purpose built, like PU-NK-H4Z42D (or Impel Down, the so called “Rings of Hell”; or Floria, the “Sinking Sea City”; or even Marineford, the “Hall of Justice”), the calling code of this secret government island we’re all trying to escape as best we can, are a bit different. Firstly, purpose built islands don’t have magnetic fields of their own, making navigating to them a pain in the ass. Secondly, everything on a purpose built island is there by design- from the ecology, to the geography, to the architecture and the people who live there, and how they live there, everything has been planned out to the very edge of reason. Thirdly, and most importantly for our purposes, purpose built islands are meant to be sunken if certain built-in conditions are met.

There are a lot of ancient prophecies floating around that are really bits and pieces of mislabelled instructions on how to sink the island someone built- sometimes you need to sink an island. Some islands are built to be raised and sunken, even…

While mainly for the sake of curiosity, the science of sinking can help you understand what the hell is going on if you’re ever on something that’s sinking- a ship, a raft, an entire fucking island- woo, that claxon sure is loud.

Every built island will react to taking on water and sinking differently depending on the shape of it’s hull, it’s anchoring system, it’s center of gravity, and the cause of the casualty. No one set of rules works on all types.

Water often enters the lowest point of the island first, the bilge area. The bilges are pits in the lowest part of the engineering section; it’s quite normal for built islands, and ships as well, to have water leaking into the bilges. It comes in through sea chests, shaft bearings, even valve seals; and properly built bilges have bilge pumps that are set to remove the water once it reaches a certain level. Protocol for sinking a built island starts with disabling the bilge pumps; after a certain point, there is no way for the pumps to help, there being simply too much water for them to discharge.

A small government research island will react very differently to a- that’s right, floating, floating island is the proper terminology for it. A small floating island like this one will react differently than bigger islands, such as Floria or Marineford. A small floating island is normally built, as much as possible, of buoyant materials; it’s far more likely for a small floating island to capsize, rather than outright sink. Low transoms, missing drain plugs, cooling system leaks, incorrectly closed openings or even broken doors are what tends to sink these smaller floating islands. A smaller island is comparable to a mega-cruise liner in size and scope- however, all floating islands have certain standard features that come built in with every… not quite a kit, but quite like a kit for building islands.

To start with, as soon as sensors within the engineering area register the presence of both a certain amount of water and the lack of action by the bilge pumps, a mayday signal is sent out- that’s part of what we got on our ship a full month ago, as floating islands only sink quickly right when it’s entirely too late to stop them sinking. Hell, as soon as I killed the Queen of Wasps, the evacuation signal started sounding.
Education across the Blues is odd—some things are universal, like evacuation signals and written languages, even how to tie certain knots; other things, like history, mathemagics… some schools have religious rituals and practices in their curriculums, if you can believe that. Anyway, we all knew what it meant that seven short horn blasts followed by one long started resounding through the cold sterile halls of the laboratory we’d found ourselves in—the time for adventuring was well over, as the whole place was in active, catastrophic danger. None of us except perhaps me (and only in the back of my mind,) knew what that danger was—it could have been anything, from a loose experiment, to a dread storm, to an erupting volcano—anything goes.

IOSHA is the International Occupational Health and Safety Administration. Their job is to ensure that dangerous workplaces are safe for the workers. Violating an IOSHA regulation is not only illegal, it’s extremely dangerous, not to mention—expensive. I forget exactly how it stacks up, but if you’re found in violation of a regulation multiple times, not only do you have to pay a fine—you have to pay a fine for *every day prior to the re-discovery that you were in violation*. That gets extremely expensive extremely quickly.

I’ve seen at least three so far.

The first one is easy enough to miss unless you’ve got an eye for spatial relations, like I do—frankly, I wouldn’t have noticed it if I hadn’t been using the Observation Room Console like I was. The Console was too low—the top level of it, I mean. Someone built it in response to the height of the ceilings, not what the actual standard height for such things is. IOSHA regulation states that ‘all work surfaces are not to fall below three feet, seven inches in height as measured from the topmost surface of the floor undergirding the work surface’.

Secondly—stairs. Minimum width is twenty two inches; the pitch of the stairs here is off, and the landings are too small. It’s important for fire safety.

Thirdly? The Health and Safety supply closets aren’t correctly labelled. I can still tell where they are—even as I’m running, I’m packing everything in the HS closet into my purse.

I’ve been trying to get my hands on unopened, unused Blue Goo for years—in Skua, we use any number of Spirits and herbal remedies. Blue Goo…it’s something no one in Skua has had any luck synthesizing, and so far it’s been determined our lack of success has been due to contaminated samples. I have my doubts—nothing that works so well on the human body, while also being so violently gained, can come of anything good. Oh, hey, floaties! And emergency supplies—fuck it, I’m taking everything not nailed down. Health potions, mana potions, haste potion, stamina. **Clover’s Love Potion No. 9**—wait, what? Fuck it, no time—potions. All the potions. Including what has to be a bottle of **Liquid Luck**, which doesn’t actually make you genuinely, permanently lucky without the proper sequence of runes. Six different catalogues for all kinds of interesting things that I’ll peruse later; a large box of yet-to-be opened interesting things and a list of what those things are… wait, that can’t be—I keep packing, even as I burst through a hole Zoro cut through the wall and charge for the beach, and I go across the tilted hall to check the other HS closet… holy fuck, it is! The closet I’ve been emptying is the only fully stocked closet in this whole island!

Violation four!

Portable Swamp, Fen, or Watermeadow; Extra-Sparky Fireworks; Flvnce Instant Fog Tablets, those are rare as hell but I can probably figure out the recipe… wait, don’t I have a bunch of… hm. Idea.

Holy- Tiffany Harbor Instant Darkness Powder! I haven’t seen this in years! Skiving snackboxes, moon belts, flying matchbox boats, what I recognize as bruise paste (guaranteed arnica gel, very
potent), chameleon combs, bug boxes, stankballs, whizbangers (for all celebratory occasions!), remote chatterboxes, fanged frisbees, miracle mustache mixtures (grows in fifteen seconds flat!), out to lunch hair-growth salve (gloves included), a variety of charmed quills (color changing, spell-checking, smart-assed, and lying), screaming yo-yos, sticky boots, scattering shriekers, curse-off swipe-wipes, half-hour daydreams… it’s like they stocked it with the contents of a joke shop! Why are there so many fireworks?-? And schoolbooks! I’ve seen some of these- never took some of these classes, but… let’s see, *The Standard Spell Grimoire; Housekeepery and Kitchencraft; Mathematical Theory; Transmorgify! by Dr. Calvin and Mr. Hobbes; Walls and Shields; What’s in the Box?: Roll Those Dice; Crack-a-Thoom: an Enchanter’s Guide by Tim the Enchanter; To Whom It May Concern; Hm-what?: Skulking and Drudgery; Equivalent Exchange: an Alchemist’s Guide by Messrs Elric and Elric… Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them; The Monster Book of Monsters; How to Care for Your Familiar: The Exhaustive Omnibus Edition*; several mail order catalogues I’ve been meaning to get copies of, they’re for magical supplies; *Numerology and Grammatica; Sybil’s Syllabary (Volume One and Two; One is for Divination, Two is for Runes, Ancient and Modern); Confronting the Faceless, and Other Dangers; Flesh-eating Trees of the World;* and what looks like the entire printed history of *The Quibble and Quirk*, a periodical I used to read religiously- it’s either deeply satirical or entirely honest, and I love it either way.

But really, why are there so many fireworks?

Oh- hah, there was a mixup at the post office, they actually got the month’s order meant for a joke shop, as well as supplies for someone’s homeschooling that’d been donated… interesting.

Aha-ha-ha, those were the pylons that just broke, time to go- and I’m on the beach. Everyone’s on the boats? Yes? Good, time to go- and we set sail.

It always takes me a moment to remember how to tack across a bay, but it’s sped up quite a lot by the knowledge that we have to get away from the sinking- and then Trafalgar Law stands upright and unsheathes his massive cursed sword and swings it and the mountain that suddenly rose to block our way is split in half vertically and we escape to safety. Woo, there’s the Sunny- and there's a floatilla of rafts lashed together with zipties, and… uh.

I didn’t realize the battle costume I made for Gally, at her specific request and instruction, would be quite so… uh. Uh. Uh. -Anyway, we’re just about to load everyone onto the ship and I’m quite ready to be done with this whole dreadful business- hang about, why’s Gally here, she said she’d- wait, why’s Fern on her back and unconscious, we just got her healthy again-

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA/

No. No no no.

Nope.

I’m leaving.

Oh hey, there was a… hm. Oho! The Spangle World Cup Finals for last year; I missed that one. I always forget the real name of the game is Bountyball, but it is and I must accept that.
11th July 2014

ALA v TIF

ALABASTA VERSUS TIFFANY HARBOUR

Transcript of the Live Coverage from the Scrimshaw Slider’s Bountyball (Sixth Degree, Champton Slippers, Baseball, Foot-the-Ball) Correspondent Jimjam “Meadhall” Rackham and the Dusty Trove’s Society Correspondent Pterry Desjarnine.

Alabasta 745 - Tiffany Harbour 747

JIMJAM RACKHAM

The Marble White Stadium is full and the noise is deafening. We’re here, due to the wheel-throw at the Goa v Lvnl semifinals, in lovely Alabasta. I am joined in the Reporter’s Enclosure by my many colleagues, including Pterry Desjarnine, who is a member of our sister publication, the Dusty Trove. We await the arrival of both team’s mascots, who will put on pre-match shows as is tradition, to invoke the power of the gods on this field of proxy-battle.

The Alabastans, of course, bring their internationally celebrated dance troupe, the Sidewinders; their many recitals and candid pictograph books constitute a major reason for the Alabastan team’s enduring popularity, beyond their prowess on the field. Tiffany Harbor’s Screaming Eels have already caused a great deal of mischief so far this tournament with their usual japes and trickery-hat theft, stealing unwatched concessions, coughing globs of extra-sticky slimy mucus onto pretty women’s hairdos- as usual, their popularity is firmly with children and certain childish individuals.

Security stand by at all points around the perimeter of the field to prevent dangerous out-of-bounds incidents, interference from the spectators, and more-than-usual horrific injury.

While we wait for the opening performances, let’s remind ourselves of the facts of the day, consider what these teams look like, and compare some key statistics.

PERTINENT NOTATIONS

The game at play is Sixth Degree; the balls are provided by the local toy shop, Jackrabbit Japery,
and have been inspected by both Skuan and Line officials for tampering. Pig is in the Pink; Slams are slippery as ever; and the Fox is Eager to Run.

Odds are 23-54 Alabasta High; Payouts are set at four million Beri per winning betting ticket; ticket-holders may be reimbursed for a maximum of five tickets. As with all games falling under the Bountyball umbrella, adherence to the legal betting laws is strictly enforced.

OFFICIAL COLORS

ALABASTA

Life Green - Sand White

TIFFANY HARBOUR

Brick Red - Mark Black

TENDERS

ALABASTA

Sebastian Manigold

After a slow start in the tournament, Alabastan Manigold was a star of the lengthy semifinal against Fiddler’s Green and is a major reason for his team’s presence in the final. However, many felt his opposite number on the Lyneel side out-performed him in Alabasta’s first match and he sustained a nasty head injury in the contentious quarter-final against Pumpkin Hill.

TIFFANY HARBOUR

Georges Jacko

Jacko let in seventeen goals against Germa in the first round and no fewer than forty six against Ryugyu Mergyo in the semi-final. Tiffy fans are rightly nervous about Jacko’s abilities facing an Alabastan Slider trio of proven ability.

SLIDERS
ALABASTA

Achmed Andres

Fernando Diaz

Gongon Pompompom

The Alabastan trio have been a joy in flight during the tourney, exciting to watch and responsible for sixty eight goals so far in the season. Gongon Pompompom has emerged as one of the players to watch, celebrated for Penning the Pig no less than twice per game- a tricky maneuver to set up even in practice games. Her fellow sliders, Andres and Diaz, continue Alabasta’s tradition of extra slippery sliders- as the saying goes, the only time Alabasta Slide’s still, they’re scoring.

TIFFANY HARBOUR

Priyanka Chopra

Tesla Corroil

Sweetiedrops Vioreguard

Less flashy in style, vicious in nature; the Tiffany Harbour Sliders have scored seventy four goals so far this tourney and have- to the surprise of fans and commentators- outperformed their Alabastan counterparts. Alabasta turns out a consistently aggressive and quick-moving trio, year after year- but this year, Tiffany Harbour has them beat.

BATTERS

ALABASTA

Daz Bones

Toya Bawanami

Although they’ve been plagued with a particularly nasty series of curses, hexes, and jinxes, the
Alabasta Batters have attended their duty in spectacular style. They flung off the last grasping tendrils of their tourney-long cursing during the semi-final (F-Green v ALA), when their efforts prevented Hunter Morgan from catching the Fox.

TIFFANY HARBOUR

Penrose Morgan
Morag Morgan

The Bloody Twins are a terrifying force, only to be underestimated at your own peril. Morgan and Morgan have displayed characteristic physical courage and astounding tactical genius all season. There are several outstanding moments of their characteristic synchronicity, each marking a spectacular moment of danger, culminating in the TIFF v RM semi-final when M. Morgan was knocked unconscious protecting the TIFF Hunter- resulting in P. Morgan’s racking up in fouls, culminating in a record-breaking number for a single player. The Council has informed all Bountyball correspondents that a numeration and list of the fouls committed by P. Morgan is strictly prohibited for publication.

HUNTERS

ALABASTA

Anthony Silva

Silva has only made two captures during the tourney due to Sabaody’s disqualification in the first round. Once he spots the Fox, he is fast and accurate, but questions must be asked about his ability to locate that quicksilver ball. His average capture time this season has been six hours forty four minutes.

Tiffany Harbour

Eloise Cloudchaser

Eloise Cloudchaser needs no introduction. The oldest combatant in this tourney, she has been a world-class Sixth Degree player since her late teens. Though before this World Cup many critics had written her off, she is largely responsible for Tiffany Harbour’s place in the final. Average capture
time this tournament: five hours fifty six minutes.

**PTERRY DESJARDINE**

The VIP boxes are now full. Her Royal Highness, Princess of Alabasta, Nefertari Vivi, gleefully chatters with the Queen of Ravens, Principal of the Sandy Island Tower of Magic; but all eyes are not on the Royal Box, where they are seated, but on Box Two.

Box Two is where Chief of Marines Tsururao Kohinoor, Admiral Kizaru, and Admiral Kuzan are seated under close guard, to prevent incidents perpetrated by an overexcited crowd. The Admiralty, invited by special request by the Tiffany Harbour Royal, Princess Portgas D. Gable, have been given prime places in the front row. Chief Kohinoor is wearing the brick red and pottery-marker black of Tiffany Harbour, while her subordinates are wearing Alabasta’s living water green and sand white.

This will undoubtedly send the gossips and chinwags into overdrive- what message is being sent by the visual division in the Marines? A division, lest we forget, predicated by the Double Wash and Hang-dry of two years ago, when Mister Sengoku and Mister Garp retired simultaneously. Are we witnessing a very public, very ugly display of division between senior and junior Marine management? My colleague, Jimjam “Meadhall” Rackham, who is sitting close enough to read everything my quill is writing, informs me that Chief Kohinoor is a die-hard Tiffy fan- particularly of Tiffany Harbour Slider Priyanka Chopra, and that Faesh publications rarely get to the general public beyond academia, handily explaining her subordinates support of Alabasta. Alabasta is, after all, a good, respectable team with genuine prospects across the board- however. Considering the other things going on these past few years, it would not surprise me if there were hidden machinations in motion.

**RACKHAM**

The crowd roars as the gates open and the mascot troupes assemble on the field. First, the Alabastan Sidewinders, dressed in diaphanous gowns and dancing to the haunting refrain of duduk, oud, drum, tambourine, and finger cymbals. Several jaws have dropped here in the journalists’ enclosure and, judging by the number of dropped pens, notebooks, and standing spectators, many also appear to have lost sensation in their brains.

**DESJARDINE**

Up in VIP Box Two, Admiral Kizaru appears to have become catatonic. Did I just see coworker Admiral Kuzan smack him over the back of the head?
RACKHAM

And here come the Screaming Eels with their lightning-blue scales and feathery fins. Tumbling through the air, stealing hats from men and ribbons from women, spitting gobs of slime at squealing children and screeching folk tunes; their general mayhem a pure gleaming counterpoint to the grace and restraint of the Sidewinders. Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah-

DESJARDINE

It is always enchanting to observe people enjoying the culture of other nations. Unfortunately, Her Highness Vivi and Queen Raven appear to be far more interested in the brawl directly below them-Admiral Kizaru has torn the shirt off of Admiral Kizaru, exposing quite a lot of bare chest and tasty muscles. Say what you will about politics, but the Marine policy of training their troops up to a certain level of fitness pays it’s own dues, my gods the definition on that man’s back could wash an entire armada’s worth of dirty sheets- ahem. In what some may see as a somewhat belated show of authority, Chief Kohinoor has broken up the fight and wedged herself firmly between the two brawling men, forcefully directing their attention to the pitch.

It would indeed be a terrible waste to not enjoy the wondrous spectacle now unfolding, with the colorful sky-fish and the dancing and what-all.

Chief Kohinoor is grinning.

RACKHAM

The opening ceremony concludes with an interesting dancer/sky-eel dance routine. It’s sinuous and slimy and scaly and wicked. I sincerely hope someone’s making a recording of this- and, if several featherfins have found themselves in the Sidewinder’s eyes, the latter have resisted the temptation to transform into the terrifying Medusae form that all Sidewinders are blessed with by the Gods and Goddesses of the Great Sandora. Great luck, as that prevents the instance of many children- myself included- gaining nightmares of their snaky forms after their display back in ’94.

And here come the two teams- Alabasta in live-waters teal and sugarsand white jerseys, Tiffany Harbour in brick red and mark black, same. They are in the traditional armor and brooms of their respective countries- Alabasta is flying Khamsin Hotwings; Tiffany Harbour is on Jetstream Steelwings.

DESJARDINE

All of the Alabasta Royal Family are supporting Alabasta. Certainly nobody can have expected HRM Nefertari to cheer for his main competitor in the trade of spices and sundries. HRH Nefertari,
who has inherited her mother’s complexion and her father’s coloring, is wearing a beautiful green and white ensemble of a blue-green romper, long lace skirt, and royal blue and gold thwab. Her jewelry is beadwork, necklace and earrings both; and her dupatta is of finest lace and trimmed in silvery-green pears. Her parasol is an Alabastan Sunshader, made of hawk feathers and seagull feathers; the bunting is of fine linen, and the pole is paper-cane; as representation of Alubarna, the Capitol City and seat of the Royal Family, the Sunshader is used as both prop and necessary respite from the glaring sun on all occasions where HRH Vivi is to be seated out-of-doors.

Queen Raven is in a black dress with embellishments of feathers and jet beads, a black lace half-mask, and a black derby hat with black ostrich feathers and trimmed with white flowers and pearls; her hair is worn in long waves; her lips are painted black; and she wears only a set of silver bangles and black lace gloves as embellishment. Her staff is unchanged, still bedecked in the badges of the Alabasta Tower. Of note is her eyes, which appear to be painted with a graphic shade of red.

Does the Raven Queen secretly hope to see Tiffany Harbour take the trophy? Or is this the kind of diplomatic neutrality one might expect of a ruthless careerist whose long-term ambition is undoubtedly to usurp the Queen of Wrens’ Mage’s Council seat?

RACKHAM

00.00HRS

And they’re off! Fourteen players rise into the air for the four hundred twenty seventh Sixth Degree World Cup final!

DESJARDINE

00.01HRS

Chief Kohinoor is already on her feet cheering, even though nothing has really happened yet. Is she drunk?

RACKHAM

00.05HRS

The Pig is in Alabasta’s possession but slick defence from Morgan and Morgan has so far prevented them from scoring. Andres, Diaz, and Pompompom are relentless, ducking and weaving as they try to find a way past the Tiffy Batters.
Queen Raven appears to be passing out some kind of snack to the people in VIP Box One. Some might hesitate to accept baked goods from Queen Raven, as she is known for her mastery of Potions, Alchemy, and Transmorgification; and, I am reliably informed her school-girl habit of pranking her friends with unwanted random body modification has never really stopped.

An excellent intercept by Tiffany Harbour Slider Corroil and Tiffany Harbour is streaking towards the goal- thrown to Voireguard- ye-ouch! Even the Alabastans groaned in sympathy there as a Slam hit Corroil hard in the throat. He drops the Pig, which is caught by Andres. Alabasta is back in possession!

Admiral Kizaru is laughing hard at something Admiral Kuzan has sighed. What is so amusing- and is Admiral Kizaru aware that Admiral Kuzan does not appreciate the joke? What division lays between them that forces such violent conflict to flare up between them in full view of the public? Surely both Admirals are aware that everybody in the stadium can see them? Woo, there goes Kizaru’s shirt, and my goodness he’s just as ripped as Kuzan-

And it’s first blood to Alabasta with a spectacular goal from Andres!

HRH Vivi has almost toppled out of the VIP box cheering her national team. Her father has seized the back of her thwab and saved her from what would surely have been a death of international
significance, spawning news stories across the world. Guard Captain Kohza is laughing heartily. Queen Raven appears completely serene, merely handing the Palace Chief of Staff one of her tasty treats.

**RACKHAM**

00.42HRS

Morgan and Morgan are successfully disrupting the Alabastan Sliders, preventing the formidable trio from scoring a second goal. Tiffany Harbour had relied far too much on the Bloody Twins earlier in the season, and is a very defense-heavy team besides; their last touch of the Pig resulted in a fumble by Pompompom and possession by Chopra. No sign of the Fox so far.

**DESJARDINE**

00.54HRS

Queen Raven is cheering every well-hit Tiffy Slam, whereas HRH Vivi is gnashing her teeth in chagrin. Captain Chaka is yawning.

**RACKHAM**

00.59HRS

Sweetiedrops Voireguard breaks through the Alabasta defence and equalises! Ten all!

**DESJARDINE**

01.10HRS

Head of the Department of International Agriculture Sean Jawson is frowning as he follows the match. Greying and wrinkly, he shows an age far beyond his nominal twenty-seven year's of age. Unkind political opponents may call him a ‘nit-picking old man’ but others go so far as to say that ‘he’s outright pedantic, and more than a little behind the times’. Renowned nature photographer Portgas D. Ciconia has repeatedly given her public support of Department Head Jawson’s forestry policies, stating that ‘the natural world is not for the use of humanity alone, and should have rights beyond merely existing.’

**RACKHAM**

01.23HRS

A sudden burst of quick-fire Pig passes has resulted in a brace of goals for Alabasta, whose Sliders continue to slip across the rails and through Tiffy defences. Gongon Pompompom has scored twice more and Chopra once, taking the score to 30-20, Alabasta leading. The Bloody Twins are starting
to look particularly reckless and are only just being reigned in by Captain-Hunter Cloudchaser. Alabasta’s team remains steady in their approach- not unusual for this stage of the game, but dangerous as we progress.

**DESJARDINE**

01.34HRS

The King of Shrikes is a thin man wrapped in sand-colored robes and bandages, due to his work with the Sandora Djinn. Like his predecessor, The King of Storks, he really only comes to sporting events like these as a way of keeping an eye on the emotional status of Queen Raven, who shows her feelings in the level of adornment and the overall complexity of her dress, to some obscure code that only the most observant of pedants and those who are in the Tower hierarchy are fully aware. He is paying little attention to the match, preferring what seems a most interesting conversation with the Sidewinder Troupe Leader, Madama “Serpentia” Angia. The difficulty of joining the Sidewinders is only speculative- they do not hold open trials, and no inquiry from any reporter has ever been answered.

Nobody who witnessed it will ever forget the shock on King Shrike’s face when Madama Serpentia asked him to the Yule Ball held at Nefertari Palace, Alubarna; nor the smile that came across his face when he saw Madama Serpentia’s dress (I refer you to the Yuletine Issue of Dusty Trove for further discussion of the event.) The two together were voted ‘Most Beautiful Couple’, by readers of my regular column. While King Shrike and Madama Serpentia appear to be holding hands in VIP Box One, this might well be because King Shrike is trying to prevent Madama Serpentia from putting on one of her famous Special Event Hats- or from tearing off her thwab and screaming, as HRH Vivi has done.

**RACKHAM**

01.43HRS

**THE FOX IS ON THE RUN!** With the score standing at 40-40 (following goals mere minutes apart from Voireguard, Diaz, and Andres) a flash of silver near the Alabastan hoops leads Cloudchaser and Silva into a breakneck chase- Batters and Sliders scatter- Cloudchaser is ahead but narrowly misses the capture- as the Fox soars upwards, both Hunters appear to be dazzled by the brilliant Alabastan sun- the Fox has disappeared again.

**DESJARDINE**

01.58HRS

Igaram and Terracotta, the Heads of Household Staff at Alubarna Palace, have only one child. This lack of fecundity has not stopped them from being something like parental influences on HRH Vivi, after the untimely death of her mother, HRM Vidhalia. The small family is sitting together, and by all appearances, is enjoying the game. Captain Chaka has taken the opportunity to turn into his Jackal form and take a nap under HRH Vivi’s stadium seat; Captain Pell has relieved him of duty, and is perching on the back of HRM Nefertari’s seat.
RACKHAM

02.03HRS

Moments after Diaz lengthens Alabasta’s lead- 50-40- Batter Bones hits Eloise Cloudchaser hard over the head with his bat. The referee is examining Gastropodal footage to determine whether a foul has been committed. The game has been paused.

DESJARDINE

02.04HRS

A great groan has issued from the crowd. HRH Vivi is purchasing a lemonade and fanning herself with a palm frond. My colleague, Jimjam Rackham, has informed me that one of the players has sustained an injury.

RACKHAM

02.21HRS

No foul! Germa referee Dagmar Bittenbinder concludes that Daz Bones did not mean to hit Eloise Cloudchaser around the back of the skull with his Battery bat. Cloudchaser signals that she is fit to continue; and play resumes!

DESJARDINE

02.36HRS

Queen Raven has come out of her serene pose to scream like the hooligan she once was. The same cannot be said for King Shrike or Madama Serpentia, who have started trying to steal each other’s tongues with their own tongues. A disgusting display of public affection? Or a calculated snub? HRH Vivi is spiritedly describing the exact manner in which Cloudchaser sustained her nosebleed for the benefit of Captain Pell, who is allowing a very handsome smile to cross his face in response to HRH Vivi’s brilliant excitement.

RACKHAM

02.38HRS

Mere seconds after play resumes, Cloudchaser and Silva are rocketing suddenly upwards- five hundred thousand eyes follow the pair into the dazzling Sandisle sun-

DESJARDINE
02.39HRS

Chief Kohinoor is on her feet, screaming.

RACKHAM

02.40HRS

Cloudchaser and Silva are in a breakneck dash for the Fox, which Silva sighted first—he is four feet ahead of Cloudchaser as both rise almost vertically—

DESJARDINE

02.41HRS

Everyone is on their feet, including the denizens of the Reporter’s Enclosure; Jimjam Rackham is speedwriting, keeping his eyes on the sky, and screaming swearwords directly into my left ear. Dear readers, did you know I’ve gone partially deaf in one ear? Hopefully it’s not permanent.

RACKHAM

02.42HRS

Cloudchaser is gaining on Silva but will it be enough…?

DESJARDINE

02.43HRS

Admiral Kizaru and Admiral Kuzan have taken the opportunity to restart their earlier brawl.

RACKHAM

02.43HRS

Cloudchaser and Silva neck and neck—

DESJARDINE

02.44HRS

King Shrike appears to have snuck both hands up the front of Madama Serpentia’s dress.
**RACKHAM**

02.45HRS

CLOUDCHASER’S GOT THE FOX! TIFFANY HARBOUR HAVE WON!

**DESJARDINE**

02.45HRS

It’s over? Good, I can go now, this was my day off- oh, yes, it was- sure, we can get coffee-

**RACKHAM**

The crowds are going crazy- after two and three-quarter hours in the blazing Alabastan sun, Tiffany Harbour has won the World Cup and Cloudchaser has achieved her life’s ambition (as stated in one of her only personality-focused interviews) on her third attempt- it looks like she might fall off her broom- tears are streaming down her face- a hugely popular win here at the edge of the Great Sandora Desert- but hearty commiserations to Alabasta- they led almost all the way, and in the end, it was Cloudchaser the Hunter who defeated them. A stunning display of sportsmanship here, as Silva and Cloudchaser embrace-

**DESJARDINE**

I have to say, I don’t particularly enjoy sporting events. Seeing people with their guard down is not quite enough compensation for sitting out in all weather, watching a sport I generally don’t care for and can’t play, often next to Jimjam Rackham, who is doing stunning work in the field of deafening others. I don’t- oh, Chief Kohinoor is jumping on Admiral Kizaru and Admiral Kuzan as she cheers.

Oh, thank you-

**RACKHAM**

After giving my friend Pterry Desjardine a big cold glass of lemonade, and drinking a glass myself, I’m prepared to give my final thoughts on today’s game. As celebrations continue here in the Sandoran Desert, we at the Scrimshaw Slider are even more determined to accurately record and commentate the games of the season. My sincerest hopes that you have enjoyed our Sixth Degree World Cup coverage from Alabasta. Next week, the National Baseball League at Lymel!!

Oh this is the issue with the SP of ‘Fox on the Run!’; they’ve really done wonders with product placement, it used to be much more obvious. Oh hey, it’s still in the back of the magazine- let’s just play it, heyooo-
My fingers are blistered. I haven’t had that happen in years.

Every Bard- which both my sister and I am, even though she takes more pleasure in writing, and I in playing- learns music on the pianoforte. At least, at our school they did. In some places, it’s recorder; others, guitar; still more, it’s choral; and in some places, it’s steel drums.

How hard is it to learn an instrument? If you have a solid foundation in musical theory- you know your genres, your history, can appreciate it and understand how to read it- it takes about a year, practicing every day. For a first-timer, it’s about two year’s. Really, you’re learning a whole new language- two hundred hours if you’ve learned a new language before, one you don’t already speak, four hundred if you haven’t.

This is for proficiency- at our school, unless you were on Bardic track or had a club, that was as far as it went. Third year, you got to pick your own instrument- be it one the school had for rent-to-own, or one you found for yourself in the city. Cece found a metal viola; Havij put starmetal in it on request. I found an accordion.

I think how fast I learned was really down to two things- how fast I learn music, and how I practice. I didn’t practice study or performance pieces often- maybe once or twice outside of class. Most of what I did was scales, trying to play songs I’d heard that day, more scales, songs I came up with that day, and even more scales. Lots of different scales, too- harmonic, minor, major, pentatonic, all the scales. When I explained it to my teachers, they were very impressed with me.

Accordions come in many sizes and shapes. Some have buttons, and some have keys like a piano. Depending on when and who made them, the reeds might be different, the keys might have a different numeration, and even what they’re made of can be different. The design and sounds vary from one instrument to another as a result; some vintage instruments are extremely beautiful, while more contemporary instruments show technological advancements.

Actually, I have two accordions- the one I learned to play on, and the one I’m playing now. Both came from the pawn shop, but the one I learned on I got as soon as I got into Bardic; the one I’m playing I got in third year. I’d been playing accordion for two years by then- and speaking frankly, the hard part about my instrument was never learning to play, it was repairing it after I bought it from the pawnshop. My “show” accordion is the twin of my “practice” accordion in every way save one- my show accordion is prettier.

The Gag has an entire platoon of sheds dedicated to servicing and repairing clowning gear- be it juggling clubs, magic trick rings, or, in my case… well, no one really had the exact tools needed for repairing an accordion, but I made do in the Fine Arts shed. To start with, I went over everything that was broken- from big things, like the leak in the bellows and the sticky keys and the mangled sound of the reeds, to much smaller things, like missing rhinestones and cracking paint.

I labelled and taped each button, numerically, so that my notations would make sense- it’s hard to know what someone’s talking about when the notes aren’t particularly clear. The first thing I did was
remove the axle on the treble side—what a clattering of keys that was. Had to use a vise to get the
damn thing out, my arms weren’t strong enough then.

After that, I set all the keys aside in a taffin leftover from Yule cookies, and cleaned out the…I don’t
know the name for it, but it’s where all the keys go. Full of dust and grime it was—had to use the
shop vacuum, and a brush to get it all out. Then, I used a very fine grit of sandpaper to lightly sand
the stains away—smooth out the minor warps that happen as fine wood ages. Another vacuum,
and onwards.

I ended up disassembling the treble side further, and repairing cracks in the frame with a kind of
epoxy putty meant for woodworking. I repaired the fine surface further with two-ply crafter’s wood,
a very flexible material with a pretty grain, before staining and sealing. I painted detail-work back
onto the side…

Hell, I learned to lathe brass, which is no picnic. Protip: No matter what your financial straits, always
use more cooling fluid. It’s much cheaper to get a bottle of cooling fluid than it is to replace a bit
you’ve burnt out or hire someone to repair the lathe itself. It also makes it less likely that the piece
you’re working on is going to catch and fling itself across the shed, directly through a window in
some cases.

There are a lot of clowns that got their material from my antics—to the point where anytime my name
was on the signup sheet for shed time, an entire crowd of spectators would show up to take notes.
Also, if you’re lathing something, wear proper face protection. A sliver of summat in your eye is no
laughing matter…after it happens to you, I mean.

After making sure the keys were clean and in good working order, I put the whole thing back
together, hammered in the brass axle with a wooden hammer. Nothing funny happened except me
dropping the hammer on my foot, and by then I was wearing steel toe boots so it wasn’t as bad as it
could’ve been. I did ham it up for my audience, because I’m actually a very good clown—and the
long pause between the hammer hitting my foot and me reacting to it was what really made them
laugh, not my reaction to it.

**Next was the grille and the paint.** The grille was clothed with an unsuitable green felt; I replaced it
with a much more sensible open weave fabric that I left undyed, as my colors are black and white.

I did all the fine, fancy making it look nice work before I did the reeds because I was still trying to
find new reeds. I eventually found a set I could have—free, just to free up the space—in the Gag’s
prop closet on Stage Six. No one knew what they were—and I know for sure now that they’re
starmetal or close enough. I knew then they were steel, at least, possibly stainless steel—and more
than enough for my purposes. The only thing I actually had to buy myself, beyond the accordion—
which was quite cheap, being inoperable at the time—was beeswax. One-hundred percent beeswax
 candles turned out to be the cheapest option, gotten from a store in the Boneyard district—and I got a
better deal because the box was crunched on.

Anyway—redoing the reeds was something I did at very strange hours, when most people were in
class because I didn’t want an audience—there are some things a man ought to be able to do by
himself.
The songs you think I sung sound too nice
All the bad things you do
You really think my disapproval made you think twice?
And I don’t care about with whom you sleep-
Surprise!
I don’t use my holy powers
To be a giant fucking creep

You shouldn’t abstain from sin because you think I want you to-
Abstain because you think it’s right to do.
Free will, assholes.
Didn’t think I had to spell that out for you.

There are many stories about me
Nearly every one of them is true
You say you don’t believe in me?
Consider: I don’t have to believe in you-
Fuck, you make my life a living hell
I didn’t ask to be your goddess
But you made me and that’s all I can tell

Here’s how it is: I exist because of you
A man walked up a black mountain
And with his blood he drew my shape
And with his mind he set a fire
And with his fire he forged me
I am the goddess you men forged
I walked down into the black valley
And I gathered up the black soil
And with it
I made the shape of a monstrous black wolvark
And once finished
I walked into its open mouth
And I wore the wolvark’s shape as though it were a cloak
And I never again removed it

There are many stories about me
Nearly every one of them is true
You say you don’t believe in me?
Have you considered that I don’t believe in you?
You’re not coming with me- sing a thousand prayers, buy the mercy of men
You’re not coming with me- I do not want you, you can’t change my mind

My sister thinks that we don’t know
Her vengeance drives her to bitter ends
An endless rage that will not cease and will not quiet
She thinks that we don’t know
She fell in love before she was ten
To a girl murdered before her time
Long black hair tied to a coral tree
Bones and silence in the grass
She thinks that we don’t know
That we won’t love her as much if she says
A single word about what makes her weep at night
But we will
But we will
But we will
There are many stories about me
Nearly every one of them is true
You say you don’t believe in me?
Did you know that I don’t believe in you?
You will never be funny- tell your stupid jokes, get out of my house
No, you will never be funny- you have no timing, and your wordplay is shit

You try so hard to be funny, but you’ve missed the point, you missed the basic conceit
You can’t care if you’re funny- you can’t care what other people think…
A shitty life, a shitty job, fucked up family and married to a slob
Parents hate you, inlaws too- yes, everything in your life is a problem
Most especially you

There are many stories about me
Nearly every one of them is true
You say you can’t believe in me?

My faith is worth nothing to the faithless like you.

You shouldn’t tell jokes because people want you to; that’s the way the joke just becomes you.

Cece has had experiences that she can’t talk about in any other way than song; and I don’t know what they are, they’re… internal. The length and breadth of her world is inside her head, but made small and soft and see through.
I’m so fucking tired.

Is it over? Oh god please let it be over.

Nami… isn’t screaming anymore. Maybe it’s over? No- wait, that’s a baby.

Others fear musicians because of the Piper. My fingers are burning and my wrist is aching and I
know this story inside out. Finally wrote a damn song about it, so- my turn, I guess.

Fuck it, time to tango.

Oh god so tired.

I’m awake. But. I’m really wishing I wasn’t.

Oh wait, that’s Bryony.

“...miss bryony, are you really there?”

“Yeah- wait, have you been playing all night long?”

“in shifts with cece, yes”

“Oh my goodness gracious. Here, let me- hook up this microphone- *I will lift mine eyes up to the hills.*”

I can’t tell if I’m just sleep drunk or if there’s an actual chorus behind Bryony’s song. I can’t tell if everyone hates me or if I just need to go to bed. I can’t tell if my limbs are actually made out of stone, or if I’m just tired and acknowledging it. I can’t tell if it’s hot, or if I’m finally relaxed enough- safe enough- to sleep.

Is she singing with a chorus, or is she singing alone? I don’t know. I don’t know.

I’m too tired to know.

The world spins and goes dark and that’s all I know- I dreamed I heard a baby crying, and I dreamed I heard Nami crying, but I don’t know which is true.

Dreams are weird.

Bryony’s song echoes through the ship. I don’t think any of the Suntides really realize they’re singing along to the hymns- everyone who stayed and everyone who went, we’re all tired.

Me most of all.

I really need a senior midwife here, but I’m all I’ve got. So. The next task, before I sleep this night- day?- night?- is to fill out the paperwork. Four birth registers; one death report. It’s of the utmost importance I fulfill my duties as soon as I can- and I am not yet too exhausted to hold a fountain pen.
For documents that are to be copied, I must use black archival ink. For documents that are not to be copied except by hand or mimeograph, I use blue archival ink.

First, turn the light on. The Galley is never really quiet— even after Sanji got that migraine, the rest of us stepped up as best we could. What’s the point of having cookbooks and written instructions for things if they don’t get used, you know? Mack and Bang are actually pretty good at stew, and I made a few cakes!

I-

Oh gods, please- n-no, no, deep breath, just.

Lay out the paperwork in order of difficulty— do the death report first, then the others.

This one was born dead— fill in Nami’s particulars, highlight where she needs to signify, mark where Chopper’s going to fill in the rest after autopsy, sign, seal and seal again, done.

Three girls and a boy, that lived. All of them have orange and green striped hair, and that square-shaped forehead of Zoro’s. And they all lived. The fifth one was born with nut-brown hair, and it- I think it, she, died in transit, in the canal. Her heart stopped, and would not be started steady again, and… I don’t know.

I don’t know.

I don’t know why things like this happen.

You don’t have to be a cleric or a midwife to lay a blessing on a baby. All you need is oil, or ash, or soot, or water, or salt— something pure, sacred. You make a mark over the soft spot on the baby’s head, and bless them— surely goodness and mercy shall follow thee all the days of thy life, and thou shalt dwell in peace forever more— and different people have different— different blessings.

Sometimes it’s I have called you by your name; when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you go through the winds, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, and the flames will not set you ablaze; when you delve into the earth, you will not be crushed. Darkness will hold no power over you; Light will never blind you. You are mine; I have called you by your name.

Sometimes it’s And all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well when the tongues of flames are in-folded into the crowned knot of fire and the fire and the rose are one.

Sometimes it’s For it is together that we can overcome all things; and by my hand, protect thee.

The one I used for the one that died, it was sleep now, little darling; do not cry. I will stay, until no longer can thee— and then she breathed her last.

Roronoa Silas; Stormborn Vivian; Roronoa Guinevere; Stormborn Lucille. Welcome to the World.

Roronoa Stormborn Brenda; we will meet again, in a better place than this.
Taffy is crying, and she’s doing it silently. I am going to make tea.

The process of making tea to drink is fairly simple. To start with, one requires the appropriate tea-loose leaf or loose dried herbs or fresh herbs, of good quality. For herbs, homegrown is best, as one can ensure proper quality. I prefer to not use a tea bag with my brewing, but rather a strainer as I pour. Loose leaf tea (or loose herb tea) requires a lot of space to move around in to brew properly.

Different teas require different brewing temperatures. Black tea needs ninety six degrees celsius; green tea needs seventy degrees celsius; herbal teas are a bit more esoteric, in that certain temperatures can ruin the natural chemistry and medicinal properties of the herbs being used.

Always use a proper kettle to boil your water, and only ever boil it once; then, brew your tea in a teapot, generally dedicated for tea alone. We have four- one for black, one for green, one for white, and one made of glass for herbal varieties.

I am making chai masala, as I can recall feeling- well, nevermind. Cold. That is enough.

To make Chai Masala, one will need:

The cheapest, strongest black loose leaf tea you can get your hands on. I’m not kidding. The orange pekoe that they sell at the Daiso in the brown paper bags with yellow and red lettering on it for a bit less than four hundred beri a pack? Perfect. A good black tea is not what you want, in this case- it needs to be strong enough to withstand the powerful flavor forces you’re about to unleash, without being so expensive as to make you feel guilty for throwing down a challenge to the flavor knights… which they are soon to answer. I keep a massive store of the stuff in metal taffins that I clearly anodized with the appropriate label so that Sanji wouldn’t get mad.

Sanji is a tea snob.

As for the spice bomb of flavor, you will need a garam masala. There are between five and eight total spices required- missing one is fine I suppose, but you need to have at least five of the following to make it taste… familiar, I suppose.

The essential spice is green cardamom. Chai masala will not taste right, will not smell right, without it. You can essentially leave everything else out- but not this. It is an intensely fragrant seed pod, with sharp vegetal notes of green, spiciness, and pepper. They are harvested at an earlier time than black cardamom. Green cardamom is in very nearly every chai masala recipe you could ever be exposed to. Lightly crack the seed pods before use; otherwise, store whole, somewhere dark and cool.

Next comes cinnamon stick, for sweetness and warmth. Store whole and crush to splinters or grind down only when ready to brew or use. Fennel seed- offers a licorice or faintly medicinal note, can be used instead of star anise, which is the same flavor but darker and stronger. Fresh ginger, freshens
and sharpens the whole pot with spice notes, warms the blood, and tempers the taste of milk. Black peppercorns are what gives the masala the back-of-the-throat bite, which is what most people remember about Faesh Chai Masala. Whole cloves give it a musky, sharp flavor. Coriander seeds make it sweeter, with notes of citrus.

The only real advice I have about how much of what spice to put in? As much or as little as you’d like, depending on what you want.

As for brewing, well… The flavors that make spices taste delicious are all aromatic compounds. Aromatic compounds are made of molecules that contain a structure known as a benzene ring, meaning they dissolve best in alcohols or fats. Therefore, for the preparation of Faesh Chai Masala, you need to get the fattiest milk you can get your hands on. Sea Cow milk from the springtime is actually almost perfect- and I wasn’t just fighting Waspy back on the Sunken Science Island, I was scouting out all their shit that I wanted for myself. That island had fully working farms in various states of abandonment- including a small herd of mini-Sea Cows. I milked them, before I sent them home to our Aquarium- they seemed, frankly, overjoyed to be cared for again. Are they a little odd looking? Aren’t we all? Besides, amphibians are always the oddest looking, of all the animals.

Tea is properly served in porcelain. I’ll be using the mismatched set, as we have service for eighty and it doesn’t match anyway- if pieces get broken, who can tell?

Gurry is sitting with Taffy, and Taffy is sobbing into his shoulder- good, good. Well, a baby is- nngh.

Chai Masala is prepared in milk, not water; it’s not, technically speaking, a drink. It’s more like a liquid, flavorful meal- thus, no food need ever be served with Chai Masala. As the aromatic compounds begin their dissolution, a uniquely homely aroma starts to flood the kitchen.

Hello, Sanji.

“Hello, Mab. Chai Masala?”

“It’s been a hell of a day, Sanji. Longer, if I’m reading the stars right- and, with the Island we were docked at now gracefully sunken beneath the waves, Nami and Taffy in no fit state to take their posts, and quite a few guests… well. One problem at a time- I think everyone could do with a nice cuppa,”

“I quite agree, love. I’ll start service, then?”

“If you like- see if the Cookids can help out as well, we’ve rather a lot of people aboard and some of them won’t be put at ease by an adult man, Demon or no,”

“Will do,”

I leave the tea in the capable hands of my husband. I step forwards to comfort my student. I step out
to comfort my friend. And, most importantly, an entire squad of me goes to sail the ship- somewhere else, please. We’ve got an Eternal Pose to Tuckleigh; Tuckleigh, Ho!

I’ll be tired and sad *after* we’re well away from the multitudes of wolvarks circling the drowning island, thank you.
I spy with my fanficcer’s eye, a crossover! Well, it could happen...

“Attention. Your attention, please: due to the number of people bitten, I have been asked to remind all persons on this ship that Goblynn the Fishcat is tolerant of petting from Deborah, our Sous Chef, alone. Please don’t pet Goblynn the Fishcat if you are not Deborah; Goblynn has bitten through battleship plating before.

“A reminder from the Galley that Breakfast services are from five hours after Midnight to Ten in the Morning; Luncheon begins at Noon, ending a half hour later; Tea is currently two hours before sunset, moving towards three; Dinner is an hour after sunset; and Supper is whatever’s leftover or packed in the Milk Fridge, whenever you get to it. The Milk Fridge is never locked- and, so long as there is still milk in the fridge, anyone is welcome to drink it. Please return all used bottles and glass containers from the Milk Fridge to the bottle-return located next to the fridge. Pudding, cheese, yoghurt, and other dairy items are on an ‘as you find them’ basis; there are no reservations, only requests.

“I will also take this moment to remind everyone that influenza is really definitely trying to kill us all, and to please report to the Sanitary or Infirmary for your vaccinations- they need not be needle-based, I hear good things about tablets these days…

“-oh, wait, I think I’ve done this completely wrong. Ahem. Coming to you live from the Thousand Sunny, A Fine Greeting to you All; it is now time to start the Straw Hat Broadcasting Service. I am your host, Mab Morgan, currently substituting for Mister Jeremiah Cross as he startled me and I punched him in the throat, then the stomach, then kicked him square and sure in the ghoulies. He’s stopped vomiting, at least, but he’s in no fit state to comment on any of the ongoings here. As for what’s going on here, please do not panic, gentle listeners; We, the Straw Hat Pirates, are currently sailing through the Rainbow Mist; I repeat, we are sailing through the Rainbow Mist.

“I do not recommend or encourage any who follow us as fans to do as we have done; you should make your own mistakes, and go your own direction, not follow ours! With that said, I neither know, nor care, what exactly the Rainbow Mist is; merely that, as current acting Senior Helmsman, I am sailing us through it. Nami is in seclusion for the next six weeks; Taffy is still recovering from her duties as Acting Midwife; and neither of them will let me use the Log Pose.

“We’re sailing blind, folks- is what I would say in other circumstances. We’re actually sailing with the help of an Eternal Pose, and I will not say where to, as that would be stupid.

“Special Announcement to the Crew: YOU DO NOT COME IN TWOS. DO NOT KILL YOUR DOUBLE. YOU ARE THE ONLY YOU. THEY ARE THE ONLY THEM. DO NOT KILL YOUR DOUBLE. ESPECIALLY YOU, ZORO. -That man would fight the very
concepts of reality if he could.

“I can now report that Cross is fully upright, still quite pale, and his snail friend is no longer sobbing with laughter at his injurious predicament. I have gone to fetch him a slice of one of our sponsor’s products, and shall now commence with reading the ad copy in a humorous fashion.

“A-hem. Your ex-girlfriend has just called. It was a painful breakup- a painful relationship- full of miscommunication and overwhelming dramatics. You’d like to move on- you swore you’d move on.

“You did not move on.

“You know it’s her that’s calling you- she’s got one of those novelty outgoing rings, so instead of the normal ‘puru-puru’ sound, your den-den’s making an unholy racket akin to a boy-band in a blender. You know that if you answer, it’s going to be an awkward five minutes of lengthening silences intercut with stilted conversation- ‘How have you been?’ ‘Fine, fine. Yourself?’ ‘Fine, just fine.’

“Neither of you is ‘fine’.

“You shouldn’t have answered the call and you shouldn’t talk to her anymore and when she suggests- like she always does- that the two of you go out for drinks at your favorite bar from back when you two were still together… You know it’s never just drinks.

“Neither of you have managed to let go far enough to get to the point in your relationship where you two can be ‘just friends’. Even now, you’re not sure you two were ever ‘just friends’; you’re certainly not ‘just friends’ now. ‘Just Friends’ don’t do things like this to each other. They don’t stay over when they shouldn’t anymore; and they don’t leave in a futile attempt to escape the consequences.

“The next morning you wake and she’s long gone, the stench of her perfume- which only just faded from your sheets- horribly, intoxicatingly, maddeningly smeared and sunk into everything. Everything you own; everything she touched.

“All you feel is empty and grey and disgusted; you swore you’d stop doing this, you swore you’d move on and stop- doing- this-

“Eventually, you leave your bed, rise, shower, and regard your refrigerator. It’s not empty; but she was the one to buy the groceries, and without her you fell back into the habit of subsisting on take-away and jars. Perhaps there’s something better than three day old anchovy-pumpkin pot pie or half a sour pickled onion in the freezer?

“Bebop-a-rebop Frozen Rhubarb Pie and Frozen Rhubarb Pie Filling; wouldn’t this be a good time for a piece of rhubarb pie? Yes, one little thing can revive a guy, and that is a piece of rhubarb pie- serve it up nice and hot, maybe things aren’t as bad as you thought.

“They are, of course- but at least you have a nice slice of rhubarb pie. That sour-sweet flavour gets the taste of humiliation out of your mouth every time- yes, that good old Bebop-a-rebop Frozen Rhubarb Pie and Frozen Rhubarb Pie Filling. Lots of things are very bad- make them better with a slice of pie,”

“Mmm hmmMm mm!”

“I can see the snail is enjoying it, at least- ah, and now for your listening pleasure- nope, sorry, can’t play it for copyright infringement reasons. Balls. Well, let’s see- I shall instead tell you stories of my youth,”
I pause and look over at the blond man carefully chewing on his slice of rhubarb pie. He’s got metal gauntlets, a snail on one shoulder, a dazed expression, and a snazzy hat. He gives me a jaunty, if wavery, thumbs up.

I turn back to the microphone transponder and continue.

“Have I ever told you about the time I almost died in a student theatre production of The Faesh Play? I’m sure I’ve told my sisters, but- well, an old classic never really dies, just revives as a ghost to haunt and torment the living once more…

“In news that will surprise no one currently listening, I was a boarding school child. Our school had several voluntold activities for the, shall we say, miscreant hooligan youth. I didn’t like to perform, but I did enjoy writing grammatically correct latin across school walls, flushing cherry bombs down the toilet, and shooting apples off my friends tits with a crossbow; thus, my inclusion in the school’s yearly production of one of the classic plays.

“It was my fifth year of school, and that year in Literacy and Composition, we were assigned a group project of retelling a Billy Shakespeare play in six minutes or less. I rewrote the entirety of The Faesh Play in a series of rhyming couplets, which by happy coincidence, played perfectly to the tune of ‘You’re So Vain’. How did it go- youooooou’re so vain, I betcha think this throne is bound to you, don’t you, don’t you…

“This song is what our group sung it as, while my favorite LitComp teacher sat with his head in his hands, occasionally making noises like he was crying. Or perhaps being stabbed, it’s been a long time…

“As an aside, those notes were lost to the fire my brother set in my first dormitory in a failed attempt to murder me. The line I sang is the only line I remember, now. That’s not what this story is about, of course, merely where it started- I won an award for that hot mess, and found myself propelled into the actual Theatrics and Dramatics class in sixth year because of it. That’s when shit gets weird.

“The first thing to know about The Faesh Play is that it is always referred to as The Faesh Play due to the well established and deeply embedded curse. I’ll explain that bit eventually- but for now, it’s enough to know that as we were all under the gimlet gaze of Skuan Nuns, and some of us actually devout, that’s what we did. We were, after all, good little Skuan school kids, even though, of course, by being included in the year’s play at all we actually weren’t. Still- we called it “The Faesh Play” and never spoke any of the lines unless we were rehearsing because that’s what one does.

“Listen, when your school is built in the center of a triangle consisting of an Age-Of-Heroes era battlefield where battlefield sounds still ring out most nights, the Old Hanging Tree where hanged men still hang in the mornings only to burn away with the night’s lingering mist in the full light of dawn, and a derelict Fairy Mound that is rumored to have an Otherbuilt Dungeon somewhere deep within; and the school itself is built atop what used to be the old laird’s house what mysteriously died of unnatural causes and whose house burned to naught but ash and stone and has been haunted by the ghosts of those trapped within it’s walls- when your boarding school, which you’ve been going to since you were nine, is like that, ye dinnae fook ‘round with fate. Tain’t smart.

“Unless, of course, your name was Mister Beverly Fujishima, and you were, firstly, freshly arrived from Ryugu Mergyo, and secondly, didn’t believe in Faesh superstition or Faesh magic, and thirdly, took every possible opportunity to spit in the face of the Gods and call it M-A-C-B-E-T-H like you
had nothing left to lose.

“Mister Fujishima was a hip young thing, or at least he hoped he was. He would show up every day, regardless of the weather, wearing geta under his dress trou, and try to hang out with us like we were his friends and not his students. In hindsight, two things become violently clear about that poor man—the first being, he must have been desperately homesick, as the school culture of Fiddler’s Green is not at all like Ryugu Mergyo, and the aquatic people's of the Fae have very little commonality with those of Fishman Island, beyond of course the ‘breathing underwater’ thing; and he was the exact sort of smiling liar, the kind of friendly lech who thought Woodrow Allenform was the pinnacle of philom genius and was likely writing a novella about a teacher who has a love affair with one of his students. Perhaps he hoped it would be semi-autobiographical.

“Mister Fujishima hated superstition, and magic, and the Gods. He hated them… well, zealously. His faith, it could be argued, was in the hating of such things, in aggressively denying their power— and above all, he hated that we corrected him whenever he called The Faesh Play by written, and accursed, name, while in the theatre room. This hatred caused him no end of grief, as he could not resist yelling the name of The Faesh Play thrice while standing on the stage we were to perform it on. He followed this idiocy with these words, and I quote direct, ‘There, see, nothing bad happened! I mean, what could possibly go wrong?’

“The curse was subtle at first, like half the supporting cast coming down with mononucleosis the first month into rehearsals. Not an unusual thing of itself for a bunch of hormone riddled boarding school kids in close contact at all times. It was after the Month of Mono, that things became progressively weirder and wilder. There are some who might argue that a kind of mass hysteria took effect, merely the actions of a group of minds united in terror wreaking havoc on the surrounding world.

“Consider this. One day, in the middle of rehearsing her ‘Out damned spot!’ soliloquy, our Lady MaccaBee almost got taken out for a nap in the dirt by a falling stage light. It plummeted out of the darkness like the hopes and dreams of anyone who’s ever flirted with Boa Hancock, smashed through the floor, and shattered in the Belows. It looked, in retrospect, like a scene from the ‘Cat and Mouse’ funnies in the newspaper— and as everyone knows, comedy is brutal, aggressive violence, spectacular and terrifying to behold—but, while jokes have the assurance of cutting without drawing blood, falling stage lights have none such to their name.

“The sound of the crash was so loud several teachers came running to our auditorium; it was thought that there had been a bomb, or a tree had exploded again— that winter was frightfully cold, after all. What they found was our Lady MaccaBee standing frozen in the center of the stage covered in dust, staring at her upraised hand where she’d felt the falling metal and heat whistle ever so just past her fingertips, and all the rest of us staring at her— realizing that we’d almost watched our friend get crushed to death by falling stage apparatus. The school had to call in a second student counselor after that.

“Under such circumstances, we can be forgiven for being, as some might say, hysterical.

“One would think, after two such dire consequences, the school would think better of hosting this end of year play. One would think— alas, no. The room was inspected, and repaired; the falling light was deemed a freak accident; and we went right back to rehearsal. We persevered through random fire suppression system mishaps— soaked right through costuming, scenery, and electrics, and made the stage slipperier than a hot cock; the Lord MaccaBee getting thrown against a window in a fight and falling out of it when it shattered, a height of four stories; and several other small mishaps which by themselves wouldn’t have mattered, except… well, people totally unconnected to the production except for their relation to those in it started getting ill.
“A woman had a severe miscarriage, and ultimately died of septicemia.

“A man walked off a cliff to his death, stopping only to remove his shoes.

“A child was carried off by a swarm of flying eels, in full view of the town and the gods and everybody.

“A calf was born dead, with two heads on it’s body.

“A man vomited live snakes for six hours straight.

“A woman gave birth to a full sized durian.

“A teenage girl married a ghost.

“A gang of cats knocked over the fish market, making off with several thousand dola worth of fish, eating snails, and crustaceans.

“There were stranger things too, but for the sake of the innocent still listening to this broadcast, and my own peace of mind, I will refrain from stating them aloud- suffice to say, compile enough misfortune into one stressed out group, and a series of small mishaps become overwhelming enough that people just… leave.

“The cast dropped like flies, their final grades be damned. Others who needed to complete the class for their chosen electives the following year stuck through it out of desperation. Still more could not get out of the class due to apprenticeships. Then there were the ones like me, just there for the shit-show and to see who would be left standing at the end of it all. It was at this point that I began researching the origins of the curse, and using my dispensation to comb through the entirety of our school system’s libraries to find some kind of talisman that would protect what remained of our cast and crew.

“We would huddle together in the Dramatics room on the second floor after rehearsals, survivors of this mutual wreck of a monument to our teacher’s hubris and ego, carrying salt and prayer beads and strips of blessed paper writ long and powerful with runes and throwing them over our left shoulders and chanting and burning our spells that they may come to pass- and, of course, discussing the play, even though we never said it’s name. We knew, at that point, that it was far too late to dispel the curse- but perhaps, with enough faith, we could lessen it’s cruel reach to merely the one who mocked it so foolishly. We prayed and we prayed and we never said the Play’s accursed name.

“Mister Fujishima did, though. All the time; repeatedly, loudly, especially when we begged him not to. Because, you see, this was Mister Fujishima’s vision and nothing small like fifteen people coming down with mono in the same week, having near death experiences, or a whole town’s worth of Weird Shit was going to stop him.

“I got moved from helping rewrite lines of the Modern adaptation- which was shaping up like Trainspotting meeting Willy Wonka meeting down a dark alley and getting into a knife fight- to stage managing, which gave me access to the entire drama department’s archives, which is important for later- to being on the raised podium off to the side of stage left, wearing a pointy hat and holding a staff. The irony of having an actual mage play a stage mage was not lost on me, or any of my classmates- but then again, it’s supposed to be good luck to have a real mage acting as a mage, and the thought was that I might be able to save us all.

“I could save no one.

“Perhaps you’re thinking at this point, ‘But Mab, what did your parents have to say about any of this,
didn’t they do something about it?’

“Firstly- none of my mothers ever took a course in Drama, or Music. They Don’t Know. Secondly- have you ever tried telling an adult that Doesn’t Know, ‘our drama teacher cursed us all by saying the name of the play instead of it’s nickname and now we’re all Doomed’- I know you haven’t, but I have. My mothers- all three of them; said, in order, ‘no you’re not, dearest’ and went back to her Art journal; ‘that’s nice, sweetie’ and went on with her smithing; and ‘finish what you start’ before going back to her office work. This was not uncommon, back then- there’d been a prevailing front of thought that all children were meant to be seen, not heard. Or perhaps they attributed our very real, very warranted fear to childish high spirits and general shenanigans.

“Right about until opening night, that is, when curtains lifted and the Lord MaccaBee is stood upstage with his shredded arm in a sling- and I have pictures of this, check the photo albums with the album art covers, it’s in one of those- one of the cool ones. Well, they’re all cool, so- just. Look?

“Opening night. Curtains up. I’m in asymmetrical bleach-scribed tights, a black puff sleeve leotard, a dainty tulle and lace capelet of cream-pink, like when your goat is new to milking at all and their kid’s gone and bitten them so now all the milk they give has a good jigger of blood in it- and it’s not like I drank it straight, I used it to bake with, calm down- a leather bustier with steel boning all the way up and down, turned ankle boots with shiny brass buckles, and a staff blessed by the Three-Who-Are-One. I’m telling you all of these details so you can understand one, important, vital facet of the events that were to follow that fateful curtain rise: I, and my outfit for that evening, were the most put together and well thought out portion of the entire play.

“Our Lord MaccaBee is standing there with his shredded arm in a sling, our Lady MaccaBee keeps looking up at the ceiling like she has a nervous tick, and everyone else is just plainly, visibly, horrifically fucking miserable and more than a little bit wild around the eyes.

“We got through it; we got through. Nothing else bad happened during the play; no one nearly died. Until the very end, that is, when Mister Fujishima gets up on the stage to address our horrified looking parents to thank them for coming, says ‘everyone, thank you for coming to our performance of Macb-’ and then he slips and breaks his entire neck, dying not a minute after.

“Thus ended the first and last and only official performance of The Faesh Play. My personal involvement ended when I gave a full accounting of the Curse to the Council of Theatrics, who wanted to know why their bright young thing had met such a dismal end.

“The Faesh Curse was started by a group of actors during the very first run of the play; some strange alchemy of discontent, plague, and mismanagement resulted in that merry troupe not being paid for their services. Those were the days gangs of wild Clowns and the Cult of Thespians still roamed through the small villages, battling each other with vicious mockery and rotten fruit missiles for limited audiences. Thus, their powers over the darkest of magical arts was truly well practiced, in ways perhaps not so well known today. Being a curse attached to a play, with activation only coming upon those who do not respect the actors staging the play, disrespecting the text itself- although there is leeway for parody- and ignoring the concerns of the actors… well. There was a clear case of negligence to be made, not to mention the implications raised by the rousing of a curse at all. Inquiries were made- and that’s all I, personally, can say about that, due to the non-disclosure agreements,”

“Oi, Morgan!”

“Hello, Doctor Trafalgar Law,”

“Yeah, hi- why aren’t you a doctor, Missus Morgan?”
“I- didn’t finish that portion of my schooling?”

“Hm. Your school offers mail-in courses, correct? And you have special dispensation, as royalty, to
mail in coursework?”

“.yes?”

“How many years is your research good for?”

“Um, considering I used census data and various records, indefinitely? I mean, five to seven years,
but-”

“So. You’ve done your research; you’ve written your dissertation; you’ve defended your dissertation.
Your dissertation is published- very interesting, by the way-”

“Oh, thank you-”

“-but you haven’t got a doctorate in medicine- actually, three, consisting of general practice,
psychology, and psychiatry, to add to your shelf of doctorates because…?”

“.I have to write up three hours of practicum and I haven’t felt like it?”

“.Mab,”

“Yes?”

“WRITE YOUR FUCKING NOTES AND SEND THEM SO YOU CAN GET YOUR
GODSDAMN DOCTORATE!”

“EEP!”

“NOW!”

“EEEEEeeeeeeeee-”

I scowl as I watch Missus Morgan scurry off to finish her notes and mail them. The extradimensional
Straw Hat, currently making inroads on a new slice of Rhubarb Pie that Deborah-

“I don’t eat bread- that includes crust, and pastry-”

“It’s crustless. Are you celiac or gluten intolerant? Or is there a traumatic association?”

“Um- mm- I’m not sure what celiac or gluten- what is gluten? Some kind of… food glue?”

“Well. Celiac disease is a serious Linear Malady where ingestion of gluten leads to minor damage to
the small intestine. Over time, this can lead to all sorts of other problems, even death. As for food
glue, you’re not wrong- but it’s more like rubber bands, or even springs under tension,”

“Mmph- go on,”
Gluten, meaning at its most basic level, glue; a composite of storage proteins termed prolamins and glutelins, stored together with starch in the endosperm of a variety of cereal grass grains. It’s found in wheat, barley, rye, and oats; as well as related species and hybrids, such as spelt, khorasan, emmer, einkorn, triticale, kamut, and so on; and in products of these cereal grass grains, such as malt. Glutens, most especially Triticeae glutens, are appreciated for their viscoelastic properties. When water is added to gluten, it becomes stretchy; thus, gluten gives elasticity to dough, helping it rise and keep its shape. It’s usually what makes a finished bread product chewy; or something similar to gluten, anyway,”

“Okay...”

“So, in a small part of the general population, gluten can trigger coeliac disease- celiac, as I asked-”

“Right, minor damage to small intestine-”

“Mm. Some people are just sensitive to it; some people get gluten ataxia; and some unlucky few get dermatitis herpetiformis. There have been reports of people with gluten sensitivity or allergy being exposed to oats and activating their misfortune- this has to do with the oat cultivar consumed, because the immunoreactivities of toxic prolamins are different in various cultivars of oats. Similar to the vigilance required of someone with a peanut allergy, someone with a gluten allergy must be aware of cross-contamination,”

“Mm,”

“True gluten is limited to cereal grass grains, and their hybrids- talk to your supplier or your farmer for more information about what you’re eating. Before the age of seven, most Fae can’t digest gluten at all; which is not why their main grain is maize, but is why it isn’t wheat. So- allergy or trauma?”

“Um… hm. Well, it might be both? I can remember not particularly liking the taste of bread as a child, it always tasted, well, **bad** -”

“-that’s usually an early indicator of an allergy, by the by-”

“-Oh?”

“Yeah! If I try to eat with silver-plated anything, it tastes like I’m licking a battery!”

“Yeah, that’s an allergy; for me it… hn. I know a crewmate of mine who’s lactose intolerant says that the milk always smells rotten, even when it’s straight from the cow; for me, bread always tasted bitter, and I never liked it,”

“Even pastries?”

“Even then- no matter how sweet, there was always a nasty bitter aftertaste that I just couldn’t get past,”

“That sounds like an allergy to me- did you have stomach problems too, or…?”

“Gassy? Bloating, I remember that- once after a birthday party, I was almost feverish for a few days?”

“Yep,”

“Then I guess what happened later just made it worse...”
“I’m sorry?”

“I’m from Flvnce, kid.”

“Uh… Oh! Jeeze, wasn’t… hang on, Amber Lead Disease isn’t a thing, Dr. Trafalgar Lamie wrote her dissertation proving that- her theory about the people of Flvnce, about lead poisoning… oh my gods,”

“So. Have you read her dissertation?”

“No, um, it was a bit over my head- not all of it, mostly the parts about Amber Lead Syndrome, I mean; I was more interested in the ‘Lead is a Neurotoxin’ part,”

“Mhm?”

“Well- okay, so, lead poisoning, sometimes known as Amber Lead Disease or Painter’s Colic, is a type of metal poisoning caused by lead in the body. The brain is most sensitive to lead poisoning; but symptoms may include abdominal pain, constipation, headaches, irritability, memory problems, sterility, and nerve damage in the hands and feet. It’s responsible for ten percent of intellectual disability of otherwise unknown cause and some behavioral problems. Some effects are permanent, with lead poisoning- your vitiligo, for example, Doctor Trafalgar, is a permanent change to the melanin production of your skin, as a result of your Amber Lead Syndrome,”

“Mm. Exposure?”

“Contamination of air, water, dust, food, or other consumer products- paint, houses, you name it. Children are at greater risk, as they absorb a greater proportion of lead. Work exposure is common in certain professions. Diagnosis is typically by measurement of the blood lead level; the ICDC has set the upper limit for blood lead for adults at 10 µg/dl (10 µg/100 g) and for children at 5 µg/dl. It’s also detectable by changed in red blood cells or dense lines in the bones of children as seen on X-ray,”

“Treatment,”

“In this case, the best treatment for lead poisoning is avoiding lead entirely. Individuals should remove lead-containing items from the home; workplaces should improve ventilation and monitoring of their workers for unacceptable amounts of lead accumulation; and nations should have policies that ban lead in products such as paint and gasoline, reduce allowable levels in water or soil, and make provision for the cleaning and safeguarding of contaminated areas. Second best treatment for lead poisoning is the removal of the source of lead; and the use of medications that bind lead so it can be eliminated from the body, known as chelation therapy,”

“Oh, that’s new- tell me about chelation therapy for lead poisoning, I didn’t know that was possible now,”

“Oh, um- Chelation therapy is the standard Sky Blue response to unacceptable exposure to toxic metals. It’s long been used in clinical toxicology, and remains in use for things like metal poisoning- of which lead is one, er, arsenic is a metalloid I think-”

“Topic-”

“-Sorry; treatment, um, chelation therapy tailored for lead specifically, um, uM-”

“Calm down, think; what does lead do?”

“It- it tricks the body into thinking it’s a valuable mineral or metal, but it’s really not, it can’t do what
the body needs it to do- oh! You’d need to get the lead out, and replace it with what the body is actually missing- iron, calcium, and zinc, for the most part. Chelation therapy lowers blood lead levels- in cases of long exposure, lead can be leached into the blood from the bones, so the therapy is often repeated multiple times,”

“...Why are you a cook?”

“Hah?”

“You’re really knowledgeable about medicine, and very enthusiastic- why are you a cook?”

“...I’m not a cook,”

“Um,”

“Yeah, there are seven of us? We’re sisters. I’m the head nurse- my sister, D, she’s our sous-chef,”

“Oh. Whoops- wait, why did you bring me a slice of no-crust rhubarb pie?”

“You skipped tea, and it won’t be dinner for hours- that’s why your piece had whipped cream and chocolate sauce, and Mister Cross’ didn’t-”

“oiOiOi!”

“The Snail is getting his own salad? I saw six kinds of leafy veggies, two different grains, and lots of soft veggies and fruits. They don’t want to overfeed ‘em, though, considering ‘e snarfed most of the pie-”

“Com plaiINt reTRACTED!”

“Goddammit, Soundbite!”

“HA hahahA HAHA HAhaa haha!”

Lick the stamp, put it on the envelope- double check the address, yes, good; put it into the ‘Outgoing Mail’ box- done. I foresee no real problems with my notes- that’s one of the few things I never had to be tutored in, which was both rare and a bit disappointing, I never could figure out where to get all the cute stickers and gel pens everyone else had…

I glance through the Galley, and take a good long look at what’s being cooked for dinner. My Husband, his Double, and a few others- all of them blond, in dark suits, with curly eyebrows- are all cooking around and with each other, while Deborah and the Cool Kids- Cook Kids, no, Cool Kids is better- watch in fascination. The smell is heavenly.

I have no idea what they’re cooking, though.

Back to the Widecast, I suppose.

“Attention. Your attention, please: We are reaching maximum capacity of Cooks in our Galley-
Repeat, we are reaching maximum capacity of Cooks in our Galley. Er. Kitchen? No, no, Galley, we’re on a ship- ahem. Although the smell from the Galley is promising, if even one more Straw Hat Cook enters, disaster of a culinary nature may very well ensue. This would be heartbreaking for every Sanji involved. Also: I have no idea what’s being cooked for dinner. It smells heavenly- but what it actually is? I doubt even the Sanji’s know, and they’re the ones cooking!

“Hello, Mab Morgan returning to continue our broadcast. The current conditions are foggy, with strange shards of rainbow light dancing over bits and pieces of the ship; the wind feels like it’s still, but we’re sailing, so it isn’t actually still. We have been sailing for what seems to be less than an hour, and yet must be more- certainly, the story I told takes more than an hour to tell, and yet, our clocks show no such advancement to their faces.

“More on this situation, as it develops.

“Hmm-? Oh, oh I see. Ahem. The situation has developed.

“The current conditions are foggy, with strange shards of rainbow light dancing over bits and pieces of the ship; the wind feels like it’s still, but we’re sailing, so it isn’t actually still. We have been sailing for what seems to be less than an hour, and yet must be more- certainly, the stories you are about to hear will take more than a single hour to tell, and yet, our clocks will show no such advancement to their faces.

“Nami tells me, during moments of lucidity between harrowing storms of grief, that we are sailing in spirals- that the Rainbow Mist is acting very much like the Sky Sea we sailed through once, and that we, inside it, are not quite sailing in circles. Spiraling through the Rainbow Mist, our time and space have somehow drifted- split- from our original ones, thus leading to the strange meeting of our many similar selves.

“I… it’s odd, but I have no double to meet. Or rather, if you know my name- the titles attached to me through deed and error and malice and ignorance, it is perhaps not so strange that I have no double self- no similar being to meet.

“You see, a few years ago, I killed my double. The circumstances are as they are- and I was punished for it. And now- I have no double to meet.”

“Mab? Mab, is that you?”

“Just a second, Titi- I need to finish up here, and then we can talk, alright?

“It is April, and something has changed. It is April, and trees that will never bear fruit once again weep their petals; tears of pink become a blizzard in warm sunshine, the scent of nostalgia thick in the air. It is April; our spring cleaning revealed what we had hoped the long Winter would have hidden forever more. It is April; thus, it is now time for the April Monologues- but first, a word from our Business Correspondent, Bryony Lovelace, with A Special Guest Speaker. -Titania, you look so-”

“Thank you, Mab. Bryony Lovelace, Business Correspondent here, with the latest Holy Day Edition of Consumption. Our topic today is unsafe toys for children. For instance, this claymore. ‘Fully sharpened, ready for action’ is the tagline, and the set includes one claymore, a sheathe for the sword, and a carrying belt. Speaking on behalf of other extremely dangerous toys, General Portgas
D. Solitaire, recently returned from the Great War of Creation, current purveyor of Incredibly Unsafe Toys. General, you produced the following so-called playthings: Ear Piercing Needle and Ear-Ring Kit; Skin Abrasion and Skin Graft Kit; Snake Charmer’s Flute with Actual Snake Inside; The Book of Secret Confessions, Guaranteed to Not Leave Visible Bruising; Throwin’ Rocks; Genuine Stab-Tag Knives; and instructions on how to properly induce ‘Dead Leg’. And what about these ‘innocent’ dolls, which you named ‘Davey Grabass’ and ‘Johnny Switchblade?’ Press little Johnny too hard, and two sharp knives spring out of his arms- press, Davey, well… I haven’t quite had the nerve.

“General, these aren’t even fun toys. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Okay, Miss Lovelace, I’mma correct you, alright? The full names of the last two products you’ve taken issue with, as I introduced them to the youngin’s on this Crew, is ‘Davey Grabass: Legendary Lothario’ and ‘Johnny Switchblade: Adrenaline Junkie’. I mean, nothing goes wrong if you say the whole thing- the youngin’s don’t know what the names mean, well, I can write and we’ve got a whole damn library, go fetch your answers for fuck’s sake. They play around, they make up their stories, no one gets hurt. I mean, so their baby takes a shiv, or an animal stuffy gets buggered. No harm in that, as far as I can see, you know?”

“Fine. Fine. Well, what about this- you’re actually selling this, I remind you, for one hundred ninety eight beri each, and it’s- it’s called Bag O’ Glass. General Solitaire, this is fuckin’ bag of jagged glass bits you found, washed, and put in a paper bag.”

“Hell yes it is. Sells like fuckin’ candy, y’know- and it’s just broken glass, no broken sugar glass or any of that crap in my bags, just plain broken glass, got it?!”

“Fern and Mack have already cut themselves on this shit! What the hell, man?”

“Listen- the youngin’s, they’d like, y’know, they’d be down in the hold, breaking useless bottles with baseball bats, picking up broken glass just- fuckin’ anywhere. The beach, the street, garbage cans, vacant lots, all over the place on every island you can think of- including deserted ones. I’m just packaging what the kids already want- fuck, I even wash that shit because those crazy bastards put it in their mouths! I mean, it’s a fuckin’ creative toy- if you hold it right, you get nice colors, and some pieces are genuine sea glass, right, and- and prisms, and shit. Light refraction. Texture- you know what I mean?”

“So, you don’t think this toy is dangerous?”

“Fucksake- look, on every bag there’s a label that says ‘Broken Glass Inside’; I don’t know what the fuck anyone who opens it and pulls out a handful of broken glass, like what, it’s fuckin’ grapes? What did you expect to happen, exactly? Shit, I got all kinds of things I can put in bags- Bag O’ Glass, Bag O’ Nails, Bag O’ Bugs, Bag O’ Snake- Winston, he’s a real sweet boy, he’ll hang out just anywhere you plop him down-”

“- what have you done with Winston, Solitaire- ”

“It’s a fuckin’ decent toy, alright?”

“Why, exactly, can you not make dolls that don’t do anything but be, and- seriously, Solitaire, if you hurt Winston-”

“Winston’s fine, Bry; and Religion. There’s no such thing as a safe childhood- only safer. Getting a
young’n used to thinking about, acknowledging, the dangers inherent in an object… s’why I called the Bag O’ Glass a toy,"

“It’s a bag of broken glass!”

“It’s Educational!”

“They could cut themselves on it!”

“Valuable Lesson!”

“Uuuugh- and that’s all the time we have for today, on Consumption. I am your host, Bryony Lovelace. We now move to the April Monologues,”

“Yis, is my turn for the tale-telling. There are many Brer and Sis’ stories, but my favorite, of all the ones my mother told me, was thus.

“One winter, many years ago- so many that those old enough to remember died, and their children died, and they died and died and only the story lives on- so long- but one winter, the dawn froze solid. The sun got caught between the trunks of two frozen birches, yis, and the land iced up so’s that it couldn’t turn.

“Many an’ old-un hollered that’was only the winter digging in, that the dawn had not frozen- but then it was breakfast, and the dawn had not come; and then it was luncheon, and the dawn had not come; and then it was dinner, and the dawn had not come. By suppertime, many an old-un’s wife had given him a sound bite to the ear, as the Dawn was quite clearly frozen, and if’n they’d admitted that earlier, something could’a been done about it by now- how’d you break it this time?

“The first rays of sunlight had frozen halfway over the mountain tops- a glacier of shimmering gold, eerie and hot, but hot without heat. Shards of frozen sunlight pierced through the forest- and there, near’bout lunch-time, in the darkest depths, in a hidden glenn, Brer Fox woke from his day’s sleep, and climbed up out of his house.

“Brer Fox had been havin’ hisself a good, gentle winter- no harsh storms in his glenn, no collapses in his den- but this Dawn that froze, well, it set all manner of critter out of sorts. Brer Fox found a whole nest of partridge eggs, unguarded; and a brace of baby rabbits; and nearly his whole weight in nuts and seeds Sis Squirrel and Sis Mouse had hidden away for later. That was good as a starter, but Brer Fox knew he’d need somethin’ more substantial- and wouldn’t you know it, when the Dawn froze up so solid, a shard of frozen sunlight had bounced off’a frozen pond, directly into Brer Bear’s sleepin’ eyes.

“Now, unlike his cold-weather cousins, Brer Bear meant to sleep all through the long winter; he’d spent all of Autumn rootin’ and huntin’ and making a nuisance of hisself, taking every fish he could find, snappin’ up every root and bug and berry he could get his paws on. Brer Fox was cheated out of more than one meal by Brer Bear, and held a mighty grudge year after year- because, in ordinary circumstances, Brer Fox could never take Brer Bear in a fight, and the both of them knew it.

“But the day the Dawn froze, things weren’t ordinary at’all. I was always too young to know the exact circumstances of their fight- too young to know how Brer Fox hunted and killed Brer Bear that Winter. But he did- and dragging his prize home near about supper time, Brer Fox finally realized
that the Dawn had frozen solid.

“Being quite clever, he knew he had to do something quick or the world was done for. Brer Fox had a freshly killed Bear on his back, so he gripped it tight in his teeth, raced up one of those frozen rays of sunlight, and began beating the hot carcass against the frozen trunks of the birches what had caught the sun. Soon enough a gush of hot oil burst through the skin and onto the icy sun and trees, thawing them out.

“Brer Fox gave the sun a good hard bite to get it going again, burning his nose and mouth— that’s why all Fox noses and mouths are black, don’tcha know, barrin’ special circumstances— and the sun, after a burst of speed, started moseying across the sky like nothing had ever happened. Me, freeze up? No sir, not me!

“Brer Fox lit his pipe on the piece of sun he’d bit out, shouldered the bear, an’ slid hisself down the rays before they melted. There’s some that say he took a chunk of sunrise home with him in his pocket, which is why sunrises are always a little paltry in the valley of high mountains— who can say for sure? It was so long ago…

“Oh, yis- is now time for more sponsorship,”

“Fuck you, Sabaody!”

“If you’re dumb enough to buy a new boat this weekend, you’re a big enough schmuck to go to Big Bill Hell’s Boats.”

“Bad Deals!”

“Boats that Sink!!”

“Thieves!!!”

“If you think that you’re gonna find a bargain at Big Bill’s, you can bend over and kiss my ass! It’s our belief that you’re such a stupid motherfucker, you’ll fall for this bullshit! Guaranteed!”

“If you find a better deal, SHOVE IT UP YOUR UGLY ASS!! You heard me right, SHOVE IT UP YOUR UGLY ASS!! You dense ugly motherfucker!”

“Bring your trade, bring your title, bring your wife! We’ll fuck her!”

“That’s Right! We’ll fuck your wife! Because—”

“At Big Bill Hell’s, you’re fucked six ways to Sunday!”

“Take a hike to Big Bill Hell’s! Home of Challenge Pissing!”

“That’s right; CHALLENGE PISSING!!!”

“How does it work? If you can piss six feet in the air straight up and not get wet, you get no payment down. Don’t wait, don’t delay!”

“Don’t fuck with us, or we’ll rip your nuts off!”
“Only at Big Bill Hell’s:”
“The only dealer that tells you to fuck right off!”

“Hurry Up, Asshole!”

“This event ends the minute after you write us a fucking check, and it better not bounce or you’re a dead motherfucker.”

“Fucking dead motherfucker.”

“Go to hell!”

“You tell’em who sent you!”

“Big Bill Hell’s Boats: Sabaody filthiest and exclusive home of the meanest sons of bitches—”

“-and the best godsdamn motherfucking boats—”

“-on any fucking side of the motherfucking Grand Line! Guaranteed!”

“Fuck you, Sabaody! FUCK!! YOU!!”

—

“Hi there. I’ve been trying to unclog a toilet for seven fucking hours. That’s longer than it took for me to be born. I could’ve been born twice in the amount of time it’s taken me to fail at unclogging this fucking toilet. -oh, it works now, but… well, I’ll tell you the story.

“M’name’s Mark, if you didn’t know. Shit’s weird.

“So, we’ve got three heads total- yeah, there’s one in the San, one by the Galley, and one dedicated Head and Bathing area. So the toilet clogged, right? You can use your imagination- it’s like the hero’s origin story. We know how it started, show me what happens next.

“So what happened next was, I started to plunge. And plunge. And plunge. And usually, once I’m using the right plunger, I’m pretty good at plunging. I mean, it’s simple, right? It should be one of those simple machines you learn about in school- pulley, crank, lever? Right? And Plunger is like their weird cousin on their dad’s side. Anyway.

“The plunger wasn’t working and I started to ask myself, ‘maybe I’m doing it all wrong. Maybe all those other times were flukes and I have no idea how to use a plunger. Maybe I’m a fraud-’ so, living with an entire shush of librarians must come with some perks, right? Lo and behold, an entire collection of home improvement magazines, articles, and books- so, I searched through them, ‘How to Use a Plunger’. I had to leave the bathroom to do this because, and you might find this hard to believe, I’ve never in my life ever read a book in the bathroom.

“I just stare straight ahead when I’m in there like a crazy person, I guess. I don’t think our books even know what bathrooms are, like how your cat doesn’t know what laundry baskets are actually for, or how our captain doesn’t know what vegetables are, or how I don’t know what the ocean is, I just swim in it.
“So anyway, I was searching for how to use a plunger and I found the right book for that but it was ad-locked and our shush hadn’t gotten the proprietary runes off yet, so’s I had to sit through like, an advertisement first. And this is the wonder that is targeted advertising at work, because before I could read a paragraph about plungers and using them, I had to read a two hundred and twenty word long advertisement for steak. Just like- steak in general; steak as concept.

“Hey, you freak, trapped in the bathroom like a loser. Why aren’t you buying steaks like, right now?’

“Steaks can’t help me. Nothing can,’ I thought, as one does when they’ve been plunging a toilet for three hours straight with no movement. Then the book filled with words and I was able to read the information I wanted. Boy oh boy do I know jackshit about plungers- really? Hell no, I know everything you could ever want to know about plungers, and quite a bit more that you fucking would not.

“For instance- standardized plumbing has been found as early as three thousand BA- that’s three thousand years before the Ages, which is when calendars were invented. If you have a leaky faucet that drips only twice a minute, you’ll waste over a gallon of water in a week. Manhole covers are circular because if they’re turned sideways, they can’t fall through their own holes. Toilet plungers narrow at the bottom to fit into the toilet- you need a good seal to make a plunger work. Shower and sink plungers are flat on the bottom.

“I think a lot of people don’t realize how a plunger is meant to be used. You’re not forcing air down towards a clog. Air is lighter than water, and it won’t break up a waterborne clog, not to mention it’ll cause messy splashing. You’re meant to use a plunger to clear the frog in the bog by creating water pressure.

“Meaning, the most important thing when clearing a toilet clog is to first fill the plunger with water. Not in the sink- I mean you stick the plunger into the toilet and tilt it at an angle, so that you hear air bubbles coming out of the inside of the plunger as it fills with water. Fittingly, this is easiest to do when the toilet is filled to the brim, like when it’s clogged and you try to flush anyway. Don’t do that.

“Still- once you’ve filled the plunger with water, you form a seal at the bottom of the basin with the tapered plunger, and give it maybe a half-dozen short pumps. When you do this correctly, there is no splashing and the clog clears almost immediately.

“I’d been plunging for three hours- nothing. The gist of the supremely unhelpful article I sat through two hundred twenty words about steak was: ‘there’s the stick, there’s the other part, you add the plunge, and it’s a plunger. Can you believe steak bought ad space on this bullshit?’

“Three hours, no movement; some very painful blisters on my hands; the deep seated sense that I’ve forgotten something important. I gave up- or at least, I wanted to. I kind of did for an hour or two. Like, you know how sometimes you can clog a toilet but doesn’t look clogged?

“And you’re like, ‘It looks fine! It looks fine, but I’m its prisoner- let me go, porcelain fiend! I pass the curse on to the next schmuck who unknowingly uses you.’ I walked out into the hallway, and then farther, through the rooms and such until I was in the Studio where Missus Mab was working on some of her mail. Just to get a feel for what the real world used to be like, y’know? And, and I was so done with the toilet, I was in super-denial about the future of all toilet use on the ship.

“We’ll burn that barn when we come to it,’ I thought; gods only know when that’ll be. But also, I felt bad, so I asked Missus Mab her opinion. I didn’t lead with the toilet, even though Missus Mab has no shame and doesn’t get squeamish- I was all like, ‘Hey, sup; so anyway I clogged the Galley toilet and I’ve been trying to fix it for three hours and I’m tired so I’m just going to leave it for the next
person to discover isn’t that great and moral and okay for me to do so anyways how are you doing?’ She didn’t think it was great.

“She told me to eat more fiber- as in, veggies, even though that’s how we got into this mess, and she told me that since I clogged the toilet it’s my responsibility to fix it- which is what I was going to do anyway, I just didn’t fucking want to. So I got my head right and walked to the supply room and the whole time, all I could think of was like ‘I can’t get murdered by my double, even if she’s a pint sized annoyance and a half, I can’t let a clogged toilet be the butterfly effect inciting incident catalyst event that ends up with me shot dead in my own big brother-’ and since you’re hearing this now, clearly and obviously I made it. I’ll save dying over a toilet for some other time.

“I got to the supply closet and found what I needed- liquid, um, gel, drainer, whatever- the stuff where on the bottle the clog looks like some golden honey shit like is’ ambrosia, food of the gods, and not literal actual shit. So I got a bottle of that, and a push-pop because it’ll be too hot for ‘em soon and eat’em while you’ve got em, right?

“So I’ve got the stuff and I’m running back to the toilet in a super panicked rush because one, I didn’t leave a note, like, ‘Don’t use this even though it looks fine, please read the toilet’s aura first,’ and two, because the push-pop was melting, those tasty orange bastards melt at a stern glance. So there’s this fucking weird hallway and it never fails to catch someone, there’s like a railing that’s there for safety that always catches someone right in the dick, and a door that’s only just big enough to go sideways through because we have some characters on our crew, alright, and I was in such a blind rush to get through I fucking- I’m blushing with shame, holy fuck, I fucking followed my Double too closely and got caught in the door with her. Like, literally trapped in a space too narrow for my shoulders to clear, and it’s not like either of us was willing to go backwards either- feels unnatural for the both of us.

“She couldn’t even turn around to be like, ‘The fuck?!’ and alls I could do was keep going ‘I’m sorry! I’m sorry!’ as we shoved through in a weird, torture-y too close for comfort formation.

“So I got out and fucking ran to avoid the confrontation and I go back to the out of commision head and as I was bursting into the room with the toilet I heard, guess, guess what I heard. Did you guess one of my crewmates flushing the toilet as I was opening the door? Because that’s what it was.

“I’ve spoken to Lynn maybe twice. I said hi, when she joined up about a- jeeze, more than a month ago- and I explained, today, through heavy labored breaths and my own shame, how I clogged the toilet and got drain cleaner to try and fix it before anyone else tried to use it. I literally burst through the bathroom door as she was ankle deep in toilet water and held up the bottle of drain stuff like it was a bottle of expensive wine I had just pulled out of a paper bag.

“She screamed, and fell over. I told her everything as she was lying there, in the shit-water, babbling like an idiot, holding the bottle of drain cleaner up like ‘Let’s celebrate today! What do you mean you’re going to take a shower outside?’

“So, yeah, I was back in the ring with the toilet but now I had a piece of broken glass hidden in my glove. I started to read the instructions on the back of the bottle of drain stuff and it said something like, ‘in case of ingestion, do not induce vomiting, drink a glass of water or milk ’- which, I mean, I’m sure makes sense. Milk is like, basic or acidic or neutral or something like that, but it just sounds so… culinary. ‘For a creamier poison control, use warm milk instead of water,’ like, is that what you use to neutralize poison when you’ve done something stupid on a dare? Really? Treat yo’self, I guess.

“So, hour five, lunch, steak sandwich- I had a craving I guess- ice cream is eaten and the toilet is still clogged. Lynn’s still taking her epic shower- like, three hours minimum- and there’s a special
recycling system that she can turn on so she doesn’t waste water. The drain stuff hasn’t worked. The tank just keeps filling up and I only turned off the water when I realized I’d need to use… more aggressive measures.

“I got the snake. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a serious plumbing snake, but the big ones are a sight to behold. This isn’t a little hand-crank auger, it’s a full on engine-powered snake with three hundred-sixty degrees of thrash-action an’ a little grabbin’ claw at the end. We have one in the supply closet- because, um, there are a lot of us and the toilets… Anyway, I fire that puppy up and send the long metal coils down into the pipes with the claw closed, figuring that I’d just bump the clog a bit and push it down the pipes until it clears- but that didn’t happen.

“I was fuckin’ done, y’all- so done, so furious, so frustrated- I twisted the control to open the mechanical claw at the end of the coil, closed it on something, and threw the motor in reverse to pull it back up.

“At this point, Deb, our sous-chef, Mince, the grill-guy, Oz, the sauce guy, and Linus, the dishwasher, are all watching me work on the toilet. Large machinery draws kids like shit does flies- and we’re all trying to figure out what the hell got flushed down the toilet that this giant machine couldn’t remove. My shits are big, but not that big.

“The motor was really straining- so loud I was actually a bit worried, because we could’a been attacked by Marines or whatever, and I wouldn’t’a heard it. The whole machine was shaking to pull whatever it’d got back up through the pipes and into the room. Finally, after an extended wait, the object is slowly dragged- sopping wet and crumpled- out of the toilet bowl.

“It was a shower curtain.

“Specifically, it was a shower curtain covered in brightly colored fish. I’d seen it before. I walked past the damn thing every godsdamn day.

“It was, quite specifically, Lynn’s shower curtain.

“We are all, of course, dumbfounded. We- me especially- are trying to figure out how this could have happened. It would be weird enough if someone had taken Lynn’s shower curtain and flushed it, but so far as I knew Lynn’s shower curtain was still there- Lynn, herself, was making use of it currently, in one of her epic showers. Seriously, they can be three hours long.

“It would be even weirder if someone had gone to the Studio, gotten the spare, and flushed that- but no, I’d seen the spare on it’s shelf, neatly labeled, when I went down to talk with Mab. Did- did someone try to steal the shower curtain, actually steal it, then feel guilty and come back only to find that the curtain had already been replaced, and flush the stolen curtain in a futile attempt to hide the evidence of their misdeed?

“Actually, the truth is stupider, and much stranger. While the Cool Kids were debating with each other, Lynn burst in, buck naked and hysterical and dripping wet, into the galley. After Deb got her a towel, and the boys put the various Sanji’s that burst a vessel into the recovery position, we all took a turn at calming her down enough to figure out the problem.

“The snake missed the clog entirely. Rather than spiraling down into the plumbing as was intended, it wound its way up into the central line, and then up again through the pipes into the outdoor shower. It spiraled its way up, out the shower drain, and then started flailing wildly around the shower like a deep-sea horror made of steel, knocking things off of shelves and clattering furiously across the title.
“Then, while Lynn, naked and soapy from her shower, watched in horror, a metal claw opened on the end of the snake, snagged her shower curtain, ripped it off the bar ring-by-ring, spun it around until it was tightly coiled around the cable, and dragged it back down into the drain.

“The toilet works, now, by the way. I don’t know what the clog was.

“Anyway, that’s what I did today. Here’s another sponsor,”

“Life got you down?

“Things are pretty tough, aren’t they?

“Well, don’t just sit there! Buy Stuff!

“Millions of people World wide struggle with depression. Studies say that shopping can help fill that big, empty hole inside of you; lifting you out of your own, personal darkness for just a little bit longer. And what better way than by Buying Stuff?!?

“Remember to buy from brands that you trust, and be sure to fill your life with lots and lots of Stuff!

“But- what if Stuff’s not enough? You’ve tried it before, gods know you have- but nothing seems to really fill that empty hole inside you, just makes it bigger and deeper and your house is full of stuff you will never, ever need and-

“Take a deep breath. I’ve got just the thing for you- if you feel tired, are often upset; occasionally suffer from chronic confusion, you should try new and improved Catharsis!

“Catharsis works directly on the root of your problems, providing a clean, painful, healing break from what ails you.

“For instant relief from intolerable situations: Catharsis. Now in liquid form! Ask your homebrew pharmacist about Liquid Catharsis.

“And if all that doesn’t work- there’s always good old fashioned blood letting! Not that unhygienic crapola, with the knives and the tourniquets- no sir! Only the finest medicinal leeches ought be used in blood letting! I, myself, have a healthy supply of them- and a cuter suckle of leeches there has never been, I tell you what-

“Leeches! Reduce bruises and swelling! Lower bad cholesterol and raise overall blood cell count! The benefits of good, fresh blood in your veins is not to be underestimated- use the finest Medicinal Leeches to get new blood in you!

“Out with the old- in with the new! Leeches, that’s the cure for you! -provided, of course, buying Stuff and using Catharsis don’t work.

“I’m sure we’ll find a way to fix you right up.”
“I wandered, lost in all ways a man can be lost and yet remain alive, for many years upon the death of my first wife. I have Mink blood in my line, and so I have the striping of a tiger on my skin; though my clothing covers these markings now, in the years following my first wife’s death, grief made a monster of me. I was not a man; nor was I a Mink; I was… less. The loss of love, love that I had neither looked for nor earned, made a monster of me.

“I fled our home that had once held so much joy- such love- and hid away in the mountains. In those mountains I came upon a cave, clean and dry and worth protecting- and so I did. That cave was my home for many years.

“Below my cave there was a path, leading down into a peaceful valley. A great forest bracketed it, and there came to be a young woodcutter who would climb the path every day. He would cut firewood to sell, I suppose, and in the late afternoon he would gather what he had cut and tied into bundles, and every morning, well after dawn, he would return again. He was a poor man, but his face was kind, and he smiled and sang, a little, as he worked; I think, that, more than anything else… that happiness of his, the joy he found in life, though he was so poor, and his work so hard… I hated him for it.

“I hated him, and I was content to hate him from afar- but eventually, he ventured too close to me, my madness… I killed that young man, and I do not know why, other than my own hate, my grief-madness… I killed him, and let his body be eaten by wild creatures, his bones scattered, his clothing torn. The worst of it all, of course, is that I was not made happy by his death- for, truly, in those days, nothing could please me at all.

“That day, that I killed that young man- Junpei, his name was- the evening stretched long and my rage, my hate, my self disgust… I do not know what I did during that time, and I am glad, and yet afraid, that I cannot recall it to my mind.

“I heard, echoing up from the valley, a wavering cry of ‘Brother! Brother!’ It rang out long into the night, and only ceased upon the rising of the moon. That same day, a sheep herder came, and found the scattered bones, the spilled blood, the torn clothing and- just a glimpse, but- he found me, too. Or, then- what was left of me. Frightened- I frightened him. The shepherd returned to the valley below, taking with him a few scraps of clothing that were embroidered with white and black thread, the fineness of the stitching marred by blood.

“The next, I speak from my wife’s perspective; as she was the one to bring these events to pass, it is only right I speak of her involvement with them. My wife was attacked by a rooster as a young girl, and though her face was of a great beauty, the limp that rooster gave her ruined all prospects for a suitable marriage-match. She could not stand, or sit, for long; her walking was slow, and great pain would wrack her body should her lamed leg be overworked- for days and days, she would be in agony. The woodcutter, Junpei, that I had killed for the great ‘crime’ of being happy with his life where I could do nothing but hate- he was her younger brother, and he had been caring for her all their lives, since their older sister’s mother-in-law had thrown them both out for being… well.

“No one is without worth. It is not always easy to see a person’s merits- but they do exist, no matter where they have risen, or to what depths they have fallen. Mei’s strengths are not of the body; but, like so many others before her, when her body failed her, her mind set her free. Junpei was the one who brought a little money to their household, every day- but Mei was the one who helped women from other households double check their finances, to ensure they were not being cheated, and Mei was the one who kept track of every marriage, birth, and death in their small village, and Mei was the one who knew every use of every tea, spice, bitter herb, and animal part one could name.

“And, of the two- Mei is the one who saved me.
“When her brother did not return from cutting wood, Mei knew that something was wrong. She called for him, all that long night the first day, until her voice gave out and she could taste blood on the back of her tongue. Fitfully, she slept; and when morning came, she dressed herself in what few clothes she had that were suitable for hard use, and gathered her ill-fitting crutch- as her brother was only a wood-cutter, not a wood-carver- and limped, painfully and slow, to the house of her landlord. Perhaps, she thought then, if she told them of her trouble, her fear, they could be persuaded to go and look for her brother.

“They could not, alas, be persuaded. However, a passing shepherd- the very one that had found the poor remains left by my madness- he told Mei what he had seen, and she, recognizing scraps of clothing she herself had embroidered, that the shepherd had brought down the mountain with him- a kind of madness overtook her for a time, and she could not move, could not think, could not speak. The shepherd was a kind man, and that day he had his two sons with him- he sent his sons ahead with the flock, and escorted Mei back to her home, and he stayed with her until she spoke again, ere the sun was highest in the sky.

“What killed my brother? Do you know?’ she said.

“The shephard was a kind man; but his life left no room for pretty lies or unneeded kindnesses. He told her what he knew.

“There are many wild beasts in the mountains,’ he said, solemnly, quietly, ‘And your brother was killed by one. It was a horror to find, miss; when I had walked half-way up the slope to the mountain, I come to a sad thing; a little pile of torn clothing and scattered bones, all splattered with blood. The axe of a wood-cutter was lying by the side of the path; and his carrying pole, and some rope, and bundles of cut wood. There could be no mistake- your ill-fated brother was killed by a tiger, or, as I suspect, a tiger shaped like a man.

“I gathered up what I could of the torn garments, and as I was doing so, I saw, unmistakably, the eyes of a man staring down at me from between the trees. There is a cave, higher up the slope; perhaps some lost soul has made a home there. Though I know not what quarrel the tiger found with your brother, it is obvious your brother fared the poorer for it; I gathered what scraps of his clothing remained, his pole and his rope and his axe, and took them home with me. My wife washed what blood she could from them all- but the clothing is as it is, and the axe…’

“I will have need of my brother’s axe, sir. Will you fetch it for me?’ she said.

“For what will you use it for, miss?’ he said.

“My brother was murdered, sir; I must go to the city at the river’s mouth, and beg a magistrate there to arrest the tiger who killed my brother. It is dangerous to travel alone, without any sort of weapon- thus, my brother’s axe.’ she said.

