Methyl Nitrate Pineapples

by razbliuto

Summary

All Sophie wanted to do was make bombs and go to war for the World Government. Naturally, she ends up strapped to an operating table with a pirate injecting poison into her foot. Sometimes you gotta take a few detours before you find your way home. — LawOC, sort of.

Notes

more additional tags that i’m too lazy to add: really terrible godawful jokes about dying, old ladies kicking ass, lifetime effects of ptsd, i began writing this in 2012 before the timeskip so law probably fluctuates between three different personalities, bepo is the unsung hero, my main girl sophie is way too fuckin smart for me to write jesus i failed statistics in the twelfth grade, you bet your ass this is a feminist work @ oda i'M TIRED.

more oc and writing shenanigans: tumblr | twitter | ff
Shells whistled through the heavy rain and slammed against a steel-fortified Marine shelter, setting the giant Red Cross ablaze.

Evacuating citizens of Vira scrambled away as the sign crashed to the ground. Clashing steel and gunshots rang out in the distance, and forks of lighting cracked through the sky. They illuminated shadows fighting among the sheer cliffs, pressing closer with every flash of blinding white.

"Hurry! Ships are waiting to take you to safety!" a Marine captain shouted, pointing his gun toward the harbor. A group of soldiers were feverishly stamping out the fire.

"Sir, we're losing ground on the front!" a ragged recruit yelled over the clamor.

"Damn the Revolutionaries," the captain cursed under his breath. "Get the injured on board! Before another round of… oh shi—"

The shelter walls shuddered and shook with the onslaught of mortars. Dust streamed from the corners. Dying moans and screams echoed down every corridor, and all hands available had to make up for the doctor shortage. For one particular chemist-turned-combat-medic, this meant getting pulled from her hiding spot under a desk and kicked into an operating room.

"Bandages! Sophie, I need more bandages!"

"Where are the IV packs? Sophie, check the supply closet!"

"Oi, Strangways, the bathroom ran out of toilet paper again!"

"What the pineapples is wrong with you people!? For the last time, I am in a Very Stressful Situation!" an irate blonde hollered, and accidentally tugged on the thread and needle gripped in her fists. The man on the operating table twitched violently.

"Ahhh, it hurts! Ahh… ha ha ha…"

The poor marine giggled wildly and then sunk into a dazed stupor. Sophie wiped her forehead in relief (never again shall she underestimate the powers of laughing gas!), before remembering—why hello there, blood. Concentrating on only inhaling through her mouth, she slowly and meticulously began to stitch the gash up.

It was a clean shot through the bone; the bullet hadn't lodged inside the body, which was good. The problem was how to handle all this blood loss. She squinted at the needle, and then shifted it so that it was perpendicular with her index finger. She carefully edged the needle into the skin, threaded it quickly, and then whipped out her ruler. Five centimeters apart, evenly spaced, two inches long. She exhaled. Three stitches down, eight more to go.

"Strangways! Where the hell is that toilet paper?" a voice behind her demanded.

"Mangos!" Sophie swore and sucked on her bleeding thumb. She turned around, hissing flames, "I'm in the middle of an operation so get someone else to wipe your—AAH MY CHASTITY PUT ON SOME PANTS."
"IV! Sophie, where's that IV?"

"My guy lost a nose, any of you seen it?"

She slammed her fists on the operating table, gnashing her teeth.

"The pain," the marine sobbed.

"Shut up!" Sophie exploded at her patient. Fortunately for her, he was too drugged up to notice. Sophie pointed at the crowd. "IV and bandages are in the supply closet, and you can use banana leaves to clean up for all I care! Get out before I have to cremate another dead patient! Get out, get out, get out!"

She breathed harshly through her nose as the door swung shut, willing herself to calm down lest she break out in nervous tics.

Sophie tore off her perfectly clean surgeon's gloves and strapped on a new pair. The laughing gas would be wearing off by now. She reached for a syringe that carried a one-hundred and twenty milligram dose of anesthesia, and injected it into her patient. One hundred and twenty… Sophie considered, and then injected another dose. Two-hundred forty. Well, one more couldn't hurt… three-hundred sixty. Pretty number. A full circle.

The door burst open. "Sophie!"

"Gahh!"

The marine, completely numb from the neck down, started snoring.

Charaka Hippo, the man in charge over the medic squad, stood panting at the door. His glasses were smudged with dust. "We're evacuating!" he yelled, peeling off his bloodied gloves and tossing them on the floor. "There's a ship waiting out in the harbor, leave everything and—stop that!"

Sophie guiltily sprang to her feet, clutching his gloves. "B-but th-the floor will get dirty!"

As if it wasn't already—streaks of blood marred the tiles, which had turned grey over the last few days of constant bombing. The stink of death and sulfur filled every crevice the operating room. Sophie herself looked completely deranged with her soot-stained curls sticking up everywhere and manic expression.

Hippo glanced up at the shaking ceiling. "Never mind that, let's go!"

"B-but I-I'm not done!"

He smacked himself in the face, strode over, and grabbed the needle. Sophie's eyes widened. "Um—wait, sensei, I was—"

In three quick strokes, the very pale-faced marine had a row of squiggly black thread running down his chest. Sophie gaped, her eyes suspiciously bright.

"Follow me!" Hippo shouted over the sound of the walls bending over and yells of other doctors. He slung the marine over one shoulder and pushed the thunderstruck blonde through the door.

"But now it's—now it's—uneven!" Sophie wailed.

He ignored her, and she remembered at the last moment to grab her lighter and stick it in her pocket before stumbling out. Her sniffles were drowned out by the torrential rain as they joined the surge.
outside into the ruins of what had once been a Marine base camp.

The harbor was nearly deserted; all the other refugee ships had long since fled except for one. Sophie looked over her shoulder, chills crawling up her spine. She couldn't clearly discern the battle through the storm, but three months spent in war had generated a sort of intuition in Sophie: the rebels were fighting loyalists and Marines back onto the shore. And the further they retreated, the more likely the battle was about to hit the shelter.

"The captain's not breathing!" someone screamed.

Sophie whirled around, searching for the voice, and abruptly stumbled over a bloody marine. She about to reach down to help her—but then Hippo yanked on her wrist.

"The woman's dead!" he snapped. "Don't stop moving!"

Another mortar hit the edge of the ruined base and sent shrapnel flying through the wind. Sophie could barely hear Hippo hollering orders to other civilians. The screams had resurfaced and lightning clapped deafeningly in the black sky.

She fell behind Hippo, who was relaying orders to a marine, and helped other injured marines who were being rushed from the shelter. Some were well past their prime and some looked even younger than her, wheeled on stretchers and bleeding from their heads, and their arms, and their mouths—

Thunder boomed and Sophie instantly stopped moving, scant inches short from the pier.

She took thirteen steps. Prime number. Bad number. Her insides churned just thinking about it. She shuffled forward two more steps, balanced thoughtfully on her right leg, and then stepped down with her left. Sixteen steps. Four squared. Good number. She breathed out in relief.

"Get down!" someone shrieked, and Sophie felt a rush of heat behind her before the shelter combusted in a roar of fire.

Something whacked the side of her head and she was thrown against the wooden planks. "Pineapples, pineapples, pineapples," she muttered under her breath, scrambling upward and nursing a giant, painful bump on her head.

Two poorly-aimed bombs splashed harmlessly into the ocean and exploded. The furious waves rocked the last refugee ship.

"Sophie!" Hippo yelled over the storm, "Hurry!"

The ship was leaving.

Sophie sprinted toward the edge of the pier. She saw Hippo fighting to get to the starboard side, heard him shout, "Stop the damn ship! My daughter still hasn't boarded!"

She stretched out a hand, reaching for the ladder, and in a burst of impulsiveness her feet left the pier (twelve steps even, ha!). Then a shell hit the docks, sending her flying through the air as the background blew up and the music swelled, hair flying across her face and eyes tearing up with the strain as her fingers brushed the ladder and—

Sophie smacked her face on the side of the ship and belly-flopped into the ocean.

Her ears roared and the world turned dark and smothering. Sophie pinched her nose with one hand and swam upward, breaking the surface with a pained gasp. She couldn't open her left eye. Oh holy
pineapples, if she got a black eye because of this…

She heard the mortars *wheeee* from the skies and dove back underwater, curling up into a ball. The muffled bombs exploded and she was helplessly tossed around by the icy current. Panic, real, cold panic, seized her and gripped her frantic heart. She struggled for air just as another bomb hit, sending her somersaulting past sinking debris and floating fish. Sophie gritted her teeth. If only she could make it to the ship—

She clawed her way to the surface, sputtering like mad. Sophie floundered blindly for anything that floated; her fingers poked something squishy and wet. Rubbing water from her eyes, she opened them and grimaced.

Squishy, wet, and very, very *dead* would be more appropriate.

She grabbed the second closest thing—the remains of the charred Red Cross sign—and took a moment to hack out seawater and catch her breath. The refugee ship was nothing more than a small grey speck on the horizon.

"Get b-b-back here you sons of b-barnacles," she bellowed, shaking her fist.

After a few more seconds of raging, Sophie slumped over, groaning. She would've started swimming already, if she didn't have any damned Sea Kings to worry about.

"I should go back to V-Vira and ask f-for help," she chattered, hugging her arms. "Maybe the o-other marines could g-give me a ship ride back to the base…"

She laughed shortly. That was a brilliant idea. And then she'd step onto the beach, hand someone a nice shiny gun, and invite them to play target practice with her head—a more entertaining alternative to walking straight into a gory civil war.

She smacked herself on the forehead, and then hit herself again, because she hated doing things in ones. "Of course! S-Sophie, you are so stupid, why didn't y-you think of it sooner…"

A few minutes later, she squatted on top of a barely-there pile of wooden planks—her makeshift raft, wrapped in wet rope and kelp. Her bare toes gripped the dismembered wood. With a determined huff, she rolled up her sleeves and started paddling with a broken piece of timber. It was do or die and Sophie really wasn't much for dying.

"It'll hold," she said forcefully. "It'll *definitely* hold until I get to the next island."

Peering out into the rain, she failed to notice the enormous galleon trailing behind her until a black shadow fell over the water and goosebumps popped up her arms.