“The shepherd could not convince her of any other path- and so, reluctantly, he fetched the axe from his house, and when his wife heard the reason why, a few other things too. He returned to Mei laden with more than just her brother’s axe; but with a horse, and cart, and the cart was laden with many things. Mei and her brother were not wealthy- but the shepherd, and his wife and sons, were; and so, though Mei protested, she was forced to accept the gift of horse and cart, and provisions for her many-week long journey, a new crutch- both well made and well fitting; a map, and a bit of money, and clothing that would make her look more a youth than a maid, no matter how fair her face.

“The following day, Mei closed up her little house, and ended the contract with her landlord- and, thus freed of all responsibilities to her village, she set out, cart and horse and provision and all, for the city at the river mouth. It was pitiful to see her, so feeble, so frail, so alone- she could not sit in the cart for longer than two hours at a time, at first, and could not lead the horse and cart faster than her
limp would allow- and so, it took two long weeks for the both of them to get beyond the villages sight.

“It was eight long months, at a painful limp, to get from her village to the city at the river’s mouth- and yet, Mei did make that journey. She eventually made it to the city- and I doubt she realized it, but her beauty had only been refined during the journey. Her long hours of strain had strengthened her body; her back was straight and long, her hair dark as ink, her eyes bright and sharp and sparrow-brown. Color had found her at last- for, when her brother still lived, she was pale as paper, twice as thin; but now, ah, life had sunken teeth into her, would not let her go.

“Her bad leg troubled her as it always had- but less so, now, than ever before. It seemed that in strengthening the whole of her body, the ferocity of the injury done to her weaker leg faded and lessened- but it would never truly leave her. The axe, once used to cut down wood for a small family’s survival, had become a protector- used to cut down bandits who would take what was not theirs to take, and to cut down animals that refused to keep the peace of the road. Two heads, does that axe bear; one, for rough work, and the other, for fine. Her mind, once concerned only with numbers and facts and keeping her small family alive- it had been exposed to a small portion of the world, and now thirsted for more, and yet, and yet- the tiger! Her brother!

“And so she went into the city, and asked her way to the public hall where crimes were reported, and justice- one would hope- could be found. Alas, the guards of that place saw her, her limp, her axe, her cart and horse and weariness- and overlooked the grief-madness in her eyes and the beauty of her face- and would not let her in.

“She collapsed, there on the stone steps leading into the Hall of Justice- and wept she, moaning of her long journey and grieving her poor murdered brother and the ill-fortune that she should come all this way, lame as she was, and be denied so close to her goal. It so happened that a magistrate was walking into his work; and, hearing poor Mei bemoaning her ill-fortune, he demanded she be brought before him, that her case may be heard and tried.

“Mei, hearing the magistrate’s declaration, calmed herself as best she could, and stood again. Hobbling with her axe on her back and her beautiful face made a ruin with grief and her well-fitted crutch thumping into the beautifully tiled floor, she entered the great Hall of Trials.

“What is the matter, young woman? Why do you raise such an uproar in front of this great hall? Speak quickly, and tell me of your trouble.’ said the magistrate.

“I am young and ignorant of the world,’ she began; ‘Lame I am, and only just strong enough to defend myself against robbers and wild beasts of the road. I have no money, and no way of earning money but those options which all women have, though stain my honor it surely would. I have not one relative now in all the world, nor a kindly friend, who would take me in. I depended on my only brother for daily living; for, though I took in some work- mending, washing, healing, financial advice- our village is small, and such work comes rarely. Every day, my brother would climb the mountain, for he was a woodcutter; and every evening he came home again, carrying enough wood to sell before the dawn would come. It was his work alone that kept us in enough money for food every day; the money I earned was spent on our rent, our clothing, and medicines should we take ill. Alas, eight months ago, he went to the mountain and did not return. A mountain tiger bearing the shape of a man killed him, and perhaps ate him; and now, alas, there is no hope- for the horse and cart were given to me, and by the custom of our land I must make a gift of them, to assure my own happiness in the lands beyond.’

“She did not speak, overcome then by horror and grief, mingling as they so often do- but then, she spoke again. It is said, of her, that never was she more beautiful; well, perhaps more so upon her wedding day, and again with the birth of her son, but as those had yet to come to pass, this was the moment of her greatest beauty.
“I shall die of hunger,’ she said, her voice the ringing of a funeral bell, ‘but before I die, I shall see justice done. I have come into this great hall today, to beg, your honor; I beg that the slayer of my brother is punished. Is it not so, that none may shed the blood of another without giving their own blood in payment?’

“Woman, have you taken leave of your senses?’ cried the magistrate, weeping, ‘A tiger in the shape of a man- how can such a thing exist? How can a tiger be brought to justice- how can a man become a tiger? There is nothing I can do.’

“The magistrate’s tears were of no use. Mei, weeping and beautiful and crippled with grief, kept up her clamour. She had come all this way to see justice done; she would not be turned away now, not without seeing her purpose realized. The hall echoed with the noise of her. The magistrate, overcome with compassion, could deny her no longer. ‘Hold! Miss,’ he begged, ‘cease your weeping. I will do what you have asked. My assistant shall show you to a teacher, learned in medicine and other arts; a friend of mine. This letter, bearing my seal, shall ensure my friend takes you on as an apprentice. Thus, even should I perish in the attempt at your justice, you need not starve. I shall summon you to court once the slayer of your brother is caught and ready for punishment; until that time, wait, and fill yourself with life again.’

“The magistrate was, of course, only trying to appease the grief-maddened Mei, thinking that if she were only engaged in some useful trade, he could give orders not to let her into the hall again. And, in giving her some useful trade, she would perhaps forget what had driven her across the land on a bad leg, with only her brother’s woodcutting axe to guard her and only the river itself to guide her. The magistrate was not a bad man, it must be said; he was not a bad man. Merely an ignorant one- he had not loved another in the way that I, or Mei, had loved; and, though he had lost the ones he loved before, he was not so old that the loss had grown huge and horrible. When people leave our lives, their exits are not equal; but the depth and breadth of what we long to share with those who leave us… that, I am sorry to say, only grows larger and more painful with time.

“Mei was too sharp, even in her grief, for the magistrate’s trickery. She saw through his plan, kind though it was, and became more stubborn and adamant than ever.

“Your kindness is great, sir; but I cannot accept it until I have seen you sign the order for the Tiger in Man’s Shape to be caught and brought into this judgement hall,’ she said.

“Reluctantly- as the magistrate was not really a bad man- but eventually, he humored Mei’s plea for justice. Then and there, he wrote the order, and signed it, and sealed it with his own seal; and turning to the assistance in the courtroom, he asked of them who would be willing to go and make the arrest.

“One of these, a man named Jet- known for his symbol, the Mouse- had been leaning against the wall, half asleep. He had won for one of the only times in his life at the turtle races the day before, and drunk so heavily in his joy that, until that very moment, he was still sleeping off the effects of the alcohol. He had not heard what had been going on in the court that day; and he would not have agreed to do it otherwise.

“Just as the magistrate turned and asked for volunteers to make the impossible arrest, one of his friends, a woman named Li- known for her symbol, the Snake- gave him a poke in the ribs. Thinking the magistrate had called him by name, he stepped forwards and bowed, saying, ‘I, Jet the Mouse, shall go and do the will of Your Honor.’

“Very well; you will do for this purpose,’ answered the judge. ‘Here is your order; go forth, and do your duty.’ So saying, the magistrate handed the warrant for my arrest to Jet the mouse. Mei, seeing all of this, was satisfied; she sat quietly as the magistrate wrote a letter of introduction to his friend, a doctor- and when he called Li the Snake forwards, to escort Mei to the doctor and see that she and
letter both were greeted and taken in with all hospitality, Mei and Li and letter all left that hall, quietly.

“When Jet the Mouse went outside the courtroom, his other friends crowded around him. ‘Drunken fool!’ they laughed; ‘Do you know what you’ve done?’

“Jet shook his head. ‘Just a little business for the magistrate, isn’t it? Quite easy.’

“Call it easy, do you? Fool of a drunkard- arrest a tiger, a man eating tiger and bring him to the city?! Ha! Better go and say goodbye to your father and mother; they will never see you again. Best settle what debts you have; you will not return.’

“Jet the Mouse was still drunk at this time, and so he slept again; but, when he woke and read the order the magistrate had given him, he saw that his friends were right. He had been very foolish- but surely the magistrate did not mean for him to arrest a tiger, man’s shape or no! It was surely a joke; certainly, no such order had ever been written before. It was plain that the magistrate had hit on this plan simply to get rid of the wailing woman; and had not his friend Li the Snake taken her to a doctor for teaching?

“Jet the Mouse took the warrant back to the judgement hall and told the magistrate that the tiger could not be found.

“The magistrate was unmoved. ‘Cannot be found? Why say you this? You agreed to arrest this tiger; why should you try to escape your promise now? I can by no means permit this; I have given my word, as have you- see there, both our seals. You will satisfy the woman’s cry for justice; you will satisfy my order.’

“Jet bowed low, and beat his head upon the floor. ‘I was drunk, Your Honor,’ he cried, ‘when I game my promise. I can catch a man, but not a tiger; I know nothing of such matters. Still, if it is your order, I will go into the hills where the river is born into this world and hire what hunters I can find to help me.’

“Very well; it makes no difference how you catch him, so long as you bring him into this court alive. If you fail in your duty, there is nothing left but to beat you until you succeed. Mai-! Draw up a will and testament for Jet, and see that it is filed properly. Should he perish in his duties, his parents deserve that much. Jet the Mouse; I, the Honorable Magistrate of this Hall, give you five years to see your duty done.’

“Yes, Your Honor,’ cried Mai, known as the Monkey; ‘It will be done at once!’

“Yes, Your Honor,’ cried Jet the Mouse; ‘It will be done at once!’

“And so there was no help for it; Jet the Mouse filed his paperwork, gathered supplies for the journey, and set off for where the river was born. Mei, instigator of Jet’s coming road of trials, took eight long months to travel down the river; Jet took a mere four.

“Upon his arrival at the small village of which Mei had spoken of, he was shown to Mei’s old house- for the village was so small, it was easier to simply give the magistrate’s assistant a house than try to find him accommodations in another’s abode. Mei’s old landlord enlisted his wife to cook and clean for Jet; and, once his business was made plain, the landlord himself escorted Jet to the shepard’s house.

“The shepard explained all that he knew to Jet; and soon, Jet was filled with a kind of relief, because he had not been sent to catch a tiger after all, but a tiger in man’s shape- and magic being what it is, if
It bears the shape of a man, it is, more than likely, a man. Jet the Mouse was good at catching men; he had become a magistrate’s assistant for just such a reason.

“During the next four years, Jet left no stone unturned in trying to find the guilty tiger—me, you understand. The best hunters in the land were employed. Night and day they searched the hills, hiding in mountain caves and in tall trees and atop great stones, watching and waiting and finding—nothing.

“I had left that area on one of my few useful tasks; though I lived a life alone, I had not forgotten myself so far as to forget the needful things of life. One such thing was salt; and so, I had crossed to the other side of the mountains, and through the grassy plains there, and made my way to the great sea. It was a year’s journey there and back; and I spent two years engaged in boiling away seawater, creating a vast amount of salt. Even a tiger-man needs money, I suppose; my clothing was nearly worn through, my only comb had broken… I had need, and so I worked, and was paid for my work.

“By the fifth year, Jet the Mouse had all but given in to despair; and I had returned to my high mountain cave. At this time, all the hunters had given up their search in disgust and gone back to their homes in the valley. Thus, Jet’s lament— for even with the help of the hunters, he could not catch the tiger; without them, he had no hope at all. So came the end of winter; and as the new year approached, Jet faced down the spectre of his own failure, and with it, his death.

“The magistrate was not a bad man; but he was heavy handed. Many an assistant had, in their failure to complete their orders, been beaten to death by the magistrate. And so, Jet entered a mountain temple to pray; tears rained down his cheeks as he knelt before the fierce deity. ‘Alas! I am a fool and a dead man!’ he moaned to the deity, ‘A dead man, for now there is no hope at all. Alas! That I had ever gambled; would that I had never touched a drop of wine!’

“Just then, he heard a slight rustling; just then, I was passing by on my way to the river’s birth, and heard a person weeping. I stood at the gate of the temple and looked within; and Jet looked up and out and saw a huge tiger-man standing there.

“Jet was no longer afraid of tigers. He knew there was only one way to save himself. ‘Ah,’ he said, looking me straight in the eye, ‘you have come to kill me, perhaps eat me, have you? Well, I fear you would find my flesh quite tough, since I have been hunting you for almost five years. You are the same fellow that killed that woodman five years ago, aren’t you? This woodman was an only brother, the sole support to his sister. Now that poor woman has reported you to the magistrate, who, in turn, has had a warrant drawn up for your arrest. I have been sent out to find you and lead you to trial. For some reason or other you have acted the coward, and remained in hiding. This has been the cause of my despair. Now, I shall suffer no longer as result of your murder; you shall come with me to the city at the mouth of the river, and answer the charge of killing the woodman.’

“All the time Jet was speaking, I listened closely. Though I had not meant to allow it, my time by the Sea, working an honest man’s trade—poor though it is—had smoothed rough things in me, cooled my great temper, and eased the grief that sought to choke all the good from me. When Jet the Mouse fell silent, I made no effort to escape; I nodded, and spoke.

“I, Kin’emon the Tiger, have done the crime of which you speak; and so, I, Kin’emon, shall be taken to the city at the river’s mouth to face judgement.’ I said these words; I meant them; I would not take them back, even now.

“I bent my head forwards and let Jet slip a strong chain over it; and then I followed the magistrate’s assistant quietly down the mountain.

“A boat had been readied a few villages away, in preparation for my capture; and now, I dutifully
followed the man to that village, and onto that boat. We arrived in the city within a week’s time, as the river grows faster the farther one gets from the mountain.

“I followed Jet through the crowded streets of the city, into the court room. All along the way there was great excitement; ‘The man killing Tiger has been caught,’ shouted person after person. ‘He is being led to trial by Jet the Mouse!’

“The crowd followed us into the hall of justice. When the magistrate walked in, every one of them became as quiet as the grave. All were filled with wonder, I suppose, at the strange sight of a tiger being called before a judge.

“I took great pains to appear unafraid of those who were watching so curiously- the magistrate, his assistants, the crowd… Mei. I sat myself down in front of the magistrate, for all the world like an ordinary man. The magistrate rapped on the table as a signal that all was ready for the trial.

“Mei, in the five years of her study, had blossomed further- from a fragile bud, to a hesitant blossom, to a full bloom. Her patients reported only the best of her; her medicines and advice was always well received. She had become a notary, and a taxidermist also; she had learned to read and write even more, learned calligraphy and of the sword, could sing and play the flute and a thousand other things women learn to do, in time. She had even gained a name of her own- Mei, the Sparrow; and so, when Jet sailed into the city with me in chains, the magistrate called her to the hall at once. So it was that I beheld, for the first time, the one who I had so wronged.

“She was beautiful, Momonosuke. Your mother was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

“Tiger,’ said the Magistrate, staring down at me, ‘Did you eat the woodman with whom you are charged with murdering?’

“I did not eat him, though I did kill the man of which you speak.’ I said.

“Mei sat quietly, staring at me with an expression I could not read- was it pity? Was it rage? I did not know.

“A life for a life is the law of the land,’ continued the magistrate, paying no attention to the forlorn woman, but looking me directly in the eye. ‘Did you know it?’

“I shook my head; I had not known that.

“You robbed a helpless woman of her only brother; the only one who would support her.’ said the magistrate, eyes sad and resolute. ‘She had no one else. She wept in these halls five years ago; begged me for justice, before she starved. She has not starved; nor will she, for I am not a cruel man, and I did not leave her to die. You must be punished for your crime; the law must be enforced… and yet, I see by your bearing, your hair and clothing, that you have suffered a grief as great as hers. It was grief that sent her to me; it was grief that made you slay her brother. It is a kind of madness that overtook you; and, though the law demands a life for a life, madmen are given more mercy than most. Do you understand?’

“I nodded, then, though I did not really understand.

“The law is the law; and you were a madman then. Tell me, Tiger: do you regret your actions, that day? Would you give your life, in place of the man whose life you stole in your madness?’ said the magistrate, staring down at me.

“I, Kin’emon the Tiger, would do so. I was not myself, then; and for no reason did I kill her brother, other than he was happy, and I was not.’ I said, bowed low.
“Very well,’ said the judge. ‘If you, Kin’emon the Tiger, can promise to take the place of Mei the Sparrow’s brother and support her all her life as her brother would have done, I am quite willing to spare you from a disgraceful death. What say you, will you accept my offer?’

“I stared up at the magistrate. I’m quite sure my confusion and thoughts were on my face- but I could not help it. ‘I have but two objections, Your Honor, though it pains me to say it.’ I said.

“Speak them, Tiger- though know that my offer will remain as it is.’ said the magistrate.

“Your Honor- it is unseemly for a man unrelated to a woman to live with her as you have asked of me, and he is not her husband.’ I said.

“I know this quite well, Tiger; thus, you shall be married to Mei the Sparrow immediately.’ said the magistrate.

“Your Honor- though surely marriage would end what unseemly business could lay between us, is it really right to ask a woman whose brother I murdered to marry me? Should not she have a say in whom her husband is to be? She is a doctor, a learned woman- surely, there are better men for her to be wed to than one such as I.’ I said.

“Marriage was her idea, Kin’emon the Tiger. Do not think that the five years spent on your capture were idle ones; many a wheel has turned in the time between Jet the Mouse’s setting out for your capture, and your presence here in this hall. If you refuse to marry her, you will be put to a disgraceful death; if you marry her, perhaps you will come to live an honorable life. The choice is yours alone, now.’ said the magistrate.

“I stared at the magistrate; and then, almost beyond my will, my eyes sought out the woman I had so wronged. Mei the Sparrow was, and remains, the most beautiful woman I have ever had the pleasure of keeping company with. Her eyes, that day, shone with compassion and tears.

“Though I do not deserve this mercy,’ I said, quietly in the grave silent hall, ‘I accept Your Honor’s offer. I, Kin’emon the Tiger, will marry Mei the Sparrow.’

“The crowd, who had gaped wider and wider as the proceedings proceeded, gasped at my answer.

“Very well, then; guards, free him. Li, Mai, and Jet shall draw up the marriage contract, and see it signed and filed; once they have done so, you and your new wife are both free to return to your home in the mountains, or make your home in the city here- only, of course, you must abide by the laws and rules such that all married couples must abide by.

“The chains were taken from my neck, and I was led silently out of the hall, through a small door to one side, where I was met by the two assistant magistrates the head magistrate had named, and Mei. We were married within the hour- in all ways such- and led from the hall with no more or less haste than such things demand.

“I was deeply confused; but, no longer alone. And so, I asked my wife, Mei, what we should do.

“Whatsoever do you mean?’ she said.

“Are we to live in the mountains, or the country, or here in the city? For- though we are now wed, we must return home, and on no account appear before the magistrate again, save for those happy occasions when all married couples appear before magistrates.’ I said.

“Ah.’ she said. She hummed a moment, and then she turned to me and smiled.
“We shall stay here, for a time; it is a long journey to the mountains, and my leg is not good. We will need money, and other sundries, before we can make the journey; I have work here, well paying, and perhaps the company of others will do you good. I shall work, and save what money I can; you shall recover further from your madness. And then, yes, I think- I think we shall go home again.’ she said.

“This city is not your home?” I said.

“No; it is not.’ she said.

“And nothing more of it was said between us, though we spoke more. Six years passed, and we settled into our new shapes- husband, and wife. For me, it was a shape I had worried I had grown too twisted to fit; for her, it was a shape entirely new. And yet, for six years, we settled, and meshed, and became what the magistrate had known, somehow, we would- a pair.

“There were many who assumed that I would kill Mei, or she me- or certainly, we would beg to be separated again. But we did not; they were mistaken. I became a medicine gatherer, for I knew where and when to find the best of the things your mother used to ply her trade; and meat, and skins, and spices I brought back to her too. We became very wealthy, in time; and we spoke more and more of returning to our home in the mountains.

“City life didn’t really agree with either of us, you see- the noise, the stench, the press of so many people around us both. We both knew we would not be so happy in our homely mountain village- hers, really- but perhaps a smaller town, along the river?

“In time, we both saw that, though the marriage was Mei’s idea, the magistrate’s choice to enforce it was truly wise. Mei stopped grieving her dead brother, as much as she could, and began to love the handsome man that had come to take his place so willingly. I let go of my first wife, and the memory of her love allowed me to love again- this one was saved from hating by love. Never forget the power of love.

“Then, one day, quite out of the blue, your mother grew round with you. The pregnancy itself was like any other; but your birth… something went very wrong, and you took a part of Mei’s womb with you, when you entered this world. Thus, she can no longer bear children at all- you, Momonosuke, are your mother’s only child, the only child of her womb.

“Nearing the sixth year of your life, my son, we decided to move as we had intended; the city on the river’s mouth had grown more dangerous over time, and we did not want you to grow up in such a fearful place. We had packed our things, and were readying ourselves for passage on a boat that would take us up river, when those strangers came.

“They took you; and when your mother told me of what had come to pass, I swore that I would retrieve you or die trying. I am not dead; nor are you, though we feared it. Two years, it has been; you are eight years old, taller than I could have dreamed you being, but my son you yet remain.

“Will you not speak? Have they taken even the scorn of my son from me?”

“No- Father, Father, no! I am only- I had forgotten. I forgot my name, and my face, and my home- near a park of maple trees it was, and in the autumn it would light with leaves of fire… Father, Father- Dad!”

There’s a sound like someone being hit in the chest. Silence; the softest sounds of sobbing. A low
voice murmurs soothingly.

“My son, my son- Momonosuke, my son-!”

“Father-!”

This babble continues for quite some time, until all is quiet. The only sound seems to be the soft rustling of grass, and the wet slap of waves on the hull of a ship. The sound of a grown man sobbing and shouting ‘suuuupaaaaaaaaaaah!’ as other people, also sobbing, do their best to shush him, echoes in the distance.

“Father… do you suppose mother would let my brother and sisters stay? I know they are not kin to me by blood, of course, but… in bond, they are my kin, and I would see them cared for.”

“Name them, and they shall be my children as you are my son.”

“Um… there’s Chocho, Kameyo, Tsururu - she’s the one with the fluffy coat -”

“I see her, yes.”

“Then there’s Gameyo, Ayame, Maneki’emon - he’s the only boy other than me-”

“You did say one brother and the rest are sisters…”

“Right, well… Ai and Jun are twins; Orihime had wings from the start; and Kaguya’s really nice.”

“…Even though she only scowls?”

“She reminded me of you- and I was right to make the connection! The two of you are exactly alike!”

“Hmph. Well. I, Kin’emon, can say with surety, my son- though I left your mother in search of one child. I have found a total of ten. She will be positively overjoyed at the bounty, I am sure; I certainly am.”

“Even though you do not smile?”

“Even though.”

“Hello, listeners; I told you I would return. This is Mab Morgan. I come to you now with a final update on our weather conditions.

“The current conditions are foggy, with strange shards of rainbow light dancing over bits and pieces of the ship; the wind feels like it’s still, but we’re sailing, so it isn’t actually still. We have been sailing for what seems to be less than an hour, and yet must be more- certainly, the stories you heard
took more than a single hour to tell, and yet, our clocks still show no such advancement to their faces.

“Nami told me, during moments of lucidity between harrowing storms of grief, that we are sailing in spirals- that the Rainbow Mist is acting very much like the Sky Sea we sailed through once, and that we, inside it, are not quite sailing in circles. Spiraling through the Rainbow Mist, our time and space have somehow drifted- split- from our original ones, thus leading to the strange meeting of our many similar selves.

“I… it’s odd, but I have no double to meet. Or rather, if you know my name- the titles attached to me through deed and error and malice and ignorance, it is perhaps not so strange that I have no double self- no similar being to meet. You see, a few years ago, I killed my double. The circumstances are as they are- and I was punished for it. And now- I have no double to meet.

“Except, of course, I didn’t meet my double; I met the double of the one I killed. His name is Tatiana; he has long red hair, and a nose like the prow of a ship, and his lipstain is blue-green- turquoise, I suppose is the proper name of the color.

“We are the same height, weight, and age; indeed, the only visual differences between us are as follows: he wears round rimmed glasses, while mine are square; and he uses a labrys, while I use a spear.

“We met just before the speaking of the April Monologues; I saw him at the edge of my vision, faded and misty, half-colored; like a wash of pigment over ink in too-bright light, could hardly see him at all. The mist was thick and we were moving fast through it, but it does not sting the skin; hardly feels of anything at all, can barely tell you’re moving but by the sensation in your gut of speed, ever more speed- when the mist touched my skin, I could hardly feel it.

“I could hardly feel a thing; the past was a fiction I’d made in my head and all consequences were choices made long ago.

“I saw colors and shapes instead of the familiar trappings of my home; a bright confirmation of life wrenched itself out of my lungs towards the mist-veiled sun before I fell to my knees, gasping and screaming, ‘No! Not you! Not you!’ in unison with my double-double.

“We stood, then, and beheld each other- and in an instant, I knew who he was, and he, I. It was my brother- the double of my brother, as I had not seen him for at least a decade.

“We talked, awkwardly- neither of us really knowing what to feel, how to express it, what do you even say to the cracked black mirror of someone you killed in cold blood-”

“My double-double is married! Can you even imagine how bizarre that is? She looked past her own fury long enough to grow- she grew! The sister I knew was a hedonist, a woman who demanded the finest things in life and reveled in them.

“Her cruelty and brutality were only matched by her genius; the Scourge of the Sky, they called her, and rightfully so. And yet, here and now, her double is… happy! And I’m… not! Hahaha, isn’t that just, like, the best?

“I got so fed up with her bullshit- her schemes, her wheels within wheels, her long long grips… I killed her. I admit it; I killed my sister in cold blood. The inciting incident that lead to that decision… well, it’s in the newspapers, if you want to look it up. I’d rather put it behind me- as much as such a
thing can be put, hahaha. It’s only now, meeting her double, that I can understand why I got so fed up with her shit. I was really just fed up with my own shit.

“How wonderful it was, to have my own horrendous personality reflected from every facet of my dear sister, all the time, every day, reminding me what it must have been like for other people to be around me, to talk to me… Or constantly having all the consequences and fuckups resulting from my own batshit thought processes amplified because there’s another version of me running around, dangerously overzealous, with money to burn and a point to prove; believing all the while, just as mistakenly as my own broken self, that they are operating in their own best interests. So what if I helped you? I helped myself, too: twice!

“Hahahaha! I’m not sure I can really convey how fucking sick I was of myself. I completely wore out my patience where my own identity was concerned; I all but drowned in my own dismal persona. I felt totally surrounded by it, inside and out; I couldn’t escape from myself.

“Even killing Mab as I did didn’t cause an end to me; indeed, there is no end to me. Hahahaha! Isn’t that wonderful? Like, whenever my mind falters or threatens to retreat into the void in any way, whenever my mind refuses to see the world anymore, merely shapes- here I come again, ready to pick up the pieces and get back on my bullshit, ensuring there’ll always be more of myself than I could ever know what to do with.

“And here and now, I can only remind myself of that, and throw it all in my face again. Hahahaha! I mean, shit, that was one hell of a mystery I didn’t actually consider a mystery and it didn’t even really need solving but hot damn if it didn’t just get solved so nice work, me! Really, just, just-fucking great!

“There’s no memory I have of my interaction with my sister- my treatment of her, the way I took her actions, everything- that doesn’t fill me with shame. Even now, I’m starting to dig up new things to be ashamed of, and my sister’s double isn’t even my sister.

“Hahahaha!”

“As it turns out, you don’t actually have to be alive to make yourself relevant. And you don’t have to be a good person to be a hero. You merely must know who you are and stay true to that truth. Do so, and you will understand reality while everyone else is running around confused and angry and upset because they think reality is something happening to them, rather than something they themselves are making happen.

“My brother was my hero; that’s why his betrayal hurt so much. Or at least- at the time, I thought he was. You know how you think you know these things about yourself, like all these personal attributes about you, you know them- you know they’re true. As if they are written, and thus, true.

“We need heroes because the define the limits of our aspirations; they are the weathervane of our dreams. We define our ideals by the heroes we choose, and in turn our ideals- courage, strength, honor, duty, and so on- define us. Heroes become the symbol of the qualities we want to have, and the ambitions we want to satisfy.

“These things I believed, I hoped that just believing in them would make them true; but that’s not actually how it works. I spent so long believing those things and taking their truth for granted that I forgot to make them true with my words and deeds. We made our own luck, our own fate; and I forgot to make mine until it was too late.
“How could I have ever truly loved my brother, thought him a hero, when I never even knew who he was? I still don’t; I cut down the whole of him long before the truth of his nature could reveal itself. And so, I never shall; and that, truly, is a pitiful thing.”

“It’s like this, okay? Imagine that over the course of someone’s life, they are truly capable of every conceivable action at any moment, and did indeed take each of those actions in different branching realities. A scenario like that deadens a person’s agency just as much as one where their fate is decidedly etched into stone as a single path of unavoidable decisions. There is no such person who can and does and would and will take all conceivable actions, other than someone perfectly generic, who only appeared to have unique predilections and motives when the arbitrary path they happen to occupy is examined.

“I went back a ways and taught my younger self how to sharpen my axe, which I knew because my younger self, after being taught how to sharpen my axe, grew up to become me, and was, therefore, capable of teaching me.

“The Rainbow Mist is one thing to call this place; but on my map, it’s called Paradoxia. Consider this: if the world came to an end every time there was some uncertainty about what had just happened in it, it would never have gotten beyond the first picosecond. Many, of course, don’t. It’s like a human body, see- a few cuts and bruises here and there don’t hurt it. Not even major surgery, if it’s done properly. Paradoxes are just scar tissue, speaking worldly. Time and space will heal right up around a paradox, and the people who go through them?

“Well.

“We tend to remember a version of events which makes as much sense as we require them to make. I haven’t really met my sister’s double; she hasn’t really met her brother’s double. We- the both of us- are nothing like our fallen twins. And yet, it is enough to know, now- that somewhere, out there, there is a version of me that was killed before I could become… this. And there is a version of my sister that became… that.

“If that is not enough; it must be enough. There isn’t anything more, after all.”

“Mab Morgan here; my brother is gone again, vanished into the mist. His axe; his voice; the relief of his presence… gone. All gone. Luck doesn’t actually matter. You, listener, matter. I- I’m sorry. I… here, have a forecast for the weather, I need- a-a moment- I’ll be right back-”

“**The Weather**: Rainbow Mist, with a high chance of Catharsis and Confusion.

“I, the **Oracle of Depthiest Deeps**, your one, your only- F! Will now take this chance to inflict a number of horoscopes on your ungrateful and unworthy selves. Are they true prophecies? Hell if I know, apparently on this ship one is **Not Allowed** to slam dunk an open glass container of keifer and cottage cheese curds onto the floor and make an augury for truth of broken glass and spilled milk and clotted milkfat, it’s a cut hazard and waste of perfectly good food, don’t be so wasteful, F, gods.

“I shall now relay the stars’ messages for you ungrateful souls. Don’t blame me if you don’t like your
fortune; it’s the stars that made these, I’m just a messenger. Please have notation apparatus ready—be it paper and pen, or chalk and slate. I shall now pause to allow time for you to retrieve your writing materials.

“These are the Horoscopes for the month. Prepare yourself.

“Aries: Cooking skills are useless if you have nobody to cook for. We are defined by the people we inflict our artistry on. Not to say that you can’t cook for yourself; but stewing in our own creative juices only leads to disaster. Branch out!

“Taurus: This week is auspicious for experimentation. Push the boundaries of your flesh; go beyond what it means to be mortal. Invent new genders. Make words where no words once stood. The power is in your hands!

“Gemini: Practice painting and surfing at the same time for double the learning.

“Cancer: Make some extra food for when your house is flooded with death god acolytes that need a place to stay while their temple training school is undergoing fumigation. They will reward your hospitality with household chores, helping you with the errands, and probably dealing with your persistent hauntings. Win-Win-Win!

“Leo: Be prepared to reap the consequences of your excitement when you run full speed into a wall.

“Virgo: Sometimes we get the reaction we expect, but at a magnitude we didn’t, and that’s just the way the cookie annihilates on this bitch of an earth.

“Libra: Prepare to learn more than you have ever wanted to know about leopards. There is definitely a leopard there.

“Scorpio: Finish what you started! Improvise! Fail! Evade capture from the police! Hide in the brothel! Use protection so you don’t get an infection!

“Ophiuchus: Yeaaaah, sky-lube isn’t a thing. It’s regular lube, my friendo. You’ve been fooled.

“Sagittarius: You’ll be waiting for something; a train, a bus, a call. You will notice the horse skull by the side of the road. Once you see it, you will feel like it’s watching you. Do nothing. Say nothing. Do not interact.

“Capricorn: Your habit of ignoring the crows and magpies as a child has paid off. No swooping for you, my friend!

“Aquarius: Some people actually are just two lesbians in a trench coat, and you should respect their decision.

“Pisces: Gnome time approaches. You know what must be done.

“These are the Horoscopes for the month. Deal with it.

“I, the Oracle F, wish to remind everyone listening that the general forecasts for the next year, two years, five years, and ten years, can be found in the new edition of the Old Farmer’s Almanac, sold in every Daiso World-wide. Costs, like, a thousand beri. Is that an investment for some? Sure. Does
the Almanac give you auspicious days for literally everything? Yes.

“Do not use a Book of Auspicious days without an Almanac to double check the dates and moon-phases; misprints, while rare, do happen. Remember: it is another human being at the other end of the printing process. We are imperfect beings.

“Do not take the advice of a Daily Horoscope, as printed in the newspapers or as I have just imparted to you, as gospel without having your Birth Chart at hand. The more exact you can be with regards to your date and time of birth, the more accurate your Birth Chart becomes.

“These are the Questions, Answered:

“Who invented the Snugly, which many people use to carry babies? Some would say the Togo clan of the Longarm are responsible for the idea. Ann Moore, a pediatric nurse working with the Togo in the early six-hundreds, saw men and women there using slings to carry their babies while they went about their lives- working, playing, resting, and so on. The babies were comfortable, easily accessed, and secure; and the people who carried them had both hands free. Moore, and her mother Lucy Greatauk, a fashion designer, used the idea to design their own adjustable, pouchlike infant carrier. Once their design was patented, it was sold to a commercial producer, and is now available worldwide.

“What is the best way to clean wicker furniture, meant for outdoor or indoor use? For everyday care, be sure to wipe up spills quickly, before they have a chance to seep into the crevices. Dust regularly with a soft cloth or, better yet, use the small brush attachment standard with most vacuum cleaners to pull away dirt and grime. If you need to do a major cleaning, best practice is to keep the wicker wet for the shortest possible time. Choose a hot, dry day with a good breeze, or set up a fan. Take the piece outdoors for a quick hose-down with a pressure nozzle. For more stubborn dirt, use a solution of mild soap, water, and salt- heavy on the salt, please. A small brush will help reach into crevices. Rinse well and dry completely. For a finish shine, wipe with an oiled flannel. Please remember to bring your outdoor wicker furniture into a protected area during inclement weather.

“What is the origin of the saying ‘Until the last dog is hung’? This usually refers to someone sticking it out until the end. It was first used in printed media in eight hundred sixty three, although undesired members of society have been called ‘dogs’ since the fourteenth year of the modern calendar. The phrase may well have originated in the Wild West Blue, where rustlers, thieves, and other ne’er-do-wells were regularly strung up for crimes against men, women, and cattle.

“What is a dinger in baseball? A dinger is a home run.

“Which sports are legal to gamble on? The internationally legal sports for gamblers are: Sixth Degree or Bountyball; Champton Slippers, or Polo- both water and horseback versions; Baseball; Foot-the-ball; and all animal races involving quadrupeds, only quadrupeds- where bipeds are involved, they have to be riding the quadruped. Dog Sled races are still in contention due to the nature of the sled in question. Nationally legal sports for gamblers are subject to local government enforcement; check with your bookie.

“Has anyone ever sued someone else because lightning struck his barn? Strangely, yes. During a long drought in the mid-eight hundred eighties, a priest in Mariejois called a prayer meeting so that all the residents could pray for rain. One farmer apparently thought prayer was unnecessary, so he did not show up for the meeting. Three hours after the meeting ended, thunderstorms rumbled through the area, bringing the much-needed rain. The thunderstorms also brought lightning, which struck the undevout farmer’s barn and burned it to the ground. The farmer sued the priest, whose
lawyer pointed out that the priest and the people at the prayer meeting had prayed for rain, not a thunderstorm. Therefore, the priest could not be held accountable for the lightning strike. The farmer’s case was thrown out of court.

“Who coined the phrase ‘under the wire’? The phrase wasn’t actually coined by one specific person. It’s a permutation of the saying ‘down to the wire’, which comes from horse racing. The original phrase describes two or more horses running neck and neck at the end of a race; the ‘wire’ was attached to an apparatus that set a camera in action, thus allowing for photo-finishes.

“Who was the youngest person ever to graduate with a doctorate? The youngest recipient of a doctoral degree is Trafalgar Law, a boy from Flvnce, who received a medical doctorate in thoracic surgery from the Universidad de Plata at the age of ten.

“This is the General Advice, for those who already know what they’re about, but need a day’s direction.

“Now the state of the ground is known.

“To de-ice a roof, mix a solution of sand and salt in equal parts, and scatter across the shingles by the handful. When the ice begins to melt in patches, the sand will allow you to walk around, carefully, and break up the ice.

“A man is not a man until he takes responsibility for his actions.

“To season a wok, one must cook in it; and not use soap, but only water in it’s cleaning.

“Use lavender, fennel, or chamomile soaks for tired, swollen feet.

“One must be grateful for turnips a while yet.

“Do not despair; the darkness will yield to light, in it’s time.

“When another person makes you suffer, it is because he is suffering deeply within himself. It may not be within your power to help them; but it is within your power to pity him.

“These are the Words; we use them, but know them not. I will now correct that, as much as I can.

“Catfishing: the phenomenon of dial-up predators that fabricate identities and entire social circles purely to trick people into emotional, romantic, and financial relationships over a long period of time. The motivations for such are possibly revenge, loneliness, curiosity, and boredom.

“Hornswoggle: trickery, similar in scope to bamboozle.

“Expert: a person with a very specific specialty in a very specific field. Anyone can be an expert at anything; though not all things should be mastered to such an extent.

“Port: a place where ships can come in, generally to trade. From the ancient Portgas.

“Dog Days: the hottest and most unhealthy days of the year. Also known as the Canicular Days, the name derives from the Dog Star, Sirius. The traditional timing of Dog Days is the forty days beginning the Third of July and ending the Eleventh of August, coinciding with the heliacal rising of Sirius.
“November: from the ancient word novem, meaning nine, because this was the ninth month of the calendar. There used to be fewer months overall.

“Chowder: from the French chaudiere, a kettle or a pot. A dish made of fresh fish or clams, biscuit, onions, and so on, stewed together.

“Civvies: civilian, as opposed to military. Usually used in conjunction with clothing, it’s beginning to see more use in describing groups of people outright.

“And now, from our sponsor, Powdermilk Biscuit Digestives. Heavens, they’re tasty!

“The taste of a good wholesome Powdermilk Biscuit Digestive can drop blood pressure, entice wild horses to accept the saddle, and encourage family dogs that have been hanging on at the end of chronic illnesses to close their eyes and drift away. Made from whole wheat raised in the rich bottomlands of the Lake Wobegon river valley by Germa bachelor farmers; so you know they’re not only good for you, but good looking… mostly. Buy them ready-made in the big blue box with the picture of the biscuit on the cover, or in the brown paper bag with the dark stains indicating freshness. Whole wheat digestives that give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done, even if that’s just sitting back down and shutting up.

“Heavens; Powdermilk Biscuit Digestives. They’re tasty; and expeditious!

“... Mister Cross, have you been eating them this whole time? Mister- um, bathroom’s right inside the Galley, the San’s the red door, bathroom is green- oh golly, I’ve never seen a man’s face blanch like that.”

“I have. Haha hAHAHAHAhAHAHAhaha-!”

“Thank you, from the Gastropod Gallery. Finally, for my contribution to this broadcast; today’s Proverb.

“A bar walks into a bar. The bartender is a snake eating its own tail. The windows look out only onto the face of the one who looks. What goes in and what goes out taste just the same. Find a better bar.

“I, The Oracle F, return you to your broadcast host; Mab Morgan!”

“Hello, everyone. I told you I would be back. It took longer than I thought, but I have returned from whatever horrible place I went. Whole? Probably not, actually. But I am returned. Mister Jeremiah Cross, looking pale as milk and a bit wrung out, is starting to fade at the edges, turning back into mist; and so I shall make brief my sentiment.

“I saw a foul devil of a man, and I slew him. I saw that man again- but I remembered. I remembered what it did to me the first time I killed him; and this time, I let him live. I let that woeful, wicked beast
live. I am sure he is not without his wounds and bruises, and I pity that he must return to the awful place from whence he came.

“And yet, despite everything, I am happy that some version of him is alive. I am happy that I am alive; that you are alive; that we are all, listening to this broadcast or creating it, even now, are alive.

“Around us, spears of light, blindingly golden, are piercing through the veil of rainbow mist; the wind smells of seaweed and woodsmoke, and it sweeps away our pains. I am sure there is blood staining your hands, listener; the shape of your sin, the final record of what you did, and who you hurt to do it.

“The bodies of some replaced by others who were- we were- all the same, to begin with. Time puts it’s mark on us all. We heal, slowly; those of us, whomever we are, that survived; and those others of us, whomever we are, that conquered; and still yet more, who even now cry out in fear and rage to be born into this word- whoever you are now, you are home.

“We are all of us home. I and my family are together; and you, with yours. My mouth, to your ears- we have each other.

“That will have to be enough. What meanings we can make of the world are all there is; there isn’t any more.

“And so we end this Straw Hat Broadcasting Service with these reminders: You are not alone. Your existence is not a crime. You do deserve to exist.

“I’ll talk to you later, World. Or perhaps not- Cross is fading fast, and I rather doubt we will ever meet again. Until next time; there won’t be a next time. This was the only time there was.”

I put the microphone back onto the transponder rig, and carefully place it in Cross’ lap. A sudden gust of wind- and he, his snail friend Soundbite, and the rest of our doubles, are gone again. The strange silence we were surrounded by, save for the slapping of waves on our hull, is gone- broken by the wailings of a newborn babe.

A newborn in the- in the birthing room-

“TAFFY-!” screams Nami.

The migraine is sudden, vicious, and nearly takes my feet from under me. The sun is setting; Bryony, up earlier than usual, sees my clutching my head and the agony I’m trying desperately not to scream over- ‘I’ve got this, Mab, I’ve got this’

I blink, and I’m sitting in the middle of the stairs, sliding down on my ass, thump and a wince with each jarring motion I feel- dizzy-

I blink again and I’m lolling on the grass, vomit, my mouth tastes of vomit-

I-

I can’t-
Remember-
I did not sleep; though my eyes were closed, and I could not be roused- that was not true sleep. I am too tired now for that to have been true sleep. I felt like I was sleeping, for a little bit- but when I would briefly surface from the blank blackness, I knew I was not sleeping.

I am Fae; and all Fae are bound, indelibly, to Time. Time cannot be halted without consequence; time cannot be killed without injuring eternity.

In the Before, there was no duality. All was one; one accord. When Pandora- Paradoxia, in the older tongues- broke the egg, she opened her mind to the insight of duality. The past is never dead; it’s not even past. We are everything we’ve ever been- everything we failed to be, everything we succeeded. Every accident and mistake and stroke of luck and triumph- all these things, we are.

We are also everything we could be; and everything we could never be.

There exists no version of myself that could ever bring harm to a child. There exists no version of myself that would ever forgive my brother for raping me, not even once. There exists no version of myself that could ever do less than feel pity and compassion for the wounded, the sick, and the chronically ill; the shut in, the forgotten… I am who I am, beyond the structures of what circumstance has made me.

I dreamed I was pouring sand and shells into a bottle to take back to the sea, but every time I would get the bottle half filled, the bottle would break open and the glass would turn to sand and the shells would swim away and I was drowning drowning-

I dreamed I opened a drawer in the galley and it was full of bloody teeth and in my hand there was a pair of bloody pliers and in my mouth was the bloody gaps where all my teeth had been but I had no memory of pulling them and then I was drowning drowning-

I woke in a field of blank white snow, and between my legs red crocuses pushed up through the crust of ice. I could not move my legs at all, but I could raise my head and see trailing off through the whiteness six other patches of bright red, blooming in the snow.

I stretched my leaves towards the sun, and on my boughs heavy cherries ripened from stone hardness to sweet fullness. Crows came, and ate all the fruit of seven of my branches; but the eighth branch stood in the gaze of a cat, and the crows would not go near it. On that branch there grew one yellow apple, swelling sweetly in the brightening sun. I feared for the fruit; perhaps my branch would be too weak or a wind would come and knock it from me before harvest time or a crow would grow unafraid of the cat and take my fruit from me please please let it live-
I opened my eyes to see statues of burlap and chicken wire, shaped something like my crewmates but the vitality of them was gone-

I fell to the earth of our home and I fell higher leaving my body behind- for, though it seemed no more than a moment in a day had passed to us, in the Rainbow Mist… Once we had escaped it, all that time we hadn’t spent sailing through it, it hit me all at once. Taffy collapsed in the middle of a conversation with Nami- that’s why Nami screamed so loud I could hear her on the deck. Mark looked like he fell asleep on the couch; it was only when Luffy and Usopp couldn’t wake him that they knew something was wrong. Bryony was definitely affected- she’s apparently had insomnia since the three of us other Fae fell. Tellicherry collapsed much like I did- splitting pain in her head, disorientation and clumsiness in her body, and then unconsciousness without a word.

The difference, of course, between Tellicherry and myself, is that Tellicherry was awake again within the day- and I was not. Tellicherry isn’t a Queen; she can recover from certain things better than I. It has been said by some that time will heal all wounds; this is not so. The wounds remain, eternally. In time, the mind, protecting it’s sanity, will cover them- akin to scarring- so that the pain may lessen. But no wound done is ever undone; the effects, the damage done from a curse remain long after such a thing is broken.

When we sailed from poor sunken Punk Hazard, I sailed us almost directly into the Rainbow Mist; I didn’t mean to, of course, but I did. From Tuckleigh to Punk Hazard is about a month. When we sailed out of the Rainbow Mist, we were within regular sighting distance of Tuckleigh- a distance of maybe a few hours time, rather than four weeks.

I did not die; and I did not sleep. Not for a whole month’s worth of time, even if I didn’t feel it.

There are repercussions for such a thing. The best way to explain it, I think, is like this: a kind of madness overtakes you when they you’re put to extremes. When rising from the darkest depths of madness to the calm surface of sanity- or as close as you can get, considering everything- regular stops at different depths are needed to prevent decompression sickness. Trying to come back from the place we went too quickly… it has the full potential to kill, if given free reign.

Luckily, we have two of the World’s best doctors on this ship- Trafalgar Law, youngest to ever gain a medical doctorate and he started with general practice before moving to surgery; and Tony Tony Chopper, one of the finest pharmacologists and trauma experts in the known world. Together, they were able to stabilize all us Fae that fell- and, though Dr. Trafalgar was baffled by my condition in particular (as I showed signs of starvation, torture, and exhaustion), Dr. Chopper was able to quickly and efficiently teach what needed to be learned.

My brother took hempen rope and bound me to the stone and said the prayer and laid over me and devoted us to the Earth Goddess and I screamed- three hundred eyes in the jar another thousand to count- my teeth crumbled to sand in my mouth and I could not speak for the dryness of it- my fingers stretched into twigs and my limbs are branches but I do not live I am only a broken thing caked in salt-

I woke but did not wake in a vast web sparkling with dew and in every drop there was reflected every other drop it was like stars in the blackness of night but they were not stars they were lives
reflected endlessly across the heavens For a time I shook and thrashed trying desperately to free myself but I could not the thin silk threads only pulled tighter and cut into my skin and my flesh and my bones and my blood turned all the white silk red and my hair tangled into the silk and I could not be freed and Eventually my thrashing gained the attentions of a great spider with whom I spoke in the glimmering white with blue light behind it in the darkness beyond the edge of Time at my back there was Her Grace Hylia but she would not see me.

Only the Spider would see me.

“Seconds ago little creatures are coming and they are asking if I am of the Gods and I am asking what the Gods are and they are telling me and I am not these Gods. These Gods are nowhere,” said the spider.

“That’s where Faith comes in,” I said.

“Little creatures are explaining Faith and moments ago it is Begun and I am here and I am here Now and soon it will End and there is nowhere for Gods to be hiding, and there is nothing Faith alone can do,” said the spider.

“So- then, what? Why am I here!?!?” I said, thrashing again- just for a moment but the pain made me stop it hurts it hurts it hurts-

“Monstrous Existence. Little creature is bound with Faith so tight it can’t help but cut itself apart; a great beast is creeping through the webs and the threads are bending under it’s weight and it is climbing the place where the web holds taught and into the waters and now it is making a tear and now it is dived through and gone and now you are here. Little creatures are walking through the waters and they are dragging in places and echoes of lives and they are asking me about Gods. I am going to tell you something, little creature. You have swum out to sea and dived deeper and deeper and deeper until your chest is breaking under the strain of the water and beyond your reach there are things blind and terrible and hungry and you know them by their lack of names. I am showing you, now,” said the spider.

I screamed-

“They are blind and they are hungry and they are toying with their prey before killing and eating. They are blind, but they are seeing you. And you are coming to them; and you are coming to kill them. After this, you are not returning here; I am climbing into the sea and closing the waters. Do not return to this place again,” said the spider.

She turned to me, and I saw that she had fingers for lips and mismatched eyes and eyes like pustules on her face and she reminded my of my kin and she looked like me but she was not me and she was so ugly and she was beautiful and I hated her and I wanted to be just like her once and She grew closer and closer to me until I was face to face with her and she laid a gentle claw over my stomach and stroked it over the softening muscles that cover my womb and she stroked the sweat from my brow with her lip fingers and she was weeping Her breath smelled of rotted things meat mostly and of flowers and herbs of earth and of fire the soot of a chimney and her hair dripped with water and drifted in the air and she was pale as paper twice as thin her skin was full of so many spiders Her lip-fingers gently grasped my chin and she turned my head so I was looking her in the eye and I couldn’t stop crying-

“There is a hole at the center of all things, and it is always growing. Between the stars, I am seeing it; it is coming and you are not escaping and all things shall forget you and all things will be forgotten and there is nothing to remember any of it, not even the things beyond.” said the spider.
I wept; the spider’s finger-lips brushed away my tears, stroked my cheeks and below my eyes.

“Now there is only the hole, and the nameless things beyond, and you, and me, and the one who would not pick a side and picked a side in unpicking… you are just your stuff, and your stuff is not caring if you are existing. You are monstrous existence,” said the spider, drawing closer still—until the bridge of it’s nose was perhaps a centimeter away from mine.

“Little creature, you are not chosen. There is nothing to choose you; I cannot choose you. This is going nowhere; there is nowhere for it to go. The universe is forgetting you and I am remembering you; not because I am caring. The beginning Begun moments ago, and the End is moments away. There is no time to forget before all is forgotten.” said the spider.

Then she leaned forwards and pressed a kiss to my mouth and it was soft and warm and her hand was so gentle on the softening muscles over my womb and she kissed by the book and a sharp bite on my lower lip stung me into dizzy sleep. Numbness and heat and tingling spread from her bite, and the world grew dimmer and dimmer until all was black—and then all was the red black of my own closed eyes.

The dream—nightmare? The spider had my voice. It was as if I was telling myself those true things; but it is said that when Zul deigns to speak, she uses your own voice to do so...

I could hear someone breathing, someone that wasn’t me; I could feel a weight on my arm, a stiffness in it that wasn’t normal, some binding on it I had no memory of putting there. There were fingers interlaced with my hand, rough and calloused and Sanji.

Sanji is here and he is holding my hand. It must be safe to do so, otherwise he would not.

It felt, honest to gods, like waking up after a very long nap at a very good spa—but I knew it couldn’t be, because I could hear and smell the Sanitary Ward around me. I could also smell the clove-tobacco stench of my husband at his most worried…and so, because I was suddenly worried about him, I opened my eyes.

The light was blinding; but I must have made a face, because I heard Sanji say my name, and that made me open my eyes again.

Ever since I broke Mom’s broom, I haven’t been able to fly. None of the rack-brooms work for me, and whenever I try to go and make a broom, it always ends up bursting into flames.

Tiffany says that my brooms keep ashing themselves because of irreconcilable faults in the spellwork; in short, the mistakes I make when I layer spells on material pile up so high that the various safety features of each spell decide that the only way to resolve the issue is to destroy the broom, and make me start over. I’ve been wanting to talk to Missus Mab about what to do for a while, but… She’s not been well at all.

I’m… I’m really worried. I’m the head nurse, so I know everything that’s going on—but that doesn’t mean I know what to do about it, or how to fix it. I’ve been massaging her, with my plain hands and
the little lightnings both, so her muscles don’t atrophy… but that doesn’t mean I know when she’ll wake up.

What would Mab say for a problem like this? Hm. Well, her first recommendation was to talk to Tiffany about making a new broom. I’ve talked to Tiffany about why my brooms keep ashing themselves- her thoughts aren’t… aren’t that great, really.

According to Tiffany, all Flight Brooms are layered with a specific confluence of magical elements- elements being what magic is called when it’s worked into a spell without being in one of the Primagicas, and has it’s own unique resonance with a mundane element of the world. Different spells do different things in a broom, of course; but at the basic level, every Flight Broom has three different kinds of spells on it.

There’s the Energy type spells; these are what keeps the broom in the air. Some work by magnesis; others, air; still more, aether. Then, there’s the Movement type spells; these are what lets the broom be fly-able, and can become very intricate depending on what the flyer wants from their broom. Adding them onto off-rack brooms and taking them off of the same is one of the first things most flyboys and flygirls involved in racing learn to do.

Finally, and most importantly, there’s the Comfort spells. I doubt it’s really news, but brooms aren’t actually comfortable to sit on by themselves. You need to add various comfort spells, be they stitched into fabric you add on as a bristle cover, an enchanted bike seat, or even special underwear- thankfully, mine are still intact. I thought, since I’ve got the undies, I didn’t really need anything but the most basic of comfort spells- the underwear are just for Cushioning, they don’t do Grip- so…

But maybe not.

Or, maybe- maybe I’ve been piling on too many Movement spells? I remember, Mom’s broom wasn’t like most race brooms- Mom's broom was a challenge to fly. Most racing brooms, they go where you point them; Mom's broom had to be pointed well ahead of where you wanted to go, and the difference between those two points was a complex variable, and if you needed to get there at speed you had to store energy in the bristles on the downswings and turns well in advance of needing it, and you needed to know you'd need it well in advance of knowing because that speed would leak right out if you didn't use it promptly...

And I could do all of that without thinking about it.

I could only make it accelerate at about a steady walk in normal circumstances; adding on the Birdthrottle Cap popped that up to maybe a brisk trot by a geriatric dog. For power, Mom had her broom enhanced to haul freight and carry... well, us. Seven babies isn't really heavy, per say, but it is more than one person can easily carry.

Handling wasn't great either- it was alright at slow and high speeds, but in the mid range I was more likely to crash into the ground or flip myself off the broom entirely- because, of course, it would stop on a thought. Full stop, no less.

Comfort, on the other hand, was unmatched. Mom's broom was reliable, time after time, in every condition- it was self-righting, and had a sink-trap for small dropped items, like change for the toll-winds and so on. It even had a parking brake; just the perfect thing for an impromptu hammock or a seat where no seat exists.

When I went in to see to Mab, she was awake; Sanji was weeping, and she had her hand pressed to
his face, her thumb stroking away his tears.

I stepped out to let the doctors know that Mab was awake, finally; and then it was all a flurry of tests and checks. Mab’s just fine, actually- still a little fatigued, but nothing a few days of rest won’t fix. She’s not allowed to train or work heavily or be around powerful magic, and she’s not allowed to drink alcohol or have sex or sew for the next week; but other than that, she’s fine.

After the first few days, things calmed down enough that I could talk to her myself.

“So, your brooms keep bursting into ash?”

“Yeah; something about the spells I’m using keep making everything unstable. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong, exactly- I thought making a broom that was basically the opposite of my mom’s broom wouldn’t be so hard...”

“Hm. Well; since I can’t go and watch what you’re doing... hand me that notepad, would you? Take one for yourself, too. I want you to list out every material you’ve used, and every spell as well. I know Tiffany made you keep a notation on such- so just copy that, please. Hmm... Now- oh, hello, Mack, could you do an errand for me?”

“Uh- sure thing, Missus Mab. What’d’ya need?”

“This is a list of books- If you can’t find the one I want, ask Robin or Mark to pull it for you, one of these is a magic book. I need them for reference. Also, in my studio, there is a medium sized bag on the shelf I wrote- over to the left from the door, then down, that’s how to read the notation. Please bring them to me, alright?”

“Ah- sure thing!”

“...um?”

“I have a hypothesis about what’s going wrong; but I can’t be sure without looking at some reference materials and making calculations. Let’s move to the table, alright?”

“Um- sure, I guess it’s not meal time any time soon...”

“Mmhm. Sanji- eep! Sanji- I can walk, you know,”

“I know; I just like holding you,”

“Hmmph. Alright; but please put me down soon, okay?”

“Mnhm. Here you go, Honey,”

“Hmm. Okay; don’t you have to train the Cool Kids?”

“Yeah, I do- alright, bye. Bye, Genny,”

“Bye, Sanji- ugh, really? Whatever-”
He always scruffs up my hair, even though he knows I hate that shit. Uuugh. Oh, and he always kisses Missus Mab before he leaves her company now- he didn’t used to do that, but now it’s like he can’t stop.

Anyway; in the time it takes me to copy out my notes about my materials and spells, Mack returns with a medium-sized basket full of books, and the bag Mab wanted. When I hand off the list, Mab reads it over. I watch her eyebrows furrow, then rise- and then she reaches for one- no, two of the books. I can’t read the covers at all- the only thing I can tell is the green one is leafy, and well thumbed; while the red one is metallic, and… glowy? Yeah, glowy.

Then she pulls out the third book- and that third book is why she didn’t go get them herself. It’s huge! Bigger than my chest, hips to ribcage; it’s thicker than my thigh, and obviously heavy because Mack was straining to carry it. When she puts it on the table, it doesn’t creak- but it’s definitely heavy. As soon as she does, all three books start opening and flipping pages.

Mab reads my list, makes notes on her notepad, and reads pages and passages from the books; as she goes further and further, the confusion on her face brews into a storm, and then a realization.

“It’s not what I thought- you’re not using outright incompatible spells. It’s a much more complex issue, one I haven’t seen show up too often. It’s much more common during a Mage’s training, and Tiffany isn’t a mage- she’s much closer to a Wizard, actually,”

“What do you think the problem is?”

“Ah- well, as I said, it’s quite rare, but the issue is one of Resonance. The materials you’ve been using and the spells you’ve been layering on top of each other should, in theory, work as you’ve designed; the problem is, nothing is ever so simple in practice. It’s an issue of Resonance, I think- I need to do some final calculations, but I’m pretty sure that’s what it is,”

“Resonance?”

“Hm. Imagine each part of a spell as a sonic tone- like a note from a bell, or a chime. A complete spell is like a chord, which is why an individual spell is so versatile; when you stack them together, they become more like a song, which is what blessings and curses become, over time. Enchantments aren’t songs- they’re more akin to symphonies. How to explain this… what do you know about destructive interference?”

“I didn’t even know what resonance is? So, um- nothing,”

“Right. Well. Interference is a phenomenon in which two waves superpose to form a resultant wave of greater, lower, or the same amplitude. Which in other words means- hm. Sound’s shape is a wave; and when two waves meet, like when you throw two stones in still water in different places and the waves made block each other out in a certain spot; and in another spot, the waves are bigger than they would have been alone; and in still one more, they don’t change each other at all. Interference can be observed in all types of waves- water, light, sound, and in this case, mana,”

“What’s mana?”

“Oh! Hm, I’ve never explained this, have I- well, it’s like this. Haki, or magic, can actually be broken down into two distinct parts- encompassing all the magic a person can ever possess, from the magic of their mind and body, to the magic of the elements locked within every person- Fire, Water, Earth, Air, Lightning, Wood, and Metal. Each piece has a yin and yang aspect; the prana, and the od.
Prana is energy specific to the physical body, and must be replenished by physical means; od is energy specific to the non-physical body, and must be replenished by non-physical means. When they’re mixed together, they become mana- which is the mage term for non-specific magic,”

“Are there spells or materials that require one over the other?”

“Yes- but you’re not old enough for either of them. Prana spells tend to have to do with injury, fertility, and age; while od spells deal with trauma, creativity, and memory. They require an exactness and a level of knowledge to perform correctly that, well… Prana spells, for example, are probably something your mother was very skilled at. Most women with her reputation, in her field, become experts at sex and fertility magic- which is almost exclusively fueled by prana- as a matter of course. Od, on the other hand, is something that for the most part self corrects- it takes a fraction of a fraction of od to affect a change in a person’s magic, whereas prana usually requires much more. Conversely, it takes a fraction of a fraction of prana to change a person’s haki; while od requires more than most people can bear to give. The entire practice of tantric sex, for example, is really about prana, and changing the way it moves through the body; while various mood altering drugs I was taught to administer ethically and responsibly in school was all about correcting dangerous od misalignments. Dangerous, complicated stuff; you’re neither old nor learned enough for either,”

“Hm.”

“Haki and magic aren’t actually interchangeable terms; haki means, literally, wearing- you wear armor, you wear observation, you wear the might of a king… magic is everything else that you do with the same sort of power haki is, but you’re not using it for armor or observation or kingliness, you’re using it to bless a child or preserve a life. I use haki and magic like they’re interchangeable sometimes- they aren’t. Someone who only knows haki could never ready a ship for sailing and then sail it with little more than a word and a song; someone who only knows magic could never defeat a powerful enemy in an all-or-nothing fight,”

“I see- what’s this got to do with why my brooms keep ashing, though?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure- but I was trying to explain what interference was. Do you know what resonance is? -can’t remember if I asked that,”

“You did; and I still don’t, really,”

“Ah! Well. Okay- resonance is a phenomenon in which a vibration causes another thing to shake, often harder or softer, depending on the frequency of the vibration. The shake-responses amplitude- how much it shakes- have relative maximums, and these are called resonant- or resonance- frequencies. So; Magic is stored in the soul, and we know this because Automata have physical souls. The soul of an Automata can be many shapes and sizes- but it’s most common form is something like a gemstone or pearl. The ethical studies are what we draw our knowledge in this subject from- Free Automata donated their bodies to magimeditical science, for the study of doctors and magic practitioners alike, to better understand their circumstances, and their relation to the rest of humanity. It was eventually theorized that Automata are human as anyone else- they’re recognized as human, fully human, in all Faesh lands, after all. As for their souls… due to the nature of the Automatic Power, Love, an Automaton’s Soul becomes crystalline in form- and I’ve lost you,”

“Sorry- it’s interesting, but… I don’t have the science education to really follow what you’re saying. I mean, I guess… what you’re saying is that magic is stored in the soul, but it’s the rest of your body that makes it, right?”

“Yes,”
“And this is known because Automatic bodies, ethically sourced for scientific study, were dissected-and their soul stones were found? Right?”

“Yes,”

“And… the soul stones had magic in them?”

“They did, yes; when living Automata were asked about the stones, the answer was something like, ‘they are all that is eternal of them’- and, as you know, the only eternal thing in a person is their soul,”

“So… are people the only beings with souls?”

“Theoretically, no. We haven’t proven that, of course- but there’s enough evidence to suggest that animals, at the very least, have souls. It’s to do with music, really- being able to appreciate music. Dogs like reggaeton music- whoo, off topic again, I am still tired, wow,“

“Tell me more about interference, and why it’s ashing my brooms, please,“

“Sure. In principle, superposition of waves states that when two or more propagating waves of the same type- in this case, magic- are incident on the same point- a place in space or time, arbitrary except that we’re observing it; the resultant amplitude- a measure of how much wave there is on the up-and-down-swings- at that point is equal to the vector sum of the amplitudes of the individual waves. If a wave’s crest meets the crest of another wave of the same frequency, at the same point, then their total amplitude is the sum of the individual amplitudes- one and one is two; and this goes the same for troughs. If a crest of one wave meets a trough of another wave, then the amplitude is equal to the difference in the individual amplitudes- one less one is none. One and one is constructive interference- it’s why breaking glass with your voice is still a trick; one less one is destructive interference- and, once I’ve done the figuring, I think it’ll answer why your brooms keep burning themselves to ash,“

“How are you going to measure that?”

“Well- firstly, every material and spell used in magic has it’s own frequency, and what you could call a breaking point, or safety- the point at which it will no longer be useable, I suppose. The vast majority of such things are either written in one of these two books-“ and here, Mab tapped the red and green books- “-or are measurable using the methods in this book,” and here, Mab indicated the massive tome. “This big book also has the formulae for measuring various interferences, and material strengths. Every material has a resonance frequency- and, no material is actually perfect. There’s always an imperfection to it, somewhere- starmetal, mythical as it is, tends to be very heavy. Moonsilk doesn’t insulate; sunsilk stains just with the oils on someone’s hands; glitterglass is extremely brittle, and on, and on, and on,”

“Gemfish only form their gems after seven years of undisturbed life,”

“Exactly. All magic has a vibration to it- a frequency. Resonance is what happens when those frequencies interact. Sometimes, two kinds of magic come together to make something bigger than one alone; and sometimes, two together equals nothing at all. Almost… done… there. Now, to solve it-“

Mab opened her bag, at some point- it’s mostly just a large collection of highlighters and map pencils, but there’s also a soroban in there. That’s what she used to solve her strange equation that I
couldn’t really read at all- I barely understood that the colors she’d used to mark each material and spell I’d used, which I’d put into groups (the same groups of failed brooms, actually) correspond to distinct formulae, each with sometimes drastically different shapes to them.

As Mab went through, her realization became a storm, and then confusion, and then an even greater realization- and one set, she circled her answer and set it aside.

I’ve tried twelve different methods to make a broom- each one failed a little differently, though ash was always the end result.

“So… they didn’t all fail the same way. Some of these, certainly, it was a destructive resonance cascade… others, though- hm. One through eleven were simple cascade failures- your spells, layered on as they were, had normal imperfections- nothing insurmountable, just, every spell has a few. Those imperfections, however, skewed the frequency of each spell just enough that they started joining together- cascading, one to the next, building in amplitude in two distinct areas. I’m going to guess and say that the majority of your brooms turned to ash end to center?”

“You can tell all that from just the mathemagic?”

“I can; not everyone could, though. I do have a doctorate in this, after all. Now, your twelfth broom is different- it wasn’t anything to do with your spells or materials, it was, well, you. Your magical resonance was destructive to the base materials of your twelfth broom- and so, even though your spells worked just fine, without the material to work with, the whole thing failed. Basically poofed into ash all in one go, right?”

“Yeah…”

“So. Your first eleven attempts were simply an aggregate of mistakes resulting in destruction- practice your calligraphy, so you can write the spells more effectively. I’ll get you a notebook and a practice book- there might be a calligraphic font or style more suited to your taste, which does matter. As for the twelfth failure- you will never be able to successfully enchant a willow-based broom. None of your sisters can do it; and Sanji can’t do it either, though he’d get closest. Hickory, Oak, or Ash-wood are all much better options- Mahogany too, though I doubt Tiffany will let you use a mahogany stave until your second success at least. For you specifically… hm. Walnut, maybe; birch was almost certainly what your mother’s used, but you said it never felt quite right in your hands…”

“Hm. Fruit and nut trees?”

“Fine furniture trees, too- Olive-wood would definitely work, but I can’t think of where to get a stave that’s both long and straight enough… I used cherry, and I can get as much cherry as you’d like- if, if you’d like?”

“Maybe… or, um, what about red maple? There were red maple trees at the very edge of the field across from our apartment building- during the fall, they were some of the only really beautiful things in our part of town,”

“Did you have a connection with those trees specifically?”

“Mm, I wouldn’t say that exactly- more like… our school year actually started just after those trees would change their leaves, because of how hot it got in Gobdark during the summer- so, I always ended up finishing my summer homework in the privacy of their canopy. Mom’s broom had a
parking brake on it, y’know- and with a lap desk and a hook I got permission from the tree to put on, I could do my homework outside, without worrying about being interrupted to go on ‘a little errand’ for everyone in our building all the damn day- ah. I can’t believe I forgot about that..."

“Well- these things come in threes, when magic is involved. Firstly, you have to improve your calligraphy; a spell, once written, is only as good as it’s wordsmith makes it. Secondly, you need to use the correct materials; a hardwood, from a tree you share some sort of kinship with, will give the best results. And thirdly- it has to be balanced. Flight Brooms- all enchanted objects, really, but brooms especially, need to be balanced correctly between need and want.”

“What you need, and what you want, are not actually the same thing.”

“Exactly so. The soul of a child is not like that of an adult- a lot of what makes a child an adult is set during their childhood. You learned to fly on your mother’s broom; and race; and do all the things you can do on a broom. I certainly never quite mastered the trick of studying and paperwork on broomstick-”

“I could sleep on mom’s broom, too, it was so comfortable… and the sink trap was nice, but-”

“You see? So- even though you’ve calculated enough spells to make a fine racing broom here… well, wouldn’t you like to have a broom like your mother’s again? Not the same, of course- you don’t have to follow her that closely. You’d have to have absolutely perfect calligraphy to avoid the resonance cascade failure, and that would take a decade of practice-”

“Does it have to be with a quill?”

“-Hm?”

“Well, I’m almost fifteen; we, my sisters and Sancho and I, we learned to write at about the same time we learned to talk, which was… three or so, I think. But, we learned with brushes, not quills- so, do I have to write my spells with a quill?”

“...You know, that’s a question for Tiffany. I don’t see why not- as I understand, the texture and viscosity of magic ink is more about the tool you’re using to inscribe with, not the spell; and certainly, I see no reason a magic ink meant for use with a brush rather than a quill could not be devised.”

“So- I’ll still take the blank journal, but I have a practice textbook about the kind of calligraphy a brush uses. Hm. You know, I checked- we don’t have any maple staves. That’s what I really want to use, I think… and for the last… you know, I tried to balance just with the Movement spells, but if I add more Comfort spells, it’ll add redundancy, won’t it? So even if my calligraphy isn’t perfect, there’ll be a better chance of- um, well.”

“Comfort spells tend to interrupt or stop cascade failures right in their tracks; so yes, it would. Now, I’m not allowed to help right now- but! I am aware that we’re in harbour at Tuckleigh, which is famous for it’s maple syrup. It may well be that a red maple tree like the ones you grew up with, and sheltered you so graciously, is somewhere on the island- and is willing, and able, to give you a limb or two for a stave. As for my thought- you’ll need more than fancy underwear to fly a broom you’ve made for yourself, with your own power. I’ll start thinking up a design now- it seems to me you’ll need something like a Raid Suit- but not actually a raid suit, those are proprietary and I’m not about to get arrested,”

“Um-?”
“Hmhmhm. Find your maple tree; make your new ink, and get a good brush to write with; and talk to your sister, Fern. She knows more about the practicalities of enchantment than anyone else on this crew, even Tiffany- if you ask her, she’d probably be willing to make a broom with you. I know she wants one of her own...”

“...Yeah! We hardly spend time together, anymore- it’ll be fun to do together!”

There’s an idea! I used to do homework with Fern all the time; as much as I got interrupted to do one more goddamn favor, Fernie got taken aside for ‘one more question, Miss Oracle, please-’ Uuugh! Awful! No wonder we both got so adamant about being paid- the only ones I’ll maybe do a favor for is my sisters, and that’s because I know for a fact that they’ll try everything they possibly can to not have to ask me.

As for finding her- well, if she’s not napping on deck, she’s at that tea room she likes...

I’d wondered why I took such an instant liking to Tuckleigh- but, now that I’ve remembered my red-leaf friends, it’s totally obvious. Tuckleigh is a place where maple trees are not only beloved- the symbol of this island is the maple leaf- but they’re everywhere!

I asked someone about it- one of the people who live here, I think. Apparently, the name of this island is actually Maple Island, because every kind of maple tree grows here- along with a few other hardwood species, mostly birch and ash trees. The most common maple here is actually the sugar maple, which I’d only ever heard of as the rock maple. It’s native to this island, actually- and it’s what brings in most of Tuckleigh’s foreign economy.

Maple Island is actually a Winter Island; there’s huge drifts of snow everywhere, even though flowers are bursting through the white, and it snowed a bit yesterday. Still- this island is covered in lakes and streams, with enormous wetland forests scattered between. Apparently, we got here just before the best months of the year are about to start- during winter, Maple Island’s average daily temperature is -18 C; and in summer, it’s almost 27 C!

Anyway- this island is almost always overcast, which is why it’s mostly maples here- specifically, sugar maples. They’re some of the most shade tolerant, of the large deciduous trees. Sugar maples grow comfortably in any type of soil excepting sand- which I guess is why I didn’t really see them too often in Gobdark.

Because of the way sugar maples prepare for spring, they’re one of the most important trees here- because, along with the black maple, they’re the major source of sap for making maple syrup. Which isn’t to say other maples can’t be used for maple syrup making- but some have lower sugar contents, or produce a cloudier syrup, or both. The best quality of syrup is crystal clear, and sugary-sweet- and sugar maples produce the very best sap for syrup making.

Tuckleigh actually produces seventy-seven percent of the entire World’s supply of maple syrup- Sakura Kingdom, a more famous winter island, is actually too cold and dark for maple trees to grow.

Maple sap to maple syrup is a forty to one ratio- forty litres of sap make one litre of syrup. That’s why pure maple syrup costs so much- and it’s why I’ve only ever had maple molasses, which is the very lowest grade of syrup there is.
I’m more interested in the wood- which doesn’t come up to market as often, but often enough for my purposes. We’re here for another two months at least; there’s bound to be at least a log I can get my hands on. Sapwood is used more than heartwood; it can be white, and smaller logs tend to have a higher proportion of desirable wood. Bowling alleys and bowling pins are both usually made of rock maple, and Tuckleigh- the name of this country- is actually pretty famous for it’s bowling leagues. I never got interested in bowling, mostly because there just aren’t that many in Ryugu Mergyo. I’d have had to go way into the interior- it was easier to go sledding or ice skating, honestly. Maple is also the wood used for indoor basketball courts, and it’s popular for light-weight baseball bats, along with white ash. Fern has to use a hickory bat because she’s the only one of us- besides Sancho and Cece- to have a full measure of Gyojin strength. Hickory’s the only hardwood that can stand up to their strength, and is also allowed as a material for baseball bats internationally. Oh! And it’s used pretty often in parts of musical instruments, sporting goods, gunstocks, and flooring.

Hm- I don’t think I need curly, quilted, or birds-eye maple, which is good because they’re especially valuable. Rock maple is prized for pool cues, especially the shafts… maybe rough staves meant for a pool cue maker? Might be a pool cue maker willing to sell to me… Sugar marks and other cosmetic issues can be compensated for with carefully placed enchantments, so I might be able to snag a pallet of wood meant for production line pool-cues…

Even so, the very best wood for the broom stave will have a very consistent grain, fine and tight, no marks or discoloration. Sugar marks won’t really affect the way the broom eventually flies- but it won’t be as high a quality with, than without.

Rock Maple would be ideal for a broom… except that’s not quite what I want. I want a really, really exquisite piece of Red Maple. Acer rubrum; Native to the New World and the Sabaody Confluence. It averages twenty to thirty meters tall, two-thirds to a full meter round, and has a dried weight of six hundred ten kilograms meter cubed. Specific gravity- point six one at twelve percent MC; Hardness- four thousand two hundred thirty N; Rupture- ninety two point four MPa; Elasticity- eleven point thirty one GPa; Crush strength- forty five point one MPa; Shrinkage- Radial: four percent; Tangential: eight point two percent; Volumetric: twelve point six percent; Tangential to Radial ratio- two to one.

In appearance, unlike most other hardwoods, the sapwood of all maple lumber is most commonly used rather than its heartwood. The color can range from almost white, to a light golden or reddish brown, while the heartwood is a darker reddish brown. Red Maple can also have a curly or guilted grain pattern.

The grain is generally straight, but it can be wavy. It has a fine, even texture. The growth rings of the wood tend to be lighter and less distinct in Red Maple- it’s a soft maple, while Rock Maple is a hard maple.

It’s not terribly durable, so far as decay is concerned- but that’s what magic, and proper varnishing, is for, really.

As for working it- all soft maple tends to be fairly easy to work with both hand and machine tools; maple does have a tendency to burn when machined with high speed cutters, like a router. It turns,
glues, and finishes well, though blotches can occur when staining; a pre-conditioner, gel stain, or toner may be necessary to get an even color when staining.

It has no characteristic odor. However, Red Maple, being in the *Acer* genus, has been reported to cause skin irritation, runny nose, and asthma-like respiratory effects. A respirator is key when working with dry Red Maple, as is properly washing after working with wet Red Maple.

If I have to purchase it, it should be in the moderate range- it’s a very common wood, frankly, though a figured piece (with a curly or quilted grain) is going to be much more expensive.

It’s not a threatened species- thus, it’s use as veneer, paper, boxes, crates, pallets, musical instruments, turned objects, and other small specialty wood items.

Red Maple earns it’s name- it’s flowers, twigs, seeds, and yearly falling leaves are all red of various brightnesses. It’s a common tree, in Ryugu Mergyo, especially Gobdark; and it’s actually fairly easy to find pure stands of it on Maple Island, just… not near the coast. Red Maple wood tends to be slightly heavier, stronger, and harder than other soft maples; though it’ll never be as strong as hard maple without magical intervention.

Fern’s not on the grass deck, napping in the spring sunlight- but the babies are! Hello, babies- aw, they’re asleep. I daren’t get too close- when we came out of the Rainbow Mist, little Brenda was alive, somehow, and… well. I think Nami knows she’s probably not quite the Brenda what dropped from her loins, but… she’s Brenda enough? Well, her middle name is Brenda- her actual first name is something else, Takara-I-think? I was very busy, and she hasn’t stopped crying, and I’m going to find my sister Fern at her favorite tea before she wakes up and starts crying again.

Sancho and Cece haven’t actually slept on the boat in a week and a half- I mean, I see them at meal times, but… They’re either somewhere ashore, or they’re nowhere near Nami and Zoro and the Babies’ rooms. Oh- it’s Beatrix, I haven’t talked to her for awhile…

“Beatrix?”

“Hm?”

“Fern went to that tea room again?”

“Bookstore first, then a gaming shop- apparently they make the best dice,”

“Hm. Tea Room?”

“Tea Room. I’m headed to the Daiso, then a yarn shop that’s on the way; walk with me?”

“Sure!”

*Beatrix*… it’s funny, but of all my sisters, I know her the least. We’re twins, so, it should be that no other is closer- but, well, we aren’t close. We haven’t had any weird Twin Things happen to us, yet; but… maybe it’s in the subtleties.

She hardly ever gets angry, I know that; her temper is as foul as the rest of ours, but she hardly ever
gets worked up enough to let it loose. She’s not shy, like Ellie is; and she’s not shamelessly bold, like Fern. She’s… not quite normal, either, Adelaide is actually the closest to that.

Beatrix is a person, I think, who desperately wants to be normal; she wants to be ordinary. Except, of course, I doubt she has any idea of what she’d do if she were- well, not herself, really. She always hated being the child of a prostitute- not because she looked down on prostitution, but because of how it always made everyone look at her differently. Her scissors… she’s never quite explained how she got hold of them, but Ellie always looks a bit shifty when it comes up in company. She’s always running into weird shitty things, too- like, that thing on Punk Hazard she only just started talking about, when she asked how to pronounce ‘Prudith’ and made a needlepoint portrait of her for the Altar…

That’s like, not exactly normal for her- but she doesn’t really tell us everything about her adventures anymore. Neither do I, of course; but the main difference is that Beatrix can’t say her adventures are anything other than they are; while I never mention them outside the context of work. We all tuned each other’s work problems out- so, while I’m sure I’ve told my sisters about my races, and killing people, and all sorts of things I’ve done- I’m not so sure they actually listened to what I said.

When she’s not training at whatever Mab’s set her on- sewing, still life and figure drawing, reading, writing reports about art and science, Beatrix likes to dance, and read terrible romance novels, and press flowers. Some of these things, she always liked- she always liked pressing flowers- but some of them are new. Hm- she likes talking about music with the Musicians, and she likes taking naps on the grass, and…

As for what she believes in, what her dream is? I don’t know. I don’t think she does, either.

Character? I don’t really know that either- determined, certainly. Compassionate, calculating… observant.

In a sentence: Beatrix is a young woman determined to be the very best at whatever she chooses to be, without losing her own identity in the effort, and with full knowledge that she may very well change what she’s pursuing at some point.

Most of her decisions are influenced by supporting us, actually- how she went about it was her identity showing, but what she did was her… duty? Responsibility? I don’t know.

The only weakness she has- a true weakness, one she has to overcome herself (though not without help, of course,) is self doubt. When she doubts herself, her way forwards, she fails.

She doesn’t like being crowded, or going around in big groups; she’ll use one word where another would use five. She’s not afraid of men; not of what they can do, not of what they’re allowed to do. Deborah, too- but where Deb is fully willing, able to, and has stabbed a man for taking liberties, I’m not sure what Beatrix would do. I don’t think it’s ever come up.

Oh, we’re at the Daiso. This city is laid out oddly, though I guess I’ve only ever been to one real city before- Captain says that Punk Hazard doesn’t count. I guess it makes sense for there to be a sort of, of floating path across the harbor, which leads around a bunch of cliffs, to the ‘front’ of the island. We are Pirates; so weighing anchor in a hidden harbor only makes sense.

The Daiso is of the kind I’d see most often in a small village. I worked as an on-call nurse for the
Corallia Postal Office, but that didn’t mean I didn’t have mail duties— I did, of course. But, because I could haul so much with my broom, and breath underwater, I got the jobs that would’ve taken a regular mail courier several weeks. I mean, my slowest trip was the one that took two weeks total— and that was because I got lost, not because I was slow.

Anyway— the Daiso is in a tiny little shack, the kind of store you get way out in the country. A roof of tin on joists that were sealed to the open sea air; thick curtains to keep the wind out, and shutters that roll up and down for heavier things. The track up to it starts as plain dirt, before becoming paved with boards—a boardwalk— and there it is, resting on piers in the water.

There’s a tall shelf towards the sea, full of dry goods and things that don’t mind temperature changes; and there’s another shelf at corner to it, full of house goods. There are cold cases full of vegetables, and fruits, and beer; there’s makeup and cheap Daiso jewelry under the glass counter, where Miss Ikari works the register.

I- oh! This is a neighborhood Daiso; the way the franchising works, there’s international stuff every one of them can sell if they want, but there’s also enough space to sell other things. Beatrix just bought a pair of knitting needles; rock maple, I’ve no doubt, with a sort of red-blonde color to the softly blazing wood. In the light, the needles flicker like flames…

I’m not good with two complex tasks in each hand; so, while Beatrix searched through the needles, I looked at the crochet hooks. None of them really felt right until I found one of the smallest ones there; a tiny little thing meant for lace, I think. It felt right in my hand, and it was just the same color as my sisters needles; same grain, same everything. I’d bet good money they came from the same tree.

We pay for our cheap knitting tools, and then we continue through to the city. This city we’re docked in isn’t the capital; it’s called Ontria, and it’s the most… hm, I’m not sure of the word to use, really. The buildings squat and perch between stands of green, like quail in the rushes; each building perched on another, larger fellow, and made of a pale yellow-toned white stone. The people wander through it, all unaware of the vastness of their home, the color of it— green, so green, green and white and golden in the mid-morning sunlight, mountains made by men of cut stone and planted trees.

It didn’t look like this as much as a week ago; all was cold and black and bare as bones, but now, it’s all burst alive again— even with the scaly sky, which Nami says is a sure sign of rain or snow, there’s something cheerful and energetic about this place.

Walking through snow isn’t fun; it was for the first five minutes, then it got old, and now I have to wear boots everytime I go outside. I’m not a fan; it didn’t snow hard in Corallia, and certainly never in Gobdark.

I’ve never actually been to this part of town; I usually end up more around the trades area, where woodworkers, well, work. The smell of the wood is comforting and enticing, after literal months of being secluded in the broom shed, working on something that never quite works out.

Something I can make work out, however, is crochet. During the winter, when New Year’s would loom and all the social expectations with it— the expectation was, we’d be getting new clothing for the New Year. As time went on, it became more and more clear to us that if we wanted new clothing, we’d have to devise ways of getting it ourselves— Mom certainly wouldn’t be able to.
In Gobdark, most women - people, really, but especially women - don’t actually wear Gyojin kimono unless they’ve business with gyojin. Merrow wear clothing that has more in common with nets, I guess? Beatrix had to write a full research paper about it, and she ended up picking my brain because... well, I’m good at crochet. How good?

Good enough I seriously considered doing crochet for commission- in truth, I did make a few pieces on commission. A wedding dress; a baby blanket; and some lace. I think I discovered medicine, a passion for medicine I mean, when Mom got sick and the doctors wouldn’t do anything about it. Before then, I wanted nothing more than to crochet and race- those were my passions, when I wasn’t contemplating my own death.

I’m actually extremely proud of the wedding dress I made. It photographed white, but in person it was actually a very delicate shade of pink; and the bride was so happy to get married, the dress was just... gilding, really. I think she’d have been as beautiful in a flour sack dress, but no. No, her dress was of thin silken thread, stitched double for speed and beautifully intricate.

As for me, well- I want a hat. A muffler? I’ll have to do some drawing...

My boots are brown and furry, just like my sisters; and we’re both wearing fleecy jeans, though mine are a bit clingier, around the thighs; and while I am content with a simple yellow sweater I borrowed from Mab (and it’s oversized proportions, thank goodness for scarves), Beatrix is more comfortable in a winter-weight band t-shirt she got off of Bang for something involving Cricket Tunes (I didn’t ask), and a fleece lined denim jacket that used to be Sancho’s. It’s got flour-sack cloth patches here and there, reinforced with band patches from events Sancho got swag for, but never actually attended.

The project I’m going to make today is a two-pattern project meant for knitting, not crochet, which means I’m going to have to do some calculations. Thank goodness I’ve got my bag with me; I’ve got my pencil case, the patterns, and a soroban. Everything I need, really- aside from the yarn, of course. Should I have done the patterning before hand?

Sure.

Are there tables for doing pattern shit at the store we’re going to next?

Absolutely.

Inside a Knitting Store is always a good memory for me; the quietness, the order, the soft things it’s okay to touch... it’s a place full of good memories.

Converting a pattern isn’t quite as good a memory, but- here’s what needs to be done. Using the knit gauge for the pattern I’ve chosen (sts per inch and rows per inch - it should be stated in the pattern), convert the numbers to inches or centimetres. You should then be able to come up with a rough sketch (if none is provided) of the size and shape of the garment piece. So long as you use the measurements or stitch count for the same size garment all the way through, you should be fine.

This project is two patterns- the first, a textured beanie I made several times as a beginner. When finished, it looks quite a bit like a knitted hat. It’s worked flat, then seamed and bunched at the top. I’ll need worsted weight yarn, approximately a hundred ten meters; a size eight hook; and as for color... hm, yellow worsted weight angora blend, I suppose. Thin dowels or- no, disposable
chopsticks, because I’m making an urchin hat. Making a hat is making a hat; no need to convert anything, I know just what to do.

As for the spines, I need a three and a quarter millimeter hook, ‘enough’ DK or worsted weight yarn to make the spines, the chopsticks, and a darning needle. I get self-ombreing yellow-to-white angora blend DK, the same amount as the yellow. Oh, yes- and stitch counters, I don’t quite know what happened to mine...

I have to say, this is a lovely store- I’ve never been in one without being followed by the staff or proprietor before. It’s… odd. Not bad- it’s nice being… I don’t know, trusted to act like a regular law-abiding member of society; but it’s… different. I kind of feel… guilty? Maybe? Because. I’m not a law-abiding member of society anymore. I’m a pirate. Kind of. In the definition.

“I need to go to Daiso again- meet up at the Tea Room?”

“Uh- sure. Making a hat?”

“Yeah; an urchin hat,”

“Oh! Well- wait, why not get batting instead? Like, they sell roving here; get plenty of that, and you won’t have to use chopsticks,”

“Oh; and it’d be soft, too. Sure, thank you,”

The cheapest roving they have isn’t the undyed, but the bleached white- it’s a little strange, but… I don’t really question it.

Fern’s favorite Tea Room is a place called Teariffic; it’s a popular place for all sorts of artists and intellectuals, students from the local Mage’s Tower, witches and wizards and martial artists. Fern’s been talking with the Mistress of the House, to see if she can rent a table or booth and do her fortune telling and prophesying there; so far, she’s getting a good response. Right now, it’s just about her lunch break- a good time to stop by and see if she… well, Mab said to ask her my questions, and see what she thinks about broom making, involve her in my process.

The building Teariffic is in nestles between the end of a bridge and the unmarked half of a churchyard, and it’s old because it didn’t ever get crushed under ice or catch fire; the floor is made of uneven stones and mud, and the walls are plastered and delicately painted with all sorts of frescoes. Beatrix and I have to cross the bridge, and go inside the bottom half of the building- the Tea Room restricts it’s access to an indoor stairwell, which is… actually pretty smart.

The Tea Room restricts it’s access to an indoor stairwell, which is… actually pretty smart. It’s certainly safer for her than a public park, even a nice one. Fern being able to work in a place you have to go through somewhere else to get to- have to be vetted to go into, just a little… for me, it’s relieving. The place you have to go through is an apothecary, one styled more like a department store than a chemist’s. For the purposes of the Tea Room… well, you buy your tea, and your first pot of boiling water, and you rent your tea set and table at the apothecary level; then, you go upstairs and you sit at your table (you’re given a number); and then, after a moment to settle, one of the waitstaff brings you your tea set, and your tea leaves, and whatever accoutrements deemed appropriate for the tea in question, be it sugar and milk and lemon wedges, or nothing at all. It’s a Longarm place- it was founded by Longarms, and Longarms are mostly the regulars in the Tea Room.
That doesn’t bother me, or Fern I expect- I just thought it was interesting. I think I’ve always thought of Longarms as very... *sophisticated*, culturally, but that might be a generalization. There are many distinct nations within the Longarm Tribe, and each nation has it’s own distinctive style and comportment. I don’t know enough about the intricacies of Longarm society to say which nation of Longarm had a particularly extended hand in the aesthetics of Teariffic- but, because of the way you purchase space, time, and tea *in* that Tea Room, I can say for sure that a Longarm was behind it.

Longarms are passionate, and mercenary. The only real difference from a Longarm and a Lanjin- in theory- is their extra elbow. Everything else- their feud with the Longleg Tribe, their worth as slaves to the former Nobility, even their martial arts practices- shares a lot with Gyojin.

Gyojin weren’t native to Ryugu Mergyo, did you know that? Back then, they were called Kappa; it means ‘Fish Men’, or so I was told. I have my doubts. The whole island of Ryugu Mergyo used to be coral; but when the Kappa came, they cut down the Bone Forests, and they scattered the humble peoples who lived within them. Kappa used to live cheek to cheek with the Longarm; and when the Longlegs kicked the Longarm’s down hard enough, all the Longarms could do was push the Kappa away. History always gets written by whoever can afford to take the time to sit down with a brush and ink and paper- but even so, the people of Gobdark remember. We remember, because the Kappa could not get into the kingdom that stood where Gobdark now stands; and they could not cut down it’s Red Bone Forest, and they could not hold it under their power without the Merrow’s full approval, which they did not have.

So, I guess what I mean to say is, I have conflicting feelings about Longarms. On the one fin, they’re people, same as anyone else; on the other, their actions are directly responsible for much of the suffering of people who look like my sisters, my friends, the people I grew up with and watched die. In one webbed hand, it is not their fault- they weren’t even born yet, how could they bear responsibility for the actions of their ancestors? In the other: they bear the names of those ancestors that so ruined the lives of my own. If they would proudly bear the standard of those who wronged my kin, then they must accept responsibility for all things that standard has been party to- good, and ill.

My mother was a Demon; but my sisters and I had a sire, too, and he- for it was no secret to us who he was- could track his Line back to the very beginning of the written record of all things that had happened to the people of Coral Island- for it is *not* an island that belongs to Fishmen alone. My sisters and I, one and all, are Merrow; and, in the countless generations since our kingdoms, our pride, our honor was stolen from us, the blood of our tribe has grown thinner and weaker with each generation. The last Prince of the Merrow was a man called Ashitaka; when he died, so too did the spirit of our united people.

For all that, it’s *a nice place*, Open, without being airy; friendly, without being cloying. If I was anyone else, I’d probably quite like it. But I am not; and I do not, save that my sister Fern plys her trade here. Looking more closely, it has clear Demonic influences as well- the preying-bird over the fireplace, the poster on the wall, the ship and the lanterns…

People forget that France was settled by people of the North Blue; and that Germa, though famous, isn’t actually the central location of the Demonic soul. France is; Germa, the Wandering Country, is not.

Beatrix and I sit down at Fern’s table, in the back corner; Fern, reading her book and finishing off a sandwich, flashes a quick smile our way. I pour myself a cup of tea to warm my fingers up; and
I couldn’t learn Astrology on Ryugu Mergyo. For one thing, it just was not popular- I had exactly one customer ask me to interpret their birth chart. I did it in this way- I made a copy of their chart, and then I went to the library and looked up how one goes about reading an astrology birth chart, and what each sign means; and then, when my customer returned, I helped them go through each portion of their chart as best I could.

This is the only time I was ever asked to do anything pertaining to astrology in five years. I kept the notes- but it’s different up here. For one thing, a lot of what the regulars in this Tea Room want are birth charts, and… well.

I’m an oracle; my job is interpreting meaning from what others may see as meaningless. I’m not, technically speaking, psychic- I can’t read minds, and I can’t see the future anything like clearly. As far as I can tell, if an astrologer says they’re psychic, you must distrust them immediately, because it means they don’t want to do the math, they just want your money.

Longarms- which frequent this Tea Room at a ratio of twenty to five for everyone else- put an almost inordinate amount of faith in their astrological birth charts. The roots of my understanding of astrology lie in the two pages of notes I made to try and interpret the birth chart my customer begged my help with. So, as follows:

People are influenced by their nature, and the method of their nurturing, and by the state of the heavens at the moment of their birth. The planets and constellations are basic forces, tools which we live by and the basis of our very matter. These forces take on different forms, depending on their position within the zodiac and on the way they relate to one another. A general understanding of a person and their potential can be formed by carefully noting, analyzing, and concluding a person’s natal chart. A person is not the stars alone; do not discount personal experience.

It took maybe a half-day for me to realize I wasn’t being given much attention because I wasn’t advertising astrology. I bought the Ephemeris then, and I haven’t looked back. Here’s the thing about astrology: many believers combine interest with ignorance- they can tell you the traits of people born under Taurus, but couldn’t pick it out of a lineup if it beat them over the head with a brick and stole their wallet. This is the definition of blind faith; and I don’t believe in coddling those who put give their faith blindly. Faith is not a noun; it’s a verb.

Performing a reading begins with the basics: figuring out your sign- well, really, making your birth chart. There are thirteen signs, which correspond to thirteen constellations, and they are not chosen randomly.

The constellations are at a twenty-three degree angle to the planet; they wrap around it like a belt, a very ornate and star-studded belt. The ecliptic is the apparent path of the sun over the course of a year; the zodiac, whichever version one uses, only deals with constellations inside this orbit. It takes about a lunar month- twenty eight days or so- for the sun to go through each constellation, and there are thirteen months to every year. The zodiac only deals with constellations inside this orbit, which is
why no one is a Souten Cross or an Orion.

When people wink at you and say ‘hey, babe, what’s your sign?’ they’re asking about your sun sign; literally the sign the sun was in on the date of your birth, and since it takes a month for that to change… but it’s just one of your signs.

For a natal astrological chart, you need to know when and where you were born- down to the minute, and the latitude and longitude, if possible. Then, you can get the most accurate read on what your chart actually is- because, you see, the stars change through the day.

In simple terms, then: your sun sign is your outward persona; your rising is the characteristics you use to cope with life. To get a good prediction from a general horoscope, as seen in most newspapers, you need to read both signs and mesh their advice together as best you can.

The exact time of birth is necessary for fairness- proper astrologists convert every birthdate to Sabaody Mean Time, Paradise; it’s only fair, after all. This information allows an astrologer to reconstruct the exact position of the stars, moons, and planets at the very moment of a person’s birth; recreating the belt our planet was wearing at the moment a person was born.

The Ephemeris is the tool that every astrologist ever has used since about five thousand years before the modern calendar. Mine is a paperback omnibus reprint I got at the resold book store; clean pages, has both covers, very nice diagrams and tables, good black ink on the printed pages still.

It’s a book full up with page after page of tables: numbers and dates and esoteric symbols that represent very real things. This is how I recreate the belt. In down time between customers- that’s anywhere between half an hour to three hours- I’ve been copying and reorganizing the book into a binder I brought from home, carefully making sense of the massive store of information at my fingertips. For one thing, the book isn’t that great for flipping through at speed; for another, my Device can handle all the calculations, provided I input the data correctly.

Locating the stars is only the beginning; mostly, astrology is based on the position of the planets and constellations in relation to your sign. It’s nearly impossible to keep it all straight in your head, so astrologers make charts: circles that are divided into twelve because it’s easy, but I do thirteen because it’s right. Each house corresponds to a portion of the ecliptic, and a number, and an associated sign, and it’s own character. The stars move every moment; and so, every moment is unique.

The reason it takes me a month to do the monthly horoscopes? I still have to look up each planet and constellation and star, and plot it’s coordinates by hand. I chart a month’s worth of points and assess what they mean as a whole, as well as what the progression over time means. My Device just makes things faster - if I want it to be accurate, I still have to know what I’m actually asking it to do.

There’s more- there’s always more. But that’s all I really need to worry about; the Longarms I make charts for know more about reading their charts than I do.

In case it isn’t obvious, I’m not an astrologer. I’m a fortune teller. That’s why I was so happy to have my sisters come by and ask me for help.

“You need me to tell you a fortune? Really??”

“...Yes. I have money-?”
“Oh thank goodness- okay, what do you need?"

“Well, you know I’ve been trying to make a broom for several weeks, now. I finally got a chance to talk to Missus Mab about it, and she says that I need to do a few things- but what I need help with is finding a Red Maple tree willing and able to give me a proper stave for a broom like Mom’s, on this island or within this island’s waters, if possible,"

“So… you want a full work up? Auspicious days and times and weather, markings on a map for where you can find what you want and when, what to bring with you, what to leave behind…”

“And anything else you can think of, yeah,"

“Half-payment first, and then I’ll get started- have you had lunch yet?”

“Nah- and I’ve got a crochet project to work on too, so, don’t worry about time,”

“Yeeeesssss-”

“Pffftahahahaa-”

As my sisters- Beatrix was there too, and she almost never needs fortunes told but when she does they’re doozies- sunk their teeth into lunch, and then projects they’d brought along to spend the time, I sunk my teeth into my actual trade. It was… indescribably wonderful.

I heard, vaguely, quite a bit of gasping and murmuring while I was cheerfully going about my work- I mean, that was the first time I’d actually smiled while working, so that might have been it?

I’m not great at astrology, I have to say- I’m slow, and it’s not intuitive for me the way literally every other method of divination- even the ones I don’t do or haven’t really practiced, I still have some idea about how to go about doing them. Astrology is just mathematic, and not super complicated mathematic either. I mean, yeah, I have to do logarithms and I’m… ugh.

Mab taught me to do it like this, seeing as I have no calculator that can do the job for me.

This method uses only multiplication and subtraction. The procedure produces digit by digit, so I can stop whenever I have enough digits to be getting on with.

For example, Log 2 + 0.30103…

If we take the 10th power:  
Log \(2^{10}\) = 10 * 0.30103… = 3.0103

Then the digits in the logarithm have all shifted 1 place to the left.

But also: \(2^{10} = 1024\)

Thus, the log of 1024 must be 3 point something something, because 1024 is slightly over 1000. If I
can find the 10th power on a normal calculator, we know the first digit of the logarithm by looking at
the number before the decimal point:

0 - 9 = >0
10 - 99 = >1
100 - 999 = >2
1000 - 9999 = >3

And so on. Knowing this, we also know that log 1024 has to be 3.-------; because we can see that the
log of anything between 1000 and 9999 must be 3. Something.

Knowing this, we know that log 1024 is 3.------. We’ve retrieved the first digit of log 2.

Subtract 3 from this number, and do the previous procedure again, and we get the next number.

The 10th power is easily calculated on paper by multiplying a number by itself 3 times:

2 X 2 =4
4 X 4 = 16
16 X 16 = 256

And the multiplying 256 with the result of the first calculation: 4

256 X 4 = 1024

So 4 multiplications in total.

I divide 1024 by 1000 to get 1.024

Doing the same procedure I get:

1.2676506

So the next digit is 0.
And then taking 1.2676506 through this procedure I get:

10.715806

So the next digit is 1.

I divide 10.715806 by 10 to get 1.0715806

And then taking 1.0715806 through this procedure I get:

1.995063

So the next digit is 0.

And then taking 1.995063 through this procedure I get:

999.00506

So the next digit is 2.

However since it is so close to 1000 we can round the digit to 3.

Now we have

3.0103

I hate logarithms. I hate the repetition, I hate the simplicity, I hate going through the same table each time… It’s awful. I don’t like doing it. Fortune telling is much more fun- I get to tell a story about all the data I can gather and all the information I have access to.

For example- all I need for this is a tourist map of the island, and not even a very good one, and a tourists guiding pamphlet.

Where the best sugar maple stands and plantations are- plus where the furniture makers keep their main offices; add in what I know about Red Maples… full sun exposure for size, soil composition, migration patterns for the past three hundred years… got it!

“Do you have a good map of the island?”

“Yeah- I got one from the board of tourism, better than the free one,”

“Nice! Hand it over- you need to check here, here, and here within the next month. Try to go
between midnight and two in the afternoon; you’ll need at least one hatchet, a candle, a blanket, a small pouch, and probably some rope. Hmm- you’ll need a cross between snow boots and climbing boots, and you need to be ready to do some mild mountain climbing. **The branch you seek bears three brooms within, but they shall be as one; seek the toad everlasting, and build a blaze of leaves and branches; take the stone, and hold it safe within your keeping; with stone in hand, the pooka will poison you not; seek the tree of your life in the rising of the sun,**”

“Thank you, Fern. Here’s the rest I owe- Beatrix, you coming with, or you good?”

“I’m good, thanks,”

“Sure. Fern- tonight, I have something else I want to talk to you about, so, remind me okay?”

“Sure thing!”

Fern doesn’t look like a fortune teller or an astrologer. Honestly, she looks like a teenage girl studying for an exam- a weird one. I mean, she’s wearing the Green Monster, and a pair of fleece-lined jeans and snow boots like the rest of us- it’s a sweater the same way Mom was a whore; both are actually factually correct, but severe understatements anyway.

I had no idea she kept the damn thing; it’s one of the first things Beatrix ever knit with purpose, and while it’s not, like, perfect, it’s still better than anything I could have made, or that Fern could have made for herself.

Fern has long, bright hair, smooth and straight and faintly gleaming, and her Device looks like flowers made of metal resting on her head like a laurel. On the table she’s rented out by the week, not the hour, there’s a stack of paper, a calligraphy set (not a super nice one, but serviceable), a soroban, dice and a book called the *Ephemeris*. Fern herself is wearing a pair of glasses that make her look like she has stars in her eyes - Havij helped to make them, and apparently they do a lot to keep her Visions from overwhelming her. Her bag is bright yellow with black checks on it; and it’s from that bag she pulled the tools she needed for my fortune.

While I waited, I listened to what everyone around me was talking about- it’s a poor woman who can’t do something with her hands and listen to something else at the same time.

So.

Most pertinent to my quest is this: the Grave of Winifred Foster.

Once, long ago, a girl named Winnie lived in the forest that would become this city, which used to be a tiny town called Treegap. Though she and a small wandering family called the Tuckleighs were the only ones to know it then, a small spring that burbled up near her house had a secret- it could give anyone who drank from it, not quite immortality, but definitely extreme longevity and health.
The spring dried up— but for many years, Winnie kept a store of the spring water, using only a drip here and a drop there, before finally... well, word got around about the water, and rather than bring destruction and misery to her people, she poured all the water out into an old frog pond— excepting one solitary bottle, which she gave to her favorite Rock Maple tree.

Over the many, many centuries since that time, Treegap changed a great deal. The woods that used to surround the tiny village had changed from mostly birch to mostly maple; and all those people who had come hunting for the spring had ended up staying due to the way the harbour iced up in winter. One thing lead to another, and soon a thriving little city grew where once only farmhouses stood.

From then until now, no one has ever managed to find the frog pond, the maple tree, or the grave of Winifred Foster— called Winnie, while she lived— since. My sister has marked three places on my map, and described a triangle of space with those points; and within, she has written in her quiet way, ‘grave, then toad, then tree; do in this order, three’.

Cryptic? Maybe.

Do I have an idea of what to do anyway? Yes.

I go to the nearest Daiso, and purchase three plates, single pieces of cultery— a fork, a knife— some butter, the smallest jar of real maple syrup they have, a pancake batter dispenser— nothing like one of these for making batches of thirty, or doing pancake art— a squeezy bottle, and some of the little novelty toad shaped candles, on sale for sixty beri a piece. I buy four of them; it’s a good deal, and I know Fern will want one. I also buy a little offering candle in it’s own little glass cup, ready to go.

It’s too late to go questing today; but I’m not going today, I need to prepare.

Sanji’s kitchen is massive, scary, and usually occupied by someone; I’m not ashamed to admit that I don’t go in there without good reason. This, even beyond my ultimate goal, is a good reason; and there’s Cece, she’d be interested in this.

“Hey Cece— do you want to come to a graveyard with me tomorrow?”

“Wa-hey-hey- Hell yes! Uh- what’s with the nervous look?”

“I’m trying to prepare a pancake mix for tomorrow, but I don’t want to go into Sanji’s kitchen alone, and I’m trying to suck it up but it’s scary in there and—”

“Shush, I’ll go with. Come on, come, come,”

Much better. When it comes down to it, we’re all just trying to find the best way to get along. This isn’t something I can actually let anyone else do for me— the offering loses strength that way. I can’t gather the ingredients together myself, but I can mix them together, and cook them— gods bless her, but Deborah can’t really do that for me, I’d have to do one or the other myself.
So, to start with- there’s a big recipe book that all the Cool Kids, and even Mister Sanji sometimes, refer to- and it’s in this cabinet… here! This is the one! It looks like a book all about half naked women, and while it’s definitely full of those, it’s actually a cookbook. A very well loved and note covered cookbook.

Mab’s asleep on the couch again, and Sanji’s sitting with her, scribbling in a notebook- he looked up when we came in, but-

“So, pancakes- or waffles, the basic recipe is very similar… would that be in bread, pastry, or breakfast?”

“Is there an index-?”

“No, but- hm, breakfast is kinda small… no pancakes here; it’s not in pastry, the recipes are grouped by method; and it’s not in bread either, but that was really a longshot, it’s more of a short bread or a griddle bread...”

“You really learned a lot in Home Clown Economics, huh?”

“Haha, yeah- I had a lot of fun, but… it’s not really my thing. Hm, it’s such a basic recipe- it might not be in the book at all. Let me see if it’s in desserts- no, that’s waffles, and… no, that’d make a very nice thin waffle, but that’s not what we’re after. Hm. Okay, well- I know a recipe for pancakes that’ll work just fine,”

“Okay- what tools should I get?”

“Hm- we’re going to need a mixing bowl, a sifter, and somewhere to put it all afterwards, a container- and I guess the tape carrell to label it?”

“Wash your hands first!” calls Sanji, mildly, from across the room.

“Mm! Uh-” I say, as I wash my hands, and then rummage through the cabinets for the tools, and then bring them over to the counter where Cece is setting out ingredients, “Cece, how much will this make?”

“Oh, uh, enough for about four batches of pancakes or waffles- so that’s between forty eight and sixty pancakes, and thirty two and forty waffles. So… like, not quite enough for everyone to have a waffle, but enough for everyone to have one pancake. So… I guess if you wanted to make it a day in advance for regular breakfast, you’d double the recipe,”

“Okay- do we need measuring cups and spoons?”

“Yeah, but I have them, and a butter knife- you remember how to measure flour?”

“Yup!”

“Okay, measure eight cups into the sifter,”

“Sure- and that’s half a cup of sugar, right?”

“Yup; then it’s two tablespoons of baking powder, two teaspoons of baking soda, and one and a half teaspoons of salt; okay, and-”

“Two more cups of flour, hang on-”
“When you’re done measuring it out, sift it all together,”

“Okay!”

After I sift everything together, I carefully pour it all into a storage container, and put the lid on; Cece wrote out ‘Pancake/Waffle Dry Mix’ onto a piece of blue tape, and after carefully cutting it and folding over the edge for a pull tab, she put it on the side of the container. When Deborah studies something, everyone around her learns it too; and Cece and I sleep in the same room she does.

“So, how much per batch?”

“Two cups- oh, should I put that on there too?”

“I mean- we didn’t have it, so it couldn’t hurt, I guess?”

“I’d prefer if you did, thank you,” calls Sanji again.

“Welp,”

On goes the label.

“So- the dry mix is literally just the dry ingredients for pancakes or waffles, right?”

“Yeah,”

“So… what are the wet ingredients?”

“Eggs, milk, butter, and vanilla extract; cinnamon, sometimes, or whatever else you want to include. For pancakes, you want two large eggs, two cups of milk, six tablespoons of cooled melted butter, and a teaspoon of vanilla extract; for waffles, you want the same amount of eggs, one and three fourths cups of milk, four tablespoons of cooled melted butter, and a teaspoon of vanilla extract,”

“Any tips for pancakes?”

“Mm- oh, one more thing to add to the mix- you should shake it before you use it, then measure out how much you need. Combine the wet ingredients before adding to the dry, and add them together slowly. Stir about ten times, less if it’s humid, and let it sit for a good ten or fifteen minutes. The more you stir, the more gluten gets created- you want just a little bit, not a whole lot,”

“What about cooking them?”

“Um, let me see… you’ll want to use a griddle or a large nonstick pan, over medium heat. Once the cook surface is to temperature, coat it with butter or oil, once before you start and then after every finished pancake. Pour about a fourth of a cup of batter onto the hot surface; space them out a little. When large bubbles begin to form and pop on the whole surface, not just the edge- takes like, two or three minutes- flip them and cook another minute or so. You’ll never get both sides evenly brown, so, don’t overcook trying to,”
“Gotcha. Any tips for pancake art?”

“Um… use a squeeze bottle and practice?”

“That’s all-?”

“There’s really not much else to it, Genny; sorry to disappoint,”

“So… this whole time, your sakura pancakes were the product of a squeeze bottle?”

“Nothing but a squeeze bottle and a dried fruit grinder for the cherries, yeah; oh, well, and some food coloring.”

“Wow,”

“Can’t get pink pancakes without food coloring,”

“Oh my god,”

“Well, I had to do something to make the powdered milk taste better, leaving it for a day only does so much-”

“True-”

“And pancakes… you’re supposed to put like, powdered sugar or syrup or preserved fruit on top, so, yeah,”

“Hang about, you can make powdered milk taste… more like milk?” asks a very sleepy looking Mab, Sanji right at her side. They’re sitting at the bar, both of them very interested.

I actually know about this, as it was my job.

“It’s not the easiest thing, but it’s definitely possible. So, to start with, you need to pick the right powdered milk. Instant milk is cheapest; regular dry milk tastes the worst and lasts longest; and powdered whole milk tends to taste the best, but it’s got a much more limited shelf life. Then, you have to reconstitute it properly- everything but regular dry milk tastes better with cold water,”

“Regular dry milk is legit the worst,”

“Fo’real. Um, once you’ve reconstituted it, if you have to drink it that day, it’s best to get a small amount of real liquid milk and combine them; otherwise, wait a day, with the milk either in a cold box, or if it’s safe to have unchilled, out on the counter. The longer you can let it reconstitute, the better,”

“Of course, if you need it to be like whole milk- like you’re baking-”

“Ah, right- if you need to add fat, then you have to add egg powder first. It acts as an emulsifier, and makes things bind together that otherwise wouldn’t. Um, you could also use straight sea-cow milk, but again, you have to add egg powder; the fats are too… fatty, otherwise, I guess. I know it doesn’t work without the egg powder,”

“And I suppose adding things, like sugar or syrup, makes it better as well?” said Sanji.

“Honestly, eating it with a sugary cereal, like Cinnabunbun Toasties, is best; the sweet taste of the
cinnamon sugar covers the awful taste of dessicated milk,"

I hummed, and then looked at Cece.

“You should teach Sanji your sakura pancake recipe; you always make them at the end of sakura season, but with so many people… it might be easier if you had help, you know? Sakura season’s over, like, the day after tomorrow- even the hardiest of trees have stopped blooming by now,”

“Mhm; she’s right, actually. Even the orchards back home have all started working on fruit now; the first cherry harvests have already started by now,”

“Ah, yes- I’d forgotten, but your home is by the sea, and when you had to do something about desertification, you planted cherry trees… can we get some of the harvest?”

“If we pay for it, certainly; let me think, there’s the fruit of course, but there’s also candied cherry blossoms, cherry preserves, cherry liqueur, cherry mead… cherry soda, well, syrup, we’d have to provide our own soda- it’s a popular summer flavor,”

“Hm. I like cherries,”

“Mhm. I’ll put an order in; you can take a look at the catalogue, if you’d like?”

Eugh. Lovey-dovey stuff.

I pull out my edc notebook, and start sketching out the design I’m going to make on the pancake; not too complicated, but obvious…

Honestly, this is like designing a flag.

Vexillology, the study of flags, has five principles. I learned this from a radio series about design; and it was a series about all kinds of things, buildings and toothbrushes and mascots and wayfinding and fonts. The mission of the series was to get people- like me- to engage with the design that we care about, like... you don’t realize you have hard, serious opinions about fonts until you realize that, say, Arial is purpose built for people with dyslexia to be able to read. By listening to this show, I began to pay attention to all forms of design; and I used to listen to it with Beatrix.

Bea, obviously, got inspired by it in a different way than I did.

I like flags. People don’t expect that of me, but I do- and people also don’t expect that they care about flags, but they do. One hundred out of one hundred people care about flags, even if they can’t say why.

What I, personally, love most about flags, is that once you understand the design of a good flag, you can understand the design of almost anything.

There are five basic principles of flag design. Number one, keep it simple. A flag should be so simple
that a young child could draw it from memory.

I learned to draw the Germa’s Six-sixty when I was a young girl; it’s a circle with two curved rays coming off of it, vertical for peacetime, horizontal for war. It’s a bright yellow mark, on a blue ground. Very simple. You use both the vertical and horizontal sixty to represent the entire country; clockwise rotation is proper.

Until I was about, oh, six or so, I didn’t know Gobdark, too, had a flag. It’s a plain red circle, on a black ground. Also very simple. Corallia’s is two pink branch things, easily recognized as coral, on a black ground with white bars at top and bottom. Simple. Dunshilly is a curve representing a hill, thick and black, on a green and yellow ground, slashed diagonally bottom left-top right. Less simple, but still recognizable.

Number two, use meaningful symbolism. The flag’s images, colors, or patterns should relate to what it symbolizes.

For the Germa flag, the blue ground represents the ocean, as the Germa Kingdom is sea-faring; the yellow represents their traditional occupation as army for hire; and the shape of the symbol, the six-sixty, represents their sixty-six day long empire. Gobdark- a city walled on all sides by red coral that grows nowhere else, so deep that the light of Eve only just reaches the tallest buildings. Corallia-known for it’s pink coral, the black makes the pink pop and gives it a connection to Gobdark (as the upwards swimming people of Gobdark tend to move to Corallia), and the white marks it as a safe harbor and neutral party to intra-city politics. Dunshilly- the curve is the hills, so famous in that place, the green and yellow- farming and wealth.

Number three, use two to three basic colors. Unless the color has specific significance, use the standard color set- red, yellow, blue, green, orange, black, and white.

When Mom knew she was going to die, she told us all that she was to be buried, or shrouded, or burnt, wrapped in the Germa flag. When people held funerals in Gobdark, it was always under the Gobdark flag. Miss Shyarly had a Corallia flag hanging in her office. Almost every working-class house in Dunshilly flew their flag; and most mansions did too, though it was under the national flag of RM.

The flag we fly is pretty great, actually- a little bit busy, but very nice all the same. Tuckleigh’s flag, on the other hand… not so much.

The main component of the Tuckleigh flag is the amphibian that could be a toad or a frog; which everyone from here knows symbolizes the mythic pond in which both lived, where Winnie poured away all that magic water. This is a big change from the flag immediately put into use after the expansion of Treegap- a girl pouring an amphora of water, which became an amphora pouring water. I, personally, think it ought to be a Maple leaf- a non-descript maple leaf, meant to be identified immediately as a maple leaf but not, perhaps, as a specific kind of maple leaf.

Number four, no lettering or seals. Never use writing of any kind, especially if it’s meant to be seen from a distance. You cannot, and should not have to, read a flag that’s functionally the size of an index card.

The flag of the Marines is almost good- except more often than not, they stamp a big ol’ MARINES on it in navy blue, which. No. Tuckleigh also has lettering on it- and I just… if anything, you’d want a T, not a W, for the flag meant to represent this place. If you have to write the name of what you’re representing on your flag, the symbolism has failed. Design it again.
You know, national flags tend to behave- they have to. The stakes of a nation’s flag are high; they are on an international stage, after all. City, state, and regional flags? Not so much. There is a scourge of terrible flags in this world, and they must be stopped. That’s the truth and the dare in one; and the first step is to recognize that there is a problem at all.

Number five, be distinctive. You need to be different from your neighbors. Those are the five rules.

Design wise, if you can understand and follow those five rules- simplicity, deep meaning, mindful color usage, no writing your user can’t read, and uniqueness- you can apply them to designing almost anything. Anything.

Good design rules aren’t followed in all that many cities across the world, certainly not for their flags- it’s considered less important, than, say, finding money to fund education or repairing the roads. The capital city of Germa, Paris- look, the island the country of Germa is on is called France, and it used to be in North Blue, and I don’t get why it’s still a winter island even though it travels and I shouldn’t have to- but the flag of Paris is a blue and red vertically divided field on which sits a pure white fleur-de-lis. According to Mom, in Paris, you can find that flag everywhere- tattooed on people's bodies, flapping from every municipal building, on stickers and graffiti and worn as fashion items. Everywhere.

When city leaders say they don’t have time or money to redesign their city flag, that it isn’t important, what they’re missing is that the flag of a place is a symbol around which a community can rally.

Anyway. Understanding flag design helps me understand offering design. The shelf- the altar, or as Havij and Neo call it, the offrenda, has to be wide enough for all our offerings to sit without touching each other; it has to be varnished, and there are actually three shelves, now, reaching up higher and higher. Mom’s offering is a kokeshi with her name on a piece of paper, written in my best calligraphy, inside.

Names are powerful, everyone knows that- and the more beautifully the name is written, the more beloved the person it belongs to. As for the kokeshi, it was something she picked for herself, which meant we had to use it.

For Winnie… well, pancakes are so popular, and so old… everyone has a way of doing them. That story I overheard- she poured the water on her favorite maple tree. And I know from Fern, frogs will eat anything they can fit in their mouths. Pancakes aren’t all that big.

So.

I guess what I mean to say is that, figuring out what to offer someone you’ve no connection to, someone who’s died… it’s really just an extension of that quest for immortality. I think the fear, the longing for immortality, is really two things- being afraid to die; and wanting to know.

Ellie’s like that second one- she always wants to know, everything, about everything. Me too, really. Beatrix hasn’t said much about it, but her goddess, Zul- well, Tellicherry explained something to me in the Barn, once.
“Roathus says that knowledge, all knowledge, is holy. It is the holiest thing there is, and the hunger for it is His blessing and His curse,”

Once you begin to learn anything, once you begin to seek knowledge out for it’s own sake, that hunger will never be slaked. At the same time, the gaining of new knowledge will become a pleasure like nothing else. Ecstasy and plague; Roathus-

Tellicherry says that there are aspects of all the other Pantheopaly in each individual God or Goddess- that Pyth, Order and Commotion, is in all things. If that is true, then Zul, Truth and Secrets, is in all things too. Tellicherry said the true Mystery of Pyth is Power; Mab said the true Mystery of Zul is Faith.

Roathus, the Gorging Host; the God of Thirst and Plenty. The Gorging Host grows ever larger yet remains insatiable, His eyes awash in tears. There are some who call him The Hunger; but that’s a cult-name, not his True Name. I think his Mystery is Knowledge; for what else could make a man hunger so, and never be satisfied?

Knowing how the world works- how everything works, from the history of dried fruit to the behaviour of weather to the nature and construction of the very stars- it’s a transcendent thing. It foments change in the learner; it forces change on the ignorant. Knowledge links us to the past, and propels us into the future.

At the same time, knowing too much will bring you face to face with all that is rotting in the world, every dark corner and fractured psyche, and it will bring you pain. No one ever said the knowledge you find would be to your benefit.

Even so, you cannot stop- once that door is opened, it can never again be shut. However painful the knowledge gained is, you will not wish to be without it- because now you know. Roathus.

I don’t really have a weapon. For a long time, my weapon was the city- on a broom, no one could catch me, no one could touch me. Now, without it… about the best I can do is run, and no one can run forever. So, I need something- something I can stand and fight with. The next day, we have pancakes- they have little cherry blossoms on them. Chopper is deeply confused, until I explain it to him; then he can’t stop talking about how wonderful our traditions are.

Eventually, the conversation twists and turns enough for me to ask him my real question.

“How did you develop your fighting style?”

“Ah? Well, it started with my chemistry studies, actually. I learned so much about chemical reactions, it was really easy for me to develop bombs and other chemical compounds- and my teacher, Kureha, she taught me how to throw knives by example, and then actual teaching. I learned to throw my bombs, and then… well, as I learned more about the body, I started developing ways to use my hooves as punching mediums. Then it sort of snowballed, and during our separation- you’ve read the logbook, right?”

“Yup,”
“Right, well, I learned actual kung fu while I was away. Once you’ve figured out the basics of your style, you can search out a teacher to refine what you’ve got- or, well, that’s what I did,”

“Hm...”

“Trying to work on your style?”

“Ha, yeah- I realized when I broke my old broom, I don’t really know how to fight- like, not directly? I don’t fight directly if I can help it- I use the surroundings, and I try to keep at least one hand free, because I need to be able to fly my broom-”

“Water balloons,”

“Hah?”

“You make potions, right? You had to learn harming potions alongside healing ones, otherwise-”

“Neither would have power... and a syringe with the right nozzle could be devised for a water balloon delivery system,”

“Exactly. Then, you carry them in a big bag- Mab can probably make you one that will hold everything you need, and not have too large a profile for flight. But what about when you’re on the ground?”

“Well... about the only things I’m good at off the broom are aiming and hand speed- I’m actually very fast, you know,”

“So, you- don’t really have a weapon, do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Hm. Hey, Mab?”

“Yes, Chopper?”

“You’re still not allowed to train or work or fuck; but you could show Genny the Arsenal. She doesn’t have a weapon, and without a broom-”

“Ah! That’s right- forgive me for my irresponsibility, Genevieve,”

“Oh, um- sure, forgiven,”

“Right- finish eating, and we’ll see what fits your hands best; ah, wait, have we... I don’t think so, right- Bryony, I need to make an announcement, ship wide please, indoors only- Beatrix!”

“Yes, Mab?”

“I need you to relay the message I’m about to give to everyone out of doors; Attention, everyone. Your attention, please: be aware that the Arsenal, our storage room for all weapons not currently laid claim to, is now organized and ready for use. If you need a weapon, please go to the Storage room directly below the Dairy, on the same hallway as the Stillroom, Distillery, and The San; if you are underage, you will have to sign your chosen weapons out. Please speak to me for any holsters, ammo bags, or other accoutrements. Thank you,”

“Tell everyone outside where the Arsenal is, and if they’re underage they have to sign a weapon out-why, exactly?”
“Responsibility: I’m the person who actually owns all of those weapons in the Arsenal, it’s part of the stuff I take care of as Quartermaster- basically, every time we defeat an enemy crew, I take all their cool shit. Most of it gets sold or given away as charity- but you can’t just give away a pile of guns, so, I’ve been, well… tinkering. I trained as a silversmith, but in Skua, silversmiths are gunsmiths- because the people who use guns are generally rich enough to fancy their guns up, and the only metal to do that with in Skua is silver,”

“Neat! I’ll tell everyone,”

“Thank you, Beatrix. Genny, are you done?”

“Yes, Mab!”

“Good- come along,”

So… below decks there’s all the workshops- the Workshop, which is where Franky, Havij, and Fern work; and Usopp Factory, where Usopp and Mark work; and the Studio, where Mab, Coco, and Beatix work; and then there’s the rooms I tend to work most in, the Stillroom, Distillery, and Sanitary Ward. When people aren’t injured terribly, they can rest in their own bed; for minor injuries, they end up in the Emergency Ward, which I actually spend most of my work hours in, treating cuts and burns from the Cool Kids. There are two hallways- down one, you go even lower into the belly of the ship, and that’s where all the making things workshops are; but the second one is where the Stillroom, Distillery, and now, Arsenal, are.

So- the Stillroom and the Distillery are actually the same kind of room- the same room entirely, excepting for a small door, but the stillroom is for non-edibles, and the distillery is for food. They’re both on the same side as the Sanitary Ward, which takes up the most space.

On the other side of that hallway, there’s a room as big as all three rooms together- the entire other side of the level, I think. The door to it has always been locked, so I put it out of my mind- but, following Mab down, I notice that she’s actually got a ring of keys on a string at her waist. They don’t jingle, so I guess that’s why I never noticed them before- but, when she draws up a key and opens the Arsenal’s door, that’s where she gets the key from.

As soon as I step inside, I’m all but blinded by the voices of- what? Mab and I are the only people here, what am I- whispers, I’m hearing so many whispers…

One of them is coming from… over here- I know Mab was about to say something, but, where the hell is that whispering coming from- over here! I’m over here, come here, this way- this way, don’t be afraid, I won’t hurt you if you don’t act a fool, come on- It’s… coming from the, the bucket? A stand, like for umbrellas, but it’s full of- spears? Javelins? It’s over in a corner of the room, underneath a crystal lamp.

I reach out a hand to grab- not me, that’s not me either, I’ve a maple haft girlie, come here, yes! Me! Pick me up! Yes! - a very chatty… it’s very tall. A spear?

I am a pike!

A fish?

Obviously not!
“Mab, what is this?”

“That’s a **Brusher’s Pike**, Genny; one of the few weapons in this room that would deign to be ridden like a broom. You could even stick bristles over the head and it wouldn’t mind much; you’d have to use reeds, not straw, and it’ll need blooding now and again, but… it’s a very good choice for you. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to start teaching you how to use it for a long while yet- for one, I’m still on reduced duties and strict rest; for another, you’re not in good enough condition to begin. I’ll write up an exercise plan- or, no, I’ll dictate one to Chopper and he’ll make sure I’m not overdoing it. But for now… see if anything else catches your eye,”

“Um- this one caught my ear, really,”

“Ah?”

“Well- maybe… does this pike have a name?”

“**My name is Queen Anne’s Revenge, miss! Oh-and over there, hanging off the wall, I think- see the shooty-shooty fast things? Try those!**

“Oh, it’s calling itself Queen Anne’s Revenge, and it recommends… shooty-shooty fast things? Guns?”

“Oh- Dueling Pistols, these are named along their barrels, see?”

“Th… Th-eh-ru-mah- Thelma?”

“Mhm,”

“And- R-Ru-ii-shu-ze- Louise,”

“Mhmmhhm,”

“Thelma and Louise, the Dueling Pistols,”

“They run on mana, not bullets; there should be a pair of rings in the stock, the handles- yes, there they are. Put those over either your fingers or your toes, they’ll self-size to fit; then, they’ll pull from your available mana to fire. No one else will be able to shoot them properly, the guns use… here we are- this ammo pouch is full of crystals and Dial shells, each of which have their own magic and elemental properties. Keep hold of it, and make sure you have Mark or Usopp run you through using them properly,”

“Yes Mab,”

“Hm- you want a shield, a helmet?”

“A shield… aren’t those really heavy?”

“Nope- or, well, they **could** be, but only if you’re not trained right. Zoro’s swords, individually, weigh about two pounds each; my spear weighs maybe ten? A shield averages between eight and fifteen pounds. This one is a Lunkhead Shield; weighs… eh, maybe nine pounds? And your pike is
eleven pounds, I’d say; and your pistols, together, are about six,"

“Oh. Well… that’s not so bad at all!”

“Exactly; now, let’s get you some carrying belts… you’ll need a holster for your pistols, big enough for your ammo bag to slide under… and a carrying strap for your pike that’s adjustable, so you can use it for your broom as well- do you have a knife?”

“Um, no,”

“Pocket knife- here, number seven standard pocket knife, Sanji and Deb have ones just like it-”

“Oh! Uhm- thank you? Thank you- oh, Mom had one like this, but she gave it to Deb when she started working… oh!”

“Hm… Well, let’s see now… I heard part of your conversation with Chopper- I don’t have anything like water balloons, but… Ah! Chopper should have Ear Syringes somewhere- ask him for one, I think that would be most useful in tandem with… this!”

“A pipe?”

“A bubble pipe! There’s two kinds of bubble solution- this one is meant for bubbles you blow directly, and this other is meant for pre-prepared bubbles. The tassel- see how it has a little wire-like slot for something like a bullet?”

“Oh! Does it work with the Pistol’s, um, cartridges…?”

“Yes, it does- the pipe is actually a peripheral for the Dueling Pistols. Here you go- got it?”

“Y-yeah, um, I- I got it,”

“Let me see- you’ll have to talk to Usopp about workspace, and Mark for training with your pistols- don’t carry them around with you until he clears you, please- and… I think that’s all, really,”

“Um- actually, who should I talk to, so I can learn to do that thing you do where you’re in two places at once?”

“The way I do it is with a Devil Fate- you need to talk to Taffy,”

“Oh. So- Usopp, Mark, and Taffy; for training?”

“Yes, that sounds right; oh, sign those out, they should have numbers on the hooks or stands-?”

“Ah- yeah! Sorry, I’ll do that- go sit down again, you look tired-”

“I- ugh. I hate being ill; but you’re right. I’ll see you later, Genny darling,”

“Bye, Mab,”

I sign out the weapons- because I’m only almost sixteen, which is still fifteen, which is still underage no matter how you slice it. I pass by Doctor Trafalgar Law and Fern and Havij on my way back up; Doctor Law looks at me very oddly when he sees what’s in my hands, as do Fern and Havij.
“Um. Hi?”

“So, this is much more interesting than a tour- Nurse Genny, what in hell’s name are you doing?”

“I’m, um, I’m expanding my battle repertoire? I don’t, uh, don’t really have any other way to fight, other than running away, so um, I… got some weapons,”

“I thought you fought like Ellie, though?”

“No… um. No. Ellie is much more ruthless than I could ever be. And I don’t have the same… stuff, that Bea does,”

“Her and Deb, man- their knives are...”

“Yeah, kinda hard to use a sword on broomstick; or a knife,”

“I see- so, guns are easier?!”

“Guns are easy to use; that’s why people use them,”

“Hm. And the other thing? What is that?”

“It’s a bubble pipe-”

“Ooh! Esoteric weapon!”

“…Yes, Havij, it’s esoteric if you’re, say, under the age of twelve- oh, wait, whoops, sorry-”

“Forgot I’m not actually a fishwoman or a mermaid, hm?”

“Yeah- sorry,”

“So. Bubble pipe?”

“It’s a tuna herder’s tool- they use it to protect the school from sharks, and also to keep the herd together come harvest time. Bea had one for a long time, but… the get less useful outside of certain areas. This one is meant for all terrain, hence the bottles of bubble fluid-”

“Oh, I see, that’s what those are. So you’re…?”

“I’m, uh- I’m going to go test out the bubble pipe on the deck, and you could all join me if you’d like…?”

“Yes please,”

“Sure, sis!”

“Of course, miss,”

“R-right, um- this way, then, follow me,”

I lead my party of interested… sister, sister’s friend, and some guy we picked up last island, up to the grass deck, well clear of the Barn and the animals and the Garden. Then I take a seat on the stairs, and carefully put my guns away in the holsters on the gunbelt, and then… how do these ammunition cartridges work- oh! I get it!
Okay, so… let’s see… Force, Spark, Mist, Haze, Dust, Smoke, Frost, Glister, and Sunflare; then there’s. Let’s try… let’s ask.

“I’m willing to try Spark, Dust, Frost, Glister, and Sunflare; which would you like to see?”

“Hmmm- it’s been snowing almost every day, so hold off on Frost-”

“Okay Havij; Fern?”

“Mmm… No Dust; it sounds like something that could make you sneeze. And is Glister just fancy for glitter?”

“Glister is magic glitter, it fades away on it’s own,”

“Pass,”

“Fern-”

“Hard pass,”

“Fiinnnnnnnnnnnnnne. What about you, Doctor?”

“Hmm… I wouldn’t mind seeing the Sunflare or Spark; I’d prefer the Sunflare one though, it’s very cold and wintry still… then again, that might confuse the plants, so… Spark,”

“Alright!”

Spark cartridge goes in like this; immediate use bubble fluid goes in… here… take a deep breath and-

Gwoooowowm! Paop!

It wobbles through the air, before rounding out into a sphere, like no bubble I’ve ever seen. I feel a sort of a… connection, to the bubble. There’s a shrinking window of time I can give it… Direction?

Up! Over there!

And then it pops with a spatter of fat, golden orange sparks. I blow one, two- and I can make them move… in patterns? And I can set their popping order, I can make one pop after the other, or I can make them all pop at once. So, while I blow two more bubbles, I make the old two pop, one, then two- and then two more float up and pop all at once.

I don’t quite know what happened between figuring out the limits of a bubble pipe, and putting on a tiny fireworks show- sparkworks show? And then, of course, Mark ended up sitting next to me.

“Nice bubble pipe. Which guns are you using with it?”
“Um- Dueling Pistols,”
“...Where are your Sling Rings?”
“Um. Still in the guns-?”
“For the love of th’gods- hands or feet?”
“U-um- for the, uh, um, um, feet,”
“Take your boots off and put them on,”
“N-now?”
“Right now, yes; you should have put them on in the Arsenal, but now is better than later,”
“Uhm- oh, um, okay- brr, my fingers are cold,”
“Hm,”
“Guh- that’s a weird feeling, it just- eep!”
“Yeah, that’s always a little weird; now. Bubble pipes can be used for party tricks like you were doing, but they’re really for your guns. There should be two more rings-”
“These?”
“Yeah- the mouthpiece on the pipe unscrews, so- do that, and then put the big rings on; they’ll shrink to fit too,”
“Um- yeah!”
Okay. Now, show me your carts- hmmm. Force, Spark, Mist, Haze, Dust, Smoke, Frost, Glistner, and Sunflare; that’s nine, so you need three more. Hm. All the carts you have now are good for area and creating distractions, but you’ll need actual power at some point… hmmm… Ah! Here; three of mine; and one for your pipe, too. For your guns: Peck, Rattle, and Anklegator. These are crystals, mostly, imbued with pieces of very dangerous Skuan animals- Peck is from the Pecker Bird, which shoot deadly and slightly poisonous spines from their beaks; Rattle comes from the Rattletail, which is something like a bird and something like a rat, and they either throw rocks or summon actual meteors; and Anklegator is the horn of an Anklegator that’s been shaped to fit your gun with a bit of crystal here and there where there wasn’t horn anymore. I have no use of these; so, I gift them to you,”
“...aren’t Anklegator’s extremely dangerous though? Like, the other two will just kill you, but the Anklegator will stalk you for a month straight if you set foot in their grass-”
“Yeah; they will. That was not a fun month. Anyway- the gun you put that cart into will always be a little more touchy than the one you don’t; Peckers and Rattletails are actually pretty mellow,”
“Are anklegators… tomboyish, or…?”
“It… let me see- oh. Thelma,”
“Really?”
“Yep. You’d think, considering the book, it’d be Louise-”

“Yeah? Oh, have you only seen the play-?”

“No, there’s a movie now too- there’s a book?”

“Remind me to grab it from the Library for you; but yes, her guns are named Thelma and Louise, so- put the Anklegator in Thelma, and then sort the rest of your carts accordingly,”

“Uh-”

“Pull the trigger all the way back twice, and turn the gun sideways; carts go in pointy side first,”

“Uh- oh! Okay- and what about my pipe?” I said, loading my pistols with the cartridges.

“This is a special cart called Sound; it’s not all that useful in a gun, as it makes the firing sound louder, basically. In a bubble pipe, however, it makes it something like a trumpet- which can be useful. You can also draw on any or all of your gun-carts- try it, go on,”

“Uh- sure-”

Spark and Sound, wait! Double check the fluid levels- fine, okay, deep breath and-

Gwloooowowm! Paop!

A bubble that’s… different, somehow, from the ones I blew before. Sturdier, easier to control- more vibrant in it’s surface colors. Same sort of time-window; over there! Up! Burst!

Shin-PAO! PLINGINGING!

Woah!

“There are all kinds of combinations- I’d guess Spark and Sound for that one. Try adding Smoke,”

I do it. The bubble pops even more like a firework- the sound, the sharp flicker of fat golden orange sparks on the grey sky, the smell of spent gunpowder… cool!

“So. Your first task, from me- make a combination table, for pairs, trios, and quartets; you’re not ready to fire fivers, or hexes, but make those tables anyway; and you won’t be ready to go beyond hexes until you’re about twenty. Try standing up,”
“Um- uuugh-”

“So. First lesson: magic is not free. Firing your guns is not free. Using your bubble pipe is not free. A little fireworks show did this to you. Something more… martial, in nature, will do more. Until you reach a certain level of overall fitness and stamina, I highly recommend you not use your magic weapons. Two hours theory, two hours practical, for ten days- that’ll just about get you to pairs level. Then, you’ll need a resting and settling period of about two months; and then we’ll train again. For now, remove all the carts from your weapons, clean them with the polishing rag in your ammo bag, and go get a blank trapper keeper that’ll fit in it, and a pencil too; and get to work on those tables. You might also consider taking a nap after lunch,”

“I- uagh- I was gonna set up workspace with Usopp, after lunch,”

“You can do that tomorrow,”

“O-oh. O-aaaaaaaugh- okay,”

I’ve never been so exhausted, yet so profoundly awake in my life. It feels like I just did twelve hours of hard physical labour, and yet my mind is fresh as daisies. The rest of the day was kind of blurry- I remember getting a math and diagramming notebook from one of the Workshops, and that I ate lunch, but not what; and then I took my nap and woke the next morning.

Magic is certainly not free. It’s not even slightly fair in it’s payments.

The next ten days are taken up by training. In the morning, I work out names of attacks, or names of types of attacks- twelve squared is one hundred and forty four. Force, Spark, Mist, Haze, Dust, Smoke, Frost, Glistter, Sunflare, Peck, Rattle, and Anklegator; those are just for my guns. I know, now, that the Animal carts are for heavy firepower; and the lightest one is Haze. I know that some of them can’t be combined at all- Mist and Spark cancel each other out; so does Frost and Sunflare. Some of them combine to make other carts- Mist and Smoke makes Dust, while Smoke and Frost makes Glistter.

My first assignment was figuring out all the possible pairs; my second assignment is figuring out which of those pairs is worth using. Mist and Smoke makes a cheaper, less effective dust; Smoke and Frost makes a more expensive, less useful Glistter. I can’t put all three Anima Carts in the same gun- it’s too heavy, and it makes me prefer one hand over the other.

I shouldn’t have the cancelling pairs in the same gun, to save on confusion. I don’t have any duplicate carts. Each gun can fire an unformed Mana bullet, as fast as I can pull the trigger. If I just want something shot real good, I don’t need to use the carts- but I run down my available mana much quicker that way.

Dueling Pistols are a hit and run sort of weapon.

So. Louise has Peck, Spark, Sunflare, Rattle, Haze, and Glistter. Her Anima attacks are Double Team, Comet Comedown, Starfall, Birdirage, Fancy Chicken, Firebird, Sunbird, Bombirage, and Glitterbomb.

Double Team uses both anima, and causes a swarm of see-through Peckers to appear, each of them
puke at most three meteors before vanishing. Comet Comedown makes a fall of flaming meteors. Starfall makes a fall of bright meteors- they almost hurt to look at straight on. Birdirage makes see-through Peckers appear- and then they disappear, but keep spitting spines at the target. Fancy Chicken makes glittering Peckers appear- still see through, still spitting spines. Just, um. Glittery? They can’t all be winners. Firebird makes a see-through Pecker with flaming wings and flaming spines appear. Sunbird makes a glowing Pecker appear. Comirage makes illusory meteors fall. And Glitterbomb is currently on permanent ban by Fern- she heard what it did and swore a great and terrible vengeance upon me if I ever, but ever used it. I don’t know what she has against glitter, honestly.

The other four available shots are Heatwave, Mirage, Explosion, and Signal. They’re exactly what they sound like, really- useful in their way, but I’m not great with Mirage. Not yet- Taffy’s promised to teach me how best to use it.

Thelma has Anklegator, Mist, Force, Dust, Smoke, and Frost. Her Anima attacks are Death Below, Death Unknown, Chunky Salsa, Sneaky Death, and Death Served Cold. Thelma’s Anima attacks have no real way of being anything other than lethal, and aiming for somewhere other than center mass doesn’t help. Anklegators are really dangerous.

Death Below calls a spectral Anklegator near the target; the spectral Anklegator then attacks the target from below. Death Unknown is the same, but with a cloud of mist around the target, making it harder to see the horn before it’s too late. Chunky Salsa gives the Anklegator explosive bite power. Sneaky Death makes it impossible to see the Anklegator below. Death Served Cold freezes the target before the fatal chomp. If I never in my life meet an anklegator, I will be overjoyed.

The other available shots are Mud Spray, Eyewater, Sandstorm, Snowstorm, Wet Fog, Dry Fog, Freezing Fog, Fog Wall, and Vent.

Mud Spray is exactly what it sounds like; but it’s particularly easy to aim for small targets with, and tends to make the target slower. Eyewater blinds the target for anything between five whole seconds to an hour. Sandstorm, Snowstorm, all the Fog variants, and Vent are forbidden for me right now- I need eye and mouth protection, and a way to navigate without sight.

Sanji’s been teaching me how to use Observation Haki; and Usopp’s been designing me specialized headgear.

According to Mab, who’s recovered about five days into my intensive training, my regular flight clothes are a good starting point for a specialized battle costume; tight, with enough give that I can move anyway I please. The jacket-dress, in particular, she’s extra pleased with- she only has to make it in a different fabric and add the right enchantments, she said, and it’d be absolutely perfect. She based the rest on my uniform; easily cleaned fabric, shoes with a lot of sole so if I need to do an Emergency Drop I won’t fuck up my feet, gloves with overmittens so my fingers don’t freeze… It’s a cool outfit.

So. According to Fern’s map, I need to go to the Grave, then the Pond, then the Tree. Fern herself told me that I’d need a hatchet, a candle, a blanket, a small pouch, and some rope. Mab’s taken care of my gear situation; I climbed mountains in my regular nurse shoes, and my flight suit boots are better.

I’ve already practiced making maple leaf pancakes; I’m pretty good at it by now, I’d say. I’ve got a
candle, and Ellie is going with me to the graveyard because I don’t like going to those sorts of places alone, and Ellie loves going to graveyards for some goatforsaken reason. Once I start, I need to have everything done within a week; so, I still need to prepare provisions, finalize my grave offering, and get good with my weapons.

Day six into my training, I broke the shaft of my Pike. The blade was unharmed; but with the shaft broken, it fell to my Dueling Pistols- Dualies? It fell to them, to be my main method of ground-bound defence.

So, there’s not really any way to build up your magical… your magic reserves? I guess? Other than expending all your ‘free’ magic, and letting it build up overnight before expending it all again- for two days straight, mind- and then doing no magic at all for a day, and then repeating. For ten days total.

To be fair, Mab warned me extensively; she told me outright that while training my magic to use the Dueling Pistols correctly was something that could be done in ten days, becoming an expert with them would take a bit more work. By the tenth day, I can fire any of my bullets, and use any cartridge with my bubble pipe.

“Genevieve, I’m going to tell you what I told Beatrix; if you really want me to train you, I will. But I will train you as best I can, with everything I know to do. It will exhaust your body, and your mind, and your spirit; I will test you every step of the way, and you’ll test yourself, too. You’ll hate me, and your weapons, and yourself; and you’ll change, no matter how hard you try not to. Training will be your life, for a time; and you won’t be able to unlearn what I teach you,”

Mab told me this our first day together. I was warned, pretty explicitly, that training with Mab would not be a cakewalk.

Did I listen? No.

Did I break my pike by not listening? Yes.

Have I made maple leaf pancakes at just before midnight in a fit of ‘I hate my life’? Yes.

Did I pack those pancakes, a small fleece blanket, a hatchet from the Arsenal- properly signed out- my one remaining toad-shaped candle (Fern loves them), the votive candle, the plate, cutlery, a small pouch from the stillroom, and some rope from the hold in a backpack that slings on over my new flight suit, a lighter from Sanji’s drawer of lighters and matches, my pocket knife, and my guns and ammo and notebook and a first aid kit onto my person, sneak off the ship onto the very quiet docks because even criminals need to sleep, and then make for the graveyard- incidentally picking up Ellie on the way?

Yes.

Did I make us double back for a bottle of maple syrup?

Yes.

So. Ellie likes to think that she’s the sneakiest of us squid-sisters, but the truth is, I am. I have to be; I’m the one who actually stole all the medicines and knowledge needed to treat Mom for five years straight. Sneaking past orderlies in mental hospitals- which is where the largest, least missed stores of
the medicine she needed were- is very difficult, particularly when they’ve got to deal with other patients doing the exact same thing.

The real truth is that Sancho is the sneakiest of us all. I’ve literally never caught him doing anything, and I know he’s done stuff because I’ve had to fix him up before.

We get to the graveyard just passing twilight; and it’s Ellie who leads me to the right grave, as she knows more than anyone else about how these sorts of places work.

The grave of Winifred Foster is in a stand of birch trees. It’s also smack in the middle of a frog village. Ellie and I get there right in the middle of one of their festivals.

Yeah, that’s not what I was expecting either.

The gravestone is itself on some sort of bier, which is in the middle of what must be a kind of fountain. In the fountain, masses of water-greenery I know not the name of gently wave over tiny houses and burrows. Their open doors and windows are bedecked with water flowers and seashells, and I can hear music echoing up from below the clear waters.

On the surface of the water, thick mats of lily pads and duckweed dance; and on the largest of the lily pads, the frog village has set up their above water celebration.

“Hallo, up there!”

“Um- Oh! Hello, down there!”

I crouch down to have an easier conversation with the frogly gentleman I’m speaking with; I can tell it’s a gentleman, because lady frogs have higher voices. Right? I think that’s right.

He’s wearing a white shirt, a silver vest- made of actual silver turned into cloth, I don’t know of anything else that shines like that- a black coat with two long tails, they practically drag on the ground, and… a top hat? Oh, and he has a little cane, I think it’s a hatpin that got ground down.

“G’morning, large girl!”

“Good morning, sir; um, may I ask what’s being celebrated today?”

“Why, today’s the birthday of the Great Old Toad Sage of the Bier, young’n; we celebrate like this every year,”

“How lovely!”

We talk a while after that, me and Gentleman Frog, about the festival that’s been going as long as the island has had humans. He tells me about The First Girl, who played here a long time ago, when this
pond was just a spring in a stand of trees, and the only amphibian who lived here was the Old Toad Sage. The First Girl was the one who started the tradition of throwing parties for the Toad Sage, and every year since her death, the village of Fountaineart throws a festival in his honor. It also coincides with their annual New Years celebration, where everyone celebrates wakes up from the winter and comes back out of the mud.

That does explain why everyone at the festival is partying so hard; that frog there is drinking a beer and it’s not even dawn yet!

“Ah, I see- I actually need to speak with the Great Toad Sage; can I swim across?”

“Ach, well- during the early Spring season, humans are strictly prohibited from swimming in this fountain, and with all the lily pads either out of commission due to frost, or taken up with festival things- how urgent is your conversation, young miss?”

“Um- I’ve got a pretty strict timetable of midnight to two hours after high noon; then, I’ll have to try again sometime else;”

“Oh dear- that’s not good miss! You’ll only be able to speak with the Sage today; tomorrow, he’s going on a ten year retreat to contemplate the necessity of cranes!”

“Ah! Wh-what should I do?”

“Stay calm, miss- your friend there, can she play an instrument; and can you sing at’all?”

“Um… Ellie?”

“Well, I’ve got a mouth-harp, and I can play a simple song on a guitar or ukulele,”

“Um- I know a few songs from Mom’s old records, and a few sea shanties, I guess- do baby rhymes and lullabies count too?”

“I din’t ask if you knew a few songs- I asked if you could sing, miss;”

“Oh! Oh, um, yes, I can sing well enough,”

“I certainly hope so; you won’t have a chance otherwise,”

I follow the little gentleman frog around the built up stones of the fountain, and soon come to a little amphitheater where a variety of frogs and toads are all croaking and chirping together. One young froggett is carrying a large basket full of tadpoles, each one with it’s own little baby beanie, obviously doing an errand for his mom; another froggett is cheerily dancing with a floggelle, the both of them cheerfully trading off who leads and who follows. A knab of toads is playing a game of foot-the-ball with a ping pong ball filled with a bit of sand; a knot of frogs is playing cheerful music, while a mixed knab and knot of both are riding around on salamanders and waving fans and flags- obviously priests and priestesses.

Fern would absolutely adore this.

“ Mayor Tibbs - Mayor Tibbs, sir, a moment-”
“Hwha- You! Pollash, you reprobate, what’ve you done now-”

“Nothing, honest! Only, I’ve just met a nice young girl, and she needs to speak with the Great Sage what lives on the Bier.”

“-Now you know that access to the Sage en’t up to me, it’s the provision of the Priesthood, an’ with them engaged in the Spring Celebration Ceremony.”

“-Mother Mayhay could give permission!”

“Mother Mayhay is- fine! Fine! On your head be it, Pollash; and if she doesn’t like the song, that’s tough luck and I’ll hear no more of it,”

“It’ll work out, you’ll see- come along, Miss and Miss; Mother Mayhay is right over here! Come on!”

I follow the suddenly bouncing frog, carefully dodging around knots and knabs as they drift together and apart; eventually I come to an old fence post with a fallen rail still clinging onto a rusted out nail, and in the triangle formed between post, rail, and earth, there is a massive animal skull, like… like a goat, but bigger. Atop the skull there’s a sort of blanket made of woven weeds, tiny little reeds in acorn caps burning with sweet smelling smoke, mushrooms like tables covered with pearls and tiny shells and tiny little bottles full of things that glow in the last bits of twilight.

Mother Mayhay is a big orange toad, the biggest I’ve ever seen- maybe a full fifteen centimeters. The animal skull comes up to my waist, maybe higher, and the toad comes up to my chin. She’s wearing beaded bracelets of yellow, pink, and blue; and a beaded necklace of pink and blue, and a soft little cap of spiderweb lace, and a little crown of seashells and seeds. She’s attended by simple garden snails, and on their backs are glowing orbs of water- or is it jelly? Dunno.

Mister Pollash bounces up onto a brick, before standing quite tall and straight and making an elegant bow. Then, he speaks to her in a strange, creaky language I don’t understand; she replies, and her voice is resonant but high, resonant enough to make my chest rattle but high enough to almost hurt my ears. They talk just long enough for me to hope they stop; and then, mercifully, they do. Ellie, behind me, has been driven to a crouch, her teeth sharp in a grimace and her hands clamped over her ears. She’s got much more sensitive hearing than I do, so- it makes sense.

“Sorry about that, Miss- but I’ve explained things to Mother Mayhay. She’ll allow only one of you access at a time; but first, you’ve got to impress her with a song, see?”

“Um-”

“It’s one song for each of you, and you can’t repeat them neither! It’s a different song for each of you, them’s the rules!”

“Oh, well- a-alright, well, um… do we need to sing here?”

“Ac-tu-all-ee, we shall go to the Bandstand down on the Green; I am not the only one you’ll need to sing for, after all. Help me down, Pollash, there’s a lovey,”

“Yes, Mum-”
Mister Pollash holds himself up tall and straight, and Mother Mayhay puts one massive orange hand down on his shoulder; and then, as he strains against her weight, the rest of her carefully moves down onto the ground. Mister Pollash crouches down and gasps from the effort, and then straightens again while Mother Mayhay arranges her beads and a fluffy white coat I didn’t notice earlier.

I follow behind the surprisingly fast Mother Mayhay and Mister Pollash, back to the edge of the fountain and—oh! It’s—**a mushroom**? No, this must be the bandstand… It’s plenty big for someone Mother Mayhay’s size, but Ellie and I are far too large.

Mother Mayhay lets out a soft cheep, and then says something in her very high voice to Mister Pollash, who nods before running off. He comes back, dragging… a small red twig with a round… a round stone stuck onto the end of it. The stone has a hole in the center of it, and the branch is living, it’s got tiny red buds on it; and the stone is deep blue-green, and then Mister Pollash has leapt up high, high and—

Ow!

Wha- Waaaah! I’m a fingerling! No bigger than a sardine, if that!

“There now; oh, you’re a cute one, aren’t you? Just a little polliwog, I reckon; here now Pollash, get the other one, there’s a lad—”

“Yes Mum-!”

There’s a huge sound, and then with a thump, my sister Ellie is the same size as me. She clutches at her head, and then rolls to her feet and looks around. Then she gasps and—starts crying? Huh? Oh! Right—all her friends are this size. She’s dreamt about being able to hug them for ages and ages… being shown that it’s possible, even for a little bit, must be overwhelming for her.

“Oh no—what’s happened, I didn’t hit her that hard—”

“No, no, Mister Pollash— all her closest friends are Tontatta- Dwarves?”

“Oh! Oh, I see—this must be the first time she’s ever been able to see things from our perspective, en’t it?”

“Yes sir, I think so; um… is… the, the hammer you used…”

“Oh, this— no, no, this is mine, en’t it? Can’t give it up, wouldn’t be able to go into town; no one in town would, either, they’ve their own hammers of course… Ah— but for your sister there… I suppose she could ask the Great Sage how to make one for herself— I know that humans like you and her need different materials than just us frogs an’ toads,”

“Mmm— well, I can help her now, I think. Miss— orange Miss, come here please!”

Ellie, after wiping her eyes and composing herself, walks over to Mother Mayhay, now much taller
than us both. Mother Mayhay’s eyes close, and with a delicate cough, out comes the largest stone with a hole in it I’ve ever seen- my sense of scale is shot to hell, but it’s big; and green! Green jade, I think, and softly ringing with some sort of sound- when I glance through the hole at it’s center, I can suddenly see human faces where I only saw frogs before.

It might be more proper to say that this is a village of Tontatta, not frogs and toads.

Ellie is crying again.

“Now- I know a Rogue when I see one, so I’ll save you the trouble of a trip- there are no thieves signs on the grave of Our Girl, nor will there ever be; and I ask that you take this seeing stone instead, which is half of what you’ll need to make a proper Poncle Mallet. You’ll need a wood for the stem, of course- talk to a mage about that; as for your sister...”

“She still needs to sing for you, Mother Mayhay,”

“Hmm-? Hmph! Quite right; come on, girls, let’s see what you’ve got,”

“Can I borrow a guitar?”

“...I suppose; Tibbs! Give the girl a guitar to use, would you?”

“Yes, Mum!”

Ellie makes sure the guitar is ready with a few practice strums; and then I start singing.

...The wind here is clinging to winter,

It seems to make everything blue,

So send me, send me- one little peach;

Just a sweet sunny piece of you!

There’s a huge gasp from outside the bandstand, but I ignore it to see the response I got from Mother Mayhay and... I guess the Fountainheart Village Council? Mother Mayhay wipes away a few glimmering tears; and the council croaks and cheeps amongst itself before unanimously giving me a thumbs up. Mother Mayhay nods decisively.

“It’s decided; you’re allowed to walk across the Lilypad Road to speak with the Great Toad Sage. But first... I think you ought to talk with the rest of your family. They seem quite worried, dear,”
Huh-? Oh. Oh no.

I forgot to leave a note!
There are some things I’d really like to never wake up to again. The realization that I’ve had another miscarriage? Hard pass. My husband isn’t at my side because we were forcibly separated? Harder pass. One of my students, a young woman I am personally responsible for, vanishes in the night? Hardest pass.

Was I too hard on her? I- I don’t know; I don’t know how to be anything else, when it comes to training. She said she wanted me to teach her, and she said she wanted to learn, I don’t… is this my fault?

She didn’t leave a note, but there’s no money unaccounted for; just one of the island-exploration bags from the Broomshed, and a few of the packed lunches from the fridge, a few bottles of milk… oh, maybe she, she just… went for a walkabout? But she didn’t leave a note- aaaugh!

Fuck!

Spitstone!

So, kidney stones are pretty terrible, but I’ve never had one; Momma Rouge did, but… anyway. I’ve gotten spitstones since I was a kid; they’re actually not terribly uncommon. It’s a calcified structure that forms inside the salivary gland or duct, and in me, they usually block the flow of saliva into the mouth.

The majority of all spitstones affect the submandibular glands located at the floor of the mouth. It’s much less common in the parotid glands (inside the cheeks), or the sublingual glands, which are under the tongue. If you have one spitstone, you probably have another in your future.

Spitstones are formed when chemicals in the saliva accumulate in the duct or gland. It’s mostly calcium; and the exact inciting cause isn’t known. Most agree, however, that major factors are those that cause lower saliva production- dehydration, poor eating (as in you don’t eat enough), and use of certain medications such as antihistamines, blood pressure drugs, psychiatric drugs, and bladder control drugs. Trauma to the salivary glands might also be a factor, but there’s not been investigation into that.

I used to get one every time I got pregnant, but I’ve also been taking psychiatric drugs since about a year ago; nothing bad, just something to help regulate my sleeping patterns. Trying a new thing for narcolepsy; so far, it’s worked really great, but if this is the side effect, I don’t know…

Spitstones don’t cause problems as they form; but once they’re of a size that blocks the duct, saliva will back up into the gland, causing pain and swelling. It’s not bad now, but I know it’ll get progressively worse as the swelling increases and I eat more meals. Ah fuck, and my spit tastes all salty now- I fucking hate spit stones, holy fuck.

Aargh, and the whole duct is swollen too, I can’t stop licking it with my tongue-

“Chopper?”

“Mab- ah, you’ve got a swelling, where does it hurt?”
“Under my tongue, I’ve a spitstone—”

“Spitstone- salivary calculus, owie; I’ll get you some sugar free lemon-drops, just a moment- keep eating meals like regular, and if it’s still there in three or four days, I’ll run some tests,”

“Thanks- aaaaugh—”

“Mab?!? What’s wrong- what, where are you hurt—”

“Sanji, breathe- it’s a spitstone, I’m not actually injured—”

“Spitstone? Uh- Oh! Oh, ow, I’m sorry- let me get you a lime—”

“Thank you; aaaaugh- ah, hello Bry. Any luck?”

“No- I know one of them took a snail, but I’m having serious issues with the signal right now- it’s like it just… gone. It’s not dead- I’d be able to find it, if it were dead. It’s… gone,”

“Hm. That is odd- and you’re sure you didn’t see them leave?”

“I was as surprised as their sisters were, Mab- I’ve no idea how they did it. It’d be more impressive if I wasn’t so pissed,”

“Truth,”

Y’know, I never thought I’d say this, but I’m glad Mab kicked my ass as often as she did during our Training Years. Otherwise, I’d never be able to do what I’m about to do.

“Okay; everyone, finish breakfast. Tiffany, pick out a squad to do a fly-over of the island; see if you can find them by air. I know it’s covered over with trees, but… Sanji, pack up bentos for everyone who’s going; you, Mab, Mark, Robin, Brook, Bryony, and Mice- you’re going with me. I’m the Captain- I Know where my crewmates are; we’re going to find them together,”

“Yes, Captain,” choruses the room.

After all that, finding Ellie and Genny is as simple as Listening real good and letting my feet follow- this way, then they went- over here?

And then I hear music and a party and a high, piping voice, singing cheerily- and I don’t need to search anymore, because there they are.

About six seconds after I realize I forgot to leave a note, Ellie is bowled over by her mouse-sized
friends. Daryl- Darla- He’s coiled his tail around Ellie’s waist, and is sobbing onto her shoulder.
Maya has taken off her hat, and is pressing it to her mouth as tears and sobs work their way out of
her, hitching and straining against her sense of propriety. Hildy is laughing from a deep, soulful
place, her face gone red and smiling; while Quil and Lindy run gentle hands over Ellie’s… not
everywhere, but her hair, her hands, and their faces are soft with joy, which is not something you
expect from the world’s spiniest punchkin and a tiny sharkwoman. Jellybean is babbling ‘How did
this happen?’ with such joy, the strain of it is making her flesh bubble and jiggle as the crystals and
metal inside of her shifts and buzzes in excitement; her fins, which usually look like particularly
pointed ears, are splayed wide with shock, but the colors- blue, orange, white, turquoise, little flecks
of pink- betray the roil of emotions inside of her.

Then an enormous shadow falls over me, and I know I’m in for it.

I look up, and see Missus Mab and Mister Sanji, the both of them very worried; Missus Mab has her
hair up in a simple ponytail, which means she rushed out here without even taking her morning
shower, that’s what she sleeps in; and she’s wearing mismatched socks under her snowboots, and
those are the pants she had on yesterday, and that’s one of Mister Sanji’s sweaters, she doesn’t
usually wear blue. And she’s not wearing glasses, her eyes are rimmed with a thick black line; no
scarf, no gloves, no hat. The lingering chunks of frosty ground have melted where she stepped, and I
can see it melting where she stands.

Mister Sanji is wearing his regular suit, plus snow boots, and a jacket I’ve never seen before, and a
thick scarf I think Missus Mab made for him, and a watch cap, and mittens. He’s not as angry as
Missus Mab is; nothing has melted at his feet. Snowflakes are landing on his curling horns, and they
aren’t sticking, but they usually don’t. His breath is hot and white rising in a gush of mist.

When Missus Mab does- my eyes water, and then she’s standing in front of me, and then Mister
Sanji lets out a little cough and suddenly he’s there too, and then I’ve been grabbed by the shoulders
roughly and now-

Missus Mab takes a good long look at me, and there are tears in her eyes, and then she hugs me and-
and- purrs-

I start crying, and I can’t stop. I don’t know why I’m so upset, and I can’t- she’s not my- I can’t- I
can’t I can’t
‘mother’ or some variation of it; but by her very actions, her care for them and the steady love in her bearing, they have come to more-than half think of her as such. She brushed their hair, and asked if they had need of any little thing, and listened and was there.

I was less so; but then, I suppose… I’m her husband; and she need not stand alone.

I take off my scarf- more a shawl, really- and wrap it around Mab and Genny, who’s crying into Mab’s chest. Then, I wrap my own arms around them both, and join my purr with my wife’s. I’ve never experienced it myself, but Mab has; and, somehow in the joining of our lives and souls and minds and flesh, under the watchful eyes of the gods, I have access to her memories too.

Being small and scared, and then held safe between two big purrings, two big purrings that love you and care for you and would protect you from anything… it’s at once deeply satisfying and overwhelming. To be safe, warm and loved… People need that, no matter their age.

Mab might not be able to purr on her own command; and she might consider herself somehow lacking in those qualities that make a mother… perhaps she’s right, in that. I do not know. I do know this: supporting her sometimes means that I do things that she thinks she cannot.

Like, say, bracketing a young woman in our care with purring and warm arms.

At some point, Genny collapsed between us, sobbing like I’m not sure she could ere the death of her mother. I pick the both of them up, and set us on the squishy bench just outside of the bandstand gazebo. Mab keeps Genny pressed between us as she shifts and settles herself more comfortably. Her chin tucks over Genny’s skull; my arm wraps over the girl between us, and my other back around my wife’s back. I tuck my own head over Mab’s, and let the purring rumble fill out my chest and echo out into the world.

We make between us a bower of limbs, and Genny rests between them, still weeping softly but slowly resolving herself into something approaching composure. Her eyes are puffy and red, and her nose has been running like an oozy faucet- I’ve got a handkerchief in my pocket, hang on.

I pull out a white handkerchief with soft yellow wheat stalks embroidered on the edges, and I wipe Genny’s face, and bid her clear her nose. Her whole fit has taken no longer than a quick fifteen minutes, but these things always feel so much longer…

I listen to her exhausted babble; and I don’t say anything. Mab does; but I… hm.

“I know you’re worried about your sister, but she needs to have time on her own,”

“I don’t know about that- she’s had a lot of time on her own, and…”

“It’s not good to push someone like that into sociability, Ellie- besides… now that you’re our size… I remember you saying once that the only people you’d ever trust enough take pleasure with was us. Is that still true?”

“…Daryl, you know it is,”
“Well. Quil took a walk around to check this place out, and there’s an abandoned house not far from the Fountain- looks like a little sugar shack, but it’s long past the season for that here- and, well, you know Maya doesn’t leave the ship without bringing along a blanket… and, um, you’re really cute Eleanor,”

“…I’d like that, Daryl- um. Is this just the two of us, or-?”

“…Do you want everyone to be involved?”

“-if that’s okay, yes. I, um, I like everyone? A-and I don’t want anyone feeling left out if they don’t want to be, and, um, I, I don’t think I could choose, um, I-”

“Hey, hey- it’s okay, breathe. We can do together, it’s okay; but we need to set ground rules together. First- supplies. Everyone needs to bring their own supply of condoms, lube, dental dams, and snacks- we’ve had sex parties before, so those are the ground rules, remember?”

“Ah- Oh! Yeah, I remember- and, I guess since I’ll be the same size, I’ll need more supplies…”

“Yeah. Um- you know everyone’s safe words already, and yours is still ‘chumbawumba’, right?”

“Yeah. Er… it strikes me that it’d probably be easier to do this on the ship, where we have supplies already- I don’t like using abandoned places for stuff like this,”

“We used our hideout though?”

“Our hideout wasn’t abandoned,”

“…Okay; I saw a Daiso a way’s back, and-”

“Excuse me, but… are you… do you have a seestone, youngster?”

We both pause, and carefully turn to acknowledge the little old frog lady that’s creaked up to both of us. Another, taller, old frog lady splats up behind her and starts scolding her- gently, the way two lovers grown old and squashy like pumpkins in the fall or a spot on the sofa (our sofa, actually, it was made by a sofa-maker’s apprentice in miniature, and I was fine with a joint chair)- and they’re both carrying… huh? Two old ladies carrying very fine seestones- not what I was expecting in this tiny townlet.

“Dearie, you’ve got to explain your reasoning before just asking a youngster a question like that, you can’t just spring it on ‘em- Pleasant, come he-are!”

“Yes, Auntie!”

A pretty woman, maybe a few years older than us, bounds up; her soft yellow poncho flutters around her black clothing. She’s- very pretty.

“Now. Elderberry, Marple, and me’self- I’m Pithiea, pleasure- between the three of us old birds, only Young Pleasant came down off our tree, ye’ken? An, time being it’s killing self, we’ve got two
seestones with no takers; Elderberry gave hers to Pleasant before she died, and Marple and me’self, well, we’d like to see our seestones passed on. We aren’t anything like young, and we’re both much too set in our little ways to want to go Bigjob and carouse,”

I blink. Daryl also blinks.

“Um- that’s very kind of the both of you, but… it wouldn’t be right to accept a seestone knowing there wouldn’t be enough for my friends to have, too-”

“Oh? How many are there of you, lovey?”

“Marple, don’t go promising the boy other people’s things-”

“You know as well as I do that reprobate is never going to give his hammer up except if he’s caught out by the police, Pithiee; and as many oldsters with no leaves to their name in this village, I might as well see good stones passed on to those what can use them, innit?”

“Uh- well, there’s seven of us, counting me and Ellie; even with both of yours, that’s three left out,”

“Um… Mister Scrump ain’t married, an’ he don’t have no kinfolk that I knows of; Tsung-sung, who runs the co-op, his apprentice had a seestone of her owns, and he’s gettin’ real old; and Mister Fairfax, his son’s gay- and he still has his wife’s seestone, it never… I don’t think it’ll ever see much use, his son ain’t sentimentals like that; and… well, Shrinking Violet doesn’t have long left in this world, innit,”

“There we are, then, Pithiee- young man, how about it?”

“Um… is that… is that really okay?”

“Of course it is, dearie; the only reason I know of to not give a fine youngster a seestone of their own is they can’t be trusted with it, and you all obviously can- it shows in the care you’ve given your friend, and your friend is of very good character, seeing as she came here with her sister; obviously, you’ve need of them, otherwise you’d not had such overwhelming feelings when greeting each other,”

“Um. I’m glad you think so highly of us, but, um, ma’am, we’re actual genuine thieves-”

“Well of course you are, lovey,”

“Um,”

“A proclivity for kleptomancy has no bearing on the content of your character, lovey! Now; gather up your friends, and we’ll get things sorted,”

I smile a bit helplessly at Daryl, who sighs, and grins. We agree; we gather; and we follow the two old ladies through town, eventually gathering three old men well into the very last days of their lives.

I’ve never gotten a straight answer about what makes a stone with a hole through it a seestone;
mostly, I get sort of… circumnavigational explanations.

Tontatta, or Dwarves, aren’t very big; on average, they fit somewhere between two and a half centimeters, and twenty centimeters. Mostly, they’re the size of Island Rats, just under twelve centimeters or so; Lindy is huge, being a full thirty centimeters tall.

They have big eyes, small mouths, and tend towards pointiness; pointy noses, pointy ears, pointy little tails- ah, yes, and a so called ‘Digger’ Tontatta has a tail. It’s usually pretty big and bushy, and those Tontatta that have them are quite proud of them. It’s not quite to the level of Gyojin Pride, and Merjin Pride, but it’s going to get there in a few lifetimes if something doesn’t change.

As for Seestones, I still don’t quite understand what they really are, or how they work, or why any stone with a hole in it won’t do; but they are, and they work, and no ordinary stone quite cuts the throat. A Tontatta with a Seestone can pop up to Bigjob size, or shrink back down to regular, no Devil Fruit needed- though, they do have to have possession of their stone the whole time, and only very special stones can do it to other people. I also understand it takes stamina to actually shrink or grow- once you’re in either state, it’s done, but getting there requires genuine effort, and staying there needs the stone.

My sister talks with Mab and Sanji for a good long hour; and in that time, me and the Mice go through the village and- with ample help from the Old Croakies- each of my friends gets their own seestone.

From Mister Tsung-sung, Daryl gets a tiny pearl earring. It looks like a tiny chip of mother-of-pearl in his ear, and Mister Tsung-sung told him that it’d be a small seed pearl on a post setting through his ear when Bigjobbed. Daryl doesn’t have pierced ears, so- after a bit of bickering- I decided that Genny would do it, as I’m not actually that great with blood on an ally. Everyone else was very jealous of Daryl’s seestone- apparently, pearls that work as seestones are very rare and very powerful.

Mister Scrump took a curmudgeonly liking to Maya, and bestowed upon her his seestone - which, in his younger years, he’d added a long chain to, as it made him appear rather dashing. It’s a hematite on a long chain of something that isn’t metal- or it is, just not magnetic, because the hematite is definitely magnetic. From the quiet conversation he had with Maya, and her quiet contemplation of the seestone after, I got the feeling there’s more to it than just magnetism; what, I don’t actually know.

Hildy got Mrs. Fairfax’ seestone- a ruby polished so it doesn’t shine, set in with a number of other rubies so’s it’s shaped like a raspberry. She started wearing it as a purse; and apparently, Bigjob, the raspberry doesn’t change size- but the chain it’s on does.

Shrinking Violet was different; we all went to see her, but Jellybean was the only one of us who had the guts to approach. I’m… I’m not good, with dying people, especially if it’s slow and the dying is a woman, I- can’t. Maybe not ever.

Sometimes people can hang on until their loved ones arrive for a final goodbye. Genny says this occurs more with a slowly progressing disease like congestive heart failure or dementia. Strength of will; deciding to fight… that can buy someone a bit more time.
Mom’s disease was slow, right up until the last few months, when she just didn’t have any fight left in her- and then, of course, it wasn’t slow at all. It took her, and we weren’t there, and she wasn’t ready to go.

Mom told us, when we went to Bonchon’s the second time after her funeral- that’s what we decided on, instead of a diner- that dying the way she did is like falling asleep when you’re sick, or injured. You fight it for a while because of the pain; and you fight it for longer because you aren’t ready, or you’ve got too much to do, still. It always catches up eventually, though; the mortality rate has been holding steady at a hundred percent for a long time now.

For Mom, her days were a mixed bag. Some days, she didn’t want to wake up at all, see what being so ill was doing to us- and some days, she said, she was so happy to be so loved by us, and so immensely guilty that we had to care for her, and not the other way around… Mom’s lungs filled with poison-air, and then holes, and then she couldn’t breathe at all- and when it spread to her gills… that was it. I stole the materials for the medical-grade Wards that protected us from her illness, and Genny set them; and I’ve never regretted that for a moment.

Mom said that the hardest thing about being sick- about knowing you’re not going to get better, that your illness is going to kill you- for her, at least, it was realizing that there was nothing she should have been doing, only things she could do. She thought she should have been doing a lot of things, at first- cooking for us, making sure we went to school, a thousand and one things- but what she could do? Be there; listen; teach us of her homeland, of her brothers, her mother and father and the world she left behind for the sake of her family.

Mom actually wrote a pamphlet for publication; and she had Genny re-write it. It’s called ‘so, you’re going to die. sorry.’ and my favorite part goes like this:

‘when i was told that i was dying and that it would only be a few years i took my children and packed our things and we went on a holiday. i moved us to a better apartment building, in a safer neighborhood, and used the last of my social favors to make sure that i’d get to keep it, so long as i lived. i sold off what i had meant to sell; i sat with each of my children and got a portrait with them; i wrote them letters for those events i knew i’d never be there to see. weddings; birthdays; childbirths; all of them. i wrote a book, and found a passion for writing romance novels; i wrote this pamphlet, because although the charities and doctors like to tell you to always keep your hopes up, there comes a time when all you can do is accept the inevitable- there is no hope, there is nothing they can do except comfort you, and yes: you’re going to die. sorry.

‘the hard part about knowing your death is imminent is realizing that, even though there’s so much you still want to do, think you still need to do- still mean to do- write your will, write letters to your brothers and phone your mother and burn everything that you don’t ever want the world to find and return what you borrowed and give away what you’d prefer not to be allocated by impersonal lawyers, mail drops, banks, and wills- catch up with that uncle, see the sky again, and- but the truth is, you don’t need to do any of that. really, you don’t. it’s your time- the last you’ll ever have- and it might take a lot of dying to take that deep breath and let go of the stress of living, but i promise you- i swear it- sometimes the only thing to be done is sit yourself up in bed, put on the radio, and pop open a nice cold beer while you yell at the damnfools wrecking this season’s game.

‘there is nothing to be ashamed of; no reason for guilt. it’s easy to feel like you absolutely need to make every moment count; but if you are content in that moment, it counted as much as it needed to. i don’t want to give the impression that all i do is drink and listen to the radio, even if all my food is smoothie-flavor now and i lack the strength to do more than hobble to the bathroom. i listen to
audiobooks, too, and symphonies, and operas; i get wheeled into philoms, and through beautiful parks; i get propped up in my chair and i people watch; i get taken to wild band concerts, which takes down the mood for everyone else. Good; able-bodied fuckers deserve a little emotional discomfort now and then, my physical discomfort is only going to kill me in, oh, a year or so. probably less, actually.

‘it took me a few tries to decide that it was okay to “waste” some time with a beer and a radio; or at the park; or at the movies; or in a nightclub; and not feel guilty about it. i try not to make long term goals or set too high expectations for myself. i found a hobby that lets me escape- my head, my body, my fury, my pain, my sorrow. i listen to a lot of books, and i mull things over, and i try my best to enjoy the little things.

‘you don’t have to keep thinking about what can’t be fixed, and what isn’t going to change. there is no winning against an enemy that refuses the very concept of the struggle. we are all dying; every second, every day, is another second and day closer. today, tomorrow, yesterday, forever; all of those moments are valuable. how much would you pay for another minute? young and healthy, you would have put a tangible price on it; now, when you can see that your minutes are running out, there’s almost nothing you wouldn’t pay- and if it hurts (and it always hurts, and it’s always ugly and undignified and awful, every time, for every person), you’d pay anything at all. because, in that next minute, some bright spark might find a way to heal you.

‘i am forty-eight at the time of this writing. i will not live to see my daughters come of age- i might not even live to see them gain apprenticeships. i won’t see them move out, go to trade school or med school or college, fall in love, get married, have children of their own, any of that. i won’t be there to comfort their hurts; nor crow their triumphs; lament their despairs; to support, to defend, to care, to watch over, to cherish- i will be gone.

‘there are no placating words that are quite big and heavy enough. nothing to say; nothing to do. some days, it’s like i’m already dead; my children can’t help but weep for me, and i for them. i can’t tell them everything is going to be okay; because i’m dying as i write this, and by the time you read it, i will be dead. they know it; i know it; there is no easy way out.

‘but there is one way out. Make the best of it. i’m not blowing money left, right, and center- because i want to leave it behind for whatever debts remain, i want them to have… something. anything- even though it’s a paltry substitute for, well, me. quit smoking; quit having sex for money i don’t even need. i got everything together for them, for when i’m gone- my son, my oldest… it’ll be hard on him, the end. The End.

‘most of what i put together is all stuff they don’t even remember; lots of pictures i took of them all when they were just guppies, just littles, just mine and no one else’s; stuff they won’t remember and i won’t be there to tell them. who will tell them how they were potty trained? who will tell them they’ve never liked lima beans and that it’s okay if they never do? early moments of wonder- first words, exact times of birth, the day they all went to preschool and came back without nappies… i want my children to have these memories.’

I couldn’t read on, after that. It was… too much. Jellybean’s seestone is small; a tiny ruby inside a cage of physalis-shaped amber. The amber is the seestone, not the ruby; and Jellybean swallowed the whole thing, rather than find some way to carry it around.

The Croakies are large- Pithiea is large, even though age has shrunken her and made her body...
crumble on itself, and so it doesn’t surprise me that Lindy is the one to get her seestone. It’s a pair of raw opal earrings, meant for a Bigjob child; and Lindy herself is so big, she can actually wear them as intended. The posts are a little thick for anyone else, but it turns out Lindy used to wear gauges. This was a surprise to all of us except Quil; as was Quil’s seestone, except to Lindy.

Apparently, he’s started changing up his style- Quil says that always keeping to one way of thinking is just a recipe for stagnation, and he’s always wanted to wear things like this. There are weirder things to base your style off of than a beautiful black lace choker, with teardrops of black stone falling from the empty cameo at the center.

And then, of course, I was informed that contrary to what I might have wanted to do today, I wouldn’t be accompanying my sister in her quest- not by Missus Mab, mind. No; that were Mister Sanji what told me so.

Well.

Missus Mab… she’s real hard about some things, but really, she’s a soft touch, and rather pathetic when it comes to punishment. Sanji… isn’t.

“I don’t mind you going off to do your own thing; and I- I’m sorry for pushing you so hard, I just… I got scared, I was scared you’d be trapped with no way to protect yourself. I’m sorry; I should have said so, rather than pushing you so hard you ran away-”

“No, no- that’s not why I ran, I’m sorry; I just… everyone treats me like I’m made of glass, and I’m not! I hate it! I thought- I thought, if I go on an adventure of my own, maybe… this is just made it worse!”

“You’re not glass! I- oh, botheration. I don’t have the words; but you’re not glass. I think you can do what you set out to do, truly; I just… I want you to take your sister and her Mouseketeers with you,”

“…okay,”

“It’s not because I think you can’t handle it- I think you can, actually. But… you’re safer in a group, is all. You notice how none of us, not even Captain, go around on our own? Fern is always with Robin- you might not have seen her, but she saw you, at that Tea Room Fern likes,”

“-Really?”

“Oh yes; seers, real seers, with as prodigious a talent as your sister, are prime bait for those who would take slaves. And you, darling; you’re very nearly a full on doctor, young and compassionate and terribly effective; the moment someone thinks they could steal you away, they’ll try it. Thankfully, you’ve a sister who’s rather good at stealing things back,”

“Oh. Well- that was my instinct also; also, are, um, am I very much in trouble?”


“I’ll skip the first part, and go to the rest- Beds empty! No note! Provisions and weapons and the lot
of you- gone! Could have died! Been stolen! Been eaten! Out of my mind with worry; did you even think, you foolish girl? Never, as long as I’ve lived, have I felt such terror- and here you are, fine and dandy and- Genevieve, please, for my sake- Don’t you ever do that again! Never was this much trouble as a kid, I swear to th’gods-”

And I suddenly realise that it’s not snowmelt in my hair- it’s Mister- it’s Sanji’s tears. His voice is deep and growly and he sounds so angry, but he’s crying and his arm around me is shaking, and- I need to-

I wriggle around and wrap my arms around Sanji’s chest. He wraps his arm around me and squeezes- not so tight it hurts, but he was scared. I scared him; and I’m sorry, aw, please- please don’t cry, Mister Sanji, I won’t do it again-

“Um, actually Miss Pleasant, we have a Code,”

“What, really?”

“Sure- us being professional thieves, and pirates, it’s more correct to say we have two. Um- Ellie knows the Thieve’s Code inside out, she helped define, codify, and record most of t’damn thing; as for the Pirate Code… Hm. Well- we’re just junior pirates, so we get taught parts of the Code as it comes up. Mab says that our copy of the Piratica Codex should be right next to the Logbook, but I’ve never seen it,”

“Um. So- what is it though?”

“So far as I can tell, it’s supposed to be the rules and regulations of pirates and piracy; it’s really more like, um, guidelines?”

“Daryl, you’re just confusing her- let me do it.”

“Sorry Boss; go right ahead,”

“So. The Code of the Pirate Brethren, also known as the Code, is a code of conduct used among pirates. It’s a revered collection of rules and laws, chronicled in the original Pirata Codex, which is kept safe by the Sirens of Shipwreck Island. The Code was written during the second Brethren Court, a governing council of the great Pirate Lords- the Shichibukai were originally the enforcers of the Pirate King, I think? But there used to be Nine, not Seven, and… I dunno, I zoned out during that part. Anyway, the original Code didn’t have Davey Back Fights or Captain’s Orders in it; and it was set down by the pirates Morgan and Bartholomew. In practice, only the keepers of the Code- the Sirens, and by extension, the Fae- keep the Code as Law; everyone else uses it more like guidelines for conduct between pirates on the high seas,”

“Okay- so, it’s a set of rules you’re supposed to follows if you have to, I guess; and it was Two of the Old Pirate Lords, Morgan and Bartholomew, who figured it out and wrote it down, and that’s what alls pirates have lived by ever since,”

“Yeah. The current Keeper of the Code is Dracule Perona, Queen of the Sirens; and one of the actual well-known requirements to become Pirate King is to swear by the Code. Like, there’s an
actual Oath and everything. Some pirates flaunt the Code; and some keep to it like it was set down by Gods, not men; but the truth is...

“It’s just guidelines, innit; and it’s what’s in your heart. If you can do it, you’ll do it; and if you can’t, you can’t. Obvious, like,”

“.Yeah, s’right. Sometimes, you’ve got to accept you’re a pirate, hang the Code, shoot the rules, and get on with it. As for the actual rules - as we know of them? Firstly: make friends, but wisely. All pirates have the Right to Parlay; Whoever spots a treasure-laden ship can choose the best of the crew-share weapons for themselves; every crewmember is to have an equal share in any treasure found; the crew accountant is to keep track of all expenses and treasure; spoils are shared on seniority- captain has first pick, followed by first mate, second, and so on,”

“Mm. Then there’s- any man who falls behind is left behind; an act of War can only be declared by the Pirate King, who would then have the power to parley with shared adversaries; the King can only be elected by popular vote by all Nine Pirate Lords-”

“Wait, but there are only seven?”

“Exactly; um- The Pirate King must swear the King’s Oath on the genuine Pirata Codex; any person who refuses to serve aboard a pirate ship must die; trading for products fair and square means the seller can do as they like, including reselling at profit or freeing them as they like-”

“Ah! So that’s why there’s a clear distinction between slavers and pirates- ors an unclear distinction, I should says,“

“Yeah; it really is a matter of what’s in a man’s heart. Last bits I know of, then Ellie can tell you the Thieve’s Code, which is much less highfalutin’; Pirates are to respect their fellows on the account. Knowingly targeting and sinking other pirate ships is strictly forbidden; and killing a surrendered enemy is not allowed. There’s also regulations on what color your eyepatch can be, and what size of peg leg you can have, but no one really enforces those unless it’s a doctor;”

“There’s a rule about not snitching out other pirates, Miss-”

“Doctor Trafalgar! Sorry, is there?”

“Yes; unless they have proved themselves so heinous as to destroy all faith in their piratical prowess, no pirate may turn another pirate in to the authorities. Am I to understand that there is a Code of conduct for thieves?”

“Ah- yes, sir. Did… you not know that I and my fellows were thieves?”

“I’m… still having issues with discerning which Suntide is which- excepting Sancho. He’s rather obvious,“

“Quite. Well, yes; Thieves have their own Code of conduct, as well as a generalized code. Do you want to hear about it, along with Miss Pleasant?”

“If it wouldn’t be an imposition,”

“Certainly. Um- so, throughout the world there is a code among thieves especially, but also including forgers, fences, chimney sweeps, conmen, and so on; there is a code of conduct for those who would set themselves aside from society. Unlawful we may be; but we do have standards, and a way of governing our own behavior. These are generally understood; but the actual Code is written in Thieves Runes, as put down by Gin Rummy, Roulette, Le Chat Orange, The Mouseketeers, and
Doctor Danger, in the *Thievius Codicies*—as each Thief listed contributed a distinctive… volume, I guess you could call it, of the *Thievius*. These are all general guidelines, with each volume being more a collection of stories in which the various rules were obeyed, or broken—and why,"

“Interesting—so, unlike the Pirate’s Code, it’s understood from the start that there is no real rule or law; these are just a collection of manners that marks one as being more or less ‘proper’ in the society of thieves. And, by having each volume of the *Thievius* written by a different thief, with the examples being stories… why, each thief that reads the full *Thievius* must come to their own conclusion about what is and isn’t allowed among thieves,”

“Er—yes, Master Robin; that’s exactly so. Mostly, the leader of the gang is concerned with the *Thievius*; it’s their responsibility to ensure propriety amongst their followers, after all. The specific rules and guidelines vary from organization to organization; but what’s true in all proper gangs is that those who uphold the Thieves Code are Men of Honor, or Women of Esteem,”

“Ah—I had wondered where that particular phrase came from among pirates—tell me, Miss Eleanor, is it particularly common for thieves to become pirates?”

“Eh—more common in earlier eras than now, Doctor Trafalgar. Piracy used to be the only way for lawbreakers to make a fine fortune; nowadays, there are other methods to acquire money you didn’t earn yourself,”

“I see. So—what are the actual rules, then?”

“Well—a Thief should have nothing to do with the authorities; be it participating in politics,”

“—which means voting, running for an official office, backing a political party—”

“—nor should they join in a government or religious organization—”

“—though that’s not to say one may not have a belief in the gods, only that one must not serve the interests of temple or state,”

“A Thief should not serve in the military or accept any offers from the government or prison authority—”

“—which is not to say you can’t help or hinder the military, or do for or unto the government or prison authority,”

“A Thief should not cooperate with authorities when detained or if another thief is under investigation or arrest; nor should they testify against them—”

“—with the understanding that this is only in relation to theft; one need not keep silence about rape, murder, abuse, and so on,”

“A Thief should keep secret the information about the whereabouts of accomplices, such as dens, districts, hideouts, safe houses, aliases, information centers, fences, distributors, and so on—”

“—without exception, actually,”

“A Thief should make good on promises given to other thieves,”

“Common sense, really,”

“A Thief should help other thieves in need, both by emotional and material support,”
“-Eeh. This one requires discretion; but- yeah, only decent,"
“A Thief must not lose their reasoning abilities when drunk or high. Intoxication of any kind is not an excuse for breaking any of the codes.”
“Word,”
“A Thief should never gamble without being able to cover losses,”
"-Unless, of course, those losses were to those who do not uphold the Thieves Code; funnin’ with your mates is one thing, losing to a right bastard is quite another-“
"-It is acceptable, proper, and quite expected to cheat,”
"-But getting caught cheating is just bad form, innit?"
“A Thief should never, under any circumstances, have a ‘legitimate’ job-”
"-Unless, of course, it’s to provide cover or information for a Job job,"
“One should live only on money obtained through gambling or theft, which in this usage refers to any respectable criminal activity, and relying on other thieves. Being a sellsword is only legitimate if one does not accept payment from, nor work for, authorities,"
"-Um, well, actually, it’s easier to have a proper alibi if you’ve got a job of some kind- means there’s a witness to say that you were somewhere at certain times, even when you weren’t-”
"-And not all Jobs actually pay that well- Anyway. A Thief should cut ties with their family: parents, siblings, cousin, kin. I don’t do that,”
“But the Mouseketeers do,”
“A Thief should never have a family of their own: No marriage. No children; No reason to ever have their True Name written down in any official record,”
“-That don’t mean you can’t have as many lovers as you’d like; and most career Thieves find that it’s easier to have a family and just never mention it, rather than try to avoid it entirely. This rule is the least enforced of them all,”
“A Thief should teach the criminal way of life to youth with potential,”
“Yep,”
“A Thief should act within the underworld to protect the basic needs and rights of criminals and prisoners according to the extents and priorities set by the community- be it a gang, guild, residents in a given prison system, or neighborhood,”
“Yep,”
“A Thief should demand an inquiry and judgement by peers to resolve disputes in the event of a conflict between oneself and other thieves, or between thieves whenever possible,”
“This can become very complicated, depending on the dispute- or actual crime- in question; a lot of the Mouseketeers volume of the Thievius is actually about peer-dispute resolution, because the Mouseketeers are known to be extremely fair and morally sound; the Mice have called the cops on thieves before, and for good reason- thieves are not abusers, nor murderers, nor rapists, and we will
not shelter them that are,"

“A Thief should, if necessary, participate in peer-dispute inquiries if called upon. Le Chat Orange has proposed to the Thieves Council a sort of… well, internal affairs commission, because—"

“—because of the third rule in the Judgement Triad of the Thieves Code; A Thief should, in bringing a dispute to their peers for judgement, elect a neutral third party to present their side,"

“Yeah. Le Chat Orange has stated, multiple times, that for certain disputes there is no neutral party to present even one side, much less two; thus, their recommendation that there be a designated branch of thieves who- aside from being thieves- are neutral when these matters come up,"

“So far, it’s mostly been an issue of there being no single Thief-line or group of Thieves with the political clout, the sterling reputation for fairness and moral judgement, and the sheer numbers needed to do that Job right; the Mouseketeers could barely handle the strain of one Territory,"

“Finally, there are the Penalties- A Thief should punish any offending thief who breaks the Code as decided by the judgement of the community; be that a gang, guild, residents, or cellmates. Further, they must not resist carrying out the decision of punishing the offending thief who is found guilty of violating the Code,"

“Le Chat Orange is actually blacklisted from the major Thief events, because they—”

“Leave it, Daryl,”

“But—"

“Leave. It. Especially considerin’ no one can prove it was Le Chat Orange that did- well, you know,”

“Fine, alright; anyway, that’s the entirety of the Thieves Code we can say to outsiders; there’s more to it, of course, but the only thing you can know about those parts of the Code is that they exist, and we can’t tell you or show them to you because you aren’t thieves,"

I sigh at the expressions on Doctor Trafalgar and Master Robin’s faces; then again, they are pirates.

“In all honesty, the only rules that really matter are the same as with Pirates: what you’re willing to do, and what you aren’t. For instance, Le Chat Orange could have accepted that a wetworks team was dispatched to kill Bittergreen due to her unconscionable crime of killing the man who raped her and throwing his head into a massive fountain before screaming to the heavens that no man would ever again besmirch her honor- Le Chat Orange could have accepted that. Instead, Le Chat Orange stole Bittergreen away, and they still haven’t found her, and they still can’t prove that Le Chat did anything at all- except, of course, for the fact that Le Chat Orange said they’d do something about it,"

“Either you accept that for the most part, criminals are criminals and normal people- or you don’t, you can’t. But it’s true all the same, and it’ll all have to be put to rights one day. Erm- Miss Eleanor, aren’t you going to go with your sister to speaks with the Great Sage?”

“No; I rather got the impression from Mother Mayhay that I’m politely banned from approaching the grave,”
Lily pads lay on the surface of the dark, cold water; they aren’t the green I expect, more a dark purple-blue. When I rest my foot on one, it feels cold and slimy.

“Don’t stand on ‘em for longer than you have to, Miss; and best keep your questions for the Sage short, and to the point,“

“Aye; thank you for restoring my natural size, Mister Pollash,“

“Aw, t’wern’t nothin‘; go on, off with you,“

“Thank you, again,“

And then, I quickly walk across the lily pad stepping bridge, leaving my crewmates far behind. The fountain is much larger than it seems; some trick of architecture and landscaping hiding it’s true size from the eyes.

When you look at a normal frog or toad, one that’s of a size small enough to fit fully in the palm of your hand, it’s easy to forget that the docile-ish amphibian resting in the soft grass, or hiding in the rushes, or nestled in the leaves of a tree- that’s an ambush predator who’s secretly a cross between a ninja, a grappling hook, and a black hole. Humans aren’t the only animals that grow to giant proportions; all the animals of this world do, on occasion.

Our logbook mentions a Marine Toad named Yokozuna; he was about the size of the couch in the Galley. The Great Toad Sage is larger than our largest horse, Steady Walker- and Steady was meant for carriages.

Anything can be dangerous. The Great Toad Sage is particularly dangerous, however, because he’s not an ordinary toad; he’s a Giant Vampire Toad.

The Giant Vampire Toad is a particularly noxious amphibian which grows to weights of up to thirty pounds. It’s warty brown and yellow body is covered with sedative mucous, and two translucent membranes of slimy tissue connect it’s fore and rear limbs, enabling it to glide from treetop perches, much like a sugar glider. It’s forelimbs are fingered with small claws which enable the vampire frog to climb and to hold prey, and it possesses two rows of teeth on each jaw, each up to three centimeters long, sharp as razors, and secreting a powerful anticoagulant.

How do I know all of this? Fern loves amphibians.

How does it matter? It doesn’t, really, except that the Great Toad Sage is a Giant Vampire Toad the size of the Mini-Merry, and the only thing I can think of that he’d eat is… well. Me. Except, of course-
“Ah. A Merrow- you’ve no warmth in your veins, child; I’ve no taste for the blood of your kind,"

“That is a relief, Mister Great Toad Sage-”

“My name is Emerson, young lady- and I suppose you’re here to learn about that accursed sap, and those poer fools who haunt the Great Maple to this very day- well, I’ll tell you what I’ve told everyone else-”

“Um- I hardly believe in curses and ghosts that are tied to the very life’s blood of a living part of nature; so far as I know, trees can’t have those, excepting hanging trees,”

“Aye- hanging trees aren’t cursed, they’ve taken up special duties in service to the… hmph. I thought the same, when I first learned of the cursed sap. A maple grown tall in the hills, guarded by a river spirit where no river flows; it cannot be found except by those who already know where it is. And yet- find it, men did. And there be the tree; and within it’s mighty limbs, the sap. They took it, missin buckets and tubes and vats and tankers, they took it all; boiled that cursed sap into syrup, traded it, frittered it all away- for drink and food and pleasures of the flesh. But the more they gave away what was not theirs to give, the more they came to find- the drink would not cease their thirst, the food turned to ash in their mouths; all the flesh in the world could not slake their lusts. It is a curse that lives in the sap of that tree, Miss; Winnie Foster, gods rest her soul, set it in that tree when she poured out the Waters of Life,”

“Um-”

“Those Waters compelled all who knew of them with greed; and by their greed, they were consumed. Seek the tree not, Miss; you will find no joy in the sap it gives, nor in the taking of it-”

“Sage Emerson, I don’t want the sap!”

“…Hah?”

“I don’t want the sap! I’m searching out the tree for a branch, or perhaps directions to a sapling of it’s line- it’s a Red Maple, and… I’m making a flight broom, see, and-”

“Oh! Well. Ahurm. That shouldn’t be a problem, miss; it’s the sap that’s cursed, the wood ought to be fine- and I’ve heard the Old Man complain a time or two about branches grown too large and heavy for his trunk, so there shouldn’t be any problem with you taking a few off him,”

I grin up at the massive Toad Sage, who chortles happily- a jolt of cold lightning trickles down my spine- I hold very still and silent for a long moment.

“My- ahem! My apologies, Miss; I have not yet broken my Winter’s fasting. A moment, please,”

Then the Sage started to wheeze and cough up rocks. Big, brown rocks- one or two were the size of boulders, veined with rich seams of many different kinds of gemstone. But some were merely pebbles, or cobbles like I can barely see at the bottom of the fountain.
“Fill your pockets with as many stones as you can bear; then take you this ring- it bears my magic within, and will mark you out to the Pucca as a friend of mine. This leaf will be as your carriage- and my son, my own child, shall take you to the place where the waters of this fountain become the waters of the river in which the Pucca holds dominion,”

“Um- wait, what about my sister?”

The Sage grumbles, before turning to me with big, yellow eyes- “Would you truly deny her the opportunity to find what she’s been missing?”- and then, with barely a ripple in the water, he’s in and gone from my sight. An echo reaches me from below the waves-

“Don’t worry about trying to return my stones- particularly that ring! I make them as a hobby, I’m swimming in the damn things-”

And then, truly, he is gone.

I look back the way I have come, and see my sister Ellie talking with Daryl, and… it’s the first time they’ve been of a size with each other, and large enough for me to see their faces together.

I have everything Fern told me to bring- and with the Great Sage gone into the waters, there’s probably enough time for me to- right.

I set out the still-warm pancake on a plate, with it’s own cutlery, drizzle it with maple syrup- and set the whole arrangement in the tiny cave where Winnie Foster’s Grave is set. Then, I leave behind my worries, double check that my hatchet, candle, blanket, small pouch- which I put the toadstone ring in- and rope are settled, and lay securely. My guns and my pipe are ready, as well.

I fill my pockets with toadstones, and when the lily pad leaf rises from the black depths, I set down on it without fear.

I’m a Merrow, after all- I can breathe underwater.

The drop is cold and black and the light fades faster than I thought any light could; below, I can see a massive toad pulling a chain connected to the lily pad leaf, which is actually ceramic. We go down, and down, and down, and leave the World above far behind; I can’t hear the chirruping of birds, nor my sister’s laughter, nor anything other than the rushing of waves, all around.
So. The Mice have their own miniature house- it’s basically a regular house, just… doll-sized? It’s actually built for someone Lindy’s size, which means everything is just large enough for a child to consider a toy, but small enough for Lindy to consider regular. I think the doll brand, Barbarella? It’s the right size for this dollhouse, the actual dollies, I mean; everything in this house, too.

There are buckets of rooms in this house; Mab designed it so that each of the Mouseketeers got their own distinct room, plus a room adjacent specifically for wardrobe or whatever. It’s a beautiful set up- and the only reason I can’t move in is because there’s no way to keep hold of a seestone while sleeping. It’s a shame; it’s really a beautiful house. The floors are all walnut, and the ceilings have hand-plastered embossing. Like, I’m pretty sure this house- tiny though it is- is better than the mansions I’ve robbed.

The first thing we have to do to set up for an orgy is set out mattresses; they look like quilts, sort of. Then, we have to put waterproof sheet-covers over each mattress, followed by regular fitted sheets. All of this happens in the great room, which usually only has a couch and a miniature fire-Dial in the world’s dinkiest cast iron stove; but right now, there’s a miniature silk rug, and the mattresses with their sheets, and a bucket full of single-serve lube packets, and another full of condoms that Pleasant is diligently tearing into individual pieces.

Through the passthrough to the kitchen, I can hear Daryl and Hildy puttering around; Maya and Jellybean went off for drinks at the Daiso earlier, and Quil is helping Lindy and me with the ‘play’ area by setting up a big screen divider. On the other side is the other couch, moved in from the screened porch; and that’s where the coolers of drinks are going, once Maya and Jellybean get back. In the play space, we’ve also got tables of sex toys, soap, erotic manuals- you know, just… stuff.

Eventually, Daryl and Hildy are done- a platter of fruit and cheese, some roast beast sandwiches, and a few other finger foods, salted nuts and so on- and they’ve set their offerings out onto a low table. Jellybean and Maya soon come walking in with their offerings- coolers full of water bottles and ice, dental dams, coconut oil (which we’re all safe to eat), and… um, whatever else Maya wants to bring out from her room. She set the kettle to boil before she and Jelly left, and it’s starting to whistle now; she comes back with a… hahaha, a large selection of silicone sex toys, which go into a big stock pot followed by the kettle of boiling water. She fills the stockpot with more water, and sets the whole thing to boil- sanitize, really.

“Okay; so, my name is Daryl, and I’ll be leading our praise to the Goddess Hense today. We will give the pain of our pre-proceedings; we will give the pleasure of each others company. Praise be!”

“Praise!”

“Now; again, my name is Daryl, my safe word is ‘Hungerpang’, and I don’t like being restrained or bound in any way. I don’t do anal play of any kind. I like being stuffed, and kissing, and cuddling the best; and I prefer pet names and dirty talk of a positive nature- I don’t like shame or humiliation,”

“My name is Eleanor, and my safe word is ‘Chumbawumba’. I don’t like pain-play, and I’m not very vocal. I’m most familiar with most vanilla forms of sex, but I’m not opposed to doing kinkier things; you’ll have to talk me through things like bondage or, um… bondage is the kinkiest thing I know of, so. Um. Yeah- um. I don’t… nevermind, it’s fine;”

“Hello! My name is Maya, and my safe word is ‘Courgette’. I don’t like penetrative sex- I will use my mouth, but nothing below my waist. I like using strapons, and other dildoes,”
“Hey, m'name’s Hildegarde- Hildy, please. My safe word is ‘Aluminium’; and I don’t like being on top. I’ll do it if we’re both bottoms, or if you’ve never done the sex act before, but I’d prefer to be on bottom, or receiving. Uh- no real objections to anything otherwise, I’m down for whatever,”

“My greetings; I am Jellybean. My safe word is ‘Nivea’; and I don’t do ‘Master/Servant’ play at all. I’m versatile, meaning I’m a top or bottom- er, giver or receiver- and I have something of an oral fixation,”

“So, uh, I’m Quilaby. My safe word is ‘doubledouble’, and I don’t like using my mouth- um, kissing other people, I, uh, I have sensitive teeth? I had a lot of cavities, so, um, I- I don’t like anything in my mouth. Like, at all. I’ll try anything else, and I really like pain-play, but, um, I’ll do anything, really,”

“I am Arlinda Rader Haai; my safe word is ‘carnivore’. I don’t like pain-play, and I don’t like being bound. I have a tendency to bite quite hard during orgasm, so if that’s not something you’re interested in, let me know- sex is not all about an orgasm, after all,”

“Oh, um- h-hello, my name is Pleasant. My safe word is, uh, ‘blueberry’. I, uh, I’ve never had sex befores, um, ever? Like, at all- about the farthest I’ve ever gottens is heavy cuddling and some kissing, so, um, please be carefuls with me?”