Her good eye bugged as she stared up at the dark, dragon-shaped figurehead, illuminated by a flash of lightning.

She giggled hysterically. "Oh mango—"

The stack of wood broke apart in her hands, and a huge wave crashed over Sophie, dragging her down into the depths.

—

An IV drip blurred into view.
Slowly surfacing back into the conscious world, Sophie blinked blearily up at the bright lights that—
wait, ceiling lights? A heart monitor? IV drips? The smell of sterilized metal? Rejoice, she’d been
rescued! The Marines actually came back for her! She was just about to sink back into a sweet,
painless unconsciousness when she glanced to the side and—

The IV faced the wrong direction.

Sophie stared at it, utterly horrified. It was completely misaligned to the other machinery and just no
no no the balance was not right, not right at all. She squinted to tell it that it was not going to get
away with this.

She started to push herself into sitting position, but her limbs refused to comply. Sophie could feel the
leather rubbing against her skin. Someone buckled restraints on her. But the IV—but the IV!

"Good, you're awake," a distinctly masculine voice spoke from somewhere next to the heart monitor.
"How old are you?"

Her mouth felt thick when she opened it. Sophie tried speaking, and it sounded like,
"UbleugghsafjdKn?"

"Your age, Miss."

She swallowed, coughed out a hairball, and then croaked out, "Ni… nineteen. Where am I?" She'd
meant to ask what Marine division he belonged to, but four words drew enough pain.

There was a sound of a chair wheeling over and a dark, lean figure appeared against the lights. She
picked apart his appearance: doctor's coat. Fluffy hat. Gold earrings. His legs were crossed and a
clipboard rested in his lap, one arm thrown over the back of the chair. His posture screamed
boredom. Sophie looked up at his face. Black goatee, black eyes, easygoing smile. No, not boredom.

There was a strange prickling of alarm in the back of her mind.

"On a vessel," he said simply, scrawling things on the clipboard. "You've suffered no severe
wounds; just a minor swelling over your left eye and some bruises here and there. Prime condition,"
he muttered, and reached towards her. A paper cup pressed against her lips. "Water. Drink."

The water soothed her raw throat immensely. While she drained the cup, her gaze flickered to the
clipboard and Sophie read his handwriting upside down. Blonde, blue-eyed, nineteen, avg. height,
underfed for approx. one month, poss. due to lack of substantial rations at Vira—

She accidentally snorted water up her nose. The smoke from the battleground seeped into her lungs
and dark shadows were bleeding, screaming, crying for help—

"How did you know?" she demanded. "That I was at—at—"

"I find a bloody and unconscious marine a few miles from an island where a coup d'état is taking
place. It's not a very difficult leap." He crumbled the paper cup in his fist and tossed it over his
shoulder.

Her gut clenched. "Well, you know how HQ is," she shrugged. "Always so anal about stationing
you in the middle of violent civil wars." Never mind the fact that she was the one who asked to be
stationed there…

He chuckled like he found Sophie's lame joke extremely amusing. There was something odd about
the way he studied her, the way he kept on smiling. "You're a combat medic, correct?"
"Correct. You know this how?"

He held up her shirt. "Identification tag."

Oh.

"To be more exact, I'm actually a chemist." She shifted. "As for why I was with the medic squad at Vira… it's a boring story."

The doctor got up to rummage around the contents of a drawer, his back facing her. "You must love working for the Marines if you enjoy bleeding for them," he said over his shoulder.

Sophie wasn't sure if she imagined his sarcastic tone. "I don't work for the Marines," she returned sourly. "I work with the World Government." It struck her that she was being suspicious of the man who had saved her life. Hippo would be so disappointed. Sophie hastily tried to rectify her behavior by adding, "And, um, you know, if you ever find your job lacking, I can get you a place in a real medical facility. As thanks for saving me."

"A real medical facility…" Okay, Sophie definitely didn't imagine the scorn there. "I'm afraid I'll have to refuse your generous offer, Miss." The doctor turned around, strapping on a pair of latex gloves and wielding a syringe filled with a brown liquid. "I'm perfectly comfortable with my line of work. There are just so many…" his smile stretched, turning sharp and cruel, "possibilities."

The situation just turned decidedly creepier. Sophie laughed nervously, nose twitching. "Right. Yeah, anyway, I am grateful to you for saving my life and everything, but I feel a lot better now. So I need my clothes back… and if you could free me from these, um, restraints—that would be highly appreciated?"

He rubbed his goatee, considering. "To the second, I really can't be bothered, and to the first, you'll be dead anyway so there's no point." He tested the syringe and a bit of the liquid squirted into the air. "Ah, the putrid stench of parathion."

He allowed brief pause, wherein Sophie heard the sound of a ten-ton anvil drop in her stomach. Parathion. C10H14NO5PS. Acts on the acetylcholinesterase enzyme… to disrupt the nervous system… wait, no, that… couldn't be right…

"But," she said weakly, "but that stuff is toxic."

"Three stars for you, Chemist-ya. The smallest drop can kill a man in fifteen minutes. It'll be quite fun recording the effects of an overdose… you're in prime condition for testing, after all."

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut. "I was an idiot for thinking this was a Marine ship."

"You were," he agreed. "It's a pirate one, Miss, captained by Trafalgar Law." He mockingly inclined his head. "At your service."

The needle glinted in the light.

"…D-Do you like money?" Sophie blurted out desperately. "I have lots of money! And gold! I'm a leading scientist at G-13, the Marine base that specializes in chemical warfare. Why kill me when you can ransom me? My superiors will give so much beli that you'll be able to live off of it for the rest of your—"

He fist a hand in her blonde curls and jerked her head back.
"Where should I begin? Should I go the standard route and use the inside of the elbow?" The pirate twisted her head to the side. "Or maybe the neck? The eyes? Maybe I should inject it straight into the brain. So many options, what to pick, what to pick...
A thumb jammed into Sophie's mouth and dragged it open. "The gums would be particularly painful," he squished her cheeks together so her lips puckered like extremely chapped fish, and it'd shut your nauseatingly loud mouth up... or perhaps I should just force you to swallow it whole."

He laughed, a strangely pleasant sound, not at all suited for his dark smile. The tip of the needle hovered right over her throat.

"I've got a nice idea," he hummed. "A poisoned apple. Yes, I do like the sound of that. Forcing you to eat your own death."

Her teeth clamped down on her bottom lip to restrain her stutters. No good. W-w-did you fix me up if you were only waiting to k-k-kill me? You should've j-j-just let me d-die!

Something slammed against the operating room and pain burst through Sophie's head. Everything suddenly became very dark. She broke out in cold sweat. Oh no, was this it? She could see a faint light. Goodbye, Hippo, it's been fun—oh. Oh, wait.

Sophie opened her eyes.

The IV drip lay across her stomach—that must've been what had hit her—and medicine bottles and dangerous-looking utensils were rattling in the cabinets; the entire room was shaking. A tray of scalpels spun dangerously near Sophie. Something heavy clanged against the ship and echoed into the operating room.

A voice rang out from the brass tube protruding from the wall. "Captain! There's an emergency!"

"What did I tell you about disrupting me when I'm operating?" the pirate yelled back.

This was her chance! Sophie started to agonizingly wiggle her hands free.

A loud boom pounded through the steel walls. "Sorry! But—Shachi, duck!—but there are two Marine battleships heading this way! They mean to intercept us before we reach Crawfish Island!"

Hell yeah! She did a mental pelvic thrust of victory. One wrist free! One more to go...

"They only sent two? Well, I've been meaning to get a higher bounty..." He grabbed a long sword leaning against the desk and shouted, "Pull up and stand by for my orders. Tell the men they better be ready to go wild!"

There was a jarring roar of sound at the other end. "Aye aye, Captain!"

He glanced over at Sophie, who instantly became motionless. Act cool, act cool, cool as an ice cube...

"Think you've somehow managed a narrow escape?"
That was exactly what she was thinking. "Actually, I was just saying my last prayers," she said flatly.

And before she had any time to protest, he jammed the syringe into the heel of her foot. A garbled, choked cry wrangled itself out of Sophie's throat as electricity shot through her leg, so fierce it felt like death.

"Good. I can at least cut off your poisoned foot and run some tests on it, after you die." He calmly assessed her desperate gasps for air, like how someone might inspect a dying bug under a microscope. "It's been nice knowing you, Miss…?"

"Go get eaten by a Sea K-King," she panted, glaring unfocusedly at the three blurring heads of Trafalgar Law.

He just laughed and kicked the door shut behind him, lock snapping in place.

Finally alone, Sophie screamed. She threw her all her weight against the restraints, pushing, straining, overcome with desperation. Her head pounded like someone was punching her repeatedly in the face, but her mind was going haywire. Parathion metabolizes to paraoxon, oxidases replaces sulfur with oxygen, first exposure symptoms: nausea, poor vision, muscle spasms; final symptoms: respiratory arrest, death.

Gaah, she took classes on this! Didn't she have to dislocate her thumbs? Or maybe those were for handcuffs… oh, of all the classes to sleep through… She squeezed her eyes shut and finally managed to yank her other wrist from the bonds… so now she had two hands flopping uselessly next to her legs.

"P-p-pineapples!"

Her eyes flickered over to the tray with all the scalpels on it. It was near—really near.

She stretched her fingers out, urgently straining for the end of a scalpel that was scant millimeters out of her reach. "Come on… please, please, please…"

With a hiss of triumph, she grasped the blade—a line of red appearing on her palm—and flipped it around her shaking fingers so she gripped the handle. Sophie pressed sharp metal to leather and started sawing. If she could just cut through the restraint on her forearms, then she could unbuckle the rest with no difficulty. Her teeth dragged on her bottom lip.

One minute… pineapples, the leather wasn't cutting easily…

Two minutes… faint explosions boomed against the ship…the pirate might be coming back soon…

Three…

Finally, Sophie fell over the side of the table and attacked the floor with her face. She crawled over to the medical cabinets—which were locked, what brilliance—raised herself to her knees, and smashed her fists through the glass.

Her eyes bugged.

"Holy m-m-mangos, you could knock out a whale with all these drugs!"