“Okay; now, this is standard for every orgy presided over by Hense, so- we will now go over the use of the Safety Tools. This is the penile condom- it goes on the penis or dildo to be inserted into someone’s ass, puss, or mouth; like so. Make sure there are no air bubbles or air pockets between the condom and the surface of the phallus; use the pinch and roll method- like so- to ensure a good fit. This is the vaginal condom- it goes only in the puss, or in the penile pocket if necessary. Being very careful not to rip the condom, or scratch the interior surface of yourself or your partner; close the ring at the bottom, and press the bottom of the condom into the puss or pocket until you reach the base. The condom is plenty long enough to reach all the way to the outside,”

“Um,“

“Yes, Pleasant?”

“I’m allergic to latex,”

“Ah- just a moment; this is refresher for everyone here,”

“Okay,”

“So. This is a dental dam; use it as a barrier between your mouth and any of the lower orifices. This is lube; use it during anal play, and whenever you feel things need to move a little more smoothly. Please try and keep the packaging contained to the trash can. Now- I know a few of us are allergic to latex or silicone- so! If you cannot use a condom, dental dam, or provided lube, please clean the area with either a baby wipe, or with coconut oil; then, do as you’d like,”

“What are we doing with our clothes, Daryl?”

“Well- shoot, forgot the basket. Um- Ellie, could you lead everyone in disrobing?”

“Sure thing; okay. I’ll start by taking off my shirt, and then we’ll go from there- okay? Ah- and everyone, if you want to partner up with someone, or join someone else’s fun, you need to ask and get clear verbal consent first,”
I get a general assent; and, as I skim out of my soft sweater, my friends all take off their clothing too. I take the time to shake my bra out of my sweater, and my panty-band out of my jeggings, and my socks out of my boots. My legs writhe and twist over each other, pulsing with blood now they’re free of the restraints of my boots.

Daryl comes back with a slithery rasp against the hardwood. His clothing is last to migrate to the pile growing in the basket; I mosey around and gather up everyone’s shoes, to put them on the shoe rack. I double check and make sure the doors and windows are locked, the curtains drawn, and everything lays well- and it does. Then, I grab a music player and a few ‘sexy’ albums, and go right back.

Everyone is naked now.

Daryl has very wide hips, for a man, and his tail is very long and comes to a fine point. He has two broad fins just behind his hips, bracketing the small of his back. His slit is bumpy, and a little spiny; and it’s oozing a thin trail of white, and I can smell it and it smells like… saltwater. He has a very sharp hourglass figure, and a full broad chest. Little specks of green and brown dot his skin like freckles, and without his bright frilly clothing, all I can see is his masculinity- the very maleness of him.

Maya’s breasts are very large, and very pale- her nipples are slightly brown, pinkening under our attention, and her veins are very blue through her skin. The cupercals along her ribcage are pinker still, and that flush travels down the middle of her body and down between her legs and all along the open thighs and over the smooth puffy slit nestled like a prayer in her crotch. Without her clothing, the muscle tone of her body is visible too- the sharp planes of her belly and the hard angles of her shoulders, the ripples and bulges of her thighs, her calves…

Hildy has thick brown hair, and it’s actually very soft- her whole body is covered in fine, light hair, except between her legs where it’s a dark, thick black. Her breasts are soft, too; warm and soft and they smell very faintly of cherries. I’ve licked between her legs before, when she was Small and I was Big; and it felt like licking the surface of a peach, or sometimes a nectarine. Her tail is only fluffy on the very tip- I don’t know if she clips the rest, or if that’s the only spot where it grows long.

Jellybean is curvy and soft and changing from transparent to translucent- especially her slit, which has puffed almost comically large, and is turning a dark, blushing red. Her head-frills have flapped wide, and become spotted and covered with dainty trails of color. Her breasts are almost peach-pink, and her nipples a darker cherry; her lips are like plums. Her skin is absurdly soft, and smooth, and she really does like using her mouth and having a mouth used on her.

Quil is surprisingly shy; his spiny slit is very dark red, and his legs are almost closed. The rest of his body is following suit, and he can barely look at anyone straight on; he’s very cute, with excellent muscle definition and very soft looking skin.

Lindy isn’t shy at all; her slit has a natural blue cast to it, and her hair is thick and blue, down around her shoulders. Her breasts are small, and her nipples are dark blue-brown, hard as little stones. She’s wrapped her webbed hand around Quil’s, and he’s slowly starting to relax.

Pleasant is thin- thin limbs, thin, narrow breasts, short hips and small shoulders- she’s small, is the thing, and definitely the least comfortable of us all, right after Quil. She can barely sit still, and she can’t look at anyone at all- she’s flushed so red, it’s almost erotic. Her nipples are hard and brown, and a large fluffy tail wrapped and tucked in front of her blocks me from seeing her puss- I don’t know if she has a pussy, or a slit, or what.
I want to help her relax, a little- but... Daryl...

Daryl lands a firm pinch on my ass, and strokes gentle fingers through my wavy blond hair. I jolt, and my tits bounce with my movement- they're very bouncy, to my bemusement. Daryl smirks, and holds up- oh, a hair comb, and a tail brush. Hmmmm...

Tail.

I take the tail brush, and calmly weave my way over to Pleasant; Daryl slinks around the other side of the table and couch, and we both sit on either side of her, my many thighs to her one, and Daryl’s tail to her other.

“Hi,”
“Hey there,”
“U-uhm. Um. H-hello, um-”

“Woah, hey, it’s okay- you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, and you’re- what’s wrong, Pleasant?”

“Everyone else is so… muscular, but I’m just sticks, I’m- I’m not pretty-”

“Hm. I know you don’t want to hear platitudes like ‘you’re so beautiful’, or ‘you’re gorgeous’- but how about ‘maybe you’re in good company?’”

“Or- maybe we like that you aren’t muscular like everyone else?”

“...S-so, it’s really okay, um, that, that I’m not... well built?”

“Of course, Pleasant!”

“Mm- I like the way you look, yeah,”

“A-alright. Um; do y-yous, ah, you want to brush my tail and hairs?”

“Yeah, if that’s alright with you?”

“Mm, yes please,”

“Um. Sure; please take care of me,”

I tug Pleasant’s tail out from around her hips and belly, revealing a thick tuft of caramel stippled with black guardhairs, all wrapped around a thick, meaty tail. It’s not prehensile, but it is quite sensitive to touch- that’s why brushing or caring for one is so intimate in Tontatta society.

I begin at the tip, and carefully scruff through the fur, making sure there are no big pieces in the hair; then again, with a tighter focus, checking for medium sized pieces; and then, at last, the brush. Daryl,
on the other side, has already started combing Pleasant’s hair.

As my hands stroke over her soft tail, I can see the anxiety draining out of her; the soft coo that comes out of her is certainly adorable, as is the little squeak she makes when she hears herself make it. Praise be, she is cute- and, when she is soft and loose and dripping-ready, Daryl and I lead her from Rest to Play.

Daryl’s tail is long and thick and very sturdy; using it as a brace or a grip is… par for the course, really. You know, I’ve never actually licked someone’s crotch before, when the crotch in question was the right size? I mean- when we were all of a size… I mean- I mean-

It’s… not bad. It’s kinda sour, like keifer that’s been let age for too long, and kinda sweet, and it smells like sweat- I have to push hair out of the way with my hands, and Daryl holds Pleasant’s legs up so she doesn’t accidentally strangle me… I don’t know.

I had fun doing it- and Pleasant had fun too… but. I guess I thought there’d be more to it than just… this? Maybe I don’t like this- there’s more to sex than-

Hm.

I- need to think.

I distangle my legs from Pleasant and Daryl, and quietly watch as Daryl strokes up Pleasant’s stomach, between her legs, along her thighs and the backs of her knees and the base of her tail, coiling himself around her like a snake taking a nap and drawing her up, up, up the long ruffled ridge of his anterior and the way her face turns red and shuddery-

Until he sets her over the blooming flush of his crotch and thrusts himself inside her, the sharp gasp and moan and the way Pleasant’s hair is thrown back her long neck a pale column of flushing and the aching want in every centimeter of her-

Her legs lock around his waist, and her tail thrashes- left, right, left right- as Daryl gives her the ride of her life, white cum foaming and dripping between them and down his tail and into the sheets. Her cries reach a feverous chant of ’yes yes yes-’ before with a hiss and a splatter, clean waters gush from between them and her cries become moans and she writhes in Daryls arms and cleaves to him tight tight her arms locked around his chest and her face gasping and weeping with pleasure.

Daryl slows his pace just enough to let Pleasant come back from that wonderfeeling, and then with a lurch she’s on her back and he atop her-

His hips find another slapping rhythm, this one designed to dig in deep and scrub every twitching nerve and sinew left untouched before. Pleasant all but comes unglued, her thin clawed fingers scrabbling desperately for something- anything-

I give her one of my legs, and slowly slither up underneath her, pillowing her straining head and neck in my empty lap. I glance up at Daryl, who only grins at me with excitement; then, my legs act on their own. One slips down between them, a sucker latching onto her clit and she all but looses her mind; another finds her left breast, another her right, and her nipples and she squeals -

I glance around the room, and see-
Maya thrusting her strapon cock between Jellybean’s closed thighs, her whole body curved around cupping cradling protective soft sweet-

Lindy biting Quil everywhere she can reach, pleasure made a fool of his face-

And Hildy, watching… me.

I revel in it- the pleasure screams of Pleasant beneath me, the thick ooze dripping from her well-worried puss, the sharp gasp and collapse of Daryl atop her and the little yelp she gives in return; the way both of them sigh as I caress them-

And then I leave them, and turn my attention to Hildegarde- Hildy. She’s pretty, with her hair down-pretty all the time, but with her hair loose there’s a relaxation that comes over her… I slink over to her, and ask-

“Can we?”

“Of course,”

I start by just… touching. Her hair, her skin, kisses on her smiling face and my tongue her tongue and all the world is- mine-

I am not- I am not afraid-

-cold and dark and bare as bones-

-sleep forever in my embrace-
I’m sorry- I’m sorry- I don’t-
Please stop touching me I can’t-

I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry-
Chu-

chumbawumba

chumbawumba
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Please please don’t leave me alone-
When I come to, I’m in the center of a pile of steadily breathing- I’m cuddled together with all my friends, naked and warm and soft together. I feel strange.

I know, in my mind, that I’m safe- but my heart won’t stop racing. I feel cold, and I can’t- I can’t stop shaking, but I’m- cold it’s cold it’s cold-

I have to pee-

So. I have cyclic anxiety attacks now. I- need to do. Something. About that.

It’s usually a fun time, being Ellie’s Second. We met- well, way at the beginning of the Second Golden Age, about six years ago maybe?

Doesn’t matter- we just… clicked. She’s ambitious, is Ellie- doesn’t show it much, but she wants, she Wants, and she is only satisfied a little when she gets it. She’s also thoughtful, and generous- for her… I don’t think stealing for things was ever her real passion. Ellie steals to steal- it’s the rush of it she likes, the complicated mess of figuring out how to get past this and that, apprasing what she’s stolen and selling it for a fine price…

Time’s like this, I remember the great honor of being Ellie’s Second. She trusts me- she trusts me to protect her, keep her secrets, keep her safe - hold her while she shakes with fear and terror and all the things she doesn’t let herself feel when there’s work needs doing.

I have to say, there’s a silver piece in this bag of dross- I’m finally of a size to wrap her up in my
coils, and hold her tight while the nightmares chew at her.

Hildy and Pleasant and Lindy and Quil got the house squared away, our food stored, our sheets and things put to laundering; Jelly an’ me, we got Ellie in her jimmjams and up to her full size, and us too-all of us. I’m in my sarong ; Maya in her plushie tracksuit ; Hildy in her tank top and lacy short-shorts ; Jellybean in her favorite see-through cape thing , like seriously, it’s barely still long enough and it’s missing sections of lace; Quil in his lacy underwear, and how we missed his style for so long when all of his underwear is like that is beyond me; Lindy, in her silk shorts and her cotton haori and that’s it; Pleasant, in her grey onesie that puts her tits up and out and full and fffffuck , I’m still so horny-
And, lastly, Ellie, in her tiger-print one piece with the side cuts because she hates having cloth tight to her gills.

We’re all settled on the couch in the Galley, Lindy and Quil and Maya rummaging for snacks in the Milk Fridge; and I, I am wrapped around my best friend. I’m not sure what set her off- I didn’t see anything different about this time, we’ve used ice cubes before to play with… Hildy likes using frozen dildoes, and so far as I know, Ellie’s never had an issue with cold…

Except-

Shit-

Aaaugh-

Wait no, it’s Genny. She’s covered in something clear and glossy, which means it was sticky when it was wet, and on her back rests three massively long trunks of red maple wood; her hair is tangled like a briar patch, and festooned with red twigs and tiny red leaves and pieces of barkwood. Her left eye is blacked, and her entire right side is encrusted with dried mud and tiny stones and river-muck cracked hard and crumbled away where her body has moved too vigorously for it to cling.

Dried blood bisects her face further, so it is only now I can see the pride in her bearing; triumph and joy light her every fiber, and though her hands are crusty with blood, and some nails are falling away, and some teeth are missing, and she shuffles like an old old thing- she was victorious, in whatever venture she set for herself. It’s not even sunset yet- dunno what she’s been doing, but she’s certainly been doing it! Pale as milk she is, and swaying as she stands- and so, bless them, I don’t even have to ask.

Hands grasp me, and lead me gently to the table where I have broken my fast before; the hands place my own in a pool of warm waters, and cleanse my face and stroke my hair to smooth lengths, and press a cup of tea to my lips, which I drink.

I let the three branches I got from Marple rest against the table, and let myself relax into my seat- it’s over, it’s done, I’m home.

I fall on a sandwich and devour it whole. A cup of tea and a small plate of spinach puffs, which bring me from the depths of deprivation back to mere everyday teenage hunger- mmm! Spinach and artichoke dip with bits of-
“Excuse me, are these bacon bits?”

“Oh- yes, in the spinach puffs,”

“They’re really good! I like them!”

“Good! Um, Genny…”

“Yeah Mister Sanji?”

“Why are you covered in treesap?”

I let out a deep, deep sigh, and consider how to answer. Two more spinach puffs die for my thinking efforts, before I- huh?

“Sorry, Fern, say again?”

“I need either one entire murderer’s skull, or a number of solid chunks of amber, and I don’t need any questions about why,”

I carefully blink at my sister, before clarifying- “Is this an either, or, situation, or is this a both, both is good, situation?”

“Both is good,”

“Okay, so, you also can’t ask why,”

“Um”

I nod, and with a clatter and some of the softest, most passionate swearing I’ve ever heard from the kitchen kids and Mister Sanji at once, I spread out my collection of murderer’s skulls and solid maple-wrought stones of solid amber.

Havij and Trafalgar Law, who were following Fern in to tea, have stopped dead and are asking questions, which I specifically said not to do- but then again, they weren’t in the room at the time. Fern, for her part, is perusing my fine wears and items with a twitchy witchy eye, before picking out the ones she wants.

I can see the intense curiosity- that intense need to know- bubbling inside of her; and then she nods, cheerfully, and walks off with the skulls and amber she wanted. Trafalgar Law has been whispering ‘what the fuck?’ over and over, and when I turn my bruised face towards him and smirk, his whispering gets louder and more confused before abruptly stopping. He shakes his head, and sits at the table, and starts eating a delicious fruit parfait-

“We have fruit parfaits!?!?”
“Yeah, sis- cheesecake, too, today’s a sweets day- but seriously though, what the hell? You’re usually so much better at not getting the shit kicked out of you,”

“Ah, yeah- and usually I don’t have to fight off a horde of Drownies on Pucca-back, but life has it’s little ways-”

“WHAT?!?!?”

“Ah. Well, so, it went like this-”
I’m halfway through my parfait before I realize I haven’t actually said anything.

“Right. There are stories with snakes that bite and say ‘you knew me that I am when you picked me from the waters’; and there are stories of abandoned children who walk into the wild places where hissing things writhe amongst the stones and tell them scaled things ‘we be of one blood you and I’; but the Drownies aren’t those stories.

“They were called Lorn Flukes, once; and they were kin to the Amazons, too. There was a reef, it’s said, that guarded that island; and they who lived there were kin to the serpents that live and spawn, and die, in the roiling waves. Their home was destroyed; their kinfolk scattered; and the Drownies swim with the ships, now. In their song is the taste of salt and tears, the hundred colors of the water, the coil of the currents and the snap of the wind. Come home, they sing; come home to us.

“In appearance, they look like people who have drowned. Practically, they’re as human as anyone else; warm to the touch, soft or hard as is their nature- they shiver, they complain, they try to drag you down to their level and make you like them. They aren’t sirens; and they aren’t madmen. When sailors fear the Sea, Drownies draw closer, as moths to the flames; their song is deathly to most, as it urges upon hearing to leap to their side and join their revelry.

“The Fountain around Winnie Foster’s Grave is dark and deep, and I was brought to it’s deepest depths by the effort of a mighty Vampire Toad. At the bottom, there’s a field of waving watergrass, thick and soft and only just covering the mud and sand below.

“And, of course; at the bottom of the Fountain, there’s the local Village of Drownies. They look perpetually startled; foolish, with their pale bulging eyes and purpled lips. They aren’t,”

My sister, Deborah, is sitting across from me, pale and fearful.

“Did you treat with the Fathomking, then?”

“I did; and his palace’s uppermost portion is the underpinning of Winifred Foster’s gravesite. The Hold isn’t visible to the naked eye; not a separate realm, but not wholly seen. Only a tiny portion is there day to day- the rest waits, below, for when it is called to use again.

“The strong Vampire Toad, son of the Toad Sage- his name is Marple. And it was Marple that introduced me to the Pucca.

“Pucca Fathomking is and isn’t a Drownie, just as the river he guards is and isn’t a river. He is a man; he is not a man; he is a horse; he is not a horse. He’s a pucca, which explains everything relevant- ah, right. Beatrix knows what that means- y’all don’t. So. Menacifent, beneficent, capricious and cruel and kindly and comforting; notions respecting the pucca’s true nature are endlessly vague. There were always more than there used to be now, wicked minded black looking bad things that would come in the form of wild colts from the stony hills where everyone would winter their sheep, with chains hanging off their withers and blood on their heaving sides. Tis said that they did much to harm unwary travellers, leading them astray and befouling the berries of the
“Or maybe they were helpful souls, good and true friends to the farmer and the herder. It’s said that once, a farmer’s son noticed the gleaming eyes of a pucca beyond their fence, and called out to him-offered a coat. The pucca appeared then in the guise of a horse, and told the boy to come to the old mill at night. From that day onward, the pucca would come secretly to the old mill, only at night, and perform all the work of milling the sacks of grain into flour. The boy fell asleep the first time; and the second, hid himself and watched them work their powerful magic; and the third, made a gift of a fine silken suit of clothing. This second gift caused the puccas to go off and see a mite of the world; ceasing all their work at the mill. Of course, by then the pucca’s work had made the farmer very wealthy indeed, which allowed the man to send his boy off to get an education. Later still, when that farmer’s boy became a man and married, the pucca left a gift of a cup filled with the waters of life- or so I have heard it said.

“Here’s what is- pucca’s don’t have set shapes, or set personalities. They aren’t Wrong, like Others- and they aren’t Right, like Gods. They just are .

“Pucca Fathomking was a pale man, drowned in his likeness; with thick black hair and the ears of a donkey. His eyes were cut like a goats, golden and luminous in the deep gloom below the Bier, and his face rested in a sneer.

“I am bound to keep the secret conversation held between the Fathomking and myself just that: secret. I will, instead, relate an entirely different story in the hopes of, hm, circumnavigating, what actually happened. I can’t tell you how I got my branches, or where the Sacred Maple- named Big Red- actually is. I can’t tell you why Marple is now the Fathomking, or what happened to the Pucca that came before him; I can’t even tell you their name. Asking me to break the solemn Oaths I gave, why- that’s like licking a tree and hoping for maple syrup, and knowing full well that it’s an oak tree to boot.

“But of the Pucca Fathomking, finally, I will say this: I have seen many horrors. A child beaten to death by their parents. A nest of bloodflies in the eyes of a woman who sold her teeth for drinking money. My sister’s blood-soaked hands in a bowl of salt-water.

“I learned, long ago, not to grow fond of anyone in our part of town. Death is very cheap, and it’s very easy for people to die. Gobdark… the ones who walk that place without fear are all things. Cradle songs of comfort and bones gnawed by teeth.

“The Pucca had lived a long, long time, and the moment I came to treat with him- well, that was the moment he’d been waiting for.

“I see everything; I see forever. Fern’s the one who can look forwards; I’m the one who can look back . Then and there, I saw a man walking a tightrope over a sea of blood and filth and curses foul; his sister dead and the black tide rising. Marple and I- we had hurried as quick as we could, and we still were only just able to save him from the rope he’d made for himself.

“As for Marple- an honest man? No. But his heart is not as black as some. It’s a funny thing, Ambition; it’ll take you to sublime heights or harrowing depths, and sometimes they’re one and the same. The Wheel turned high and dragged a man with it, choking on his own blood; the Wheel fell low, and tore a man down, snapping his neck beneath the treads. And ever and on turned the Wheel- and I must still my mouth on these things, now, as my Oath demands of me.

“Deborah- I think, honestly, things would have been different for you, if your friend had survived all those years ago,”
“Lots of things would have been different if Miki had lived, Genny,"

“Heh. You know, for having such a bleak outlook on pirates for so long, you- and the rest of us, but you especially, Deb- you’re well on your way to becoming a very fine one. Stole valuable cargo; murdered men in cold blood for the sake of vengeance; sailing with a deadly crew; and you’re completely obsessed with treasure,"

“Now, don’t leave yourself out, Gen-ney- if the scraggly hair, matted from too much sun exposure and greasy with lack of washing wasn’t a big clue, your ability to belt lewd sea shanties while yarding in line by the age of two was an obvious indication that you were born for this as much as I- not to mention your love of gambling-"

“Pfft!”

“Thbbth!”

And then we’re both laughing like we haven’t since Before. Before Mom; Before Miki; Before.

Genny looks terrible. She’s bruised and bloody and terribly pale under layers of grime. Her entire body is slumped in place; and I’m quite sure it’s only pure exhaustion and the fatalistic rush of Winning that’s keeping her conscious at all, half-closed eyes and lolling head be damned. She looks half dead and everyone but her seems to know it; I have no doubt that by tomorrow at the latest, she’ll certainly feel it.

Genevieve, honestly, looks like Death has picked her up, shaken her like a rag doll, chewed on her with murderous intent, and then decided that it didn’t want to deal with her quite yet. So, Death spat her out onto a cliffside, where she promptly fell, hitting every root and branch of the pain-tree on the way down. Say whose child thou art, who in Fafnir’s blood thy bright blade reddened; and I can question her not, for she swore an Oath not to say!

She’s- better, though, I will say that. There’s a spark in her eyes that’s been gone for a long while, and her face is softer, her mouth tilts easily to smiling- ah! Some portion of her great Sadness has torn free, I think.

Now, if only mine would do the same…

I’m fast and accurate, so long as I can use both my hands. It’s how I used to get through my homework so quickly; I can actually write with both hands at the same time, so long as I’ve got a weight on the paper. Once I was done, I had a whole hour, usually, to just… be. With the trees, I mean.

When Mark taught me to fire with the guns, there was a moment where he started to lecture me on developing specialties, in hands? And I explained to him that I’m just as good with either, and it
didn’t make sense to him until I wrote my name with either hand.

Ambidexterity is rare, and highly prized, in Slingers of all kinds. The old ‘I am not left-handed’ thing, you know? I can catch with either hand, and I learned to juggle alongside Sancho and Cece. I don’t really do strength or dexterity with a specific hand- it’s either or.

This has been an issue with learning to use a Pike with Mab. To me, my hands are interchangeable; to pretty much every weapon style except guns, they aren’t.

Mab’s very… I don’t know how to describe it. ‘Unforgettable’ makes me sound like Sanji; annoying has too many connotations to be correct. *Something.*

Among the weapons of the staff-type: quarter staffs, spits, spears, pikes, and so on- of them all, the pike is the most plain, the most honorable, and the noblest. The weapon that called to me- the Brusher’s Pike- is highly esteemed among the Fae because it is void of deceit.

I can hear Kaladanda, Mab’s spear; and She, because Spears are mostly Female, and Swords are mostly Male, that is a *thing* - she doesn’t lie. Ever. Queen Anne’s Revenge, my pike- She also doesn’t lie.

Wood-based weapons rank among the oldest weapon form excepting those made of stone; and I’m actually more familiar with bone-and-stone weapons. Spears aren’t super popular under Sea; unless they’re harpoons, and it costs money to upkeep them, on account of there not really being any sort of material that can withstand the hard use that the line of a harpoon requires.

Even so, wood weapons are inexpensive and simple to produce- on par with stone weapons, really. With that said, simple doesn’t define versatility, or lethality. As a child, Mab used deadwood found in the forest and switches of woven grass to trash dangerous animals- and annoying younger siblings and cousins. Sticks can be thrown, thrust, and used as clubs or other force-multipliers.

There’s very few places inhabited by people in this world that don’t have some sort of tree- we called it tree-coral, for gods sake. Handy weapons, if you need something not necessarily deadly; or all you have is a pair of guns and no magic left.

No one actually knows when adding pointy bits to the ends of poles started; or even when genuine martial traditions popped up.

It’s the very end of the Sap Moon, and the beginning of the Egg Moon; Mab says that maple sugar season is over. Every day, before I do training with Mab, she has me warm up by helping her in the garden, or by helping Mark and Sophie in the rest of the Farm areas.

The quail and the doves have started laying again, and Mark’s slaughtered all the kids we aren’t keeping for the Interstate Fair, so the nannies are giving particularly good milk from the spring pastures. Cheese and honey, sprouts and pollen, herbs and dried beans- these things, I’ve become more familiar with. I’ve also had to help with the tsukemono- pickles; and, well. I didn’t know so very many things could be pickled.

So many.

Like, you can pickle butter, if you’ve a need to- most butter meant for long storage is heavily salted, but there is a brined variety. It’s skuan, and actually kind of gross- slimy, in texture… but also really
comforting? I don’t know how to explain it.

This is also the time of year that harvesting massive amounts of wild crops happens- fiddlehead ferns, ramps, sorrel, nettles, green garlic, watercress, wild herbs, morel mushrooms… And then there’s all sorts of things I didn’t realize grew on the ship, like asparagus, microgreens- which is actually regular salad greens, right when they sprout; there’s sunchokes, spring onions, radishes, rhubarb, spring peas and pea greens, spinach, lettuces, chard, something called rapini- it’s like broccoli, which I’ve had at a Longarm takeaway before- and, of course, strawberries.

While I work in the garden or on farming, Mab gives me… stories? Lectures? Something mostly involving words- training is different.

So, the spear has been carried into almost every battle of recorded history. It’s used as a primary weapon by all sorts of people, both for throwing and thrusting; there are some styles that use it more as an extra-long sword, even. A spear is long- longer than a sword, longer than a man’s arm, and it’s easy to poke with- that’s the whole point of a spear, no pun meant.

The quarterstaff, like the spear, is cheap to make, versatile, and lethal even in the hands of a child. Have you ever been smacked with a baseball bat? That’s a short staff- and my sisters and my brother and I, well, we all played baseball in the summer. In Gobdark, knives were the sidearm of choice, much moreso than guns- cheap, always available in pawnshops and certain Daiso locations, and really easy to kill with. A short staff, made of nice hickory or ash, is often more than enough to smack a bitch down… although you will get mistaken for a punkfish carrying a bat around on the bus.

The staff is also a symbol of the Law; from ancient times, all the way to now, in schools and courtrooms. Bailiffs carry staffs; so do cops. It’s the perfect weapon to separate toughs with sharp swords or knives who’d gotten rowdy or wouldn’t stop fighting. A person with a staff can beat two people with swords, if skilled enough, as the sword fighters must always enter the danger-zone of the staff in order to attack.

It’s actually illegal for certain people- read: people of merrow descent- to carry bladed weapons over a certain length. Knives are popular in Gobdark because swords are illegal- and expensive. Staffs- or bats, and so on, are still legal. Shakujo are definitely legal- so long as you’re either in school, or a monk at the local monastery.

I- the reason I could even hear the Pike at all… the reason, I think, I could hear Queen Anne’s Revenge, was that I was in the staff-fighting club at school. School had three kinds of clubs- arts clubs, science clubs, and athletics clubs. You had to join one of each kind- so, in an effort to, I don’t know, distance ourselves from each other, because we never liked being mistaken for each other… We each joined a different club.

I was in Gardening Club, Broomstick Club, and Staff-Fighting Club. Gardening ended up disbanding, and I went to Study Hall instead; Broomstick Club is what got me into Alleycat Racing; and for Staff-Fighting Club… People always forget that real flight brooms are between one and a half and two meters long, same as a short staff. And when Mom got sick, the first thing she couldn’t do anymore was fly- so, I took over the family flight broom.

It’s interesting- go as far as Corallia, and learning how to fight with potentially deadly weapons isn’t something for schoolchildren to learn. In Gobdark, there’s nothing more proper and honorable than learning to fight and defend with a simple weapon; in Corallia, fighting with deadly weapons is bad, overly aggressive- something to be stopped so you don’t freak the tourists. Merish domestication is
fascinating and excruciating and horrifying all at once.

Apparently, during Staff-Fighting Club I learned standard techniques. According to Mab, the staff and spear are twin weapons, held and used exactly the same way, shield or no; the only real difference is whether or not the ends have a point.

The two weapons are the same shape, often the same or similar length, and can be used to thrust, throw, or strike; and how many hands you have free is how you wield it. Antique fighting styles don’t survive; but the human body has changed very little, and the staff or spear not at all.

This is why, Mab says, there are only superficial differences in world-wide spear-and-staff styles; differences in names, in stylistic flourishes… but the muscle-and-bone mechanics of spear fighting are much the same world-wide.

Truthfully, the biggest difference in styles is really how they’re meant to be used- as a sport, as a game, as a dance, or as a combat style. A staff is much more civilian, while the spear is decidedly military- but even today, there are some who will hunt the wild boar with a spear, blessings on them. Mab explained that a Boar is like one of our pigs, but bigger, with tusks, and angry.

Pole-arms are like spears and staffs, but they’re heavier- slower than spears, but much better at stopping someone cold. Polearms are what I have to watch out for on my broom- Demons and Longarms, in particular, are known for preferring them.

A short staff is between two and three meters; while a long staff is four meters, and my pike is five meters long. Let me say that again- my pike is five meters long. Or- it was, before it broke. Now, it’s closer to four meters, because after cleaning up the maple branches I got from the Old Man, the longest one was just under four meters. The bottom is shod with rings of metal, four in total, each with points of metal around each ring; and there’s a cap of heavy metal at the butt.

Quarterstaff got it’s name like this- you grip it at the quarter-points, and the center; with one hand at the center, palm up, and the other at the lower quarterpoint, palm down. Thus, you’ve got a meter point end, and a very useful butt end. You change grips by releasing one hand, and swinging the staff to catch it appropriately for the next technique or strike.

Actually- it’s funny, but I’ve never had a staff fitted to me before. Er, spear. The way it’s measured was- Mab stood the staff that would become my pike upright, and made me reach up as far as I could along the staff. After this measurement, she added on additional length for me to comfortably hold the staff in the quarterstaff style. On average, that’s eight or nine feet long; but the real measure of a staff or spear for anyone is how you handle it.

In the Club, we all had two meter poles; it’s taking me a bit of a think and chew to get used to the extra meters. Then again, I’m twice the size I was when I learned, and it does feel a hell of a lot better- less like I’m crunching in on myself, you know?

There are three guards: a high guard, where the butt of the pole is held over the head and the point angled to the ground; a low guard, where the butt is held low to the side and the point is angled up; and a near vertical guard where the butt is embedded in the earth and used as a deflective shield,
sometimes with another secondary weapon in the other hand. The first guard I got drilled on was this third one- because, Mab explained, being able to use my gun and my staff at the same time would be invaluable. Then she started using her two-at-once thing to attack me from across the ship at the same time as right up in front of me.

The concept of half-staff guards was new; but it’s also pretty simple, so long as I equate them to the bat styles. Other guards are available; and some of them are meant for one thing or another.

My first real lesson from Mab? We are *not* all created equally, and we cannot- should not, *must not* fight just the same way. I am *not* interchangeable with my sisters; and I do not think like any of them, or my brother. Since everyone thinks differently from everyone else, everyone behaves differently in combat.

In Faesh tradition, the hand and leg should agree- meaning, whichever leg is forward, the same hand should be forward on the staff. Furthermore, you should have the same leg and hand combination forward as your enemy, in order to keep the fight on your inside and not towards your back or open side. The inside- my front, between my arms- is easier to defend by moving the forward arm across the body to block, which is more natural and has a greater range of potential motion than movement backwards. Mab also keeps my knees bent, and my weight on my toes, so I can fucking move, godsdammit all.

Like a punch or a good sturdy sweater, guards have a time and a place for best use. Not all of them will be successful in every situation; some require more space, while others are deeply situational. In training, the wrong answer is getting hit; and Mab is always telling me to fight to her openings, not to her steps. It’s not a dance.

Eventually, she taught me a Secret Skill, what her Dollperganger is based on- Sneaky Decoy. It’s somewhere between stealth and subterfuge; a thing that could be me, and being unseen until I strike- these are valuable, in and of themselves. There’s another Secret Skill called Counter Blow, meant for my shield- but I’m not physically strong enough through my entire body to learn it yet.

As for my guns… they’re deadly weapons, meant to kill with; if I don’t mean it dead, I don’t point my gun at it, end of story. If I need to stop someone, I warn them and take aim; and if they haven’t stopped, I shoot to kill. Aim, always, for the center- chest, or gut. Even an unworked mana bullet will kill what it hits; I don’t fire my guns unless I’m under direct supervision of Mark or Usopp.

I’d say, now, that going from complete novice to ‘decent’ beginner with a handgun takes about forty hours and fifteen hundred rounds- that’s what a bullet fired from a gun is called, a round. Up that to Dualies, and you need to add about five more hours and five hundred more rounds. There’s also a lot of dry fire practice, with no bullets at all, and a bit of lecture included- not to mention the homework of spell tables and so on.

I use these numbers because that’s how long it took me, and how many I fired- Mark made me keep a record of everything. I didn’t turn into a crack shot after two weeks, but I did get a good solid foundation and what I guess is a ‘decent’ level of skill. I’m not ready for a real fight- but then, if I’m really fighting, things are already in the shit. I’m not a crack shot by any means- my accuracy is eight out of ten, which no one- not me, not Mark, and not Usopp either- are happy with; but I do have good, solid foundations. All I can do now is make those foundations a part of my body, so I couldn’t do it wrong if I tried.

It’s not a group setting by any means- there aren’t enough dedicated gunners on our crew that I have to wait for my turn at a drill or course. Two hours of my four hour sessions are dedicated to gun
safety, maintenance, and chemistry; the rest is shooting. Shooting still targets; shooting moving targets; shooting still targets while moving; shooting moving targets while moving. My accuracy in each of these arenas varies wildly. I’m eight for ten with still targets; ten for ten with moving targets; eight for ten while moving; and ten for ten while everything is in motion. None of us can figure out why my standing still accuracy and my moving accuracy are so different—two whole shots is a lot of difference, it’s twenty percent. I got nothing.

Hmm…

Mab’s birthday is soon—although Fern has said that it isn’t actually her birthday, it’s just when she chooses to celebrate—so, should I get something for her? Or make something, maybe?

I don’t know what to do!

It’s odd— I think the first time I ever learned about knitting as a craft was with Momarav, when she taught me to knit with wire. Knitting with wire isn’t like knitting with wool or even cotton— for one, wire isn’t as fluid as wool. It seems like an obvious assumption to make, but what it really means is that when worked into a woven object, like a cowl or a pelerine, the stitches you make will look pretty much exactly how you’ve formed them—unless you’re working with a specialized material, like moon-silver or sun-gold— or, for that matter, twilight-bismuth (tricky stuff, but very pretty), or the drape of your weave is particularly forgiving. Unless you block your metal fabric, to reshape what you’ve made, what you stitch is what you stitch.

Getting perfect uniformity won’t happen with wire until you’ve gotten used to using wire— or good at knitting, whichever comes first. Practice perfect, and all that tosh.

Now, for actually knitting with wire, you need wire. It comes in many gauges; the larger the number, the thinner the wire. For knitting, stick between twenty-four and thirty— that’s the gauge for fabric and other woven objects. Go bigger, and you need something other than knitting needles; go smaller, and the wire snaps when the fabric is used.

I like twenty-six gauge because it’s easiest to work with for me; but experiment to find what you like. Mommarav taught me on whatever scrap craft wire she had in her forge; as I got better and better, she invested in wire of silver, then gold— and then I learned to spin moon-silver, sun-gold, and so on— threads for myself. I learned on bone needles, and I… hm. I don’t know what happened to them, actually— I’ll ask Mom about it, and in the meantime, I guess I’ll make my own. Hm. I need a tusk or a femur, and some pearls perhaps— or mother of pearl… I also like to have a pair of wire cutters and a pair of jewelry pliers, but that’s just me. I don’t need new ones, I think.

When I work with the esoteric metals, bone is the best because it’s familiar to me; and it carries my magic best. Trying it for yourself, well, try different needles— maybe wood or metal would suit.

Most knit jewelry worked with wire also has beads incorporated into it. Any kind of beads are appropriate, so long as they fit on the wire you use. To knit with beads, string them onto the wire before you cast on.

Protip: don’t stress the wire by twisting it into strange positions; thus, use the wrap cast on rather than the long tail cast on.
You can make basically any stitch that you could with yarn using wire, but I like plain knits and
purls. Increases and decreases work the same as well- but, plain-jane yarn-over and knit-two-together
work the best. Add beads wherever by pushing a bead up to the end of your working thread and
holding it between two stitches. Pull and stretch your work every few rows to block it to the shape
you want. For finishing, normal bind-off is fine, or you can clip a tail and weave it in. This is perfect
if you need to add a clasp.

Wire is much less forgiving on the hands as compared to literally any other string. Progress is slower,
muscles tire, bruises pile up, and repetitive stress issues appear much quicker than usual.

Why, then, am I knitting my husband a cape with a pelerine out of moon-silver and sun-gold? Or
planning to, I mean? Politics, and love, really.

Sanji is a Prince; well, a King, really, as I’m a Queen. There will be times when he needs to wear
raiment befitting his status- and, as I’m the only sewist on this ship with the knowledge and the skill
to make what he needs, I am the one who will. For another thing, I’ve already gotten him a bottle
opener ring, and put on little fish; there’s not much else I can really do for his birthday, which is
coming up.

Spinning moonlight into moonsilver requires… hm. Clarity. Any gemstone will do, but I prefer
sapphires; a large one, and the color doesn’t matter so much as the shape. A ten-dollar per carat is
what I use- it’d be for a carver, in Tiffy or Fid.

Set up your spindle; hold the gem in your off hand, put the moons over your shoulder and spin. If
you’ve focused the moonlight correctly, you’ll be left with a silvery thread of miraculous properties-
not warm, but cool, slippery like silk and slightly sharp.

Sunlight to sungold is much the same- but during the day, not at night. Of course, the main problem
is keeping your family from running off with your thread. Or keeping your apprentice out of your
light. Or throwing the cats out of your basket of finished skeins of moonsilver and sungold.

Life, man. What can you do?

As for the shawl itself- three full skeins of sungold, and three of moonsilver. My size seven bone
needles, and my good stitch counters; a simply enormous amount of mother of pearl beads shaped
like fish, and yellow seed beads- cream, Faesh corn, pearl, ivory, gold, cognac, caramel, saffron, and
amber; and yellow, gold, beads of other sea creatures.

When Sanji saw me knitting his cloak, he smiled- and then… he asked me to spin him skeins of
sungold and nightjet, so he could weave something for me in return. Uدورoth has different ideas
about what constitutes ‘mans’ or ‘womans’ work- basically, it’s the presence of water or fire. As
sewing, spinning, and weaving, for the most part, has neither… well. Sanji learned nalbinding- and
he’s gotten very good.

For me, he made a Day and Night cloak; in Day form, it is a structured short cloak of gold in the
Demonic style, longer than a capelet or pelerine, with a high collar and vest-like closures in the front,
as is proper for a woman, festooned with flowers embroidered with black, and bright yellow bee
beads dancing across, honeydrop colored beads dancing here and there; in Night form, it is a
diaphanous full length cloak of black studded with stars all the way down, it’s collar restrained in
height and bedecked with feathers stitched in gold.

For him, a King’s cloak of sunrise red, or bloodmoon red, depending on the ambient lighting. I
beaded a paisley design, all across the back of the collar and his shoulders, wrapping around to the front; but all the rest is very plain on the outside; all the beads and oceanic imagery is on the inner portion of the cloak.

During the weeks of our stay in Maple Harbour- Tuckleigh doesn’t own the harbour, it’s whatever-everyone picked up a hobby they’d put down, or familiarized themselves with hobbies that had changed over their thousand year absence from the wider world. Udoroth actually really likes the new-fangled spinning wheel- says it makes a thread faster, which is true. He also really likes knitting; says it didn’t exist in his day. Zapphire has fallen in with Mack and Bang- they have more arguments and conversations about music and musicians than I knew could be had, and they’ve been going to local concerts all the time we’ve been here. Muhktar, oddly enough, has gotten really into bottle cap collecting- like, weirdly into. I have no idea why.

As for Solitaire… I don’t know what he does with his spare time. He and Bryony are becoming good friends- but he still doesn’t really like being around me. I think I remind him of Granuna too much.

All of the Suntides are doing their own things- Deborah and the Cool Kids are rambling around the city most days, trying local foods and expanding their palates. Ellie and the Mice are… actually, I think they’ve been mostly having sex with their new friend Pleasant, I really haven’t seen much of them at all. Fern is taking a master course in astrology at the school of hard knocks- also known as a tea room frequented by the local longarm population. Genevieve has been recovering from her meeting with the Fathomking, and working on her new broomstick.

Adelaide and Ailbe have been training- Ailbe is strong enough that Adelaide can go nearly all out without causing severe harm, and the both of them are hard at work, every day, mastering Fishman Karate. Adelaide’s variant is meant for fighting Others, I think, while Ailbe’s is best against Devil Fate holders. Beatrix has been learning to knit with wire, and reading all the potion manuals we have, including the ones in the Galley- I think it’s her Concentration.

Cecelia and Horizonte… I haven’t really seen them. Then again, what with Takara…

Ah. Right. Brenda died either in the birth canal or shortly after birth; and Nami isn’t really… she does care for Takara, certainly. But… hn. I have examined that girl a few times, and she’s been floppy, and cold- dehydrated. Zoro won’t leave her all night to cry in her own mess; but Nami… I don’t know if she’s done it a-purpose, she had Silas, Viv, Gwen, Lucy and poor Brenda- five babies? Five babies. She’s dealing with the death of Brenda… but. She has four other babies to care for, and Brenda’s loss to live through, and…

I think I need to talk to Captain Luffy about this. He’s on his special seat- I can see him, I’ve just come from a nap in the Garden, it’s finally nice enough to sleep in the open air again…

The figurehead of the Thousand Sunny is much, hm, broader than Going Merry was- the spines of the sunflower-like mane are broad, and numerous. They come together just right to form little nooks where Captain likes to sit when the day is just right- not usually when we’re in harbor, but… when Genny came back so beat up, he had to have a sit and think on the figurehead for a good long while after dinner.

Genny was so trashed that day, I’m not surprised she doesn’t remember, but Luffy was uncharacteristically silent that mealtime; angry that one of his juniors had been beaten… tortured,
really- and beyond that, sworn to silence on who did the beating, and why she submitted to it. Luffy was furious - everyone who understood what had happened, what Genny had allowed to happen- or rather, the surface of what had happened to her, well. They were furious too.

I wasn’t; but then, I remember my own Initiation into the Mysteries. Hm. Can I break my silence, now? Zul does not forbid it; it is only my sisters in Faith who would.

I’ll explain it to him, then. I stopped being scared of my sisters a long time ago.

“Captain- are you still angry about what Genny did the other day?”

“Yeah- mostly, I’m angry that she won’t talk about it,”

“Hm. The Pantheopaly of the Fae is not kind, Captain- the gods and goddesses ask of their followers… I always referred to it as a Trial. It’s something like a Challenge, presented to you by the gods and goddesses; and it’s something like a rite of passage; and it’s something like an initiation; and it’s something like a medicine, to make you well and strong again.

“Acobi, the Faithful- Her Trial comes with no warning, and is fought within. Everyone has what we in the Mystery-biz call a crisis of faith at least once, Luffy- how you deal with it is how you deal with the challenge presented by the Trial. Sometimes it’s ‘do I really have the right to do this thing?’, and sometimes it’s ‘should I follow him still?’ Mark had one of these, while he was away from us during our Separation- it started way back in Water 7. Obviously, he worked through it to our advantage- otherwise, he wouldn’t be here- but… that doesn’t always happen.

“Garmuth, the Driven- His Trial is known by all, though not as what it is. Most people know Garmuth’s Trials as Dreams or Ambitions, Captain- and the size of someone’s Trial is often a direct reflection of who someone really is. Depending on what you want, you yourself define when the Trial is over- or, of course, it might be a thing that can never end, can never be gained.

“Hense, the Sensual- Her Trial does not begin, and once begun, does not end. Pain and Pleasure are complicated things, Captain. Lust and Vitriol; kisses and punches- what you like, and what you don’t like… so long as you can be said to exist, your sensuality exists as well. It started before you were born; and it doesn’t actually end. You can remove yourself from the Trial- Zoro’s working on that- but it doesn’t actually end.

“Lemain, the Builder- His Trial does not end, and once ended, begins again. A legacy is when you plant a tree whose shade you, personally, will never enjoy. How many legacies you leave behind is a personal choice- and also a reflection of what you do with your life. Bryony, for example, has the legacy of a pirate; but also the legacy of a singer, a songwriter, a dancer, a warrior, a holy woman… who you become, in the eyes of history… The hardest part about His Trial is that you will never know what will become of your legacy, not really. Not even Udoroth really knows- even here and now, because his legacy isn’t… it’s not done, it’s not over.

“Micia, the Desirer- all who live and die face Her Trial, in the end. It’s said in some places that the Otherside, where people go when they die, is so wonderful- well… some people do such terrible things, lie to themselves so completely, the Mother can’t take them back into her bosom. They are returned again, bade live- again- so that they may become better than they were, or at the very least, learn something of what they were meant to.

“Olak, the Lucky- His Trial is for all who would begin again. The Otherside is so wonderful and beautiful and fun, there are lots of souls who are content to stay there forever more. Some, however,
become so enamored with life, and living, that they do everything in their power to return to this world. Luck is what says what you’re reborn as - a bird, a beast, a fish, a tree or flower, a bug - or a human, and if so, what kind and in what circumstances.

“Jevel, the Cursed; Jevel, the Blessed- His Trial must happen twice, for a blessing is also a curse. Sometimes, your health and long life are a blessing; sometimes, they are a curse. Sometimes, your illness and short life is a blessing; sometimes, they are a curse. You must experience both sides of both states to fulfill the Double Trial of Jevel.

“Pyth, the Powerful- His Trial is one of the body. Tellicherry told me about this one, actually- it’s a combination of scholarship, martial arts, and spiritualism that does it. Not everyone can actually do Pyth’s trial, it’s so damn hard.

“Roathus, the Knowing- His Trial is one of the mind. This is what Genny went through the other day.

“Yudrig, the Being- His Trial is of the spirit. This is what Genny has been going through her entire life. On Yudrig’s mighty back rides the small Goddess of Magic, Hekate- the Three-Who-Are-One. She says this: ‘Some people must live lives that are cursed- in bodies that are marked with curses- with minds that are ruined with curses- with weakened spirits and worn out ambitions.’ There is no magic that can free Genevieve from her Depression; nor medicine, nor treatment, nor religion. There is no magic that can free me from my Amnesia; no medicine, no treatment, no religion. We can only manage our afflictions, Luffy- bear up under the endless weight of our curses; and keep trying.

“Zul, the Wise- Her Trial is one of silence, and blood, and songs- always the songs. I undertook the Trial of Zul, Captain- but before I tell you about it, I’ll tell you the last one.

“Caelya, the Inspirer- Her Trial is of the breath. More than that, I cannot say,”

“Neh- how come you can talk about yours, but Genny can’t talk about hers!?”

“How come you could talk about Ace, but not Sabo?”

“...”

“The answer to your question is as simple as ‘we pray to different gods’; the answer to mine is ‘they’re different brothers’. The truth of course, is that nothing is so simple as that. Zul… for Zul, all things and all places are sacred. Ugly- horrible- cruel- evil- Zul doesn’t make distinctions like that. For her, the question isn’t one of worth- to Zul, all are worthy. In some ways, She’s the easiest of the gods to follow. Prayers to Zul aren’t spoken aloud; they’re done . Every time I sew, every time I mend, every time I clean or fight or love- or hate, refuse to fight, make a mess, break, cut… all things done by a follower of Zul are in Her name. Sometimes, I can dedicate part of what I do to another god or goddess- but even now, this conversation with you, my choice to nap outside in the sunlight… my choice to kill my brother… Captain, Zul is in all things. To Pray to Her; to Praise Her- I must choose, and do, and I can’t take anything back. Not ever. Zul isn’t the Goddess that Genny chose to follow, though; she wouldn’t have said anything at all about what she did, if She was,”

“Mm. Who is?”

“Roathus, the Knowing. Roathus Himself doesn’t demand silence from His followers- and his followers don’t demand it of each other. The things you learn, in pursuit of Roathus’ Trial, are often so horrible- so spectacular- that words… fail. From what I know, it’s not that Genny won’t tell us what happened to her, or swore she wouldn’t- from what I know, she shares every adventure she
has. From how she does, and doesn’t talk about it- I’d say, Genny can’t talk about what happened. She doesn’t have the words for what happened. Zul keeps silent because that’s who She is; Roathus keeps silent because what He knows is too much for words to express,”

“Mm. So… when she’s grown into herself some more, she might be able to talk about it?”

“Maybe; and maybe she never talks about it, ever,”

“I still don’t like it- but… I guess I understand. Is that all you wanted to talk about?”

“…No, Captain. I’m really worried about Nami; she hasn’t bonded with Takara, and she’s still grieving Brenda, and while it’s admirable that she took Takara in...”

“She still has Silas, Vivian, Guinevere, and Lucille to look after. Hnn. Can… can Nami even make enough milk for all five of them?”

“She thinks she can; but subconsciously, she knows she can’t. That’s why she’s been neglectful of Takara,”

“Neglectful?”

“Nothing a new parent wouldn’t do anyway- but… not more than once, either. I’m concerned,”

“…Hmm. Where’s Nurse May?”

“Um- there she is right now, with BBC. Why?”

“We obviously need more wet nurses and child-carers; if, for no other reason, than because we have six babies on the ship, with more probably incoming. Nurse Mendy May would know how to get more people like her- she’s really strong, right?”

“Oh- yeah,”

“So- we need another strong wet nurse, and someone extremely strong who can look after the Babies when everyone else is busy,”

“Mm. That’s what I was thinking, Captain; um. But maybe don’t get nurses and child-carers without talking to Nami, first. They’re her kids, after all,”

“Mm. Come on; you’re good at calming Nami down,”

“I- oh, okay, sure,”

I follow Captain down onto the cool grassy deck, and over to where Mendy May is playing with BBC. Captain settles down next to Mendy May, and starts having a conversation; I take it upon myself to play with BBC. She’s gotten so big; she’s already wobbling around on her own two feet, and her screeching and giggles at all hours are slowly, slowly becoming more like words. Mendy May and Captain- wait, when did Zoro and… all his kids, including Takara… welp.

I look at Mendy May, who looks at Captain, who looks at us, and Zoro- before nodding once. I split myself and take BBC over to Zoro, and start cycling the legs of poor little Takara, who’s gassy and letting everyone know it; and I take myself along with Captain and Mendy May.

We find Nami flat on her stomach in her and Zoro’s bed, face pressed into a pillow, fingers tangled
thick in her hair and wheezing. Captain sits himself down next to her, lets his legs stretch out next to her torso as his back flattens against their headboard. I sit down on her other side, lay a hand on her shoulder; Mendy May lays across the end of the bed, and waits. Eventually, Nami flips herself over, and struggles up to be sandwiched between Luffy’s shoulder and mine. I carefully weave my fingers into hers; Luffy does the same on her other side. Mendy May has rolled onto her legs, kneeling and then sitting at the end of the bed, quietly waiting.

Nami takes a few shuddery breaths before barely moving herself to speak.

“I’m not okay, and I need help. I can’t… I can’t feed all of them and… I know it’s wrong, I know it is, but- I can’t stop myself from leaving Takara out, and I don’t… I don’t know why,”

“It’s because your body knows it can’t support five babies at once without destroying itself; your absolute maximum is four, and you’re straining yourself at three. It’s too much, Nami,”

“Mab- I’m supposed to be able to, to care for my babies, I’m supposed to be a good- I’m supposed to be their mom, and I can’t -”

“Nami, it’s okay. It’s okay. We didn’t ask Mince to raise BBC at all; what makes you think you need to raise your five- or four- alone?”

“-Or four?”

“Mm. Mendy May-?”

“Right. So… I was hired to care for BBC by a casino’s General Manager. I, personally, can provide enough milk for one baby. Some women can’t make milk; or have severe trauma connected to their breasts; or can’t make enough milk. There are also people who don’t know how to care for their children; or don’t have the time. My entire job exists because of these things; I exist as I am because, all over the world, right now, there are people with enough money or influence going through exactly what you are. Even if you were a hundred-percent perfect mother- what do you know about teaching young children? Training them in basic martial arts? What if they have no skill or passion for swords, or the weather? This conversation would have happened, no matter what- that it’s happening now is because we care about you!”

“You’re my Navigator, Nami- how you’re supposed to be concentrated on your job when you’re all worried about your kids, if you even love one of them the way you love your other ones… neh, didn’t you have a talk about this with Zoro, Mab?”

“Oh, yeah- Nami, if it weren’t for inbuilt reactions to the way babies are, humans wouldn’t have survived at all. Human babies are annoying, and super helpless, and extremely needy, all the time. The most important thing to remember, as a new parent, are these two things: you will need to ask for help, and you will need to take breaks. In this case, you’re not exactly asking for help, but who does when a barn needs raising- and in the other… sending Zoro off with all the babies so you can feel safe enough to cry is a very good example of taking a break. You made sure the babies would be safe; and then you had your moment, away from them. You’re a human being; it’s okay,”

“...really?”

“Really,”

“...so, what’s the, um. The plan?”
“Well- my first thought was getting at least one more wet nurse?”

“Actually… we need at least two or three. I’d go with three, myself; there are three people I can think of, right now, who would be willing to sail on with this crew. I can give them a call- one of them’s in Dressrosa, which is where we’re going anyway- the other two are actually on this island, if you want…?”

“Yeah; call your friends, Mendy May. What’re their names?”

“ Bronwen Flare , and Justice Peace Logan- we just call her Logan ,”

“And the other one, in Dressrosa?”

“ Millefeui . She’s a Mink, if that matters-”

“It doesn’t- Mink milk’s no different from anyone else’s, right Mab?”

“No, not really. It’s how much long fur they have compared to everyone else, really-”

“Now’s not the best time for a tangent, Mab; I’d like to know later, though,”

“Okay Nami,”

“Right. Mendy- call your friends here, have them meet up with me at that Tea Room Fern likes; I’ll see if they’re right. Mab; see if you can find some teachers or, uh, babysitters? Which would be better?”

“Teachers- or rather… yeah, teachers. Hm. Both, actually. I have friends in the Maple Tower right now; and I’ve been looking for an excuse to go, anyway. I’ll take care of it, Captain,”

Every country in the world has a population of magic users- mages, wizards, witches, and magicians. Thus, every country has their own Tower. They aren’t quite schools, although they do teach students there; think of them more like… hm. Social clubs, I guess. Like every well established social club, every Tower has a dress-code and conduct code. Thus, I need to change my clothes, and actually style my hair.

To start with, my hair- an upside-down french braid , and coil the ends up into a bun. Pin it then with bobby pins, and move forwards. Yellow thigh high socks and shiny black shoes ; a functional garter belt, and a bralette , which I don’t usually wear. My dress is a two-piece affair; a mini-dress of black beneath a sheer dress of middle length, dotted with lily-flowers. Over the dress, the cape that Sanji made for me; on my head, the only pointy hat I’ve ever owned, as well as two white hat pins to keep it firmly attached to my head.

Today’s bag is the Purse of Misfortunes , with my normal purse accoutrement, plus a small wand, and a lace fan for fine work. Oh yes- and I renewed my subscription to Quibble and Quirk , because I’ve got a reputation and standards at once; thus, I’m taking along my new issue of the most recent monthly publication of QQ , for a bit of light reading, alongside Numerology and Grammatica, one of the very few mathematical texts I’ve only heard of, never read.

Fern meets me in the hallway. She’s wearing a blue dress covered in stars, knee high yellow socks , yellow running shoes , a necklace of eyes, a headband of frogs with her long hair unbound but for
the knot at its end, a pair of mail-order spectrespecs that have had their lenses replaced with her own custom requirements, bright yellow lipstick, and a yellow pineapple crossbody bag. I pause a moment to look her up and down; during this moment, she also pauses, allowing me to see her bag of spell components, her miniature staff— which has definitely been refurbished somehow— as well as Housekeepery and Kitchencraft, and both volumes of Sybil’s Syllabary, and even her paperback copy of Ephemeris.

“You’re going to the Tea Room like that, Fern?”

“No- I’m going to the Maple Tower today— for some forsaken reason, it’s not like fortunetellers really get along with magic-users normally… although, if I get my Enchanter’s License, I can start selling them publicly instead of, um, not selling them.”

“Mmhmm. No Havij?”

“She’s already got her license; and she’s covering for me at the Tea Room, said she’d take a crack at the maths once she found her own copy of the Ephemeris and read it through,”

“Hmm. Beatrix and Genny?”

“Well- here they come now, actually,”

Lo and behold, she’s exactly right.

Beatrix comes swaggering in, wearing a pair of rolled up blue jean overalls and an indigo bodysuit with a pair of white leather shoes and plain white ankle socks. Her hair is loose and messy, and it’s obvious to me that she’s been struggling for hours with it. Her lipstick is indigo, and her Rending Shears are in a sheath on her belt.

Genny, of course, is in her revised flight suit, jacket dress fully closed and soft green, boots black and laced high and tight. No lipstick; but her goggles are green lensed, and cover her ears fully. On her back, rests her broom; on each hip sits a Dueling Pistol.

As the girls and I continue through the ship, we pick up more magic users— Gally, the Illusionist, bedecked with her powerful jewels under thick robes of broadcloth; Precious, the Growing Flame, his tea kettle full of mystical plants hanging off the broom over his shoulder; Bang, the Band Geek, his hair just a little bit fluffier and his backpack positively coated with pins and patches from the bands and musicians he’s seen in person; Mono, the Potioneer, his eyepatch extra clean and nice, and very few band aids at all— right until he scrapes himself on… on nothing? And now he’s bleeding, um, how- nevermind; Zelda, the Honey Bear, a massive jar of honey tied over her shoulder, and a honey-wand with tiny topazes inset around it’s base; and finally, Bura Kada Bura, pockets full of crystals and a song on her pursed, whistling lips. When the group of us swagger into the Galley, Sanji, my beloved husband (and a Master Potioneer in his own right (cooking at his level is intense)) lurches off from where he was leaning against the wall and calmly falls into step with me, the stink of smoke swirling from his only cigarette today.

Apparently, I’m leading an expedition.

Which Tower is suitable for you depends on a few things— politics, money, what the Tower itself is
best at teaching… for example, the Coral Tower in Ryugu Mergyo is known for producing warlocks and alchemists, not enchanters, and definitely not thaumaturgists- the first, warlocks, is due to simple excellence of teaching programs and internal support. Alchemists are produced at the Coral Tower due to money- specifically, the Royal Permit system, and the Royals of Ryugu Mergyo always wanting alchemists for various purposes. Enchanters and Thaumaturgists have to do with money- it costs a lot of money to build a safe Workshop or Menagerie for student Enchanters and Thaumaturgists to learn in- nevermind the greenhouses, gemstones, precious metals, and so on, for all their secondary skills and classes.

There are Nine types of Tower.

Black, for Transmutation (also called Transmorgification), changing energy and matter into different forms; Red, for Necromancy- but they usually get conflated with medical schools; Blue, for Illusion- Gally’s robes are actually blue, even if her crystal armor isn’t; White, for Abjuration; Orange, for Conjuration and Summoning- mathemagically, they’re the same thing; Purple, for Divination, which technically Fern’s overqualified for; Gold, for Enchantment- which is tricky to define. Sometimes, it means entrancing and beguiling people or creatures, which is helpful for thaumaturgists and bankers alike; sometimes, it means creating various magical objects which can have any effect the maker decides to include, or is paid to include. It’s tricky. It also, handily, explains why Fern wants a License for Enchantment- due to the Astrology Consortium, no Seer needs a License of any kind to practice. Most ‘Seers’ are actually Astrologers with an Ephemeris and an abacus- a competent Trig-student can get the job done, and the book, depending on it’s quality, provides full explanations on which formulae to use, and how.

Fern’s actual passion is for Enchanting, not Divination- she’s very, very good at designing and creating sturdy, cheap, and effective magical items.

Finally, there’s Green, for Evocation- harnessing the power of the elements. Nami, being a Weather Mage, uses Evocation. I think Genny does too, actually.

When you’re a student at a Tower, it’s basically like going to a private school. There’s a strict dress code to be followed; not for the sake of student unity, per say, but for the sake of student safety. For example, my uniform was designed to withstand the mercurial weather conditions of- well, I can’t tell you exactly where the Tower of the Fair is. Or what it looks like.

As for what my student uniform actually was, when I still studied in the Tower of the Fair (three times a week, four hours per- mathemagic is a generalist’s position, but I’m best at Necromancy, actually), well. Footwear for me was a pair of sturdy, well fitted boots, made of fine leather; the spells were actually in a pair of four-strand boot chains that I and my Mommarav bedecked with various charms and such. Because the charms were on a removable chain, and were removable themselves, my boots never wore out in seven years of schooling- I still have those boots, and the boot chains, too. The Tower of the Fair did require hats during the Sleet and Snow seasons; for student safety, if nothing else. I had so many; and some of them I don’t even remember buying or making, they just… appeared. I’m wearing the nicest one I still have right now.

Belts were two things- firstly, a regular belt to hold up your pants; and then the buckle, to show your affiliation with various groups and Tower-clubs. Usually, a belt would also have some sort of enchantment on it, to protect the wearer in case of danger or failed experiment; and some way to carry a wand or holster, and probably a pouch for spell components. I just carried a satchel, because I had too much shit and was way too busy for that- just. No. At most, my belt had a resistance charm and a Midwifery buckle when I got through that class in second year.
Wands and staves are tricky- I used a lace fan and an umbrella because of my rank, and because they were more effective than anything else I could have used. The only thing more effective would be my spear, and actual weapons aren’t usually allowed in the Tower unless you’re a warlock or a battle mage, and mathemagicians are neither - research and development is where I learned to excel.

There’s usually a selection of four to six magical items that gets recommended to students on their supply lists- but their effects can often be duplicated with much cheaper or more durable items, magic only sometimes required. The Tower of the Fair required six; they were duplicated or substituted by me as follows.

Goggles of minute seeing, for viewing extremely small things that aren’t actually microscopic, can be duplicated with a good quality inspection lens, loupe, or even a crystal if it’s cut correctly. The Tower of the Fair had portal lockers assigned to each student over the summer; you used a key to access your locker, and inside was all the things you put inside. It’s what I based my own Bag of Tricks on. Thus, I had no need of a Haversack of Holding.

I used a Moon Belt, a slow-fall vest with a hood, and a grappling hook with reel and line in my first year, while my wing healed from it’s break. Phoenix cloaks aren’t actually expensive, merely delicate. The reason I didn’t use one is twofold- the first being, flight magic around injured wings is bad- fouls the nerves. The second? Status. At the time, I was a Princess, and not favored in the Winter Court- thus, any phoenix cloak would be suspect, especially because I couldn’t just buy one without sending the wrong sort of message. A Moon Belt and grapple, on the other hand, when paired with a slow-fall vest, can be much more effective- especially if you need to keep your back protected, or just like exploring. Towers tend to be very vertical.

A Ring of Brightstar is useful… if you aren’t also going to a military academy that specializes in, hm, quiet time. So. The Eye, Ear, and Nose set is what I used; ears and nose was a curious collection of asymmetrical earrings and nose rings connected by a chain, and they enhanced my scenting and hearing abilities… a little. Mostly, it was my glasses that did the work of giving me good darkvision. Well, that and years of practice.

A Crystal Terrarium can be subbed for just about any assortment of household herbs in the kitchen garden- except for mint and rosemary, and basil. Mint and Rosemary will take over your plantings; while Basil prefers a dedicated pot. You’ll need either a box of sea-salt or a selection of unworked quartz crystals to make up for that ‘just about any’ qualifier I threw down earlier- but otherwise, yeah, just use regular kitchen herbs.

Finally, a familiar. Most Towers don’t require familiars- the Tower of the Fair does for the simple reason of tradition. I got special dispensation for my familiar, because it was actually a hive of bees; the whole hive was eventually counted as one singular organism because I raised such a stink about it. By my third year, new students were bringing ant colonies and swarms of butterflies- and by graduation, an entire branch of the familiars’ appreciation club had formed, dedicated to, you guessed it, entomology. Bugs are, and always will be, cool as shit.

The Tower of the Fair is one of four All-Color Towers- it’s why I was able to learn Mathemagic at all. Being able to take the basic classes of every style of magic is what allows a mage to learn the basics of Mathemagic- being able to compare, contrast, and analyze everything is the bread and butter of the mathemagician’s world.

The friends I have here aren’t, technically speaking, students of the Maple Tower; they aren’t teachers or professors either. Tethry, Marsha, and Haron were groupmates for my doctorate projects-
the ones that lived, I mean. Magic is dangerous, and hard; death is almost certain, in every color.

Tethry’s focus was wards—shields, rules, filters, locks, keys, even certain enchanted weapons. So long as they could block certain things out or keep other things in, he wanted to know about it. There’s a lot of mathemagic in wards—defining what your ward does, what it allows, what it doesn’t… A lot of the research for warding involves finding the correct frequency for whatever you’re trying to… the phrase is ‘bind’, you find the frequency, and you write in a rule that binds what you want the way you want it. Difficult, dangerous, finicky stuff.

Marsha was focused on leylines— a wooly subject at any time. There’s not a lot of hard evidence supporting or denying they exist; just mountains of hearsay. Most of what Marsha did for her study was collating the various accounts in conjunction with historically accurate maps of the areas where the accounts were set or came from, combined with maps of those areas in the current day— all in an attempt to find or quantify what the hell those people were talking about. Sometimes, it was ergot; or mushrooms; or a particularly sheddy flock of poisonfeather birds. And sometimes, it wasn’t. Almost all of her research was done in the library— except when the library didn’t have the resources she needed. Then she went out to get her information.

And finally— Haron. Haron was interested in souls— specifically, their interaction with music. It’s his work that formed the basis of modern Resonance theory. I paid the least attention to his research because it had almost nothing to do with mine.

I was interested in two things— astrology, and metamaterials. They do go together, in an odd way… Learning what all the old mage traps are made of, you learn how to make them and how to break them.

There’s a lot of things I know for absolutely no good reason. For example, the worst prison in the World is not Impel Down; Impel Down is just the most famous. The very very worst prison, in all the World, is the French-Germa prison, La Bastille. People who go into that place as prisoners… their memories are taken from them by force, and they forget they were ever anything other than prisoners.

I figured out how to escape from La Bastille when I was fourteen years old.

I also figured out that the most lucrative property to steal would be maple syrup, seeing as there’s a very good market for it and almost no way of verifying where it’s from once you’ve got it out of Tuckleigh jurisdiction.

Why am I thinking about all of this? Pretty simple— I wasn’t very nice when I was a teenager, and I’m super ashamed of that. I was… awful. I’m still pretty fucking awful, but I like to think I’ve gone from being a solid ninety percent terrible person to like, an eighty-seven percent terrible person. That’s a little bit better than I was before, right?

Anyway.

We’re here.
Germa focuses on the wrong borders, and the wrong countries. It’s not their seaward borders that matter most; and it’s not the various support states within, either. It’s Tuckleigh, with it’s Mounties, and comedy writers who move among us but we know them not, betrayed only by their occasional mispronunciation of ‘about’; that threatens us all.

I don’t think Tuckleigh was founded on the free flow of syrup- but it probably should have been. I can tell you, now that we have so many kids on our crew, the price of syrup is stable and high; it’s more expensive than oil. Was it Sandora sheikhs who did this, or Muscovy oligarchs? No. It’s Tuckers, who, organized into an ironfisted cartel of syrupy madness, established a stranglehold on the sweet elixir.

The Federation of Tuckleigh Maple Syrup Producers- FTAP- is OPEC. Formed in 1566, the federation tasked themselves with taking a business in which few could make a decent living- the price went north to south with the quality of the yield, which went north to south with the quality of the spring- and turning it into a respectable trade. This was accomplished in the classic way: quotas, and rules.

Control the supply, and you control the price; limit supply, raise the price. And humans always have a demand for delicious sweets.

Tuckleigh makes seventy-eight percent of the world’s maple syrup. They always have; and so, they’ve always been able to set the price. So far as I know, the commodity is valued at nearly $150000 a barrel, twenty-five times more expensive than crude oil; fifty more than ambergris.

How do I know this for sure, well. Deborah, my sous chef, returned to me from her jaunt off to the market in a bit of a tizzy- ‘genuine maple’ is a distinct legal definition, and a bottle of syrupy goodness with that legally defining label on it costs… $1500!

This shocked everyone- Chopper, who loves maple syrup; Nami, who funds this expensive habit; and Deborah, who’s never actually had genuine maple syrup before.

Now, to be fair, it tastes absolutely nothing like Aunt Jenny’s Sirup of Maple; and it doesn’t taste like Mab’s homemade Cherry Sirup or Birch Sirup either. Maple syrup has a distinctive spark to it, a crunchy note not unlike the smell of fallen leaves in the autumn, when you hold them up and crumble them in your hands, or woodsmoke some three hills distant from your place on the porch some autumnal evening, when the cold snap threatens to hit and frost will soon trace spiraling fern fronds across the glass panes. In texture, it is akin to a simple sirup one would use in any number of mixed beverages; in color, it can range from pale amber to molasses-dark.

Aunt Jenny’s Sirup of Maple comes in a number of sizes; a family-sized gallon jug runs about $400. This is because it’s not real syrup- it’s not even really sirup, it’s… effluvium. A disgusting brown goo, with a flavor of overbearing sweetness and a touch of liquid smoke.

When Deborah asked me why a bottle of genuine maple syrup cost so much, I told her the truth; Tuckleigh maple syrup is an international legally registered commodity; ‘real’, in a legal sense. In a world covered in genuine snake oil and sailing straight to hell, there’s nothing more honest than good old tree sap.
Tuckers will tell you that the frog trappers got it from the native Maple People, who got it from their ancestors, who got it from the gods. It’s the life, death, and rebirth of the forest turned into wine. I know that because of FTAP, which turned Tuckleigh into a brand. But, there are side effects to all this- the federation, with it’s quotas and iron control, has reaped it’s own sticky harvests.

I’m referring, of course, to the high prices- and the inevitable black market that springs up around such things. By making syrup production seem like good business instead of an eccentric survivalist hobby, production has increased- much of it in Skua. With oil, it’s deep deposits reached only by fracking; with syrup, it’s forests in Ultima Thule, which Tuckers tell you with a shudder, has three times as many maple trees as all of Maple Island’s archipelago. Tuckleigh- the province encompassing the main island- produces seventy two of the seventy eight percent of the world supply- but if Skua ever makes the push to self-sufficiency, these pancake loving assholes are cooked.

The most troubling of unintended consequences is the black market, a subterranean world of contraband sap where wildcatters move unmarked barrels through deep woods; the seedy-sweet history behind your stack of crêpes. The pirates of the syrup nation are attracted by the peak prices; they skulk through warehouses, waiting for the watchman to doze off over his Gambler’s Digest, as the getaway cart idles.

Aunt Jenny is a fake. There was never an Aunt Jenny. The original character was borrowed from a minstrel show that was touring South Blue at the end of the ninth century. The original Jenny was a land-man in scale face, possibly a Germa; this is why the current day Aunt Jenny is a caricature of the mermaid brushing her hair on the shore, her shawl of lace fallen low about her hips and her breasts uncovered- the stereotyped mermaid, though no real merrow I’ve ever met has ever fit that misbegotten mould, nor any other woman for that matter. Women wear tops to swim, because if they don’t their breasts flail around and get in the way. Fat floats; that’s how it is. And just about the worst thing you can do to your hair is brush it right after getting out of salty water- at the very least, you want to rinse it with fresh, and then put on a layer of oil before you get to business with a comb.

Aunt Jenny stands for everything Tuckers distrust about this World and the syrup much of it consumes. It’s one of the things FTAP was organized to battle; phony maple syrup and it’s delicious lies, fake backstories cooked up for Aunt Jenny and her gal pal, Mrs. Buttersworth.

Caroline Cyr, head mage of the Maple Tower, and a spokesperson for the federation- with a name
like that, what else could she be? is known for being especially irritated by varieties of what is essentially high-fructose sirup of cane sugar, products that often decorate their labels with maple leaves and log cabins, implying a connection to the forest that simply doesn’t exist.

FTAP fights with advertising and fancy recipes and funding towards the Maple Tower; Crustless Vegetable Quiche with Maple Syrup, Crépes with Kale and Maple Syrup, Maple-Almond Truffles, Genuine Maple Syrup, the Maple Tower Spell Review, being one of the hosting places for the semi annual World’s Worst Bakers Competition- but mostly, they fight by controlling the quality and quantity of the product.

Hence the Reserve; and the Tower.

Here’s how it works: there are thirteen thousand five hundred maple-syrup producers in Tuckleigh. Each is permitted to send a fixed amount to FTAP for sale that year, a quota that was established six years ago, even as Skuan production exploded- up twenty-seven percent from their previous zero. Members of the federation- which bulk producers in the Maple archipelago are required to join- give their harvest over to FTAP, which inspects, tastes, and grades the syrup. Some of it is sold immediately, usually from first time producers; the rest is stored in the Reserve. Producers are paid twice- once when their syrup goes into the Reserve, at a flat rate, and again when the syrup is sold, which is recalculated year to year and can itself take years. FTAP keeps B5400 for each barrel, a kind of tax that pays for the advertising, the testing of the recipes, the upkeep of the Reserve, the Maple Tower grant, and so on. In this way, the federation steadies supply, filling the coffers in banner years and satisfying demand in fallow; the price of syrup is always stabilized, benefitting even their Skuan competitors.

Laurierville is a town at the very heart of Tuckleigh Province, maybe a five minute walk from the coast. Towering steeples, frost coated roads, tree covered hills and teenagers in touks eating croissants at Bonchon’s Chicken. It’s reached via a spotless skyway- basically a bridge between two buildings, with a roof and windows- where no one’s pissed on the walls and there’s no graffiti and absolutely no sweartoads to speak of. Bizarre, but not bad, per say.

It’s just the polite blue-grey of concrete in the skyway to Laurierville, a state of existence that is indelibly connected to how most syrup producers have been content to abandon the free market for the safety of the syrup cartel. It’s a better life, with less ugliness and disease and foul sweartoad curses, but also a life devoid of color, excitement- windfall and spree and wildness.

A banner on the first bulletin board inside the Maple Tower proclaimed, in bright red letters on stark white ground, ‘NEARLY 2,044,122 LITERS OF SYRUP WAS STOLEN; 12.5 PERCENT OF THE RESERVE; WITH A STREET VALUE OF B1,340,000,000. IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT THIS THEFT, PLEASE COME FORWARD AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.’

Mab and the Mages left myself and my cooks at the door; I took my youngsters along with me to meet Caroline Cyr, and go on a tour of the Reserve. As I said, it’s the holy of holies; where oceans of syrup, the accumulated wealth of the maple forest, hibernates- sometimes for years. I had a clear mental picture of the Reserve: huge vats, surface crusted and covered with flies; tanks reached by tottering ziggurats; visitors in perpetual danger of falling in and doing the slowest, stickiest, sweetest dead man’s float of all time.
In truth, the Reserve, which holds somewhere around 2839058800 liters on a typical day, is a warehouse filled with barrels—white drums stacked from floor to ceiling, nearly two-hundred feet high. There was a Charles Sheeler-like quality to the interior of the Reserve, an industrial awe; the barrels in their near-endless rows, the implied weight of them, the pipes and ladders gleaming under harsh blue-white light; persnickety and precise in a way that’s especially Germa. It’s almost like the life anyone could know… but not quite. So close; yet so different.

The Reserve is a treasure trove, with inventory, at any time, worth perhaps \$2063360500. The syrup is tested when it comes in; then sent through a William Wonka-style conveyor system, where it’s pasteurized and sealed in a barrel, labeled, lifted, and stacked. Each barrel’s label has it’s grade (Extra Light, Light, Medium, Amber, and Dark), along with percentage clearly visible.

When maple sap exits the tree, it’s two to four percent sugar. As it’s boiled, the sugar concentrates. To be syrup, it must be sixty-six percent sugar. Below that, it’s not a shelf stable product. Above that, it begins to crystalize—first as butter, then as harder and harder forms of candy.

There were two or three workers doing maintenance on one of the cranes, all in clean white jumpsuits and hairnets and face masks.

“We’re finished for the season;” Cyr told me, “we still haven’t really recovered from the theft, that’s why this place is so empty.”

Being in syrup is like being a tax accountant; three or four weeks of absurd intensity followed by months of waiting and wondering. Here, at the Reserve, it’s like being a tax accountant for a country— that’s the amount of work they have to put in, anyway.

I asked Cyr if there’d ever been a spill. She looked at me with the visual equivalent of ‘tes con’. I told her about a molasses spill that had once smothered Fiddler’s Green’s Riverside, a great stinking wave that upended trees, drove buildings off their foundations, and killed lionbirds by the hundred.

“No,” she said calmly. “We are a food reserve, not a munitions factory; we have higher safety standards and better training overall. We have never had a spill.”

The Reserve is a monument to collective planning, to thousands of little guys each giving up a little freedom in return for security. Tuckers call this a better life. Skuans call it socialism— which is what their entire government structure is built on, and it works very well for them. Muscovy might call it the ‘road to serfdom’— life wasn’t kind, to them. It’s like all the other roads in Tuckleigh; calm, predictable, without a single teenager on roller-skates blasting gods-awful music on a boom-tube, or a solitary patch of graffiti telling you, in no uncertain terms, to eat shit and die. It’s also had the perverse effect of pooling wealth, of creating just the sort of target criminals mean when they say they rob banks because that’s where the money is.

Cyr encouraged me to lift one of the barrels. I could do it, but it was a strain- and certainly not quick. I imagined trying to steal one of those barrels; and then I imagined trying to steal ten thousand of them.

It was the Gran Tesoro heist of the syrup world— or rather, the Bucket of Gold down the Seine.
About four years ago, a man- in broad daylight, on a weekday- picked up a ninety pound bucket of gold dust and just… ran off with it, following the public bridges and walkways adjacent to the Seine, in Paris. No one stopped him; no one knew him; and he still hasn’t been found. Similarly, in the summer just after the War of the Paramount, on one of those July days when the first hint of autumn cools the north, Michel Gauvreau began his precarious climb up the barrels in St. Louis de Bergerac, a small village outside Laurierville, where part of the Reserve was stored in a series of rented warehouses. Once a year, FTAP takes an inventory of the barrels. Gauvreau was near the top of the stack when one of the barrels teetered, then nearly gave way.

“He almost fell,” Cyr said, pausing to let the picture form.

A small man, astride a tower of syrup barrels, realizing, suddenly, there’s nothing but empty wood beneath his feet. Normally, each barrel weighs more than two hundred seventy two kilos when filled; the stacks are supposed to be more than sturdy enough for the weight of a man, so something was clearly wrong. When Gauvreau knocked on the barrel, it tolled like a gong. When he pulled the cork, he discovered it empty. At first, it seemed like this could have been a glitch- a mistake, some clerical error. But soon, more punk barrels were found- many more; even barrels that had seemed full had been emptied of syrup and filled with water- a sure sign of thieves who’d covered their tracks. In most cases, when a boring bureaucratic job turns interesting, there’s trouble afoot- doesn’t matter what that job is, taxes, mail, data entry- as soon as it becomes interesting, trouble’s a brewing.

Inspectors called FTAP HQ and sounded the alarm. Just like that, the facility was swarming with cops. It was a great mystery- there are no cameras, after all. Who would steal syrup? And, even if some sick bastard wanted to, what would they carry it off in? How far could they get? Syrup is as heavy as water- and I know for a fact that lifting a barrel of water off the ground and carrying it back to a ship is not for the weak of limb.

Anyway- the investigation was headed by the Tuckleigh police, which was soon joined by the Royal Rangers and International Consumables Bureau of Investigation (ICBI). They promised to spare no expense. These heartless criminals, these ne’er do wells, they would be brought to justice, and the syrup, described in the parlance of law enforcement as ‘hot’, would be recovered. About three hundred people were questioned, forty search warrants executed; it was not the Juice and the Jester, and it wasn’t the Badger Fighter and the One Eyed Man- but it was special. Strange.

There’s something stirring about making off with all that syrup; it boggles the mind. It’s… flabbergasting. It feels less like a crime and more like a prank, what you might do to your cousin if she were all powerful and had barrels of syrup lying around. Of course, it’s serious business to FTAP; nearly 2044122 liters of syrup have been stolen- twelve and a half percent of the total Reserve, and I am not joking- with a street value of an absurd amount that they’ve brought upon themselves, really.

It’s known as the Great Maple Syrup Heist, and is said to be among the most fantastic agricultural crimes ever committed, on the same level as Orpheus’ theft of the Cattle of the Sun. Granted, agricultural crimes are an odd, venerable subset- but, well, every ancient civilization has one or two stories. The tale of Cu Chulainn, which Mab told the Juniors over the winter, well- that was all predicated on cattle theft and divorce. Wars are fought over cattle, trees, water rights and crop yields; they always have been.

Everyone I’ve spoken to- including my Kids- figures that it’s people who’ve done it, but no one’s quite sure of the how. I, myself, am having trouble with the scenario- syrup, as I found out today, is heavy. It’s sticky. Once you’ve taken it- how do you hide it, and where? Who do you get to smuggle it? Where do you sell it? It’s like stealing sea-salt from salt panners- sure, you could, but why would you want to?
Ignoring everything else, it’s likely an inside job. Not a member of FTAP- though rogue syrup producers have their theories- nor a manufacturer, but a tenant who happened to be renting space in the same facility. That would mean access: keys, ID card, reason to be there… FTAP itself provides motive- the value of the commodity (1500 beri per small jar! Hells bells, just take my blood why don’t you-), the tight control of supply, the black market that sprung to life in the wake of such rigorous control… In a world without centralized government- yeah, Mab’s destruction of Mariejois, and the theft of the three mountains that supported it; it had startling knock on effects- as various powers and parties run gauntlets for this and that, Tuckers fight over the rights for the last precious drops of genuine maple, all grades.

Several conspirators have already been pursued, including alleged ringleaders Avik Caron and Richard Vallieres. Working with a handful of others, some with knowledge of the trade, they apparently went after the bounty like Mickey in the Night Kitchen, dreaming their dream between midnight and dawn, when the world is half-and-half, not here and not there- insubstantial. It isn’t real, in the mystic sense- that’s why if you’re trying to break a curse or some other long-standing spell, between midnight and dawn is when you do it. This is also the time when even criminals tend not to be out and about- everyone has to sleep at some point.

According to the prosecutor’s report, the gang would cart barrels out of the Reserve to a sugar shack where they would siphon the syrup in the way you siphon oil from an engine; they fed it, a cask at a time, into their own ramshackle barrels and then refilling the originals with water. As the operation grew, the masterminds allegedly brought on accomplices and began siphoning the syrup directly from barrels in the Reserve. Nearly 10,000 barrels of syrup were stolen and carted to points south and east of Tuckleigh proper, where the market is freer of scrutiny. So far, prosecutors have brought four men to trial.

The case was worked in the usual way- chase down every lead, question every witness, identify the ringleaders. In this last December, the police arrested two alleged ringleaders and one other suspect. A large portion of the syrup was ultimately recovered, with the application of some serious sleuthing. Apparently, there's a play or philom in the works- I don’t know how they’re going to play it, but my guess is the criminals will be the protagonists. That’s how Holly Would usually does it (even if you won’t, Holly Would!); but, really, it’s the cops that made a miracle.

If it’s hard to steal syrup, imagine how hard it is to recover it legally- especially after it’s been stolen. Like oil, syrup is a fungible commodity; once it’s on the market, it’s just syrup. Oil is oil; syrup is syrup.

So.

How did they do it?

Gumshoe policework; retracing the footsteps of the criminals, following their trail through the black market, a trail that led past lonely crossroads and out of the province. The goods were scattered: some of it in Brunshwicke, which is as loose with syrup as Deadwood was with silver claims; some of it way across the border in Verdigiry, near Thule, stashed away in the factory of a candy-maker who swore she had no godsdamned idea that the syrup was hot. Several of the crooks have plead guilty and have paid fines or are serving sentences.

Vallieres has plead not guilty to trafficking and fraud; the other alleged ringleader, Avik Caron, has plead not guilty to theft, conspiracy, and fraud. He allegedly cooked up the conspiracy, and went on trial in January. He could get more than fourteen years medium security, but that’s in Tucker, so I’m not exactly sure.
I don’t know what the home office of OPEC looks like, but I do know what I think it looks like. Glass and steel; massive desks occupied by sheikhs in flowing robes, kaffiyehs and Vuarnets, quoting prices on the phone while looking out at palatial gardens strewn with flowers and deep-blue tiles in glimmering ocean waves; gleaming storage tanks; oil tankers stacked to the horizon.

I was expecting something similar from FTAP, I think; a gleaming tower, walls covered with maps, tacks showing the location of each rogue. An onhand cook dedicated to making- ugh- breakfast, all the time, day or night.

I instead found myself, and my kids, in a very normal brown-brick building, adjacent to a windmill, all of us standing with Simone Trepanier, the tall, curly haired and fantastically curvaceous executive director of FTAP, who was pointing out this and that feature, annotating the land around us like a passage in a book.

The country outside Tuckleigh proper is strange. Flatter than a crepe, extended sunsets, vistas and such- but here and there, mountains rise without the prelude of foothills. Flat, flatter, mountain, flat, flat. A landscape designed by a person with no experience in geology, no idea of tectonic plates. When I asked Trepanier to explain, she pointed out each mountain; a chain of peaks, an archipelago, what the Conmi islands might look like if the plug could be pulled and the sea drained; and she said “Volcanoes. Extinct volcanoes. They blew up and died and over time were covered by forests. Tuckleigh comes from Lavatuk’ay, which comes from Lava, Tucked Away.” We stood for a moment, looking.

I got the sense that we were looking at more than a panorama, more than a the view to the east. Peaks and forests, gullies and ravines, hollers and hidden places, the sun rising and falling, the earth turning in it’s wintry slumber and giving way to spring, time unraveling between solstices. We were looking at the seasons, the very essence of time unbound. We were looking, in fact, at syrup.

This is why it’s holy to Germa Tuckers. They got kicked in their entire ass by the Skuans, and they have to live as a minority in their own country, but they still retain the sweet essence of the New World. In this way, syrup really is oil. It’s not man-made, nor invented. It’s the land. The people working in the trade are merely enablers, acting as middlemen and agents. No man or woman has the power to create syrup.

When we sat down in the ready room, adjacent to the FTAP lobby, Trepanier spoke about oil, informing me the analogy only goes so far. Oil can be found almost anywhere on the planet, she said. Sink a drill deep enough, you’ll hit it eventually. But maple syrup comes only from the red and sugar maple forests found in a particular range of Paradise and the New World, and that includes the Sea, the Land, and the Sky.

“That’s why FTAP is necessary,” she told me. “If one country stops producing oil, the slack can be picked up by others all over the world. But, if there’s a bad season here, you’re going to have a year where maple syrup is scarce as hen’s teeth- which will have knock on effects in candy, medicine, cosmetics, plastics… there’s a lot of things that require the specific kind of sugar that comes from maple syrup, and most people don’t realize because they’re not supposed to. That’s why the Reserve is so important; and that’s why the theft was such a huge issue.”

Trepanier handed me a juice box, the kind I pack with bento boxes. It was filled with maple water as it comes from the tree, before it’s been boiled into syrup, butter, taffy, hard rock sugar crystals. It’s thick, in some strange way- like milk is thicker than water, but it’s not milk; it makes me think of the water you get after straining curds from whey, cloudy and colored something like tears. I sipped it slowly as Trepanier told me the story of maple syrup; where it comes from, what it means; eventually, I lost interest and handed it off to Deb, who shared it out among the other kids after
tasting it herself. Linus enjoyed it the most; Mince the least.

The Wampanoag taught starving Skuan farmers how to bury fish heads beside corn seeds, a natural fertilizer that greatly increases yield per harvest. Algonquins showed Germa trappers how to tap maple trees and collect the heavy waters each spring; and how to sacrifice blood and burnt bones to their roots. The waters became balms and elixirs; the sacrifice ensured that the trees continued to grow vigorously. No maple tree can be drawn from more than once in a set of two years, not and maintain quality in the syrup; and once drawn from, unless the tree is fed, it’s sap giving quality will remain degraded for the rest of it’s life.

The Algonquin had the sap but didn’t realize it’s full potential- couldn’t, actually, realize it’s full potential- until the Germa brought their bronze cookware needed to cook it down; the Germa had semi-advanced cooking techniques, but lacked things to use them on until their fateful meeting with the Algonquin. Each side had half- and neither side could have made maple syrup without the other’s presence, Trepanier explained. When they came together, they made something new.

In some ways, my wife is as free as any other pirate. I certainly think so- she doesn’t think of it as such, but I know for a fact that if she really didn’t want to do all our laundry, handle all our clothing, make sure every rope and sail on our ship was in good working order- she’d find a way to have someone else to do it, while she did her own thing. She certainly almost never checks the sails herself- that’s one of the first things she ever delegated.

Mab spent a lot of her childhood at school- but some of that school time was actually in the Winter Palace of the Fae, because she was a princess. Specifically, she was the eldest daughter of a reigning Queen; that has responsibilities from which only the most dishonorable will run. She discovered her passion for fabric, and fiber, on accident I think; then, she made it her life’s work. She’s the current Queen of Ultima Thule, the only Faesh Kingdom that came to be incorporated into Skua by dint of being the last one standing on it’s own- according to Mab, it was a bit of a ‘well I guess if everyone else is gonna do it,’; and also according to Mab, Ultima Thule has never quite… settled, into being a part of the rest of Skua. The exact details aren’t mine to know, but apparently Ultima Thule is the largest and least inhabited part of Skua; Mab’s got the basic infrastructure to massively expand her part of the country, but not the people. There’s also the fact that most of her massive, sprawling, empty country is infested with terrifying monsters, ancient tombs, and deadly Autonomic monstrosities. Ultima Thule was basically a dumping ground for a long time, and the favorite theatre of every civil war the Skuans ever fought.

When Mab became Queen Thule, she got a lot of property, all over the world. One of those properties is actually here, on Tuckleigh; it’s a lodge on one of the islands best skiing mountains. Mab doesn’t particularly like skiing, and it’s past the end of the season for it; but her lodge sits on a parcel of land that holds some of the finest sugar maples anywhere.

It’s a beautiful complex of buildings, a small village in it’s own right, really- and it’s where her ninjas live. Just about every Royal House has their own Clan of ninjas; the Vinsmoke have the Gravedust, while the Morgan have the Nighthowlers. From what I understood of my lessons as a boy, the Nighthowlers had some sort of massive schism- half the clan left, following He Without Name, while the rest stayed, unwilling to betray their Master or the One Without Fear.

It’s funny- I haven’t really thought about my childhood in a long, long time. I wasn’t actually taught the same way as my siblings- we really only shared two classes together, our Comportment studies, and our combat training. I wasn’t great at combat- the traditional Demonic styles don’t work for me at all; but I was very good at Comportment, probably because of the rest of my schooling.
My bodyguard, Corinthia, was… well, she was one of the only people I can think of who was ever solidly on my side. She did everything in her power to keep me safe, and I think grew to care for me quite a lot before I… ran? Escaped? I know she had to have known what I was doing; she had to have known what my siblings were doing, what my- He- was doing… Anyway, most of my other lessons were with the children of the Gravedust clan. I remember the images of our teachers, but not their names; I barely remember Corinthia. I know that the Old Man didn’t have to teach me much of anything about potions, merely the recipes and more complicated brewing techniques- I already knew all the major ingredients, and how they reacted with each other, something that takes most people twenty years of constant study to learn.

Anyway, uh, there’s a selection of Nighthowlers here, on Tuckleigh, who live in Mab’s ski lodge. This is one of their training grounds, apparently- close enough to a Tower, a major City, and the Wilderness for it to be a key location to train up baby ninjas in the fine arts of theft, spying, assassination, and sabotage. In their downtime, during the sap season, they also run the Morgan Tuckleigh Syrup Shack. Mab’s books read something like fifty-five barrels last year, boiled and loaded and shipped and sold around the world. Mab only keeps a very vague eye on the workings of her sugar shack here- it’s just not a very big part of how her kingdom makes money, even if it is particularly lucerative. Mostly, it’s a way to keep her ninjas solvent in those times when she doesn’t have anything for them to do, which is actually most of the time.

The Nighthowlers quickly became interested in the syrup business- then more than just interested. By the time I met The One Without Fear - a small man with stark white hair and the most pristine scarf I’ve ever seen- the Nighthowlers, technically Clan Lupa, was heading two major operations. One cranks out some of the finest sex toys and lingerie anywhere in the world- Mab has an extensive collection of their fine, fine work; and the other cranks out maple syrup.

During sap season, he’s at work in the maple grove from sunup to sundown, then long into the night, keeping watch on boiling pans, rotating shifts of baby ninjas working the pans, and fighting off giant squirrels who want desperately the syrup they’re cooking.

The One Without Fear led us- the Kids and Me- through Mab’s forest, of which he and his clan are charged with caring for and defending. It’s a place that roars and sings with power, pristine as a forest can get, crossed by a river that triumphed in a waterfall; and One himself wore gumboots and a pristine polka dotted scarf as he led us quickly but without rushing, through the inky trees. Skuans, for the most part, are characterized as ever smiling, or ever grim- but that’s not really true. What they are is focused- Skuans live almost exclusively in the moment. Certainly, they create and abide by extremely long plans and strategies- but… I can’t explain it.

The One Without Fear- he asked me to call him One- showed me the network of tubes and dripcatchers that suckle sap from the trees like milk from a breast. He explained the process, how the tubes carry sap to a tank where excess water is drained away, and how what’s left continues on to the sugar shack. Me and the Kids and One, we sat in a warm rom in the back of the shack, pasteboard walls covered with mounted animal skulls, which I contemplated thoughtfully- that’s a trevally- as he loaded my Kids up with the products of his clan’s operation. Taffy. Butter. Little maple-leaf shaped candies you stop eating only when you feel sick from the sweetness. Dildoes. Lubricants. Condoms and dental dams. And, after getting measurements and a bit of a rummage, a pile of lacy lingerie, which went into a nice nondescript paper sack- one per Kid, no need for sharing.

As the Kids hyped themselves up on sugar and giggled over sex toys, One and I talked about rogue producers; wildcatters angry at FTAP’s cartel. One thought a moment, then said, “But, you know, when you get into the politics of it, it’s easy to forget what this is all for.” I left the Kids to their play, and followed One into the barnlike main room of the shack, where we stood beside a gleaming
stainless-steel machine that cooks maple water down to sixty-six percent sugar. It was being tended to by a master, a demon who was clearly of Germa descent and came with the shack when the Nighthowlers moved into the lodge area.

The Master of Syrup explained everything in Low Demonic, which I don’t speak terribly well- I understand it, I just have trouble using the slangy words of Low Demonic when I learned to speak in the very formal and structured High Demonic. Anyway, Master Syrup was friendly and warm, much like the food he creates; by following his words, gestures, and eyes, I could see where the water came in and how it worked it’s way through the system, exiting into a bowl as syrup. The One poured me half a shot of the finished product; golden, blond, still hot enough to burn the tongue but not so hot as to be uncomfortable to hold. I waited for it to cool, and then sipped slowly, memories of 20-year-old scotch and vanilla extracts swirling in my mind. It went to my head in the same way: delicious, pure, aroma and flavors so complicated only poetry would approach the full breadth of sensation- a cold, high place where red trees grew for a hundred years, their blood cooked and eaten first for survival, then pleasure- like drinking the forest, the land itself. This is the Golden Blood of the Earth; counterpart and equal to the Black Blood of the Sky (coffee), and the White Blood of the Sea (salt).

One filled several jugs for me, swore a simple oath of fealty (as I am now his King; Mab finished the paperwork and gave me the rightful share of paperwork); the first and last batch of the season, and the first such oath I have ever accepted.

The jugs were still warm when we all- me, the Kids, the Spellgeeks, and a fuming Mab- got back to the ship.

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So, uh, the backside of the Tea Room Fern set up shop in looks like a bodega with like, other stores crammed in? Literally nothing about it looks like what it is- the main portion of the first floor is a massive apocthecary, and the second floor is the tea room; I think the third floor is an acupuncturists? Anyway, I spent the morning doing star charts- pretty easy, so long as I get the appropriate information, I’ve no idea why Fern has so much trouble with this…

Lunch is delayed- the last customer basically burst into tears, so I had to deal with that, and then about five minutes later I had a jaw-cracker and a craving for dim sum- which this tea room sells, shockingly enough, but only twice a week and surprise surprise, today is one of those days.

I still have basically every bit of money I ever made in odd jobs saved up- Neo refused to let me use it on our expenses, said that her only requirement for me joining the adult world of work was to spend my money in frivolous ways. I opted for the silent ‘or not at all’ caveat; excepting on things like underwear and afterschool snacks, I haven’t really spent money in… years.

Today I’m wearing an oversized grey sweater that used to be Mom’s, see-through star tights, ombre clear boots, diamond sunglasses, and a star-shaped bag. I’m in a stellar mood. I added the headband after I started working- I forgot to bring extra hair ties, and one of mine broke, and my hair still isn’t quite long enough to just use the one and not feel like I’ve got a mullet… I dunno, I’ve gotten a very different experience from this place compared to Fern. Maybe it’s because I’m a lot less… fake-nice? Than she is? I’ve been told that I’m very blunt- or maybe it’s the face I make when I’m Done With Someone’s Shit?
Anyway, Fern comes in followed by everyone who went to the tower this morning. Fern sits across from me, and everyone else crowds into the booth, which made me thankful I’d already put the Astrology stuff away for lunchtime.

Dim sum is seductive, with it’s steamy fried baked small plates of delicious things and it’s golden memories of when Gran-gran and Grammy were still alive. It’s not talked about much, but a lot of Longlegs actually immigrated to Ryugu Mergyo, and then the rest of the New World; past the Red Line, most areas with a healthy population of Longlegs will have dim sum restaurants. I thank the gods for this benevolence every day.

With good, however, comes bad; and I’ve learned by now how to tell good from bad, and more importantly for the gastronomically inclined, good from great. There are more dim sum dishes than playing cards in a standard deck for Grease; thus, I’ll break it down to about twelve dishes my Grannies taught me to look for.

Har gow are shrimp dumplings, and when I need a quick check for quality at a dim sum parlor, this dish tells all. The Tea Room does good har gow; even pleating on the dumplings, the purse shape is consistent between the four pieces, and the bamboo basket is clean; the shape is pretty in and of itself. The wheat-and-tapioca-starched skin is smooth and tacky, not dried out; and the shrimp have a texture that’s toothsome and lusciously tender. I can also tell they’re using real pork fat, not a vegetable substitute- I feel bloated after if they’re trying to cut corners, but in this case, no. It’s the real thing.

Shu mai is har gow’s meatier, more crowd-pleasing cousin: a steamed dumpling with minced pork, shrimp, mushrooms, and bamboo shoots, all cupped in a thin egg dough wrapper and topped with an orange garnish dot. This decorative touch is the clue to the quality of the restaurant; cheap kitchens top with carrot, while high-end establishments will go with an orange roe. Either doesn’t change the taste; it’s for aesthetics, and dietary restrictions, as some people are allergic to certain kinds of fish. The wrapper is also important- the filling should be even with the top edge of the wrapper, meaning the wrapper hasn’t drooped down or the filling isn’t overflowed; these are good signs of a quality shu mai. It’s got the same textural rules as har gow: toothsome, bouncy, fresh and satisfying to bite into.

Soy sauce and chili oil is sufficient extraneous sauce, though not necessary.

Chicken feet are basically all skin and delicious flavor; they should be deep fried, then steamed, then stewed with garlic, soy sauce, and fermented black beans. Slurpy and good- and if the dim sum place doesn’t offer them, don’t bother asking for them unless you know they’re on the secret menu.

Lo mai gai is lotus leaf-wrapped sticky rice with chicken and a few other things; a melange of filling, not unlike a tamale. What those fillings are varies with the cook, but a constant is dark meat chicken, Longarm style blood sausage (sundae), and mushrooms. You’ll know the kitchen isn’t cheaping out on you if there’s two additional ingredients: dried scallops and a salted egg yolk nested in the filling. Entombing the stuffing is a pocket of savory glutinous rice, and the lotus leaf that wraps around imparts a subtle smoky tea-like flavor to the rice. One of my very favorite dim sum, especially during the winter or when I only have enough money for one thing.

I don’t like wu gok because I don’t like taro, but my sister Neo loves them. Think of them like deep-fried, meat-filled, mashed potato croquettes- but with a different enough composition to let you know you’re not eating potatoes. A wu gok is an engineering marvel, with an exterior of latticework-style honeycombed fried batter, cocooning a ball of mashed taro root stuffed with ground pork and sometimes mushrooms or bamboo shoots. The most alluring part is that crispy, lacy crust, or so my sister says- and lard is one of the reasons it gets that way, not to mention the heat of the oil; the mark of experience is getting this texture correct. I don’t like taro, so I almost never order this unless I’m eating with my sister- she loves the things, and will snaffle up my untouched portion without
prompting. With that said, I do know to look at the paper doily underside holding the rugby-ball shaped croquettes: if it’s sodden with oil, it’s a sign the kitchen fried it at a too-low temperature.

Spare ribs with fermented black beans—these are Captain’s favorite, and if he were here, no one else would get to try them. Steamed spare ribs used to be my very favorite, without reservation. Not so much, anymore. Yeah, when ships sink due to catastrophic boiler failure, they also burn. No pork.

Spring rolls are about the size of a cigar, and extremely crisp when it comes to their exterior—think of them like, hn, a crisper philo dough, a bit thicker? That’s what the wrapper should be like—shatteringly crisp, not doughy or thick. Stubby, with a filling of shredded pork, mushrooms, and bean sprouts, with a subtle sauciness within. Worcestershire sauce is the best compliment, even though it’s not necessarily traditional—although, considering what’s in the stuff, I’m pretty sure it’s the name that causes the most objections, rather than the sauce itself. Hnn—barley malt vinegar, spirit vinegar, molasses, sugar, salt, anchovies, tamarind extract, onions, garlic, spices (mostly cloves), soy sauce, lemons, pickles, and peppers. I’m fairly certain someone was really high when they came up with this recipe—it sounds like the kind of thing you’d eat blitzed out of your mind.

Radish cakes are my favorite; Neo hates them. The closest I’ve had to them since I joined the crew would be… polenta squares, we had those over the winter. Shredded radish or turnip is mixed into a batter with dried shrimp, mushrooms, and Longleg sausage, then formed into squares and pan fried to a savory crisp. That’s the key, by the by— they have to be aggressively fried to a deep browned crust, so look at the color. The filling should also be generously incorporated throughout the slices. Add a dab of sriracha sauce and you’re golden.

Egg tarts are a good memory. They were the only thing Dad could cook perfectly—everything else, heh, hit or miss. Not egg tarts. He could make them perfect—smooth jiggly custard insides, barely set when he served them, made of eggs, milk, and flavored with vanilla. I can remember eating them after school at room temperature while doing my homework; and I can remember eating them for breakfast on the weekends, hot from the oven. Even not great egg tarts remind me of the warm and flaky crust, the sweet and glossy filling with a soft creamy texture, the strength of my father’s arms and the warmth of his regard. The interior is the color of sunflower petals, and it should be glossy, too—hot tea or plain water to accompany this treat. Neo can’t make them; she’s got different memories attached to them.

Fried sesame balls remind me of Mom. Mom made them every night, it felt like—we always had them with dinner, if Mom was home. They were crisp and chewy, sticky rice flour that always puffed up during deep frying and coated with sesame seeds. Inside, there was sweet red bean paste or lotus paste, depending on season. I can’t make these, and I can barely bring myself to eat them.

Barbecue pork buns are a crowd pleaser—char siu bao, for those who want to know. They’re filled with chopped pork marinated with hoisin, soy, and oyster sauce. The bun is to be fluffy and moist throughout, and should tear apart with a gentle tug. Seasoned chefs add ornamental vertical creases to the bun, which makes it look like a carousel. The filling itself should never be saucy, but paste-like with a sweetness equal to it’s savoriness. Remove the piece of paper or leaf on the underside—it prevents the bao from sticking to the steam carton.

Finally, there’s beef tripe. Neophytes to dim sum get put off by the appearance—it’s cow stomach, after all. But the good ones don’t taste gamey or organ-like, or even smell like stomach acid; they’re hot, slick, garlicky, beefy rubber bands. Steamed in oil with green onions, ginger, and red chili, and served hot—send it back if it isn’t. I want a springy snap, and it should be steamed to tenderness. As for the sauce underneath? If you don’t want to spoon it over steamed white rice, you need to find a better restaurant.
Eventually I realize that Fern hasn’t said anything—Mab’s gone on a full tirade about stupid academics not seeing the point of studying past studying, practical applications being lost on them like the pleasures of the flesh being lost on a virgin nun with a vow of chastity; but all Fern’s done is eat her dim sum and work something over in her head.

I catch her eye, and raise a brow. She blinks as she swallows, and then looks me dead in the eyes and says—

“So today I learned nipples grow back and now I have to figure out what to do with this information. Thoughts, Havij?”

“First of all, why do you always have to take me down with you, oh my fucking fuck; second of all, what use could this information possibly be; and third of all, how did your licensing thing go?”

“In order— if I needed to learn, so do you; there is no useless information, merely information that’s not useful right now; and I passed.”

“Congratulations!”

“Thank you; they said I’d be getting my badge in three to five business days through the post,”

“That’s quite a turn around—”

“Well, I’ve had the paperwork filed since I was a tadpole, I just needed to handle fees and sit the paper exam,”

“Ahh. But— um, nipples?”

“Right. I know nipples grow back because once when I was in middle school in my gym class a bunch of dudes in our year who were always fucking around instead of running or training heard a rumor that if you sprayed that bodyspray that was really popular a few years back, you know—”

“Oh god, the stuff boys would practically bathe in, BATTLEAXE, right?”

“Right. They heard that if you sprayed BATTLEAXE onto your nipple for exactly sixty seconds, and flicked it, your nipple would come off. So, of course, the moment the teacher left the gym to go take a piss or whatever, these little fishlets whip out a spray can of BATTLEAXE and one brave, stupid soul among their idiot number began to spray himself while the rest chanted ritualistically.

“At sixty seconds, they watched, giggling, as this idiot young man put his hand up to his breast and flicked. To everyone’s horror, the nipple did indeed come right off, and, at ballistic speeds, soared across the gym and hit me right in the cheek. And stuck. So; in the horrified silence produced by this spectacle, as blood gushed from the nipple hole on the breast of the poor idiot who let his friends talk him into stupid shit; I am literally incapable of moving, having astral-projected so far away from this severed nipple that I may as well have been an ambulatory corpse.

“The teacher returned and the boy’s shirt came down, in a futile attempt to hide the tomfoolery that had taken place—but we both know full well that BATTLEAXE Body Spray and Cologne knows neither mercy nor fear, and almost immediately she was alerted to the scent of teenage defeat. Blood seeped through a shirt and down my cheek. She didn’t ask for an explanation, simply advised him to take the pass and go to the nurse. As he stood to go, the bodiless nipple peeled away from my cheek like a scab, and fluttered onto the floor with a splat.
“I saw that boy again today- grown, now, and shirtless, and with both nipples. A moving experience that honestly changed me forever. I’m a new woman, now.”

“I’m newly deceased,”

“Gods, if that isn’t the biggest fucking mood of my life,”

“...Ah! I finally came up with a word for that feeling, remember?”

“Mmn! What’ve you got?”

“Fuckor is when someone makes an assumption about you that is ten-thousand percent accurate and actually factually correct, but you really hate that they were able to expose you so easily. Contrafuckor is when someone makes an assumption about you that’s so wrong you’re confused as to how the fuck they could ever come to this conclusion. Intrafuckor is when you realize something about yourself that everyone’s been telling you for years is correct and you feel like one whole dumbass bitch. Antifuckor is when you realize what everyone’s been telling you about yourself for years is actually factually bullshit.”

“Nice! Words for things!”

“I know, right?”

“Mab. You have my full attention,”

“An amature MMA asshole asked me to engage in aggressive altercations, and being an authority on automatic violence, I volunteered,”

“Who was actually toughest there, though?”

“That’s still me, Sanji,”

“...Bullshit,”

“Bopped me so bad in the bean I was beyond ass-backwards; no blood, albeit bloody brutal,”

“Clunk?”

“Clocked my carriage, clipped my canopy, caught my consciousness with a carefully concocted combat cuffing,”

“Dink-”

“Decked me defiantly,”

“Easy,”

“Everyone gets one once,”

“Fuckin-”

“Fucked my fair face up from front to fireplace in a fairly unfair fashion unfortunate for these times,”
“Gods,"

“Got up, gathered my goods, got some get-up-and-go, got after the giddy goon, gave glory a goodly goal,"

“Had at it,”

“Hucked a haymaker,”

“Instantly,”

“Irked that idiot for sure,”

“Jackass!”

“Just so,”

“Killed?”

“No- kicking ass is enough for me to keep my temper these days,"

“Losers,”

“Luckily, I have contingencies in place for little hiccups like this,”

“Minty salve-"

“My goodness, when did you start carrying that around with you?”

“Nieces,”

“-Now how in the world did I forget about that?”

“Overwhelmed,”

“Okay, moving on,”

“Mab, please-”

“After punting those pricks down the proper channels of propriety, I punched their pasty faces in,”

I watch as my husband takes in the verbal part of the explanation of what happened this day at the Tower, which he only saw the end of. He smiles at me, shrugs in that Germa way, and peruses the menu again. I see his brow furrow.

“Quirky,”

“Quite so; as if a dim sum chef was conned into starting a cafe,”

“Right!?"

“Really, you want one or the other- dim sum is dim sum, and a cafe is a cafe,”
“Seriously,”

“Someone, and I know not who, convinced that poor chef to do far more than their training had perhaps ever intended, securing a bizarre fusion style cuisine for the masses without ever seriously considering the consequences,”

“Terribly confusing”

“Terrible con-fusion,”

“Urgh!”

“Um,”

“Very confused,”

“Very?”

“Well- a bit,”

“What should we order for dessert, do you think?”

“Egg tarts,”

“Excellent,”

“Yeah,”

“Yes-”

“Zebra torte?!”

“Zounds and gadzooks, give me that menu, I’ll order-”

I pluck the menu from my Sanji’s confused and twitching fingers, and calmly order egg tarts for the table. They come, flakey hot and perfect; and after paying, all of us but Fern and Havij scatter off to do our own things.

It’s funny- I never thought I’d crave sex as much as I do. A time of abstinence due to injury wouldn’t have bothered me overmuch before I got married to Sanji; but now… I’ve just got all this energy, and my pussy gets all itchy and achy, and I can’t get the kind of satisfaction I want from masturbation anymore. Kissing just stokes those fires higher, unfortunately; and at the end of the day, all I want is a good hard fucking and to fall asleep on my husbands hairy chest. Is that so wrong? No, I think not.

When I got the news this morning, that it was finally okay for me and Sanji to have sex again, I admit, I almost took him off for some hot loving then and there- but, alas, my good sense prevailed. Too much to do, this day, to let my urges have full say over my actions- but the day is done, now, and I…”
I want to fuck my husband.

Luckily for me, he’s of much the same mind- and, considering he made a stop at The One Without Fear’s personal stock room of maple syrup and sex toys, I think I’m in for a wonderful night.

So. What to wear, what to wear… body chains are Sanji’s favorite kind of lingerie… hm. Never have worn the crotch chains, for obvious reasons-

“Hm?”

“What-?”

“Why haven’t you worn the crotch chains, love?”

“Um. I’ve got too much bush, and I don’t know how to shave it, and trimming it would be… a bit, um, contortion-y?”

“…I could do it,”

My husband is pink from his scalp to the tips of his ears, all down his neck and chest and I’m sure below his undershirt and boxers. It’s been strangely awkward between us, since I got injured in the Rainbow Mist and Chopper banned sexual activity… I think, maybe-

“Help me pick out body chains, then, and I guess… shave away?”

“Pfft. Y-yeah, um, yes- okay, so, show me you’re- hnngh,”

I have a lot of body chains. I carefully pinch the meaty part of Sanji’s forearm to bring him back into the moment.

“Ek- ah, thank you. Hm. I think I like this one- it’s almost like two little pieces of maille, and it looks like they cup you, just so… and it comes up between your ass, too. Ahh, it’s so cute~!”

“Oh-kay, but, um… my hair is much too long for this-”

“I can definitely fix that,”

“I- faaah. Okay,”

“If you don’t like it, we won’t do it again, okay?”

“Okay,”
I never knew there was so much involved in shaving; usually, I’m out of bed after Sanji’s finished shaving, and the most we interact before breakfast is the quickie before we get up and some kisses before we get to work. I’ve never taken the time to watch his morning hygiene routine, and… There’s like, a whole little ritual for it.

First, he sets me up on one of the chairs in our cabin, a simple straight backed thing; I’m sat on a thin towel, with the small of my back supported by a pillow. My legs he spread open and propped on some empty crates he had in the storeroom of the Galley; and after I assured him that this pose was just fine, and I’d tell him if it wasn’t, he began setting up his shaving kit.

A stack of clean white washcloths; a safety razor with a collection of guards, and a number of extra blades; a fine tooth comb and a pair of small sharp scissors; a small electric kettle, a brush, a small bowl with some soap- oh, the kind I make that lathers in the extreme, okay; and… Nivea Creme? Okay… and a small bottle of something, some sort of… extract, maybe? Salux cloth... gloves, I think, and, some sort of yellow- oh, the honey and sand exfoliant I made for him, okay. A wash basin and a simple water carafe… I didn’t know that they made salux cloth gloves. I also didn’t know that Sanji buys them in bulk at the Daiso- apparently they’re the favorite of horny mermaids everywhere? Um. I don’t really see the appeal, but- um. Mmm!

He- Sanji put one glove on and an exfoliant in his gloved hand and he got his hand wet and started, aaah, hah, started scrubbing my pussy with the salux cloth glove and the exfoliant and mostly it’s just scrubbing but when he scrubs over my- aaah- my labia- aaaaaaaah-

“Okay?”

“Y-yes, just- aaaaaAH! You’re rubbing very vigorously, is all, a-and the salux feels- good- th- therereee, mmn, mmmnaah, ah, ah,”

“Have you ever exfoliated here before?”

“U-um, uh, n-aaaaah, no, no I haven’t-”

“Well. A good shave starts with exfoliation, as it helps soften and smooth the skin and hairs. Here comes the rinse-”

“Ah, oh, okaaaaaaaaAH AH AH NNNGHAAAH- COLD-”

“Hm, you’re already spreading open so wide for me, Mab,”

“Aah-”

“You’re such a pretty color here too, it’s like salmon-”

“NNNNGHAAAAA-”

“And when I rub directly on your clit like this, you make the cutest noises- keep your legs open, we’re not done-”

“Y-yes, s-sorry, haaa, sorry,”

“Hmm. That’s the last of the exfoliant, I’m going to wipe you with a washcloth now- do you need to change positions, or stretch? I know this is a weird pose for you,”
“No, no, I’m okay,”

He looks up at me from between my legs, and then smirks. He pulls off the salux cloth glove, rinses it out in the wash basin and hangs it to dry over the sink in our room. He then opens the jar of Nivea Creme, and takes a small dollop, and starts rubbing it in. It’s very thick, and almost impossibly smooth, and he pays special attention to my thighs and the bulging of my womb and the dip of my hips and he rubs and rubs until the creme is all gone and it’s just his hands stroking over my most intimate skin and I want- him-

And then he stops.

“Mmn!”

“Pffft- don’t worry, don’t worry- I just need to lather you up, and then we’ll be almost totally done,”

“Hmm. Okay- I- eeeEEEh! That’s really warm!”

“Haha, yeah; do you want me to get the crack of your ass?”

“Hmm- sure?”

“Okay- and… done. Be very still for this part; even with the guards, I could really cut you with the razor,”

“I’ll be like stone, love,”

“Heh,”

First, Sanji combs my pussy hair, paying special attention to the area right around my clit, the very edges of my labia, and the crack of my ass. Then, he trims the longest hairs with his scissors. And then- I feel a cool sort of… weight, on my pudgy flesh betwixt the legs. It’s… very odd. And then Sanji is pulling and pressing on me, and the razor glides across my skin, and- this is very odd. Not bad, certainly, but very, very odd. And then, almost as suddenly as it began, it’s over, and when Sanji washes all the bubbles away with the carafe pouring down and the basin below to catch, all that’s left is a sort of… a sort of reddish-black peach fuzz, certainly too short to be caught by jewelry chains.

When I make to lift myself away from the seat, Sanji presses a broad hand against my hip and a kiss against my navel, which draws quite the squeak from me. He dries what drops of water and shaving soap remain from my skin with a soft towel I didn’t see him get at the start, and then he rubs even more Nivea Creme into my skin and pussy and pussy hair. By the end of it, my bush is laying soft and clingly to my pussy, and my whole crotch feels warm and delightfully slippery. My nipples are fully erect, and my face is flushed and I want him-

“I’ll get your jewelry and put it on you- take your sleep clothes off, please,”

“Hah, okay,”
As Sanji putters around, removing the detritus of whacking my bush down to manegable size, I ruck my sleep shirt even higher, up over my breasts and their pearly nipples, before I cross my arms and twist them up and over. My sleep shirt follows my hands, slips down my arms, and arcs cleanly through the air and into the laundry bin.

Sanji comes back with a small bag I know he got today, and whatever jewelry he’s decided I’m to wear this evening. While I’m admiring the play of light across the dark hairs on his chest, he’s lifted me up in one swift motion and set me back down on the hard wood. I squirm, a little- this position isn’t the best for- and then his face is between my legs and his lips are just barely on my clit he’s only barely sucking on it and I want- aaah, Raz, please-

His sucking and teasing only gets worse, and all I can really do in response is wrap my legs around his shoulders ever tighter and curl over his head like- like- wrap my fingers around his horns and w h i m p e r because- because-

No-

“ Why did you stop?!? ”

“I do want to put jewelry on you, Mab; did you forget?”

“Y-yes...”

“Pfftahaha, well; I didn’t,”

The cold of the body chains is a sharp shock, after the warmth of my husband’s mouth. That same cold on my nipples, when usually he would take them in his mouth or his fingers and squeeze and twist and flick, I- nnngh- cold, the metal is so cold but I want-

“R-raz-”

“Shhh; almost done, shhh-”

“R-raz, please, I need you, I need-”

“Almost done-”

The soft click of a clasp, and suddenly I’m in… well, it’s very like a body suit, except it’s made of jewelry chain and covers absolutely nothing, so not like a body suit at all. As my husband carefully tugs and pulls the many fiddly chains into place, I find myself pressing against my breasts and stroking up and down my throat, buzzing my wings against themselves and wishing I had thought to braid my hair, but no, it’s in a sleeping bun- and then Sanji reaches up, and kisses me, and lets my long heavy hair fall down in crimson waves of curl and I- I-

Aah, this is so embarrassing , I can’t-
“You’re so beautiful, Mab. Every time I think I’ve gotten that, you blink and it hits me again,”

“Don’t just say things like that out of nowhere!”

“Pffftahahahahaha! But it’s true!”

And, confronted with my gaily laughing husband, all I can do is blush and stutter and when he kisses my clit, squeal and moan and dig my hands into the hair around his horns and cling to his horns as his clever silver Demon tongue and his soft strong lips pull me to screaming pleasure.

I lose a bit of time between gasping my breath back after a shuddering joy and having my hair gently handled and left to fall gently over pillows, my husband standing full and thick and quite erect as his lips- return to- ffiaaagh-

I don’t know what possessed me in that moment of pleasure to wrap my lips and tongue around him and slurp the sweat and dripping precome away, only that I needed to somehow return the pleasure I had been given, to somehow- and he moaned, and sucked harder, so I moaned too-

We were lost then to our suckling and full throated moans, the thickness of him caught down my throat and coveted by the vibrations of my voice, his whines and whimpers pressed through his lips in prayer to me, sucking and licking and moaning a deep rumbling purr through my thighs and hips and I-

I’ve done a lot of things in my life. Choking because my husband’s cum went down and then out the wrong tube, resulting in streamers of his sticky white fluids drooling from my nostrils, is a first. I jerk myself off of Raz’s cock, and gasp and snort hard like I’m blowing my nose and I just- burst into horrified laughter.

“Mab- Mab, what-”

“I-hehehehee- it went out my no-hohohohose~! Mmahahahahahaha!”

“Pffftahahahahahahahaha~”

Raz licks his cum off my face and kisses me so thoroughly I quite forget my amusement- and then we fuck like rabbits. I can’t focus as well as I usually do- something about the event just brings more and more giggles to the surface, and Raz can’t help but laugh with me.
No amount of skill in any world will protect you from the sheer luck of a chronic dumbass. I say this while knowing full well that my Captain is a chronic, possibly terminal, dumbass- and I say that in the most loving way possible. Nothing else could explain the single distant, but very loud, yeehaw that woke my husband and myself last night from our well earned slumber after a violent and fully desired round of vigorous lovemaking.

I’m fairly certain that it was Luffy who did The Yeehaw, because he’s the one blushing the most while the kids- mostly the Suntides, but at this point “kids” encompasses everyone who’s under a certain level of seniority on this crew- needle whomever did the yelling with their particular brand of jesting. It’s in this moment that one can really see who is twin to whom, amongst the Suntides. Deborah and Eleanor are twins, not just because of their identical leg arrangement, but because of their empathy for each other. Ellie will never be contented with an ordinary life- and although she presents herself in a hidden way, she’s also very honest about who she is. Deborah, on the other wing, has resigned herself (I think that’s the best way to describe it) to an extraordinary life- and there’s something about herself that she cannot bear to show, something she hasn’t ever shown to anyone. As Ellie becomes more comfortable with who she is, with what she wants- with wanting at all- Deborah becomes less… satisfied. Less content.

Less.

Fernanda and Cecelia are twins, though it’s hardest to see with them. It’s hard to see under Cece’s Face, but Fern and her are identical; down to the freckles. They actually come to me together to order new clothing- they have a very distinct horror that I can well remember of wearing matching or even complimentary clothing. They’re also fanatic about putting their name and wash-symbol in each and every article of clothing they own- I sense a few too many mixups in their past. Mostly, the biggest difference is how they choose to use their Sight- Fern decided to make money with hers, and Cece decided to make Art. It takes a particular kind of person to make as much money as Fern does in fortune telling, even in her least preferred method- there’s a reason Nami didn’t object too much to the table rental fee after the first week. It also takes a particular kind of person to make being called a thief every day of your life a joke- and a funny joke at that.

Beatrix and Genevieve put in a lot of work to stand apart- to stand alone, as individuals. They don’t tend to make a lot of noise when everything is going alright- so, I’ve no doubt that they were conflated fairly often, Bea and Genny becoming BeaGenny and then Begeny and then BeeGee and there it would have stayed, beegee beegee beegee- until they objected. In Beatrix’ case, probably quite violently, at the edge of a blade. They have almost completely different philosophies, skillsets, weapons- I’m quite sure if Genny was to ever wield a blade, it would be as a scalpel; and I already know that Beatrix uses a needle like a spear.

Adelaide is the one left out in all of this; she has no twin, and in the shuffle of her louder, more vivacious sisters, she gets pushed to the back. Most of her day, when not engaged in meals or necessary work to keep us safe and sailing, is spent either training her Karate, or working with the horses. I don’t know her like the others- but then again, she hasn’t lived quite the way her sisters have lived. When her sisters were falling in love, meeting strange people, having terrifying adventures in places time forgot- she was teaching, working, making steady money for her family.

In their time here, the Suntides have steadily gained weight, height, and muscle tone- to the point where their lifestyles are starting to have appreciable effects on their bodies, almost enough to give
them different resting stances and silhouettes.

“Little bit of Yee, marginally more Haw-”

“I would have gone with all yee all haw myself-”

“You overdo things though, everyone knows you need only just enough yee to make the haw unquestionable-”

Also, the Suntides are all a pack of little shits, led by Sancho, the brat. Strangely, their colorful commentary on early morning events has led me to ruminate on the arrangement of household servants. I’m not sure why- but it is good to know, I suppose.

A household is the family and clients of someone very like a Captain- Whitestache embodies it best, but Captain’s well on his way.

In order, then- the First Steward is in charge of all the household servants. Their job is to hire new servants, train existing servants in new skills, and keep order in the house. They have one assistant.

The Second Steward is in charge of correspondence, accounts, ordering supplies, planning the travel routes, and making sure people get paid. They have one assistant, usually able to read and do mathematics.

The Treasurer is in charge of the travel purse, notes all expenses, does the actual paying of the household, and sends letters. They have two assistants.

The Marshal is in charge of horses, travelling vehicles, and all working animals. They can have three to five assistants, which does not include working animals.

The Priest(ess) is concerned with spiritual matters. They only have an apprentice if they themselves are very old indeed, or the household warrants more than one Priest(ess).

Then come the servants that aren’t seen by the public much at all; seven maids of all work, who serve food, repair mundane fabrics meant for household tasks, and clean; seven washer women, who wash all clothes and fabrics, as well as do minor repairs to them; a seamstress, who does all major repairs and creates new clothes as needed; the Keeper of the Wardrobe, who ensures that all the clothing of the household is accounted for, recorded, and cared for; an assistant to the Keeper of the Wardrobe; the Ewer, who is in charge of bathing facilities and water supplies; two assistant Ewers; and the Chandler, who makes all the candles, and is in charge of the torches, lamps, lightbulbs, and so on.

There’s the Chef, the Sous-chef, various specific cooks, and apprentices who do drudge work; the keeper of the pantry, the butler (who is chiefly responsible for wine, mead, beer, and spirits), the keeper of the cutlery, the naperer (who handles all dish linen); the guards, knights, sergeants, archers and crossbow men; the Master Huntsman, hunters, and a falconer.

Making all of that relevant to our crew…
Luffy is our liege-lord, to whom we have all sworn in one way or another, our fealty- and he to us. The rest of us senior crew members have taken on multiple roles within our ‘service’; and as more and more people join, more jobs get delegated out in favor of making them a part of us. Further, there are different requirements for a pirate crew than a lordly house.

Luffy is Captain; Zoro is First Mate; Nami is Navigator; Usopp is Sniper; Sanji is Chef; I am Seamstress; Chopper is Doctor; Robin is Spy; Mark is Gunner; Taffy is Ninja; Bryony is Communications; Franky is Shipwright; Brook is Musician; Gurry is Chronicler.

Deborah is Sous-chef; Eleanor is Thief; Fernanda is Seer; Genevieve is Head Nurse; Adelaide is Marshal; Beatrix is my Apprentice; Cece and Sancho are Clowns.

The Mice are Thieves under Eleanor.

Mince Coffyn is a Cook; Mendy May is a Nurse; BBC is a baby; and Oz is also a cook.

Sohei is Treasurer; Tellicherry is Priestess; Neo is Computer; Havij is Engineer.

Tiffany is Flight Steward; Precious and Daily are Assistant Flight Stewards; Lucille is Assistant Seamstress; Mack is a Servant of All Work; Bang is Assistant Musician; Ailbe is Ewer; BKB is Assistant Communications; Mono is a Nurse; Zelda is a Servant of All Work; Jun is a Medical Auxiliary; Sawbones is Trauma Nurse; Bradford, Bobert, Maurice, and Pascal are actually very accomplished Fishermen; Coco is Cordwainer and Cobbler combined; Sophie is Shepherdess, in charge of all food animals; Parsley is Head Gardener (and it seems to be healing something very broken inside of him); Mila is Assistant Gardener (which has helped calm her down considerably); Gally is Keeper of the Stillroom; Phillip is Assistant Keeper of the Stillroom; Lynn is Aquatic Gardener; Ori is Forward Scout; Stacey and Cathey are Librarians; Aoife is Assistant Aquatic Gardener; and Annie is Night Watchwoman.

Solitaire is Chandler; Udoroth is Naperer; Mukhtar… I’m actually worried about him the most, he’s still lost after all this time; and Zaffire is Keeper of the Pantry. He hardly cooks- but he’s got an almost supernatural way with organizing and keeping Luffy out of the pantry-storeroom.

Hm. While I was thinking about this, I gathered up a strange spread of breakfast foods; cucumber, yoghurt with dill, liver pate, an omelette with bright red peppers, olives, and dolmas. Everything but the liver pate makes sense- as for the pate, a bit of dry toast and I worry over it no more. Mmph! Fatty Liver!

“Adelaide, could I talk with you after breakfast?”

“Um- sure? It’ll have to be while I do mid-morning chores-”

“That’s fine,”

I don’t know Adelaide particularly well; I suppose it’s because in many ways, she’s the most adult of her sisters. Then again, doesn’t that just mean she learned to lean on herself…? That’s a solution, just not a tenable one- I know.

In some ways, I’m thankful that Adelaide became our Marshal- nothing is better for the inside of a
person than the outside of a horse, after all. Adelaide is not a ‘horse girl’ - a spoiled popinjay (poppin’ jenny?) whose parents money finances an entitled life of empty pleasure - no. She’s a working farm girl; she shovels the horses’ shit herself, and weighs and measures their feed by hand, she cleans and cares and works those animals and inside of her…

The way my Aunt Medjool explained it once, women let men do hard work because it makes them feel manly, not because women can’t or aren’t good enough to do it. And so, it only applies when there’s a man around willing to step up and do the work - an’ if he of good hardy stock, the strength he needs to get it done, it comes to him regardless. Aunt Medjool’s first husband was a shiftless gambler; her second, gods preserve him, caught a consumption of the liver; as for the third, a horse caught his hip one evening and he din’t walk right again. Her only living son, Buster Blue, fixes elaborate excuses much like his father, Auntie M’s first husband; and Gala, her foster son, he’s chiefly concerned with keeping his mama’s prize horses out of the apple orchard, because they will eat windfalls and choke to death on’em. So; it falls to Saoirse and her younger sisters to keep the ranch from falling apart.

Even when the whole family pitches in, extended cousins included, there’s never quite enough time to get everything done - on a ranch, there’s always more work that needs doing, and not enough of any needful thing to do it with. I did enjoy my time at the ranch; but I never could escape the notion that instead of my Mother’s family owning the place, the place owned them - and that, perhaps, was the real lesson Mother wanted me to learn. Being a Princess - then a Queen - is much the same; in many ways, I don’t belong to myself, and never will again.

For all of that, though… there is something wondrous in a rural night sky, filled brimful as can be -awash with clusters of planets and singing with stars and marriages of galaxies, laced with comets and dark meteors turned bright as they burn, all within a wobbling dust of gas and unborn stars. There are constellations, if you know to look for them - dancing women, scorpions and hunters, seven sisters sitting in a row and the prettiest of them has bright red hair that throbs in the night sky like my husband’s full-swelled cock.

That is the stuff of which we are made, physically speaking; all that is of us, above us. Out in the sky, an endless procession of ghosts lives in the very same things we are, though not as we are. I stood this morning, before the world could turn and the sun could banish them, and I stared up and open mouthed to swallow what was above down and inside - the light, the song, the endless dances. I looked out at the past in the farthest distance of the heavens, where from there, here we are not- and for some strange reason, all I felt was comforted, and alone.

I went back to my husband, and my bed, and slept as easily as I could - which was not, as it happens - and went about my usual routines when the time came for them… but I cannot ignore that I felt the same things here and now that I felt so long ago, on a summer’s night in a sea of grass, worlds and lives away.

I think I’m going to wear my favorite clothing today - it feels like a dressed-down sort of day to me. A lightweight longtail short sleeve scoop neck shirt; durable, covers my ass, lightweight fabric that’s neither itchy or wimpy - and it’s in a nice shade of greyish brown, like cold coffee. It’s one of my favorite layering shirts, very good for sticking under a thick jumper that I don’t want directly on my skin for one reason or another. Over that goes a dark clay colored dry-and-mighty turtleneck. It’s easy enough to keep warm while working; the hard part is staying comfortable once you’ve stopped. Sweat is meant to chill you out; but too much of a good thing leads to terrible mistakes later on… This particular one helps wick sweat away from my skin, keeping me warm and dry in the chill. It’s a soft merino wool and spandex blend, meaning it’s nice to the touch and very stretchy.
Finally, a pair of gardening bib overalls, made of fine ripstop fabric—tough and lightweight, abrasion resistant and stain-sheding. There’s even a gusset to allow me to kneel without constricting my vagina, which is the worst part of wearing pants, really; double chapped legs for durability, and double layer articulated knees have a bulk-less bonded water barrier because these are gardening trews, after all. Oh yes—and it has twelve pockets. Very useful. A plain leather belt, and my old school boots—sinfully comfortable and good for all work—and I’m well dressed for the day.

I come back into the Galley just in time to hear Fern’s Astrological Prophecy—

“Aries: Armed only with your trombone and the funk in your heart you will hurtle yourself unto the breach to seek a lover taken too soon. It weighs you down. With weight comes momentum. Be an emotional sumo wrestler. The stars also say the McRib will soon be back. The McRib wants revenge. Make a hot chocolate, spend the day in your underwear. Most things can wait. Every 24 hours without sleep is equivalent to about 1 tab of acid. This is not a challenge.

“Taurus: You are the biggest girlfriend. All others shall quake beneath your hideous strength. You shall hold the vault of the sky and will be given the right to drop it selectively on those you despise. Fear the improperly constructed flat pack bookshelf. Those who can make working furniture with no instructions are not to be trifled with. Their spatial reasoning and constructive powers are beyond your own; who knows what they could do, if angered. All Taurus’ are about 20% better at punching through solid stone walls than the other signs. No, screaming and running around in circles like a rabbit isn’t terribly effective at solving your many problems, but it is cathartic, dammit all, and that’s the real point. It’s amazing how a half-dozen to a baker’s dozen words of mild disapproval can absolutely ruin someone’s day and send some people into a spiral of murderous vendettas.

“Gemini: If someone asks as to why you are carrying around a pair of industrial bolt cutters, take a moment to consider how much effort it would take for you to answer. A pestilence of violins, and many horny spider boys to play them. Your collection of novelty stamped one beri coins is almost complete; the door to the Otherside will open as soon as you visit Adventureland in the New World location. Did you know you can pretty much dance wherever you want to? Most people are too uncomfortable or into it to ask you to stop. Bust a move, you funky little Gemini, bust a move. A desire for companionship is natural. Necromancy is too far, and too resource intensive.

“Cancer: It’s reverse cremation time! Ashes to flesh, babey! The modern world has given birth to a new breed of arcane. You must be careful. Laugh with the universe as you find your enemy impaled on wrought iron fence. You cannot unbreak the egg. You can try; but you will only have a horrific creation of super glue and sticking tape and nobody wants that. There’s a decent, non-zero chance that the world we mortal beings inhabit is a simulation or some vast shared dream; but that won’t really change how much anyone enjoys things like sexy thigh high socks and musical philoms of a romantic-comedic nature.
“Leo: Seek the lighthouse before it seeks you. Wear dark clothing and move as quickly as possible. A common metal wastebasket worn as a helmet makes excellent defense against slashing weapons. This information will be critical for the future. For safety reasons, all Leo’s will be required to announce their arrival in new rooms with a bugle. Bugles will be provided and can be located in the nearest ditch or gutter. If you’re making curry, make sure to chop the veggies really fine, grate those fuckers if you can, and let the curry reduce 50% longer than you think it needs to; that’s not the stars’ advice, that’s my sister, the cook’s advice. Ideas are not bulletproof: they are vulnerable to heavy arms fire and heat based weapons, and especially self doubt.

“Virgo: In case of emergency, you can wield a rope with a rock tied into the end like a flail. It is effective against barrel-tops used as shields, and for going around corners. Relax your shoulders. More. If you ever can’t relax again, sit your ass down with a fucking coloring book- yes, like for kids- and some markers or crayons, whichever you prefer. Don’t recommend colored pencils, though. Those sure were some big words from a pile of weird ghost sand that talks and knew your name. I asked a star for the rest of your fortune but all it did was recite the entire script of the Godfather II really really fast. Sorry, I guess.

“Libra: Life has no victory condition. There are no winners, and no losers. With that said, having an orgy on the moon is fucking impressive. Death is a gift; the shittiest of gifts, but definitely a gift. Carpet armor is only effective against foot based attacks; you made a good choice, Libra. Get it out. Scribble madly on the page. Tear the paper. Damage the desk underneath. There is time enough for that; there is time enough for rest, too.

“Scorpio: I think you meant Dire-Goodboy. Hyperawareness will only show you things you really shouldn’t see, things you can’t really comprehend. Not many last long like that. The stars say happiness will find you and hit you with a wrench until you tell them where the safe house is. With good timing, curses can be reflected with baseball bats. Ever see something interesting by the side of the road? How many of those memories do you still have? Why do you remember some, and not others?

“Ophiuchus: If you are going to die, you might as well do it in roller skates. Have fun, until that last moment; go out rollin’, my snakey friend. The familiar is safe, comfortable; there is kindness to perfectionism. There is greater adventure still in failure. Do another shot. There are obstacles in your future. Literal hurdles. Hope you practiced your high jump. The believers know they’re right; you have no faith left to give to smiling gods. Everything has a darker nature.

“Sagittarius: The sauce is increasing, the tide is rising, hold your breath and prepare your gnocchi. What- are you just gonna lie there and wait for another steamroller? What most people call mistakes, great artists call style. You are your imperfections. I asked a star for your fortune, but she just did finger guns at me. Now she’s wearing my Occluspecs; they look good on her. I bet you do too. I could not receive the rest of today’s fortune because the stars were making fart noises with their mouths and giggling, and I couldn’t hear your star over them. She was so annoyed, and your star
doesn’t like repeating herself. Better luck next time.

“Capricorn: Curses can be caught in silk blankets and tossed back without going off. Get up early, eat donuts for breakfast, watch a hardware store burn down while you finish your coffee. Who knows what the day has in store for you. A predator of sentient echoes lurks in the streets. Shut your ears; make no sound. Wear an apron and nothing else for your hot after-date date tonight. After enough time, one knows exactly how much rice to put in a particular bowl for an appropriate serving. This is the essence of Zen.

“Aquarius: Time will flow in reverse briefly today and you’ll think you’re high. It will be fine; you are there, ever fleeting. Given other choices, your first boat could have been a warship. The twirling of the room is of no danger to you. It means it is time to sleep. There is no justice in suffering. You owe and are owed nothing. Treat yourself.

“Pisces: Today your guardian angel will descend from the sky to tell you to eat more dietary fiber. Your guardian may be a twisted, broken thing, but it protects you all the same. Do it a favor, and don’t look directly at it; it’s shy. Your heart should always have a couch for others to crash on. The night is a blanket over all of us. There is fear and comfort in the privacy of the dark. Anything can become enchanted. Anything.

“While I have you here, I’ve noticed you’ve had a lot of questions about necromancy.


“Hey, are you okay?’ your friends asked.

“no.’ you said.

“I have answers for your questions; fear them not. Necromancy does work on animals but as a rule of thumb, bigger ones take more energy while smaller ones take more precision. The happy medium tends to be with large dogs, and other creatures of that size-class. Cats do not respond well to necromancy.

“Plants do not respond to necromancy, and require a different form of magic to manipulate; but there are a few weirdos who practice Necrofloromancy.

“Fungi actively degrade necromancy.
“Shampoo has likely undergone too many industrial processes to be magically reactive in this way; however, exceptions to this rule exist. You are more likely to get a live goat or a pile of olives than a pile of limes.

“Necromancing individual bacteria would take an inhuman amount of control, or outright automation.

“Same concept with Dinosaur skeletons; they’ve been dead so long, and reanimating them would take so much energy, you’re honestly better off trying to just rip a hole in spacetime and hoping something good falls through. Like a pteranodon, or a velociraptor.

“Limestone is particularly reactive to necromancy. Be careful practicing around limestone.

“These have been answers to your questions; deal with it, unseeing mortal.”

I swear, my sister gets more ominous and her prophecies more dire with each day.

There’s one thing, and only one thing, you really need to know about working like I’ve learned to. And that is: there is no tool or trick that can compensate for hard work. There’s no technique; no new angle; it doesn’t matter if you don’t have the right food, or haven’t slept well, or you pulled something the day before.

If you have been given the duty of caring for an animal- or in my case, a group of animals- then they come first. It’s strange- through some arcane wrangling of the working schedule I frankly don’t have time to understand, much less care to know, the Out of Timers got assigned to me as… I guess workers? So, well, I went with it. Mark and I share them, their work, I mean- sometimes, Mark will take the guys for harvesting various animals for food for that month-long stretch, and sometimes I have them work our horses and move our sea-cows to a different pasture, or do work with the dogs…

Here’s how my day usually goes: at around five or four in the morning, depending on season and so on, I wake up and have first breakfast with Mark and Bryony, which is oatmeal. Then, I go out and feed the horses, check their water, and so on. Then, I turn them out into the open ocean, their normal habitat; and I muck out their underwater stalls, which takes maybe two hours. Then I take a shower, and have second breakfast- a random selection of whatever the Cooks decided on for the day, and it’s always delicious, too.

Um, then I guess I work on my karate- drill my forms, do conditioning work, and so on. That goes till lunch, and then I spend the rest of the day working in the barn- cleaning tack, organizing, cleaning in general, bringing the horses back in…

That’s what I do every day, really.

Our barn is set well, with good sun exposure for the winter and summer, and good ventilation downwind of everything else. Our feed storage opens to the outside and to the inside, so we don’t have to clean it out- there’s a constant rotation of hay and other vegetation, which is good for the horses digestion. String seaweed hay and Bull kelp hay is their ‘normal’ feed, but I’ve always supplemented with a variety of smaller seaweeds and kelps, because normally horses forage and
graze on whatever catches their fancy. When I run my hand flat across our horses ribwards sides, I can feel the bones underneath- but I can’t see them. Turnip runs to fat; so her, I tend to work a little bit harder, which she enjoys, rather than feeding less. This works out for the both of us quite well, and, well… Turnip says she’s my horse.

As for how feeding works- ten to twelve percent of the horse’s diet ought to be protein. If that means blood, meat, eggs, legumes like alfalfa- whatever, just feed the horse. If the horse doesn’t get enough protein, they’ll search it out for themselves- I’ve seen other people’s horses eat live birds, just, whomp, and they’re gone. Vitamins and minerals are actually the easy part- good hay will provide all the vitamins needed, and a mineral block provides the rest- I have supplemented with simple vitamin powders Chopper provided me on request, due to injury.

Pasture is the most important part of our horses lives. They need, physically, psychologically, and spiritually, the freedom of the open waves. I, personally, feed them rations that’ll last them about four hours of energy- once at the start of the day, and again at the end when I bring them in.

Zaffire is the best all around horseman of the Out of Timers. He has a good, straight leg, and his post is exceptional. He’s not afraid to get dirty, and he’s got a good work ethic for what needs doing. His favorite thing to do, oddly enough, is cleaning tack- he likes polishing, untangling, and generally cleaning all our horses tack, from the fine leather stuff to the plain cloth web stuff.

Udoroth is… honestly, he’s a bit useless at the hard stuff. He’s strong- spectacularly, unimaginably strong- but he’s... sentimental. He’s good for mucking out stalls, feeding, cleaning- but things like shoeing and so on, no. Good with a broom and shovel, though.

Solitaire is a jackass, but a responsible jackass. He always remembers to oil the horses before taking them to do above-water work, and he’s never once failed to bring some sort of treat for each horse- sometimes a horse-safe digestive cookie, sometimes a slice of fruit or a root vegetable or even chunks of frozen honeycomb once when the winter was particularly cold and I couldn’t let them out because the waves were so rough. Something in that man won’t let him be particularly kind to people- but he’s infinitely kind to animals, which I suppose is enough of a redeeming quality for me to not break his pretty face in half on the open palm of these two hands.

Mukhtar… he’s lost. Whatever he saw, before he came to us, he can’t stop seeing it. The horses help, Steady Walker especially- but he’s not okay. And I don’t know what to do. I’m glad Mab saw it- because I don’t know what to do, but she might.

“Hmm. That’s quite a puzzle- honestly… it’s awful to face it, but no amount of speech or song can convince a man to live when he doesn’t want to. You’re doing well to give him responsibility, Adelaide- maybe remind him that the horses understand a lot, but not his excuses,”

“Hm. Alright. Ugh, I’m all gloomed now- tell me a story?”

“Alright- what kind?”

“Anything. Please- I just… I want a story about someone who got what they needed,”

“Hmm. Alright. I shall tell two tales, then- the first, of Fuck-it Jonn, because that woman was the only person I have ever known to have mastered, accidentally, the art of the con. She is the greatest confidence woman in the world, and she wasn’t even trying to be when it happened. I say this with
full certainty and absolute truth: she stumbled, by accident, into the scam that would define her entire life. This lie would be the catalyst that would transform her entire existence; a lie formed out of sheer random bullshit and pure, unadulterated chicanery. The second story will be, chiefly, about peanuts.

“Even now, knowing what happened, I’m quite sure that Jonn’s only motive was to eat as much finger food as she could fit in her mouth.

“In the wayback when, I was a lowly first year at school, unknowing of the ways and the doings. I had a TA in one of my classes- and this was Jonn. In those days, Jonn had just finished school and found a job in the Device Sciences. Which is not to say she had studied Device Sciences, mind; as I recall, Jonn studied media literacy and eel farming. Those were simpler times, when knowing how to activate a Device was enough to get you a lifelong job at the ripe age of twenty two years.

“Except that Jonn, who was a bohemian of the most relaxed and accepting nature, was bored to death by her desk job. So bored, in fact, that she decided to just up and quit. ‘Fuck it’ was Jonn’s motto. Fuck it, she’d find something better; fuck it, dying in a ditch would be more interesting than this. Fuck it, and things would work out! Except, as you may have guessed, of course they did not.

“For months and months, she didn’t find another job- only retaining her medical insurance by becoming a TA, which is not paid well enough to live on indefinitely. She became depressed, struggled to remain standing upright, and moved into the attic room of the dorm at which I and my year-mates had laid claim at the start of the year. She ate dinner with us three times a week, in our tiny kitchen which consisted of a firepit and a pile of bricks with a wooden board, a pizza oven, and several copper lined pots; so that she would not literally starve to death.

“Time went on. Jonn was still unemployed; and so, before her resources hit absolute rock bottom, she did the only logical, reasonable thing. What’s that, you wonder? Beg for her old job? Went back to school? Crawled home to her parents? Get a better job? Nonsense! Jonn’s adventurous and entrepreneurial spirit wouldn’t let her choose such reasonable courses of action! No, her bizarre logic and plain weird approach to life in general saw that only one course of action could possibly save her now!

“Heidi Elphaba ‘Jonn’ Wickett, my friend and possibly the only reason I got out of school alive, when faced with the lack of everything necessary to live… she said ‘Fuck It’, and went to the Germa Kingdom.

“Because, you see, by Faesh standards the Germa Kingdom is cheap as fuck to live in. So cheap, that even a penniless woman on unemployment could live there for months on end, spending much less than she would have in any Fae country, as long as she didn’t mind camping in the woods. As Germa woodlands are significantly safer than Faesh ones- so much so that people let their children wander them at night without much more than an admonishment to be back for supper- Jonn didn’t mind. ‘Fuck It’, she’d said, and by the gods, she would stand by her words!

“So. Jonn gamely scrounged up the money for the ferry ticket, and then- well, she basically bummed around Germa Kingdom, and the wider fleet of France, Muscovy, and so on- seeing the sights, eating strange food, scandalizing the locals with her Faesh mores, sleeping on statuary, and even making new friends.

“One of those new friends turned out to be very adept at forging papers. ‘Huh,’ Jonn said to herself, probably high as a kite at the time, ‘this sounds not at all shifty and more like a ONCE IN A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE SOME FUN; what could possibly go wrong? My new Muscovy friend is even offering me a family discount, for fake papers. FUCK IT LET’S HAVE SOME!’
“So far as I know, Jonn didn’t need fake papers. She just didn’t want to pass up an opportunity like this; so she smoked some more drugs- my money is on stinkweed- and got a Brilliant Idea. Fake ID? She was twenty two- didn’t need one at that point! Fake flight licence? Already has the real thing! Fake doctorate? Laaaaaaaame. No! Jonn got herself a fake social secretary card.

“But why?

“Obviously, just so she could get into various cultural and social events for absolutely no money whatsoever- conferences, art premieres, theatre events, parties, and so on- and eat all the finger foods she could get her fingers on. That was her grand plan- her only plan, actually. Stroll into various events of the hoity-toity, wave her forged card around, and gorge herself on canapes and hot, fresh gossip. No more going hungry! Ever! Jonn had resolved herself to living off of tiny slices of toasted foie gras and flutes of champagne for the rest of her natural life!

“So now Jonn, Obviously Fake Social Secretary is in Germa and she’s Doing The Thing. And this was before closed circuit surveillance and pictographs in every local broadsheet. Impersonating a social secretary was very easy. If people asked where you worked, you were never expected to answer; and of course, when asked whom you worked for, well… freelance is the only answer needed. Then, Jonn would just steer the conversation to current politics and stealthily devour the entire buffet, literally sliding entire trays of hors d’oeuvres into her tupperware in her oversized purse as everyone hotly debated the issues du jour.

“And so, this is what Jonn did for three years. Her monumentally stupid plan is working beautifully. This is how she eats: with Muscovy papers and sheer fucking confidence. And, of course, people start noticing her- eventually. Jonn goes to every party and event- including weddings, funerals, and graduations- because, again, THIS IS HOW SHE EATS. It’s to the point that Jonn can say with frightening accuracy who catered what, and predict where the next piece of tasty gossip is going to come from. As it’s always the same people running around these circles, nobody’s surprised to see the same people over and over; and, because Jonn had me to consult with and the rest of our dorm to get fashionable clothing from, she blended right in. Jonn is actually very good at making friends, and changing the subject- and, of course, taking meticulous notes on which canapes and which parties are worth the effort of getting into a steel-boned corset and pinchy shoes.

“And then, one day, one of John’s new friends in the social secretary pool- a real one, mind, who has no idea that John has only been pretending this whole time- goes: ‘bish, i’m so swamped right now. M’lady wants invites to every party but i know she doesn’t actually want that. Fuck. shit. Are you swamped too?’

“For sure,’ Jonn said through a mouthful of her thirtieth serving of canapes that night. ‘Not a second to myself.’

“Gods. Fuck. Tell me about it. Shit. I’m just so damn tired.’ Real Social Secretary shakes her head. ‘If only someone could cover for me on this one thing.’

“Now, I know I said before that John was smoking stinkweed, but I must confess now I said it for humorous effect only. I have serious doubts that Jonn has ever been within five hundred paces of a blunt in her whole entire life, including when she was in school. What you need to understand about her is that she’s Chill on a soul-deep and terrifying level, the entire expanse of her mind one long exhale of foul smoke followed by the words ‘fuck it’. This is the woman who left her job due to boredom, lived in the Germa fleet on a tourist visa for six months, got fake papers in Muscovy for the fun of it, and is now living off high-society social events in Paris. John was Born High.
“So. When RS asks her: ‘Bish. Jonn. You said you were working freelance. I know you’re busy but don’t you think you could maybe cover for me? Just this once?’

“Jonn naturally answers: ‘Fuck it. Sure. Write up the details of what you want done and give me two weeks.’ This is what she’d heard other times, from other Real Secretaries- again, John is very good at blending in.

“Jonn then goes to an unemployment center and applies for one of their free five-day classes. On being a secretary. (A social secretary, of course, is what happens when a socialite needs a paycheque to continue their lifestyle.) Jonn spent five days learning How To Be A Secretary With A Real Job. Then she does what she was asked- sending invitations, commissioning dresses, finangling genuine invitations to certain events, 'losing’ other invitations in the mail- and so on. Basically, engaging in the sort of bullshittery a real social secretary does every day. Half-assing the life out of it; faking her heart out. Because why not? Fuck It.

“Upon reflection, she must have done an exceptional job- good enough for the RS who really must have been truly swamped, and was so truly grateful for the help that she told all of their mutual secretary friends; who, of course, were all swamped. As I understand it, this is the natural state of the social secretary in the wild.

“Jonn ended up regularly covering for all sorts of secretaries; including the Royal ones. Making more money than she had been, which was none; and those Royal commissions enabled her to get an actual apartment, and stop camping in the woods. Not bad for a woman who studied secretary work for five days and lived off of canapes for three years.

“And, well, it was fun for her. Much better than moping around at home waiting for the next free canape. So, Jonn kept at it. Eventually, it occurs to her that- hey, shit! I spent six months traveling around the Germa Fleet on no money! And three years living in the woods! I could tell other people how to do that! So she writes herself a lil guidebook, retelling her bum-tastic adventures in the Germa Fleet, Cheap Living and Forged Papers- that last one having nothing to do with her personally of course.

“And she’s actually quite proud of it. So much so that, after editing and revision, she sends it off to several publishers she’s met in the various parties- and she asks if maybe someone would like it? Someone would be interested in publishing it? For a modest fee and maybe a jambon bur et cornichon?

“Yeah; someone was interested. That someone was The Royal Tourism Commission. So. Jonn got a Real Social Secretary card, and a full time job at the RTC. She’s spent the rest of her time there traveling abroad for six months, then going back to Paris and writing about her wacky adventures. She still says ‘fuck it’ to any problems that may arise; and, so far as I know, she’s quite happy.”

“Hm. What about the peanuts?”

“Ah. Well. When Sanji was in school-

I started a cartel. I didn’t mean to, of course- I was, after all, a prince- but that’s what happened. In the Germa fleet, there are various sundries and luxury items that are in high demand. Mostly, in schools, this turns out to be anything that can keep someone awake for longer, and snack foods.
I became the peanut dealer for the Germa ship when I was six years old; by nine, I had created a powerful student cartel. Is that weird? My wife thought that was weird-

“I swear I can explain-”

“I’ll just-”

“No, please, let me explain! We live on the same ship anyway and I’ll just end up telling you tonight anyway- wow, that came out a bit threatening. Seriously, though, it’s not that weird and I promise, the explanation is pretty simple,”

“Oh, Sanji. I trust you. Also, you absolutely will flop on top of me like a cat and tell me anyway later, so,”

“Oh, good. It started a few weeks after I turned six, maybe a week or so-”

“When does the cartel happen?”

“We’ll get there when we get there! I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I always stock peanuts as a snack, right?”

“…Yeah?”

“Have you ever tried them?”

“Uh- not really the biggest fan of peanuts, so, no…?”

“Here-”

“Um… mm! Oh wow, these are really good-”

“Yes they are. One day during Literature class, some of my classmates had finished early; and one of them was turned to talk to the other and so he saw it when I pulled out a large sack of peanuts and started eating them. We’ll call them Sparks and Beat. Sparks being Sparks, when he sees a snack the first thing he thinks is ‘I can I get them?’”

“Understandable.”

“So, Sparks asked me, and I was a Good Boye back then so I gave some to both Sparks and Beat.”

“These peanuts are of a higher quality than normal ones- they have a better flavor, more intense, and… did they eat all your peanuts?”

“That, and ask me where I got them. Here’s the thing, though- I’d actually been getting them from my Aunt Aquila, but- and this is the most important part of everything- I couldn’t remember the brand name. ”

“…”

“I couldn’t then!”

“…”

“-Anyway, armed with the dread knowledge that I have access to really good peanuts, Sparks and
Beat asked me to share with them the next time I brought some. I grudgingly agreed, and they got peanuts off me a few more times over the next few weeks, joined by Spike because he sat next to me and eventually noticed all the peanuts getting passed around, and Acid because if there was a secret being kept anywhere she would know and she would find out. By that point, it'd developed into a thing where every few days, I’d go to school with the peanuts and they’d beg them off of me like fucking bloodstarved leeches,”

“Reminder: Save more blood for Sawbones’ leech colony,”

“Noted. -Ah, the time before I charged money for my peanutty goods feels nostalgically pure and innocent, and also one of the worst times of my life for pure stress,”

“Yes?”

“Yes- even edging out when I thought I’d have to train for two years straight in those god’s awful heels; certainly worse than setting up the cartel,”

“What happened with the cartel!?”

“-Master Mab, do you know where my scarf is?”

“Where’d you leave it last?”

“On my desk,”

“Did you check under, behind, and to the sides?”

“-right, thank you-”

“So, um; well, the way things turned out, what I ended up doing might have been, um, illegal? So, I haven’t really, uh-”

“Oh no, you said you started a cartel and I want to hear about it. Spill,”

“Pffft, fine, fine. So, uh. Well, the ending sounds really extreme but I swear it’s not as bad as you might think; like, you know how when you’re doing something, every decision you make seems like a logical one, like the next reasonable step to take, but then when you get to the end of your dance card and you realize you’re on the roof, no groceries to speak of, bridge burning behind you, and wanted in several fleet ships for a variety of crimes? And maybe, just maybe, things escalated quicker than you could adapt to and now things might be completely out of hand? That’s this,”

“...Go on,”

“So, uh, well, a few weeks in, I reached my limit. They’ve been taking all my peanuts and I’m so done. I said ‘I’m not giving any of you any more peanuts for the next two weeks, and if any of you ask me for some, I’m going to start charging money. They held out for three days, then Acid ruined it for all of them. I start charging money for the peanuts- that’s were it started- and because I’d never actually told any of them the name of the brand or even which country they came from, they were stuck with it,”

“Okay...”

“The thing is, my Oncle Vaughn is a stockbroker, and his wife, my Aunt Jenny, she’s an economic analyst; and of course, Aunt Aquila, who has been sending the peanuts this whole time, she runs her own- not peanut related- business. No one would say what it was, back then- but now I know what
she did, and, well, it does explain some of her extremely effective advice… So, anyway, all that meant that I was supremely legitimate: if I started to set prices and run a business, I was going to do it right, you know?”

“I mean, okay,"

“So, I came in the next day with a sheet of paper listing all the amounts I was offering and their prices, arranged either by container- like a small paper bag full of peanuts- or weight, like grams,"

“You went from zero to a hundred real fast there, love,"

“I didn’t really mean to, I just started thinking ‘okay, how is this going to work,’ and then it got out of hand and, um, well, it was very funny to see their faces when I handed the purchasing details over...”

“So… they actually started paying you for peanuts?”

“Short answer: yeah. For the most part, I’m pretty proud of where my peanut business went, but I feel like the time my brothers fist fought each other for a ten gram baggie of my product is the crowning achievement,”

“Oh wow. You know, I know they’re the same height as you, and yet, somehow, I still look down on your brothers…”

“...”

“Too much- mmmph! Mmmm♥! Hmhmhmhm!”

“You’re doing the Gods work, love,”

“I guess so! Haa... So um- how does it go from here? I’ve gotten invested in this story.”

“Right! This is actually about where the cartel stuff starts getting involved, so, strap the fuck in,”

“I see. Okay; um, okay, I’m ready,”

“Just so you know, this is where things start getting really fucking weird. Like before it was just a fun thing that happened but everything was pretty harmless and made sense. After this point, some of the things that happened and some of our decisions were… questionable,”

“Nothing you could possibly say could make it weirder than what I did in school,”

“I’m telling you flatly that you’re absolutely wrong, so, anyway: I was selling the peanuts now to my four regulars, Acid, Spike, Beat, and Sparks, right? Well, with a much higher supply because my aunt was more than willing to send me too many peanuts if it was for business purposes, I started thinking, ‘Heeeeey. What if I expanded and started selling to kids outside my class?’”

“Solidly but warily following you so far,”

“Spike and Acid are friendly people, or they were when I knew them; lots of friends everywhere, so, I offered them discounts if they would mention it and share peanuts with those friends, and, uh, long story short it worked. I got a bunch of people buying. Long story short, it worked; and I got a bunch of people buying. I set up times and places where I would sell over the week, to organize things and also keep it on the down low because I knew even then this wasn’t exactly, uh,”

“Legal?”
“Sure. Let’s go with that. I kept records because that’s what you do when you’re a responsible business-owner, and at the highest points I was making ฿100000-120000 a week,”

“Holy fuck,”

“I know! And especially because my Aunt was sending me the peanuts for free. So, well, as more people bought, it started getting difficult to manage- which is when I recruited Beat and Spike just to help out, for a small share of the profits and also a better peanut discount. So then we were running a small, not particularly legal business together, with me at the head-”

“And you were all little six year olds?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Just checking; proceed,”

“Sure. Anyway that time lasted about a month, but see the thing of it was, um, I had assumed that we were doing this in a kind of economic void the entire time, that I was the only person selling stuff like this at the local school. I was not.”

“Oh boy here we go,”

“So, business training starts young as shit in Germa; the Horde likes for it’s specialists to be good at what they do as soon as possible, I guess. In hindsight I really should have expected it, and I also should have wondered why so many students were buying from me so readily, as if they were used to buying stuff like that at school. From what I recall, the Student Horde- the Legion- is massive, way too large and efficient and calculated for it to have been created within my lifetime. I think it’s existed for years with baby business demons cycling through it, joining, getting promoted, and being replaced by another student when they move up through the school system- to the point where I’m fairly sure certain business groups based in Germa pull their new officer talent from the Legion. It’s also designed so that it’s very hard to realize that a single entity, like, exists and is calling the shots if you don’t know already; people buy and sell and pass on what they sell and filter the products throughout the fleet, constantly, but almost no one on the outside realizes that there’s something of this scale churning behind it. I only know this much about it because Aunt Aquila told me. You okay?”

“…”

“It’s okay, I didn’t believe it until, well, I’ll get to that. Really, it’s incredibly shocking; take all the time you need,”

“I-”

“It’s okay, Mab,”

“…peanuts,”

“Yeah,”

“Business Mafia,”

“They’re called Legionnaires, but yes, you can definitely call it that,”

“Cartel,”
“That’s oncoming,“

“Okay. Okay, I’m cool. How are you-they-not arrested for collusion, or, um, insider trading, or even tax fraud? Absolutely something illegal is going on, here,“

“That’s a good question. I thought of a couple different options for this shit show, ranging from no pertinent authorities know, period, end of story- which, honestly, the national sport of the Germa Fleet is evading the law. There’s the option of the pertinent authorities know, but are willing to ignore it because the Legion keeps it under the radar; after all, they aren’t doing anything like, blatantly illegal, nor are they using government funded resources, like the internal mail service, to do business with. It’s literally just trading and selling snacks and drinks and so on- pencils, pencil cases, gel pens, washi tape, bookmarks, and on and on and on. Finally, the pertinent authorities know, and they publicly endorse it to the Legion; or that the school system created the whole thing in an effort to either give the baby business demons experience, or keep them out of trouble. My money is on the third one, because there was a lot of cultural intermingling with the Fae in early Demonic history, and some things just don’t ever quite wear away with time,“

“Oh right- that whole thing with female Demonic virginity...“

“Huh?“

“Oh, the- right, well. You know how it’s usually a thing for… do you want the whole scientific lecture?“

“Yes,“

“Alright, give me a moment… All Demons have human standard reproductive organs. “

“However, Males tend to produce ejaculate at a very high physical temperature, with a massive number of spermatophores present in comparison to the other Tribes, averaging at four times the global average for a Lanfolk male. Females tend to be able to withstand much higher temperatures than their tribal cousins, and release multiple eggs from both ovaries during ovulation.

“Like their closest tribal cousins, the Fae, Demons have wings and tails- however, Demons are noted to be the only tribe with horns. In the physical sense, a Demon could have horns, bat-like wings, and a tail that is between twenty and ninety centimeters.

“The horns of any individual will be keratin over bone, enervated, and shaped according to heritage- Corsica Demons, for example, have very different horn shapes compared to their Parisian kin. The horns are both an erogenous and aggressive vector; during erotic play, the horns are often grasped or handled, usually by the partner, in an effort to increase sexual aggression and domination.

“The wings of any individual will be structurally similar to an elongated hand, with the arm- particularly the shoulder- forming the connection between the finger-ribs of the wing and the greater mass of the body. Demons tend to have lighter bones, lighter builds, or pneumatized skeletons and muscles. It varies individually; what does not, however, is the erotic nature, both physically and culturally, of a Demon’s wings. They are heavily innervated, similar in scope to someone’s hands, or lips, and can pick up minor fluctuations in air pressure from something as simple as a house pet walking by or a leaf falling off a tree. Touching, stroking, and other forms of sensation play with regard to wings are very common and popular in Demonic society. For many, seeing a female in flight is often the most erotic sight one could think of; which, naturally, makes seeing a female Demon in flight somewhat rare. Female Demons are excellent flyers- outnumbered only by specifically trained Fae.”
“The tail consists of between nineteen and twenty three sutural bones, formed much like a cat’s. Demons use them mainly for balance and scent marking. During erotic play, the Demon’s tail becomes an erogenous and submissive vector; when grasped or handled, usually by the partner, sexual submissiveness tends to increase.

“Female Demons have human standard internal reproductive organs; however, half of the population is marsupial-typed, with a brood pouch covering anywhere from six to twenty four distinct nipples, each with their own group of dedicated milk ducts, usually on the abdomen above the womb and going to just below the breasts.

“The womb itself is lined with a special collagen-based webbing, or mesh. During intercourse, multiple orgasms are required to ‘prime’ this mesh, pumping it full of blood and internal fluids, readying it for implantation of fertilized eggs. When the male ejaculates, the heat of his ejaculate is what softens the mesh enough that fertilized eggs can implant on it.

“The clitoris is longer and wider than the world average, looking much more similar to the glans of a penis than to a Lanfolk woman’s clitoris; there is the tip, and then portions within the vagina, and encircling the entrance. It engorges when stimulated directly, when the Demon who has it is experiencing ovulation, and when certain environmental and physical factors are present. Clitoral sensitivity varies with age; younger Demons experience massive, overwhelming sensitivity, while adults report a much more nuanced variation. On average, the clitoris in Demonic females is between two and four centimeters wide and one to five centimeters high, with the most sensitive tissues located around the entrance of the vaginal canal and deep within, close to the cervix. Heavy pressure is almost always preferred as stimulation. The ‘g-spot’ in female Demons is usually located in the anus, not the vagina, and can be stimulated with tail massage or anal fingering.

“Demon vaginas are significantly muscular, with variations in ability to control the spasms and fluctuations in movement from individual to individual. Some Demons can insert and pulp apples; others can open pop-top soda bottles; and still others can break fingers. A Demon can also consciously control how much their vagina relaxes or contracts, thereby creating a wide variety of sensations when penetrated. Demonic females experience multizygosis, where both ovaries release at minimum two mature eggs per ovulation; non-identical twins and other groupings of multiple births are common.

“During certain times of year, or when exposed to certain external factors, female Demons will excrete an extremely slippery mucus from their vaginal canals. This mucus acts as a powerful aphrodisiac: in the mechanical sense, by creating a friction vector around the clitoris that is not normally present; and with scent, as the mucus produces a powerful odor likened to cheese or fermented fish, which male Demons have described as ‘extremely enticing’. This mucus also protects the vaginal canal from heat damage that could be experienced during the male ejaculation, as well as general friction damage.

“Male Demons have human standard penises, testicles, and so on; but, their prostate glands produce seminal fluid with a temperature between thirty two and thirty seven degrees celsius. The penis is often the same length or longer than the vaginal canal, with an erect width much wider than the vaginal canals standard relaxed width. When compared to other human males in the World average, Demonic males tend to be of greater length and girth, without exception.

The only texture on a Demonic penis is that provided by the natural exposure of the glans by the foreskin; the skin is very smooth overall, and generates low amounts of friction even under high
speed. Demonic males find rhythmic squeezing the most stimulating when applied directly to the entirely penis.

“The glans of a Demon is a very conductive vector for heat; while the penis itself is a surprisingly effective insulator. The ejaculate of a Demon male is not only hot, but exits the body with considerable force; empirical testing has shown that a young healthy male can ejaculate with sufficient force to break heat-safe glass.

“A male Demon, both physically and culturally, does not like ejaculating anywhere other than inside a living orifice; and, he cannot do so without express permission. However, if given enough time, and kept in an aroused state, a male Demon’s penis will heat a female’s vaginal musculature to exhaustion, causing them to relax enough that the male can physically ejaculate within her, permission or no. It is also for this reason that male Demons do not, as a whole, rape underaged individuals; physically immature individuals cannot create enough negative pressure inside themselves to allow the male Demon to ejaculate, which is considered the most relevant form of male power in Demonic society.

“Physical jostling, heat, and pressure are all required to relax the internal collagen mesh inside a female Demon womb. Sexual pleasure is required to relax the vaginal musculature enough for male ejaculation to take place. Male Demons have an instinctual knowledge of how best to please a receptive female partner, be they of their tribe or no.

“Anal play is heavily gendered in Demonic society, considered the mein of females only. However, males have fully working and surprisingly sensitive prostate glands; thus, anal stimulation is a popular, if occasionally fetishized, or illegal, practice. Wing play is less gendered, and almost normalized. While touching a female’s wings without permission is grounds for a duel, merely observing them has been heavily commoditized. Tail play is extremely intimate, and varies by individual preference.

“Breast fetishization originated with Demons, as their main method of nursing- ie, in the marsupial style- almost never requires the use of breasts directly. Thus, breasts came to be seen as an external sign of female reproductive maturity; and then, became sexual objects in and of themselves. Some individuals with breasts report enjoyment of erotic play involving them; others do not enjoy such erotic play, but will participate for the sake of a partner; while still others cannot participate at all, finding it acutely painful.

“Some Demons experience an overproduction of mucus or seminal fluid, which leads to hypersexualized lives- these Demons, sometimes called succubi or incubi, often turn to prostitution or multiple partners to sate their extreme sexual hunger,”

“...That explains a few things from my childhood,”

“Oh?”

“Mm. Like why my mother was hospitalized, for one thing… if there’s a tribe specifically suited for, um, high heat, there must be a tribe that’s extremely unsuited for it, aye?”

“Mink. Ah. Um. You were saying about how the adults either know and endorse the Legion, or no one’s said anything for decades…?”
“I mean- I don’t know. Maybe? The Germa 66 is weird, and the Fleet is even weirder; it wouldn’t surprise me. Certainly back then, for one reason or another, no adult that knew was doing anything about it,”

“Hm. Alright; so far, I understand. What the hell’s with the cartel, though?”

“So, I’d been running the peanut business for more than a year, and going at full capacity for maybe half of that year after a few false starts and the work it needed to really get going. The second year was expansion, first into the upper year schools in the area; then, into the full school district. In that time, I believe the Legion noticed me, but considered my efforts to be, well, small time; and then I coordinated with you,”

“Me?!? Wait, that time you- I remember this! The peanut selling thing!”

“Haha, yeah- when I started going international, because every school in the district had a sister school somewhere outside the fleet, and the people I had selling had friends in that sister school, well. It was about then that the Legion realized that not only was I cutting into their own profits for certain snacks, I had cut an entire unconsidered market out from under them. They scouted me out; and they formed a plan of action,”

“…”

“Pffft, okay, so they sent a group of students who sold a couple different types of crackers and chips and things, to make it seem like there was only that group and their organization wasn’t any larger than that, to corner me one day and tell me flat out to knock it off.

“They were pretty smart about it too, as I recall; they only tried to intimidate me in terms of business, because back then I had a bodyguard and everyone knew she wasn’t afraid to shed other people’s blood for my sake. Instead, they pointed out that I was new to this, that they were the ones learning this in class and that they knew what they were doing a lot more than me, that I should be focusing on my Royal studies instead, stuff like that, you know?”

“Uh huh,”

“And maybe it was true- I could have been focusing on my studies more but the business was going well, and I was making a lot of money, and I had a huge international market, and I was already doing well in class- not the top of the class, that was Ichiji, but he had to be top of the class so I didn’t let it bother me too much; and in training, well, nothing was going to fix that but time, so. I wasn’t going to drop it, just like that- I didn’t say that though.

“No, see, first they offered to buy my business from me; they’d pay some amount I’ve forgotten, and I could keep and do what I wanted with that in exchange for telling them where I got the peanuts and agreeing to let them have the ‘rights’ to sell them at this school, and I would just stop and not have anything to do with it again.

“I, politely, declined. It’s not like I could impolitely decline, of course, considering I couldn’t even land a solid hit on Yonji, the weakest of my older brothers at that time,”

“Hmmm,”

“It’s over now, and I am better than I ever was before; and honestly? I don’t know how much money was on offer. For all I know, it could have been exorbitant in real life, not just to a seven year old boy. But… this thing I was doing, I was proud of it; it was one of the only things I had in my life I
could be unequivocally proud of, even when we went back to the palace. Even then, it still went well- and so, I couldn’t just… back down, let it go, act like I’d never… I said no.

“I could tell they were unhappy with my choice as I was leaving, but I didn’t really think on it; not until their leader stopped me at the last moment. He started talking, and he said, well, ‘That’s your decision now, but really, we can’t have competition on this, especially not from you. We’re going to get your agreement eventually; nothing personal, just… well. Business. No one’s fault, really.’

“And then he paused, and smirked, and said ‘What was it they said? Don’t worry about it, right? Yeah, that’s it- don’t you worry ‘bout a thing, my Prince.’ -And then they all turned and walked away,”

“Holy fuck that actually happened!? I thought it was just a weird dream I had in my childhood,”

“No, it happened, and I wrote you a letter about it,”

“Gods be double damned,”

“Yeah, that was my reaction then, too, only all I had to curse with was lil’ baby demon swears- burn in hell like the testicles of the undevout, breaktail, and that sort of thing,”

“Hmhmhmhmph!”

“Hush. Anyway, that was just… so disarming. I had no idea how to react; and they just… walked away. And as weird as it was for you, imagine how weird it was for Beat, Sparks, and Spike, who were there in school with me.

“So. The Legion declared a quiet, passive aggressive war on me, and I had to act like nothing of the sort- like nothing at all, in fact- had just happened. As far as timelines go, this was right before I started experimenting with recipes you sent my way and I sent back my record of the various mishaps that came of flying too close to the Faesh sun,”

“That’s when all this happened?”

“Yes,”

“Well- alright, what did you do in response to all that?”

“Well, the important thing you have to know is that my three older brothers, and my older sister, they were all in Frontline Combat track during our shared schooling years. I, personally, wanted the Trade track of Cooking, but my- He- refused to put me into the Trades, so I settled for, hm, Ambassadorial Combat track, which is fancy for ninjas and spies. So,”

“…Wait, wait, your sire expected you to match the physical skills of frontliners when you weren’t a frontliner yourself?”

“Yes,”

“Fucker,”

“Yes. Anyway, the first thing we did was stop selling immediately- had to figure out a plan of action, y’know. I mean, we knew there were other people selling things, but we didn’t have any evidence; and if the Legion knew what we were selling, they probably knew where we sold it, and when. If we kept going, they could easily report us to a teacher while we were selling, and then it was all over. The next day, Beat had me point out everyone I remembered as part of the group that
confronted me to her as we were walking around the Caf at lunch.

“Beat was in Embassy Track because of her hearing. She’s a bit like Bryony, but her main attribute was range measured in point to point distance, not clarity and musicality. As I recall, she was either a Mink or a Troll—she had those big ears like Mince does? Anyway—once she had samples of sound to listen for, she could pinpoint those voices over a distance of something like three kilometers square, with descending clarity as her range from the target increased. Importantly, having something covering her ears didn’t degrade or improve her ability in any way.

“I showed her where they were sitting; and she could always hear their voices after that. They didn’t talk about it at the lunch table or anything, but she did manage to get their names— and then, while she kept an ear on them, the rest of us would do as much research as we could,”

“It’s amazing what you can find in public records,”

“It really is. So, that went on for a few days; the Legion didn’t talk to me, look at me, or do anything out of the ordinary— I remember us Embassy being impressed with their facade. It was like dropping a pan of hot oil and knowing it’s about to burn the shit out of your legs but it’s not splattered yet; and, what little we could find on them didn’t help. There were no rumors about them, and Beat didn’t report anything suspicious in their conversations— until, of course, the day it all changed,”

“...Well don’t leave it there,”

“Sorry, sorry— it’s just, Mab, if I had made different friends, if my— He— sire, had been more involved, if my brothers and sister had been closer, if Grandmere hadn’t… things almost didn’t turn out like they did, and it’s only sheer dumb luck that they did. So, one day, Beat went to a library a few blocks away from our school— she wasn’t following the Legionnaires I’d identified for her, she was actually there to return some music she’d borrowed. She was walking up to the library, headphones on but symphony ended, when she heard the voices of the Legionnaires, very faintly.

“Without missing a step or changing her gait, she continued, and the voices clarified— going from the barest edge of her range to well within it; and, as Beat returned her music and browsed for more, she counted. Twenty voices, she heard; all of them discussing me, and what to do about my interference—and one voice, the voice of the Leader said my name, reporting it to someone else,”

“Holy shit,”

“Beat gathered up new music, and continued browsing through the library— and when she went to the audiobook section, the conversation she was listening in on—changed. Like a switch flipping, the group seamlessly transitioned into talking about homework assignments and study plans. Beat didn’t miss a step or change her face— she continued into the audiobook section, got one on cricket, which was a well known hobby of hers, and checked her materials out.

“My theory about what happened is this: the Legion is almost absurdly cautious, more so than an Embassy-student run illicit organization could ever be— we were, after all, expected to fight when necessary. Instead of waiting for suspicion, like an Embassy student would, Legionnaires are preemptively careful to make sure that never happens. Tactically, they must have had one or several people set as, as lookouts, some sort of watcher, set around that library— whereby, if they saw any of their classmates, any of their teachers, even, even the maintenance and janitorial staff, they would be alerted and so could switch to an unsuspicious line of conversation quickly.”

“Should we be concerned about—”
“Nah. Really, it’s insane how lucky we actually got. There was such a specific chain of events that let us find out what we did, and with nearly anything else we wouldn’t have. The fact I was confronted; the fact that Beat had such good hearing and wasn’t listening to music and recognized their voices and wasn’t spotted until after she’d heard too much. If any of that had changed, she’d have never known anything; and if she’d let on she’d known at any point, we’d have been in trouble.

“If Beat had made any indication she could hear them, they’d have put two and two together- they knew we were friends after all. I… don’t actually know what they would have done, but it was undoubtedly good that Beat was able to recover the information she did,”

“…So this is becoming a novel,”

“Yeah?”

“Mm- I’ve been considering writing another one, after that one a few years ago…”

“Mm. Fine with me- I won’t tell you the real names though,”

“Fair. So- how’d you find out more after that?”

“Grandmere. By the time Beat relayed the information to the rest of us, we had maybe two months of school left. Obviously Beat redoubled her efforts in eavesdropping on the Legionnaires, but she didn’t find anything- until, that is, my Grandmere’s 78th birthday party. It’s always been her tradition to open the Seaward Palace to the public, and have all her family around her; and she always wanted her family to bring their friends and loved ones too. That year, I brought Beat, Spike, and Sparks with me to my Grandmere’s party.

“It’s always easy for people to forget that the Demonic Royal Line is one of service- most of the Line chooses to serve in the military, but all kinds of service are acceptable. Grandmere’s service was in business- specifically, before her rule, she dealt with a massive famine and economic bust by securing various work contracts- farming, mostly, which counted as her Service,”

“Mm. I see,”

“It’s a pretty even split in service- between the Trades, Business, and Military, I mean,”

“No Arts?”

“…Not in a few hundred years,”

“No interest?”

“No one made the cut,”

“Ah. Proceed,”

“Right. Well, my whole extended family comes for Grandmere’s parties- she’s the oldest still living relation, and the King Mother. But all of that isn’t important to our story- what matters is, hey, what if we asked Grandmere for answers on the off chance that this whole ‘Legion’ has been a thing for a while and she knows something about it?

“Well, Sparks suggested it, which was strange considering that he was basically born stoned. He did come up with it fair and square, it’s just- we were literally pretending to do our study group but actually arguing and trying to figure it out, and on the couch there he lounged and he just randomly blinked out of his normal stupor and said ‘why don’t you just ask your relatives when they come
over for your Grandmere’s birthday.’. We all stopped and stared at him, because this was one of the most coherent sentences he’d said in weeks.”

“This is definitely becoming my next novel. What happened then?”

“When the time came, I invited them as my friends and very pointedly made sure to introduce them as school friends, so we could bring it up in conversation.

“Spike is alarmingly good at charming old people- specifically old ladies? Like, I have no idea how he learned the skill, or why he needed it, but he was chattering to my Grandmere- who, I must admit, was well in her cups, which was almost certainly part of it- and he lied, I think, because he said that when he was younger he had done a lot of entrepreneurial stuff at his pre-school and managed to sell a ton of things but of course it faded because, and I quote, ‘I must focus more on my Ambassadorial studies’- and had she ever done anything like that, maybe?

“And my Grandmere paused, and drained her cup dry, and leaned forwards and said, ‘I can’t tell you this, and if you say I told you, I will say that I didn’t and I will not be lying. But if, if. I were to have done something like that-’ and then she told us everything. Later during that party, I got two other people to vaguely reference it; Oncle Vaughn and Aunt Jenny said there was a ‘group activity’ that a lot of the kids in the Business track ‘did together’, and that most of them had been doing it while they were there.

“Spike, though, hit the motherlode. Grandmere explained a general outline of the structure of the Legion as she knew it- and considering how well that structure worked, there was probably only the most minor shifting in the years since- and how they sold everything, how they made sure it went undetected; which, actually, I was wondering about because none of us had ever heard of stuff being sold at schools before, despite the fact that people were obviously buying. The answer is that they pay off people in other courses in other schools to casually sell stuff under the pretension of being a regular person looking to make a quick buck, and switch people around periodically so no one notices a pattern. Sometimes, they do it themselves, under a pretense of doing market simulations and research for an assignment.

“So, it ends up that people buy things, but no one ever realizes there’s any kind of organization. Of course, the entire Legion is extremely organized; with different branches for each snack or item they’re selling, and different people within the branch in charge of recruitment to sell, sales, stock, money, payments, pricing, marketing- everything. Most importantly- the majority of the sales weren’t even snacks. The Legion has distinct markets- M1, my market, was dominated by stickers and temporary tattoos and marbles, but everyone knew the best item was actually glitter. M2 was the middle schools- and for them, it’s perfume. M3 is the high schools- instant coffee.. M4, college, instant coffee. M5, grad school, instant coffee. M6, trade school, instant coffee. The biggest markets, therefore, were the high school, collegiate, grad school, and trade schools; as, a solid fifty percent of the total market, not to mention the more lucrative half, was just coffee or instant coffee,”

“Not totally unexpected for a school,”

“No. What was unexpected was that they also had a group of… they aren’t CEOs. Grandmere called them ‘Branch Commanders’; and it was actually a meeting of theirs that Beat first overheard- it had to be, nothing else would have given us the same information.

“So. Armed with this information, it fell to me- the only one among us passing Tactics and Strategy above a Pass/Fail- to Make A Plan. The First thing I decided, naturally, was to ensure that they could not report us to authorities without ensuring their own destruction. Beat had never heard anything from the conference room in the library again; so it fell to myself, Beat, Sparks, Spike, Acid, and Shimmer, who we recruited for this specifically, to wander the fleet and report to each other if we
saw any of the Legionnaires Beat knew or thought were part of the Conspiracy. Once reported, Shimmer, Acid, and Beat would- Shimmer, Acid, and Beat did- audio-stalk, magic-stalk, and normal stalk the individual indicated.

“We did this with all the confidence and panache of people who’ve gotten way to invested in a preposterous situation. We got disguises and tracking spells and everything. It took three months to find another meeting, but we kept at it and found one; Beat, who by then was top ranked for Stealth, Evasion, and Tracking, managed to duck in close enough to record about five minutes of damning material while Shimmer kept watch and Acid caused enough of a distraction to their lookouts to make our operation all but guaranteed.

“Nothing they said that day was anything like ‘We are secretly running a buying, trading, and selling empire and make enough money off of selling things at school to fund a small war’ but it was certainly enough… well, everything they said that day would be deeply, deeply suspicious to anyone who heard it. What we had secured, together, was a very easy way to rat them all out if we needed to, and we also figured we could get more later- just in case, though, Shimmer somehow went and got a lot of blackmail, some pieces dating back several generations, for all the people at the topmost positions. I was, and remain, a little bit terrified of her;”

“Okay. Okay, actually, that’s pretty amazing- you conducted a full intelligence operation over the course of three months with six people or so. You weren’t even beginning to be taught about anything close to that in school, because you would have written me about it-”

“Yes, absolutely,”

“And you still pulled it off really well. That’s impressive! What happened then?”

“We sent them a passive aggressive letter saying not to start any shit because we had all their numbers, and we started selling again,”

“Oh-kay,”

“Speeding things up from here: they were supremely enraged, because clearly no one had ever compromised their operations before, and they couldn’t figure out how we did it either. It was here I realized and informed my team that the teachers at least didn’t explicitly endorse what they were doing, based on how seriously they took our threat. If they had official support, they would have laughed the threat off; but they did not.

“For the next six months, the Legion and my group of upstarts, which they called the Feywild,”

“Oh my goodness gracious,”

“Yeah. So, from then on- I was insulted on your behalf, love, and, well, I was just… extremely passive aggressive about it for about the next two months of the semester. We glared at each other in passing, they demanded our stock lists, we laughed and declined to share, we said pointed things when the other was in earshot, they made offers, we rejected them, Sparks went straight up to one of the Legion and innocently asked if they wanted to buy some peanuts, a top-ranked Business student flipped all of us off… It was a wild time.

“We’d also decided to expand our market, and started selling a few other snacks- I made sure they were all weird or rare or extremely old fashioned snacks to make novelty Our Thing. And it’s not like we actually put the Legion out of business or anything, because they were still making money hand over fist- but, they were also used to being the only fish in the pond and we wouldn’t be removed, they could not be rid of us, and we both of us knew it. They seethed over that for ages.
“That’s how things stood for those two months; it was a golden time. I’m fairly certain they expanded as well, trying to dominate the market, but we made solid profits- we had a solid customer base by then, and they just could not dislodge us. Aunt Aquila was in stitches over the whole thing-apparently they’d tried the same thing with her, back in the day. And then the semester ended and I had to move back to Paris- lost my team, lost my lack of oversight, lost… nearly everything.

“Sorry for ruining the mood, but- honestly, nothing really changed. After I joined the bowling team-”

“Hmhmhmhm-”

“Hush. What actually happened because of my relocation was anarchy. Pure, glorious anarchy. See, the difference between where I was going and the school I went to in Paris was, and is-”

“Dorms. You went to a boarding school like me- the selling market is completely different, the market cycle is much more attuned to the school’s schedule, not the week-”

“Exactly. With the ability to hoard food, and the convenience of having a safe place for your stash- the market actually exploded. Demand skyrocketed because of the sheer convenience of being able to by stuff inside the school, and when demand increases so does supply- because everyone, after all, has some use for money.

“In the span of a few days into the new semester, people were buying food, giving it to their friends, charging money or favors, setting stuff up, jumping on the bandwagon- and flooding the market. See, the Legion was class locked, for the most part- and when I came in, selling my novelty snacks, suddenly everyone in my new posh school had to do the same. It was happening- a free market, there and then- and absolutely no one could stop it.

“Of course, neither the Feywild or the Legion liked this; it felt weird to be on the other side, actually- to be the established group that didn’t like the new people coming in… just. Mab, there were so many people; the market became unpredictable. At first, our sales went up- and then they went down- and then they were swinging like a drunk in a barfight, here, there, everywhere-

“People still bought from us- I got a new team at my new school, which was a whole other story I’ll tell you later-”

“Of course-”

“But the thing was, and I cannot express this enough- it was absolutely impossible to predict what was going to happen in the market next. Market Oracles went down with severe migraines every day- and… a lot of the new people were fucking incompetent fools. At the very least I had a system and people working with me; I had regulated prices and was careful to make sure our sales went smoothly, but these newbies… massive amounts of people just jumped in with no preparation, plan, idea of what to actually sell, nothing.

“People just casually selling or giving to their friends weren’t a problem- but so many other people looked at the Feywild and decided to copy our business model without actually understanding anything about it. And they were so bad at it- just, so very bad. I saw a guy just half-yelling advertising for his thing in broad daylight, in the hallway, when a teacher was right around the corner. A friend of mine had to basically tackle him so the teacher wouldn’t hear, and that’s when it really dawned on me that ‘oh my fucking fuck, these people are going to get us ALL caught. So, most of the first three months of our semester, when not doing school, was just wildly running around trying to keep things under control, secret, and- honestly? Maybe trying to kick and intimidate people out. See, the Legion had to have a veneer of civility, because they were business track and had to hold to certain ethical standards. Embassy track has no such restrictions; we literally
were allowed to do just about anything to each other and other students. Most of us didn’t because the internal policing of Embassy students is extremely effective, but- well. Oh my gods, they’re going to get everyone caught, this chaos must be ended by these mighty fists.

“I had trouble just keeping my basic system of selling intact just because there were so many people around, and we were just so jittery that literally anyone could blow the whole thing at any minute. That’s how it was for the first three months of school. You follow, Mab?”

“I really wish I didn’t,”

“Well, good, because it gets worse,”

“Oh gods and goddesses, how?”

“Well. The Legion is facing the same problems as the Feywild; but the Legion wants to be rid of us all, and they realize that all the new people are copying us. So… the Legion redoubled their efforts to be rid of us. The former tense but stable peace had absolutely collapsed. Everything from before was still in place; we still had our paydirt, but the Legionnaires didn’t care. We were all making wild, snap decisions. ‘You can report us? Who cares, this’ whole operation might crumble at any minute! - Stop giggling, stoppit, this was serious business- well, anyway, they went straight for us,”

“Hmhmhmhmhmhm!”

“They didn’t try to report us because of vast aforementioned reasons, mostly a loss of face, but instead they threw everything they had at running us off. They recruited vast swathes of the newbies and made them work for the Legion; they got a huge chunk of the general population, Gen Ed, and then… they started buying our products and reselling them. At this point, the Feywild was a coalition across the entire fleet, all of us in careful contact with each other. In that moment, the Legion dealt us all a mighty, terrible blow,”

“Oh?”

“They resold our shit at cheaper prices, and to a much wider market-”

“Oh!”

“So sales exploded again briefly, and none of the Feywild were suspicious until a few days in, but by then the Legion had gotten all they needed. Feywild sales tanked. Most people weren’t aware that the Legion existed the way it did and does, and of course those fuckers lied and said they were just a group of people fed up with our mean, mean business policies. And, as the Feywild was totally public about selling stuff to students as an organization, and because we had tried to push some people out, it was easy for the Legion to paint us as the villains,”

“Damn,”

“Yeah. If we had been adults, in real business, there would have been political cartoons and way more fires. Anyway- the Legion started reselling Feywild products, and our sales tanked. We couldn’t figure out who their supplier was- who was buying from us and giving it to them, or even reselling to them, and we couldn’t block everyone or stop selling entirely because that’s what they wanted. So… stalemate,”

“What did you do?”

“Before I answer that, I need you to completely understand the situation and my resources. We- I- had been in this rivalry with the Legion for a good two years, and they wanted my business
destroyed, and they were close to doing it. We hadn’t been making any sort of real profit for a month because of the chaos the new people caused, and we were constantly on edge waiting for the other shoe to drop and for one of the Newbies to get us all caught. The Legion had convinced everyone else in the know in the school system both that they didn’t exist and that the Feywild were the bad guys. Our products were being stolen and used to force us out of business.

“Mab, I was- and am- a prince. If I want something you could get at a Daiso, I literally just had to ask a servant to make it happen, and it would happen.

“I absolutely fucking snapped.

“So. First, I got a typewriter and a mimeograph machine, to make copies; and then, I wrote some instructions and copied them out. Then, of course, I asked one of the servants to procure for me an ungodly amount of instant coffee as soon as possible, a number of shipping boxes, and the necessary outbound mail materiel. When my friends at school asked me, the next day during our study session, what we were going to do- at three pm on a throughsday- I just looked at them and said ‘Do you have any idea how much instant coffee I can get on short notice?’

“And they all blinked. So, I showed them- wall to wall, floor to ceiling, my garage, which had been empty because Fa- He- refused to gift me any sort of vehicle, so. My garage was full of instant coffee packets in their stock boxes.

“I explained the main source of the Legion’s profits- and by then, the Feywild were in every level of the school system. And then I asked my friends how much of the lower level things they could get on short notice- stickers, glitter, small toys, and so on- and one of them, who had a lot of money saved up for no good reason, said ‘A lot’. And I said ‘Good’.

“And one of my friends said ‘I can get all this into the fleet mail system without rousing suspicion,’ and I said ‘Good.’

“And one of my friends who wasn’t particularly good at putting things together said ‘What’re we going to do?’ and I said ‘Instant coffee is their biggest seller market-wide. We’re going to flood their market at prices they can’t beat.’

“Like I said: I fucking snapped. It was a long time coming, though,”

“This book is going to fucking slap, I swear it,”

“Things happened quickly after that; we spent many a good afternoon, after finishing our homework, packing instant coffee with my instructions and mailing it off. We poured blood, sweat, and hours of paper cuts into the effort; it was now or never, our last ditch effort to throw a handful of sand into the eyes of the Legion.

“There was one stumbling block. My plan, after all, wasn’t to sell the coffee- because that would become another Sales War. No, we had to push the coffee on the good students of the Fleet, for free or close enough, overload the paying public with it- until no one, absolutely no one, would ever dream of buying it when they had so much already. To spread coffee that thoroughly, the Feywild would need help. So- whomst did I get?

“The Trades, of course- known as the Squints and the Drovers. The Legion already had the help of Gen Ed; so, the Feywild allied with Support and Logistics to balance the scales of fate,”

“Symbolic. Though, I can’t help but hear the implication that the Legion was a pack of-”

“No time for that shit, lunch is in, like, half an hour; I went to the leader of the Squints and the
Drovers, explained the whole situation, and negotiated for their help. I wanted them for two reasons, really- just to have more people distributing the coffee and more creative ways of distributing it, and because we had a two-pronged approach. Mab, tell me- what’s the one thing students want more than food?"

“...Effective cheating methods?”

“No… SHRIMP!”

“-no no no- shit! Chef?”

“Deborah, what’s the one thing students want more than food?”

“Cool shit that makes it easier to live your best life,”

“Exactly. Many of the people in the Squints were fully capable of making the good shit- mechanized pencil cases, extensive organizers, fancy fountain pen ink, snail cases that protected better, snail rigs that reached farther across the fleet, higher quality shellbum-players, shellbum cases, and headphones with and without microphones. They’d already made most of it for their own use, and could definitely make more- and a repair service? They could do that in class for extra credit.

“While the Squints helped us spread the coffee, they’d make the cool shit. We’d get distribution rights, as well as a small cut of the profit for giving them the idea. In exchange for their time and used materials, we’d also help them test or develop some of their more… esoteric items. My coup de grace, my crowning glory- that was what I did with the Drovers. See, this entire thing relied on discretion- if the Legion knew what was being sent, they’d come up with some way of stopping us. But if the Drovers took over the in-school mail duties… they’d also earn extra credit, and they’d get discounts on cool shit. And the Legion wouldn’t know what the Feywild had done until it was far, far too late.

“The plan was to destroy the Legion’s main seller, while at the same time debuting another unique series of products, the source of which we had a monopoly on, and the distribution of which we controlled. We were ready,”

“...How’d that go?”

“Mab, it was beautiful. We started in my school, stocked the upper year dorm kitchens with it. And then we stocked the actual official offices with it too, as a ‘gesture of kindness’. The Vice Principal called bullshit because she always did; the Nurse was deeply touched. We started handing it out on the College and Tower quads. We left a stack of packets by the breakfast and lunch lines at Trade Schools. In a meeting with the Squints, the Drovers, and myself, an idea for something called ‘Instant Coffee Day’, wherein people gave instant coffee to their friends, was hatched.

“We made flyers for it- well, after asking The Marshal, leader of the Gravedust, permission to do that. He gave us a smile and, I swear, he most definitely knew all the shit us students were up to- I don’t know about any of the other teachers, but he knew. Anyway, on the day in question, we gave coffee to all the teachers- that includes the nurse and the VP, and even the Marshal- and everyone else we knew who actually would drink instant coffee.

“My- He called bullshit, but He always called bullshit. Oncle Vaughn and Aunt Jenny were deeply touched.

“We just kept giving out the coffee, virtually shoving it down people’s throats, leaving piles of it on random tables in cafeterias in graduate schools. My joy for business died- but my plan worked so
fucking well. It played out perfectly. For five weeks, no one bought instant coffee at all- I actually had people in various branches of the Feywild check all through the fleet, no one was buying any coffee for any reason in five whole weeks. The Legion was panicking.

“Then we started selling the cool shit. That went great too; and we only had to wait about five days before the Legion- Head Active Legionnaire of the Germa Fleet, Commander Ten, came to me, Flight Leader of the Feywild, Holly Golightly-”

“Hah!”

“Shush. Never let it be said that the Legion doesn’t know how to cover it’s own ass, or adapt to a changing market- they offered to form a cartel with us,”

“You know, I’d actually forgotten about that,”

“I knew I had them dead to rights- but Commander Ten spun their argument well. A cartel is basically when multiple companies come together and agree to set the same prices so they can act as a monopoly, and, you know, adjust those prices as much as they want. Since the start of all of this, the thing the Legion wanted most is to get rid of their competitor organizations and have their monopoly again. Since the start, what I’d wanted most was just to have a good saleable product, to be left alone to sell my aunt’s peanuts and novelties in peace. Commander Ten suggested forming a cartel to fix that for both of us.

“We both of us knew, of course, that this was just a tactic to save their asses because the Feywild had backed them into a corner, but never let it be said that the Legion doesn’t look after it’s own interests. They value profit over pride, and we’d fucked up enough of their profit that it became easier to join us, rather than fight us. Then, after we formed the cartel we destroyed the majority of the other groups who were selling in the Fleet districts to maintain our power,”

“Gotta have a monopoly for the cartel to work,”

“Quite. When I left, there were five groups- the Feywild, the Legion, Artist Collective, Gamblingerers, and LogSupport, which separated and formed their own group after paying the Feywild a big severance fee. That’s what happened, really- so far as I know, at least,”

“...Why weren’t there more magical items on sale?”

“Lack of product and worker placement,”

“I see. What’s for lunch today?”

“Soup, salad, and fresh bread- it’s a bit cold, still, so I was thinking bean soup?”

“I like the sound of that,”

“Maaaaaaab-”

“Yes, Captain?”

“How come you tell everyone else stories but never me?!?”
“You never ask or hold still long enough to listen,”

“Oh. Tell me a story, Mab,”

“Alright. This is the story of the time my Aunt Medjool Menaced a Cherry Tree with a Baseball Bat So Hard It Bore Fruit Out of Season; there’s also a side of Aunt Medjool menacing cityfolk relations with giant corn, because it’s that kind of story. Remind me to tell you the one about the fireworks and bison.

“For the Full Context, understand how my Aunt Medjool- actually a cousin to my mother- and her side of my family got to Fairisle in the first place. Prior to 917, that branch was all farmers of limited success that migrated from county to county, trying not to starve or run afoul of the county-King, until a covey of the Morgans heard that they could be shoveling shit in Pumpkin Hill, then quite a Wild stretch of land. It had the added bonus of being very far away from the people they owed money to, as well as being too dangerous for the Bank’s Repomen to follow you into.

“Thus, that whole branch of Morgans fucked off to Pumpkin Hill, and made a fortune in the horse-raising business in the middle of nowhere during the Great Depression of the First Eon. Despite their newfound comfort in the upper-class, they never actually gave up farming, and having a pair of glowing green thumbs was and still is a point of pride in my family. So, when Aunt Medjool moved out to the Nokken Reaches, specifically to the Thule River Valley, which is where an absurd percentage of the finest cherry trees in the world are grown because it’s full of probably the world’s most perfectly fed-and-graded soil for cherry tree cultivation, Aunt Medjool had to continue the tradition and set up a garden out back of her house.

“She planted various crops and flowers in January because fuck you, Ultima Thule’s seasons are on a year-to-year system, not actually seasonal; and she invited my mother, Harry, and her growing brood of children, out to visit.

“We went out in July, to escape the city humidity and the fetishization of butter for a time, when the corn is typically getting to be around knee-height if things are going well. Aunt Medjool spent a long time asking how things were back on the farm, plying them with ice tea and her lethal Devil’s Kiss cookies, before politely inviting Mother and I out back to see how her patch was doing- oh, it’s not much really, just a bit of a laugh for me and the boys-

“I stared in fascinated aw at the nine-foot corn which was already showing fruit in it’s blades because it’d been going since New Year’s. At the watermelon plant that had taken over the side yard and had unripe fruits hard as stone the size of my chest; at enormous cucumbers and vibrantly green lettuces and a trellis of roses with scents so overwhelmingly powerful, my eyes still water just thinking about them. There were a few moments of awed silence from myself, my brothers, and Mother.