Right. She was currently dying of parathion poisoning. This was not the time. Think, Sophie, think, parathion was a chemical weapon, she'd worked on it before and even recommended autoinjectors of
the cure to be carried by the marines… and the cure was… was…

…Atropine! Of course! Even an idiot's gotta have some in his ship!

She plunged her hands in and grabbed a fistful of white bottles. Her vision swam—*oh fudgeapples*. Sophie leaned over and loudly emptied her stomach of the contents she had ingested earlier that morning, which basically consisted of seawater and greyish bits of expired potato. Sophie sunk on all fours, wheezing and fumbling through the bottles.

Atropine.

Her nose was less than an inch above the neat label. Atropine, one hundred milligrams a pill. Snatching the bottle up with shaking hands, she twisted the cap open and popped two pills in her mouth.

Sophie slumped against wall, gripping her trembling hands together, eyes shut.

She sat there for some time, mentally reciting all the elements on the periodic table, and when that was done, their atomic symbols, and when *that* was done, their atomic weight. Slowly, little by little, she found it in her to stand back up. But she wasn't out of danger yet; her foot was numb, chances of paralysis high if she didn't get the poison in it drained. And excess atropine was toxic; she couldn't rely on that…

Sophie heard distant shouts, the sounds of battle, eerily reminiscent of Vira. *Good*, she thought vindictively. She hoped that rotten plum got his leg blown off.

Gritting her teeth, Sophie hopped over to the desk, where (she started laughing, because she was getting hysterical at this point) all her dirty clothes had been neatly folded—unmentionables included. Didn't that mean…? *Not the time*, she chided herself as she changed into her Marine uniform and wrapped her foot tightly with bandages to make it easier to walk on. For precaution's sake, she also stuck the scalpel in her pocket.

Now what to do about that locked door…

A thrown desk, two flying chairs, and multiple attacks with a surgeon's saw later, Sophie belatedly realized that, no, unlike the books she's read, this was not enough to break out of a steel door.

*You fail at life*, said an extremely nasty voice in her head.

"I'm kind of *new to this,*" Sophie hissed under her breath, eyes narrowed and twitchy. Great. Now what was she going to do?

She started pulling open cabinets and overturning drawers. There had to be something she could work with in one of those medicine bottles.

Think, think, think thinkthinkthink what sort of medicine would a doctor carry that could bust open a steel door… alkaline metals? No, definitely impossible—nitrocellulose? Acetone peroxide? Raw sodium? Would he have any of those? *Think, Sophie, think—*you spent your whole life blowing things up for fun! Nitroglycerin, ethanol… wait a minute… ethanol…

Five minutes later, she set a roll of tape, a jar (she had to dump out an eyeball), and two bottles of isopropyl rubbing alcohol on the operating table. The latter was used as an antiseptic, but it also had over seventy percent of pure, concentrated ethanol. When she finished pouring, the jar was cheerfully swishing with medicine/flammable fluid and taped to the steel door. Now she needed fire.
…Oh, as if things would ever be that convenient.

She had no way of making a spark, and besides, with all these drugs in the room, she would bet a tooth that the psycho doctor fireproofed everything.

Sophie sat down heavily on the operating table. She was so, so close… but this was it. She really was going to die on a pirate ship. Though, in all honestly, the revelation of her dying place wasn't as depressing as her next thought: she was going to die without a last smoke.

If things were going the way Sophie imagined in her mind, she would have busted out of that door ages ago, contacted Hippo, boarded one of those Marine battleships while making immature faces at Trafawhatever and the rest of his evil, pox-marked crew as they were send to the brig, reached into her pocket like so, and a beautiful box of cigarettes would appear in one hand, her favorite lighter in the other, and she'd give herself a celebratory smoke…

Sophie blinked down at her hand, which clenched said favorite lighter.

"And next, one hundred million beli will appear!" she said loudly. Nothing happened. "Okay, so I don't have magic powers…"

She hopped off the table. Right, back at Vira…

(He ignored her, and she remembered at the last moment to grab her lighter and stick it in her pocket before stumbling out.)

That brief moment of giving into her addiction had saved her!

"I love you," Sophie murmured reverently, and kissed the lighter.

Revitalized, she vehemently ripped off a long piece of cloth from her ex-hospital gown (it rather stress-reducing) and twisted it, then soaked it in rubbing alcohol and plugged up the jar. The heat and pressure combined would hopefully make the alcohol burst into flames and explode.

She flicked the lighter. A tiny flame cheerfully burst into life, greeting Sophie with the sweet smell of smoke. She waved her ring finger over it, relishing the sizzle as yet another burn mark was added to the generous repertoire of scars on her hands.

Any last words? the mean, nasally voice in her head asked.

"Shut up," Sophie said serenely, "and let's just enjoy the music."

She lit the makeshift wick and leaped to the ground.

Seconds later, a bang and an explosion of air swept through the room. Bottles and scalpels and glass crashed onto the floor, but it wasn't as loud as she expected… or was used to. Sophie uncovered her head. Through the haze, she examined what once was a perfectly sterilized operating room.

…Trafalgar Law was not going to be a happy doctor.

The steel door swayed a little, barely torn off one hinge. But that was enough for Sophie to wiggle through.

"Nicotine, oh nicotine, how I've missed you so," she sighed.

She peeked at the peculiar metal pipes that lined the walls—man, this was a weird ship. Shrugging, Sophie stuffed the lighter in her pocket with the scalpel and slipped away. A few seconds later, she
sneaked back into the room, turned the IV drip so it was parallel to the other machines, and bolted off again.

She couldn't move.

Sophie wasn't blocked by the evil doctor, or any of his evil, pillaging minions, no. She wasn't stopped by a Sea King, or a row of spikes threatening to shred her skin to pieces.

There was... a mud stain.

A mud stain on the floor, with a turned-over bucket of water and a wet mop beside it, clearly having been abandoned when the alarm rang out. But that wasn't the point. The point was: it was a huge, ugly lump of mud. Whoever had been cleaning this filthy hunk of metal should be forced to walk the plank! Or, you know, at least fired! What a disgrace! What an absolute ignominy! Even Sophie felt pity and embarrassment for this poor—

No.

Sophie forced her face forward. In her rather short time spent trying to escape, she figured out she was in a submarine—which foiled all her decent, half-mapped out plans. How the pineapples was she supposed to escape from a—

The mud stain was mocking her. Mocking. Her.

So close, Sophie. You are so close to the exit. Don't stop for a stupid stain on a stupid pirate ship! If you stop I'll smack you all the way to the Red Line!

She shuffled her toes forward, millimeter by millimeter.

Square numbers! Detergent! Bleach! Soap! Freshly-cut fingernails! Four! Nine! Sixteen! Twenty-five! Thirty-six! Four... oh, for the love of Sengoku, that pirate only missed one stain, how difficult is it to just mop off that one stain before running off to go kill a few marines—

"—I mean honestly, it's not that very d-d-difficult!" she yelled in aggravation, grabbed the broom, and started to vigorously attack the stain.

And once that was done, Sophie suddenly noticed how dirty the floor was around the little clean spot. Well that just wouldn't do... She pulled up the sleeves of her shirt and gripped the mop like a sword. When she was finally done, the entire passageway was sparkling—glittering, even. Sophie wiped her brow with a satisfied sigh... cleanliness was indeed a true sign of happiness.

A large shadow fell over her shoulder. Filled with trepidation, she looked up.

"Aye?" The big, fluffy polar bear blinked. "A marine?"

She slapped a hand over her nose. Get a grip, Sophie! But she couldn't. It was just—too—too—gaah, damn you nosebleeds!

"Here." Sophie handed the mop over and bowed. "I cleaned up for you."

"Ah, thanks—"

But Sophie was already limping as fast as she could limp out of the hallway, blood spewing through her fingers. The sub was at the surface! As long as they didn't pull down, she could escape through
one of those hatches at the top, right? She clambered up a steel ladder, praying for the universe’s temporary suspension of the seemingly ubiquitous Murphy's Law—

"We're landing at Crawfish Island tonight, ya bastards!"

Why, Universe, why, Sophie sobbed.

Hurried footsteps were heading her way. "Oi, oi, careful on the ladder!" a voice yelled. "If you get even more blood on the sub, Captain might have a fit."

Sweet son of a clamshell, was there a thing between ladders and Super Mega Bad Things Happening? Cursing herself for not noticing that the battle had already stopped, Sophie quickly slid back down to the floor and jerked open door number one.

"Gaahh!" Sophie squeaked as a tower of falling brooms appeared over her.

She ended up sprawled beneath a pile of wooden sticks, dust and cobwebs clinging to her clothes. She glared at the brooms, feeling betrayed.

There was noise like someone jumped onto the floor. "C'mon, Penguin! We're supposed to check if the patient is a corpse yet."

Muttering swears, she grabbed the traitorous brooms and whooshed inside the closet, closing the door behind her with a quiet snap. In the dim light, she could see a large, hairy arachnid dangling on a fine thread right in front of her nose. She nervously smiled at it as she dabbed her nose with her shirt.

Another person landed on the floor. "Too bad it had to be a girl. And the Captain wouldn't even let us take a peek. I mean… you know, even if she was damn ugly…"

She scowled. Yeah, thanks.

"At least we're at port now, huh?" A happy sigh. "After three weeks I'll finally get to bask in the presence of women."

Her foot throbbed in an unexpected flare of pain. Unconsciously reaching down, Sophie bashed her elbow against the wall. Her eyes bugged. "Homunnghf!"

"What was that?"

She clapped her hands over her mouth.

"What was what?"

"I thought I heard…from down the hall…"

A bead of sweat trickled down her chin. The shadows underneath the door shifted.

There wasn't any room for her to crouch down and hide! Buckets and frying pans and broken anatomical models and other random stuff that definitely did not belong in a broom closet were surrounding her. One wrong move and it would all tumble down. She dug her hands into her pocket, remembering the scalpel she stole earlier. Sophie clutched it tightly. She could pull a feint—aim at his heart, dodge away at the last second, and run as if hellhounds were snapping at her ankles. She could—maybe—probably…

The footsteps paused right outside the door. Sophie stopped breathing.
"Eh, Bepo? What the hell're you doing?"

Sophie perked up. Bepo, the bear pirate filled with adorable squishiness! She pressed her hands against the door and tried to peer through the crack of light…and felt like the weirdest pervert ever…

"The patient escaped."