“Fuck you, Medjool.’ Mother said eventually, before bursting into raucous laughter. The rest of the visit was a pleasant diversion, and Auntie M even taught me how to make her Devil’s Kiss cookies- I’ll tell you after the story, Love,”

“Thank you,”

“The following spring, Aunt Medjool received a package from Ultima Thule, specifically a small cherry tree with a note saying, ‘With Love, Harry.’

“I knew better than to engage in such jackassery, because this is Faesh agrarian passive aggressive Bullshit at it’s absolute finest. ‘Sure, you can do corn; any asshole with good exposure can do corn. Try this fussy cherry varietal instead, fucko,’ is a more accurate and honest translation of what my Mother had sent my Aunt.
“Aunt Medjool, not about to be intimidated by a mere tree, planted that bastard in the front yard and proceeded to pamper the little shit—bloody bones, roasted bones, bone meal and blood fertilizers, a brand-new irrigation system, the works. Hell, she would go out sometimes and talk to it. The tree, of course, thrived, and flowered, and she borrowed one of my beehives to make absolutely Certain that it got pollinated, because she was going to mail cherry preserves to Harry for Yule, that absolute shithead.


“That autumnal season, Aunt Medjool received a letter from Harry, asking after a couple of paragraphs of circumnavigating, how that tree she sent was doing?”

And here, I pause, to sigh and make the exact face I know my Aunt made that day. How do I know this? I was there when she made it.

“Aunt Medjool got up, made herself a Daiquiri and drank it, picked up my baseball bat from where it was leaned against the wall, and walked out to the front yard to have a Discussion with the Cherry Tree.

‘I’ve just received a letter,’ she explained, waving a rage crumpled paper at the tree. ‘Asking me when you’re going to fruit, like. I think I’ve held up my end of the bargain involved in being your caregiver, so it’s time to provide. D’you understand? This spring, if you do not start fruiting, I will take personally take this stick-’ she said, waggling my baseball bat in the air, ‘to your vital regions and reduce you and them and all of it to kindling.’ She then stepped quite close to the tree, sticking her face near the trunk as though whispering—hissing—into it’s hypothetical face, for it’s ears alone to hear.

“Do not test me, you shitty twig.’

“The next week, and every year after, that tree bloomed out of season- and by February, it had set an obscene amount of fruit, which Aunt Medjool kept the best of as seed stock, turning the rest into preserves which were sent off with me to school and mailed back to Fiddler’s Green. Those preserves were some of the most delicious, most sweet, most cherry-flavored preserves I have ever had the pleasure of making myself sick on when the homesickness became too much for me. They tasted of summer days, and blistering heat— the cool spring waters on my Aunt’s ranch and the smell of clean, dry hay. Nothing, and I do mean nothing, could ever compare—excepting, perhaps, the Cherry Cider that she made the next year,”

I pause, to take in my audience—general interest, most of which is coming from Solitaire. I scrunch my face, and I glance at the Suntides, because this is going to tickle them the most—

“The tree my mother, Harry, sent my Aunt Medjool was a Merrow Cherry. Primarily used as shade and ornamental trees since antiquity, the Merrow Cherry tends to produce fruit that is too sour and small to be palatable to the human tongue, or worth human cultivation—birds tend to like them, though. The specific cultivar my Mother sent my Aunt was one of the extremely ornamental ones— it was supposed to flower profusely, but never fruit.
“They’re mostly planted in residential areas, or business areas that require a very lively sort of atmosphere- extremely high class brothels in Ryugu Mergyo tend to use Merrow Cherry trees as a sort of, hm, mascot. Merrow babies are weaned, traditionally, by use of the Merrow Cherry juice- as I said, it’s very sour, but crucially will do no true harm to a babe.

“They tend to be small, bright pink cherries with little orange, yellow, or white speckling near the stems. I say again- Merrow Cherry trees are meant for shade and ornamentation. They do not tend to produce fruit that is in any way edible, and the baby tree my mother sent my Aunt was never supposed to bear fruit.”

The Suntides have expressions of pure shock and awe on their faces- they understand what I’m trying to say.

“My mother intended to tell my Aunt Medjool this fact on her deathbed, or more likely in a letter sent long after her death, as this was her idea of a funny joke. She became so enraged when Aunt Medjool mailed the cherry preserves that she very nearly started a Feud- as she wrote, in an actual letter, accusations of chicanery and falsity- and, of course, she said that my Auntie M’s corn was skinny, sour, and probably fake as well. Aunt Medjool was furious and sent back pictographs of the tree and the corn to show that SHE WAS NOT FAKING IT, THANK YOU VERY MUCH HARRIET, and Mother accused her of gluing store bought cherries to the tree, and on, and on, and on. This went on for several years and got increasingly bitter and nonsensical, until, at last, the entire family was gathered at my Aunt Medjool’s ranch.

“And there it was- haloed in moonlight at three in the gods be damned morning, all of us fresh of the train and my Mother in a high, fuming dudgeon- and the tree itself? Flourishing, with a number of smaller children arrayed around, and festooned with thousands of fruit. Come morning, when the fruit did not fade as Illusions do, my Aunt Medjool- in clear view of my Great Aunts and Granuna and Nanelphe, for the sake of veracity- showed my Mother the godsdamned tree, with the real fruit it was actually growing, THANK YOU VERY MUCH HARRIET.

“My Mother very nearly argued with Harriet about it, but Granuna threw a forty of rum at her head and said ‘If I hear one more godsdamned word about this fucking tree, I will check and make sure that you really are my daughter.’ It’s funny what can be a death threat, at the ass-end of the morning when no one wants to be awake but there’s too much work to be done to crawl back into bed…

“This was the last time my Mother was particularly sane- she never was entirely sane, but this was the last time she was in any way reasonable. I have a good relationship with that side of my family, even now- and it was my Aunt’s gift of cherry pie as consolation for my Mother’s death that made me laugh again, ere her passing. Oh, and of course- we had to move that orchard after some trouble with the IRS, and wouldn’t you know it? That tree is still fruiting, same as always,”

“...You don’t have anything lighter, Mab?”

“Not today, Captain,”

“Really?”

“Sorry, Luffy. I honestly thought it’d be funnier,”
Here’s something interesting most people don’t know: the ability to pick up and put out signals into the atmosphere, commonly used by Transponder Snails or Den Den Mushi (same thing, TS is more common in Wes and Nort Blue, while DDM is more common in Est and Sout,) is an ability mimicked by Interference Snails (White DDM), Refraction Snails (Black DDM), Skybourne Eels, Crystal Crabs, and- interestingly for my purposes- trash you can get out of a midden in a small village. Or you can be born with it, if your mother was exposed to enough iron during her pregnancy and you have a shocking number of iron and semi-precious crystals in your skull, like me...

The major difference for all of these methods is range, and signal quality. It’s like an echo- bounce the signal too many times, it starts to degrade.

An adult Transponder Snail is able to receive and give signals to an entire Island, which on average is about 731 square km; a baby TS can do an entire city; Interference TS’ can block signals for about an hour on average, while Refraction Snails can only pick up one signal at a time; Skybourne Eels require a large number to handle the load of a single conversation; Crystal Crabs have the superior speaking ability, but almost no range worth mentioning; and as for the trash…

Let’s talk about usage, for a moment. Most people have at least seen a Transponder Snail, if not used one- there are TS’ booths meant for public usage in most major cities, and it’s a very small village indeed that doesn’t have at least one person with a TS in their keeping. Transponder Snails don’t actually require a rig of any kind to speak snail to snail- however, without the rig, the snail in question is usually limited to it’s own egg group, that is to say, it’s direct family- descendants, antecedants, hatch mates, and so on. The Transponder Rig is built to work around the snail’s natural signal encryption- which is a very weak, yet very effective, method.

Most consumer goods meant for office work use Transponder Snails as a base- fax machines, for example, are used World-wide to send documents that must be secure.

Skybourne Eels, on the other hand, is more my area of expertise- I got into music, and the Revolution, and of course, Crystal Crabs, on a whim- but the Eels… they chose me, really.

To start with, it’s important to know that in most sufficiently ‘advanced’ societies, there are things called Mechanical Calculators. They’re more complicated than abacuses, and they can do more complicated mathematics; I’m considering getting Fern one for her birthday because I know there exists one that does logarithms. Let me see- where’s the article…

Right, so. Fast and complicated calculations are what happens when you’ve got lots of fiddly bits of data moving very quickly- markets, a high level star-chart, navigation at high speed- you need a machine that isn’t fallible like the human mind is, that can also, you know, do the thing you need done, and quickly.

It is someone’s entire job to correctly calculate and operate using one of these machines. Once you’ve gotten that squared away, well- it’s only natural that you might want to share information, between secure locations, of course. You’ve got computers, and their adding machines- but it sure would be useful if those computers in their secure locations could talk to each other without the possibility of interception…
Thus begins the history of the InterNet. Initial concepts of a wide area networking system originated in several computer science laboratories in the Faesh Unified Coalition, Ryugyu Mergyo, and the Germa Fleet—specifically France. The Faesh Department of Offence awarded contracts as early as the 960’s, including for the development of the ARPANET project. The first message was sent over the ARPANET in 969 from computer science Professor Leo Cleanrock’s lab at FaME to the second network node at Ohara Research Institute (ORI).

Packet switching is a method of grouping data that is transmitted over an Eel network into packets. Packets are made of a header and a payload; think of it like… like mailing a letter. The information on the outside of the envelope tells the mail carrier where the payload— the letter—needs to be sent, and where it’s from. That information also tells the receiver at the destination who—or what—is supposed to extract the payload and use the information within. Networks for packet switching are the basis of the modern Postal Service; and the development of internetworking, in which multiple separate networks are joined into a network of networks, is the basic principle by which all modern Devices work.

Technically speaking, I’m one of the Administrators for the Network that governs magic as a system; there are things set in place that regulate the massive natural flow of magic, and I’m one of the people in the World, currently living, who can change the parameters of those regulators. The Eels chose me, I think, because I was… open? To the sound.

Eels are this planet’s weirdest, most mysterious creatures—moreso than Sea Kings and Sky Queens, those are extraterrestrials; no one’s entirely sure what eels are.

The first time I spoke to an eel, more than twenty years ago, I wasn’t expecting it. It swam down out of the mist around Floria during one of the few Bright days, when I was still just a little feather-brat and hadn’t—well. I was sat on a friendly Cherumb’s grave, which I had gotten into the habit of lingering near because the Automata guarding it knew me, and knew that I just wanted to sit somewhere quiet for a good long while, what with the orphanage being so loud.

It’s funny— one of the few things Mab can’t talk about, I can. Being born of a Fairy Egg means that you remember what you were, and what you weren’t— and what you would have been, too, had you been born with a soft shell inside a mother. I remember growing up in Floria, the orphanage, the guards who were kind and the shopkeepers who weren’t; how and why I ended up in Water 7, in the company of Mark and Taffy, as well. I also remember being a simple Smackclaw crab, wandering the shore, delighting in each new find of seaweed and kelp; and I remember being a simple Transponder Snail, unworried about the meaning of the signals I heard, repeating them all the same.

Mark remembers growing up in a vast City of Brass; the cutthroat politics of the Djinn and his eventual choice to leave his home, leave his kin—leave everything he knew— to try and find some measure of peace, some place where he only ever had to be himself… Mark remembers being a boat too weak to sail across the sea her beloved crew pointed her towards.

Taffy remembers being the youngest of three; of surviving the fever that took her parents and her sister, of having her older brother—nearly a man, then—being unable to look her in her face, she took after them so. She remembers going to a school for opera, and ending up a clown; she remembers finding her sword in the desert, after a ghost had finally been laid to rest. Taffy also remembers being a centipede, her days no more than the eat, sleep, fuck, repeat repeat repeat of that kind; she remembers being a cloud fox, loyal unto death should she have a mate and protective of whatever kits may come, and wholly concerned with her own survival otherwise.
But how, one might ask, can all those pasts be true? I reply: those pasts are as true as they need to be, for me to make sense of myself- or my friends to make sense of themselves.

So. I met the first eel, Spicy, in Floria, as a child; on a day like any other, in a place where destiny, to be frank, usually took a nap before deciding that finding it’s Fated Champion was quite a lot of work, honestly, and giving up. I, being an orphan, was relieved of the burden of choice- I had no family to support, no Dream to follow, no Ambition that would be squandered by Fate coming to find me.

In addition to many strange adventures on the way to Water 7 that had nothing at all to do with any sort of prophecy, preordained fate, or Mysterious Destiny; I was the one to lay a ship of ghosts to rest, and I was the one to rout a Kraken from a harbour, and I was the one who found a woman’s child, and eventually- before I had even left Floria at all- I met Spicy, the eel. It is no exaggeration to say that the choosing of a Gamayun Mossa- the Wandering Leaders of the Syreene- is a Mysterious Mystery. I don’t know what the criteria are, or how the eels know which child is Worthy and which is not- only that they do, and they are, and the children that put themselves forward as choices without being Worthy pay the penalty with their lives.

Before that moment, eels- and their Mysteries- were slimy, mysterious, dangerous creatures; not snakes, not birds, not amphibians nor good red herring. And further- what would an Eel, harbringer of Fate, Destiny, Mystery- what would they want with an orphan birdlette, unwanted because of her untamable strength and impossible hearing? Certainly no Syreene did; and, at that time, I truly looked like an ordinary child of the Sea Bird people.

The Syreene name for Skyborne Eels is Unagi; they’re as long as a tall man’s arm, and maybe double thick as a man’s cock. The legends of Syreene’s engaging in carnal relations with eels is a fetishized mess- while there is a ritual involving insertion of a live eel into someone’s vagina or anus, it’s not for sexual pleasure. Quite the opposite, in fact- Sirins are bound against having children or any carnal relation until after their service has been completed, and the eel, once introduced, remembers the Sirin in question. Once a Sirin swears their Oath, they are bound to keep it- and should they falter, even once, (though only of their own accord,) the eel will keep their Oath (and offending body part) for them. The Sirin in question usually doesn’t live through that part.

Fae live through lives marked with blood, Oaths, honor, and magic; yet somehow, every person I’ve ever met, every story I’ve read, it’s always the Oaths and honor and magic they want to talk about. The Blood’s the most important thing. Maybe they’re just squeamish? Eels aren’t squeamish; and, being inducted to their Mysteries, neither am I.

There’s never more than a hundred thousand total Sirins in Floria at the same time- even now, with a proper Island underfoot, the old law still stands. There’s just not enough room for all that aggression in one country- get too many Sirins together in a Floria summer, well, blood flies and heads roll.

Being Chosen of the Eel has perks- for one thing, after my body got used to the Boon, I never once got a pimple, and I recover from sunburns and windblisters much faster than anyone else. Chopper said that my skin is particularly oily, rich in vitamins A and E; I’ve got a nose for omega-3 fatty acids, as well as certain fruit-based antioxidants. And no one- absolutely no one, not even Mab though she comes close, can beat me for stamina during our landfalls on Summer Islands.
Syreenes- Sea Birds- actually come from the Kappa, not the Merrow. When the Kappa fled from their original homeland, now contested in ownership by the Long-Arms and the Long-Legs, there was a serious internal schism. About half the original nation went on to conquer Coral Island, which became Ryugyu Mergyo; the other half stuck to their wandering flotilla, with the half-thought idea to one day ‘reclaim the mother-land’ or something like that. Eventually, enough generations were born in the flotilla, then the fleet, that reconquering some nebulous homeland no one had ever even seen, much less could find anymore- well.

We picked the Florian Triangle for a number of reasons- mostly, we picked it because no one else wanted it. A coral reef known for wrecking ships, thick banks of mist and fog, and doldrums wasn’t by any means prime real estate- thus, if we took it, and made it our own, not only would no one bother taking it from us, *if they did*, they certainly wouldn’t be able to keep it.

Technically, physically, I’m a Seafolk- Fishwoman. Sort of. Basically, there were three main family lines that broke off from the other five, with another that followed a while after- Rostrata, Anguilla, and Jamonica, with Aeoboria following our alliance with the great Queen, Ariel. Over the thousands of years, those four lines have intertwined enough that the basic Syrene build is very, very different from the basic Fishperson build, even if at a distance you could say that we’re both Fishpeople. Technically, we are- but truthfully? We aren’t.

Fishpeople tend to be very large- and I know Taffy knows the particulars of our genitalia, but that doesn’t matter so much as this: Fishpeople don’t lay eggs. Syreenes, unless impregnated, do. There’s some other stuff, about a major size and shape difference- Fishpeople tend to be a full head higher in either gender, but with much more lithe figures comparatively- but honestly? Syreenes lay eggs- all the Bird people of the Fae lay eggs, instead of menstruate. Yes, really.

How do I know it’s not just me?

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Taffy lays three to eight large, bright turquoise-green eggs, about four times a year. It happens every three months or so, and she’s dedicated to tracking this particular cycle of her body.

Preparations for this are actually not terribly much- a basket to catch them, a towel so they don’t break on impact, something for her to crouch over or against while she works… and an enema, because the gyrations her womb undergoes are powerful and there’s nothing a Fae person hates more than uncontrolled body waste.

The enema she handles the days leading up to what I think of as the main event; and then, I start working with her. It starts with fifteen straight minutes of me rubbing her clit, and then (with her enthusiastic permission) I get to hold her legs open and watch as the green eggs push out of her peony-colored depths and the thick black hair that hides such sweet secrets damps down with sweat, watch her face grit with determination and her eyes roll back in her head as the mixture of pain and aching pleasure overwhelm her senses. Her wings push and thrust and wrap around me and her whole body arches with each egg that passes through some deeper place I’ve never seen- a doorway, I read it described, to the womb.
Sometimes, when she’s tired and she’s pushed out a very large clutch, all I can do is rock her a bit and kiss her sweaty brow and blush smilingly as she weakly broadly smiles back and digs her fingers sharp as claws into my hair and drags me down to kiss.

This time- and it’s only happened once before, it’s very very rare- this time, one of her eggs is too big, or maybe turned wrong. I can see the great lump of it pushing up against the skin of her womb, the sudden jerk of her hips can feel the sharp twitch and quiver of her thighs watch as her lips and her face and her eyes redden and overflow with maddening sensation.

“Ffuah, Gurry- Gurry it’s stuck-”

“Don’t worry, I’ll help you-”

“NnnnnNNNNNNAAAAAAAAAAH AH AH-”

Taffy is not particularly quiet during her time of the month, and Gurry is Into It. As for Mark and Mab: Mark could at any time end up laying eggs instead of menstruating. I think it’d mortify him, but it’s still something that could happen. Mab… no. Not without a conscious decision.

As for me, I’ve got a strong enough pelvic floor that the problem isn’t getting them out, it’s getting them out intact. At least mine are softshell- but there’s nothing worse than a yolk-stain to get out of a pair of panties, the fats bind right to the cloth and only a good scrubbing with soap before it’s set in will really get it all out…

Anyway, in recent decades, the population of Syreenes has been… heavily controlled, due to the lack of viable- common parlance would have me call it nesting grounds. Basically, every Syreene wants a specific sort of area to nest, or settle down and have kids, in. As far as Tribes go, if the Syreene in question is of the gregarious, convivial, or social clan, they’re uniquely suited for city life. The more powerful the Syreene, the less suited they are for inclusion in a society-like structure- the powerful, solitary Sea Witch of folklore is very common for a certain sort of Syreene, simply because more than half of all Syreenes are powerfully introverted.

I’m different, in that I’m a Goose-type; meaning, I need some sort of family group to truly be content, I am very physically powerful, I am a water bird, and I take the defense and protection of my dependants very seriously.

It also means I’m particularly skilled at Hearth Magic, which is a bit embarrassing seeing as I don’t actually know any spells or rituals meant to keep a house. I do, however, have a notebook- nothing fancy, it came from a five pack of spiral bound notebooks meant for note-taking and not much else- and in that notebook I’ve been writing, well…

They aren’t really spells, I think. Mostly they’re ideas- little things to make life just a bit nicer. A potion to make tangled hair easier to brush out; a spell to keep mugs at the right temperature longer; a spell that dries out socks, even while you’re wearing them- even though I don’t wear them…

I actually know a lot of mathemagic. I have to- there’s actually a lot of mathemagic involved in
Communing, even if it’s all encoded. More importantly… well, all Syreenes get inducted to the Weather Corps. It’s a national law; I, personally, wasn’t quite one of the best, and I never had the heart for it, but I did keep up my Fog License just in case… And of course, I kept my sleeping schedule.

Because Floria wasn’t a natural Island, it didn’t have it’s own weather systems; we, the Syreene of the Floating Island, had to make it ourselves.

“Excuse me, Doctor Trafalgar- I heard you the other day, when you asked Chopper about my sleeping habits. I can explain them, if you’d like?”

“Uh… sure, Bryony-ya,"

“Well. The first thing you need to know is that for the last several thousand years, the Syreenes haven’t actually had an Island to call home. We had a Floatilla- a Floating Island- instead. Floating Islands can be many things, but there are a few key faults they always have. First, and most important to my people- Floating Islands don’t have magnetic fields,"

“Uh,”

“…Consider Punk Hazard. Mechanically, it wasn’t attached to the ground- and by that I mean, after a certain point, it did not fully touch the Sea Floor. If it had, it would have developed a magnetic field of some sort. It didn’t.”

“Oh. So… what does that have to do with your sleeping habits?”

“…Well. The first thing you really need to know and understand- and I do mean that seriously- is that Haki and Magic are the same thing, and all things that are Real have one or the other, or usually both. Floating Islands aren’t quite Real enough to have the same kind of Haki or Magic as an actual Island- that’s why their particulars are often so forgettable. Tell me; before it’s destruction, what was Punk Hazard like?”

“Uh-”

“Did it have a particular smell? A sound? A color or texture? A Voice?”

“…”

“Flvnc did. I know it did, because you still echo with it- a poison in your bones and a scream locked in your throat, fire and broken cities in your eyes. A white city, and a shallow sea that went for five kilometers out; you could walk the whole thing in between high tides, if you had the nerve for it; the silver city, all in black and blue and white, ever the white, and it’s harbor so shallow a man of your height could wade it’s entirety with his head well above water. In that city that shone with all the lights, all through the world, there was a college, and the finest doctors in the world were trained there; you were trained there-”

“Enough. That’s- enough,”

“… Floria, too, has a Voice. A city made of graveyards and brooding houses, leaning on each other. Art in every corner, wrapped around every post and pole; skulls and hearts and birds, so many birds, flowers too, all of them watching through the mist. A mist that distorted everything- every sound,
every color, every breath cloying in your throat. Punk Hazard, though?"

“A jungle. Then- fire, and ice. Nothing more than that,"

“Floating Islands aren’t true Islands; and, unless carefully managed, they cannot produce their own weather conditions. Did it ever storm on Punk Hazard? A real one- thunder, lightning, trees made to bow to the Wind?"

“...No. At most, it just… rained,”

“Syreenes are connected to the weather- and on Floria, then and now, we make our own. Weather is something that never stops needing attention, never stops needing to be monitored. Most people, no matter where they are, want the bad weather- rain, in particular- to happen while they’re asleep, and don’t care. This means that storms- which are necessary, and complicated, and very difficult to manage- are often scheduled for the night. And yes, Doctor- in Floria, the Weather Schedule is just that, a Schedule, often dictated by the votes of the constituents and the needs of the hand-built land below,”

“Oh,”

“Before I came of age and left Floria, I was a Weather Captain. It was my job to manage the Weather Corps Division, and our Territory. Which was half the country,"

“Oh,”

“My jobs were, in order- schedule shifts, payroll, supply management, demand management, public relations, and on call duties, in addition to my skill and power in forming, locating, and placing the various weather systems the Syreene Weather Corps was in charge of. Thus, I would be needed to work all times, around the clock, especially at night- but often, not for extended periods. During the worst portions of this period of my life, I didn’t sleep eight uninterrupted hours for two years straight,”

“Oh holy fuck,”

“Not to mention, the Licensing Tests- for every form of weather you can think of, there is a test that requires you to give the scientific name for that weather condition, the circumstances in which it occurs, and how to replicate it as a Weather Corps member. Fog is easy; certain forms of Lightning are nearly impossible,”

“...”

“As for my sleeping schedule… things are better, now that I can get eight uninterrupted hours nearly every day. Would I prefer if that happened during the night, and not the day? Perhaps. Do I enjoy the time I am fully awake? Yes, actually- and no, Doctor, I am not fully awake now,”

“-Gah, now I’m yawning-”

“Hmm. Perhaps I shall see you again at dinner? Then again, probably not- this is, after all, a midnight snack for me...”

“Perhaps- ah, you wouldn’t happen to know any places that are good for napping, would you?”

“Hmm… You won’t get much out of them, what with all that shit still in your bones and blood- talk to Mab about it, her medical Doctorate was focused on the sort of regenerative therapy you need; however, for you, Nami’s Grove would be best. There’s a nice bench there that gets just the right
amount of sunlight this time of day, without heating up overmuch...”

“-Guaaah- can she really do anything about… all this?”

“At the very least, she can fix your jaw- that dentist botched those nerves, and no mistake,”

“Heh. I’ll talk to her about it,”

I’ve just come from the most interesting conversation. Trafalgar Law- you know, the surgeon- just inquired as to whether or not I could do regenerative therapies. When I, of course, informed him that I certainly could, he asked- begged, though a bit too nervously proud to beg outright, really- for my help. It seems that Trafalgar Law has had to live with a Curse of the Body- and unlike some things, this particular Curse is one that can be broken.

I’ll need to prepare, of course- after all, I never do a job halfway. Liquid Catharsis, powdered bonemeal, milk, proteins, vegetables, sugars for energy, and quite a lot of salt; hm, and a silent dark room I can fill with a liquid he won’t sink in. Difficult, but doable.

Let’s get started!

Mmm. Naps are good.

It’s hard to Champion the humble eel. They’re slimy, and phallic, and they have very sharp teeth. They don’t really look like the fish they are- they don’t have pelvic fins, most don’t have pectoral fins, and their dorsal, anal, and caudal fins fuse into one long fin-ribbon framing the entire length of their wiggly bodies. Despite having fins and scales, eels aren’t what the Demons call saf because their scales cannot be removed cleanly. Their bodies are covered in mucosal slime which means you can’t catch them by hand, either- making them what the Mink and Longarm call effroth. When the Fishers up on deck catch an eel, they throw it back or kill it for bait- Sanji almost never serves eel as food, and I think I might be the only person on this crew who considers Jellied Eels a delicacy.

Eels are cool! They’re nocturnal, like me, and they can absorb oxygen through their skin, which means they can slither across land and over barriers. Skuan Eels can live as long as eighty years wild; in captivity, over a hundred and fifty. Eels are catadromous- they always spawn, and die, in the Sea, but otherwise spend their lives in freshwater or sweet-water clouds.

Their blood is toxic to all humans- research into why led to the discovery of anaphylaxis, the scientific term for an allergic reaction. This is also why eels must be served cooked, no exceptions. If you’re eating raw eel, you aren’t actually eating eel- or you’ve got no other choice.

Eels have weak jaws, and small but sharp teeth that tend to curve in like hooks; in order to break apart their food they spin like maelstoms. They can also swim- or fly- backwards.
Most interestingly of all, every Eel in the world is born in the same place in the Southern Calm Belt; where, at the end of their lives they return, reproduce, and die: the Sargasso Sea.

The Sargasso Sea is a whirl in the Southern Calm Belt, bounded by clockwise… technically there are no currents in a Calm Belt. In reality, there are no currents in the water of the Calm Belt; the air currents are very high up, too high to be of use to ships of the sail. Anyway- the Sargasso is named for sargassum, a type of seaweed found in abundance in those waters, which are exceptionally blue. The warm, salty, calm conditions of the Sargasso would make it ideal for Sea Kings- if there wasn’t one other interesting thing about that particular sea: it’s shallow.

How shallow? At it’s shallowest, you’d only get your ankles wet; at it’s deepest, your hips. At the center of the Sargasso Sea there is the Blue Lagoon Sea, an incredibly blue lagoon of saltwater and uncharted lava vents, where massive forests of bull kelp mark the bounds of the final feature of the Sargasso Sea- the Ember Islands, and Barriera Reef. The main, and Royal, Island of the Sargasso is Hearth; but of interest to me is Anguilla, which is shaped like an eel and smack in the middle of the largest eel hatchery in the world.

Baby eels don’t look like eels. They don’t look like eels at all- and for centuries, eons, no one knew that baby eels were even eels. No one knew if eels even had sex at all; certainly, even now, no one has ever seen an adult eel spawn in the wild. Immature eels look enough like eels to be mistaken for full grown- but when dissected, they don’t have any sexual organs. It took twenty years of finding smaller and smaller larvae in the Sea to figure out that they were going somewhere to spawn; and it took longer still to realize that certain species of fish were actually immature eels.

Every year, after hatching- they are still fish, after all- the tiny larval eels of the Sargasso Sea swim off towards land. Skuan Eels find massive waterspouts to fling themselves up into the troposphere and higher, making it Up There from January through April, every single year. It’s hypothesized that a form of Voice Memory tells the delicate larvae where to swim- that each one is born with a species memory of the Voice of their Home Waters, which can be interpreted as a Response Signal. Thus, we come full circle- eels use the tiny crystals of iron in their skulls to home in on various signals, particularly the one produced by their Home Waters.

Glass eels are what happens when larval eels start looking like eels; elvers is for when they gain pigment from their food and migrate upstream in their thousands, blackening the cold winter-melt waters with their slimy selves. Elves and Eels have a powerful connection as well, but that’s really all I know about it...

Glass eels and elvers are valuable. You can eat them straight from the water- fried in oil with garlic and red pepper are a Basque delicacy called angulas. More likely, they’re captured to be farm-raised in tanks. Remember- no one’s ever seen an eel have sex. We don’t know how they lay eggs, or get them fertilized. Thus, we can’t breed them in captivity on a commercial scale- though there has been success in smaller, more naturalistic, processes.

Unagi is popular- but the local eel population of RM has dwindled, and it’ll take a long time for it to recover. The cheapest, fastest way to grow eels is in heated water- they eat more, after all- and so, the most common ‘proper’ work for a Merrow in Gobdark is actually Eel herding. You can’t use a bubble pipe to herd Eels, they don’t respond to it; it’s too dark. Gobdark is also where most eels eaten as unagi are slaughtered, cleaned, skewered, and grilled; massive warehouses converted to kitchen lines, the finished food packed into crates and shipped- everywhere.
There’s been a rush on glass eels too—especially in Floria, where the rivers are exceptionally clean. Fairisle banned export of their eels due to overfishing about ten years ago, and there was an earthquake in RM not two years ago that wiped out the depleted stocks of most of the Merrow eel farms. On Floria, you can only commercially fish for elvers in two places legally— the Main Shore, and Caroler’s Hill. In Floria, the price of glass eels, caught live, increased tenfold in the past three years. At its peak, you could buy a pound of glass eels for ¥260000; and during that season, there was rampant poaching, night time standoffs between entrepreneurial Syreene and environmentally protective Nokken, even heavily armed fishermen.

I called my cousin Patrice the other day; she’s a fisher on the Main Shore, almost always out on the water as things come into season. When I asked her what eels were going for this year, she laughed a bit, and said: ‘what are they actually worth, or what are we selling them for, d’you mean?’

See, when I was a fledgling, glass eels went for about ¥1000 a pound. Two weeks before I talked to my cousin, she was being paid ¥205000 per pound by buyers sent from farms on Coral Island. During the height of the season, eel is the third-largest import to the Tsukiji fish market. In Floria, there’s almost no demand for older eels, so there aren’t many licensed adult-eel fishermen around—I’m one of the few, for reasons that should be obvious.

Eels spend about ten or twenty years in freshwater before going back out to sea; no one knows what kind of signal it is, but we do know that once they get it, before they go, their bodies change to adjust for the deeper, darker, colder waters that they’ll encounter in the ocean. They get longer and fatter; their heads compress and their eyes enlarge. Gradually, the river garb of olive brown is changed for a sleek black coat that glistens in the light with an underpart of cool silver. This is the dress worn only by those eels about to undertake the far journey to the Sargasso— they’re also the formal colors of my ceremonial dress, even though I’ve not yet needed one. Black coat; silver dress.

I want to see the eels return to the Sargasso, one day— it’s said to be one of the most spectacular sights in the world, a great confluence of slithering black snake-like fish in waters shallow enough to wade in...

"-hahaha! Hey, hey Deb-"

"-Ah? Yeah?"

“If you don’t get a date soon, you’ll end up cursed!”

“...I am already cursed,”

Linus blanches, and turns all the way to stare at me and all I can do is stare down at the pepper I’m supposed to be deveining and all I can see is darkness and the pale white of her skull and the black strands tied to that damn coral-tree and-
“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine- I just. I need- out,”

And then I’ve put my knife down and I’ve walked out of the Galley and I’ve dived into the cold harbour waters and I don’t know what set me off. I just- one moment, I’m listening to Mince and Oz giggle and set up a fun date for the two of them and then- Linus teased me about- I didn’t want Miki as a friend. I- she was so beautiful, with sunbaked hair and a chipped tooth smile. I should have- held her hand? Kissed her? I- just one more night with her at my side, one more night over at her house, one more sleepover… staying up too late talking about nothing I just…

I found her body. I found her, and I held her in my arms, and I- I- I don’t know how I’m supposed to live in this world without her.

My hair comes undone in my frantic push downwards; my hand darts out and snatches my mothers- my- hair clip before it’s gone forever. I kick off my boots and tear off my jacket and swim down and thrash out of my skirt and stockings and my legs burn with all the things I can’t bear to say, colors and lights flaring across them like they haven’t since- Since-

The bottom of this harbor is actually pretty nice. There’s gouges from all the anchors, of course, but there’s also a fairly nice sandbar, and it’s full of little sand-beri. I watch the flat urchins wriggle back under the sand at my approach, and then I just- can’t swim any more. I collapse, crumpled over in the sandbar and clutch my head and scream-

I can’t remember Miki’s voice. I’m watching sand move with my ragged breaths, and I’m watching my hair drift around my head and I’m watching a thread of blood drift up from where I gripped my hairclip so tightly it-

I can’t. I can’t remember her voice, or her face; I don’t remember what she liked to eat, I can’t remember her favorite books or what she did after school every day or why she only ever used pink hair ties and I can remember that there was a reason but not what that reason was I can’t-

It hurts to be without her. It hurts to breathe and know that she’s not somewhere, breathing too- every new thing I see, every new thing I taste, every new friend I make I want to share with her and she isn’t here and she never will be and I can’t- I can’t-

My sisters can’t help and my mom’s dead and I have no father and I-
When I got into a bad place, Miki pulled me out; when I got too serious about everything, Miki made me laugh. I was a whole person with her; and when we were apart, as we had to be, I was still a whole person. Now, without her, I’m not. I don’t remember her voice and I can’t go home and- I want-

I want a reason to live without her. I want a reason- anything, any reason, I was finding All Blue for her, that was her dream and I just- if I can’t share it with her, is there a point at all? I can’t- I don’t have a reason, I don’t have a dream, I don’t have her- I don’t have… anything.

All I can do now is lay on the sandbar and breath through the pain.

I think I fell asleep or maybe passed out because when I come to I’m being hugged to someone- Sancho? No, too warm- Sanji? And I’ve been dried off, and I’m wearing pajamas and my hand is bandaged and I can see my hairclip on the sidetable and- I’m under a sheet, a damp sheet, and then a rubber sheet on top, and Sanji is… stretched out along my back and holding on to me, like I’m… precious, or something.

I- I don’t-

Gah! Oh, no, it’s only Buttercream- but- this- isn’t my bedroom, and when I shift around I realize I’m not laying with my back against Sanji, I’m on my side between Sanji and Missus Mab, who’s taken on the form of the prettiest Tuna Mermaid I’ve ever seen, and she’s under the sheets with me and I-

I’m crying again.

Fuck today.

“Have your cooks ever had really good bread that you know of?”

“Uh… well. I’m a fair baker- but I see your point; they won’t get to the finals of the WWBs without some actual baking foundation… why do you ask?”

“Well, I know you don’t want them baking in your kitchen- and since we’ve got a good month left, I thought I’d teach them out at my lodge,”

“…”

“You’d be there too, of course,”

“Well-”

“I was going to go over the history of bread? -of all things, I think bread is the easiest to learn, but the hardest to master,”
“Now that, we can agree on. -I do like hearing your lectures and seeing you teach,”

“Do you?”

“I do,”

“...I'm glad you found her.”

“Yeah. Me too. I didn’t know it was getting this bad, though- otherwise… Her health and her sanity come first,”

“I know. I just wish she knew that too,”

“...Yeah,”

Interestingly enough, One has run into this problem before- or rather, this particular quirk of magic. It’s all to do with magic.

“The reason none of you can bake, save Linus, is magical in nature. The nature of that magic is this- Fire and Air are diametric to Water and Earth. The three of you have very powerful ties to Water and Earth, and very weak ties to Fire and Air- with all of you having nearly no true ties to Air, and Deborah having the strongest ties to Fire,”

“...Huh?”

Oh dear.

“Mince, Oz, and Deborah- all three of you grew up under Water, in cities made of stone that was formed under water. Contagion is a funny thing, in Magic; taken in it’s most literal sense, contagion is literally ‘to touch together with’. In this case, I think all of you are operating under a fundamental misunderstanding of how Magic and Cooking are intertwined- and they are,”

“Missus Mab, shouldn’t Chef be-?”

“Sanji agreed to let me give you this instruction, Deb; he cares too much about your feelings, your pride as cooks, to give you a true accounting of the bloody details. I do not have such reservations. The truth is, barring a distinctive Magical event called a Transformation or a truly terrifying set of circumstances, none of you will ever make a truly good baked good. At best, on a perfect day, in perfect circumstances, once all of you know and understand what I have to teach, you all will be able to make an edible baked good, circumstances permitting. It will never be easy, or second nature to make an edible baked good; but it will be within your power.

“That is all I can promise you- and the reason it is important for all of you to know this is that the World’s Worst Baker’s competition is looming close, and though you passed the Regionals, you will not be able to earn distinction enough to get into the true Finals for the Worlds without solid foundational studies. Raw talent will only take you so far,”
“I see. What do we need to know, Missus?”

“To start, a revision on Magical Theory. Sanji assures me that all of you understand the foundations of your Art and Craft; what you need reminding of is Magic, which is integral to the higher levels of all Arts and Crafts. The true basics of building strength and ability have nothing to do with fancy theatrics or special moves. They have everything to do with simple skills and knowledge: what to wear, how to stand, the way you eat, how to keep your tools; and other things that are not so easy to teach, like strength of character and genuine hospitality. At the highest levels of your Art and Craft, when you are not genuinely happy to serve someone what you have cooked, your feelings will contaminate- the active form of contagion- the food. You cannot hate and cook; your bitter heart will poison what you cook. Your true limitations; your full strength; your weaknesses; a true accounting of your ability, as you are now: these things are what you build your power, your Art and Craft, upon. They are the base; that is why they are the basics. Am I understood?”

“Uh…” “Sort of?” “No, Missus, not really,”

“These are the life lessons your parents should have taught you, had they been willing or able; that they did not is no fault of your own. However, you must learn these things- what is the point of learning to sharpen knives, wash dishes, budget a month’s meals against food costs and nutritive needs?”

“Your tools are your only way of cooking safely and effectively, in a timely manner. Though they need not be the best, they must be fit for use… take care of what you have. What you have might not be the best, but replacing it because of negligence on your part is no good,”

“…Clean dishes- pots and pans and serving dishes, cooking tools and eating tools and all the rest- make and hold clean food. If the food isn’t clean, people could get sick and die. -We’re responsible for people’s safety; every time they choose to sit in our house and eat our food, we hold their lives in our hands. Be responsible with other people’s lives,”

“I- No One Leaves Our House Hungry. There is enough for everyone; and I suppose, at the higher levels, we’re not feeding a physical hunger, but a psychological one. An ounce of meat and some flower petals and leaves isn’t enough to fill anyone’s stomach- but at that level, you’re not feeding the stomach, you’re feeding the soul. At our level, I think the best we can do is make sure that people feel welcomed, and, uh, that they have enough to eat at every meal we serve them. Generosity and Kindness are the virtues we bestow on the world,”

“Exactly so. This is of the Faesh Culture- and yes, the Fae do have a distinctive shared culture. One of our most powerful social calling cards is that Nobody Leaves Hungry. If I were cooking our daily meals, there would be a greater variety of garnishes and sides, and far fewer main dishes- can you think why?”

“…Ease of cooking?”

“Not quite, Deborah,”

“F-familiarity?”

“Better, but no- keep thinking, Oz,”

“…Portions?”

“Keep going, Mince- think about how my cooking is different from Sanji’s,”

“Sanji and you… Chef makes enough food for everyone to eat seconds, but we hardly ever have
more than that, even if we want more- and we always do, unless we genuinely don’t like the taste of a certain ingredient. You *always* make enough for everyone to eat fourths, even when it’s only average- Oh! Plenty! The main philosophy of Faesh cooking is Plenty!”

“Exactly so. The main philosophy of Demonic Cooking is Quality; Minkfolk want Scent; Lonfolk want Texture; Seafolk want Harmony; Talfolk want Specificity; Faefolk want Plenty; and Lanfolk, of which Demons are most definitely a part, want Quality. Ah- and Automafolk want Reliability. The reason this matters? Your natural inclinations define *who you are* at a very deep and primal level; they define *what* you consider food at all; *when* you consider that food to *be* food- is it ready after you burn it to taste? Is it ready after it’s fermented? During a certain year? A certain season? When is food, food?

“It defines where you know food to come from- does it come from the grocery store? The field, the forest, the waters deep, the wide sky? Is it bloodless? Do you gather it with your own two hands when possible- or do you need it then and there, no fussing about who got it to you or where it came from?

“It defines why you eat some things, and not others. Some things cannot be eaten excepting certain ways because they are toxic. Some things must be eaten by certain people to live. Some things are always taboo- others change their nature with circumstance.

“And, least of all- it defines *how* you cook. The method of cooking is easy to teach and share; is *meant* to be taught and shared. The more defining features- Why you eat the food you eat, Where the food comes from, When the food is ready for consumption, What is the food… who eats what; who *gets to* eat what… These are broadly defined by your Tribe, whether you know it or not.

“There’s lots of overlap, of course- Lanfolk’s desire for Quality is shared by every other Tribe; while the Faefolk’s desire for Plenty is perfectly understood by anyone who has gone hungry because there wasn’t enough to share. In truth, the philosophies of all the tribes, when taken together, can create marvelous things- but understanding why those philosophies are the way they are…”

“Missus Mab?”

“...What do you know about the history of the Fae? Do you know why we live in the Sky?”

“...No, Missus,” “U-uh-” “Can’t say I do,”

“Right. We tell ourselves, in our main history books, that we left because the Giants invaded our homeland and destroyed our sacred tombs- and they did, that’s not untrue. But that’s not *all* that is true. We left our homeland because we were starving; and although there was no guarantee of food in the Sky, there was a certainty in the lack of it on the Land. We, the Fae, left for the Sky during a period of World-wide ecological disaster- a massive Volcanic eruption, along with a terrible earthquake and a drought. Plenty is the Philosophy of the Fae because we know what it is to live Without- and we know that if one lives Without for long enough, they will surely die.

“Quality? The Lanfolk were enslaved- not to the Nobles of the Old World, but to the Others. The Others are not human, and they do not care for human needs- and so, the Lanfolk were made to subsist on the unwanted garbage of the Others tables, and what they could find, beg, steal, and scrape together. Even though the Others used Lanfolk as chattel, they saw humans as vermin; you can put the rest together yourself, I think.

“Mink lived in the True Wild, where the only assurance came from your own knowledge- hard earned or passed on through grim experience- and your own senses, and for the Mink? Scent is the most powerful of all... when it comes to food, at least.
“Lonfolk lived lives of austerity. Texture became their only outlet for expression and creativity for eons; and so when their Austere way of life was no longer needed, their love of Texture remained.

“Seafolk are strongest when they work together with each other and the World around them. Harmony, for them, is a natural expression of this strength- and, as the Seafolk have spent most of recorded history being kicked out of their homes or living through cruel twists of fate, being able to find strength with each other and the world around them- in Harmony… Discord is what the Seafolk had to live through. Discord is what Seafolk have to live through now. Harmony, then, is what they crave.

“Talfolk often have to make due with what they can find. Every single Giant in this World, however, wants. Famously, Giants like Big Mom want candy; but some want a fight, or a lover’s caress, or a beautiful coat. Very often, a Giant will not be able to get what they want- ingredients for the candy Big Mom wants aren’t available; there is no fight to be had; no lover worth the vulnerability; no sewist up to the task. But the Giant still Wants. There are tales of Giants devouring naughty children- because there were Giants so driven by their Wants that they ate children. There are tales of Giants destroying cities because Giants destroyed cities for wanting. Wanting something specific is, I think, their way of providing themselves… a drive, I suppose. Wanting all the world and expecting to get it is flatly impossible- the World itself will foul your efforts. Wanting a certain kind of candy, or a gentle kiss goodnight? Those things, specifically, are possible.

“Automafolk want Reliability. I don’t know why- but then, I suppose I do. Automa had very few assurances through history- and what assurances they had were of the worst sort. That they would be seen as inhuman- lesser, inferior, better, superior, it doesn’t matter, really- either way, they were not particularly welcome. That they would be seen as tools, and not people; objects without souls. That their Goddess, Galatea, died before she could create a place for them to go when they die- and so, there is nowhere for them to go when they die, and they will not see their lost ones ever again… In many ways, the history of the Automafolk is one long, terrible tragedy- disaster after calamity after catastrophe after tragedy- is it odd, then, that the most comforting thing to an Automafolk would be the assurance that tomorrow would be much like today, down to the meal?”

“oh,” “...yeah,” “...i thought it was just me...”

“In review- Magic, when it comes to cooking, has the same foundations as all other forms of magic- which is to say, if you can’t cook, you can’t use cooking magic. That’s just how it is. The things you need to know now are thus- All words are magic words if they are truly meant; a spell is a word or series of words that the World cannot ignore; and some people, no matter what they do, will never be able to use, understand, or safely interact with certain kinds of magic. For the three of you, it’s Baking; for me, it’s Dreams; for Sanji…”

“Warspells- I can’t throw firebolts, and never will be able to, even though it’s the basis for literally every warspell in the Demonic tradition,”

“Now for the lesson: People draw their magic from two places. There is a personal reserve, which is built on experience, environment, and familial traits- and there is an ambient reserve, which is native to the environment. Sanji’s main forms of magic are Air, Fire, and Lightning- he is a Firestorm, like the majority of Demons in the world, to use the slang term for it- and I will explain why he can’t throw firebolts even though all datums say he can. My main forms of magic are Lightning, Water, and Air; a Thunderhead. I have no skill with weather manipulation; and I will explain why, shortly.

“Magic exists because we exist- and our magic exists inside of us the way it does because of where we come from, that is to say, our physical location and how we were raised. I was born in the Sky, in a grove of sacred cherry trees. I was taught to be a kind of steward, a caregiver- and it grated on
me because, according to my magic, such things are not within my normal nature. I do not hesitate, and I do not forgive, and I do not forget. These are not bad or good traits- but the tasks I was suited to were few and far between.”

I pulse, and the air suddenly feels heavy and thick, like a thunderstorm about to break open the air, like lightning waiting to strike- but there is no… oppression. That isn’t who I am. In front of me, Deborah, Oz, and Mince all go rigid with terror then relax.

I reach out and place my finger in the air, and at the end there grows a ball of lightning that crackles and sparks and quietens to a ball of vigorous light. I release the orb of magic and it splits into seven; two begin circling each other like fish in a small pond, one of living vine and the other of metal, gleaming and rusted and crystal and tarnished. As for the other five- I point to all and give my warning; then each in turn, for the sake of clarity as I speak.

“The five internal magics are not toys. They are an integral part of every human being. Learning to cook with the five magics is not easy. It will exhaust you; it will confuse you; it will frighten and stress you, find faults in you that you did not know you had. You will be tired, and you will wonder if you’ll ever see the sun again, and you will hate me, and Sanji, and each other, and yourself; and you will never be as you were before. You do not have to learn this to be successful; there is no glory in learning this, and no shame in choosing not to. But you cannot choose to unlearn; and the longer you wait, the less time in your life is available to form a true understanding of this magic. Will you continue, knowing this?”

The seven Magics blaze with my power; and I make sure to meet each Cook with my eyes, and impress upon them that I am not kidding; and they look back at me, and at each other, and at the strange light of the magic between us. And they do not leave.

“At the end of this, you may well never be able to cook as you did before. Are you really prepared for that?”

“Yes; I was prepared the day I asked Sanji to teach me to Cook,”

“Yes; I am,”

“Teach me; please,”

I do so love my juniors. Their spirits are truly remarkable.

“Very well. The preparation for this is simple: find the state of mind as when you clarify stock, or peel eggs, or wash dishes. Instead of preparing the task in your mind, reaching for a tool- reach inside yourself. I will show you what you need to find, and where to look; I will guide you. You will be the one to pull it up and out, and you will be the one to wake it, and you will be the one to let it settle inside of you, awakened forever. We will start when all of you are ready,”
I watch, calmly, as the three Cooks shift where they stand; Deborah adjusts her apron, Oz double checks his sleeves, Mince makes sure his shoes are set right on his feet… and then, they nod, ready to begin.

“Fire cooked first. When I said ‘is food ready when it’s burnt to taste’, I was not making a joke; fire is what makes food edible. Fire is the friend of man; it is the seat of will, and defined by passion and intensity. A candle; a campfire; a forest fire; a volcanic vent. Fire destroys; fire is what makes life possible. Burning; Heat; Dancing. It comes from the gut and the throat; and what you want.

“Water cooked second. You cannot cook with water if you have no vessel; and you cannot make a vessel without mastery of fire. Water is what allows man’s comfort; water is the seat of understanding, and defined by adaptability and flow. A teardrop; a raindrop; a river; a wave; a flood; a Sea. Water takes action; water is what makes life livable. Wet; Cold; Flowing. It comes from your blood, and the actions you are willing to take.

“Earth cooked third. You cannot cook with time if you have no mastery of comfort; the best things to eat exist on no schedule but their own. Earth is the toil of man; earth is the seat of strength, and defined by endurance and stability. A stone; a mountain; a field; a mine; a quarry; a landslide; an earthquake. Earth endures; earth is what life turns to when all others fail. Solidity; Pressure; Stillness. It comes from your bones, and finds a way when there is no way.

“Wind cooked last. You cannot cook with transformation if you have not mastered time; some moments cannot be recreated or recaptured, and no magic can change that. Wind is the freedom of man; wind is the seat of change, and defined by speed and unpredictability. A breath; the shiver of water on a still lake; mist; fog; clouds; tornadoes; tempests. Wind changes; wind is what makes life change when stagnation becomes death. Shapeless; Careless; Ever-changing. It comes from the lungs and the diaphragm, and is a tangible form of faith,”

The four magics go through the Cooks like shit through geese. Deborah has a bright red streak across her face, like warpaint; Oz is flickering with stark black lines, roiling and jolting like an Art Deco oil-slick; and Mince… has horns, curled like a Corsican cow. Magic is one hell of a drug- all of them are soaked with sex-sweat, eyes blown orgasm wide and hooded with exhaustion; shaking with energy that they’re too exhausted to use, and all of them too energized to sleep.

“The order of your awakening is not trivial. Martial magic requires stability; hearth magic, which is what you are learning now, also requires stability. The difference is where that
stability is; for the martial artist, stability in the body begets stability of the mind; for the hearth keeper, stability in the mind begets stability of the body. You want; you comfort; you endure; you change. And, most importantly-

“Lightning doesn’t cook; because lightning *thinks*. The other magics can be used in jest; lightning cannot. Lightning is unpredictable, adaptable, indomitable, and wants *with everything it has* - to exist. Lightning cannot afford to forgive, or forget. If you fuck up how you think about food, people die. If you ever forget where food really comes from, and the work that goes into making it, people die. If you make food only to feed the body, people die. If you ever forget that food has to taste good, people die.

“If you cannot find enough food, people die. This is most important of all.

“Lightning innovates; Lightning is the seat of power, defined by duality and potential. A poison becomes a medicine becomes a food becomes a poison becomes a medicine becomes a food. All foods are medicines; all medicines are poisons; all poisons are foods. A spark; a thought; an idea; a bolt of fire that destroys and creates with every moment it exists. Sharp, Dry, Shifting. It is your spine, and it is what bids you live- even if you must eat poison and garbage, live,”

Deborah sobs, and she does not run- she can’t, her legs are barely holding her upright, even with stockings and boots to support herself with.

“It hurts; oh gods, it hurts so much,”

“Live, Deborah ,”

“I- I *don’t know how*-!”

As she wails, Sanji’s calm command undoing the last dregs of her composure, Mince and Oz- and Linus, who crept into the room and stood with Sanji- quietly wrap themselves around Deborah, and hold her up even as she screams her grief.

“We will show you- ah, the three of us, together. If you’ll let us, I- I mean,”

“We will not leave you,”

“You are not alone,”
And of course, their quiet, firm kindness is what really crumbles the last piece of her. Deborah collapses, but this time bracketed by friends- not family, not superiors, people her own age who care about her as herself.

“Magic isn’t meant for pain; and pain is not the end, though it can feel like it,”

Sanji’s taken over now- he was so quiet, so… proud. Of them- of me. But this, I think, he needs to say.

“Living through pain doesn’t make you stronger; it’s the living that makes you stronger, not the pain of it. You might think you’re not strong enough, that you don’t know what to do- you do. You have an astonishing strength. All you have to do is reach out- just a little bit, push a single brick out of your wall- and we’ll all be there for you,”

“I know things seem bad, like they’ll always be bad- but they aren’t, they won’t, and they never were. You will feel better, I swear it; you just have to live,”

Eventually, we’re all adjourned from the kitchen in the small cabin adjacent to my ski… really, it’s more like a mansion? Anyway, we’re all in the living room; Sanji and I are settled together on a couch large enough for both of us, while the Cool Kids are in a cuddle puddle on the sheepskin rug in front of the hearth.

Deborah has been going through rounds of weeping and exhausted staring- and, bless them, but the three boys, Linus, Mince, and Oz, they haven’t left her for a moment longer than it takes to go to the bathroom. One of them is pressed up against her at all times; thigh to thigh, back to back, an arm slung over her shoulders or a pair wrapped around her back as she sobs into a broad chest…

Deborah looks up from where she’s been curled up between Linus and Mince, one of her legs curled around Oz’s calf, and she says-

“There were seven,”

“Hmm?”

“When you were teaching us about magic- there were seven, but we learned five. What are the other two?”

“Ah. In regards to Hearth magic- the other two are Metal, and Wood. Active in you whether you like it or not, so no need to look- becoming aware of them is no bad thing, but not strictly necessary like the other five. They were present from before you were ever born, being portions of your sire and dam’s own magic; and they will return to the great Wheel, upon your passing from this mortal world. Martial artists rely on them more heavily than you will- however, that doesn’t mean there aren’t certain things that require their usage…”
“So… Um, well, what are they, exactly?”

“In you? Wood is spirit- your emotions; Metal is body- everything you know to be real- oh, sorry, magic, right. Hmm.

“Wood is what gives food flavor. Cooking with spirit is infinitely better than cooking to survive; there’s more to life than survival. Wood is the growth of child to adult; wood is the seat of growth, and defined by adaptation and discovery. A seed; a sprout; a brave green leaf; a memory of sunlight; the patient, curious strength that cannot be denied or delayed; the wish, the promise; a love that never dies or fades or is forgotten. Wood grows; wood is what makes the changes wind brings Real. Changing; Forming; Fertile. It rests in the body, and is unbowed by Time.

“Metal is what gives you an idea of how to cook. The method and the knowledge that cooking must be done is not enough; those things and the supplies to do them with is not enough; you must know how such things are to be done, and resolve yourself to doing them. The solidity of bone; the fluid warmth of blood; the scent of piss and bile; hard and sharp as a knife; soft and sticky as honey; the beauty of a marigold and the putrid filth of cheese. From death comes life; and to death life must return. From night, day arises; glory from sorrow. In the darkest depths of despair- laughter. In crumbling dust- gold. The eye of the storm and the strength to carry on. Ferocity, subtlety; rage, calm. A coin to trade, a blade to fight, a kiss to remember; a promise to never forget. Changeable; Formed; Vital. It rests in the mind, and gives all actions direction and meaning.”

I hum, and pull with my shadow. Eight baby ninjas- an entire sneak of ninjas, really- shudder as the longing in their hearts suddenly has somewhere to go. As I continue to quietly lecture the Cool Kids, now shuffled into a warm pile lounging at my feet, the other couch steadily fills with ninja. Although I never look at them directly, and Sanji is very good at keeping a straight face… Well, a sneak of eight ninja isn’t actually all that unobtrusive, not when they’re all genin. Shit, student wizards are sneakier than genin, and student wizards categorically can’t stop talking about their work- which is why, in social settings, it’s easier to ignore them, and not, say, the gaggle of young women being suspiciously quiet and holding very still on the other couch in the room that you’re directly in front of and have a very clear view of.

Am I cheating? Absolutely. Can anyone stop me? Not that I know of.

“So. Ovens were first developed for baking bread, and bread alone. Pottery actually came after breadmaking- because you don’t need crockery of any kind to make a good loaf of bread. You don’t even need knives, really; what you need is an oven, water, flour, and a little bit of salt. If you want a puffy bread, you still don’t really need crockery- you need a box or basket, and fine-weave cloth, and the very open air.

“Here’s how it works- every technology begets the technologies that come after. If you want optical glass, such as the kind that’s in my glasses right now, you need to be able to produce good soap first.
Good soap, of course, is the kind that lathers nicely, and doesn’t leave any weird smells or residues on your skin when you wash with it- and if you really want that glass to be clear, and colorless, and without fault? You need to know how to make laundry detergent. From scratch.

“I apologize- earlier, I said that none of you would ever be able to make more than an average, edible loaf of bread. That’s still true- but I feel as if I’ve allowed you to think that a loaf of bread is the only kind of bread there is. It is not. What I should have said was: None of you- not Deborah, not Mince, not Oz- will ever be able to make bread- that is, a bread loaf - in an oven. Ovens are meant to do one thing: they are meant to shape fire and heat in such a way as to provide the correct magical reactions, for the production of bread; and only bread. That an oven can be used to cook an extensive list of other foods is a happy accident; and that the three of you can use an oven to cook foods other than bread is also, a happy accident.

“I say this now- all cooked food is produced in one of four ways. The first, most ancient, and most profoundly human is by exposure to fire. Every Tribe has some tradition of barbeque- Deborah, merrow cook certain kinds of fish by exposing them to volcanic vents, don’t they? And of course, I saw a number of yaki stands in Chihiro Town, not to mention the entire yaki restaurant in Sento Chihiro… Second, of course, is by exposure to water, or a chemical cooking- salad dressing actually wilts the greens and roughage in the salad, or it’s supposed to-

“-which improves the texture and the nutrition available for digestion-

“-Quite so. Third is exposure- or rather, internment- in earth. Shoyu, champagne- they wouldn’t exist without a long, quiet rest in the earth’s embrace. Finally, fourthly- air. There are drifting strains of silt, an invisible mixture of animals and plants, and when they, in careful husbandry, are exposed to food… pure magic is the result.

“This brings us back to bread, and ovens. Everything that wasn’t bread was cooked on, in, or in front of a fire. Domestically- which we, as pirates, simply don’t have the space for, nor can do safely- this is still the case. Commercially, ranges with integral ovens have been in existence for at least… four hundred?”

“Four-fifty,”

“Four hundred and fifty years- give or take the fifty it took for the practice to be standard across all commercial kitchens. Not to mention the holdouts, and the historians- and of course, some food simply can’t be cooked properly in a standard commercial kitchen,”

The Cool Kids baulk, at that. I sigh.

“Is it deer or humans?”

“Uh-”

“I know it’s one or the other; which one?”

“...Deer, Missus Mab- they’re messengers of the gods! You can’t just… just-

“Be thankful for it’s sacrifice and use every part of it’s mortal flesh I can?”

“..."
“I made my first school backpack out of deer skins my mother had hunted, about a year or so after I was born, just for that purpose. The style was as close as I could get to a Tsuchiya Kaban without actually having handled one before; I had pictures of the back from all six sides, as well as pictures of the interior and a list of dimensions and features. Mother had managed to gather a collection of intriguing buckles and closures- none of them the Tsuchiya Kaban brand, but all of them totally worthy in their own way.

“Three whole deerskins to work with, and my mother told me all about them. It took a full month to stalk the first; and a week for the second; and half a year for the third, which was albino and nearly blind, and so had Haki far in excess for normal deer. I knew the deer long before I knew my bag- I knew that one liked fresh pea shoots, and another would shove it’s head and whole body through small holes in hedges for the joy of it, and I knew that the white one had a deep and abiding hatred of rubber ducks. I knew that one had a small herd, and one was alone, and one was shunned. And above all else- I knew that the meat we ate every night for dinner that year was their meat, and that the skins I was using to make my backpack was their skin, and that without their sacrifice- without their service- without their generosity and kindness-

“If those deer, my deer-relatives, had not taken pity on my mother, we would not have lived through the winter. Ultima Thule, the place I grew up in, has nearly an entire year’s worth of winter- spring, summer, and fall are all squashed into a bare three months. I call them deer because that’s what you’re most familiar with- but in reality, they were caribou. They were caribou, and my mother hunted them in the skin of a wolf, with her wolf-family around her; and if she had not, we would have starved to death.

“The deer’s blood became soup stock, and fertilizer for the greenhouse; it’s bones became toys, and tools; it’s skull and it’s teeth, in particular, were coveted for their powerful magic. There’s more of course, but in truth? We of Ultima Thule- which is both Sanji and myself- eat deer because there are times of year when the alternative is starvation. You know very well that such a thing cannot become,”

I pause, and take a deep breath. Sanji weaves his fingers into mine. I regard the Cool Kids- particularly Deborah, who still looks horrified at the mere thought of eating venison- with quiet fondness. And then I snap my fingers and point at the oldest of the genin on the couch behind them, the one I’ve got a feeling is going to be up for chunin promotion this time next year- she’s also the only one dressed in comfortable flats that are meant for someone her visible age, which shows a certain level of sensibility that her fellows lack.

“Would you please call for a number of refreshments in the Winter style of the Thule court, for this lounge, please?”

“Yes ma’am,”

“And send for extra blankets as well, I saw you lot shivering,”

“Y-yes sir,”

I am very careful to keep my amusement, concerning the reactions of the Cool Kids to the sneak of ninjas right behind them, between myself and my husband. Amusement becomes somewhat more
bubbly when the Sneak and the Cool Kids realize they’ve all met before—though probably only Sanji really knows where that might have been.

I barely manage to keep from smirking or bursting into giggles of pure anticipation—good gods be great, I’m turning into Mommarav and Aunt Zippy—as the Sneak, all eight of them, and the Cool Kids, carefully arrange themselves into a very snuggly cuddle puddle. When the refreshments and blankets arrive, I move before anyone else can; I take the entire trolley, move it to Sanji’s side, and take the extra blankets from the bottom. I throw them over the cuddle puddle just the right way so that my ass—anyway, when the cuddle puddle of kids starts giggling and laughing, Sanji gives me a very welcome pinch somewhere quite personal.

I settle in his lap, and calmly lounge. His rumbling laughter against my back sends wet fire through my whole crotch and my ass and my thighs—my ass anyway, when the cuddle puddle of kids starts giggling and laughing, Sanji gives me a very welcome pinch somewhere quite personal.

“Hmhmhm. Right. Ranges with integral ovens are very new, domestically speaking— I didn’t learn to cook on one, to give you some idea of what that time frame we’re working with, and also an idea of why you’ve only ever encountered them professionally before, if at all. Integral ovens aren’t popular in Skua for a number of reasons, mostly because of weight— they’re heavy, is the thing. In other places, roasting before the open flame is becoming unfavorable, though still going strong in those places where barbecue is king.

“The general-purpose integral oven is not well suited for breadmaking; there are specialized ovens purpose built for breadmaking, and even they do not quite suit all applications. The heat produced is too fragile; hot air and hot metal and not much else. A good loaf of bread is formed in the deep heat of the structure itself— stone and clay and brick come together and keep the heat, radiating it outwards into the surface of the bread, particularly it’s bottom. There are a number of tricks and ways to fool bread into behaving inside the most modern of ovens; however, there is no substitute for a proper oven. Breadmaking often develops into a larger programme of equipment, construction, and rethinking of the kitchen’s economy. It just grabs you by the short hairs and doesn’t let go,”

I sigh, and relax back on Sanji, who’s stopped laughing thank goodness. Oof, he’s gotten quite big-down!

“There are big and small ovens; and they can be indoors, or outdoors. At the Worlds, they will be indoors; for now, while you all must learn, outdoors is safest.

“In short, then: ovens work on the principle that you build a fire inside the oven itself until the structure has absorbed sufficient heat to cook a loaf of bread. At that point, the fire is raked out, the oven is washed or cleaned in some way, and the baking begins. A pizza oven works on the same lines but hotter; the fire is not removed but kept burning during the cooking process, so that it can be revived at short notice to get heat up again for another baking. Pizza is fast food, after all; when all ingredients are at the ready, cooking one in a proper oven takes less than three minutes.

“For you three, driving and tending an oven will be much more important, and much more difficult,
for possibly your entire lives. You all have lived your lives separate from true flames; and there is a
fascination in watching the flames curl over the brick dome and listening to the roar at the mouth as
the heat gets up to maximum. There’s also the pure delight in using a baker’s peel to put a loaf in; or
it’s attendant disasters as hesitation and fear make a mockery of your hopes.

“Speed, too, is a marvel of the true oven; at its full potential, an oven will cook bread at twice the
speed of a standard cooker; and, as it settles onto the gentle declining slope after breadmaking is
done, you can do all the things you’ve learned to do with ovens that isn’t bread- stews, finishing,
cakes, biscuits and cookies and meringues and so on all profit from the free heat.

“Hmm, I had a point to this lecture- ah, yes. Tomorrow, this sneak of ninja will teach you all they
can about working with a real oven; as the Qualifier rounds of the WWB are in a bit less than three
weeks, and its best not to tempt fate overmuch, I find.”

“Uh- wait, didn’t we compete in semifinals already?”

“Yeah- those were to get you a spot in the finals. These determine what that spot actually is;
remember, the Finals are about showmanship. Having a good spot will ensure that you get a good
crowd, ready to see what you can do,”

“ Yes chef! ”

“Pffft. No need to be so serious; take today to enjoy each other’s company. Tomorrow, we’ll begin,”

I suppose I should explain why I want to build a completely mechanical radio when my own senses
and a good snail do so well. The issue is throttling, and control- I can reliably do one or the other, not
both. And of course, there’s the problem of power- mine is finite, and so is a snail’s. No living
creature can be fully aware at all times; neither myself nor a snail can listen to everything all the time.

Machines don’t get tired the way living things do. When something in a machine tires, it really wears
out- and it is much, much simpler to replace part of a machine, as opposed to letting an injury heal.
Machines can be modified- not necessarily with ease, but more-so than a body can be, without
complication. You can always throw a machine out and start over, too; but I’ve only got one body.
And I’m not a bloodmage.

A crystal radio is what I’m building; pretty punk, as far as radios go. It doesn’t need a power source,
since all the power it needs is picked up from the antenna. As a result, most simple sets are pretty low
volume, but it works- and with my hearing, and the way I’m going to be building it, I don’t need it to
be loud.

For the sake of operational security, however, I do need it to be secret. What that really means is I
need a new hairstyle. A bouffant is the height of fashion back home, of course- but I never really got
into teasing my hair, and the scent of hairspray has always been a migraine trigger for me…

“Miss Robin?”
“Oh! Bryony- you’re up quite early,”

“Ah, yes- I was wondering if we have a copy of Godey’s Lady’s Book? I know that there’s at least one recipe for fixatures in that book, so—”

“Godey’s Lady’s Book… hmmm- not in the manuals, not in the cosmetics- aha! Here we are!”

“Thank you,”

“Of course. This is our only copy, so please don’t take it from the library- just put it on a book cart when you’re done, if you’d be so kind,”

“Absolutely, Robin. Anything exciting happen today, or same-same as always?”

“Hmm… A sneak of ninja have taken residence in one of our unused crew berths, and so far Captain- though informed- has elected not to have them thrown into the Sea,”

“Interesting- aha! Bandoline!”

“Hmm?”

“Bandoline’s the precursor to modern hair gel, and quite simple to make- and I’m considering new hairstyles that won’t give me migraines,”

“Ah, of course. Hairspray,”

“The scent truly is intolerable…”

A woman can change her style as many times as she likes, for fashions change with the seasons; but her scent is for life. Mab’s scent is always floral in tone, even if the specific flower shifts between honeysuckle, vanilla, and lavender.

I need a pomade and a bandoline; of fruit and flowers, I think. Firstly, the perfume on which the scent profiles of both shall be based- with attention to what I like and what we have in the Stillroom, I’ll make a citrus-based fruit perfume; and I might as well do up perfumes for the rest of the Ladies of this ship, while I’m at it. Taffy’s perfume bottle was a gift from her brother, apparently- it belonged to her mother. Nami has an antique from her mother- they look like orange slices in an orange peel, it’s the most darling thing. Mab’s is made of silver- and I don’t know how, or I’d be more precise. Robin only wears perfume when she goes to temple- some Automa tradition I’m not privy to, I think, or perhaps a memory of her mother… There’s a set of seven empty phials that comes to mind which would be perfect for the Suntides- they’re just of the age when young women begin wearing perfume; I think I’ll make a point of making perfume with each of them, so that they can choose their own tassels. Curiously, Mark keeps his favorite cologne in an ancient Djinn-style perfume bottle- gorgeous, I think the gold inlay is actual gold.

As for myself, I have a far humbler bottle in mind; neither ornate nor plain, I think. Hm- before I get too far ahead of myself, I should make my own perfume. And before I can do that- I need coffee beans.

I guess I’ll go over my toilette? I feel like I should… Toothbrush, toothpaste that Mab makes- as I understand, it’s just baking soda, coconut oil, and peppermint oil. It tastes like minty-fresh dirt, but it
does get the job done… Nivea Creme on my feet, because I don’t wear shoes or even socks unless it’s near-freezing or below; deodorant I get from a jar, not from a stick- I use only as much as needed, then. I only brush my hair now, after braiding it for the day’s sleep; I’ll have to change that…

Shampoo, conditioner, detangler, brush, comb, and that’s it. Adding an extra brush out, teasing, and bandoline treatment- not to mention the pomade… that should be fine, right? Ha, and of course, the bandoline. I’m sure there’s a bottle somewhere in the Studio appropriate for the stuff…

It takes me fifteen minutes to find the recipes I want and copy them out. Then, it’s down to the still room to begin actual production, with a short stop in the Galley for unground coffee beans from one of the Cool Kids still cleaning up- and apparently they want deodorants, for their boots. I think I have something in mind…

The Stillroom on our ship has a constant temperature of just about sixty degrees fahrenheit, and it’s the one room on this ship where Chopper, not Mab, and not the Captain, has full control. Chopper’s the one who allows or dis-allows people into the room; and Chopper is the one who controls who is allowed in when. Taffy and Genny usually work in the Stillroom during the early mornings; Gurry and Chopper have the room most of the day; and Robin and Ellie actually have it for the early evening. Free hours are from sundown to midnight; this allows Mab, usually, the time she needs to work with her soaps and salts. Tonight, she will be joined by me, because I need to make a perfume base before I can make pomade or bandoline for myself.

A base of lemon essential oil, to start, ten drops or so; then tangerine and orange oil drops, as Nami actually grows both. Tangerines add sweetness, while oranges provide earthiness- slowly increase both until I like the balance, against the lemon. Frankincense in ten drops, neroli- perhaps five, and myrrh… no more than two, I should think- the spices are for depth. Then, it’s all down to fine tuning- personally, I want something sweet, but not too sweet, and to really let the citrus shine. Once satisfied with the oil mixture, and the scent it produces, I’ll add a goodly amount of vodka- enough to dilute its texture without diluting the smell. Once mixed and tested, I’ll have to put it into a container of some sort… This one, I think. Date; mixture; person who made it…

Now then. A pomade is a greasy- in my case, waxy- substance used to style hair. It generally gives a shiny and slick appearance to the hair, and lasts far longer than most products. It usually takes about four washes for me to completely remove pomade from my hair. The recipe I’m using calls for one-fourth pounds of honey, one-half ounce of beeswax, which I will increase to three-quarters ounces because my hair is unruly; and three-quarters drams of a blend of lemon, tangerine, and orange; a blend of frankincense, neroli, and myrrh; and vitamin e, for nourishment.

After simmering together the honey and beeswax for some time, until all is dissolved I suppose, I strained it, added the oils, and stirred the mixture until it cooled enough I could transfer it to a deep tin for storage. Label; clean up; done.

Finally, my bandoline; an ounce of tragacanth powder, normally used by Usopp or Franky or Fern, and a pint of rosewater; they go together into a large jar, and I shall be shaking them together for the next three or four days, before straining with gentle pressure through fine linen. I will then add a sufficient amount of my perfume base; the rest of which will be going in my humble perfume bottle, as I made more than enough for my purposes here.

For some reason, I thought that would be harder.
I’m able to start wearing my new hair style at the beginning of the next week; it took the rest of the last and the week-end to make the bandoline, and I wasn’t about to put so much teasing into my hair with pomade. I’d never get the teases back out if they went in with pomade.

I’m tired of skirts; not that there’s anything wrong with skirts, I just don’t want to wear them anymore. So, I go to my Wardrobe, and I… put my old clothing away. There’s an entire section of clothing Mab made just for me that I’ve never felt… pretty enough? Brave enough? Not enough- to wear.

This is just the first cheongsam I picked; in the Syreene style, not the Long-arm. It’s a deep-sea blue, with cats playing across the surface and rolling around with balls of string. My feathers are worn something like Gran Una wears hers; abbreviated in number, and hanging gracefully at my side.

As for my hair… I’ve never actually curled the ends in this way before, and I must say that it adds a rather becoming feature to my face. A little more spider-leg with my eyelashes; a little more feline with my eye-liners… and I’ve got a Look. I know it’s a good Look for me when not just Deborah, but Mince, Oz, and Linus all start stuttering and flushing when they speak to me at… dinner.

It’s easy to forget, what with Brook, that I am famous for my musical skills. Brook is, after all, a genuine rockstar. I’m much more like a country or folk singer, when it’s just me and my sidemen on the album; I’ve been in many other genres because of my voice, I think.

But I do have Presence; and I am beautiful. These sweet horny teenagers are tripping over themselves to serve my humble requests. Then again, a cheongsam, even in the Syreene style which is much looser and less stiff than the traditional Long-arm style, is quite possibly the most suggestive of all possible dresses.

I’m covered from the base of my throat to mid calf; and yet, when I take a deep breath and smile down at my meal of steak, and sides- I can hear those four biting their lips. I can feel their admiration. I’m not even wearing lipstick.

Mark, in his red paisley qipao, with his hair all braided up and his guns tucked at the small of his back- he starts a new round of stuttering and blushing. Now this, I understand; I’ve no attraction to him, but even I can tell that Mark’s a stone cold fox. I’d bark up that tree all night if it wouldn’t get me shot.

Taffy, in her new ensemble, just about makes poor Deborah lose the entirety of her blood through her nose. The wider leg and less severe coloration really suits her, as does the sharp sharp cat eye-liner. I can actually see the moment Adelaide decides on a new style; the sparkling of her eyes really gives her away.

Then Mab walks in, in her sailor pants, school-team tee, and high-tail ponytail, and I have to catch my breath a moment.

Oh, huh. I like jocks.

Interesting.
I’m going to have to stagger Trafalgar Law’s treatments; remediation in a living body has challenges, especially when analgesics aren’t effective. To start with, I’ll need to train him in deep relaxation- a sensory deprivation tank, along with some liquid catharsis, should do the trick.

Liquid Catharsis- commonly known as the Acid of Truth, is a powerful hallucinogenic drug. It alters thoughts and feelings, and changes the awareness of one’s surroundings. You will see things you have not seen before, and go to places you might never go again.

As for physical effects- dilated pupils, increased blood pressure, and increased body temperature are typical. The effects of the Acid I will be using will last for twelve hours, and will begin effect in half an hour once ingested.

It’s not addictive, and I will be taking steps to reduce the occurrence of flashbacks.

Basically, I’m going to turn Trafalgar Law- in as controlled a way as I can- briefly schizophrenic, so that I can remove the built up lead in his system and replace it with actual useful things; and also repair the damage to his nerves and muscles, his bones and so on- he’s actually still in the growth window, I think he can achieve his full natural height. Then, once my work is done, I will be putting his schizophrenia in remission.

I could, of course, do this with yoga and meditation. I don’t think I have the time or the patience.

Yoga, after all, is also intentional schizophrenia; the intent is to break away from the world, plunging inward, and the ranges of vision experienced are the very same as those of a psychosis. The main difference between Acid and Yoga, so far as I can tell- well, the plunge is all into the same deep inward sea, of that there is no doubt. The symbolic figures encountered are in many instances identical; the sharp difference, then, is that yoga masters can swim, and Acid takers cannot.

Yoga finds those who already have a talent for this sort of thing- or are willing to be taught, to have a little dust brushed from their eyes, or ready to open their eyes (this is an entirely different discussion, but a good metaphor)- and teaches them, step by careful step, and following the guidance of those who came before and the knowledge of a master, enters the deep inner sea and finds they can swim. Acid throws you into the water whether you can swim or not.

For this treatment- and I treat the whole person, body, mind, and spirit- I’m the lifeguard.

As for the sensory deprivation tank, well- the thing about Devil Fruits isn’t that they make you sink. A person who has eaten a Devil Fruit doesn’t weigh more or less than before; and they are no more or less dense.

Eating a Devil Fruit makes the person who has done so unable to swim. If the water has physical properties that make it impossible for you to sink, you won’t. Period. You won’t necessarily be able to get out of the water yourself without serious mental preparation or a helper, but that’s another thing entirely. You might not even be able to stand up, or stay standing- but if the water, physically, will not allow you to sink, you will not sink. Physics don’t stop working just because Devil Fruits start.

It all comes down to salt, really.
A crystal earpiece is a type of piezoelectric earphone, which produces sound by using a piezoelectric crystal- which changes it’s shape when electricity is applied. In the end, everything really comes down to vibrations- to signals. I don’t need a lot of the supporting technology to use a piezoelectric crystal to hear my radio, loud and clear- which opens up the option of using something prettier for my one required earpiece, instead of the hearing-aid like standard.

I spent a while designing what I was going to make- and even though it’s never going to be seen by anyone if I have anything to do with it, I still want it to look nice. I think I did well, all things considered.

Crystal radios can be any shape and size- you’re only limited by your materials. Most radios end up box-shaped because people know what to do with fragile boxes; and they fit nicely on shelves. A radio doesn’t have to be a box; it doesn’t even have to look like a radio at all. Mine doesn’t; it looks like a long pair of earrings, a giant eel skull that I took the crystals out of to put them in something more comfortable on my head, and an eel jaw I’ve been carefully filing the teeth on- redesigning, really, so I’m in less danger of cutting my own throat with the bottom jaw of an eel’s head from a fishmarket in Sabaody. Yes, stylistically, the whole thing is genuinely cool as shit, but goddamnit I’m not quite willing to sacrifice comfort for fashion.

So- earrings, a veil, and a necklace made out of an eel’s jaw. I should probably paint my nails or something...

Anyway. Crystal radios are punk. They don’t need a power source, since all the power needed is picked up from the antenna; as a result, most sets are pretty low volume. It works, so… With a crystal set, all you need is the right parts, and there are only four- this is a Skysea invention, after all. The truly great sets have antenna; they aren’t strictly necessary, as the coil can function as a sort of ad-hoc antenna, but for the best results, one needs a dedicated antenna. The more antenna you have, the more power your set receives, and the louder it can broadcast.

That’s because radio waves are wireless power. I haven’t quite needed to draw on their power yet, but one day- I might. Having a simple radio will make that easier.

Nikola Tesla experimented with wireless power, among other things. Power means a lot of different things, after all- Tesla, however, was concerned with electricity. Most lay-people think of electricity in the same way as they think of water- in reality, it has its own rules and characteristics that govern it’s entirety.

Radio waves are electricity; radio waves are just that, wave-form fluctuations in the electromagnetic fields that surround everything at all times. The electromagnetic field defines life on this ocean- a field of force that consists of both electrical and magnetic components, resulting from the motion of an electric charge and containing a definite amount of electromagnetic energy. The reason the Skysea doesn’t have a particular reliance on Log Poses is because we use radio signals, which can be tuned for- every island in the world, every true island, has a radio signal of it’s very own, unique in all the world. I don’t need a compass to find an island; no Syreene really does. I don’t know about Cherumib, like Taffy; and I don’t know about Djinn, like Mark; and I don’t know about Fairies, like Mab. But I do know that a Syreene can always find their way home; no Syreene is truly lost, merely… wandering.
Copper wire—saffron string, as it’s called, sometimes—can see the waves because it’s a conductor of electricity. Most radios are made with copper wire… I suppose I should explain. The Four Kingdoms of Syrene, Cherumib, Djinn, and Fae each have a certain metal and a certain element they… resonate, is a good enough word for it, as I can’t translate the Syrene word for it. Fae, silver, and wind; Cherumib, gold, and water; Djinn, brass, and fire; and Syrenes, with aluminum (more often tin, aluminum is quite rare), and earth. Silver resonates most purely with Haki and Magic both; gold doesn’t tarnish; brass doesn’t melt easily; and aluminum is a fairly common superconductor.

Essentially, a radio wave is a vibration. When it hits a conductor, they make the conductor vibrate. The main problem is that the vibration loses more energy due to resistance—think of it as friction, okay? Aluminum is precious to the Syrene because it’s a superconductor, which means at the right temperature (or with the right runes to control it’s temperature) aluminum has exactly zero electrical resistance. Which means a lossless signal.

When a wave hits a conductor, it makes the conductor vibrate; and in this case, the vibrations are so small that they’re almost impossible to hear. A crystal (or diode) can help adjust the signal, and a very, very sensitive earpiece to hear it. When using a powered radio, it adds that power to the circuit, amplifying the vibrations until they become loud enough to easily hear. That’s what the battery, or plug, does. No matter the kind of radio one has, it’s always picking up radio waves—signals—even when the power is off. I sleep during the day because the background noise of everyone else creates a curtain of sound behind which I can rest; at night, the signals are so loud, I can’t sleep at all.

I’d probably be nocturnal even if I hadn’t been a weather captain.

The wire is the skeleton of the radio. It serves two purposes: it catches the radio waves, and it allows one to tune the radio. The wave catcher—or antenna, if you’re being proper, and the tuner—well, coil; have many configurations. As simply as possible though—insulated wire and magnet wire are the same thing. It doesn’t matter which you use, though I used magnet wire because I liked how it looks. As for gauge—16 to 20 gauge is best in my opinion.

As for the crystal, save yourself some trouble and use a damn diode. They look… kind of like catfish whiskers. Honestly, they’re fixed-whisker radios—that is, it’s a cat’s whisker radio, but fixed so it can’t move and sealed so dust can’t fuck it up. Crystals are filters—they transfer a signal in one direction, but not the other.

When you have a circuit, the signal will flow anywhere it can, even backwards; if your signal is flowing both directions, unshielded, you’re going to get a giant mishmash of signals if you try to listen to it. There is a reason I grew my hair out, and a reason I always used a snail to broadcast, no matter that I technically didn’t need one. Unfiltered signals cancel themselves out, contaminate each other— it’s aural fog, it’s like… like… nothing I can describe, really. It’s loud and whining and there are voices and buzzing and—and when I was a child, I heard voices. Some would speak and some would sing and some would scream but that was always—always just—me—

The point is, it’s unlistenable. To fix that problem, you use a diode to filter your signal on the circuit. That way, you only receive one version of the signal at your earpiece.

Think of it like a pool of water. The water is everywhere in the pool at once—like electricity in a circuit. If you throw a stone in the pool, waves will travel out from where the stone hit the water; and if you measure the waves at the edge of the pool, you’ll get an unimpeded signal from the waves you made. If you throw two stones, however, the waves will meet eventually, canceling each other out and destroying the purity of either signal. The normal state of a circuit is the two-stone pool; adding a diode turns it to a one-stone pool, allowing a pure signal to be measured at the end.
The earpiece is where the signal ends, once it’s been collected and filtered. In order to actually hear the signal, I need a specialized earphone; modern ones are built to use more power than can be had with a reasonably sized antenna. Building your own is better than purchasing, because only one company makes the ones you need and they are shit. I also recommend buying an antique- you want magnetic headphones, in that case.

I built my own, remember.

Finally, resistors. Resistors are gates, managing how much power goes through a circuit; if your antenna exceeds a certain length, you'll blow your diodes. Don’t do that; use resistors. I used a 47k resistor, which is complicated to explain without a lot of technical jargon. Basically, the number refers to how much pressure of electricity the resistor gives the circuit- how wide the gate is. The longer the antenna, the more resistor you need.

As for making a radio, it’s pretty simple- take a nonconductive cylinder- toilet roll, dowel, anything that doesn’t hold a charge- and wrap wire around it. Leave the insulation on, which in my case means the enamel; and make sure the coil is tight, not loose. You want to make something that’s between four and sixteen centimeters in diameter, and hollow down the middle. The less material there is between the wires, the stronger the magnetic field they generate will be. Wrap your wire around your coil form. Every third turn, make a tap- a little loop of wire that sticks out. You need to do a total of about forty turns, and you should end up with 13 taps.

This makes our coil into an effective homemade variable resistor. Variable resistors- potentiometers- are devices in all sorts of things like volume knobs, dimmer switches, and so on. Anything that needs a variable amount of power has a potentiometer. In a radio, the variable resistor tunes the signal by artificially lengthening and shortening the magnetic field. I have to sand off the enamel on the taps with sandpaper- or really, emery boards. I also make sure to leave slack at the beginning and the end, because I’ll need to connect those ends to other things. Once that’s done, the rest of the radio is just a matter of connecting the coil to my other parts.

The top of the coil connects to my antenna; soldered to a special copper-rune, because I’m crap at taping, really. The sister-rune is in each stud of my earrings; and the bottom of the coil connects to the ground, which is very important for getting a good signal. A ground is how the circuit dissipates excess electricity. Ground is exactly what it sounds like- ground. Ideally, what I’d do is pound a metal rod a few feet into bare dirt, and then connect the bottom of my coil to it. I don’t have that- so, I did the next best thing. I put a different copper-rune at the bottom, and put it’s sister in the ear that doesn’t have the headphone. Syreenes are of the earth, after all.

Strictly speaking, a ground isn’t necessary. Neither is an antenna; the coil can function as an antenna in it's own right. However, without an antenna and a ground, the signal is extremely faint.

Once everything is wired up, I just move the diode-wire around on the taps of my coil until I hear something; and then, I carefully by way of runes put everything into a particularly cool mask and put the whole assemblage away.

After all, I only made it so I wouldn’t get too nervous about the World’s Worst Bakers event the Cool Kids are about to participate in. Frankly speaking, I was too chickenshit to view Mince or Oz compete; Mince I heard screaming foul imprecations even here, and Oz caused a massive explosion, and I know it was him because I recognized the laughter- but Deborah would be heartbroken if all of us didn’t support her, I know she would.
For those herbalists who tend to others and themselves from the carefully accrued bounties of the earth, such medicines are just a scrupulously crafted. As such, there is a long held conviction; any tincture, no matter how diluted, will always work. Even should it be stretched to it’s snapping, the potency is no less dulled, to the point of impossible circumstances.

I have drunken three drops of Black Tonic in a liter of water and I feel more awake than I had ever thought possible. The coffee has succeeded in finding my weariness, dragging it into an alley, and gutting it. Up coffee! I’ve never drunk coffee before I always thought it made people too dependant on its effects what a fool I have been I feel like I could do anything why am I standing in this line I should be running or fucking or swimming or doing long division or drinking more coffee or-

Focus focus focus the line is shorter now and the sun has moved ‘tis passing strange I feel wonderful my mind is thinking faster than I ever have before I wish I had drunk that coffee last night then when the Heartbreak had reared up again I could have thought up some solution that was better than cry into my pillow until exhaustion took me away at two in the morning then I wouldn’t have woken up so wearied today and cutting myself by peeling-

Wait what how did I even cut myself peeling an apple with a knife bad luck bad luck what is with this line it keeps jumping around and what was Mab saying? “Ar eyoua Llright?” What kind of made up language was that wait isn’t all language made up-

I regained consciousness, unfortunately, right before my turn on stage. My head hurt, the sun was too bright, and the world was much too loud. I shall never drink coffee again so long as I live; somehow, I’ve sleep-waited in line. I’m next.

*Miki; Miki, I’m so sorry.*

“Miss? Miss Vinsmoke? Are you competing?” one of the judges asked.

I snapped back to reality.

“Miss?!”

“Yes! Yes, sorry; I am competing,” I said as I walked up to the table and the impatient judges.

A *Nokken man* and a *Demon woman* are seated across the table from me; both wear a badge that designates them as official judges of the WWB. An alchemist holding a smoking black flask was the
obvious taste-tester; and from the annoyed looks on all three faces, they had likely rolled snake-eyes on running this preliminary, though the Nokken is at least pretending to be friendly.

“Please present your signed acceptance form and be quick about it. We already have more competitors than we were supposed to,” said the Demon woman before turning to the Nokken man. “Honestly, the semifinal tryouts were far too generous this run.”

“Well, that is why we’re out here. Reduce the number to a manageable level,” the Nokken said, barely looking at me. “You’ve already turned away nearly half the applicants; now we have less than the expected hundred.”

“Just makes our job easier in the next round of cuts.”

“As you say- I say, miss!”

I’ve taken my knit hat off and put it on the table.

The Demon glares daggers. “I said present your acceptance form, not your hat. What’s wrong with your hair?”

“I had my form wrapped into my hair so that I couldn’t easily lose it.”

The Demon sneered as she took my chin in a surprisingly delicate grip and examined my hair. “Your acceptance form is illegible. Thank you for wasting my- our- time. Please try again next run.”

“Bullshit. You didn’t have to take this job; and your bad attitude will not stop me from competing. Just because you don’t want to be here doesn’t mean I don’t,” I said, because I’ve been expecting something like this and I am more than ready to die.

The Demon rolled her eyes and said slowly and loudly, like I’m stupid, “I cannot read your shitty acceptance form; made up scribbles do not constitute written language.”

“Historically speaking, yes, they fucking do,” the Nokken said. “Further, your elitist bullshit concerning High Demonic and the various syllabaric languages cost us no less than two hundred perfectly fuckin’ good applicants and nearly ruined our credibility. You might not be able to read it, but it is perfectly readable, and correctly filled out. Let’s see what she can do.”

The Demon scowled at the Nokken. “If it was up to you, all of the fucking World would be competing. Our job is to narrow it down to the top ten, and that means some people go the fuck home. This form is so covered in hair gel and sweat that I can barely stand the fucking smell of it, much less fucking read it, fuck. The spots on her face are clearly from where ink has rubbed off. If a person can’t even correctly fill out a form, then they don’t deserve to fucking compete. It has to be unanimous between us to allow her in, and I say Fuck No.”

“And I say, Let Her Bake,” a new voice said.

The Demon turned her anger on the new Demon, then blanched at the look she got back.

“S-ser Vinsmoke, I didn’t-”
“Think I’d be walking the grounds of my own fuckin’ competition?” Ser Vinsmoke asked. Wait-

I looked at Ser Vinsmoke. He’s a big Demon man, with a face identical to Chef’s but the suit is charcoal grey with deep black pinstriping and a bright red silk scarf over his shoulders but not wrapped around his neck- silk, maybe. His tie is a full windsor knot, and his shoes had an aggressively white saddle- with just a peep of a black sock with some kind of berry on it. Not quite a squidberry, it’s plumper than that… Plain white pocket square- I think his suit is of the same kind as Chef’s, just… different styling, maybe? Three pieces? His eyes were a clear blue-green, set in a face that is truly identical to Chef’s, but the facial hair is different, and the hair is a bit curlier. His eyebrows swirl the same way mine do, and his shirt isn’t so starkly white- there’s a red stripe to it, and his vest is a glossy black with a red tint. His hair’s a paler blonde than Chef’s, with a soft red tint to it; another difference. Curly hair, long in front; not like Chef’s at all, that’s how I know he’s not Chef… Mostly, the way he holds his head high- that tight smile; that’s what projects his authority, better than clothes and words.

“N-no,” the Demon woman squeaked. “It’s just… with the chairholder meeting about to start-”

“Pff, please, like I’d want to be stuck in a room with those fuckers for longer than I fuckin have to, hell’s blood. Most of them only care about maximizing profits or keeping the ‘wrong sort’ out, which is not what this competition is fuckin’ for,” Ser Vinsmoke said, before turning to me. “You’ve a strange aura about you; I’m curious to see you bake, fuck.”

I nod, and pull my application out of my hair and hand it in and put my hat back on. The two judges rapidly set up the station for testing. This is it. It’s time to see if my Bad Baking is enough to take me into the top ten of the WWB.

I look at the table in front of me. A bowl of flour with a spoon, a cup of milk, a cup of sugar, an egg, and a stick of butter are laid out. I look up at the judges.

“Combine the ingredients in whatever order you wish, coz, fuck,” Ser Vinsmoke said, giving me a surprisingly friendly, and so far as I can tell, genuine smile. “Whenever you’re fuckin’ ready.”

I’m not ready. I’m not sure I could ever be ready for this. Not after what happened at the semi-finals. I really hope nothing tries to kill me this time.

I lift my hand, taking a deep breath; and, caffeine still coursing through my body, reach out and touch the spoon with shaking fingers.

The effect is immediate.
The gentle cold breeze that had been flinging stinging bits of snow into people's faces moments before stopped dead. The background noise of a crowded fairground faded away. Birds took to the air, squirrels vanished into the trees, a gaggle of geese that had been harrassing a toddler decided now was the time to cuddle it and safeguard it from danger. The sunlight brightened as if a dirty window had been cleaned in the sky, then all but vanished as if someone threw a wet blanket over the sun. The world was silent but for my breathing and the beating of my heart.

The judges shot out of their chairs and retreated a full three paces. Their eyes had widened as they fought against their primal instincts telling them to run. Ser Vinsmoke seemed interested and unafraid.

I took a hard breath, and began. I would finish what I had started. I took my trembling hand off the spoon, grabbed the cup of milk, and then poured it into the flour. The milk curdled midpour, blackening in the bowl. It began to bubble and emit thin wisps of foul smelling smoke. I ignore the smell as best I can as I take the spoon again and stir the horrifying mixture. My eyes burn from the acrid smoke and tears begin to drip into the bowl. Finally, I can take no more and step away from the bowl to attend the remaining ingredients.

I coughed as thick black clouds of smoke rose from the bowl. The clouds pooled and spread in the sky above, turning the already darkened world to twilight and fearful shade. Red lights crackle within the clouds above as they rumble ominously. The winds howled their return, no longer the gentle prankster's breeze from before but wolves baying for blood. The mixture stopped smoking. It was ready for the next ingredient.

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The cup of sugar shook in my hand as I poured it into the bowl. I set the cup down and was about to reach for the spoon when I felt my skin prickle, my very slime quivering. A cackling bolt of red lightning streaked down through the sky and struck the mixture. I shut my eyes and clamped my hands over my ears, curling and rolling with the impact. The flash of light had torn my vision in two, and when I staggered back to a standing daze, it was to see the shattered bowl and the sugar bubbling with red crackles and turning brown then black and the egg a smear of yolk and yuck and powdered shell and the butter molten and burning before me.

The clouds woke and in their fury poured more red lightning into the field around us. The winds howled and screamed, savaging banners and flags and hats. I pulled the ties on my hat out from inside it, and tied it down to my head.

“What you done, fuck?” asked the Demon woman next to me but she sounded so far away. The Demon woman stared at me, eyes wide with fear. “This can’t be real!” she shouted over the wind. “Please tell me this isn’t real!”

“Don’t be a fool!” I shouted back. “This is real as fuckin’ hell and twice as dangerous!”

The forces of the Enemy were too much, and the table collapsed in on itself. The wood splintered and shattered, reducing the table into so much sawdust. The dark mixture seeped into the newly thawed earth. Grass and flowers just sprouted from betwixt Winter’s death-cold fingers died as the circle of corruption spread. The judges backed further away, afraid of what would happen if they touched the black dirt. Ser Vinsmoke smiled.
The circle stopped growing after a few feet, and then the ground began to rumble. Thick black vines burst from the ruined earth. The vines twisted around the circle as sharp thorns and blood-colored sap grew and oozed from them. The wind stopped. The clouds broke open to reveal a single beam of blazing sunlight.

We all stare at the thorn patch. In the center, in the dark green heart of the deadly tangle, there grows a single red rose, from bud to blossom before our very eyes. My breath catches as I look into the rose, and tears run down my face again. I hadn’t known that much beauty could exist all at once.

After only a few moments of life, the rose wilted, dropping it’s petals to the ground and leaving a single rosehip behind. The vines wilted too, thorns crumbling to dust and sturdy tangle withering to crackling brush. I reached out and plucked the rosehip as sound returned to the world, but the judges and the alchemist and Ser Vinsmoke were all silent.

I put the rosehip on the only surviving plate, and presented it to the taste tester. The Alchemist took it, took a small lick, and bolted to the nearby ditch. I turned away as he began puking. The judges were entirely silent, as was I; our silence was broken by Ser Vinsmokes quiet “Well fucking done, cousin.”

He turned to me and spoke loud and clear. “I’ve seen people- men, mostly- with your particular condition enter this competition before. I’m pleased to say that you are the first that has not only my interest, but my full attention. Don’t consider my regard as a measure of ease, moving forwards; put this many bad bakers together in one place, and strange happenings become the norm. I do think that with determination and luck, you will be quite a sight to see- after all, this competition is a stage, and you are the star of your show. It’s not about winning; it’s about making something… memorable,” said Ser Vinsmoke, with a strange smile playing around his mouth.

“Enter her into the finals,” he said to the judges. “She’s proven herself capable. I’m off to lunch-Brother, shall you join me?”

“I’d be fuckin’ delighted, shithead,” said Chef with only the slightest gritting of teeth.

“You too, coz; we hardly know each other, after all,” said Ser Vinsmoke with a smile.

“Ser, I must protest!” said the Demon woman. “It takes a unanimous vote of the judges panel to let an entrant skip the preliminary rounds, and there are only two of us here-”

“Then find the other judges and tell them that I told you to make the vote unanimous for the young woman,” said Ser Vinsmoke without breaking eye contact with Chef… Vinsmoke.

Oh.

Oh dear.

I locked eyes with the Demon and then the Nokken, who could feel the tension ratcheting higher and higher into the air. On the bright side, I’m in the finals; good thing too, as I’m probably never going to be able to do that again in my life. I’ll have to try and pace myself in Germa Kingdom; making it through the quarter-finals only to have nothing left for the semifinals, let alone the final round, would be disastrous.
The Nokken said something.

“Your pardon- could you repeat that, please?” I asked.

“What’s your name, miss?” said the Nokken with a surprisingly hungry look on his narrow face.

“Me?” I scoffed. “I’m Vinsmoke Deborah, the Crimson Tide. Fuckin’ problem with that?”
Fuckin' Degens

I know I’m supposed to be paying attention to the subtext or fuck even the text of the conversation Chef is having with Ser but the caffeine is still playing merry hell with my body and mind and part of the after action processing in the semi-semi finals what the fuck level even is this I don’t understand anything that’s going on right now but a crow just knocked a decorative vase over and it broke my typewriter and ruined my after-action report and I can’t- I don’t-

Beatrix?

“I’m going to fix this,”

“...How?”

“Trust me,”

So as I cry I start to smell a chemical reek and my sister Beatrix is crushing some sort of pill in a mortar and a percolator is perking and I can see a big bottle of Black Tonic Water and she just pours the Tonic into a pot and she adds the powder and she adds the coffee and she adds gunpowder tea and she adds faesh coffee ground fine as dust and she starts stirring and chanting and stirring and the pot steams and she adds an entire one pound bag of sugar and she stirs some more and then she ladled me out a cupful and I drank it and before I drank it I said “nobody lives forever” and she points me at a new typewriter and then I am signing my name to the bottom of a stack of pages and I am walking at a fast clip down the street.

My teeth hurt from chattering and my nose hurts from the cold and my head hurts from the coffee and I want I want something to eat I want something to chew on and I am so very AWAKE I may never sleep again this is problematic and also my very limited precience is starting to kick at me because every daughter of Vinsmoke Aquila was born with some measure of Sight and Fernanda got the most of it and Beatrix has the least so I think she couldn’t possibly know what her actions well meant and very helpful would wrought would wring excuse me upon this earth I’ve got a small scoupon a small teaspoon of Sight and I can usually see what’s edible and what’s only edible once and have you ever had to sit at the same table as two people trying to not start a fight but every twist of phrase and turn and gesture just digs a knife deeper into some conversation you’re not a part of and I’m asking for myself because that is what I’m barely sitting through right now I get up and leave the table and Chef and Ser both stand with me and then I’m quick stepping out the door and pacing up and down the street.

I walk too and fro and too and fro I can’t feel my face and I just want to rest bad baking takes a lot out of a person and I just want a nap but that’s not happening and hello Adelaide “Beatrix told me what she did so I’m spending the rest of the day with you” that’s very kind of you didn’t you have other things to do today “nothing so important it can’t be done later and maybe you can help me too” oh how can I help you “I need a new style” I see what’s wrong with the one you have now “it’s plain and ugly and boring and I want a change” do you have any direction to go in or “or” okay how
about cheerleaders because you need to be able to move right and you always like wearing clothing that shows off the flowing movements of your Art I remember “I don’t want to look like a schoolgirl I want to look like a woman” okay how about a swing dress I saw one the other day and thought of you instantly so maybe that would work “lets go check it out oh hey Sanji, someone I don’t know” but I didn’t stay and relisten to introductions I was moving down the street towards the dress I had seen that reminded me of Adelaide.