Sophie squinted. Pineapples.

"WHAT THE HELL, YOU TALKING BEAR?"

"I'm sorry…"

"SO WEAK!"

"S-stop! This isn't the time! We have to tell Captain about this!"

"Ah! Right! Bepo, where did you last see her?"

"Down over there. She was cleaning."

"Like… cleaning blood off a knife or something?" one pirate asked slowly.

"Nope. She was mopping the floor."

There was a long, befuddled silence. Sophie felt strangely mortified. So what if she enjoyed cleaning? It was perfectly normal to want to eradicate every single bacterium in existence, wasn't it?

The other pirate sighed pityingly. "Poor girl. What experiment did Captain do to her head?"

Sophie glared at the door, fuming.

"Okay, Bepo, Captain's in the kitchen, alert him about the patient. Shachi, let's go check the operating room."

The footsteps pattered away and all Sophie was left with was a hurt ego and the smell of dank mold. After waiting a few seconds, she tentatively peeked out into the deserted hallway.

It seemed escaping from the top of the submarine was out. But Sophie got a better idea…

Beyond the porthole was a cerulean sky speckled with thin streaks of white. If she craned her neck enough, she could see the tide rolling onto the beach and a clump of tall, swaying trees running along the curve of land. This was what she left G-13 to see. And now here she was, seeing it behind the porthole of a pirate submarine. Life was ironic.

Sophie inspected the glass pane. This would be a bit unorthodox, but…

"There's a first time for everything," she muttered to herself, running her hands along the latch.

It took three bleeding fingers and one hangnail, but Sophie somehow managed to pry the porthole open. She grabbed hold of the rim and shoved herself through it, legs first.

Inch by inch, arm cramp after arm cramp, Sophie shimmied her way out with a pop, inhaled quickly, and dropped into the ocean. The splash was instantly muffled. Bubbles followed her descent and the sea wrapped her feverish skin in a cool, calming blanket. Her hair rippled and swirled like a golden cloud, almost ethereal against the blue depths.
Sophie opened her eyes and kicked upwards.

The air was salty and fresh, and it tasted of freedom. She took in the squawking gulls, the sunlight sparkling on the waves, the island just ahead. She could see a town right at the edge of the beach; she could find help there, and safety, and life was wonderful.

A large smile breaking across her face, Sophie started swimming towards shore.

—

Law tossed an apple up and down as he surveyed the damage.

Glass, medicine bottles, and atropine pills were scattered across the floor. Cabinets had been broken into, chairs tossed clear across the room. A revolting smell wafted from the puddle next to the sink. Oddly enough, the IV was the only thing that looked untouched.

After a very long hush, Law took a step forward and kicked away a bloody eyeball. It knocked against the wall with a wet *squish*.

"That girl," he said quietly, "took my favorite scalpel."

"Maybe she drowned?" one pirate piped up, "After all, the poison—"

"The patient found the antidote and broke free using my rubbing alcohol. She cut through leather in her malnourished state on pure desperation alone." His assessment was coldly detached, as if he was simply stating the results of a diagnosis. "I'm certain she's already reached town."

"Well, why the hell're we standing around?" another pirate growled. "Let's find her, damn it!"

"You can't rush the perfect dissection," Law responded with a small smirk. "There's a method to this madness, after all, and it's been so long since I found such a curious specimen."

"Whoooa, Captain, you're so cool," the Heart Pirates cheered from behind a corner.

With one last glance over the wreck of his operating room, he said, "Someone clean up this mess. Someone else get me a brain. I feel like burning something."

Law munched on the apple as he left. Shachi and Penguin eyed each other behind their captain's retreating back.

"I'll take the floor, you get the cabinets, and we'll leave Bepo the… brain?" Shachi proposed.

"Deal," Penguin agreed quickly.

*to be continued*
Thirty Miles to Gator Town

Chapter Notes

ey, somebody subscribed! thanks cool person. u rule.

Sophie woke up a very familiar room.

"Good, you're awake," said a very familiar voice. "I've been dying to try this new heart procedure, but I just couldn't find any volunteers."

Chains were knotted around her wrists and neck and ankles, binding her to the table. Something like oh god not again mixed with so you like bondage, huh was pushed aside to doesn't matter, get me out! She yanked, hard, but the chains began tightening. Sophie choked as it pressed against her neck, painfully hot.

A shadow stood above her. "I hope you don't mind I didn't give you any anesthesia. The pain and blood loss should knock you out soon enough, anyway."

She desperately fought the burning steel, so hot it was melting her insides and blackening her flesh. Sophie tried to scream, but her voice was choked by horrified fear. She was sinking. This was her hell, this was Vira, this was the Vice Admiral… and they were pulling her down.

"Fair warning, Chemist-ya: it has a death rate of one hundred percent."

He loomed over her evilly and revved up a chainsaw.

"Eyaaauugh!"

Sophie sat up so quickly she smacked her forehead and saw little pirate skulls spinning around in the air. "Holy pineapples stop I'm too young to die!" she wailed nonsensically, curling up into a little ball and pressed against the wall.

She lay there, shivering, for several seconds. Someone tapped her shoulder. "Excuse me… Miss?"

The unfamiliar voice sounded… wizened. But nice. Distinctively non-piratey. Sophie tentatively rolled around. She peeked up at an anxious-looking nurse and an old man with poufy white hair and a bright red spot on his chin. Sunlight filtered in through the open windows. A ceiling fan whirred loudly overhead. Oh. So she was at…oh.

Oooh crabapples…

"Umm…” Sophie smiled weakly. "That… was unintentional."

"It looks like the poison cleared up," the doctor laughed, sitting down beside her. "It warms my old heart to see my patients so lively."

"You'd be the first," she muttered under her breath.
The doctor blinked. "Hm?"

"What?" Sophie blinked back, folding the blanket in perfect, crisp ninety-degree angles.

"I thought I heard—oh, never mind an old man's ramblings. I have a few forms I need you to fill out, just for the records and all." He dipped a quill in ink and started scribbling on a sheet of paper. "First—you checked yourself in as Strangways Sophie. That is your real name, yes?"

"Uh-huh." She paused from rearranging her pillow. "Wait—I checked myself in?"

"Yes," he said distractedly, "Four days ago."

She gaped. "Four days?"

The doctor looked up. "You... don't remember anything?"

"Um." Sophie wracked her memories. "Was I choking a squirrel at any point?"

"It's understandable," the nurse assured. "You were in a state of near collapse. The poison in your body was attackin' your nervous system. You kept on crashin' into things an' dry-heavin' everywhere..."

Sophie felt her cheeks heat up in embarrassment. If that stupid, crazy, idiot, psychotic, murdering pirate hadn't tried to kill her... ugh. Thankfully, a knock on the door distracted Sophie from her plans to sink in the ground and die. Another doctor appeared, beckoning toward the nurse.

"Room Five," she muttered. "A marine just woke up. We need to get him under anesthesia."

The nurse looked troubled. "Right. I'll leave this t' you," he told the doctor.

"Alrighty. You go on and save some lives."

Sophie watched the nurse leave, suddenly realizing something. "I've never that man's accent before."

"It's the Crawfish Island accent. There are different dialects from village to village, but all the natives have it. Some say this island originally drifted here from South Blue." The doctor chuckled. "Moving islands, can you imagine? But stranger things have happened in this world." He pulled gently on her eyelids. "Look to the left, please."

She did as the doctor directed.

"Your vital signs are all good, and your speech patterns are normal." He slipped the stethoscope around his neck. "How did you manage to get all that parathion in you anyway? Did you chug a whole can of bug repellent?"

"Something like that," Sophie shrugged, smoothing out the wrinkles on her hospital gown.

He looked genuinely interested. "That must've been quite a sight. The poison, as the nurse said earlier," he indicated to his temple, "disrupts the nervous system; you get tremors, vomiting, very severe diarrhea—"

"I know what parathion does," she said shortly. Sophie really wasn't too fond of being reminded of the pirate. Or his stupid mocking smile. Or his stupid grey eyes. Or his evil, stupid-looking goatee. Or the way his hands felt, so light it was like a whisper on the air just above her skin, and it was a pity he was about to kill her because he really had nice hands—
"Ah, that's right," the doctor blithely went on, oblivious to Sophie's mild seizure in the corner, "You're a combat medic, correct?"

She stopped hyperventilating for a moment. "How did you...?"

"Your identification tag, Miss."

Sophie fell off the bed, flailing. Bad memories, bad memories!

Unfortunately, she was still attached to the IV and the heart monitor, so it resulted in a mess strewn across the floor. Sophie threw herself at it and hastily rearranged the drip and the monitor so they were symmetrical to the other machinery. Yep, all according to plan... The doctor watched her with slightly befuddled amusement. That amusement slowly turned to concern as Sophie gingerly peeled off the tape that held the IV in place.

"Ah... you shouldn't do that, Miss. We still need to wait for the diagnosis to come back before we can let you go."

"No time. I really need to go home—back to G-13," she mumbled, lightly pressing on a band-aid over the crook of her elbow. She took exactly four tiny steps over to the sink. Her foot felt decent enough to walk on. "And if you try and pull the Code Grey card on me," Sophie warned as she started washing her hands, "I swear, I will find you and I will eat you."

She tried to make it threatening. She really did.

The doctor stood up with a creak of his joints. "Well, if you're homesick... and Marine bases usually have fine doctors... alright, you're free to leave. You're in good shape and you don't seem to have any complications from the treatment. All I ask is for you to pay."

"...Pay?"

"The bill," the doctor clarified.

It took Sophie a moment to comprehend that. Living on World Government funds, she'd never paid money for anything in her entire life.

"Oh! Right. Of course! All I need is to go find the nearest Marine base and call my sensei and we'll have everything sorted out!" She rubbed the bar of soap furiously between her fingers. "So I'll need directions to the base, the nearest shop that sells cigarettes, and... and... why are you looking at me weirdly?"

He scratched his white beard, coughing. "I'm afraid that's not possible. Four days ago, a group of pirates completely destroyed it."

"Pirates?"

"The... oh, what were they called? Oh, yes, the Heart Pirates. Led by the Surgeon of Death, Trafalgar Law. They haven't caused any trouble yet. His group only looted the base, which is—was—some miles away from here." The doctor peered into her face. "Is something the matter? You turned very pale all of a sudden."

Her hands froze. "Pirates?"

"The... the... oh, what were they called? Oh, yes, the Heart Pirates. Led by the Surgeon of Death, Trafalgar Law. They haven't caused any trouble yet. His group only looted the base, which is—was—some miles away from here." The doctor peered into her face. "Is something the matter? You turned very pale all of a sudden."

She swallowed and turned off the faucet with her elbow. "Do you have a Den Den Mushi?"
"Out in the lobby, go straight and then turn right. But, Miss—"

Sophie dashed away with a speedy thank you and goodbye. The Den Den Mushi snored on the reception desk. She zoomed over, tripped over her feet, somersaulted like a ninja, and coolly dialed G-13’s number.

The snail's eyes popped open. "The line is presently unavailable."

That must be a mistake. Sophie hung up and redialed.

"The line is presently unavailable."

"Then make the stupid line available! This is Strangways Sophie! I really need to speak to Charaka Hippo, head of G-13’s medical division! It is of the upmost importance. The-world-will-die and all that jazz!"

There was a brief pause, and then…

"The line is presently un—"

"Water-figging-melons!" Sophie threw the receiver back on the hook.

Relieved of its call, the Den Den Mushi started to snore lightly. A couple by the door covered their child's ears.

Sophie felt like kicking the wall, she was so frustrated. She used to have a baby Den Den Mushi reserved solely for when she was separated from Hippo, but she left it back at… back… Sophie inhaled through her teeth and pushed the Den Den Mushi slightly more to the left of the desk.

After a pause, she also rearranged the tissue box and the little jar of ink.

"Strangways, right?" the receptionist asked, flipping through her clipboard.

Sophie looked up. "Yes. Wait. That was a conditioned response. I actually have no idea what you just said."

The receptionist popped a bubble. "Yeah, you're definitely that girl. Y’ knocked over three potted plants, broke at least five of the toys we keep for the kids, an’ overturned the fishtank. Y’ killed Hermy the hermit crab. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Sophie fidgeted. "Do I have to pay for all that?"

Her expression darkened.

"…I mean… I am definitely going to pay for all that!"

She gave Sophie a sugary-sweet smile. "The bank's down the street. The biggest buildin'. Y' can't miss it."

"Right… thanks…” Sophie weakly saluted and sidled out the front door. A minute later, she ran back inside. "Forgot my lighter." She paused. "Taking my clothes would be a good idea, too."

—

When she turned eighteen, Sophie had been given full access to her bank account. Ever since she went under his care, Hippo made sure to add to the pile of beli every month. 'Course, he also
took out a bit every month to help pay for damage repairs. She'd keep on insisting it wasn't her fault— the accidental explosion of the Marine lavatories, the inadvertent corrosion of half the Marine base, the unintentional Great Sulfur Incident when she was fourteen…

Sophie sighed as she examined the rest of the beli. She'd spent most of it on the hospital bill, Hermy the hermit crab's funeral, a leather satchel, a box of yummy cigarettes, and a new wardrobe. She kept the scalpel, her lighter, and what remained of her Marine clothes in the satchel. Sophie sighed again. Even after she bought a comfy pair of laced-up boots, she still hadn't been satisfied. Not wanting to settle for some Doskoi Panda knockoffs, she ended up forking over thousands of beli for top-notch Criminal clothes. B-but it wasn't her fault! The smell of beautiful, luxurious clothes called to her…

And it certainly didn't help that Crawfish Island was a humid pit of hell.

Absolutely miserable, Sophie rested her head on the bar counter. "Beer," her voice was muffled, "strongest you have."

"Yes'm," she heard the bartender drawl, and the sound of glasses clinked.

The fan in the corner slowly whirled towards her, a warm, tepid wind fanning the flush on her cheeks. Sweat formed where the back of her legs touched the chair. Her curls were so frizzy Sophie wouldn't be surprised if she shocked herself just by glancing at metal.

The record player sang a scratchy, upbeat little tune and she found herself tapping her fingers to the tenor of the sax. Sophie looked up as the bartender pushed over a glass of beer.

"Cheers." She raised her glass and then downed half in one gulp. It felt warm on her tongue and burned in her veins, like life. "So!" Sophie said grandly. "Crawfish Island! Spring Island, I think?"

"S'right. If you haven't seen 'em before, you should check out the swamps. They're still regrowin' down here, but the ones up north? Huge, massive things. Always a hit with tourists—what little of 'em we get here."

Sophie made a face. "No, thank you. Swamps are dirty."

"Romance can bloom anywhere," he declared with an air of grand mystery. "Hot an' humid all 'round, but if it don't draw out nostalgia even in the most hard o' hearted."

"That's because they associated nostalgia with this weather," Sophie replied bluntly. "The mind trains itself to respond automatically with certain feelings in certain situations. This can actually be controlled, you know? For example, if you blast extremely annoying music loud enough and long enough, the enemy may associate that with agonizing frustration and sleepless nights and repetitive headaches, so later when he's being interrogated—"

She abruptly stopped when she caught the look on the bartender's face.

"Th-this is great beer!" Sophie backpedaled with a wide, frantic grin. "What's in this?"

He stared. "…Alcohol."

"Ah-ha. That was my first guess…" she mumbled into her glass.

She couldn't remember the last time she interacted with a civilian. Science jargon? Perfect. Military slang? Decent. Normal human speak? Sophie still wasn't getting it, no matter how many times Hippo had tried teaching her.
"Where are you from, Mam'zelle? Grand Line? Or the Four Blues?" the bartender asked, looking more amused than disturbed by her behavior.

Sophie wiped her mouth exactly two times with a napkin. "Me? I'm... well..." She folded the napkin in half, thinking. "...I'm nobody. Just passing through."

"Ah, the ol' cliché," the bartender chuckled, throwing a sideways glance at Sophie's hands. At least he wasn't saying anything about it. "C'mon. This place don't judge. You sailed here, right? Weell... y' don't look like a sailor." He rubbed his chin, squinting at Sophie. "Hold on, 'm good at these. A merchant, maybe? Nah, somethin' tells me I'm wrong. A pirate?"

"Very, very wrong," she muttered around her glass.

"Probably not," the bartender agreed, throwing a dishrag over his shoulder. "You don't look like one of 'em Heart Pirates, anyway."

Sophie stared into her cup. Trafalgar Law stared back... his lazy smirk and cold, unfeeling eyes...

"You've met them?"

"Non. They dropped anchor on the western shore and this here's the southern tip o' the island. Haven't caused no ruckus yet. The Marine base on the other hand..." He sighed. "Completely destroyed the whole place. Most marines got out in time, though when I say 'most'..." He shook his head and resumed filling two mugs.

She swirled the beer around in her glass. "There was a battle, right? Four days ago? The Marines were trying to intercept the pirates."

"Two battleships were sunk. Sent just 'bout the whole town runnin'. We can only pray an' wait for 'em t' leave soon, when their Log Pose sets. Three more days t' go."

By golly, that was just teeeerrific. She fished the cigarette carton from her pockets and examined the twenty fresh new cigarettes. Feeling slightly more heartened, Sophie lit one up and took a hefty inhale. All the stress began to ease from her muscles. She blew rings of smoke out and watched them fade up somewhere between the bottles of cognac and champagne. Ah, there it was. Control. Her fingers stopped trembling.

The bartender passed the mugs to the two customers sitting at the other end of the bar. They were both wearing hats that obscured their faces, and had some sort of white jumpsuit thing tied around their waists, baring taut, sweaty muscle.

Hm.

Taking another deep puff, Sophie leaned over and asked, "Do you know if there's a Den Den Mushi here that can contact other Marine bases?"

"Eh, we already tried that. Even if it did get through, most o' the marines in the vicinity have all been sent to Vira..." He rubbed his chin. "Though I hear Gator Town's still tryin' to connect t' the line."

"Gator Town?"

"Yes'm. You get Pantano Town here, a few other villages scattered between the swamplands, and Gator Town on the other end o' the island. Thirty miles away."

A quick glance at the clock told her it was one in the afternoon. "Think I can make it there before
"Nightfall?" she inquired while downing the last of her beer.

"Walkin'? Not a Y chromosome's chance in Amazon Lily. We got carriages. Extremely expensive, but if ya need t' get there fast…"

She pressed the cigarette to her lips. "Extremely expensive is out of my price range." Sophie exhaled and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Now I see why I shouldn't have splurged on these Criminal clothes."

The bartender blinked. "You went to Ricky Rick's Boutique? Wow, you're probably the first tourist who fell for his knockoffs."

Sophie's eye twitched. "…Knockoffs? What are you—no way—" Horrified, she tugged on the collar of her shirt. "I spent twenty thousand beli on fake Criminal? Isn't that illegal? Can't I have that pineapple arrested—or—or at least get a refund!?"

He snorted. "Sure, it's illegal, 'cept no one usually falls for it. Ricky Rick rips off anyone who walks into his store. Look sharp next time; your money's your own responsibility."

Sophie's head met the counter again. Life was so much easier back in G-13.

"I don't care anymore," she sobbed, clutching her head. "I just want to get to Gator Town! Why does the universe hate mee?"

"What's the hurry? You should relax here for the night an' get a good start tomorrow."

For a millisecond, Sophie dwelled on the question. She could say she was recently captured and experimented on by the very same crew of pirates that was currently residing on that very island… she could tell him that she had been a combat medic in a vicious civil war and the last refugee ship left her stranded in the middle of the Grand Line… she could divulge that she'd never been out in the seas—never even been outside her home—and felt exhausted, and scared, and alone.

All of those were reasonable, truthful choices. And all of those had the high percentage of ending with a panic attack. And wouldn't that be the awkward cherry on top of the awkward cake in the form of an awkward turtle. So she really had no choice…

"See, I have a stalker." Sophie nodded sagely. "He's been following me for two islands already. Really scary guy—all tattoo-y and earring-y and murderous tendencies-y. I'm in super big trouble because of him."

…but to lie her awkward pants off.

"Damn," the bartender said.