I had not remembered the train I took to get there until after I got to the station and then Ser Vinsmoke was there and he said “My bodyguard will throw an absolute fuckin’ shit fit if I take regular public transportation, but it takes like half a-fuckin’ hour to change cars on a train so I guess we’re taking public transportation” and then I had a ticket because Chef was the only one of us who actually brought cash money except Adelaide has my savings and her savings but no she shouldn’t open those in public those are our actual life savings because banks weren’t trustworthy where we lived and riding the bus across town with my pay to a bank would be a terrible plan and Adelaide doesn’t even carry a wallet or pocketbook much less a purse and maybe that should be part of her new look I mean I like having money on me when I want it and having money floating around my bag or my skirts is terrible that’s why I always have a coin purse or wallet but the Enemy doesn’t like money so I left it at home.

There’s a store on this train like a store for people who forgot things they needed at home or planned to buy what they wanted on this trip and I can see a **coin purse wallet** that would be perfect for Adelaide she doesn’t actually like wearing blue all day every day and CLEAVER.

“You can’t just buy every knife you like, Deb,”

“Fuckin’ watch me, Adel,”

“Hmm. How much is it, and does you has ones you likes more betters?”

“Uh- says 1400Ƀ, and I don’t have a cleaver that size at all, I always used my Giant Carver which is not meant for going through bone like that is, it’s a slicing carving knife-”

“Okay, so long as you’re sure,”

“Yes!”

CLEAVER CLEAVER CLEAVER I don’t know why I like knives the way I do but I do I am to use a whiteman expression flabbergasted because there’s a whole fucking bank in this train like what the fuck I no this was here I just didn’t care-

“Yes Deborah?”

“Should I have a bank account, Chef?”

“Um. Yes, you should- do you not already?”
“No, we don’t- which bank do the Vinsmokes even use-”

“This one on the train is a branch of the bank the Vinsmokes use, but you should probably be sober when you open your account, coz,”

“Oh. Adelaide?”

“Yeah, fine,“

I blink, and my head hurts, and Chef and Ser are both looking at me strangely and- oh, right, they don’t know.

“Cece’s the oldest; I’m youngest,”

Now they’re flabbergasted, stupid fucking whitemen. No understanding of spectra at all.

I need a drink- not coffee, if I see another cuppa I might actually puke; I want… herbal tea, maybe. Something to get this taste out of my mouth and rehydrate. Ugh, my head...

So here’s the thing about Adelaide that’s kinda hard to realize when you don’t know her as your sister. Adelaide isn’t good at academics- which is not to say that she’s not good at learning, or even not smart; she’s not good at book learning. Her whole life is lived very much in her body- and Mom seemed to understand that very early on.

Adelaide got a choice: Sports, Dance, or Martial Arts. She had to pick two, as she just- she used to go everywhere at a dead run, okay? Like. Sports, Dance, or Martial Arts. Adelaide tried all three, but she fell in love with Martial Arts- she’s an excellent soccer player, and she can probably still waltz if she has to, but she’s a journeyman master in Coral Palm Fishman Karate, and you don’t get that good without love and discipline driving you on. More importantly, she’s not using any kind of magic, and there’s no trick to what she does.

I can do what she does, at a much reduced level- anyone could, really.

Adelaide just straight up beats punk ass bitches down.

“Catch these hands” is the only name she’s ever needed for an attack, and honestly? I can respect that. Unfortunately, that also means her standard response to confusion and uncertainty is punching. Punching, while useful- and she’s very good at it too, no question there- is not always the answer.

I know why she’s here, with me, instead of Beatrix. Beatrix may have made the potion for me but Adelaide is the only one of my sisters who can stop me cold every time without killing me outright, or even severely injuring me. It’s because of Drownies- it always comes back to them.

Here’s the thing- Drownies aren’t Kappa and they aren’t Merrow, and not because of anything physical but because there are some things that get you… thrown away, thrown out, outcast; but when those things are magical in nature, not the breaking of social mores…
Women’s work isn’t supposed to be done by a girl; but there was no one else to do it. And I can’t drown. I swam with the ships that held my stolen brethren; in my song was the taste of metal, the hundred colors of darkness, the loving kiss of death. Come here, I said; come here to me.

Kappa say that Drownies are those who fall to the blood-waters, to the thick promise of vengeance, and when they rise again they are not friends to any living thing. Forever cold and forever lost to the darkness, dragging those around them down, down, down to make you ugly like they are. The unquiet dead; singing songs in the darkness below the sea, killing all who would sail it’s waters.

Merrow don’t say much of anything about Drownies.

I say- something had to be done. They stole five full classes of schoolchildren, and no one cared. The truth is, when a ship’s crew fears the sea, that fear makes them easy to slaughter. To hear a Drowniesong then is a death sentence, because men who have not… sinned, against the sea; they do not fear her. Most men jump in when they hear the song and then their blood turns the waves crimson-red. The worst of them have a strong will, and resist the urge to jump ship.

In that case, a woman’s business becomes… my appellation, in the language of my mother, is something like “Righteous Evildoer”. That’s what Crimson Tide means, metaphorically- well, there are, mmph, connotations of vengeance and score-settling; of inevitable slaughter and terrible, just, death…

Now that’s something that only Merrow really… conceptualize? Consider? The logic is as follows- those gods that require blood sacrifice are not, technically speaking, alive. Only the living bleed; and the Faesh Gods require blood because they aren’t alive at all, they’re… so far as I can tell, and this isn’t my area of expertise, but so far as I can tell the Faesh gods are… above. More than.

The Gods of the Merrow- even the Daemonic Gods- are Less. So. If something can bleed, it can die; and the gods of the Merrow can bleed; and the gods of the Demons can bleed; and so they can die. There are some stipulations, however. For the Merrow, it’s very simple- a god dies heroically, or as a matter of justice. As for how those terms are defined- heroic, or just- broad, mysterious, and on a case by case basis is the least of it. You can kill a demon god by being a champion of good; a god can die a martyr against the forces of evil. Just; Heroic.

So far as I can tell, Demons have five kinds of death- Heroic, Just, Merciful, Senseless, and Cruel. Each pantheon of the Dae portains to a certain kind of death… and that’s about all I know.

Drownies exist because the Merrow don’t have any gods of the Sea anymore- we cast her out, and we do not pray to her, and we do not speak her name; she is forever diminished in our sight. She was the one who told the pirates how to find our homeland; she was the one who brought the Kappa to our forests and turned them bone white. The closest we’ve got to a deity of the Sea nowadays is the Fathomking, and there’s one of those for every body of water evil was done in. It is said, in the course of duty, a Drownie looks like a waterlogged corpse; and it is said that Drownies sometimes commune with the living world peacefully when negotiating or in the Hold of the Fathomking.

The truth is… I can’t say what the truth is.

It’s never so simple as a story.

So… the closest analogue for Tea was an after school snack- half a sandwich and some milk, an
apple and a pear and a slice of watermelon, leftover short ribs and a half-pot of black tea. I’d never really had tiny dainties meant for eating with a variety of teas before, and I’m not sure I like it now.

“Sorry to interrupt your thoughts, Coz, but- back at the competition, you called yourself the Crimson Tide. A name like that- you can’t just take it.”

“You want the story of my Name, Elder Cousin?”

“If you don’t mind, of course,”

“Of course,”

And so, as Chef orders a gravlax pizza and a big pot of black tea, I explain my name. First came my unforgivness; then, my sinking of the slavers; and lastly, What I Did to That Woman that Hurt My Friend.

When Ellie tells the story, she says something like “she who was raped cut the head of her rapist off and flung it into the fountain at their village’s square and proclaimed that no man would ever again besmirch her honor.” That’s a fancy, sweet-hearted lie, though- the truth is that Miki killed himself, and the horror of his choice- trying to figure out why he chose to cut his wrists and not his hair, why, why did he do that-

That choice that my friend made without me, well. It left it’s mark on more than just him alone. And I have more than enough blood and vinegar and rage for all my sisters and my sister’s friends and Miki, Miki I’m so sorry.

I’m sure there are those of a ghoulish persuasion that want to know what it’s like to cut off a man’s head and throw it in a fountain; they want to know perhaps the metal smell of blood and the color of bone when that blood runs dry, they want to know the weight of it which is about ten to eleven pounds, flesh and bone and all- or maybe they want to remember the arc of it through the air, the smell of piss and shit as the bowels voided the last bits of life from a worthless sinner.

Fun isn’t something one considers when taking up a duty, but that last, which earned for me my name- that did put a smile on my face.

Finally, I explain what a red tide is, and why my color is crimson.

A red tide is an algae bloom that gets out of hand. Algae, drifting through the ocean…

“What are al-gee?”

“Uh- I guess you can’t see down that small. They’re plants, essentially- tiny, tiny plants. Some of
them look like, um, snowflakes and seashells all at once; and others can sort of swim. They’re the essential backbone of the oceanic foodweb, providing tiny little fish the nutrients and getting rid of big-fishes waste. However, when algae are supplied with too much nutrient, they multiply uncontrollably, and become a red tide which smothers nearby ocean life.

“It’s usually runoff from farms and slaughterhouses that does it- that’s why the zoning laws are so strict, you know? And because they’re plants, basically, they produce high amounts of oxygen, which makes the bacteria and little animals that eat them multiply too, and then there’s no oxygen at all- the water goes dead. For about two weeks after that, everything in that area dies too- fish, everything that eats those fish, turtles, and birds. The algae that turns the water red also produces toxins- usually neurotoxin, if that matters.

“It outright kills manatees and dolphins- the water, and the air for a good meter above the water, all of it is poisoned. Us Sea-people are a little tougher- even then, if you swim the wrong way through a dead zone...”

“You can breathe the poisoned waters?”

“I can’t, actually. What I can do is switch to anaerobic metabolysis, which will save me for a time- but the longer I do that, the worse it is. I have to breathe all that shit out eventually- and it smells nasty. Everything that lives through a red tide is poisoned too; shellfish, especially. I… the best poison I can compare it to, on the surface, is strychnine, and that’s rat poison,”

“So you’re called Crimson Tide because-”

“Because of my orangey-red legs, and because of my habit of leaving ship wreckage and corpses floating in the harbor all through the heavy slaving season, yeah,”

“Orangey-red legs...?”

I blink at my cousin Ichiji, and drink some water. It’s warm enough- and Adelaide just came back with a pair of clear ankle boots with pink lacing and pink soles, and they’re my size... I hike my skirt and unlatch my garter clips from my socks, and then I peel them away. My legs wriggle happily. One curls around and helps me slip out of the entire garter belt- I really don’t like them, but they do keep my socks looking nice... maybe tights?

Then I put on a pair of see-through socks, and my new boots, and I realize that Ichiji has turned a bright lobstery red and is staring very pointedly at the ceiling of the train. Chef is trying so hard not to laugh I almost thought he was choking.

“Something wrong, Cousin?”

“Nnnnoo, I just… it’s. Improper? To look at a lady’s legs without permission.”

“You can look at my legs. I have eight of them,”

“Wait wha-?”

And then, for the first time in my life, I strike a man speechless without using a knife.
After a long drawn out quiet, I wriggle my legs in the cool air of the train compartment and pull on my see-through socks; and then I pour my legs into my nice new boots.

I suppose I oughta describe the compartment. It’s a small room with two long benches facing each other; there’s a little table at the end under the window and a small door leading to a corridor. When the tea arrives, while Ichiji mulls over the sudden realization of innumerable legs (I only have eight, though), Sanji pulls a leaf out from somewhere and the table is suddenly large enough for all four of us, and the tea service.

I’m working on my third slice of pizza when Ichiji pulls himself together.

“Apologies for my silence, fuck. Er- Miss Adelaide, how did your treating with the bank go?”

“Well, uh. I didn’t know starting a bank account was as simple as saying “I’d like to start a bank account” and having some money to deposit. Uh. I have a checkbook, a balance book, a charge card, and petty cash now? You do too, sis, I opened one in your name-”

“Uh. Thank you?”

“Mm. That’s where most of your savings are, natch,“

“Oh! Thank you! Wait fuck-”

“Yeah, we need pocketbooks now; coin purses, too,”

“Noooough-”

“Yeah, you’ve gots alls thats money shits, plus your throwings knives, plus thats cleaver, plus whatevers herbs and spices you come across you wants to eat later, plus your emergency stashes of herbs and spices, plus-”

“Okay, okay, fuck. Pretty ones are so expensive though!”

“I knows; still, it’s a necessaries expense,”

“Uuuugh. And it’s not like we can just get black ones, Mom forbid funerary colors and there’s no one else we know who’s dead-”

“Yeah, peoples who wears black when no ones personally deads are total drags to bes arounds, fuck,”

“I don’t wear black all the time!” yelps Sanji.

“It’s a religious thing- wait, you don’t?” said Ichiji.

“Oh, right, you were sick- yeah, I got myself kicked out of Temple School right before I ran off, and I had been having doubts in the Faith before that for obvious reasons, and I just… don’t wear black all the time,”
“...What the hell did you do to get kicked out of Temple School, Snooj? Because if inviting the entire Forest Court to Cousin Hilda’s blessing ceremony didn’t do it—”

“Heretical Victorious Play, with the added bonus of I actually wrote it,”

“...Go on,”

“Alright, so, firstly, you remember how I was always hiding in the library?”

“Looking back, it was an excellent strategy- particularly because our brand of stupidity was absolutely Not Allowed anywhere near all those books,”

“Right, so, uh- this is how our Daemonic Temple had me, a nice Fae boy, rewrite their Victorious Play and inadvertently got the province hooked on 3rd era Agnonostic heresies,”

“You’re Fae? Since when?”

“Since I got married- by Her laws and ours, we are one flesh under the gods, and the Faetheon outrank the Daemonia by about… four thousand years of recorded history? Anyway- our youth group leader had decided that the Victory Week play they did yearly was stale, and needed a little spicing up. I had just done a production of- uh, something...”

“The Four Kings of Hell and The Queen Who Ruled Them—”

“Ah, yes. My second try. Anyway, I had helped do staging and rewrites for Four King Hell Queen, you know, making the sex merely suggestive when it’s right there in the text so’s we didn’t get arrested by the Moral Authority Officers, figuring out how to have a man turn into a flock of poison-feather birds without getting anyone killed, normal stage stuff... so the nicest nun ever, Sister Olga of the Radiant Blade, she asked me to do this thing for the Temple, please Prince Sanji,”

“Oh fuck,”

“Mistake number one. Relevant backstory for you two young ladies- the five of us, Ichijun, Nooj, myself, Yargle, and the lovely—”

“-and ever furious—”

“Ghostface Killer-dilla, were enrolled in Theologics almost before we could reasonably speak, in the vain hope that we’d turn out devout Demons. Ichi was kicked out for asking too many complicated and very logical questions; Nooj...”

“He straight up became a heretic and joined the Joculators, before running away to the Circus,”

“Really? Good for him. I was increasingly outrageous- as for Yarg and Ghostface...”

“Yarg became a Maena; and Ghostilla is... so far as we can tell, she’s become an actual philosopher. She lives in a large clay pot somewhere in the Germa Fleet, and has so far evaded all attempts at arrest,”

“Anyway. Apparently, everyone had forgotten that I was the one to personally and correctly write and address the multitude of invitations that got the Forest Court to attend my Cousin Hilda’s blessing ceremony, in blatant and direct violation of several thousand years of tradition. I was the one who wanted to give employment and education and health services to the poor, not merely alms; I was the one who had serious inquiries to the nature of the Gods divinity, and was ten-thousand percent willing to backup my questions with a blade; yes, YES, t’was I that set the blaze! Ahem,”
“Snooj you dramatic shithead,”

“I was told to write a series of monologues from the perspective of different characters present for the Great Victory of Udoroth: Kostcheki the Deathless, The Queen Morgan, Scratch the beloved Page, Calypso the Bearer of Waters, Cu Chulainn, The Prince with a Thousand Enemies, The Bereaved Crows, and Jellicent the Betrayer. This was also about the same time I heard the entirety of ‘The Lesser Key of Hell’ and whoo, did I have some thoughts. I was also voraciously reading Agononostic Gospels, Daemonic archaeology and archaeo-sociologic texts and reports, all kinds of stuff. This is not exactly going to produce a good, proscribed, super legal Demonic script. So, not wanting to get anyone arrested or even worse- killed- I ask the nice nun if there’s any guidelines I should adhere to maybe?”

“Read: How far can I go with this before someone calls the Morau?”

“She told me, ‘Just write something really engaging, mi’lord. Make them feel like understandable people. You’re a good writer; I’m sure you’ll think of something.’ That was the second mistake,”

“Holy fuck she actually said that?”

“Yes she did. Anyway, I was stoked high and burning hot, all of nine years old and ready to get to work. I went to the library; read all kinds of sources and gospels that didn’t make it into the canon. I read all kinds of things, did actual studies in modern psychology and, uh-”

“Why Does He Do That?”

“Yeah, that was one hell of a find, I tell you what. Anyway- I did my research, made my notes. And then I started writing.

“Koschei the Deathless was an abusive, controlling monster; and when his foster son fought the Leviathan, all that was needed was a single moment of aid. Kostecki refused- because his rebellious son represented a threat to him, because his authority had to be absolute in order to repress the zealots trying to revolt against the Emperor of the Others at the time, Condemnation.

“The Queen Morgan was co-suffering with her husband, vicariously experiencing the agony of Demonic Victory only without the stasis of Abduction. She was a living martyr, an unending reminder of the necessary evil required to free the world of the suffering of tyranny; and she redeemed the world created by suffering in it, and with it, and not leaving it behind.

“Scratch was in love with Udoroth. Full-out romantically in love with Udoroth. Wanted to kiss his wounds and let the spirit transcend the flesh that had betrayed them all; took up Udoroth’s mantel instead, and helped slay Kostecki when the time came, tricking the Demons into their unending faith.

“Calypso the Bearer of Waters was a converted priestess of the Sea; she was the sacred vessel carrying the faith in Udoroth’s return, unwilling to flee from the war or the reconstruction. She was the embodiment of the Femme Divine, unafraid of death or toil.

“Cu Chulainn, peer to Udoroth; he was one of the few people who really understood Him, and was His genuine friend, and was said to mourn Him forever after. A bro, really; and one hell of a wingman, according to some of the heresies I was absolutely not old enough to be reading.

“The Prince with a Thousand Enemies, peer to Udoroth, was a sobbing, miserable coward- brilliant as the sun. He made the Compass that would find Kostecki’s palace, hidden Between the World and the Would; he had foreseen the war that would take his friend, and that only a betrayal of that friend would create the circumstances that would allow the death of the Deathless,”
“The heart inside a crystal inside an egg inside a bird inside a chest inside a tree guarded by a dragon in a garden of a magical palace no one could find, excepting on certain impossible occasions,”

“All so. The Bereaved Crows- or Memorial Mob, I can’t remember—"

“Memorial Mob sounds more like you, Snooj,”

“Well. Udoroth did not achieve his great and terrible Victory alone; he took the generals Solitaire, Muktar, and Zaffire with him. Solitaire, of course, is a heavily debated figure in his own right- and I almost wrote a passage for him, but, hah, I couldn’t find enough credible sources for him. As for Muktar and Zaffire, they led what would become our family shinobi, back when they were just wild ninjas. The records of the Gravedust go back a long, long way- and they actually did have something to say about it. Basically, it amounted to ‘They followed our lord into battle, and fell. We mourn them forever; and we move on.’ Because of that, I made their part a dance sequence to some truly excellent lo-fi jazz ,”

“Yeah- until you said that, I didn’t realize that crazy fever dream I had was one hundred-thousand percent real. You know they still have dance parties to lo-fi jazz and hip-hop?”

“Really?”

“Ninjas of all ages like dancing,”

“And then there was Jellicent. I had to make the greatest traitor in Demonic literary canon, up there with Noland the Liar, Stealth Black, and Honey Bee, into someone human; relatable, understandable. That’s what the nice nun wanted of me,”

“Mistake number three;”

“I wrote Jellicent chosen by Udoroth to betray Udoroth as part of the great Victory. That Jellicent, like Morgan, was an outstretching of His great power. Udoroth knew what Victory would cost- because, of course, the Thousand Prince told him at the start of the war. And Jellicent was chosen to betray his Lord, because someone had to; without his betrayal, the War would not be won. Jellicent created victory with a scream.

“I admit, I took a bit from the Second Key to Hell; it ended with Jellicent being unable to cope with what his Lord had asked of him, thus killing himself and trusting that his Lord- when he returned- would understand, and forgive him of doing the terrible thing asked of him. I inadvertently wrote a Victory Play that fulfilled the promise of Glory with the death of Jellicent; making the creation of the Sword of Victory possible through sacred betrayal, and unending sacrifice,”

“...People who commit suicide don’t go to the Halls of Valor, nor the Valley of Rest,”

“No. They don’t. I’d read something about this somewhere in my research, y’know? It stuck with me. What I’d read was a 3rd Age Heresy that saw Jellicent as a savior of the Demons in his own right, destined to make Udoroth’s great Victory against the Leviathan possible. No one noticed.

“The nice nun was delighted- she’d never read a Victory Play more engaging. We went straight to rehearsals, and no one informed any of the monks. The guy who played Jellicent was amazing; holy madness and unending despair live onstage. We orchestrated it so well, too- we had lighting, and live accompaniment, and we even dug up some of the really old liturgical music. You know- ‘It Ain’t Fair’, and so on,”

“Where in the hell did you find that tuba player? Had iron lungs on ‘im, fuck,”
“The brass section was all clowns, Iji,”

“Not.”

“For true. So… there were three performances. One on the Saturday before War Week, one on Bone Friday, and one on Saturday the March the Battle. They were very nearly standing room only. People were raving about it; nobody had ever seen such a good Victory Play. People from other temples showed up; people who weren’t even Demons showed up. Another temple asked me to write a Victory play for them, just a little less Daemonic, please? And no one mentioned the Agononistic heresy of Jellicent being the ultimate Victorious by offering his own future salvation as guarantee for every other Demon there was and ever would be.

“I actually got very good at writing plays of all kinds, not just Victory plays. For example- were you aware that Mosh, when called by the Elders to become a prophet and lead the People from their chains, very nearly turned himself into a goat in defiance? He didn’t think he was enough for the job asked of him. Deborah- killed a general in his tent with a tent spike and her own two hands. Our cousin is named for her, I think.”

“...Coz, are you named for the-”

“Yes,”

“...Ah,”

“Anyway; by this point, I had spread Agonistic heresies across the entire fleet because no one had stopped me, and no one had taken any real notice,”

“Until they did,”

“Until they did, yes. The nice nun who’d asked me to write that first play got a letter from the archfiend asking why she was allowing the youth group to perform heresies for the entire district of the upper Hell, and did she know another district wanted to do it? So. Our Sire, and the district priest, and the Marshal, and the nun who started it all called me into the Hall of Judgement and asked me to explain how I’d written this play. In other words: Did I know I was spreading heresies?

“So I said: I just wanted to make it make sense why someone would betray someone they love and think is a God. If a God has to die to save the People, and that death had to be the Victory, and the Victory and the Death that would produce it was all foretold by another God, then why wasn’t obeying the strictures of fate a holy act- Sister said to make it understandable to anyone!

“And so, I did.

“This was when I was told very firmly by both Himself, and the priest- the sister and the Marshall were both quite silent on the matter- that my Victory Play needed to be rewritten for next year. The Marshall even had a letter from the archfiend- a list of heresies I’d need to excise from all future versions of the Victory play.

“Now, girls, understand- I am an evil-minded shithead on the nicest of occasions; in this moment, I knew exactly how to get myself kicked right out of Temple School for good. They said to excise all the heresies on the list? Fine. I had a whole sheaf of notes of heresy and hearsay that was just as plausible, just as engaging- but for reasons of fame, I’d gone with those now barred. What followed was a full year of revision, and then my Victory play was put on again- this time with every fitting heresy except those listed by the archfiend, as requested. I made sure to tell the temple goers this as well, in the introduction to the play. I certainly removed those heresies the archfiend was so kind as
to inform me of; and they would not appear in the play to come, of course.”

“She Hells Bells, Snooj,”

“They certainly couldn’t keep me in the Temple after that; certainly not after I asked so very many questions and in such prose. I don’t know what happened after that; I was asked firmly to leave and not come back. And the next year.”

“The Victory Play was a goddamn disgrace!”

“Yeah, apparently people kept calling about the Good Victory Play from Last Year, and the Really Good One from The Year Before; and lots of districters went to the Mortis Cult Grounds or the Faesh Songhouses to see them. The pri-fiend, shit, sorry, the title is fiend; the fiend had to send out a strongly worded letter telling districters not to go to any of my Victory Plays because they were heresy and would endanger their immortal souls and their entrance into all the Hells. That was when Grandmere stopped hoping I’d become Daemonic, and contented herself with me being merely a Demon. Honestly…”

“She yet lives,”

“Do you suppose she’ll be relieved that I’ve converted to Faesh Songstering? I can’t infect any more districts with my artistically compelling Agnostic heresy,”

“I… Snooj. Sanji… I think a bit more Agnostic heresy would do the People some good,”

“Ichiji?”

“...I know you and He don’t get on, b-but- lupus!”

“…”

“Lupus can present as schizophrenia; in Demons, early indication of schizophrenia is characterized by abuse of family and friends. We started rolling lupus screenings a few years ago, and we of Vinsmoke got the vaccines as, as examples… and it was like night and day, Snooj. Like night and day. He’s not the same man,”

“…”

“Don’t the Fae say a man is always worthy of forgiveness should he do wrong?”

“Yes. But it is not required that he be forgiven. Let the past go, yes yes; let him be a part of my life yes, sure- that would be very noble, very... kind.

“I am not that man.

“If you wish to remain something like a friend, do not speak to me of this again,”

I’ve never heard Chef talk like that before. There was a kind of rumbling finality in his voice; an authority I could not disobey. Ichiji’s jaw bulged with clenching muscles and his lips turned bright white from being pressed together and I could see clearer than ever that they are brothers and then he breathed out
and then he breathed

In

and visibly, painfully, begrudgingly, dropped the subject and picked another.

“...He is getting married again, soon. I’ve an invitation for you- your wife, your girls and boys, your whole crew. He would quite like to see you there, you know?”

“I’m sure he would,”

“And, um- she’s very nice, that He’s marrying. I’m to be coronated half a year after- so, ah,”

“Congratulations,”

“Thank you,”

“...Is our stepmother... cute?”

“Ah- well, she’s... actually, she might be smarter than Him?”

“...”

Goddamnit and it was going so well, too. Fuck. I don’t know what the hell keeps setting Chef off but... maybe he doesn’t either? Huh. I’m not the friendliest person, and I know it; neither is Adelaide, really, which makes it doubly ironic that we both have to work so closely with people in our professions. Mmph.

And here we are-

“Okay, mission two, finding that dress for you Adelaide,”

“Wait, what the fuck was missions one?”

“ Fucking getting here, Del, fuck,”

I stagger to my feet and out of the train and out of the station and walk at a brisk pace and stumble up a set of stairs and cross the bridge and here we are. Thrift Store, Bay-be.

There, underneath the marquee, because once it was a theatre, where once stood a ticket seller and a popcorn seller and a cigarette stand there now stands a legend in words writ in gold.

FOR LACHRIMOSE KALENDA, WHO DREAMED SINCE SHE WAS A CHILD OF
USING A BALLOON TO FLY; WHO IN 982 SPENT FOUR THOUSAND PENNIES OF HER CART-DRIVING MILK DELIVERY SALARIUM TO BUY SUPPLIES FOR SUCH A THING, INCLUDING ONE LAWN DECK CHAIR, FORTY TWO SILK BALL GOWNS, AND A FRIGHTENINGLY LARGE AMOUNT OF HELIUM GAS, WHICH SHE USED-AFTER STITCHING THE SILKIEST SILK PORTIONS OF THE BALLGOWNS INTO A LARGE BALLOON- TO INFLATE IT AND LIFT IT THUSLY, ARRANGING IT IN SUCH A RING AND WEB OF NETTING AROUND THE LAWN DECK CHAIR, A STURDY ALUMINIUM TYPE FROM THE PORTGAS MAIL-AWAY CATALOGUE, IN WHICH SHE LAUNCHED HERSELF ALONG WITH HER PELLET GUN AND WATER JUGS, A BALLAST OF SOME FOUR HUNDRED POUNDS, A THOUSAND FEET A MINUTE INTO THE BLUE FIRMAMENT WITH THE GOAL OF CLEARING THE MAPLE-LINE AND ASCENDING TO THE PEAK OF THE MOUNTAIN WHAT STANDS GUARD OVER OUR TOWN; WHO, AGAINST ALL ODDS AND NAYSAYERS FLEW, FROM THE ROOF OF AN OUTHOUSE IN THIS NEIGHBORHOOD IN OUR TUCKLEIGH EVERLASTING TO THE STONY SHORE OF MAPLE SWEET HARBOUR, AN IMPERFECT WOMAN ON AN IMPERFECT FLIGHT PATH WHO BROUGHT HER CAMERA AND TOOK BUT ONE PICTURE OF HER DAUGHTER SCREAMING IN JOY AT HER MOTHERS SKY-BOUND TRIUMPH, AND ANOTHER OF THE SUNRISE AT SEA, AND YET A THIRD OF HERSELF AND HER ARRESTING OFFICER WHOM SHE LATER MARRIED; WHO, UPON HER ARREST BY THE HARBOUR AUTHORITY (AND LATER, BELOVED HUSBAND,) WAS QUOTED THEN AND THERE AND HERE AND NOW AS SAYING:

‘A WOMAN CAN’T JUST SIT AROUND…’

The logo of the shop is a hot air balloon with a lawn chair instead of a basket. They sell pop guns and dresses and possibly sweater dresses with places for pop guns. And their selection of frilly nonsense dresses is exactly the kind of thing Adelaide always tries to talk herself out of but not today, not today, Hells Blood.

One of us better walk out of here happy or I may have to actually knife someone.

Shit, the last time Deb looked like that, she actually stabbed me. I guess I have to actually buy something now.

These dresses are absolutely the kind of thing I want to wear. Although… I don’t like tight sleeves, but this nearly see-through one is absolutely fantastic, it’s going home to my closet even if I never wear it. This lace one is the wrong nude, or I’d take it- ugh, no, I don’t like the lace pattern, nuts. Sometimes simple is better - this one would be good for wandering the harbor town. I don’t like the sleeves on this one, which is a pity- the embroidery on the sheer tulle is really nice.

Ah! I thought the crystals were just polka dots! Well, but there might be a wedding reception or some
such I need to go to- an evening event? Dammit, the sleeves- the whole thing, really, is much too tight; I really do like the embroidery, though. Oh gods, oh fuck me, I need it. Fuck.

Oh my god it's perfect. This is it, this is the dress; I get tired of wearing kimono, and this is so simple in comparison, and it hangs so loosely. It’s perfect.

Now I just need a pair of shoes I can wear anywhere and still fight in, and I’m done for the next five years. Hell yeah! Wait fuck now I need a pocket book; I ahve a bank account and money and none of these dresses have pockets worth a damn and you can’t always add pockets because it ruins the line of the dress and-

Deep breath. Release. There, on a coat rack, hanging artfully- a pocketbook maybe a half-tone darker than my new favorite dress, sized just right for my money and my spending money and maybe a novel, possibly also a small sandwich.

White shoes; demon women wear white as accent color, men wear black. The spectra denote personal birth order, and they are very strict about that, for some reason. I think we actually just picked the colors we liked best, and ignored the Rules about them- so, when I grab a pair of white shoes with bright blue flowers on, I ignore Ichiji’s raised eyebrow. One patch of black shouldn’t be that big a deal, I think.

I go and change into my new clothing; and I seriously think about selling off some of my old wardrobe, but… I should talk to Missus Mab about that first. My boots and jumpsuit get folded up into a paper bag, which Mister Sanji immediately takes from me so I don’t have to carry it. Weird flex, but okay.

Oh! Hey shit, we have money- and there’s an arcade right across from that hair salon! I know exactly what we should do next!

HOLY FUCK THEY HAVE TAIKO NO TATSUJIN HOLY FUCK THIS IS NOT A JOKE THIS IS NOT A FUCKING JOKE-

We can’t spend all our spending money on video games, Del, we have to get haircuts first! Yes, really! I know, we haven’t played it in ages but- no! Haircuts first!

Of all the arcade games in the world, there are only two that I’m good at. One of them is pinball- not pachinko, pinball- and the other is Taiko no Tatsujin. Adelaide likes Taiko no Tatsujin and DDR; I never got into dancing games, sadly.

I don’t know why I’ve kept my hair long for so long; I guess I was… trying to prove myself, somehow. I got a sweater to change into after my haircut- I hate the feeling of cut hair on my skin.

After our haircuts- Del’s is short, but mine is shorter- I changed into my new sweater dress and we went over to play at the Arcade and Sanji had to stick near the skee-ball and the hoops, you know the carnival games and so on. Ichiji convinced Sanji to play some sort of shooting game with him, which Sanji isn’t bad at, but… Ichiji is better.
Hm. Okay. I think I see the shape of the problem. Well- a problem.

“Ne- is there a two player versus mode on Taiko no Tatsujin, or-”

“If there isn’t, there’s always Buck Hunter-”

“Fair,”

Now, how to wrangle two grown ass men into a challenge against us at a game of our choosing… aha! Chirping! I catch Adelaide’s eye, nod over at Sanji and Ichiji, and then smirk. And then I start in on them both.

“You know, I think they’ll make some future paleontologist very famous when they discover their solid-bone skulls,”

“Pfft. I mean, really, dense doesn’t begins to covers it; people who gets close to eithers of ‘em gets trapped in their Event Horizons,”

“I won’t deny they have hidden depths but they’re less like the leviathan filled Sea and more like the lost sock compartment of the clothes drying machine,”

“I’m fairly sure that if I shouts directly into Ichiji’s ears canals, he’ds echoes,”

“I’m fairly sure that when Sanji describes his ancestry it sounds like a charcuterie board but in person he’s velveeta, grape jelly, and spam,”

“Some things ferments and improves with age, sis- wine, cheese, other things worth havings; all these twos did was decompose,”

“Who can blame them, really? Some people- gossips, not like us-”

“Of course-”

“-say that Ichiji slept his way to the top,”

“That’s bullshits!”

“I know, Ichiji is nowhere near the top,”

“Well, you know, some peoples say that whens Sanji left the Vinsmokes to bes a Morgans, he raised the average IQ of both families,”

“Goodness knows I won’t be going to Ichiji’s coronation; I’ve scheduled a root canal that day specifically so I won’t have to,”

“Golly- and I thought I’d at least sees Ichiji’s pieces actuallys wins at somethings today,”

“Pieces?”

“Ichiji, his frilly ascot, and the ha’walnut rattling rounds his skulls that he uses for a brains,”
“Maybe Sanji is better- after all, his inner machinations are a rotating pie display, not half of anything.”

Both men have turned away from the shooting game- something to do with ducks- and are now staring at myself and my sister. They are not amused.

“I loves what they’ve done with their hairs- getting it to comes outs of the nostrils like that must takes ages,”

“The tartness of their faces sours ripe grapes;”

“I means, they starteds at the bottoms and beens going downhill ever since,”

“If stupidity was painful, they’d be in agony,”

“Somedays they’ll finds themselves; and they’lls be sos disappointed…”

“I mean, really, any fool can shoot a gun-”

“1, 2- hey, look what we’ve got two of, sis-”

“But neither of them ever had the skill to beat a drum, more’s the pity,”

“Such a pitys,”

“Sad that they can’t handle being chirped at either, but what else can you expect from a pair a fuckin’ dial tones?”

Ichiji looks over at Sanji, who closed his eyes around ‘sours ripe grapes’, and says “We have to introduce them to Cousin Boris,” and Sanji opens his eyes and both his eyebrows go up and he says “Blast and damnation, not without a camera to catch the looks on their faces. Alright, girls- what’s the game?”

And Adelaide says “Taiko no Tatsujin; women versus men,”

And I say “Who’s Cousin Boris? Nevermind- let’s go,”

Enchanting and code have more in common than most people would think from the outside looking in. Video games are a branch of enchanting, after all; so is fiber art. There’s a reason Havij is my best friend, and it’s not just because she understands my little wierdies on a deep and intrinsic level. It takes a special kind of person to understand what you mean when you say “banana banana banana” in response to Miss Nami asking for the shopping list for your group, or yelling ‘bugfoot’ when you accidentally dial the Whitebeards on your Baby Den-Den which shouldn’t be possible and yet...; someone who giggles when you describe what you’re doing as ‘duck duck goose’ for when Franky is reviewing your projects and you really do know what you’re doing, actually, so you put in some
little wrongsies in the first two so he’ll leave the third one alone; and on and on and on. It’s a terribly
dangerous business, enchanting- about the most benign thing that can go wrong results in a fairly
violent explosion.

Finding someone to be your friend through that… it’s hard.

What I’m trying to say is I’ve been developing a rhythm game for several years now, and Havij has
started helping me play-test it. Rhythm games are tricky to make.

There are two issues; the most important one is how to make sure you interpret the player's input
correctly, so that they feel like they're being rewarded accurately, and the slightly less important one
is making sure that your graphics match the music, so that it looks like the notes/actions are
happening in sync with the music. The music itself is inconsequential- anything will work, honestly.

Because I’m an enchanter, I start with the second one: making sure the actions/graphics are matching
the music. My game is similar to Sitar Hero, or Devil Dancer Revolver: as the music plays, notes
come falling down the screen towards a "strum bar", and when they reach the bar, you're supposed
to press a key. Easy, right?

I could just use a function like this:

```javascript
renderNoteFallingDownScreen(id:int) {
    note[id].y = strumBar.y - (mySong.position - note[id].strumTime);
}
```

but everything rendered is wrong. The notes are jittery- stuttery- and when they do finally manage to
stutter their way down, it looks like they're hitting the bar about half a second behind the song,
especially during framerate dips. So what gives?

First of all, in almost all environments where you're playing back an audio file (or at least the
environments I've worked in: AS3, javascript, C#), it's very difficult to get a precise playhead
position for an audio file that updates at a reasonable rate (~60FPS). In a perfect world, if you traced
out the playhead/position of an audio file every frame, you would see something like this:

0, 17, 33, 50, 67, 83, 100, 117, 133…

But in the real world, the results are going to look something like this:

0,0,0,83,83,133,133,133,133,200,200...
Instead of giving you a smooth, consistent output, the playhead updates in steps. What you need to do is interpolate between those steps, which is exactly like interpolation in a multiplayer game.

The easiest way to do this is to keep track of the playhead position with your own variable, and automatically add time to that variable every frame.

There are bad ways to do it:

```javascript
everyFrame() {
    songTime += 1000/60; // 1000ms in a second, 60 frames per second
}
```

And slightly better ways to do it:

```javascript
songStarted() {
    previousFrameTime = getTimer();
}
```

```javascript
everyFrame() {
    songTime += getTimer() - previousFrameTime;
    previousFrameTime = getTimer();
}
```

// OR:

```javascript
songStarted() {
    startTime = getTimer();
}
```

```javascript
everyFrame() {
```
songTime = getTimer() - startTime;

However, all three of these methods are imperfect. Or, to be more precise, your audio playback method is likely to be imperfect. Either way, it means that eventually, your little songTime variable is going to get out of sync with the actual audio playhead. This is especially likely to happen if you're in an environment where the audio is likely to skip, buffer, or crash - like a slime game or a game that streams its music instead of playing from a file. It's also likely to start off with a slight delay because most audio playback routines hiccup at the very start of playback - especially if you're using MP3 files that have encoding data baked in, if you're reading the audio file from a slow hard drive, or if your gamer is using Chromeshell's built-in "flashpaper" plugin, which is a piece of shit.

So in order to take our songTime and keep it consistent with the actual playhead position of the audio file, I like to use a basic easing algorithm to apply corrections every time I get a fresh playhead position, like this:

```javascript
songStarted() {
    previousFrameTime = getTimer();
    lastReportedPlayheadPosition = 0;
    mySong.play();
}

everyFrame() {
    songTime += getTimer() - previousFrameTime;
    previousFrameTime = getTimer();
    if(mySong.position != lastReportedPlayheadPosition) {
        songTime = (songTime + mySong.position)/2;
        lastReportedPlayheadPosition = mySong.position;
    }
}
```

This function will automatically take the songTime variable that I'm tracking manually and average it with the actual reported playhead position every time a new playhead position is reported. I only do it when I've just received a fresh report, because if we keep easing it towards the "stepped" valuable in
between fresh reports, we're gonna get stuttery playback again. Instead, I'll continue to advance the songTime manually until I receive another fresh report.

But the fun's not quite over yet! You see, all rendering pipelines have delays of their own: the time it takes to actually render the scene, plus a small delay for the scene to make it to the user's monitor (and if they're playing on a TV this delay will be much bigger). On top of the delay it takes for your graphics to make it to the monitor, there is also a delay that happens between the user hitting a key and the keystroke making it back to your program. In most games, this delay is completely negligible, but when you're dealing with rhythm games, you need absolutely perfect accuracy, which means you need to account for that small round-trip delay.

Unfortunately, every person's monitor and input devices are different, which means there is no universal constant we can add to our playhead. Instead, we need the user to run a visual delay test, like the one rock band / guitar hero uses. They use two tests, and we'll get to the other one later, but the one we're talking about right now is [this one](#).

There are lots of ways to do this test. You can flash the screen, or you can show a visual indicator like a metronome, and ask the user to tap along with the indicator. There should be no audio playing during this test: you are trying to calibrate their video lag, not their audio lag. Each time your test flashes the screen (or makes the metronome tick), record that time. Then, when you receive a keystroke back from the user, you just measure the time again. Subtract the time you sent out the visual flash (ping) from the time you received the keystroke (pong), and that's your visual latency.

In theory, it's not possible to have a negative visual latency, because visual latency = rendering lag + input lag. However, the user might be the kind of person who consistently plays their notes a little bit earlier than they think they need to. If they are, and if their monitor and input devices are both very low-latency, it's not impossible to have a negative visual latency, so your system needs to be equipped to deal with that.

Also important: you're going to need to run this test for 15-30 seconds to get reliable results. A single round-trip ping test is not going to be reliable: there are too many variables that can cause inconsistencies, both in the rendering/input process and in the user's ability to keep a consistent beat with your test. Each time your test ticks and you calculate the lag for that tick, add it to an array, then use the average value of that array to set the video latency.

Once you've got the stable measurement of the song's position and a fairly good video latency, it's easy to display graphics and animations in sync with the music, using a formula like this:

```plaintext
renderNoteFallingDownScreen(id:int) {
    note[id].y = strumBar.y - (songTime - note[id].strumTime) + visualLatencySetting;
}
```
And there you have it. The visual side of things is taken care of! Now we need to deal with the music itself.

Just like visual lag, there's a lag between when an audio file is processed and when the user actually hears it. Again, there are a ton of variables in this equation, including their audio hardware, their reaction time, and even their distance from the speakers. And to make things even more fun, this audio lag is usually totally different from the video lag, which means we can't just use the same adjustment variable for both of them.

Fortunately, we can account for this audio lag exactly like we account for the video lag, with a test like this. This particular video is using a method where the guitar actually listens and plays the note automatically, but for your game, the user is probably going to have to tap a key along to the beat, which means we're also taking input lag into account here, too.

Because this could result in double-compensating for input lag, you either need to fudge the numbers a tiny bit to compensate, or you need to do the audio test first and apply the result before starting the video test. In other words, every time you get the 'pong' response during the video test, you adjust it based on the results of the audio test.

There are two reasons you want to apply the results of the audio test to the video test, rather than vice versa. The first reason is that audio latency is much more important than video latency. In rhythm games, your eyes guide you to the correct note, but your ears tell you when to play it, so they get top priority. Another reason why it's safer to do the audio test before the video test is because audio latency is usually much, much lower than video latency, which means more of the latency is coming from input delays rather than output delays. Say, for instance, that I run the audio test and get an audio latency of 25ms. If I had to guess, about 20ms of that is coming from the user's reaction time and input lag, not lag between your game and the audio hardware.

This also means that the user is more likely to have a negative audio latency. Again, this is not terribly uncommon, especially with inexperienced players/musicians who will try to overcompensate and end up playing notes a little too fast. It's important to note, though, that a user might get uncomfortable and overcompensate during a latency test, but then once they get into the game, they start mellowing out and hitting notes at the right time - but since they adjusted the latency settings based on early note hits, their timing will be off again.

To solve this problem, your audio calibration test needs to be as close to real gameplay as you can get. The user needs to feel relaxed and in the groove. Listening to a metronome ticking with no background noise is stressful and difficult. In between every tick, there's a lot of dead silence, and during that silence, a lot of people are going to get antsy and lose track of the beat, because very few gamers (and even musicians) are accustomed to following a metronome without accompaniment. To see what I mean, listen to this and try to tap along to the beat, then skip to about 1:15 in this song and tap along to the beat. The second one is way easier, right? I've never understood why Jazz Band uses
a metronome tick instead of a simple song with a consistent beat, and I think it's very dumb that they're still doing it after all these years.

Anyway, assuming you applied the audio latency to the video test, that means there might now be a tiny, insignificant discrepancy between the video and the audio, because not 100% of the audio latency comes from user input. These discrepancies can come from hardware delays, the user's reaction time (although this should be minimal; rhythm games are about anticipation, not reaction), and even the time it takes for sound waves to travel from their speakers to their ears - roughly 1ms per foot between the speakers and the user.

Because we tested for audio latency first, the player should always be able to close their eyes and play by ear without any problems, even if the video is a little bit off; but for hardcore gamers, it's nice to allow them to fine-tune things. For that, I like to have a manual adjustment window where I show a metronome or a flash (adjusted by the video latency setting) while music is playing, and let the user manually tweak their video latency setting up and down 1ms at a time until the metronome tick is perfectly in sync with the audio.

Sorry, I know I'm rambling at this point, and I kind of get the feeling that I went way more technical than you were expecting. Just one more thing I wanted to mention. In most environments, you will get a much more accurate reading of a user's input if you take the input reading inside of a listener, rather than checking key states in your main game loop. For example, this:

```java
keyPressedListener() {
    keyDownTime = getTimer();
}
```

...is much more accurate than this:

```java
everyFrame() {
    if(keyIsDown) {
        keyDownTime = getTimer();
    }
}
```

Again, this is probably environment-specific, but in the environments I've worked in, event listeners fire near-instantly, compared to frame loops which only process at around 60FPS or so.

Ah, sorry journal- um. For future reference-
Programming is what enchanting is called before activation. Programs are organized lists of instructions that, when executed by activating the magic held within the enchanted object, cause that magic or enchanted object to behave in a predetermined manner. An enchanted object is useless without a program.

A program is like a recipe. It contains a list of ingredients (called variables) and a list of directions (called statements) that tell the computer what to do with the variables. The variables can represent numeric data, text, graphical images; the variables can also represent increasingly esoteric forms of magic, both malicious and benign.

There are many programming languages -- C, C++, Pascal, BASIC, FORTRAN, COBOL, and LISP are just a few. These are all high-level languages. One can also write programs in low-level languages called assembly languages, although this is more difficult. Low-level languages are closer to the language used by a computer (which is integral to the formation of any enchanted object), while high-level languages are closer to human languages. Runes are the highest level of high-level programming languages; binary code is the lowest of the low-level languages. All programming languages can be used to cast normal spells; however, spell-building with them becomes increasingly difficult the closer one is to the higher level languages.

A routine is a section of a program that performs a particular task. Programs consist of modules, each of which contains one or more routines. The term routine is synonymous with procedure, function, and subroutine.

A function has two definitions in programming. One, it’s a named section of a program that performs a specific task. In this sense, a function is a type of procedure or routine. Some programming languages make a distinction between a function, which returns a value, and a procedure, which performs some operation but does not return a value.

Most programming languages come with a prewritten set of functions that are kept in a library. You can also write your own functions to perform specialized tasks.

Two, the term function is also used synonymously with operation and command. For example, you execute the delete function to erase a character.

Anyway. Today, I’m wearing a pair of yellow overalls and a plain white t-shirt, with a headband made out of eye shaped rhinestone pieces; Havij, my faithful companion, and bestie for life, is wearing galaxy tights and winged shoes, with a black skater dress and a surprisingly majestic ponyhawk.

As for why, exactly, I’ve wandered into this side of town, so far from the harbor and the teahouse I’ve been taking care of business… I don’t know. Felt right, I guess.

Havij is carrying the soapbox for me- it’s an old crate I swiped from the kerb. And then, in the sudden lull produced by two young women walking in from the out of doors who aren’t obviously there for video games, Havij sets the soapbox down and I make a quick hop up onto it.

I take the megaphone off my belt and pull it to my mouth. It’s covered in eye stickers and googly
“Aries: You’re holding on pretty damn hard, there, bucko. Look- you’re bleeding. Let someone else take that for a while, just a little short while.


“Gemini: Decay flies a banner of black and green on a pole made of the bones of the dead.

“Cancer: Loneliness doesn’t make a good story. We all spend too much time alone; even escape needs compatriots.

“Leo: Dizziness is not normal. Take a break; we’ll trade stories.

“Virgo: We twist things into better memories, into better shapes. Given enough time and effort, everything can become art. For better; for worse. What will you forget?

“Libra: Pieces of this, pieces of that. What do you think you are? Nothing but a ramshackle like the rest of us.

“Scorpio: Paranoia marks you like a brand on the side of the sacred calf. You have to trust something.

“Ophiuchus: Holding off the chaos is easier done with a friend, you know.

“Sagittarius: That could be you in a few years. Keep your feet on the ground, and steady underneath you.

“Capricorn: So many threads, so many roots; you are just the trunk. You are the Spine of the World.

“Aquarius: The bees alight on your shoulders. They share very small things with you.

“Pisces: It won’t take long.

“The day shall come when the sky turns to ice, a promise marking a Brutal Age. Once more, rivers shall run dry, and a woman of grey will raise a faith of fog from the depths. The day shall come, yea, and the dogs will sing in chorus and the birds will flee their nests, and a broken man shall mark the fall of a false god and the return of a vicious war. O’ horrors, o’ wonders, the air shall turn white and grey, a challenger will usher forth a Brutal Age of Misfortune, and the return of monsters thought gone. O torment, or something like that, fuck, I don’t care.”

And then I step off the soapbox, and speak again.

“If you have any questions about the prophecies spoken in this place on this day, I, the Seer, will be wandering the woods just outside town, searching for holes in the weft of the World. Thank you,”

As I click off the megaphone, Deborah and Adelaide appear before me, smirking. Deborah says to
me, “I’m high as a kite,” and Adelaide says “I can punch ghosts,” and the two men who once shared a relationship much like my sisters’ say “We have nothing better to do,” and I say “Onwards, then,” and then we walk into the woods and find nothing except the normal things one finds in the woods.

Mostly trees and plants and so on.

We also find the Best Tattoo Artist in the World.

Deborah asks the Artist Tzipporah for a tattoo, and Tzipporah agrees but only if Deborah can forgive herself, and then-

And then-

And then Deborah tells the Artist a story.

You ask me if I can forgive myself?

I can forgive myself many things. For where I left her; for what I did. But I cannot forgive myself for the year that I hated my best friend, when I believed they’d run away, perhaps to Sea. During that year of hatred, I forbade their name to be mentioned, and their name entered my prayers when I prayed at all, t’was to ask that they would one day learn the meaning of what they’d done- of the fear and pain and shame that they’d brought me, of the red that ringed my eyes and the despair that haunted my every hour.

I hate myself for that, and nothing will ease it, not even what happened that night on the mountainside. Not now- not ever.

I had searched for nearly four years, although the trail was long cold. I would say that I found her by accident, but I don’t believe in them. If you walk the path, eventually you must arrive at your fate.

That was later. First, there was the valley in the backstreets, the grimey bar behind the flower sellers that sat low and toad-warted against the pink coral like a stormcloud on the dawn, cold and grey with a copper roof going to green with age.

There was a girl outside the bar, rolling a marble between her outstretched legs. She didn’t see me draw near, and she didn’t look up until I said, “I used to do that. I got mine from soda bottles and won ‘em off rich little girls and fished them up from the muck at the bottom of sewer grates. I’d wash ‘em clean, then play with them again and again- baseball, blood knuckel, you know.”

She turned. She looked shocked, as if I had appeared out of nothing- and I had not. I had swam and walked many miles, and had many more to go. I said “I move quietly. Is this the bar of Tolly Crookshank?”
The girl nodded, drew herself up onto her webbed feet and her full height, which was maybe a hand taller than mine, and she said, “I am Tolly Crookshank.”

“Is there another of that name? For the Tolly Crookshank that I seek is a woman grown.”

The girl said nothing, just shoved her dusty webbed hand into a pocket under her skirts where her fingers clicked more marbles together.

I said “Your mother, perhaps? Would she be Tolly Crookshank as well?”

The girl was staring at me with honest confusion.

“What are you?” she asked.

“A cecelia; a woman, same as you. And I’m here to see Tolly Crookshank.”

“Why? And why are you so… ugly?”

“Because I have something to ask your mother. Women’s business.”

I saw a smile start at the tips of her lips.

“It’s not a bad thing to be ugly, young Toloi. There was a night when the Crows came knocking on my door, a whole troop of them, twelve men with knives and sticks, and they demanded of my mother that she produce me, as they were there to kill me, in revenge for some imagined slight. And she said, ‘Girl, run down to the Daiso and tell your Aunt Crim to come back to the house, that I sent for her.’ And the Crows watched as the girl ran out the door. They knew that I was a most dangerous person. But no-one had told them that I was a cecelia, a slight one, or if that had been told, it had not been believed.”

“Did the girl call you?” said the girl.

“It was no girl,” I told her, “but me myself, ‘twas. And they’d had me, and still I walked out of the door and through their fingers.”

The girl laughed. Then she said ‘Why were the Crows after you?’

“It was a disagreement about the ownership of property. They thought what they had bought was theirs. I maintained the Crow’s ownership of the property had ended when it washed ashore and came home with me through the Red Gate.”

“Wait here,” said young Tolly Crookshank.

I sat by the kerb and looked up at the bar. It was a good sized bar: I would have taken it for the bar of a brewer or a trader, not of a legbreaker. There were bottle caps in the gutter and I picked them out with my leg and cleaned them in the clear water sluicing from the drainpipe some meters away, and skipped them across the street, one by one, into the storm drain. I have a good eye and a better arm, and I enjoyed rattling the caps over the cobbled street and into the water below.

I had thrown a hundred caps when the girl returned, accompanied by a tall, loping woman. Her hair was salted with white, and her face was sharp and sharkish. There are no wolfsharks in those alleys, not any longer, and the bearfish have all gone too...
“Good morning,” I said.

She said nothing in return, only stared; I am used to stares. I said, “I am seeking Tolly Crookshank. If you are she, say so; I shall greet you. If you are not she, tell me now, and I will be on my way.”

“What business would you have with Tolly Crookshank?”

“I wish to hire her, as a guide.”

“And where is it you would wish to be taken?”

I stared up at her. “That is hard to say,” I told her. “There are some who say it does not exist. There is a certain cave on the Foggy Mountain.”

She said nothing. Then she said, “Tolly, go back inside.”

“Aow, Mum-”

“Tell your father I said he was to give you a gingersnap. You like that. Go on.”

Expressions crossed the girl’s face—puzzlement, hunger, happiness—and then she turned and ran back to the grey bar.

Tolly Crookshank said, “Who sent you here?”

I pointed to the road as it bustled beside us on its winding dance through the city.

“What’s that?”

“Road.”

“And there are many who cross it.”

I did not know her then at all, and never knew her well, but her eyes became guarded and her head cocked to one side.

“How do I know you are who you say you are?”

“I have claimed nothing. Just that there are those who have heard that there is a cave on the Foggy Mountain. And that you might know the way.”

“I will not tell you where the cave is.”

“I am not here asking for directions. I seek a guide, and two travel more safely than one.”

She looked me up and down, and I waited for the joke—about my legs, my clothing—but she did not make them, and for that I was grateful. She just said “When we reach the cave, I will not go inside. You must bring out the gold yourself.”

I said, “It is all one to me.”
She said, “You can only take what you can carry. I will not touch it. But yes, I will take you.”

I said, “You will be paid well for your trouble.” I reached into my pocket, under my obi, and handed her the pouch I had hidden there. “This for taking me. Another, twice the size, when we return.”

She poured the coins from the pouch into her huge webbed hand, and she nodded.

“Silver.” she said. “Good.”

Then, “I will say good-bye to my husband and daughter.”

“Is there nothing you need to bring?”

She said “I was a reaver and then a legbreaker in my youth, and both travel light. I’ll bring a rope, for the mountains.” She patted her knife, which hung from her obi, and went back into the grey bar. I never saw her husband, not then, not ever. I do not know what color his hair was, or if he had webbed hands and feet, or a tail, or legs like my own.

I threw another fifty caps into the drain as I waited, until she returned, with a coil of rope across her shoulders like a vest. And then we walked away from a home too grand for any reaver or legbreaker, and we headed west.

The mountains between the city and the coast are gradual hills, visible from a distance as gentle, purple black blue, hazy things- like clouds or smoke or banks of mist. They seem inviting. They are slow mountains, old tired things of the kind you can walk up easily, like walking up a hill- but they are hills that take a full day and more to climb. We walked up the hill, and by the end of the first day we were cold.

I saw snow on the peaks above us, though it was high summer.

We said nothing to each other that first day. There was nothing to be said. We knew where we were going.

We made a fire, from dried seacow pats and a dead seaweed bush: we boiled water and made our dinner, each of us throwing a handful of rice and a fingerpinch of smoked fish into the little pan I carried. Her handful was huge, and my handful was small, like my hands, which made her smile and say, “I hope you will not be eating half the rice.”

I said I would not and indeed, I did not, for my appetite is smaller than that of a full-grown woman. But this is a good thing, I believe, for I could keep going in the worst of times on nuts and berries and leavings that would not have kept a bigger person from starving. I have grown now; so this may not still be so.

A path of sorts ran across the high hills, and we followed it and encountered almost nobody: a tinker and his mule, piled high with old pots and pans, and a boy leading the mule who smiled at me when he thought me to be a lady, and then scowled when he saw me as I am, and would have thrown a stone at me had the tinker not slapped his hand with the switch he'd been using to encourage the
mule; and later, we overtook an old woman and a man she said was her grandson, on their way back across the hills. We ate with her, and she told us that she had attended the birth of her first great-grandchild, that it was a good birth. She said she would tell our fortunes from the lines in our palms, if we had coin to cross hers. I gave her a scuffed beri, and she looked at my palm.

She said, “I see death in your past and death in your future.”

“Death waits in all our futures,” I said.

She paused, there in the highest of the high lands, where the summer winds have winter on their breath, where they howl and whip and slash the air like knives. So close to the sea, you could stick your hand through and feel the crushing weight of darkness above. She said, “There was a woman in a tree. There will be a woman in a tree.”

I said, “Will this mean anything to me?”

“One day, perhaps.” She said, “Beware gold. Silver is your friend.” And then she was done with me.

To Tolly Crookshank she said, “Your palm has been burned.” She said that was true. The old woman said, “Give me your other hand, your left hand.” She did so. The old woman gazed at it intently. Then, “You return to where you began. You will be higher than most other women. And there is no grave waiting for you, where you are going.”

She said, “You tell me that I will not die?”

“It is a left-handed fortune. I know what I have told you, and no more.”

She knew more. I saw it in her face.

That was the only thing of any importance that occurred on the second day.

We slept in the open that night. The night was clear and cold, and the sky was hung with stars that seemed so bright and close I felt as if I could have reached out my arm and gathered them, like berries from a bush or a drunk man’s pocket.

We lay side by side beneath the stars, and Tolly Crookshank said, “Death awaits you, she said. But death does not wait for me. I think mine was the better fortune.”

“Perhaps.”

“Ah,” she said. “It is all a nonsense. Old-woman talk; it is not true.”

I woke in the dawn mist to see a stag, watching us, curiously.

The third day we crested those mountains, and we began to walk downhill. My companion said, “When I was a girl, my mother’s working knife fell into the cook fire. I pulled it out, but the metal hilt was hot as the flames. I did not expect this, but I would not let the knife go. I carried it away from the fire, and plunged the blade into water. It made steam- I remember that, and how it burned my nose to breath it in. My palm was burned, and my hand curled, as if it was meant to carry a sword until the end of time.”

I said, “You, with your hand. Me, only an ugly little woman. It’s fine heroes we are, who seek our fortunes on the Foggy Mountain.”
She barked a laugh, short and without humor. “Fine heroes,” was all she said.

Rain began to fall then, and did not stop falling. That night we passed a small croft-house. There was a trickle of smoke from its chimney, and we called out for the owner, but there was no response.

I pushed open the door and called again. The place was dark, but I could smell tallow, as if a candle had been burning and had recently been snuffed.

“No one at home,” said Tolly, but I shook my head and walked forward, then leaned my head down into the darkness beneath the bed.

“Would you care to come out?” I asked. “For we are travellers, seeking warmth and shelter and a place to rest. We would share with you our rice and our salt and our wine. And we will not harm you.”

At first the man, hidden beneath the bed, said nothing, and then he said, “My wife is away in the hills. She told me to hide myself away if the strangers come, for fear of what they might do to me.”

I said, “I am but a little-woman, good man, no bigger than a child; you could send me flying with a blow. My companion is a full-sized woman, but I do swear that she shall do nothing to you, save rest in your house, and dry ourselves. Please do come out.”

All covered with silt and slime he was when he emerged, but even with his face all begrimed, he was beautiful; and even with his hair all tangled and greyed with silt it was still long and thick, and lustrous black. For a heartbeat he put me in the mind of my best friend, but that my best friend would look a woman in the eye, while he glanced only at the ground fearfully, like something expecting to be beaten. A merman of seahorse kind; soft and curvy, like a maid.

I ate my fill. He had no appetite. I believe that Toloi was still hungry when her meal was done. She poured wine for the three of us: he took but a little, and that was with sweetwater. The rain rattled on the roof of the house, and dripped down the corner into the pool we all rested our feet in, and, unwelcoming though it was, I was glad that I was inside.

It was then that a woman came through the door. She said nothing, only stared at us, untrusting, angry. She pulled off her cape of oiled sacking, and her hat, and she dropped them in the pool below us. They floated like corpses on the bottom of the harbour. The silence was oppressive.

Tolly Crookshank said, “Your husband gave us respite, when we found him. Hard though he was in the finding.”

“We asked for no more than respite,” I said. “As we ask of you.”

The woman said nothing, only grunted.

In the high lands, people spend words as if they were golden coins. But the custom is strong there: strangers who ask for respite must be granted it, though you have blood feud against them and their clan or kind.
The man—little more than a youth he was, while his wife’s hair was grey and white, so I wondered if he was her son for a moment, but no: there was but one bed, scarcely big enough for two—the man went outside, into the sheep pen that adjoined the house, and returned with rice cakes and a dried ham he must have hidden there, which he sliced thin, and placed on a wooden trencher before the woman.

Tolly poured the woman wine, and said, “We seek the Foggy Mountain. Do you know if it is there?”

The woman looked at us. The winds are bitter in the high lands, and they would tear the words from the unwary’s lips. She pursed her mouth, then she said, “Aye, I saw it from the peak this morning. It’s there. I cannot say if it will be there tomorrow.”

We slept beneath the water of that cottage. The fire went out, and there was no warmth from the heating stones below. The woman and her man slept in their bed, behind the curtain. She had her way with him, beneath the sheepskin that covered that bed, and before she did that she beat him for feeding us and for letting us in. I heard them, and sleep was hard in the finding that night.

I have slept in the homes of the poor, and I have slept in palaces, and I have slept in trees and ditches and fields beneath the stars; I have slept underneath the bed of working whores, and would have told you before that night that all places to sleep were one to me. But I woke before the dawn, convinced we had to be gone from that place, but not knowing why, and I woke Toloi by putting a finger to her lips, and silently we left that croft on the mountainside without saying our farewells, and I have never been more pleased to be gone from anywhere.

We were a mile from the place when I said, “The Mountain. You asked if it would be there. Surely, a mountain is there, or it is not there.”

“The Foggy Mountain is not as other places. And the fog that surrounds it is not like other fogs.”

We walked down a path worn by hundreds of years of sheep and deer and few enough men.

She said “They also call it the Smoke Mountain. Some say it is because the mountain is really the smoke from hell, rising from the depths below. And I do not know the truth of it.” Then, “‘and what is truth?’ said jesting Pilate.”

It is harder coming down than it is going up.

I thought about it. “Sometimes I think that truth is a current. In my mind, it is like a current that flows through the sea: there can be a hundred twists, a thousand trickles, that will all take you, eventually, to the same place. It doesn’t matter where you start from. If you follow the truth, you will reach it, whatever path you take.”
Tolly Crookshank looked down at me and said nothing. Then, “You are wrong. The truth is a cave in the black mountains. There is one way there, and one way only, and that way is treacherous and hard. And if you choose the wrong path you will die alone, on the mountainside.”

We crested the ridge, and we looked down to the coast. I could see villages below, beside the water. And I could see high black mountains before me, on the other side of the Sea Bubble, coming out of the silty mist.

Tolly said, “There’s your cave, in those mountains.”

The bones of the earth, I thought, seeing them. And then I became uncomfortable, thinking of bones, and to distract myself, I said, “And how many times is it you’ve been there?”

“Only once. I searched for it all my my sixteenth year, for I had heard the legends and believed if I sought I should find. I was seventeen when I reached it, and brought back all the gold coins I could carry.”

“And were you not frighted of the curse?”

“When I was young, I was afraid of nothing.”

“What did you do with your gold?”

“A portion I buried and I alone know where; the rest I used as groom-price for the man I loved.”

She stopped as if she had already said too much.

There was no ferryman at the jetty. Only a small boat, hardly big enough for three full-sized men, tied to a trunk of coral on the shore, half dead with white and sharp with salt, and a bell beside them both. Bronze it was, with a smooth handle, the wood still shiny with disuse.

I sounded the bell, and soon enough a fat man came down the shore.

He said to Toloi, “It’ll cost a bobu for the ferry, and three pennies for your girl.”

I stood tall. I am not as big as other women are, but I have as much pride as any of them. “I am also a woman,” I said. “I’ll pay your bobu.”

The ferryman looked up and down, then he scratched his beard. “I beg your pardon. My eyes are not what they once were. I shall take you to the mountain.”

I handed him a ten-beri coin. He weighed it in his hand. “That’s tenpenny you did not cheat me of. Ten pennies are a lot of money in this dark age.”

The water was the color of slate, although the sky was blue, and whitecaps chased one another across the water’s surface. He untied the boat and hauled it, rattling, down the shingle to the water. We waded out into the cold water, and clambered inside.
The splash of oars on seawater, and the boat propelled forward in easy movements. I sat closest to the ferryman. I said, “Tenpenny. It is good wages. But I have heard of a cave in the mountain across the water, filled with gold coins, the treasure of the ancients.”

He shook his head dismissively.

Tolly was staring at me, lips pressed together so hard they were white. I ignored her and asked the man again, “A cave filled with golden coins, a gift from the Northies or the Southies or from those who they say were here long before any of us: those who fled into the West as the people came.”

“Heard of it,” said the ferryman. “Heard also of the curse of it. I reckon that the one can take care of the other.” He spat into the sea. Then he said, “You’re an honest woman, Goblin. I can see it in your face. Do not seek this cave. No good can come of it.”

“I am sure you are right,” I told him, without guile.

“I am certain I am,” he said. “For not every day is it that I take a salt-bitten reaver and a little Goblin woman to the Foggy Mountain.” Then he said, “In this part of the World, it is not considered lucky to talk about those who went to the West.” We rode the rest of the boat journey in silence, though the sea became choppier, and the waves splashed into the side of the boat, such that I held on with both hands and all my legs for fear of being swept over and away.

After what seemed like half a lifetime the boat was tied to a long jetty of black stones. We walked the jetty as the waves crashed around us, the salt spray kissing our faces. There was a humpbacked man at the landing selling mochi and dried plums and fish cut down their spines and smoked until they were almost wooden. I gave him two beri and filled my obi with all three.

Ahead, rising like a wall, there was the Sea Bubble; and along the path, a gate of blackened horn. We walked through the gate, and through the Sea Bubble, and onto the Foggy Mountain.

I am older now, or at least, I am no longer quite so young, and everything I see reminds me of something else I’ve seen, such that I see mostly nothing for the first time. A pretty girl, her hair ink-black and yellow in the light, reminds me only of another hundred such girls, and their friends, and what they were as they grew alongside me, and what they looked like when they died. It is the curse of age, that all things are reflections of other things.

I say that; but my time on the Foggy Mountain, that is also called, by the wise, the Smoke Mountain, reminds me of nothing but itself.

It is a day from that jetty until you reach the black, smoking, mountain.

Tolly Crookshank looked at me, half her size or less, and she set off at a loping swim, as if challenging me to keep up. Her legs propelled her through the water, which was blue, and all fern-weed and anemones.

Above us, shoals of threadfin shad and blueback herring were schooling, glimmering white and silver, hiding each other and revealing flashes of brilliant white sky-waters and hiding again.

I let her get ahead of me, let her press on into the wild waters, until she was swallowed by the shifting, silty haze. Then, and only then, I swam.
This is one of the secret things of me, the things I have not revealed to any person, save to my
Mother, and my sisters, and my brother, and my best friend Miki (may the Bubbles cradle their poor
soul)- and my chef, Sanji: I can swim, and I can swim well, and, if I need to, I can swim faster and
longer and more surely than any full-grown fishwoman or merwoman; and it was like this that I
swam then, through the silt and the sweetwater swells, taking to the low current along the black-rock
ridges tipped as they were with yellow sea-shells, yet keeping below the reach of branching coral
fingers.

She was ahead of me, but I spied her soon, and I swam on and I swam past her, on the low current,
with the brow of the hill between us. Below us was a sweetwater current. I can swim for days
without stopping, or sleeping, or taking any sort of respite. That is the first of my three secrets; there
is one I’ve yet to tell, and one I have revealed to no woman or man currently living. My siblings have
guessed my unspoken secret; but I cannot bear to indicate if they’ve the right of it or no.

We had discussed already where we would camp that first night on the Foggy Mountain, and Toloi
had told me that we would spend the night beneath the rock that is called Man and Dog, for it is said
that it looks like an old man with his dog by his side, and I reached it in late afternoon. There was a
shelter beneath the rock, which was protected and warm, and some of those who had been before us
had left a leavings pit behind, shells and fins and scales. I swept the sleeping shelves clean of silt, and
set out the things I had bought from the humpbacked man. They swelled in the water, and their scent
swep out across the purpling seagrass.

It was dark when Tolly swam into the shelter and looked at me as if she had not expected to see me
that side of midnight. I said “What kept you so long, Tolly Crookshank?”

She said nothing, only stared at me. I said, “There is sheepshead, swollen with seawater and smoked,
and the sand will warm your bones.”

She nodded. We ate the sheepshead fish, drank wine to warm ourselves. There was a mound of fire
sand and seagrass, piled high in the rear of the shelter, and we slept upon that, wrapped tight in our
kimono.

I woke in the night.

There was cold steel against my throat- the flat of the blade, not the edge. I said, “And why-ever
would you kill me, Tolly Crookshank? For our way is long, and our journey is not yet over.”

She said, “I do not trust you, Goblin.”

“It is not me you must trust,” I told her, “but those that I serve. And if you left with me but return
without me, there are those who will know the name of Tolly Crookshank, and cause it to be spoken
in the shadows.”

The cold blade remained at my throat. She said, “How did you get ahead of me?”

“And here I was, repaying ill with good, for I made you food and a place to rest. I am a hard woman
to lose, Tolly Crookshank, and it ill becomes a guide to do as you did today. Now, take your knife
from my throat and let me sleep.”

She said nothing, but after a few moments, the blade was removed. I forced myself neither to sigh
nor to breathe, hoping she could not hear my heart pounding in my chest; and I slept no more that
night.
For breakfast, I stretched the mochi to tenderness, and sliced the plums to get the stones inside them out.

The mountains were black and grey against the roiling white of the shoals above. We saw black rays, huge and ragged of wing, circling high above us. Tolly set a sober pace and I swam beside her, taking two kicks for every one of hers.

“How long?” I asked her.

“A day. Perhaps two. It depends on the currents and the fish. If the shoals come down in two days, or even three...”

The shoals came down at noon and the world was blanketed in their shivering scales, worse than rain: the faint stench of fish shit and piss came with them, and we were buffeted by waves of silt and sour water soaking through our clothes and our skin; the rocks we swam past became treacherously light, tilting and swaying and crashing with the movement of the water. Tolly and I slowed in our ascent, swimming carefully. We were walking up the mountain then, not swimming, up seagoat paths and craggy sharp ways. The rocks were slippery and green with algae: we walked, and climbed and clambered and clung, we slipped and slid and stumbled and staggered, and even in the silt, Tolly knew where she was going and I followed her.

She paused at a current that splashed across our path, thick as the post of the Red Gate. She took the thin rope from her shoulders, wrapped it about a rock.

“This was not here before,” she told me. “I’ll go first.” She tied one end of the rope about her waist and edged out along the path, into the rushing water, pressing her body against the smooth-worn stone, edging slowly, intently, through the sheet of water.

I was scared for her, scared for both of us: holding my breath as she passed, only breathing when she was on the other side of the current. She tested the rope, pulled on it, motioned me to follow her, when a rock gave way beneath her foot, and she slipped on the smooth stone, and fell into the abyss.

The rope held, and the rock my legs and suckers clung to held. Tolly Crookshank dangled from the end of the rope. She looked up at me, and I sighed, anchored myself firmly, and wound and pulled and hauled her up and up. I hauled her back onto the path, winded and breathing curses in tones of awe.

She said, “You’re stronger than you look,” and I cursed myself for a fool. She must have seen it on my face for, after she got back her breath (wheezing and coughing like a seal), she said, “My girl Tolly told me the tale you told her about the Crows coming for you, and you being sent out by your ma, with them thinking you were off to find your Auntie and not yourself at all.”

“It was just a tale,” I said. “Something to pass the time.”

“Is that so?” she said. “For I heard tell of a gang of raiding Crows sent out to Gobdark a few years ago, seeking revenge on someone who’d sunk their ship and stolen their slaves. They went, and they never came back. If a small woman like you can kill a dozen Crows... well, you must be strong, and you must be fast.”
I must be stupid, I thought ruefully, telling that child that tale.

I had picked them off one by one, like rabbit lobsters, as they came out to piss or to see what had happened to their friends: I had killed seven of them before my Mother killed her first. We buried them in the circus lot, where no one played and no one lived; put coins in their hands and stones on their chests, to weigh down their bodies that their ghosts might float freely to the Bubbles, and we were sad: that Crows had come so far to kill me, that we had been forced to kill them in return.

I take no joy in killing: no man should, and no woman.

Sometimes death is necessary, but it is always an evil thing to kill another being like yourself. That is something I am in no doubt of, even after the events I speak of here.

I took the rope from Toloi Cruickshank, and I clambered up and up, over the rocks, to where the current came out of the side of the hill, and it was narrow enough for me to cross. It was slippery there, but I made it over without incident, tied the rope in place, came down it, threw the end of it to my companion, walked her across.

She did not thank me, neither for rescuing her, nor for getting us across; and I did not expect thanks. I also did not expect what she actually said, though, which was: “You are not a true mermaid, and you are ugly. Your mother: is she also strange and ugly, like yourself?”

I decided to take no offense, whether offense had been intended or no. I simply said, “She is not. She is a tall woman, taller than you, and when she was young- a bit older than me, but not much- she was reckoned by most to be the most beautiful woman in the world. The bards wrote many a song praising her purple eyes and her long black hair that shines golden in the light.”

I thought I saw her flinch at this, but it is possible that I imagined it, or more likely, wished to imagine I had seen it.

“How did she come to have you, then?”

I spoke the truth: “She wanted me, and I came as first of a set of seven sisters total- seven in one go. She would not give me up; and she would not let me give up. She said I would be the wisest and kindest of her daughters, and I would always return to her, no matter where my life takes me. And I have.”

The shoals began to lower, once more, and the world blurred at the edges, became softer.

“She said I would be a good sister; better than she ever was, to her brothers. And I have done my best to look after my sisters- who are, save one, if you are wondering, quite normal. And I hardly ever have to thrash sense back into them.”

“I beat sense into young Tolly,” said older Tolly. “She is not a bad girl.”

“You can only do that as long as they are at your side,” I said. And then I stopped talking, and I remembered that long year, and also I remembered Miki when we were both small, sitting together at the bus stop with dirt on our faces, he looking at me as if I were the strongest and wisest in all the world.

“Ran away, eh? I ran away when I was a lass. I was twelve. I went as far as the court of the King in
the Clouds, the Father of the current King.”

“That’s not something you hear spoken aloud.”

“I am not afraid. Not here. Who’s to hear us? Black rays? I saw him. He was a fat and ugly man, who spoke the language of the air breathers well, and our own tongues with difficulty. But he was still our King. And if he is to come to us again, he will need gold, for vessels and weapons and to feed the troops that he raises.”

“So I believe. That is why we go in search of the cave.”

“This is bad gold. It does not come free. It has its cost.”

“Everything has its cost.”

I was remembering every landmark—climb at the whale ribs, cross the first three currents, then walk along the fourth until the five heaped stones and find where the rock looks like a seagull and walk on between two sharply jutting walls of black rock, and let the slope bring you with it…

I could remember it, I knew. Well enough to find my way down again. But the silty fogs confused me, and I could not be certain.

We reached a small glade of seagrass, high in the mountains, and drank sweet wine, caught huge white creatures that were not shrimps or lobsters or crabs, and ate them raw like sausages, for we could not find any fire sand to cook them, that high.

We slept on a wide ledge beside the frosted seagrass and woke into shoals before sunrise, when the world was grey and blue.

“You were sobbing in your sleep,” said Tolly.

“I had a dream,” I told her.

“I do not have bad dreams,” Tolly said.

“I I do not have bad dreams,” Tolly said.

“It was a good dream,” I said. It was true. I had dreamed that Miki still lived. He was grumbling about the fuckboys at the meatpacking plant, and telling me of his time in the hills with the horses, and of things of no consequence, smiling his wide-toothed smile and tossing his hair all the while, ink-black and golden like my mother’s, though they were no relation.

“Good dreams should not make a woman cry out like that,” said Tolly. A pause, then, “I have no dreams, not good, not bad.”

“No?”

“Not since I was a young girl.”

We rose. A thought struck me: “Did you stop dreaming after you came to the cave?”

She said nothing.

We walked along the mountainside, into the silty mist white and cold, as the sunroot behind us lit up.
The mist seemed to thicken and fill with light, in the sunlight, but did not fade away and I realized that it must be a cloud, sunk beneath the waves. The world glowed. And then it seemed to me that I was staring at a woman of my size, a small, dumpy woman, her face a shadow, standing in the air in front of me, like a ghost or an angel, and it moved as I moved. It was haloed by the light, and shimmered, and I could not have told you how near it was or how far away. I have seen miracles and I have seen evil things, but never have I seen anything like that.

“Is it magic?” I asked, although I smelled no magic in the water.

Tolly said, “It is nothing. A property of the light. A shadow. A reflection. No more. I see a woman beside me, as well. She moves as I move.” I glanced back, but I saw nobody beside her.

And then the little glowing woman in the air faded, and the cloud, and it was day, and we were alone.

We climbed all that morning, ascending. Tolly’s ankle rolled and twisted the day before, when she had slipped at the current. Now it swelled in front of me, swelled and went red, but her pace did not ever slow, and if she was in discomfort or in pain it did not show on her face.

I said, “How long?” as the dusk began to blur the edges of the world.

“An hour, less, perhaps. We will reach the cave, and then we will sleep for the night. In the morning you will go inside. You can bring out as much gold as you can carry, and we will make our way back off the mountain.”

I looked at her, then: salted hair, grey eyes, so huge and wolvarkine a woman, and I said, “You would sleep outside the cave?”

“I would. There are no monsters in the cave. Nothing that will come out and take you in the night. Nothing that will eat us. But you should not go in until daylight.”

And then we rounded a rockfall, all black rocks and grey half-blocking our path, and we saw the cave mouth. I said, “Is that all?”

“You expected marble pillars? Or a giant’s cave from a gossip’s fireside tales?”

“Perhaps. It looks like nothing. A hole in the rock face. A shadow. And there are no guards?”

“No guards. Only the place, and what it is.”

“A cave filled with treasure. And you are the only one who can find it?”

Tolly laughed then, like a seal’s bark. “The coasties know how to find it. But they are too wise to come here and take its gold. They say that the cave makes you evil: that each time you visit it, each time you enter to take gold, it eats the good in your soul, so they do not enter.”

“And is that true? Does it make you evil?”

“...No. The cave feeds on something else. Not good and evil. Not really. You can take your gold, but afterwards, things are,” she paused, “things are flat. There is less beauty in a sunbeam, less meaning in a song, less joy in a kiss, less wonder in a mage’s spell...” She looked at the cave mouth and I thought I saw fear in her eyes. “Less.”

I said, “There are many for whom the lure of gold outweighs the beauty of a sunbeam.”
“Me, when young, for one. You, now, for another.”

“So we go in at dawn.”

“You will go in. I will wait for you out here. Do not be afraid. No monster guards the cave. No spells to make the gold vanish, if you do not know some cantrip or rhyme.”

We made our camp, then; or rather we sat in the darkness, against the cold rock wall. There would be no sleep there.

“You took the gold from here, as I will do tomorrow. You bought a bar with it, a husband, a good name.”

“Aye, and they meant nothing to me, once I had them, or less than nothing. And if your gold pays for the King- or the Queen Over the Water to see us and rule us fairly and bring about a land of joy and prosperity and warmth, it will still mean nothing to you. It will be as something you heard of that happened to a woman in a tale.”

“I have lived my life to bring the Good King back.”

“You take the gold back to them that rule. Your King will want more, because Kings will always want more. It is what they do. Each time you come back, it will mean less. The sunbeam means nothing. Killing a woman means nothing.”

Silence then, in the darkness. I heard no wolvarks: only the wind that called and gusted about the peaks like a mother seeking her babe; like a friend calling for a friend; like a lover weeping in the night.

“We have both killed women. Have you ever killed a man, Tolly Crookshank?”

“I have not. I have killed no men, no boys.”

I ran my hands over my obi in the darkness, fingers seeking and smoothing over birds and flowers stitched in thread gone grey with oil and dirt, the memory of love. I smoothed my fingers over the handle of my switchblade knife, smooth and cold. I had not intended to ever tell her, only to strike when we were out of the mountains, strike once, strike quiet, but now I felt the words being pulled from me, would I or never-so.

“They say there was a boy. And a thorn-tree of coral.”

If I said another word, I knew, she would be silent on the subject, and never speak on’t again. So I said nothing. Only waited.

“They told me the ostles of the lowlands were strong and lovely, and that a woman could gain honor and glory by adventuring off to the south and returning with the fine red horses.

“So I went south, and never a horse was good enough until on a hillside in the lowlands I saw the finest, reddest, loveliest horses that a woman has ever seen. So I began to lead them away, back the way I had come.
“He came after me with a stick. The horses were his lord’s, he said, and I was a rogue and a knave and a thief-all manner of rough things.

“But he was beautiful, even when angry, and had I not already a young husband I might have dealt more kindly to him. Instead I pulled a knife, and touched it to his throat, and bade him stop speaking.

“I would not kill him- I would not kill a man, and that is the truth- so I tied him, by his hair, to a thorn coral, and I took his knife from his obi, to slow him as he tried to free himself, and pushed the blade deep into the earth.

“I tied him to the thorn coral tree by his long hair, and I thought no more of him as I made off with his horses.

“It was another year before I was back that way. I was not after horses that day, but I walked up the side of that bank- it was a lonely spot, and if you had not been looking, you might not have seen it. Perhaps nobody searched for him.”

“I heard they searched. Although some believed him to be taken by reavers, and others believed him run away with a tinker, or gone to Sea. But still, they searched.”

“Aye. I saw what I did see- perhaps you’d have to have stood where I was standing, to see what I did see. It was an evil thing I did, perhaps.”

“Perhaps?”

“I have taken gold from the cave of the mists. I cannot tell any longer if there is good or there is evil. I sent a message, by a child, at an inn, telling them where he was, and where they could find him.”

I closed my eyes but the world became no darker.

“There is evil,” I told her.

I saw it in my mind’s eye: his skeleton picked clean of clothes, picked clean of flesh, as naked and white as anyone would ever be, hanging like a child’s puppet against the thorn-bush coral, tied to a branch above it by his black-golden hair.

“At dawn,” said Tolly Crookshank, as if we had been talking of provisions or the water, “you will leave your blade behind, for such is the custom, and you will enter the cave, and bring out as much gold as you can carry. And you will bring it back with you, to the mainland. There’s not a soul in these parts, knowing what you carry or where it’s from, twould take it from you. Then send it to the King Over the Water, and he will pay his men with it, and feed them, and buy their weapons. One day, he will return for us lost souls. Tell me on that day that there is evil, little woman.”

When the sun was up, I entered the cave. It was quiet in there. I could hear the soft rush of water on stone, of sand over sand, and I felt a wind on my face, which was strange, because there was no wind inside the mountain.

In my mind, the cave would be filled with gold. Bars of gold would be stacked like firewood, and bags of golden coins would sit between them. There would be golden chains and golden rings, and golden plates, heaped high like the china plates in a rich man’s house.

I had imagined riches, but there was nothing like that here. Only shadows. Only rock.
Something was here, though. Something that waited.

I have but three secrets- one I have said; one, it is easy enough to guess; and one that lies beneath all my other secrets, and not even my sisters or brother know it, although my twin Eleanor knows as there are no secrets between us, truly, and it is this: my mother was a mortal woman, a Demon and the daughter of Demons, but my father- our father, excepting my brother who was not born of my mother though he is her son all the same- our father came to our mother from out of the West, and to the West he returned by sleeping roads, when he had tired of sporting with her. I cannot be sentimental about my parentage: I am sure he does not think of her, and doubt that he ever knew of us, of me. But he left us with our gifts of magic, and me with a body that is small- dainty hands and flat breasts, fine features and fine hair, dainty legs and tiny pink suckers all down them- and fast, and strong; and perhaps I take after him in other ways- I know not. I am ugly, as mermaids go, for I am a cecelia, and my father and mother were both beautiful- though, concerning my father, I only have my mother’s whispered words, and only once when I came home in tears at being called ugly in school again.

Perhaps she was deceived.

I wondered what I would have seen in that cave if my father had been anything other than what he was.

You would be seeing gold, said a whisper that was not a whisper, from deep in the heart of the mountain. It was a lonely voice, and distracted, and bored- and, at my entrance, intrigued. It sounded like- no, not like my mother. It sounded like a voice I could have heard, had things been different- like a voice I’d never heard before at all.

“I would see gold,” I said aloud. “Would it be real, or would it be an illusion?”

The whisper was amused. You think like a mortal woman, child, making things always to be one thing or another. It is gold they would see, and touch. Gold they would carry back with them, feeling the weight of it the while, gold they would trade with other mortals for what they needed. What does it matter if it is there or no if they can see it, touch it, steal it, murder for it? Gold they need and gold I give them.

“And what do you take, for the gold you give them?”

Little enough, for my needs are few, and I am old: too old to follow my sisters into the West, too old to take the Dreaming Road. I taste their pleasure and their joy. I feed, a little, feed on what they do not need and do not value. A taste of heart, a lick and a nibble of their fine consciences, a sliver of soul. And in return a fragment of me leaves this cave with them and gazes out at the world through their eyes, sees what they see until their lives are done and I take back what is mine.

“Will you show yourself to me?”

I could see, in the darkness, better than any woman born of mortal man and woman could see. All my sisters can. I saw something move in the shadows, and then the shadows congealed and shifted, revealing formless things at the edge of my perception, where it meets imagination. Troubled, I said the thing it is proper to say at times such as this: “Appear before me in a form that neither harm nor is offensive to me.”

Is that what you wish?
The rasp of sand on stone. “Yes,” I said.

From out of the shadows it came, and it stared down at me with empty sockets lit with glowing motes of weeplight, smiled at me with wind-weathered ivory limned with grime. It was all bone, save its hair, and its hair was black and gold, and wrapped about the branch of a thorn-bush coral.

“That offends my eyes.”

*I took it from your mind, daughter of my house*, said a whisper that surrounded the skeleton thing. Its jawbone did not move. *I chose something nearly like what you loved. I chose something like your Miki, as he was the last time you saw him.*

I closed my eyes, but the figure remained.

It said, *the reaver waits for you at the mouth of the cave. She waits for you to come out, weaponless and weighed down with gold. She will kill you, and take the gold from your dead hands.*

“But I’ll not be coming out with gold, will I?”

*Will you?*

I breathed, and listened to the blood rushing in my ears. I thought, a moment, in the darkness. I thought of Tolly Crookshank, the salt-grey through her hair, the line of her flat mouth. She was bigger than I am, but all women are bigger than I am- shoulders, spine, breasts, hips, all of her. Perhaps I was stronger, and faster, but she was also fast, and she was strong.

*She killed my beloved,* I thought, then wondered if the thought was mine or if it had crept out the shadows into my head. My beloved died because a reaving woman found him. Took his knife and took his horses and took his honor too- what else was he to do but die? Aloud, I said, “Auntie Whispers, is there another way out of this cave?”

*You leave the way you entered, through the mouth of my cave.*

I stood there and did not move, but in my mind… I was not an animal in a trap, not exactly. I was more… more like beating rice to rid it of chaff and split it to cook; ideas tossed up high and let to fall down and be caught again, the least of them blowing away like dust. No fear and no hesitation and no regret. No. None of those, not now. Not ever again.

I said, “Auntie Whispers, I am weaponless. She told me that I could not enter this place with a weapon. That it was not the custom.”

*It is the custom now, to bring no weapon into my place. It was not always the custom, niece. Follow me,* said the she-thing of my house in the skeleton shape of my Miki.

I followed her, for I could see her, even when it was so dark that I could see nothing else.

In the shadows it said, *It is beneath your hands.*

I crouched and felt it. The haft felt like bone- perhaps a rib from a whale. I touched the blade cautiously in the darkness, discovered that I was over something large, almost like a sword- but more like a paring knife than any weapon. It was thin at the spine and thinner at the edge, sharp at the tip and the pommel. It would be better than nothing.

“Is there a price?”
There is always a price.

“Then I will pay it. I ask two other things, Auntie Whispers. The first… won’t you come with me, into the light? A journey too hard for one alone is made easier by two together.”

Live through your battle to come, and perhaps I shall.

“Then the second, and last… you say that you can see the world through her eyes.”

The glowing motes in those empty hollow sockets flickered, and then the whole skull nodded.

“Then, Auntie Whispers- I ask that you tell me when she sleeps.”

It said nothing. I felt a hand- and though it looked like a skeleton, it felt warm, hard as bone but gentle, gentle, touch the strands of my hair that had fallen out of my tenugui. The warm hard fingers tucked my hair behind my ear, and stroked down the side of my face, down the side of my neck, rested on my shoulder and squeezed.

It said nothing.

It melded into the darkness, and I felt alone in that place- but not uncared for, nor unwelcomed, nor unloved.

Time passed. I followed the sound of the rasping sand, took a water swollen plum from my belt, and ate it. I ate half of my last mochi, breaking it in half and then working the half until it stretched and squished and then chewing it in small bites until it dissolved into nothing at all but a sweet-sour taste and a sticky film on my teeth. I slept and woke and slept again, and dreamed of my mother waiting for me as the day turned to night and the seasons changed, as I grew and she withered away; waiting for me just as I had waited for Miki, waiting in the painful space of- of not knowing - waiting for me forever.

Something, a finger, touched my hand: it was not bony and hard. It was soft, and humanlike, but ever so just too cold and too light.

She sleeps.

I left the cave in the blue light, before dawn. She slept across the cave, catfishlike, I knew, such that the slightest touch would have woken her. I kept my weapon in front of me, a bone handle and a beak-like blade of blackened silver star-steel, and I reached out and took what I was after, without waking her.

Then I stepped closer, and her hand grasped for my ankle and her eyes opened.

“Where is the gold?”

“I have none.”

The wind blew cold on the mountainside. I had danced back, out of her reach, when she had grabbed at me. She stayed on the ground, pushed herself up onto one elbow.

Then she said, “Where is my knife?”
“I took it,” I told her. “While you slept.”

She looked at me, sleepily. “And whyever would you do that? If I was going to kill you I would have done it on the way here. I could have killed you a dozen times.”

“But I did not have gold then, did I?”

She said nothing.

I said, “If you think you could have got me to bring the gold from the cave, and that not bringing it out would have saved your miserable soul, then you are a fool.”

She no longer looked sleepy. “A fool, am I?”

She was ready to fight. It is good to make people who are ready to fight angry.

“Not a fool. No. For I have met fools and idiots, and they are happy in their idiocy, even with straw in their hair. You are too wise for foolishness. You seek only misery and you bring misery with you and you call down misery on all you touch.”

She rose then, holding a rock in her hand like an axe, and she came at me. I am small, and she could not strike me as she would have struck a woman of her own size. She leaned over to strike. It was a mistake.

I held the bone haft tightly, and stabbed upward, striking fast with the pointy beak of the paring knife, like an eel. I knew the place I was aiming for, and I knew what it would do.

She dropped her rock, clutched at her right shoulder. “My arm,” she said. “I cannot feel my arm.”

She swore then, fouling the air with threats and curses. The dawn light on the mountaintop made everything so beautiful and blue. In that light, even the blood that had begun to billow and soak into her garments was purple. She took a step back, so she was between me and the cave. I felt exposed, the rising sun at my back.

“Why do you not have gold?” she asked me. Her arm hung limply at her side.

“There was no gold there for such as I,” I said.

She threw herself forward, then, ran at me and kicked at me.

I ducked and dropped the too large paring knife from my hands. I threw my arms around her leg, and I held on to her as together we tumbled off the mountainside into the current.

Her head was above me, and I saw triumph in it, and then I saw black water, and then the valley floor was above me and I was rising to meet it and then it was below me and I was being dragged to my death.

A jar and a bump, and now we were turning over and over on the side of the mountain, the world a dizzying whirligig of rock and pain and sky and curses, and I knew I was a dead woman falling, but still I clung to the leg of Tolly Crookshank.

I saw a leopard spotted ray in flight, but below me or above me I could no longer say. It was there, in
the dawn light piercing through the silt and gloom of the deep sea, in the shattered fragments of time and perception, there in the pain. I was not afraid: there was no time and no space to be afraid in, no space in my mind and no space in my heart. I was being dragged with the current, holding tightly to the leg of a woman who was trying to kill me; we were crashing into rocks, scraping and bruising and then…

...we stopped. Stopped with a force enough that I felt myself jarred, and was almost thrown off Toloi Cruickshank and to my death beneath. The side of the mountain had crumbled under the force of rushing water there, long ago, sheared off and scrubbed smooth, leaving a sheet of blank rock, as smooth and as featureless as glass. But that was below us. Where we were, there was a ledge, and on the ledge there was a miracle: stunted and twisted, high above the kelpline, where no kelp has any right to grow, was a twisted yronwood kelp, not much larger than a bush, although it was old. It’s roots grew into the side of the mountain, and it was this yronwood kelp that had caught us in it’s grey-green arms.

I let go of the leg, clambered off Toloi Cruickshank’s body, and onto the side of the mountain. I stood on the narrow ledge and looked down at the sheer drop. There was no way down from here. No way down at all.

I looked up. It might be possible, I thought, climbing slowly, with fortune on my side, to make it up that mountain. If it did not crumble beneath my fingers. If the current was not too hungry. And what choice did I have? The only alternative was death.

A voice: “So. Will you leave me here to die, bangtail?”

I said nothing. I had nothing to say.

Her eyes were open. She said, “I cannot move my right arm, since you stabbed it. I think I broke a leg in the fall. I cannot climb with you.”

I said, “I may succeed, or I may fail.”

“You’ll make it. I’ve seen you climb. After you rescued me, crossing that waterfall. You went up those rocks like only a bangtail like you could’ve, with your legs and your suckers.”

I did not have her confidence in my climbing abilities.

She said, “Swear to me by all you hold holy. Swear by your king, who waits over the Sea as he has since we drove his subjects from this land. Swear by the things you Goblin creatures hold dear—swear by dreams and smoke, by shadows and shark skin, by dice and silence. Swear that you will come back for me.”

“You know what I am?”

“I know nothing. Only that I want to live.”

“I swear by these things… by dreams and smoke, by shadows and shark skin, by dice and by silence and sunbeams through silt. I swear by green hills of seagrass and standing gates of stone. I will come back.”

“I would have killed you. I had planned to kill you, and take the gold back as my own.”

“I know.”
Her hair framed her face like a salt-greyed halo. There was red blood on her cheek where she had scraped it in the fall.

“You could come back with ropes. My rope is still up there by the cave-mouth, but you’d need more than that.”

“Yes, I will come back with ropes.”

“When?”

I looked up at the rock above us, examined it as best I could.

Sometimes good eyes mean the difference between life and death, if you are a climber. I saw where I would need to be as I went, the shape of my journey up the face of the mountain. I would have to climb up pressed flat against the stone as the current bore down. I thought I could see the ledge outside the cave, from which we had fallen as we fought. I would head for there. Yes.

I blew on my hands, to warm them and clear the dust from them before I began to climb. “I will come back for you,” I said. “With ropes. I have sworn.”

“When?” she asked, and she closed her eyes.

“In a year. I will come here in a year.”

I began to climb. The woman’s cries followed me as I stepped up and crawled and stuck and clung and hauled myself up the side of that mountain, mingling with the cries of the rays, closing in on the stink of blood; and they followed me back from the Foggy Mountain, with nothing to show for my pains and my time but a knife I cannot use for cooking nor fighting and an Auntie who has gone home now, and I will hear her screaming, at the edge of my mind, as I fall asleep or in the moments before I wake, until I die.

It did not crumble, and the current pulled and pressed at me but it did not throw me down. I climbed, and I climbed in safety.

When I reached the ledge, the cave entrance seemed like a darker shadow in the noonday sun. I stepped to it, and entered.

“Auntie Whispers, are you here?”

_I am, my niece._

“I have done one part of what I set out to do.”

_You have, and your first battle is won. She that fell was the last to carry a piece of me; and she will be dead soon._

“Will you come with me?”

_I will._
I took my Auntie Whispers’ cold, thin hand, and drew her into the light. She was not a skeleton at all, merely thin and weary and old, her hair nearly white and her eyes a filmy blue from cataracts. We turned from the little hole in the mountain, turned my back on the mountain, and from the shadows that were already gathering in the cracks and the crevices and deep inside my skull, and I began to lead my Auntie home, away from the Foggy Mountain. I left the Smoking Mountain behind, to return in a year.

There are a hundred roads and a thousand currents that would take us back home beyond the Red Gate, far to the West, where my mother and brother and sisters and home would be waiting. On my red legs, and my Auntie’s see-through fins, we swam for it.

I returned as I said I would to the Mountain; but I never could find that cave again.

The interesting thing about all the stories I tell is not only are they true, they actually happened as well. Fine, but important, distinction, that.

I’ve never actually said all of that out loud. I feel… less. Less twisted up, less… furious. Less. For having done so.

The tattoo I get is a combination of the flowers I wanted and the traditional tattoos every sailor gets. I get my peonies and red spider lilies, a sweet pea vine winding around an anchor labeled ‘Mom’; anemones and blue asters and bluebells curling around the shark over my spleen-scar, camellias and jasmine and lavender curling around my ribs and under each pitiful breast where the skin won’t stretch; a swallow on my shoulder, ‘hold fast’ on my knuckles, a rooster on my right hip and a pig on my left, a harpoon crossed with a cleaver and a cutting fork on my right forearm and my crew’s jolly roger on my left… and under my ear, on the side I sleep, a northern star.

So I don’t get lost again.
So like, I’m not allowed to do business in the public parks of Germa Kingdom. There’s public ordinances against it? Which, like, would be fine if it weren’t for the fact that I’m also not allowed to rent an office space or put out advertising for enchanting unless I have a license and I don’t. I’m not allowed to tell fortunes in my favorite fortune telling space; and I can’t sell enchantments under the table because that’ll get the Moral Authority- Morau- after me. Those people don’t have senses of humor; I’m pretty sure if they even try to smile, they burst into flames.

Anyway. Havij talked to the ninja who follows me around, Farthingale, and they came up with a compromise of a public garden. Handily, there’s one attached to an Ice Cream shop cat-corner to the ferry station in the Third Fleet- Sanji’s Fleet, France. There’s a whole like, Thing, about how each Royal Vinsmoke is In Charge of a Fleet of the Germa Kingdom, but I was eating a grilled cheese sandwich with hot tomato soup at the time so I only listened to the bit where Mab explained which Prince or Princess had which ship, and where that ship fell in standing amongst the Fleet entire.

The sandwich had three different kinds of cheese, and the tomato soup was made with herbs I’d never had before, so you can understand how much more interested I was in lunch than whatever politics Mab was saying.

Something something Sanji’s in charge of Fleet France, which is the shittiest fleet or whatever blah blah blah politics blargle the sandwich was fuckin’ good.