Sophie nodded, sniffing for added effect. "He even… he even tried to take advantage of me." Which was pretty true. "And he has a foot fetish! He is a mean, twisted, psychotic, evil little foot-fetished fruitcake!" Sophie clawed at the counter, hissing.

The bar was silent. The bartender was actually staring at her, open-mouthed.

She pushed the beer aside and said in a very tiny voice, "I have a lot of feelings."

"Uh…" The bartender looked around for help, and when none came, he sighed and leaned in closer, "I can lend you a bike if ya really need it."
Baby kittens around the world mewled in joy. Sophie clapped her hands, beaming. "That would be fantastacious!"

"C'mon, then," he motioned, and hopped over the counter.

Wiping the sweat from her thighs, Sophie slid off the stool and followed him out into the damp heat of Pantano Town. The air was muggy and hot, something Sophie was horribly unused to. G-13's laboratories had one set temperature: cold. Vira alternated between unexpected thunderstorms and balmy breezes with a chance of violent gunfire. She slicked her hair away from her neck—all the things she'd thrown her money away for, Sophie thought ruefully, and she'd left out the hair tie.

"Dear ol' Romarin," the bartender said with an odd tone of fondness. "Ain't she a beauty?"

A grimy red bike was propped up on the side of the bar. The leather on the seat was flaking away and mud was caked on the tires. Flies hummed over it. The chains looked like they were about to fall off at any given moment.

"A bit rundown, but she should carry you." He patted the handlebars. "Why don't y' try her out?"

Sophie pulled out a few napkins she had nabbed from the bar and dubiously wiped down the bicycle seat. "Are you sure it can last for thirty miles?"

"I guarantee it! She's an old friend's bike. He cared for her real well, named her after his dead mother-in-law…" He smiled, basking in the nostalgia. "Well, I've actually been meaning t' throw her away, but never really found the time, y'know? Though I'm sure he'd be okay with you takin' care of her."

"Tell him thanks from me," Sophie said sincerely.

"I would, but he's dead, too."

Sophie's smile froze. "That sucks… Wait, no, I mean…" At times like this, Sophie had fully realized the practicality of Hippo's etiquette lectures. Sure, she still didn't understand the sentiment behind it, but… "I mean, I'm sorry. Um. For your loss."

To her surprise, he laughed and waved it off. "Nah, don't be. It was a long time ago."

That was… new. Didn't it typically involve a bunch of neurotransmitters affecting tear ducts, heightened emotions due to stress, and lots of H2O and NaCl? Then again, Sophie only watched Hippo say those words to the families of the marines who had recently died. Hm. The outside world was interesting.

"Well, if you say so!" she exclaimed cheerfully. "I don't know how to repay you for this, but…" Sophie rummaged through her pockets and tossed him a small wad of beli. "Erm… for the drink and a serious IOU?"

He shrugged and accepted. "Jus' keep headin' north an' you'll hit Gator Town. The path don't stray. If y' get there in one piece, look for Nellie's place. Her rent's cheap an' the food's t' die for."

"I will." She wiped her sweaty hand on her shirt and then held it out. "Strangways Sophie."

His large hand encompassed hers and he grinned handsomely. "Sid."

Sophie swung her legs over the bicycle and started to pedal. It was a little shaky; she hadn't ridden one since she was a kid. It brought back memories. The first time she ever blew up a bike… the first
time she poured corrosive acid over a bike… the first time she set a bike on fire and pushed it into a pit of explosive gas…

A flock of pelicans soared across the grey sky as Sophie biked across town. Raccoons flicked in and out of the shadow of cypress trees. Pantano Town smelled like the musky scent of nature, thick and heavy. Mosquitoes fluttered between rows of moss-lined buildings. The wooden houses whooshed by her, all lined up in neat little rows. They were real houses, like the pictures in her textbook. Some even had the generic flower curtai—

—flickered into a smoking wreckage of ash and timber. A soldier was slumped against the broken door, head lolled to the side—

A bout of nausea hit her in the gut. Sophie sagged against the handlebars, winded and trying to swallow down the urge to vomit. The temperature seemed to drop about fifty degrees. Cold sweat bloomed across her upper lip and her chest *ached* so much it felt like a knife was sliding between her ribs—

Like window shutters sliding in place, her expression stilled and relaxed. She held the cigarette between her thumb and two fingers, and inhaled deeply. The smoke curled in her lungs, whispering promises of sweet relief that she slowly breathed out through her nose.

Her eyes flickered open. On the outskirts of Pantano Town was just a single dirt path outlined by white-bark trees, like grave markers.

A lonely sign was dug into the dirt, a clumsily painted arrow pointing north. *Thirty miles to Gator Town.*

So Sophie started pedaling.

—

"What do you mean, it's impossible to sail east?"

Sid glanced up from the beer mug he was wiping. "Y' haven't heard?"

Sunglasses glanced at his companion, and both shook their heads. "We recently arrived here with the Log Pose, so…"

"Travelers, eh? Listen up. You'd do well t' buy yourself an Eternal Pose. They might cost you some eighty thousand beli, but it's worth it. Any other place is better than the island lurkin' beyond the eastern horizon."

"Why's that?" the one in the penguin hat asked.

"Khanwari," Sid replied with an ill-disguised shudder. "The tyrant that ruled Cat's Eye Island for the last twenty years. Ever since then, not a single ship—merchant, pirate, Marine, or otherwise—has passed through its gates."

Sunglasses shrugged. "Alright. So it's just another World Government kingdom. Maybe if we ask nicely…"

"Don't underestimate him," Sid said sharply. "Twenty years ago, he burned down half this island. All of it, ashes. I was with the few who were lucky enough t' escape. Still remember the white ash falling for months an' the mass burial for the bodies no one could recognize."
Penguin Hat and Sunglasses were both staring at him, their mouths open. Sid grinned at the attention, but his smile was bitter.

"That's rough," Sunglasses said finally.

Penguin Hat looked contemplative. "But what was his motive?"

"He wanted the throne. Some say the Cat's Eye and Crawfish are bonded by blood. Sister islands, tradin' partners, comrades in war. Khanwari knew the young king would wage battle, once he saw what happened t' Crawfish. An' that king, that stupid king, danced right into his palm. The entire royal family was disposed. A fortnight later, Khanwari built a massive stone wall around the entire island an' set up watchtowers every square mile. Only a handful of people managed to escape… but not enough, not nearly enough. Hell, I know a girl who's been waiting twenty years for her parents t' come back."

They looked surprised. "The Marines didn't do anything to stop it?"

He squeezed the water out of the dishrag. "Back then, Cat's Eye an' Crawfish weren't a part of the World Government. The king offered 'em a fat purse an' his allegiance, an' those screwed-up bastards accepted."

"An impenetrable, unassailable fortress led by a crazy king…" Penguin Hat mused, and then cracked a grin. "Sounds interesting."

Sid stared at him—and burst out laughing. "You sure meet some crazy people on the Grand Line!" he chuckled, throwing the dishrag over his shoulder. "Where ya stayin' at?"

"Our submarine," Sunglasses replied easily. "At the western shore."

He didn't say it loudly, but the whole bar quieted. All traces of laughter disappeared from Sid's face. "You two are pirates?"

Penguin Hat grinned. "Bingo."

The two of them gulped down the last of their beer, as if they were oblivious to all the occupants of the bar who were slowly standing up and drawing their weapons. Sid clenched the flintlock hidden underneath the counter, mouth twisting in anger.

Sunglasses slammed his mug down on the counter and exhaled with gusto. "This is some good beer! You think we can take some back to our—"

"Get out," Sid snapped, pointing the gun right at them. "I have the right t' refuse service t' anyone I don't like. Leave!"

Wiping his mouth, Sunglasses tilted his head at Sid. "What, you got something against pirates?"

"Not especially," he growled. "But I do have something against the salauds who burned down the Marine base."

"That sounded pretty brazen." Penguin Hat paused. "You ever think about becoming a pirate?"

"I SAID GET OUTTA HERE!"

Penguin Hat held his hands up. "Alright, we'll leave quietly. Don't want a fight. Here's the money for the drinks. Oh—but before we leave…" He nodded at Sid. "That blonde girl you were talking to
outside… well, this is just an off-chance guess, but…” He scratched his chin. "What did she say her name was?"

"Strangways Sophie! You still haven't found her yet?"

The marine flinched, sweating buckets. "Y-Yes, that girl! We're deploying marines to Drum Island, Longben's Skull, and Crawfish Island… all the islands closest to Vira… a-as soon as possible."

The silhouette against the window turned around. Yellow epaulettes made his large shoulders even more pronounced, a thick, black mustachio fell just beneath a square jaw, and scars overlapped on his forehead. He uncrossed his arms and laid his hands flat on the desk. His eyes were so pale they might've been glass.

"As soon as possible?" he repeated dangerously.

"Lay off, Lettidore," Hippo sighed, balancing on the back two legs of his chair. "The whole base is understaffed. There aren't enough marines able to be shipped out. Over three-quarters are still recuperating from the war." He balanced on the back legs of his chair, picking his nose.

He scowled. "Why are you in this meeting anyway?"

"It's because I'm worried about my precious daughter, you idiot!" Hippo slammed his feet against the desk for added effect. "Idiot! Idiot!"

The marine looked scandalized. Lettidore merely raised an eyebrow and snapped, "Stop acting so childish." He glared at the marine. "That will be all."

He saluted and left quickly.

Hippo chewed on the hem of doctor's coat sleeve. "Ahh, my poor little scientist! Is she afraid? Is she hurt? Why are youuu, Sophwieee?" He tore off his glasses and scrubbed at his eyes. "I haven't had more than fifteen hours of sleep since I left Vira! I had to perform twenty operations in five days, and there are still more waiting! I can't work like this, damn it!"

"I should've never let Sophie leave," Lettidore admitted. "A chemist of her stature as a combat medic? And for Vira's situation to turn out the way it did… there's no helping it if she's dead. If she's still alive, then we might have a problem." He picked up the receiver of a Den Den Mushi. "This is the Vice Admiral. Get me CP5."

"Understood. Please standby as we connect the call."

The chair slammed onto the floor. "Hey! Don't you think that's a little drastic?"

"Given the circumstances, I have to be. As for the damned captain of that refugee vessel… he'll be demoted to Warrant Officer. Leaving without all the passengers," he spat in contempt. "That display of cowardice is an embarrassment to the Marines."

Hippo pinched the bridge of his nose. "Damn it, Lettidore, you don't have to—"

"What's going on, Lettidore?" the Den Den Mushi asked, the tone familiar to the two men. "Is Hippo there?"

Hippo grunted.
"I hope you boys have something fun in mind; HQ says I need a break from work. What the fuck do those dipshits know, anyway? Just because I haven't had any sleep in four days, fucking idiots..."

"It's Sophie."

There was a noise of irritation at the other end. "Amateur hour. What else?"

"This is important to G-13. She must be found and brought back here alive. If she's already dead, her corpse will be suitable." A pause. "It'll be a fast search-and-retrieve. No skin off your back."

"If the girl's been taken captive?"

"I'll take responsibility for your actions."

"...And she resists?"

"I ordered you to bring her back alive, not unharmed," he replied and hung up.

Hippo stood up. "You cannot be serious."

"I'd go look for her myself if G-13 wasn't in such disorder." The Vice Admiral shot him a reproving look. "You should also consider the full extent of these circumstances. If escaping was intentional on her part—if she's been tortured, if she reveals anything that compromises G-13, she'll put the entire Government in danger. Sophie is young and impressionable, and the world is dangerous... especially to a child who's only ever seen it from inside her little tower."

"And that child went through a war," he said harshly. "I seem to remember two boys doing the exact same thing at her age." Hippo sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Besides, you know as well as I do Sophie doesn't care about anything besides her chemistry."

"Then why did she ask to join the war?"

He had no answer.

"How can you be so sure she won't be led astray by her own naivety... by a dangerous person... or a dangerous idea?"

"She won't be."

"And how do you know?" Again, there was no answer. "I learned from my mistakes in Vira. Dragon completely blindsided us, and now we've all but lost the country." Vice Admiral Lettidore clenched his fists. "One lone variable is enough to upset the balance. We must find Sophie before that variable comes into play. I am not going to suffer another failure by losing the head scientist of my chemical warfare division."

—

The Heart pirates stood expectantly around their captain. A small, menacing grin played over Law's features.

"Set a course for Gator Town."

*to be continued*
The farther Sophie walked into Gator Town, the worse things looked.

She slugged it through the sticky heat, past clamoring pubs and worn-down houses. The fatigue hit just after she wobbled past the charred ruins of the Marine base. Romarin, the still-attached bike, was a surprise—but the same couldn't be said for any of her clothes, which were drenched in sweat. Sophie finally stumbled upon a rickety-looking inn with Nellie’s flickering in neon pink. It was smack-dab between a rowdy gambling house and the swamp.

"Thank the glorious mother of pineapples," she cried, throwing her hands up. Hallelujah for soap! And showers!

She stepped inside and the smell of smoke and baking bread furled over her. Books, dusty vials, weird plants, and an assortment of other curious trinkets were scattered around. Sophie glanced at a bowl filled with bird feathers and tiny, brittle bones. Very, very curious trinkets…

"Bonsoir, Mam’zelle," a low, husky voice crooned from the dark, "You have business here?"

A curvaceous brunette seemed to melt from the shadows, one elegant hand clutching a long, thin pipe. Her eyes were rimmed thick with kohl and her lips were stark red—she swayed calmly as she walked, as if conscious of but apathetic to her striking beauty. Sophie pushed her hair behind her ears, aware of her own inferiority.

"Hello. I'm Sophie. Strangways Sophie."

"More like Slim to me," the woman observed, taking a deep inhale of her pipe, "Blonde hair like a canary's, too. My name's Nellie, owner of this fine establishment." She nonchalantly waved her hands at the crystal balls and (what Sophie hoped was) fake skulls nailed to the wall.

"I was told the rent's cheap, but no one said anything about this being a… a…" What exactly would one call it? "A… magic occult shop thingy?" she finished weakly.

Nellie laughed. "Nothin' is for sale, darlin'. They're all mine." She smiled, showing a flash of sharp teeth. "But movin' on from that—you wanna stay the night, yes?"

Mildly startled from the abrupt turn to business, Sophie nodded fervently. "But… well, I'm kind of running out on money—"

"Come, come, let's get you some food. We'll negotiate later. You look like you're about to fall over dead any second, Canary-chan," Nellie said as she beckoned Sophie over.

"Thanks, I think," she mumbled, and suddenly remembered the mud on Romarin's tires. "Um—should I put my bike outside?"

Nellie turned around, just noticing the bike that was partly hidden behind Sophie. It was hard to tell with the faint light coming from the candles, but Sophie was pretty sure she turned about three times paler. Well crapsicle on a fudgestick, that was not a good sign—maybe she should've just left the bike outside before walking in.

"Is… that bicycle yours?" Her voice was wrangled.
Sophie shook her head. "No. Why? Is it cursed?"

"Perhaps," Nellie said faintly. "Did someone give it t' you?"

"Wow, that was right on the mark. A bartender called Sid back in Pantano Town."

"Is that so…" She froze. "Pantano Town? That's thirty miles away! You traveled all the way here on that crappy bike?"

"It wasn't too—"

"Leave that bike be an' get over here!" Nellie snapped. "You must be exhausted. Let's get somethin' warm for you t' eat."

Sophie considered. "Food. Okay. Food is good." Her stomach rumbled in agreement.

She leaned the Romarin against the wall and followed Nellie into the dining area. Decidedly less spooky, this place was well-lit and furnished with pale-eyed porcelain dolls and faded black-and-white photographs. There were some shriveled heads here and there, but she tried to think nothing of it. Nellie vanished behind a door and reappeared a moment later, tossing a towel at Sophie.

"Thank you," she said gratefully, and started wringing the sweat from her hair. "What's the cheapest, fattiest thing you have on the menu?"

"One shrimp gumbo, extra on the fat, comin' up! Anythin' t' drink, Canary-chan?"

"I… no, I'm good," Sophie forced herself to say, and stared at anything but the liquor cabinet behind Nellie. No, no, stop! She was already low on cash. Sophie slapped the rest of the beli on the counter, speaking louder than normal, "How many nights can I stay for this much?"

Nellie examined the money as she took a deep puff of her pipe. "With the cheapest room available, three."

"Two is fine," she said, shoving the rest back in the satchel. Then she'd have enough time to find a ship that'd let her hitch a ride back to the base.

Nellie tucked the rest of the beli somewhere down her striped shirt. She had eight black stripes and seven white stripes… fifteen stripes in all, that wasn't good. Maybe if Nellie turned around a little, Sophie could count the ones on her back… and then she realized what she was staring at and turned pink. She coughed into her fist and busied herself with her satchel.

Nellie held up a plush doll with pins stuck in it. "Canary-chan, what do you think?"

Sophie studied it. Four pins. Not bad. "…It's kind of cute."

"Ain't supposed to look cute," Nellie returned, but laughed slightly. She started to thread a black button on the doll's eyeless face. "You ever wanted to curse someone?"

Sophie cupped her hand around the lighter and lit a cigarette. "I think there are worse things you can do to people."

Nellie looked at her. Her violet gaze was unnerving. "You speak from experience?"

Sophie hadn't realized she was smiling until that smile dropped off her face. "What? Oh, no. No." Her palms turned sweaty."I don't… um, I mean, just, the whole voodoo thing, sticking needles in dolls, all fortune tell-y, I don't believe in that stuff. I'm more of a science-minded geek." She stuffed a
spoonful of gumbo in her mouth. "Mmm! Zhis is gooh!"

"You're a scientist for the World Government, aren't you?"

The jumbo slipped off her spoon. "How did you…?" She frowned, wagging her spoon at the inn owner. "Don't you dare tell me you read my mind."

Nellie shrugged, starting to work on the doll's other button eye. "I suspected you were a marine at first. Vira's coup d'état is all over the newspapers."

Her heart jumped to her throat. She instinctively focused on steadying her breathing. Faraway screams echoed in Nellie's dining room, something only Sophie could hear.

"But I don't think you're bruised enough t' be a marine comin' back from the battlefield," Nellie continued. "You have very poor posture—that's also an indicator—an' you have an awful lot of burn scars on your hands. A girl with a knack for science an' self-inflicted injuries, who biked all this way to Gator Town from Pantano—why? 'Cause you heard we're the only place on this entire island that's still trying to connect t' the Marine line. You don't seem to be a marine, so most likely you work for 'em."

Sophie rubbed the splotches on her hands. They covered her fingers and stretched across her palms; she'd had gloves before, nice leather ones that hid the burns, but they had also been forgotten at… that place with the war.

"That was an impressive deduction," she said.

Nellie looked up. She had been sewing this entire time. "Am I wrong?"

"How'd you know about the scars?"

"'Cause I have my own set." Nellie swung her legs up on the counter and tugged up her dress. Blotchy red disfigurements ran up the sides of her legs, terrible things that shouldn't belong on a person so beautiful. "Twenty years ago, there was a fire. Not all of me managed to escape."

Sophie's brow creased. "I'm sorry," she said, and meant it.

She smiled. "You're a nice girl, Canary-chan. How 'bout you?"

Sophie didn't think it would break any of the Vice Admiral's rules if she told Nellie just a bit of the truth… "I really work as a chemist for the World Government." She straightened up from her slouch, smiling ruefully around her cigarette. "The poor posture, by the way, is from bending over looking into microscopes."

"That's some special job. Your family must be very proud of you."

It'd been so long since she'd spoken to Hippo about her work—probably around three years, at least. No surprise, considering they were in different divisions. Before the war, she'd been so busy with work she sometimes forgot a world existed out of her lab. But even so… Hippo would've known, right? He would've had some idea about the things she'd created for the Government…

"Yeah," Sophie mumbled, "I suppose he is."

Aside from the dead rat floating in the toilet (she disposed of it immediately), her room wasn't bad. It
looked clean...ish. No rabid tarantulas anywh—

"HOLY PINEAPPLES," Sophie said in a very calm and rational manner, and proceeded to bash her boot against a poor spider that chose the wrong time to slink down from its web.