Flavor Craver’s is a femme of the first ice cream shop, according to Demonic mores- and those same mores are responsible for the amount of black and white in my outfit, you get fined, yeah that’s right, fined, for not expressing a gender as well as your birth order in the Germa Kingdom. On the day I and Havij gained a Third for our Coven, I was wearing a black and white outfit of stars and skirts, a cropped yellow jacket adorned with strategic patches- think, um, union worker, not punk rocker. The eyes were at my collar, while the orbuculum went betwixt my shoulders; and the last one went on my right shoulder, the one I am most proud to have. My skates, of course, were just broken in.

Havij was wearing a red crop top under lycra biker shorts, all under a letter jacket housecoat frankenstein I immediately called her ‘leisure suit’ and henceforth refused to change my appellation, under pain of pain which she gave me every time I said it. And say it I did- listen, your friend goes out in public in crushed pink velvet velour, you say something about it. The black satin cummerbund which she was wearing off centered, obi style, and the enormous and frankly overwhelming variety of enamel pins stuck into the black satin provided plenty of color commentary, when the leisure suit joke wore a bit thin.

We were also both wearing hard shell knee pads, and helmets, but that’s safety equipment, and need not count as fashion. Although, this being Germa Kingdom- my helmet is yellow, and Havij’s is pink. Havij also had wrist guards, and I had heavy work gloves; doing the kinds of handstands and handspins and handsprings I preferred on suspect concrete has shredded my hands more than enough for one life. My gloves were also yellow, but that’s fine.

Mostly, we dress the way we do because the Spectra order actually comes before the Gender order, in Germa Kingdom. Basically, birth order is more important than gender is, and the way you can tell where someone is in birth order is by color- gender is denoted by tone or shade. That gets muddled
pretty easily, of course- gender is not so simple as 'closer to white or black'; but the actual color, the *spectra* itself is always clear to a Demon.

Red is always first; followed by Orange, then Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet. Mister Sanji was born Third; and the Prince Dimitry, one of the only Vinsmokes not currently with the Fleet, was born Fifth. Spectra is not something that gets discussed in polite society- from what Missus Mab told me when I asked, Demons find the knowledge instinctive. It’s not really something they tend to play around with or question- and there are very few Demons willing to wear a color that isn’t their own. Apparently, the clearest indication of my sisters and I not being all that Daemonic, much less Daemonic? The fact that we borrow colored clothing from each other, without much more than a comment that we want to or are allowed. I wear my sisters stuff- usually with permission, sometimes without- all the time, and never really think about it. Sure, I know the yellow stuff is really mine, and so do they, but it doesn’t bother me to wear things of theirs and vis-a-vis. Any fights we’ve gotten into over clothing has been about not asking first or damage accrued, not wearing a color that isn’t our own.

This also led to a discussion about people with color blindness, and… I guess the layman term for it is color attentiveness? Basically, what I mean to say is- Cece doesn’t wear all black Slap *just* because her Clownsona is based on a raccoon. She doesn’t let it stop her, and she doesn’t broadcast it, or even think of it… but she *is* color blind. I was never clear on the details of how much, but she is.

According to Missus Mab, Demons aren’t color blind, ever. It’s a mystic impossibility- even if their eyes, their *brains*, physically cannot discern the difference between different colors, *they will still discern the differences*. She said that there’s something similar in Automata- that absolutely every Automata or Automatic person can discern Soul Tones, the literal musical variance of souls. (For Fairies, it’s Meanings- with a lot of crossover into Tones- especially concerning names.)

In contrast, Demons who are color attentive tend to outright ignore or disregard the Spectra, which can be inflammatory to the more traditional, orthodox Daemons. She compared it to Fae, actually- said that there are only Seven Laws that the Fae are all taught, and all adhere to- but what those laws actually *mean* and how they’re enforced is the subject of literal Ages of debate, scholarship, and schooling. Being a Faesh Lawyer means more than just passing the Bar Exam- it means being more knowledgeable and practiced in the vagaries and nuances of Faesh faith than literally any other Fae excepting a Judge or Royalty.

So like, Flavor Craver’s is across the street from a mec the first’s skate shop; it’s called *Grindhouse* and the only time I went in there was to buy a pair of switch-aglets for my skates and I did *not* like the vibe or the smell of unwashed man stank, so I noped out after making my purchase and haven’t been back since. This is not to say that I like the smell of Flavor Craver’s any better- it’s too sweet, the whole place smells like cold and those crunchy waffles they put ice cream in. Bleh.

I like the garden I tell fortunes in- well, actually, people in this Kingdom don’t really want fortunes or even astrology charts, so I’ve been working on my Device. In it’s inert state, it’s basically the size of a hair comb, and I wear it as such. Active, it’s a real *Crown*, with tassels and everything. Gold, enamel, inlay, and cool green-water magic. It suits me. Anyway, the garden I would tell fortunes in if anyone wanted a fortune told, it smells like… like clover, and the way bread smells before you bake it, and sweet sea-salt air. I like it.

Also there’s a fuckin sweet skate park like, three blocks down from the ferry station. When the wind is just right, I can hear the cracking of sick moves all the way from my shaded seat in the green garden.
The garden out back of Flavor Craver is this huge enclosed lotus garden, with gently floating tables atop these massive lily pads. Even though this garden is totally open to the public- believe me, I checked- most days, the only people here are me, Havij, and Farthingale. The skaters only go into the ice cream shop; mostly for sodas or milkshakes. I see them through the open columns sometimes, and there’s one I seem to always catch sight of. He’s tall, I think- dark brown hair, with these two curling horns sprouting from the sides of his head. They look like ram’s horns, I guess.

I think his name is Vadym?

I’ve never gotten a good look at his deck, but I’ve seen him move on the board- he’s good.

I know what to do now- the main issue is, I don’t have a way of getting into the Hell Tower. Basically, I need to diversify- if I paint Enchantments on to the decks of skateboards, I can probably find a niche market. If nothing else, I can probably do some pretty great art on them...

Anyway, after I came to this conclusion I told Havij and Farthingale and they agreed and then we all went to the skatepark. We jokingly couched it in business terms like, uh, scouting or whatever but really we went to skate. It’s nice.

Having friends to go with to the skate park, I mean.

So like, the day we, I mean my cousin and me, actually met was the day Vadym ate shit so hard his bone stuck out of his leg.

I have seen one person die in front of me outside of battle, and that was little Mitsuo at the skatepark. He broke his leg like that, with the bone out in the calf, trying a sweet flip in the bowl and his blood went all on the outside of his body and he died in minutes and I was the only one who didn’t run. I couldn’t- I couldn’t put enough pressure on his leg and I couldn’t wake him up and all I could do when the ambulance came was tell the EMTs that he wouldn’t wake up and I was sorry and-

I carry a first aid kit, now. Genny’s the one who became a nurse; but I got full EMT certification, which. Has more use than it doesn’t. I also carry a serious first aid kit, for what shouldn’t be obvious reasons.

It’s important to know that a first aid kit should be a carry-along for any ‘special’ activity you’re doing outside the norm, and your workplace should have first aid kits as well. More importantly, the first aid kit for your special activity or workplace should be calibrated for that workplace- I’d expect more burn and cut treatments in a kit meant for a working kitchen, whereas the one I take with me to skateparks is a skater’s kit, meant for dealing with road rash, serious blisters, impacted toenails, and heavy bruising.

Every first aid kit starts with the case. I used to keep mine in a large white taffin that I painted a red star sign on, but Missus Mab made me a super-high vis backpack with mesh zipper bags in a variety of sizes. She even stitched up a first aid patch, which states things about me that are true, and put it on my jacket, along with all the others. I went over common injuries with Doctor Chopper, and made sure what was in my bag was actually, y’know, useful. He really only made two additions to the specifics- all the rest was stuff more often found in a general first aid kit.
Pre-cut adhesive bandages, in sizes small and flexible enough for cuts on fingers and toes- which really hurt and get annoying fast because of how much they sting when sweat gets in them- all the way up to ‘scraped the skin off of my hip and the waistband of my pants is making things so much worse’. Blister cushions, because they are very painful okay? Like, fuck. And, a small tin of triple antibiotic ointment.

Tegaderm dressings are Sixty-Six technology- a waterproof barrier that still allows oxygen and other gases to circulate through the film. It’s very good indeed for covering stitches, tattoos, anything that needs a covering but also needs to breathe. First aid tape, and athletic tape because the first aid tape doesn’t always stick well and the light tan first aid wrap that matches absolutely no-one’s skin too, because it isn’t sticky in itself. A folding straight razor with absolutely no frills, as it’s a medical tool-nothing worse than getting your hair ripped out from medical adhesives. Although I’m not sure if having a bright red folding razor is frilly or not… oh yes, and sharpening tools for the razor.

There’s a bottle of saline solution to irrigate and clean wounds, aspirin and ibuprofen, gauze pads, gauze rolls, and two inch wide conforming crepe bandage. Sterile non-stick pads, latex and vinyl gloves, paint on new-skin from the daiso, tweezers, a dedicated tourniquet, and a small stick of hickory to make the tourniquet more effective.

Um, let’s see- white linen tea towels for setting out tools on, pins and drill bits and pliers for dealing with toenails after endurance events or long-run sets… and squish-to-activate reusable ice packs and warmers too; and an insulated lunch bag with tupperware and such inside. Dentists can only put teeth back if they have the tooth in question, y’all. Oh, and all the regular stuff too.

Two absorbent compress dressings, antibiotic wipes, an emergency blanket, quick-look card for the variations of cpr, hydrocortisone ointment in a large tin because Havij is a bmx biker, oral thermometer, triangular bandages for arm and shoulder injuries, and of course an Emergency First Aid guide- two, actually, one specifically for oceanic threats and one published in Germa Kingdom for fleet-specific threats.

So I don’t know if I mentioned it but I’m a skater when I skate- I skate on skates, I mean, I skate on roller skates, is what I mean. They’re yellow suede, with little like, hearts cut out over the ankle. I make my own ankle support. I have a matching pair of work gloves also in yellow suede, because too much suspect concrete murderizes your fingies and that’s not cool, y’know?

Anyway so Vadym was trying a sweet loop on the half-sphere in the skatepark and he flinched I guess and then he- fell-

And then his bone was sticking out of his leg and I told “Havij, call an ambulance” “Right!” and then I had my full first aid pack and I was sliding on my knees to a stop near him and he was bleeding and I was putting gloves on and tourniqueting his leg.

I actually looked it up after we got settled into Sanji’s townhouse- the thing I’ve been fixing for years, the thing I thought was a weird sunflower barrette in Mom’s trunk… it’s proper name is the Water Lily Tiara. Making me, in the proper High Daemonic, Fernanda, Seer of the Lily the Water.

I’m thinking about this so I don’t think about shards of bone and broken flesh but it’s not working. I pressed bandaging to his flesh and held fast there, waited until the paramedics came and went with him to the hospital. There’s bloodstains on the yellow suede of my skates now, that’ll never come out and I don’t want him to die. Even though we’ve never met, even though we’ve never spoken- I don’t
want him to die.

So the reason Farthingale is following me around is because of politics so maybe I should have listened to Mab explaining things but the sandwich was really good and I had the hunger. Tes con. So uh it has nothing to do with me being female, why I’m not allowed to leave the house by myself I mean; I mean, the reason is my surname and age. I’m a Vinsmoke and always have been, and that’s the ruling house of the Germa Kingdom or whatever. I’m also of bride age or something? Which. Gross?

Anyway, the Sneak of Ninja reports directly to Robin, and she told them that us underage Vinsmokes were not to be out of Sanji’s house unescorted so that’s how I got Farthingale.

Vadym’s blood has soaked through my gloves. I have to get new ones.

Mab made everyone in the crew clothing “appropriate for the Kingdom such that we don’t have to pay fines to the Morau” but I know she really just likes making us all new clothing. It’s weird that Beatrix does too- I thought she liked hunting, but I guess we really don’t know each other anymore. We used to- we used to be so in each other’s pockets it felt kinda like there weren’t seven girls but one girl in seven places; I have faint memories of learning to cook at an Auntie’s place but I don’t actually know how to cook, or which auntie, or anything.

I never noticed how much I strained against being mistaken for my sisters until it stopped happening. I have the longest hair of all my sisters and I almost never wear it up. We look nothing alike each other, now.

I don’t know why that doesn’t make me happy.

There’s blood on my skates and blood on my dress and blood on my hands through my gloves and there would be blood in my hair but it’s tied back in a low-tail and I can’t ever wear these clothes again not even the jacket and I was so happy when I got the jacket but it’s ruined now I’ll never be able to think of anything but Vadym’s blood on my hands and his face white with pain and the glare of the late spring sun overhead and his friends screaming and panicking and the howling of the wee-woo wagon and the smell of the hospital and I-

“H-havij?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you call Sanji?”

“No, Farthingale did,”

“Oh, ok,"

And I don’t have my occluspecs on, and I can’t put them on because my hands are covered in blood
and I can’t let anyone else touch them and I can’t- I can’t- I can’t-

So my first words to Fern after I broke my leg were “Thank you- but hell if I haven’t broken my leg right when I’m to take my Mastery in Enchantment.”

And she said “Uh. Is that a problem?”

“Yeah, um. There’s a lot of stairs to get to the Testing area of the Hell Tower, and with me down a leg...”

“When’s your test?”

“Next week, why?”

“I’ll go with you,”

“Uh. They won’t let you in if you aren’t there to take the test-”

“I don’t care if I fail the test. I already know who I am, and what I can and can’t do. You need help getting to your test- do you need some refreshers on studying, or like...?”

“Uh. Well. What do you know about enchanting?”

“...Do you want me to start at the beginning?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. Enchanting is the process of designing, testing, and building an executable spell or program for accomplishing a specific mystic task. Programming involves tasks such as: analysis, algorithm generation, profiling algorithmic accuracy and resource consumption, and the implementation of algorithms in a chosen programming language, commonly referred to as runes. The source code, or Base Rune Cluster, is written in one or more languages that are intelligible to the enchanter, rather than spell code, which is directly executed by the Device.

“The purpose of enchanting is to find a sequence of runic instructions that will automate the performance of a spell on a mechanical or digital computer, often for solving a specific problem—usually too large, too variable heavy, or too mystically volatile to leave to a human caster alone. As a process, enchanting requires expertise in several different subjects, including knowledge of the Sphere of Influence for the Device, specialized algorithms, and formal logic.

“As Enchanting falls under the clade of Wards, an enchanter must also learn to test, tweak, maintain, build, and manage run-off. While these are considered part of programming, the term spellwriting is often used to differentiate the Enchanter’s process from the Warder’s own spellsinging. Enchanting also pulls a great deal from the field of engineering, as the two share more than a layperson would expect.

“My particular specialty is Bodging and Shifting, with quite a bit of experience in Smallcharms. My current project is the repair of an ancient Device my mother left to me.”
I took a moment to process what my cousin told me- look, I knew we were kin by looking, even if I don’t think Yellow is her actual color- and then I smiled.

“Coz, I think you’re gonna do just fine.”

This was just before I was discharged from hospital, and Fern and her Coven were kind enough to escort me back to the ferry station, and then to my house. We exchanged shell numbers, and then I had to deal with my brother’s chirping and Mom being really upset and Dad being… disappointed, I think? He’s never interested in what I do, really.

It's whatever.

Anyway, my Cousin and her Coven- Havij, in white star shoes, a bright orange suit, and a white mesh shirt with stars on, glittering in her tousled bed head hair, even in her ears; The Ninja, in blue and black, with a mask to suit their cape; and Fern in… wow, full mage’s robes, wearing the Lily Pad Crown.

Fern looked me over, then nodded to herself and pinned a sword and shield onto my shirt on either side of my throat. They’re violet; I’m not sure how she knew, I usually take pains to only broadcast my gender… I’m in my normal school shoes, a pair of zipper legged cargo shorts to account for the cast, a black tank top, and a violet scarf I swiped from Hildy and am wearing as a belt. It’s a full chroma, no tint or tone, so it’s fine.

It’s a quick bus ride to the Hell Tower, and then, like I said before, stairs. So many. The Coven takes it in turns to carry me up the stairs- Fern goes so far as to take out her wand, a tiny thing of hickory, and cast a spell on the scarf that makes me weigh as much as I would were we walking on the moon- calls it the moon-belt enchantment, which is how I know the spell is permanent and probably not going to hurt me.

Fern has a powerful and terrifyingly strong grip; Havij actually physically takes most of my weight when she helps me up the stairs; and the Ninja is very uncomfortable with physical touch in all it’s forms. Not the best entourage, but then again I’m like, a professional third wheel.

So, I’m the youngest of fourteen- Hildy’s older than me, and all the rest are too. I have to take it, when they started calling me Dimo to my face- and they can call on me at any time to get them out of situations they don’t want to be in anymore, even if I’m busy or don’t want to.

Basically, if any of my sisters have an unwanted suitor, anys of my brothers aren’t sure if they’re on a date, any of them can’t turn the outsider down without causing offence, they call me in. Dimo the Unwanted, here to help. Nearly four years of experience sabotaging romantic encounters under my belt now, and ten more of being the inescapable tag-along for literally everything-

I think even my parents feel like that? Like, Hilda is much more interesting than me- she likes fighting head on, she likes the outdoors and just… she fits into our family, way better than I do. I’m the uncomfortable silence my siblings call on when they don’t want to deal with it themselves anymore.

Maybe I should start offering my services professionally. I mean, I’ve heard Fern spout off some of her Prophecies, and if that really does happen every day… shit, I’d’a tried making money off it two.
There’s probably someone who would settle for me as a platonic bufferzone on unwanted or ambiguous dates with suitors that don’t suit and can’t be turned away with a simple “no”. I kill every good mood at every table I sit at- including table’s where I’m the only one sitting- so I’ve gotta be able to market that, right? Get some good out of it.

“What’cha thinkin’ about, Coz?”

I tell Fern what I’m thinking about, even as my hand clenched tight on her shoulder. The landings are starting to really hurt my hip.

“Hm. Well, on the one hand, I think you’re being too hard on yourself- or something like that, fuck- and secondly, what would your basic services be?”

“Hm… Terrible puns, poorly-timed jokes-”

“Like, bad joke timing, or bad time for a joke?”

“Yes. Mm, casual displays of affection, bringing up unappealing facts about who I’m with-”

“Real or fake?”

“We’d decide that ahead of time. I’d include myself in attempts at cuddling, domineer conversations, have irritating laughter, talk about how I might’ve found an apartment big enough for all your cats and your skull collection, subtly make remarks about how nice it is that you’ve made a new friend, take a sleeping draught instead of a pain draught and punch myself in the leg all evening, forgetting I’m allergic to peanuts and puking on your date, using my most horrifying table manners in public-”

“What about advanced services?”

“Creating diversions-”

“There should be a tier list,”

“Tier one, for example- pouring a glass of water over my head and shaking it off like a dog; tier two, impromptu interpretive dancing to replace my portion of conversation duties; and then, at tier three I start triggering alarms; uh, intimate displays of physical affection, “accidentally” spilling things on your suitor, laughing at everything your suitor says while drinking until I manage to spray onto them through my nose,”

“Would you laugh whether they’re telling a joke or not?”

“Yes,”

“Package deals?”

“Eh?”

“Like- I sometimes sold prophecies with a few enchanted objects, not that I knew it was illegal at the time, of course,”
“Of course. Uhm… Gay Best Friend- exactly what it sounds like. As far as personas go, it does run the risk of stereotype and exploitation, so I try to keep my happy-go-lucky idiocy subtle. I try to keep my flirty giggling and wide-eyed interest mild, while also doing my best to seem very overbearing. Imposing Older Brother- scowling, smirking, and snorting judgmentally. I can be the violence minded Firebrand, and the Insufferable Know-it-all; I don’t have a big enough rack to really sell Suspicious Meathead or Soldier of Misfortune. I can be the Irritating Younger Brother- for obvious reasons, I’m very good at this,”

“…”

“The Fiend- I dunno why anyone would bring their fiend on a date, but if I don’t, neither will your suitor. I’ll use my Divinity studies and nearly-shouting rhetoric to obfuscate them into backing off. If that doesn’t work, I’ll recite the appropriately dry, inflammatory, or stomach churning Five Point Star passages until they’re driven off by crushing boredom and liturgical nausea,”

“…”

“The Man Out of Time: Depending on the age difference, I can pose as a relation of yours from the Wrong Time. I’ll wear conspicuously unusual clothing- going so far as to do traditional hairstyles in the original way- continually ask for the date and time, anxiously mutter about how it’s almost time, make loud calculations on an abacus, and get startled about super common foods,”

“…”

“Zombie Ex; I don milky semi-opaque lenses and follow your every command with mindless, jerky, unnatural movements. I’m at your direct command, controlled from beyond the grave by your occult powers- the fate of all suitors who displease you,”

“Nice,”

“Thanks. Prince Vinsmoke of the Germa; I’ll wear a stylish suit, soft kidskin gloves, and my best amethyst cuff-links carved in the shape of Dracolisk heads. I’ll have a ring or a cane decorated with the horns of a ram, and it’ll stamp little fleur-de-lis into the soft dirt. I’ll say little, but smile often, and menacingly. Now and then, I’ll pull out a little silver watch-glass from a chain in my waistcoat pocket, examine it, hum curiously, and return it with an enigmatic smile. I’ll wear smoke-black glasses over my eyes and stare so direct only your suitor’s eyes will shine in their blackness. I’ll speak modern Demonic with an Ancient accent, and ask subtly probing questions. I’ll carry a briefcase rigged to emit a bright light and strange chantings when I crack it open a hair. I’ll seem ever so slightly bored, even when engaged in the best of conversations,”

“Wow,”

“I know. Conspiracy Uncle is a proven classic. I’ll periodically derail the conversation with crackpot conspiracy theories, the nature of reality, extraterrestrial intelligence, and ESP. I may accuse your suitor of being in a conspiracy, or demand they feel the scar where I had an alien implant removed. I’ll insist we change locations- tables, restaurants, whatever you need- because this one is under surveillance by a secret shadow government,”

“Like the Horde?”

“No, worse- wait, you know about that?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Uh-”
“Have you considered ‘Beloved You Thought Lost Forever’ - you burst in, filthy from the road with sea-soaked clothing and a crab dangling from your horn. You’ll smell of brine and have a haunted look in your eyes. It’d require some acting skills from your employer; they’ll have to throw themselves sobbing into your arms and cry ‘I thought I’d lost you!’ and you’ll hold them and mutter something about Davy Jones getting ahead of himself.”

“Mmph. Fuck, that sounds good. Switching out?”

“Yeah, it’s Farthingale’s turn-”

“Have you considered a Vodka Auntie? You carry around a stack of SeaMall magazines you stole from the ferry, interrupting conversations with their date to point out funny products. You constantly bring up a parent of their choice and talk about all the unfortunate behaviors that run in your assumed shared family. You force the suitor to look at albums of blurry cats and talk about unpleasant surgeries in explicit detail. You can’t speak for more than a sentence without touching them nearly inappropriately. The flask of vodka mixed with juice or cut fruit is implied, and does not necessarily need to make an appearance,”

“...I’m sensing some family history, here,”

“...”

“No?”

“...I’m not supposed to say, but. If you put your makeup on just a scotch unevenly, maybe paint outside the lines on your lips and put on too much fake eyelash? Might be. Hmm. Frighteningly accurate?”

“...Alright, well, I’m not saying no,”

“...”

“What?”

“Territorial Werewolf Park Ranger. Exactly what it sounds like. Bonus if your employer can do the ‘werewolf not swearwolf’ line with a straight face,”

“Holy fuck, yes- uh. Havij, I don’t think-”

“Oh, no, I’m here to get in on this conversation. Have you considered… Dying Wife Who is Lovingly Helping You to Select Her Replacement? You’re not long for this world, but you can’t leave them to face the rest of their life alone! They need looking after- by someone who meets your impossibly high standards. You’ll smile the whole time, but it’s only a facade for the anguished tears you’re hiding behind your brave face. Add in a lil’bit’a lip tremble when you interrogate the suitor about their personal habits, measurements, favorite media, and aspirations. Have the suitor try on your fake wedding ring, just in case,”

Fern has abandoned the pretense of even pretending to be a student of any kind, and has enchanted her shoes and sash, and is now floating backwards in front of us, rising up the stairs. Wow, I- how in the fuck did she do that?
“Oh, oh- I know! Android Sent From The Future to Prevent You From Getting Laid!”

All three of us are silent. Fern huffs, and explains.

“Like, okay, so- violence attracts unwanted attention and continuously replacing assassins costs a lot of fuckin’ money, right? So, so so- robot future overlords are trying something a little more subtle than fuckin’ deathbots- Contraceptors. Don’t let the scrawny build and unimpressive rack deceive you- the Contraceptor is relentless and fully armed with unpleasant facts about conception, birth, sexual intercourse, and STDs; plus, plus plus plus- the Contraceptor lacks all inhibitions about discussing them openly at the dinner table. You’ll follow them around as a robotic chaperone and disrupt any flirtatious behavior, declaring that you can’t allow the passage of issue to an offspring under any circumstances and have been programmed to identify and disrupt all such behavior by any means necessary. Also, you can claim ‘First Law Prohibitions’ to get out of actually fighting a suitor,”

“…”

“…”

“...That might be a little Tribist though?”

“-Wha- Dammit! I thought I had something funny!”

“Oh, no- it’d be very funny, just, I don’t think Vadym should be the one to do it, y’know?”

“I’m liking where this idea of more complicated characters is going, Fern, don’t despair- hm. What about the Hard Boiled Private Detective- best at traditional restaurant dates, but maybe work with them to accommodate their needs, yeah? So, they and their suitor sit down at a table,”

“You thought this was a romantic evening out? Wrong,”

“This is an interrogation,”

“I’ll order whiskey with gin in it and eat a cigarette. I’ll arrange to have a table illuminated from a single source of light behind those thick slat blinds and prepare a grim monologue about corruption-”

“And The City is a Woman,”

“And then you’ll start asking the suitor weird personal questions, observing them closely and taking notes, and commenting on their physical mannerisms and appearance in a vaguely objectifying way-”

“And best of all, my employer won’t have to do anything during the date other than look nervous and a little guilty, which probably won’t require acting,”

Fern suddenly gasps as we all mosey towards the testing hall, and Havij steers her to an alcove and wait shit that’s the-
"**Aries:** You’re holding on damn hard. You’re bleeding- look at where you held it to yourself. The stars say to let them handle this one for you and put some mercurochrome and maybe a sticky plaster on.

"**Taurus:** There’s nothing left. There is no escape. There is nothing but the cold wind and stone walls and ashes and silence. Yet- and yet, something still burns inside of you. You will emerge from this a beast.

"**Gemini:** Decay flies a banner of fleur-de-lis and sixty-ka. The stew of politics must be stirred and skimmed, or only scum and oil collects at the top.

"**Cancer:** Loneliness isn’t a good story. Even escape needs compatriots. Make some friends godsdammit.

"**Leo:** The Stars told me to tell you that dizziness like that is not normal, and you should get yourself checked for anemia and low blood pressure.

"**Virgo:** Spit it out.

"**Libra:** What are you? A ramshackle pile of secrets, same as everyone else.

"**Scorpio:** With those who have harmed you, be forgiving but merciless. Savor the revenge and move on.

"**Ophiuchus:** All I’m getting for you is a busy signal and a pre-recorded message from your Stars. Better luck next time.


"**Capricorn:** When the Moons are in the Seventh House, and Jupiter aligns with Mars; then peas will grow in box frames, and lovage in earthen jars- **THIS IS THE AWNING OF THE CAGE OF ASPARAGUS**, cage of asparagus! Asparagus! Asparagus! Hydrangea and umeboshi, sassafras and thyme abounding; no more falsehoods or divisions; golden saffron dreams of vittles; mystic crystal revelation and the meals true libations- Asparagus! Asparagus! When the Moons are in the Seventh House, and Jupiter aligns with Mars; then peas will guide the platters, and lovage will steer the stars- **THIS IS THE AWNING OF THE CAGE OF ASPARAGUS**, cage of asparagus! Asparagus! Asparagus! Asparagus! Asparagus!

"**Aquarius:** Know that in every mind there is a door that will never be unlocked.

"**Pisces:** It won’t be long, yeah yeah yeah, it won’t be long, yeah yeah yeah, it won’t be long, yeah, ’till exams are upon you!”

And then Fern rolls her head on her neck and shakes off the, um, prophesy? I don’t know, I just want to do the Enchantment Exam.

“Wait, are all four of us going in? I thought it would just be Fern going in with me-?”

“Nah, we talked it over, and it turns out all three of us together make one superior enchanter, so
might as well all go, y’know?”

“Ah. In that case… do you three want to team up? We’ll have to produce one enchantment per person in the group, but, um, four sets of hands is better than one? Right?”

“I like the way you think,”

“Sure thing, ow,”

“Fern, you need your specs?”

“Yeah- I thought I’d finally finished this thing, too-”

Fern takes off her crown, does something to it, and it- holy shit! It folds up into a pair of fractal glasses, what even, how- and in their crackling lenses, her eyes are reflected infinitely into reflections of her eyes.

“Okay- it’s taught in the Hell Tower that fortunetelling is a load of bullshit. So, um- why the occluspecs?”

“Well, in the Wave Tower, fortune telling is it’s own field of study. Since I’m sure you’ve not even had an introductory course to the practice, I’ll tell you- Fortune telling is the aggregation of discrete data into comprehensible, acceptable stories; the substance and import of which is often left to the layperson to interpret. Telling a Fortune and Interpreting that Fortune are two entirely different fields; I don’t know what the fortunes I tell mean. That part, at least, is true- the interpretation of a fortune often is a hot fat load of bullshit,”

“So… wait. What do occluspecs even do, then?”

“On most people, they break up your third eye’s vision into glimpses of probability- a literal visualization of every possible thing. On me, they sort of… filter? I already see all probability; the occluspecs sort of…”

“It’s like a viewfinder, or a screen? So far as I understand, and I’m a Dreamer, not a Seer- so, um, for me, they just make me dizzy,”

“Um. Ninja fortunetelling is a bit less… hm. May I?”

“Sure,”

“Hnnnk- nope, no no no-”

“Sorry, they take some people like that,”

“Well, anyway- what are we going to make, then?”

“Well, I want a self sorting till- a cashbox I only have to open to empty, no sorting required,”

“Oh, I think I know how to do that- Miss Havij? What are you wanting?”

“Um. Oh! I want a Dream Key- do you know what that is?”
“Yes… I’ve never seen anyone make one from scratch- and I don’t know that we’ll have enough time...”

“It’s fine- if we don’t, a Cloak of Stars is an acceptable alternative,”

“Ah! Yeah, that’s doable- and you, Farthingale?”

“Uh. A light that follows me?”

“...Like a fuckin’ Driftglobe you could get from the gift shop on the first floor?”

“Yeah. But, um, maybe… it could be a weapon too? And more than one? Smaller?”

“Like a swarm of, I don’t know, pyreflies that can come together into a big orb, and also kill people?”

“Yeah,”

“How would you control it?”

“Uh… a bracelet or maybe some hair clips?”

“If we do both, I can give you basic Device functionality; you won’t be able to cast with it, but you can do the computing and data storage no problem,”

“Uh. What if it were two bracelets and the hair clips too?”

“Then you’d be able to cast one spell...”

“The only spell I’d want is presto-”

“Easy peasy lemon greasy,”

“Really?”

“Yeah- I finished loading and writing up the Magica Compendus, so, all cantrips are available. Anyway- what do you want, Vadym?”

“A whip to kill vampires with,”

“Um,”

“Uh,”

“Oh sure, always nice to have when the time calls for it,”

With that, the warning bell for the exam rings, and there’s no more time for words.

I never thought I’d be taking this exam under the pretense of supporting my cousin- who I didn’t know existed like, a month ago but here I am, and here we go.
Y’know, as I get started, I get the feeling that our style of enchanting might be, I dunno, Country Hick style? We might be science hicks- er, magic hicks? I mean. I don’t need to measure reagents by measuring tool anymore, I just eyeball it and add a bit more or rebalance according to what happens…

And Havij appears to be straight up tossing things willy nilly into a salad of components…

And Farthingale took off his mask and cape and bundled them together into a blank Vice Versa hat, letting his own dark blue hair flop into the light… Hm.

What are we starting with? I ask Vadym with my eyes. Vadym was calculating derivations longhand, but paused to take in our gung ho actions and kinda… blanched? I bat my eyelashes at him, and he swallows and nods and points at me first.

Okay-

I finish folding the paper cauldron I’ll need for his Vampire Killer, and have a wander over to the wall of blanks. Man, this tower has money for enchantment. I grab a money pot, and… a coin purse? Billfold too, huh, that might help.

When I wander back over, Havij has started dunking star shaped thingies into the potion Farthingale made in the paper cauldron I made, I’ll just fold another one, it’s fine- might as well do the figuring for the Vampire Killer. Wait- I point at Vadym, and hold an arm out as he hooks himself over my shoulders.

He picks a variety of smaller pieces out, aha- I see, what he’s wanting is really a meteor hammer with a long handle, that also transforms into a mace. I can do that.

Put the pieces together, lay the spells within, use my wand for the delicate work what else is it for- and there’s a velvet lined box for the blessing thereof, this is the tricky part. I lay out a blessing on the metal and leather grip and the whole thing glows red hot and holy white before settling into a weapon I certainly can’t use but Vadym wanted it and now it’s done.

The only time we’re allowed to speak in the examination hall of the Hell Tower is when we name our finished works- and for this one, it’s- “Morning Star,” and I can’t speak again until the exam is over. I look over at Vadym, who smiles and nods, once. Then, he speaks- “Cash Money Selfie,” and I smile in relief. Then, Havij pipes up from the other side of the table, a delicate pair of rabbit-y bracelets in front of her- “Fox, Leverage, and Mouse,” and then she sneezes violently and goes to wash her hands. Farthingale is silent for a long, long time- and then, finally, in tones of exhausted victory, “Dreamgirl Guiding Stars,” and with that, we’ve all done what we needed to, to finish our exams.

I stare long and hard at the Vice Versa blank holding Farthingale’s mask and cape, before looking
over at Havij, who has returned from blowing her nose, and Vadym, who is all but drooling over his new weapon. I hand Farthingale my toadstone bracer and take the blank Vice Versa from him. This, thankfully, is very simple- wish the same was true of my Spell Bat, but these things happen…

And… Done!

Farthingale hands back my- Spell Bat! How? And the shrinking action is so smooth-! And from the side of my eye, I see Havij Inscribing a mandala into the glass of a magnifying lens, Pushing an amalgam of skeleton keys into the handle and doing something with wooden feathers at the edge; she draws a Sygil onto paper and casts a spell- and then it’s… a Dream Key. When she powers up to strike, the necklace of stars flares to life, and a cloak of stars and night dusted with sunrise coats her shoulders. Then her fingers spin the Dream Key around, and she tucks it into the loop on her waist- I suppose that’s what it was for.

And then… huh. Vadym just put the sword and shield enchanted pins on either side of Farthingale’s throat. Spellblade and Spellshield… they changed! And the trio of spell focuses on that dangling chain is odd too…

Hm. Farthingale needs knuckle dusters. And Havij needs a weapon for close in work… and Vadym wants to see if he can’t fix my Device, well, hell, someone has to-

What followed, I can only describe as a frenzy of enchanting.

I don’t talk much. Most of my life has been spent in pursuit of martial excellence; and at my dojo, talking wasn’t exactly discouraged, but it wasn’t important either.

Still. You hear things in dojos, and one of the Things I heard about was the illicit trade of ginseng from Germa. That is an important thing to remember at this time because it explains several things- chief among them, why some fuckin’ degens scared my horse away and are hunting for me in the woods while I hide in a tree.

So. Ginseng is a Big Deal. Wild Ginseng is used in certain rituals and spells to heal diseases of the muscle- mostly related to being unable to relax. It’s also thought that being unable to relax contributes to infertility. Thus, whenever Beatrix would find a patch out in the woods, I’d always end up going with her to watch her back.

When harvesting ginseng, it’s important that you actually leave the majority of the patch in the ground, or it won’t grow more ginseng. It just dies. Most people don’t care, however, and they pick the entire patch so that no new ginseng grows there, making wild ginseng even more rare than it is.

Back ho- on RM, farmers with ginseng on their property weren’t usually interested in selling it, but it was a very hush-shush thing. After all, if word got around that your property might have ginseng on it, the Wrong People always found out. And then they’d sneak onto your property and steal it.

Ellie thinks she’s the only thief in the family because she’s not terribly observant outside of her work.
As for now, though, once you get private property, trespassing, poaching, and money involved- well, things get pretty scary.

Here’s something else I learned in the Dojo without ever actually asking about it: Tooth fairies are a smaller and friendlier vassal-clan of the larger and much more hostile bone fairies. It’s only after meeting Mab Morgan, and to a lesser extent, Mark Read, that I understand what that actually means.

Mab Morgan is a Bone Fairy; as is Mark.

And so am I.

I’m not great at storytelling, Journal, so, sorry if this seems out of joint. The reason I’m out here is to try and find The Girl who ran off in tears when the senior students of her martial arts school… I’ve seen bad attitude before. Seeing a bunch of Seniors beat the love of the Art out of their Junior is a new one on me. There’s probably a bunch of gender politics going on- or even regular politics- that I don’t care about, because no one should ever beat the love of the Art out of someone.

I don’t know her name, and I don’t know what they said to make her run into the woods in tears; I do know prime ginseng growing spots when I see them, just a matter of like, topology- and I know that the most dangerous thing in the woods is other people. So, I rode Steady the Ghost Horse into the woods to follow the girl and sure enough there were ginseng hunters- Ginseng Degens- and here we are now.

Ah, there’s the Girl- hiding in a thorn bush; so.

I creep out across a sturdy branch and land on a Ginseng Degen like the wrath of my own two fists.

See, Journal, here’s the thing- it takes more than consistent practice to become knowledgeable in the Art. You need guidance. From who, is the usual problem- if you’re lucky, you’ll get a teacher who cares about you, who loves the Art and wants you to love it too. Great teachers will teach you what you need to know, and teach you what to ignore.

I wasn’t quite that lucky. My teacher was old, is the main problem- she taught me more about being a person than she could about the Art. In that sense, she was a truly Great teacher; but I’ve lost her now. As I am now, the one I can trust to help me continue on the path of learning and growing is me. I am the greatest teacher I have.

One more punch and then- six Degens I counted, and six lay insensate before me. The Girl in the thorn bush has stars in her eyes. I settle myself in calmness again, and walk out of the woods. The Girl follows me furtively, staying just outside my immediate sight. Past the trees and scrub, there’s the road; and there’s Steady!

The main issue with being self guided is that most people aren’t great teachers. My teacher was
clever, though- she made me teach many students, so that I would learn how to teach myself. Showing up and working out is not enough.

If you’re learning something, ask yourself- what am I working on?

If you have no answer, even if you’re working hard, you’re just going through the motions. Maybe you’re learning- maybe you’re not. Sometimes, your answer is vague, like ‘sparring’ or ‘kata’ or ‘side kicks’. Those answers are just what you’re doing; the question that needs to be answered, every session, is “What are you working on?”

A good answer is much more specific. ‘I’m trying a new set up for my reverse punch.’ ‘I’m ingraining this kata’s movements for demonstration.’ ‘I’m figuring out which side kick I’m weakest in.’ This is the Mastery Mindset. This is how great lovers of the Art talk.

Even my teacher would talk like that- ‘I’m maintaining my dexterity.’ ‘I’m improving my grace when sidestepping.’ ‘I’m gauging the power of my stomps.’

Great lovers of the Art set specific goals in their training. I can’t wait for a teacher to tell me to fix something- I have to be aware of myself, and fix what I’m doing wrong when I notice I’m doing it wrong. I must also guide myself- I have to be honest, and diligent, and above all, loving.

Solitaire talks to Beatrix sometimes about “The Will to Overcome”. She’s cagey about what that means, exactly, but I imagine it’s similar to my Art’s “Will to Improve”. I don’t know what all goes into “Will to Overcome” other than sheer bloodminded Determination, but for me, the Will to Improve, or more simply- Courage - boils down to two questions.

What am I working on?

How can I do this better?

Very simple.

An Advanced move is just a basic move done better.

A Master of the Art is just someone who can teach you better than you can learn alone.

As for the Girl- She’s finally gathered her Courage enough to meet me.

I am wearing simple clothing, stuff that relies on the shape of my body to give it form. Blue lace up boots in deceptively soft and form-fitting sea-king leather, for all that it shines; a long grey skirt meant for dancing in, but the Art appreciates a nice non-binding leg cover; a plain white blouse Missus Mab made for me, with belled out sleeves and a scooped neckline; a cobalt blue cardigan with mother of pearl buttons, and I need to find a water fountain quickly or this blood will never come out; and a tiny little teal flip-n-tumbler I already had.

The Girl, limping out of the woods, is wearing the traditional martial arts kit in the Germa kingdom-
high-tie skirt in dove grey, an overtunic in her personal color of blue, long dancer’s tights, and no shoes to speak of. I can’t quite stop myself from crouching down and nodding her onto my back.

Her hot breath presses into the side of my neck, and her sticky hands crumple the top of my cardigan. I think I have a first aid kit… Mm. If I don’t, there was a Daiso across the street.

Time to dojo-storm with a little bit of shaming as well.

I click my tongue to encourage Steady to come closer, and double check- no first aid kit, meant to pack one, didn’t. Hm.

“I am going to take you back to your dojo, clean your feet, and spar with you. This is not a negotiation,”

“K-kay,”

“Your name?”

“V-vinsmoke Hildegarde, b-but most people call me Hilda,”

“Hmm. I am Vinsmoke Adelaide; you can call me Adel, or Cousin, as you prefer;”

The girl on my back squeaks and her hand goes very tight on my cardigan. You know, I think Mab can get blood out of cashmere; still, I should find a water fountain and rinse the blood out as soon as I can… and do I have money- yes, good. To the Daiso!

I hitch my horse to the hitching post, bounce Hilda a little higher on my back- honestly, it’s like she’s never been carried piggy back before- and step into my favorite convenience store. Hm. Medicines first- cleaning wipes, cute bandaids with an assortment of colors- gotta use the blue ones on her, it always annoyed me to have a different color; bottle of newskin for her feet, and a brick of jelly cake for the pain (OG red bean flavor, accept no substitutes); a double pack of notebooks, three pack of erasers, mechanical pencil, pencil case, coin purse with those little flat pockets you can put like ferry passes in or whatever; two bottles of water, a two pack of onigiri (shredded pork, what will they think of next) and some gummy bears; and when I walk past the claw machine, I feel Hilda on my back turn and admire the cat bag inside.

Every one of my sisters has a Secret Skill that has nothing to do with anything particularly useful. Mine happens to be claw machines. I don’t have any change though, so- purchases first.

I buy what I need to, and have the cashier change my hundred berry into twenty five berry coins. I also take the time to take the packaging off the school supplies, pack them up neatly, and write Hilda’s name on the inside of the pencil case in permanent marker- just her nickname, though, I’m not stupid.

The claw machine is twenty five berry a try; and I need to check one thing first.
“You want the one with little legs, or the one that’s sitting up?”

“...The one that’s sitting up, but how-”

“Alright, watch this-”

And then I examine the Pit carefully. Unless you’re my sister Ellie, who can shrink and thus climb inside, getting a prize out of a claw machine is tough. I just happen to be very, very good at it. In my time, I’ve nabbed hundreds of toys from the Prize Pit of claw machines, most of which got donated for charity. My current record is four in a row. I’m good at this because snatching cool shit from the prize pit of claw machines is one of my only non-Art related hobbies.

To start- check the Pit. The prizes aren’t too tightly packed in the higher strata; and although the bag Hilda wants is pressed close to the side, it’s also hooked over a spiny blue thing. I think if I snag that, then let the machine drag it up, I could probably get both of them... yeah, a lot of animals aren’t front facing anymore, and it’s only way lower that they’re packed in like sardines in oil. Things can be jiggled loose here.

It’s unfortunate that I’m the only one in line for the machine- and also unfortunate that Hilda is choking me out, she’s not slipping... Ah. In the reflection of the claw machine, I can see some of those jerks who made her cry. I pat her hand, and when she looks at me in the backing mirror, I smile. She loosens up, and I hitch her high on my back again.

I can’t tell how loose the claw grip is, or if it’s designed to let go or give a jiggle after it grasps something. Hm- is there another one farther back that’s easier to get? ...not that I can see, sadly. Normally, I’d go for the onion cat, but I don’t... hm. I know what to do.

It’s important to be realistic about what you go for, of course- but in this case I have four tries, and so can afford to use one on an onion cat I don’t really care about.

I put in my first coin, line up the other three on top of the deck, and go over the route in my mind. The claw machine is designed to break concentration and be very annoying- but I’m good at ignoring things like that. I press the start button, and carefully maneuver the claw exactly where I want it. I take all but the last few seconds of time putting it just-exactly-right- and then I drop it. The claw wraps around the onion cat’s head, before closing and snagging on an ear; and then it moves jerkily, I see, but- yessssssss! There’s a soft squeak from Hilda, and I pull the onion cat out and hand it to her on my back.

Okay.

The bag she wants is at the very end of the machine, but I think I can hook a strap with that weird blue cactus... for the bag itself, getting a claw prong under a strap is going to be paramount, although that angle will be tricky. And I don’t like the cruft over the other strap; at this angle, I can’t tell what it is, other than in the way... Three more tries.

I put in the second coin, and this time aim for the cruft around the other strap. It’s all the same as before, the meticulous movement of the claw, the drop- and what rises is four cute kitten dolls, each with their own pull over and floral skirt. The bag is still pressed up to the glass, but I have options now. I hand the dollies up to Hilda, who cooed over them and poked their little heads over my
shoulders to watch.

This next one is going to be a little tricky; it’s a rotund shape, with not much to grab onto. I can’t see it very clearly, so I’m just going to have to guess. Third try- aim the claw, careful, careful- drop it down… and I got two this time, the strap of the bag neatly sandwiched between the two… is this whole thing full of cat plushies? I’m not mad about it, just gently confused. The herky-jerky claw yanks the bag right over to the chute, and drops the cactus cat and the… I think I’m legally obligated to call it a nyanpan, and I think Hilda’s run out of arm space…

“If you could stack the nyanpan and the cat-tus on my head, I’ll get that bag you want,”

“Okay!”

Final round. Examine the route before adding in the money; add in the money and examine the route again. That loop between the ears is my best bet, I think. I drop the claw, and it closes- around the bag loop! And on the tail of… a tiny bean bag plush? It’s really cute, actually…

“Uncle!”

“Hmm?”

“This is Uncle Kitten! He’s from my favorite comic!”

“That so? -y’know, I’m on a roll here. Anything else you want?”

“The Mewcarons!”

“Uh-”

“The little round ones, pink, green, and purple!”

“Ah. That’s going to take some work- We’ll need more coins. And a tote,”

“Okay!”

I hand Uncle Kitten up to Hilda, and hook her new bag over one arm, then carefully walk us both over to the bench out front of the Daiso. I clean off her feet, bandaid her legs, and check how much money I have.

“Let’s eat first- you like your bean paste?”

“Yeah!”

“Good; have a rice ball,”
We eat, and then we go back inside- I buy two reusable shopping totes and ask for all coins back. I have fifteen chances now. That’s… less than four hundred berry? Yeah. The jerks from Hilda’s dojo are still here, lurking around the claw machine. I pack the totes with the cats, and the cat bag with Hilda’s school supplies.

The main issue I see with getting what I think are the Mewcarons is their shape- they’re basically round, with thin flimsy bits sticking out. Tricky tricky tricky. Let me see…

The pink mewcaron is on top of the squidberry cat; so that’s what I need to go for. If I can angle the claw just right over the squidberries on it’s head, I’ll get the mewcarons too.

Green mewcaron is on top of another nyanpan- specifically the tail. Simple enough.

Purple, however, is going to drive me up a wall. It’s not on top of anything of substance- and I have a feeling the mewcarons are just light enough that jostling something out from under one is going to send the little kitty-cat treat flying.

“So, to double check- the mewcarons are the pink one on the squidberry cat, the green one on that nyanpan, and the purple one all by itself?”

“Yeah!”

“Okay. The purple one’s going to take the longest,”

And then I get started. Pink and green mewcaron are easy- and we gain a squidberry cat and another nyanpan for the totes. Purple proves to be elusive- I get a bananya, another Uncle Kitten - this one with a little red bowtie; a lorge boi Blueberryan; a hat which is much too big for Hilda, so I put it on; a Cookie Cat, which I haven’t had in years; and ten Pusheens, but no purple mewcaron.

I’m pissed now.

I take a small break for an iced tea and lemonade. I get three more chances. And then I go back again.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to get the mewcaron for me-”

“I can do it, hang on,”

Bongo Cat and Catbus take the first try; Pusheenasaur and cat head take the second.

Third and last try. I aim for the purple bastard, and snag it and a weird green nubbin- which reveals itself as the green foot of a very plush cat. I take all the plushes out of the chute, and take a good long look at the mewcarons. I am very nearly certain that there’s some sort of joke here, but I don’t eat sweets all that often, so I don’t really know what that joke is.
I do know one thing, though. I’ve got a crowd of jerks around me and Hilda is very tense on my back indeed.

“Cousin Hilda, are these what you wanted?”

“Yeah!”

“You havin’ a good time?”

“Yeah!”

“Are these the boys who made you cry?”

“Yeah!”

I smile and shift around the first one who tries to smack Hilda in the back of the head, lurching around like a drunkard and slamming my ornery forehead into his. Then it’s a short half step back to crush the air out of another boy’s gut with my elbow, spin and slap the taste out of that one’s mouth and slam two heads together then hitch Hilda up onto my back again. Pick up both the totes, step over the unconscious headbutt receiver, and out we go.

I put the totes in Steady’s panniers- that’s not the right word, thinking in Germa is hard- and then I settle Hilda on the saddle and turn to unhitch.

My horse is gone. I can see the faint sparking trail of Others in the air, and the faint scream of a scared young girl and a furious Gheisthorse.

Welp.

That’s a Problem, fuck.

To: Haute Claire, Internationally Celebrated Food Critic, ℅ The Germa Review, Block 2, Row 1, Fleet Ship Germa

From: Vinsmoke Deborah, The Tide The Blood The Drowner The Drowned, Current Chef de Cuisine Desperaux, Block 14, Row 6, Ferry Ward, Fleet Ship France

Dear Madame Claire,
I was told that referring to an internationally celebrated food critic as a classist, a tribist, a piece of worthless, brainless, mediocre scum; no matter how disgracefully and cruelly they have used their power, how ugly they have shown themselves to be; to call them a worthless, feckless, fleece-skinned excuse of a woman and a blister on the ass of Hell; to call them, in short, an utter disgrace; to call them such things plainly for all the world to see is not the done thing. I will try to resist all further urges to refer to you as a worthless piece of substanceless fluff during the body of this letter. I can make no promises.

In short, Madame, how fucking dare you? Truly, how fucking dare you?

It was, I am sure it is no surprise to you, a horrendous shock to find one day earlier this summer, that my very own Lending-Chef had put his entire restaurant up for collateral on a gambling table, and then skipped town before his numerous creditors, and his creditors many fine leg-breakers, could catch him. Further, I am sure you are aware that those fine creditors took literally everything that wasn’t integral to the building in their well deserved repossession spree- even such things as the toilets, the mirrors on the wall, and all the lampshades. Truly, I cannot imagine you would be surprised that the Sous-Chef of that time- me- was left with a quandary: that is to say, I was left with all the remaining debts my former Lending-Chef had accrued, simply by showing up to work that day. I was also left with the shell of a building that had once been a restaurant, an entire Fleet Ship’s worth of suppliers that would not supply to me due to their well earned disgust of the Lending-Chef I was still associated with, and no one to turn to.

I am sure you are unsurprised to learn that a fourteen year old sous-chef on her very first Lending was saddled with the gambling debts of a full-grown man, and expected to pay them off within the year. You are, of course, a woman of the World, and are well versed in life’s unthinking cruelties.

I will not pretend, Madame, that I am anything other than a Goblin from the darkest depths of the Sea-borne Hell; and I must confess that I have never paid over much attention to criticism. The truth is that the work of a critic has very little value. The average piece of junk is worth more to this world than the words of a critic declaring aforementioned object so.

I will also not pretend that I was particularly interested in running a restaurant, and I must confess I found the entire situation quite amusing. I had expected to go to prison for murder, not debt, after all.

I believed I would get no further than apologising to the suppliers before someone would come to their senses. When that did not happen, I had believed, somehow, that I would be stopped by the health inspectors, whom I do not know and do not particularly like; nor they me. I was, I had assumed, too impolitic, too brash, too poor, to ever be given the distinct responsibility of feeding those who are hungry.

With the passage of time came clarity: not one inspection did we see without passing with perfect scores; not one word of complaint from our suppliers; and the entire restaurant was well appointed long before it ever opened.

No one would be stopping me.
week, he began to take pride in my few accomplishments. He pronounced me an equal to him, a Chef in my own right, and began the necessary preparations that would crown me with a Star of my own.

Imagine my astonishment when on the very day I was to sit my Star Brigade examinations, your haughty review came out, declaring my cuisine to be the “foolish remit of only those most desperate” and “barely hovering over the midden-pile”. Such harsh words, of course, led to a full inquiry by the Starlight Brigade, and my missing the exams, which are naturally a yearly event and can neither be postponed nor re-sat until the next due time.

Such was my surprise I could scarcely comprehend that the ill-fortune now visited on me was due to your review.

I tell you, you miserable excuse for a Demon, I have never been so furious in my life.

It took my entire brigade, which includes my dear waitstaff and all the cooks working under my command and three bussers and a garbage gnoll, a full three days to convince me writing this strongly worded letter is a more appropriate response to your disgusting display than taking one of my many knives and finding you. I want you, specifically, to know that though they may be uneducated, poor, and ignorant of the world, they are Demons of unquestionable Honor, Courage, Compassion, Loyalty, Generosity, Kindness, and all other Virtues which as of yet are unnamed. Perhaps it is true that they will always be less renowned than your hideous self; but yet, it is unquestionably true that they will always be better than you, to wit: in character.

You have them to thank for the lack of knives in your future. With quicklime so very cheap, and the Sea so very near- and I have so many knives, all of them sharp. But no; my brigade prevailed upon me to see reason, to accept that doing a great and terrible violence upon you would not be the answer.

I have no illusions to my skill with French cuisine. There are only two clear memories I have that connect with it in particular- the first, being the first time I tasted a freshly baked croissant and decided I would make one myself or die trying. I was four years old at that time. The second is when my mother, struck low with a sickness that would eventually take her life, begged in her delirium for a bowl of Boeuf Bourguignon, that she might die with a single taste of home on her lips. I was never able to make that stew to her satisfaction; and I never will, as she is dead and the smell of it turns my stomach now. I was eight.

I have almost no memories of a time when my mother was not ill; and only one good memory of French cuisine, and it is not a memory of comfort. The only cuisine that offered any sort of comfort to me was traditional Ryugu Mergyo cuisine; healthy, wholesome, filling, and in your critical opinion, “cheap”.

That is quite true- after all, how could a cuisine that kept eight children and a dying woman alive for fourteen years, and an entire Island of people alive for thousands of years be anything other than cheap? To imply otherwise would be foolish. Certainly, my cuisine is the cuisine du despair- to imply otherwise is an outright lie. Would you despair, if your mother and sole caregiver was dying, and you could not save her?

My sisters and I don’t actually know who is eldest amongst us aside from our brother, who remembers our birth. It is obvious beyond all doubt that we are of mixed Tribes. Due to the absence of a father, and the long illness of our mother, it can only be natural that each of us found our own way of providing for each other and our own way of handling those problems that parents would in
the course of time.

I started working when I was nine years old. All of us did- my brother, eldest of us in truth, began working far before then, as someone had to pay the rent and utilities and mother’s savings could no longer provide for such and pay for what few medications there were to relieve her suffering and allow her the dignity of a funeral pyre. Consider, for a moment, what seven nine-year old girls can be trusted to do in a workplace- any workplace; what can they be allowed to do, disregarding maturity. Consider their size, and strength, and the depths of their knowledge. Consider the price of medicine in a country that has not subsidised healthcare. Consider the cost of a one room apartments rent, the cost of utilities, of groceries, of new clothes each year because you have six siblings and none of you can wear each other’s clothing for more than a year’s time before all of you- yes, all of you- are too large for them. What of school supplies and fees? Medicines? And these are only the things necessary for life- what about the things that make life worth living?

There is no money for toys and games and art supplies. None at all for cute hair barrettes, for makeup, for trips to the theatre or the beach; for dates and parties and sleepovers. There’s barely enough money for fresh fruit and vegetables; how can you justify the expense of spring flowers, cut and arranged in a vase you found in the back of the cupboard? Even such things as a box of chalk or a length of string, paper and sticks for a kite- even those things are too much for your budget to sustain. There are no toys but what you make; and you so rarely have time to make them…

I became a cook, despite my mother’s protests. Having only one true skill- that of ignoring true bigotry and cruelty in the face of being paid for my labor- and only one knife, I only had to learn, oh, everything about working in a professional kitchen the hard way. And so, I spent the next five years cooking and learning and cooking some more, and trying with everything I had to keep my family from dying of starvation. I have woken in the night, my skin made slick with sweat and my sheets a mire of my own fear, because for a moment I thought one of my sisters collapsed from hunger again.

I am doing much better these days, though I still cannot make myself stop looking at a full refrigerator or pantry for a full minute before doing actual work, and my night terrors have not left me. Which rather brings us back to you; you fattened lamb, you privileged disgrace, you contemptible pissant.

What do you know of the Cuisine du Despair?

My brigade, praise be unto the Gods, have never had to face the shame of being unable to offer their ancestors even a handful of boiled oats on a banana leaf and a bamboo cup of water. They have never wept from hunger, nor been unable to become warm for lack of bodyweight. They know nothing of holding a mouthful of chewed apple and being unable to swallow. They know nothing of eating garbage- true, real garbage, that you have dug from the midden pile yourself and washed in a fountain, praying that it does not sicken you. They have not eaten oranges so off the slices tasted like hard alcohol that had been set next to an orange peel. They know nothing of their skin cracking; of their hair falling out; of nearly going blind.

Neither do you, Madame.

How fucking dare you.
The horrors I have seen, the lengths I went to protect my family, time and again; I have kept a journal, and conferred with my sisters, in some vain hope that what we went through were merely the misrememberings of a scared child. They were not.

Even so, abject poverty is the ruiner of many things; it is expected to be vile, cruel, and destructive.

What I did not expect was to discover that an internationally renowned critic, one who was well known for her generosity, her kindness, her honesty, her loyalty, the joy she found in food; and the friendships she made with young chefs... I did not expect to discover that this critic, who had inspired me to reach for more than merely being a line-cook, who had pointed me towards many new and wonderful discoveries, had amused and taught me- could also call me worthless, and my life’s work a fool’s errand, and cause those charged with ensuring only the highest quality of Chef gains a Star for their Hellish crown to doubt me, and insult the tribe of myself and my sire in one moment.

You are clearly not a Demon of any true Virtue, and so I wonder if you fully understand what an unthinkable cruelty you have committed against myself, my tribe, my mother, my sisters, my brother, and my brigade.

A Cook must feed those in their care, with the best ingredients they can find, in such a way as to ensure that the food created is also eaten.

A Cook never uses food as a method of dispatchment or disposal, as it is an insult to all who worked to prepare the food in question.

A Cook is above all things Virtuous, for their Virtue becomes the spiritual nutrition necessary for the proper growth of the Soul.

Only someone like you could stoop to such unnaturalness. It’s just as well you had nothing to say about the presentation of any of the food you ate, nor it’s flavor; I’m not convinced you actually ate anything at my restaurant. I’m not convinced you eat at all.

You are Wicked, cruel, and despicable. You have acted without honor or grace towards myself, and by extension my brigade, and the House Royal, Vinsmoke. I don’t mind telling you that should you ever show your miserable face in my restaurant again for anything less than a formal written apology, I will personally take hold of you by the wings and throw you into the Sea.

Should you dare to darken my restaurant with your ugliness and freakish misery again, without an apology, or even expect me to take back these words I have written here... I implore you to try it, Nanny. If I ever see you in My House again, Nanny, by all my ancient and revered ancestors, by the sharp edge of my knife, by the burning in my blood and the purity of smoke; I will mete out a punishment so horrific, whispers of my terrible wrath will curdle milk and chill blood for generations proceeding from my death unto eternity. This I swear.

I do not doubt that you will find some way of disparaging me further. I feel, however, that I have gotten as much of my utter disgust onto paper as can be expected. I am fully aware of the fact that all your mail is screened before it ever sees your hand, and so I will refrain from poisoning this letter.
in any way, and from laying some foul curse upon it. I could simply no longer stomach the fact that I chose to do whatever I had to, in order to live; and more, so that my family would live; and you would dare call me a fool for it. I certainly hope the mountain of accolades you have gotten in your long career warms you, and your own mirrored reflection is a good conversationalist, as I cannot imagine you have close friends or family willing to spend much time with you.

I hope your wings wither and your words fly away on the wind; I hope your disgusting lack of Virtue brings you everything you deserve; and I pray that no one who actually cares about you as a person need ever live in your company again, you despicable burden on all who live.

I am entrusting this letter to a rather dishallible mail-person. They have given me their assurances that this letter will reach the office of The Germa Review. From what I understand of that august establishment, a chance to print what many deem unprintable is never passed up.

I pray that this is so, and that the whole of the World knows of your utter disgrace, and that you read this letter and feel like the wretch you are.

With warmest regards,

Vinsmoke Deborah, The Tide The Blood The Drowner The Drowned, Chef de Cuisine du Desperaux

When I was much younger, I got a library card and free reign at all the libraries in the country I could get to and get back from before sunset. My Mother, may she rest forevermore, gave me a Talk about Library Safety. There were Things In Books, she explained. Inappropriate Things I was Much Too Young To Read.

I felt I was a Girl of the World. I had Seen Things- terrible things, actual murder in my own home; more importantly, I’d been to the art museum, and we’d visited the gallery of nudes. Not just scantily clad- actual nudes, their every roll and insecurity bared to the world. I had seen people naked; there was nothing left for me to see!

My dear, patient, crazy mother sighed. No, she explained, there were Other Things. Things I Knew Nothing Of. Things I Ought Not Know. They were in the Books, and I was to Avoid Them. It was made clear that this was the Parental Final Word. But I was left terribly confused, and doubly curious.

I’d thought I’d understood how things worked, you see- a picture of a person in regular clothes was modest; a picture of a person in a little less than that, like Mary Money’s extremely famous picture, was a touch ris-kay; a picture of a person in underwear was pretty much a sex thing; and a picture of a person sans all clothing was, barring art or anatomy, pornographic.

How then, could there be something more pornographic than a totally naked person? What could this wrong, forbidden, inappropriate, unnatural thing be?

The logical sequence so far was quite clear- less clothes, more inappropriate! And eventually, you’d gotten down to nothing at all, at which point you’d seen everything there was to see and nothing
was left private anymore and married people could engage in baby-producing activities!

I mulled this over for quite a while. Finally, I came to the only conclusion I could: the next step in this sequence had to be taking off your skin.

This was extremely explanatory! No wonder this Secret Thing was so Wrong- you had to skin someone alive to produce it! No wonder they didn’t want kids seeing it- how Traumatic! This really was a Perverted Deviance Of Modern Society! What Shame! What Horror!

I proceeded to make the obvious series of extrapolations from this. There would be sequenced pictures of people slowly and seductively removing their own skin, or other people’s skin, of course. There’d be teasing images arranged to look like someone was removing their skin when they really weren’t. Some would go further, and show the muscles being stripped away as well, to reveal organs and bones. Some truly disturbed perverts would be more intrigued with seeing animals stripped of their skin- and suddenly I had to contend with being surrounded on all sides by my Family’s Weird Sex Shit, as our house was stocked top to bottom with taxidermied animals, several of which were heirloom pieces.

And no wonder sex slavery and prostitution were so horrifying, if people were being forced into that- not to mention those poor animals. Of course I was familiar with the concept of prostitution; but I couldn’t figure out porn. I had a classical education; and as it happens, one of those comes up in Classic Literature exceedingly more often than the other. I also learned a great deal about fetishes before I really understood the concept of pornography, and so began to consider how this Perverted Deviance Of Modern Society would ape other fetishes for itself. Were there, I wondered, people who only wanted to see skin removed from the hands akin to one removing a glove? Foot skin socks? Just from the back, or the thigh? Were there those wretched deviants who only wanted to see someone tied up and strips of skin lovingly removed in whatever BD/SM fantasy they concocted? How far down did this horrifying snake hole go?

In any case, I continued to operate under this assumption for long enough that when I went to school, I had to explain it to my Dormmates during our end of year orgy, the sixth one. I was happy in its explanatory power, and felt Terribly World-Wise And Jaded- and occasionally, very guilty that I was not nearly so innocent as my mother thought.

My Dormmates, after getting over my comparatively rare but deeply entrenched nonsense, actually explained what pornography actually involved. Fairly anticlimactic.

No skinning involved at all.

I’m thinking about this because I’ve been bouncing on my Sanji’s dick for the past three hours and he’s not ejaculated at all. He’s orgasmed about thirty times, by my count- but I want that wet fire, and all I’m getting is frustrated while he’s getting off. And my thighs hurt! And… and I think… I think he wants to tie me up.

I’ve stopped bouncing. I slowly return from my gasping frantic pace to a more measured throaty huffing, my breasts scraping over the sharp fur of his chest, gah, my nipples really burn-

Sanji’s glazed blue eyes roll and focus on me- my red faced frustration, my auburn, finally
remembered that word, hair plastered to my skin with sweat, the sharp red lines gouged into his shoulders and chest and-

His rough hands stroke and soothe my tense ass, rub comfort back into my shaking thighs. I stifle tears of pure frustrated edged out aaaaaAAARGH-

“Mm. M-mab?”
“Hah-yeah, ah, y-yes?”
“...this isn’t working,”
“....no. I know you wanted to, to not think about it with sex, but-”
“I.”
“Would tying me up work better?”
“Ah-!”

The heavy throbbing heat that rocks into my hips is so shocking it kicks me right over into orgasm. I’ve been edging around one for all three hours; when I finally, finally come, I’m sent to some other place made of sparking golden light and the taste of blood. When I can hear again, it’s the sound of my husband laughing; and when I can feel anything other than the sharp sparking wonder of finally orgasming, it’s my husband holding my hips tight to his and that blood taste is from him because I’ve bitten right into the shoulder area between the rounded edge and his lovely throat.

I pull my teeth out and gently lick at the bloody bite in him. He rolls his hips under mine and I very nearly tear into him again, Sanji, Sanji please-

“I would like very much to tie you up, Mab,”
“I- aaaaaAAAAAAAH- Oh Gods, Yes, Yes, Please Yes- I can t-teeeeAAAAAAGH-”
“Pffft- Ha- d’you have anything you don’t want to do?”
“Nnnngh- ah, n-not behind my back, don’t tie my h-h-hands- Oh oh oh yes-”
“Hah- okay- I- ooooh, fuck-”

Ah ah aha ahaaaaaAAAAAAAH- eeek, he’s licking my neck and kissing behind my ear and along my jaw and sucking and biting my n-neck hah, he must really want to OOOOOUGH aaah AAAAAAH- oh my god, oy, that- hah. He’s orgasmed again, but it was together this time and I- hah.

“Hm. I want you to lie down on the bed, please,”
“I’ve never actually tied anyone up for sex before. And the handcuff knot, while useful, isn’t what I want right now- hell, it’s been so long since I’ve had a bed like this to work with…

At home, our bed has a bunch of rails that make considering tying up Mab a fun exercise in masturbation; here, it’s a four poster carved with that stupid Sixty-ka and the Fleur de Lis. She doesn’t want her arms behind her back, and I don’t like it when her breasts are covered…

Hm.

I know. We haven’t used this toy yet- but it does have a warning to hydrate, stretch, and have nothing else planned for the day. We do have to go have dinner with my siblings and my Stepmother- which is weird to even think- and Him this evening, for something to do with the Charlottes, which I don’t remember but whatever- this is more interesting and important. To me, anyway.

Mab has high expectations of this thing, but it wasn’t priced all that high- five thousand berry is cheap for a good sex toy. I wouldn’t be shocked if it’s mediocre.

“Sanji?”

“Mab?”

“W-what do you need me to do when it’s over?”

“Hmm?”

“After, after you tie me up and have your way with me, once I’m unbound again and free to do as I like- what will you need?”

“...Uh. I’ve never really… I don’t. Know?”

“Um. Maybe just tie up my hands, and then- I don’t. I don’t want my legs tied up, I’m sorry, I-”

“No, no no- that’s fine, it’s okay, I- I’ve wanted to do this for ages, s-so, whatever way you’re comfortable doing it is-”

“...”
“-You’re not comfortable at all, are you?”

“-I- I think I’m being more anxious about it than I should be? Maybe? I know you won’t hurt me, like hurt me, I know that- I just. I’m so scared of being tied up, Sanji, I’m so s-scared-”

“Mab-!”

So. Just about the least sexy thing in the world is my wife curled up in my arms, sobbing because she knows one of my fetishes now and cannot let me act on it out of fear. This is not sexy, this is a deranged cocktail of emotions I don’t want to be having- not because I don’t want to feel like this when my wife is crying out of fear, but because… because I don’t want her to be afraid at all. That made sense in my head, but.

I.

“I could just. Not? Tie you up, I mean. There are other things I want to do,”

“A-as much as this?”

“Just as much,”

“You’re not saying that to make me feel better?”

“Only a little bit, it’s mostly just true,”

“Hmhmhm. I- guh. Fine. I’m sorry, again-”

“No, no. I’m sorry for being… pushy? I got too excited, and I didn’t notice your feelings,”

“I could have said something!”

“I could have too,”

I’m cold and a bit sticky from where Mab was rubbing them out of me, and it smells like overhumid air and sex sweat in our room now. I have a deep ache in the root of my cock because I think Mab dropped straight down on me a few times and it sorta got… jammed. And my horns itch; I’m still fucking horny, fuck.

“Lay down on your stomach?”

“Why?”

“I want to rub your back, Mab,”

I watch her bite her lip and think that one over. I can almost hear her thinking about it- am I still horny, do I want to be so frustrated again so soon, massages are nice, and you’re here? Sanji?
Mab?

Sanji, how-?

*Uh. I’m not sure? But I really do want to rub your back FUCK WINGS-

Hmmmm.

...What if we both did something we’re uncomfortable with?

…Like what?

*Well. I know you like your wings rubbed, and all those back muscles must get tense…

Yeah… and, I know you want to tie me up a bit…

And we haven’t tried that new toy either…

She bites her lip again; and this time, I can’t help but lick mine.

“Only for you, Sanji. What did you have in mind to tie me up with?”

“Scarves?”

“And what if you have to cut me out? -We have a lot of tight braid cotton rope, don’t we?”

“Hm. I do have those EMT shears, too- and so we’re clear, I can tie your hands but not your legs?”

“…Tie my hands first, and ask me again,”

I let a smirk roll around my mouth; I’m so giddy with excitement, but it’s tempered by the unsure smile Mab sends me in turn. I feel her breathe in against my chest, and I watch her resolve firm like stiff dough.

“Okay. Um. Do… do you want to get set up? I- think I have some jewelry you’d like, too…”

“Mm, Mab, you say the sexiest things-”

“Hmahahaha, fine,”

And then we break apart for a moment. I pull on a pair of loose shorts, trapping my stiff cock behind the elastic waist; and Mab swipes the carafe before nipping into the bathroom. I listen to her take a piss as I gather the things I’ll need- a small first aid kit, EMT shears, cotton rope, lube, that toy we haven’t tried yet, massage oil (Mab’s favorite blend of jojoba, sesame, sunflower, and rose), and when Mab returns I’ve put all the things I want on a tray on the bedside table.
I patiently watch her tend herself- brush her hair, wipe the sweat away from her skin; she catches my eye in the mirror and scrunches her nose. I laugh, and then I turn and open a transom window. The sudden airflow makes both of us squeak; and the refreshing breeze brings in the smell of the sea and the faint cooling breath of spring.

Romantic ambiance doesn’t have to mean dim candle lights and a dark and seductive atmosphere- it can mean a mason jar of fresh cut wildflowers from the overgrown tangle in the backyard of a house you’ve not seen in ten years, put there by your wife. White cotton curtains you got from the hundred berry store, blocking the street and not the light; plain white walls with delicate sculptural details, like a plasterer dreamed of another life. Romance can be watching your wife take a wet comb to her long hair, and braid the tamed beast up around her head in a crown. It can be watching her put on what I realize now is as close as she can make herself get to being bound in any way- and, gods help me, it’s just a tease looking at her in all her clinking chains.

For some reason I can only describe as “taunting”, she always starts with her ears. An earring set of green crystals and golden everything else, clapping to the elegant sweep of her perfect ears, chiming faintly with every tilt and sway. Then, her ankles- the thinnest, daintiest chain I’ve ever seen on her, even, if the Morau weren’t quite so aggressive- a charm on each side shaped as a honeybee, and tiny sparkling green gems, like drops of morning dew on grass.

The panties are new for this sort of thing, but as I watch her bend at the hip to dig through a drawer and get down on all fours, the simple green and white polka dots grow on me. For one thing, watching the bright cotton turn dark and shiny with her wetness is… deeply satisfying. For another, they really do hug her in all the right places… and they make quite a bit of sense once Mab finds something I’ve genuinely never seen her wear. It’s a simple skirt made out of chain that drapes over all her curves and steep angles, chiming and glittering in the midmorning light.

On its own, the earrings and anklets and skirt and panties would be enough, but when she adds the belt I suddenly realize what she’s really doing. It’s gold, with mostly white stones; a few crucial embellishments of red, because she is the First of her siblings; and at center, in pride of place, a green gemstone.

I find myself standing much closer, right behind and to the side of her closer, close enough to touch if I wanted, close enough I can see the throbbing tip of myself in the mirror over her hip; and when she holds up a necklace, I speak.

“I want to see your breasts; nothing over them at all,”

“...Because…?”

“I like them. Their shape; the color of your nipples-”

I put my hands on her hips and slowly stroke up her ribs, cupping each one in my hand. I roll the sharp little pebbles in my fingers and watch her squirm somewhere between delight and discomfort. She always says she doesn’t care if I play with them, so I’ve associated me playing with her nipples and very good orgasms, and now she doesn’t know what to feel other than sensation. Is it good for her, as I twist one way and then the other? Her reddening face and tightly pressed lips say no- but if she didn’t like it enough, she’d pull away, and as I flick and rub them, that hasn’t happened. When I squeeze them hard enough the soft flesh bulges out between my fingers, I feel a hitching gasp go through her and watch that dark wet line in her panties creep forwards, even as her legs press tight...
together.

“-I like the size, and the way they feel in my hands. And, since you’re going to be on your back to start, I’d like it very much if you wouldn’t cover them in chains,”

“Uuhn- wh-what about, hah, what about framing them?”

“I dunno... ”

I rub a circle around the tip of one nipple and let my left hand glide down. I watch her and myself in the mirror, watch as I tease around her with the chains. They clink and chime and Mab’s blushing face is so godsdamn cute, I want to squeeze her. So I squeeze her breast again, but only just cup her strawberry-shaped center.

She lays out a green and gold necklace and earring set for later, and with shaking hands returns the necklace I’ve refused into it’s velvet bag. A truly lovely collar is Mab’s second pick, and it genuinely pains me to refuse it; something about it just seemed... I don’t know, actually. But that wasn’t the right one.

I take a firm grip on Mab’s panties, and pull them tight to her pussy. She squeaks, and squirms against my hoist. I let go, and tuck my fingers between the waistband of her panties and her own hot skin. The dark hair there is strange against my palm; usually, when I finger her, it’s while we’re fucking. I… I don’t think I’ve ever touched her quite like this. Even so, I do know what she likes, and how she likes it; and with a bit of dedicated effort, I’ve got her knees knocking and her hips rocking into my sweaty hand.

The chains jingle softly as I rub an orgasm out of my wife, and the sudden loss of strength in her legs only makes me smile, even as I press shivering bug wings to my chest. That dark stain on her panties is so much bigger now; soon, it’ll be cleaner to take them off of her entirely.

“Maybe something that covers your shoulders, Mab?”

“Aaah, ha, ha, aaah, oh oh oh oh OH OH OH AAAAAAAAH-”

“The one with the squares, maybe? I don’t think I’ve ever seen it on you- no no, you stay here, I’ll get it,”

“Nnnmmmm-”

I keep touching her, even as I take my arm away and gather up what I want this time. I unclip the frontispiece, and drape the whole thing around her shoulders like a cape, before closing her into it. I bracket her head in my hands, stroking her face, gently weaving my fingers into the loose space between her crowning braid and her scalp- and then yanking her tight to my body, one hand white knuckled in her hair the other wrapped around her throat but not squeezing.
“Aah!”

“Is this okay?”

“Yes!”

“I’m not hurting you?”

“Not at all!”

“Mm. I’m going to tie you up now,”

“O-okay!”

I walk us both backwards before turning and throwing her onto the bed. She squeaks when she
lands, and lays limply as I saunter over. I grab her pretty feet, and look them over- can’t believe I
didn’t notice the green nail polish, fuck. From this angle, the wettest parts of her pussy are almost
totally visible through the soaked through cotton. I tug on her until her hips are just right between the
bottom posts of this fourposter; and then I have a thought.

“Do you care about these panties?”

“No, th-they’re just for fun. D-do- what are you-”

I spread her legs open, hook a finger through the narrowest part of the panties, right between her
legs, and tear the fabric apart. She shrieks.

I wedge my knee against her sopping wet pussy and put my arm like a bar against her shoulders and
chest. I take up the cotton rope with my right hand as I push her down flat with the full weight of my
body. Her eyes are brown and flecked with gold and wide wide wide with startlement and shocked
amusement. I’m also a little shocked- I didn’t expect I’d be so… Whatever this is. I’m not sure how
much I like this side of myself.

“Sanji?”

“Ah- that was a bit violent, wasn’t it?”

“I liked it. I’m not fragile-”

“I know-”

“And… I like it when you’re a little bit pushy, you know,”

“Right, right. Left or right?”

“Ah?”
I put the rope at the edge of the bed and take her hands in mine, the full weight and length of me pressed into her, gods I want to fuck her senseless-

“O-oh. Ah, w-whichever y-you prefer, I- mmmph- mmmmmmmm, mm-”

I’ve never actually cut her off with a kiss before either. Today is just full of firsts. Mmph. Mab tongue. I pull myself away eventually, draping her right arm in soft kisses and kitten licks, even as Mab covers her face with her left hand, barely able to peek out at me and watch. I pause, and put the rope back on the edge of the bed, before reaching up for the pillows. Her first, I think- I dig my hand into her hair and pull her up again, and she follows like a scarf in the wind. The first pillow is for her head and neck, to make sure she doesn’t strain anything overmuch.

I let her drop back down, and give her sweet brown plums a friendly goose as I toss the other pillow to the end of the bed. Her soft moan is like music, I swear.

Hooking a pair of fingers inside of her dripping pussy and scissoring them open, only to hook them in a classic “c’mere” to make her buck her hips up with a shriek? That’s really just for me; as is catching her ass with a rough swat when she tries to let herself drop back on the bed. Honestly, I think I just like hearing her shriek and squeal; it’s fun for me. I actually fold the pillow in by a third on the long side, and take the time to really settle her hips just right. I even test the fit by kneeling down and breathing on her, making sure my horns will get supported by the bed even as my mouth is in just the right spot to have a snack in a moment. I adjust the pillow into a half fold to account for the pillow I’ll need for my knees, nipping and licking all around her furry treasure as encouragement- but never actually touching the soft liquid center.

Mab breaks out in shivers.

I stand again, and take her in. She’s pretty, like this- opened up and flushed red, chest heaving and nipples tight as stone. I want to pound into her until she can’t remember how to speak, much less scream my name- but I want to tie her up more.

I have two bundles of eight meter lengths of cotton rope, and I finally remembered how I want to tie up my beautiful lady wife. To start with, I need the bight of my ropes, which is pretty easy to find; and then, I need to tie a column. Specifically, I’ll be tying just above the joint, to minimize nerve damage risk.

No bracelets, and so we begin- take one bundle, unwind it, and wrap the rope bight around her right wrist, above the joint, twice; check that there’s three fingers of room, just like a dog collar. Cross the bight over the working ends, reach under and pull the bight through all the ropes; this is to retain the lay.

Fuck, this is hot.

Focus- loop the working ends, pull the bight through, and do it again- pull tight, and check to make sure the full amount of play around the wrist is retained- it is. I’m not trying to hurt, just restrain.

On this bed, the box springs sit a bit inwards from the actual edge- Mab insisted for some odd reason,
and I guess it makes it easier to change the sheets? But really, for me, what it actually means is that I can wrap the work end around the solid middle spar of the bed, pull it up, pull it through the leftover bight, and then make ready to restrain my wife.

“Ready?”

“Y-yes. You- you really do like this, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,”

Mab is so cute when she blushes, fuck. I pull the work end of the rope tighter and tighter, until Mab’s arm is fully extended- but, critically, relaxed against the bed. Once I’m sure of it, I secure her restraint with a double half hitch. The long tail I toss under to the other side; but before I can continue, I have to make sure Mab’s okay.

I kneel against the bed and just look at her. She’s not afraid, so much as pensive, now- still flushed with desire, but waiting for me to do what I will. I press up and kiss her freckled cheeks, another to her sweet mouth, again and again and again until she’s flushed with laughter and I’m kneeling on the bed and- fffuck, I want her, this is hard!

I take her left hand in mine, and bring her knuckles up to kiss; turn her hand and kiss the palm. She squeaks and her fingers tangle in mine and- I’ve embarrassed her? So easily?

So cute!

I move to the other side of the bed, and it’s all the same again- and this time, I only have to look up once to catch the nod my wife gives me, and the moan I get when I bind her down, fuck, I’m almost undone with that alone.

Only I want her legs too, fuck-

“May I?”

“Hah- y-yes, okay,”

“Alright,”

Left leg; and I’ll be using a double column. Find the bight of my second rope; wrap it twice around the ankle (above the joint and off the tendon) and her thigh, with significantly more slack on my bight than I did for the single column tie. Hook my chin over her knee and work the rope so that the bight and working ends are at the outside, and more importantly, crossed at the top and center of the four lines. This time, I wrap the bight over both the top and bottom sets of ropes; between the column of her calf and thigh, over both sets of ropes, and back up again. Make a loop with the working ends and bring the bight through; loop again, bring the bight through again, and pull tight to lock it down. Check to make sure there’s ample space between her flesh and the rope- and there is; and pulling on the working ends doesn’t tighten anything on her- it doesn’t.
I hug Mab’s leg to me and press kisses into the skin; and when look at her, she looks so very…

“May I?”
“Yes,”

And, with her permission, I wrap the work ends around the smooth part of the bedpost, pull them through the bight, and restrain Mab’s leg in a lovely splay with a double half-hitch. Stroking along her thigh to her mound; I can feel the tension in her with the tips of my fingers. The hair here has become thick with sweat and desire, and her free thigh shivers with anticipation as I touch it. I brush dangling chains out of the way, and with a quick jerk of my hands finish tearing apart her panties, stripping them off her sweaty body and tossing them aside.

Her leg, which I had thrown over a shoulder and pinned with a horn, briefly shook as I tore her modesty away- and now, as I tie it up and bind her down, all Mab can do is blush and avoid my eyes.

“Hey,”
“…”

“Mab, do you want to stop? Because we can stop if-”
“No, I like this with you. Keep going,”

“Alright,”

I take another pillow from the top of the bed, kneel down, and eat. I lick and kiss and suck and hum, and through it all Mab goes from her normal moans to… desperate shrieking. She tries to buck into my mouth, too, but now I can just hold her still with my hands and she can’t do anything other than take it.

I eat like it’s my last meal. I eat like it’s my favorite food. I eat until Mab begs me to stop- which takes much less time than I’m used to, but, I do stop.

“Mab?”
“S-sanji, Razz, I, I can’t- I can’t take any more, please, I-”
“If this is as far as we go, that’s fine,”
“…I. I-if. If we went further, what would you do?”
“Do you trust me to show you? And do you remember your safeword?”
She bites her lip and nods.

“I need your words, Mab,”

“Oh, haaaaah- y-yes, yes, I- aaaaah!”

I dove back in before she could get to the third yes, and this time the only reason I stopped exploring how many sounds I could get out of her was the fact that my shorts were becoming stifling. So, I stopped and took them off—right in the middle of an orgasm, too, which made Mab break out in some particularly furious swearing.

And then I dug back in.

I didn’t have high expectations for being tied up, but when Sanji started tying me down, his face was so… Even with his obvious and slightly overwhelming joy at the sight of me in ropes and tied to his bed, I wasn’t anticipating anything other than mild discomfort and a whole heaping helping of shame.

I have never been so happy to be wrong.

Still, when he pulled out that new vibe… I was warned. My Mom told me of it’s power when she sent it to me; she even told me to take the whole day off, hydrate, and above all do some stretches first. I thought she was being Dramatic.

My Mom isn’t dramatic.

We have to go to dinner in a few hours, and I’ve been soaking wet for most of the day; Sanji’s been pounding me into every surface of the house while everyone’s away, and today he’s been extra horny, probably because of our dinner engagement.

Still, he has to untie me soon so we can start getting ready; and then Sanji started fiddling with my clit and the toy and all thoughts of the future flew from my head. At first, it felt quite nice if a bit faint, and when asked I said so— and Razz is Razz, so he goes from standing start to full speed in less than a thought.

He hit the suction setting to level five or six, turned on the g-spot button, and adjusted the suction placement— at least, that’s what I think happened, because there’s a big black spot in my memory.

I heard the faint creak of ropes in a high wind.

I’ve never come so hard and fast in my gods damned life. I squirted in his face, and I know that’s what it was because piss has a very distinctive smell and it wasn’t piss. I frantically tried to buck it off or dislodge it but only managed to jab a button with Razz’s nose like a maniac, turning the suction even higher and activating variant pulses from the g spot vibe.

I came again.
I’m fairly sure I levitated myself and the bed and definitely shifted all the wind-movable objects in the room. I was caught in the storm of an unending and cataclysmic orgasm. My soul left me, and the Widow Thorn Herself said ‘Damn girl; what’s that lil’ toy called again?’ I told her, and she wrote it down on a notepad at her desk; and then she said ‘Ain’t time for you yet; back down you go!’ and then she tipped me over with a single finger.

What time is it? I can’t stop shaking; who am I again? My name is… Bou- no. Mabreenia. Mab.

I was flung forcefully back into my earthly body, opening my eyes again to the very worried face of my dear husband Rasputin Symo Ottar Tristan Vinsmoke- he’s crying?

“T’m okay- hey, woah, I’m okay-”

“I’m sorry-”

“No, no, I’m okay-”

“Mab-!”

So I talked to, soothed, my husband while he sobbed. Dominance Drop; I’ve never actually seen it in person before. Also, I think I’ve hurt my back and hips. And I’m thirsty. Mmm.

That was really good though.

“Untie me now?”

“Oh-okay-”

Shsshssh- I’m okay, I’m here; Sanji, I’m right here. Definitely pulled a back muscle, but otherwise fine. I start actively cuddling, stroking parts of his body, wriggling into better positions and out of the wet spot at the edge of the bed. Sanji snuffles drop-snot into my neck and shoulder.

In fits and starts, we return to neutral positions; I stretch my legs out and force him to stretch out too. I can’t tell where the soft lazy purring is coming from, but it feels nice. My thighs are a little sore from being tied up, and a muscle in my back is spasming. Definitely from the toy- and not what I was expecting at all.

Oh- Sanji’s stopped-

“I don’t know why I’m so sad,”

“Mm?”

“I- hah- I know you love it when I come inside, but… I think, maybe, not today,”
I press my whole body to his, wrapping into a tight and squishy cuddle.

“Okay; not today,”
“Mm. ...Is something wrong?”
“Think I pulled a back muscle,”
“Fuck! -want me to start that massage?”
“...Help me to the toilet first, and then… if you’re up to it, a cold massage would be nice,”
“For you, I’ll be civil to my sire,”
“Ah shit, we have that in a few hours too-”
“This maybe wasn’t my best idea,”

And with that sheepish admission from my sheep-horned husband, all I can do is giggle and try not to twist or jar my hips.

The massage that follows is… languid.

We’re going to be late for dinner.

I’m sorry in advance for what will probably be a lot of annoying technical jargon. I’ll try and keep it to a minimum.

Mirror Passage is an advanced Dreamer skill that can’t be learned without the aid of a Dream Key and Star Cloak; the two items act as stabilizers while the physical is made metaphysical and the form becomes formless enough to pass through the tesseract realities seen only in reflections.

My skill in enchantment comes from nothing more than generations of trial and error, and has more to do with philosophy and metaphor than hard science or mysterious magic. It’s the wooliest of Magics, and is not something just anyone can learn- and that’s a fact. You can learn all the mechanics of poetry and churn out technically perfect shit. Anyway, at the Hell Tower, there’s a full wall of mirrors, and that was where they decided my Key and Cloak were to be tested.

One of the things Dreamers do is set up and activate defensive measures against Others. There are very particular ones meant for use around Students and a general population predisposed towards curiosity and competition. These defensive Wards are a suite of hexes, spells, cantrips, jinxes, and
enchantments—altogether a lot to say, so the word ‘ward’ is used as jargon to mean all of those at once. The best Ward to use here would be one called in my book—which I’ve carefully rewritten as a text with practical use, rather than a haphazard collection of journals—the *Oneroi Biblica*, something to the effect of ‘Complex Mirror Maze’. Maybe 80% of active Other defenses rely on Mirrors in some way, due to their deleterious effect on Other magic.

Enchanters as a group fucking hate learning anything about Dreamer Enchantments, because they seem to break so many cardinal enchantment rules—they don’t, but if you don’t have an advanced enough understanding of what the actual rules of Enchantment are, well…

There are three ways to obtain an enchanted something. You can have a dedicated enchantment table, which can be anything so long as it’s used for absolutely nothing else; you can have an anvil, which is classic and can produce items of powerful complexity; and you can make someone else do it for you.

Something can be enchanted so long as three things are present—the something; the spell matrix; and a sacrifice. The most important part of this equation is the spell matrix.

For a Dreamer, there are a whole host of spells and magics that are of vital importance to have on, all the time—particularly if they, like me, tend more often than not to have Business in the Dreaming.

Back to the Exam. The *Hell Tower Examiners* are a grim reminder of the excessive fashion of the average mage. They are also a surprisingly quizzical and accepting bunch—when they ask me to explain the use of my enchanted objects, they don’t scoff or snort, merely ask a few questions and take notes. This still makes me feel like a dancing clown.

Even so, I am very good at this kind of Enchanting, much like I am very good at everything else in my life, including building model ships in bottles, forging star-metal, and being Right. These are just a small sample of things I am good at, of course, but I feel they are important for this story.

So the Examiners ask me some questions about activating Dream Wards. I tell them what’s gonna happen. They hem and haw and let me get to it; switching the enchantment over from a simple Mirror Maze to a Complex Mirror Maze. The gilded mirror they want me to ward makes me nervous because those are rarely Unlocked; and I make sure to warn them.

They assure me it won’t be a problem.

Foolishly, I believe them.

I take my Dream Key, plunge it into the silvery web inside the mirror, and surprise surprise the goddamn thing is locked to some asshole named Ioannes. Fuck. Okay—this mirror can be unlocked but it’s Ioannes, whoever that is, who has the actual Mirror Key. I take my Dream Key out, take the mirror and go to put the old Maze back on—except that Maze is locked to my Dream Key. I take my Dream Key out and put the mirror back on its stand, which should reboot it to standard Blank—but it doesn’t have any enchantments present at all, which usually means the Dream enchantment was successful, except of course, it didn’t lay.

This is fucking weird, but all is not lost. The Registry is like, five steps away, and I only need one piece of information to Fix This. I wouldn’t even bother, but this is an Exam and there are Rules or whatever. I just gotta stay chill.
So I go to the Registry with the Mirror floating behind me like a dead goose and I open up the Book of Names and the book’s all like ‘yo babe you need a pin number’ and I’m all like ‘uh no when I plucked the web I didn’t get an error and that always happens when I need a pin number’ and the book’s all like ‘yo one was randomly generated for that mirror and you Need It’ and I’m all like ‘that sounds fake as shit but okay where do I find it’ and the book’s all like ‘the named person has it babe come back with that pin m’kay bye’ and I’m all like ‘oh fuck you’.

So then I’m like okay, I’ll just go and find this Ioannes guy, it shouldn’t be that hard. Why the fuck did I say that.

So I look at what little information I can access in the Registry and surprise surprise the sheet looks like a licorice bin of blackouts and redactions but I do learn that the jackass named Ioannes names his Abode as the Fleur Palais; and that’s enough information, I only need three pieces to make this work. Specifically, I need a Name, which it has to be to lock me out; I need a location, which I have thanks to the Registry; and I need an Object, which, handily enough, I have.

Scribing a Call In is simple for a Dream Enchanter in a way that it’s impossible for any other; for me, this is basic shit. For my examiners, it’s New. Still, I press my key to the air and strike true, opening a Way from myself to the one called Ioannes, and then I’m all like-

“Hi, my name is Havij Starstrider, I’m a tech calling from the Hell Tower Enchantment Exams and I’m trying to lay a Complex Mirror Maze on Ioannes’ gilt-edge mirror, there’s a lock on his weft and-”

Maybe I interrupted something? But there’s a lot of screaming and cursing and the sound of two horses maybe and then someone shouts at me-

“HAVIJ HOW DO I CLOSE A MIRROR ROAD TO OTHERS?”

“Oh hello Adelaide; the easiest way if they’re actively incursing is to smear the frame with the blood of Others you’ve killed yourself, then recite the Litany of Wrath; make sure you’ve got everyone you wanted through before this though, it’s a very permanent solution,”

“How wrathful do I need to be?”

“Fullstop bloodspit wrath is best; the more you mean it, the stronger the Wall will be. Do you need me to dip on this and come over? Because I can do that-”

“No don’t dip on your exams just- Die Fucker Die- hang on I’ll pass you to-”

“…”

“UH- sorry, hi, little busy-”

“It’s cool, I need your pin number for your gilt-edge Mirror-”
“Uh, I don’t have one?”

“What.”

“Sorry? Uh- FUCK FUCK DIE FUCK-”

“Because I’ve been trying to put a Complex on the mirror and the Registry’s all like ‘lol bitch gimme dat pin number lol lol’ and I’m all like ‘if you insist’ so I’m pretty sure that you have the fuckin’ pin-”

“Uh no, the lay was set without a pin and that means it doesn’t need one; and I don’t have one for you, so there’s no lock on my end- SHIT FUCK FUCK CHARLOTTE SALT ON YOUR LEFT-”

“Um, so, I’ve been trying to lay the new weave and it’s locked; that means it’s on you-”

“FUCKING SHIT GODDAMIT- NO, SORRY, the port began without a pin, and that means I don’t have what isn’t there. Sorry, gotta go-”

And the Way closes. I go back to the Registry, smearing greasepaint on my face and sticking my feet in shoes ten sizes too big and tucking my hair up into a wig that looks a hot mess- and I’m all like ‘Registry, I checked for a pin and there wasn’t one’ and the Registry’s all like ‘I’m just a pile of spreadsheets with a Voice Interface and a bunch of information protections on a table, I can’t help you’ and I’m all like ‘I know that, and I can do this’ and so I check the mirror again to make sure I really can’t open the bastard and the mirror’s all like ‘fuck you’ and I’m like ‘fuck you first’.

I fucking OPEN THE WAY TO IOANNES AGAIN BECAUSE THAT’S WHAT MY LIFE IS NOW I GUESS. YOU LIKE TAG? YOU’RE IT, FUCKO. DANCE, CLOWN, DANCE!

I’d like to take a moment to recognize the Examiner’s patience. It’s been five hours of straight work, we’re all hungry and tired, and I’ve gotten not a single complaint from them. They’re all adults, smiling, understanding, patiently letting me get on with it. I’m so used to people yelling and getting Angry that I know more about enchanting dreams than they do; and I’ve been getting the runaround this whole exam. My coven mates are done, fucko, this is such bullshit.

So anyways, I open the Way again but this time get-

“Allo?”

“Bonjour, my name is Havij Starstrider, I’m a tech calling from the Hell Tower Enchantment Exams and I’m trying to lay a Complex Mirror Maze on Ioannes’ gilt-edge mirror, there’s a lock on his weft and-”

“Goodness, have you been trying to lay on that old thing? I told him to change the pin but did he-”

“Oh, you know it?”

“Of course, it’s <348!90!12>; and if that doesn’t work, you call my flakey grandson right up and take him to task,”

“Yes ma’am,”
And so I use the pin and fucking fuck it works- for about the first five threads, and then, of course, I NEED ANOTHER FUCKING PIN.

It’s like, on the wrong side of midnight at this point, by the cry. I am the only person aside from my coven and the Examiners who are still conscious and I haven’t eaten and I was going to a dinner party and even if I wasn’t, even if I were a regular enchanter, I would still be the best here, fuck. Fern calls me over when she’s having issues. I am alone in this kingdom of dismal commerce and blurry vision, a hungry queen lamenting the solitude of her throne.

I consider my options. I could give up, take the Fail, move on. I’m not doing that. First- Vadym’s gonna need both his legs. Thankfully, Havij seems to have already taken care of it; his flesh healed basically already, and some good milk from the ship took care of the rest. Next, double check that everyone’s armed and dangerous- and we are, even the Examiners, who are honor bound to continue the exam until I either succeed, destroy the testing materials, or give up. Finally- I need to pick my Daydream…

Oh, right, I should probably-

“So, this is me, Havij, the genuine person, telling you this. This is fuckshit, and I am absolutely furious, and I am also very hungry, and very tired of just. This entire fuckshit. So. I’m going to be taking decisive action- if that’s alright with all of you?”

I get back a group chorus of “do what you need to” and that’s the best damn thing I’ve heard this entire long day. DANCE CLOWN DANCE. OH YOU DON’T LIKE KNIVES? TAKE A STAB AT THIS WHY DON’T YOU.

“Coven! We’re going into pitched battle! Make sure you’re ready for that, m’kay?”

“No problem,”

“Oho, I get to use my hat already? Lucky day,”

“Oh- hang on, I need a hacksaw-”

While they work that out, I consider the absolute hell that’s about to rain down on a battlefield from the bleepbloop department of fuck you. I take a piece of chalk and draw a full Web; no mistakes or hesitations. Fern stands across from me; the Mirror, I strapped to my back. On my left, Vadym; on my right, Farthingale. Behind me are the Examiners; in front of me, the Way.

I step through. The Examiners follow me; then my Coven.

And then, I draw my Key and fight.
Honestly, every battle kinda blurs together into one mega swirly glowy crunchy bloody mess of broken Others and dissonant dance music. Now, where is- ah, that one, with the blue hair and the missing shirt.

I go over in my head what I’m fairly sure has to happen now, but I just want to give him one more chance to try.

“Sorry, are you Ioannes?”

“Uh- yeah?”

He sounds like all the worst traits of a Sabaody teenager in living form. He sounds like he’s longboarding and smoking a joint as he’s talking to me. He sounds like he’s supremely unconcerned with the manganese-magenta blood splattered on his bare skin, or the thirsty eyeballing he’s getting from a whole crowd of women I doubt is of age. He sounds like he was born at Bonchon’s Chicken after midnight. I don’t mean any of this in a friendly, inviting way- I mean this in the way where he doesn’t have time to be told what’s what by a teenager who thinks she knows about Enchanting, can you believe? A Teenager!

Still, I’m quite kind, I think. I explain the convoluted problem, and that if he could just beat his memory with a stick so I could finish my exam and get something to eat fucking hell that would be awesome and he’s all like ‘okay’ in a half interested half judgemental tone and I am on my last good nerve and everything he says is one stifled yawn away from a ‘whatever i guess’ and I-

“Did you try reguilding it-”

“No, Mist-er, I haven’t fuckin’ tried anything because no one has TOLD ME what to DO in the realm of ENCHANTMENT. No One has Instructed me or walked me through anything, I’ve been doin’ the fuckin’ registry two-step for eight fuckin’ hours and no one has fuckin’ answers for me and YOUR GRANDMOTHER said you’re gonna fix it, so you’re gonna take this fuckin’ mirror and fix it,”

I dunno, it sounded more eloquent in my head, but I make up for it by snarling it in exactly the tone Buttercream the Wolvark taught me for when Males are being Too Stupid to Live. This particular tone and demeanor has gotten me called a bitch on the daily, as I radiate the kind of primal confidence that makes ain’t shit people face the fuckin’ music. Unfortunately for those useless souls, they are absolutely correct, I am a bitch, and I will always be more powerful than them.

With every new excuse he tries to make, I let him know how long I have been working on his mirror; I tell him I had a dinner engagement that I dipped on specifically to get this done for him; I tell him that this ONE SINGLE THING made me miss my dinner, a good fight, and possibly a sloppy makeout and I am fully willing to fail this exam by BREAKING THE MIRROR OVER HIS STUPID BLUE FAT HEAD FUCKIN’ TRY ME FUCKO.
Hell’s blood but if his dick don’t finally shrink up; he gives in like a petulant child with a full pout and everything, and I hand him his mirror. He unlocks it; I fix it; and I’m done. Surprise surprise, all it took was one pissed off Dreamer and the snarl of a wolvark. Fuck I’m hungry.

When I hand over the mirror for inspection, the Examiners smile at me, patient as ever.

“That’s it, Starstrider,” they laugh, “You’ve just gotta be meaner.”

I smile back, for the first time all night.

“Strange,” I tell them, and I do mean it, “I’m usually told just the opposite.”

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