After thoroughly checking the room (and sweeping it with a spare broom she found outside, bless the gods for their invention of cleaning supplies), Sophie tossed her satchel on the bed and quickly undressed. She gave her clothes a furious scrub in the shower, wrung them out, and jumped into the shower herself for a scalding wash, maneuvering awkwardly to keep her bandaged foot dry. The droplets *sizzled*, decontaminating every part of her body. It was heaven. Finally, when patches of her skin started to turn a violent shade of pink, Sophie wrapped herself up in a fluffy bathrobe and flopped on the bed.

"Should buy more clothes tomorrow—ugh, no, I don't have enough money—I could steal... aghh! No, Sophie, you're not a pirate." Her clothes would hopefully appear dry and clean tomorrow. "Should ask the merchant ships about hitching a ride... but what if Traffle-waffle..."

The Heart pirates were all the way in Pantano Town. The chances were practically infinitesimal they would meet again, so there was no point thinking about it—but if she *did* see him...

Sophie shuddered.

*Let's not think about that.*

With a sigh, she plopped onto her pillow and immediately winced. "Oww..."

Rubbing her smarting head, Sophie pulled aside the pillow. A thin, yellow-crusted book poked out beneath her bedcovers. She frowned and dug it out. *The Tale of Apolleon.* The pages were softened with age and the threads that bound the book together were falling apart. Curious, Sophie flipped through the pages.

*Once upon a time, an Alabastian mechanic traveled the world, seeking the secrets of metal and fire. In his journey, he chanced upon a swamp-covered island in West Blue, ruled by a stern king who had lost his wife many years earlier. His only treasure was his young daughter, the princess of the swamps. Unbeknownst to the king, the princess and the mechanic fell deeply in love.*

Yes, that was all good and formulaic... but where were the action scenes? Sophie skimmed ahead.

*Eventually, he discovered his daughter's affection for the lowborn foreigner. The king's might grew so much in his rage that he picked the island up and strode fearlessly into the Sea of Terrors.*

*But the Alabastian mechanic was not disheartened. For one thousand days and one thousand nights, he labored over a giant mechanical Sea Cat that could sail upon the waves of the sky. He searched and searched the world until he finally found the princess. When he proclaimed his love for her in front of all the villagers, they were awed by the honesty they saw in his eyes and were won over to his cause. The mechanic had built a large castle for the princess, and together they left the swamp island for their new home.*

*The king was furious. In the dead of night, he and his troops carved an opening in the belly of the cat. With their swords in hand, they quietly sneaked—*

Naah, this was nothing new. Sophie shut the book, yawning. Stories could wait for another time; sleep could not.

Scratching her mosquito bites, she set the book on the nightstand and turned off the lamp. Moonlight
Shone in, cool and silver.

Sophie glanced out into the swamp. Perhaps the fairytale was modeled after Crawfish Island. It would be romantic if a princess really had lived here. She smiled a little. Sophie used to force Hippo into telling her bedtime stories… knights rescuing fair maidens, noble and true kings presiding over noble and true kingdoms… she liked those the best…

Something odd flashed in the corner of her eye.

A faint blue glow bobbed amidst the dark trees, like a flickering torch or an eerie lantern. Sophie blinked. One moment it disappeared and the next dipped back, as if beckoning her over. Leaves rustled as a sleepy, warm wind swept through the swamp.

Sophie gazed out for a few more minutes, but the glow didn't appear again. That was… odd. Phosphorus? Radium? They both emitted blueish light… Actinium, maybe? …Unless there was a uranium ore mine underneath the swamp, Sophie didn't know why she was considering that…

Jotting down a mental note to ask Nellie about it tomorrow, she sank back into bed.

Sophie breathed in the woody, after-the-rain smell, instead of the wet stench of soot and blood she was so used to. She listened to the flap of a heron's wings and the croak of frogs, instead of bombs thudding on the roof or low, amused laughter…

She forced herself to keep her eyes shut. You'll fall asleep eventually, you'll fall asleep eventually...

Chilly hands touched the sides of her face and frost appeared, icicles forming at the edge of her eyelashes. Fingertips trailed down her lips, turning them blue and bruised, down her jaw, and peeled off the blanket. Sophie shivered, goosebumps popping up on her arms, and curled into a ball.

His hand brushed over her bandaged foot. Sophie started to hyperventilate, but her voice wouldn't come out; her vocal chords had frozen solid. She tried to scream wake up wake up please. She felt him—it—the figment of her imagination—press over her, violently gripping her wrists, turning her as numb as death.

"Relax. I've told you before…" The whisper ghosted across her skin: "I'm not completely heartless."

Her eyes popped open.

She was sprawled across the bed, still under the covers, still with her bathrobe on. She dimly registered the sunlight on the floor as it poured in, bright and warm.

Very slowly, her brain put two and two together.

She rolled around and screamed into her pillow.

—

"Are you sure about this?" the hairdresser asked dubiously. "It's such a waste…"

"I want it off," she confirmed. "And stark black. Jet black. Dark as the night, you know the deal."

—

Half an hour later, Sophie hopped on her bike feeling like a new woman.

Her hair was just below her chin now, and a slick, shiny black. After having unruly blonde curls in
her face since—well, forever, it was a nice change. Hippo would have the mother of all heart attacks
once he saw her… maybe she should also get a lip piercing and a tattoo on her rear…

Not entirely abandoning the thought, Sophie pedaled into the town market. A tribal-print skirt with
bird feathers braided to the ends swirled around her knees. She'd tentatively asked Nellie if she had
any clothes to spare and in return offered to run down to the market for her. Hippo would be so
pleased to hear all his etiquette interventions hadn't been for nothing.

As she entered the crowded market, Sophie slipped off the bike and pushed it along. The smell of
fish and damp wood and spices invading the sweaty air. It was a breath of normalcy, a welcome
change from everything that happened in past few weeks.

Sophie skimmed the list. Anise, Tipton's weed, balm of Gilead, a bushel of apples, a bottle of plum
blossom sake…

Nellie told her there'd be a florist or a physician where she could get the herbs from, but she'd start by
tackling the easy stuff first.

"Apples, apples, apples," Sophie hummed cheerfully as she passed by the numerous stalls. Glassy
alligator eyes stared back at her, live crabs snapped their claws, and buckets of seaweed-covered
oysters glinted in the sun. Her mouth watered as the perpetual ache of hunger started up in her
stomach again.

"...staying back on the sub, this place is hell with all that fur."

Sophie whirled around. She frantically scanned the market for a spotted white hat or yellow-on-
black, but there was nothing. She'd just heard wrong. It was understandable, given the clamor of the
market…

Shaking her head at her irrational panic, Sophie turned around and accidentally bumped into a
passerby. She stumbled against the bike, wincing.

"Sorry about that," the stranger apologized hastily, his face obscured by sunglasses. He and his
friend wore white jumpsuits tied around their waists, showing a firm roping of strong muscle.

She waved it aside. "No, no, it's fine."

"Shachi," she heard the other guy mutter to his friend, before they were swallowed by the crowd.
Something about them was strangely familiar, but she couldn't place it…

Eh, probably nothing.

Sophie approached a fruit vendor, digging out the beli Nellie gave her. "Exactly sixteen apples,
please. No more, no less."

"Alrighty," the vendor said, and then did a double-take as he sized her up in Nellie's clothes, bird
feathers and all. "Runnin' errands for Manette-san, are ya? 'Round these parts, no one but her wears
those sorts of clothes. Stayin' at her inn?"

Sophie tilted her head. "Manette-san…?"

"Hele—ah, she prefers Nellie, right? Manette Nellie. Though I hear that woman doesn't like to be
called that no more, what with her husband n' all. Here's your apples."

She took the bag but didn't move. "What happened to her husband?"
"Died durin' his siege, didn't he? Darnay's Siege, we call it. Five years ago, I think it was." The vendor shook his head. "Only eighty men strong an' they tried to storm down the Cat's Eye. Passionate fools, all lookin' t' die young. I still remember the burnin' horizon that mornin'… like all of heaven was on fire."

Sophie was strangely entranced. "They surrendered?"

"'Course they did, after Darnay was beheaded. Not many survived. Half of them that did were taken as prisoners. The other half was sent back here t' tell the tale. She started getting' into the mumbo-jumbo voodoo nonsense afterwards. Never quite the same, that woman. First her parents, then her husband, all taken by Khanwari. 'Cept that Sid guy, but what good was he for her, huh?"

That was a lot of information to take in… but what stood out the most was…

"Who's Khanwari?" Sophie asked.

"The current king of Cat's Eye Island. Twenty years ago, he burned down everythin' from Pantano Town to where the Marine base stood."

Her eyebrows furrowed in disbelief—twenty years ago, there was a fire. Not all of me managed to escape.

"A king did that? He killed Nellie's parents?" But it couldn't be true; kings were good and just and kind, everyone knew that…

"Might as well've," the vendor sighed. "They were at Cat's Eye just in time for the previous king's inauguration. But after Khanwari massacred the entire royal family, he didn't let any of the Crawfish folk leave. They've all been stuck there for the past twenty years, an' god knows if they're still alive or not. That's why all our nerves are stretchin' thin with the Heart Pirates stayin' here," the vendor continued. "Brings back bad memories."

Sophie chuckled uneasily. "At least they're not staying here here; they're back at Pantano…"

He shook his head. "Wish it were so. But that yellow submarine was sighted this mornin', off the shore a few miles from town."

---

The sun burned low in the sky when Sophie arrived back to Nellie's Inn.

It had taken longer than she expected to find all the herbs, and even longer to find a ship to take her back to G-13. The town hall was still trying to connect to the Marine line, but to no avail. After a few unproductive hours of lingering in the sweltering heat, Sophie had finally given up and went off to search for a ship.

She'd bumped into the captain of a large fishing vessel, whose siblings had perished four days ago in the scuffle against the Heart Pirates. "It'd be like doin' 'em one last good," she'd said. "Any marine is a friend of mine."

Sophie dumped the grocery bags beside the empty bar and hollered, "Nellie, I have the groceries! Nellie?"

There was no answer.

She tugged at the collar of her shirt, where beads of sweat appeared. "Can I help myself to a glass of water? Or, you know, ice would just be fine. Nice, solid chunks of ice that I can sit on and be happy."
Sophie waited. Nothing. Maybe Nellie went out to run some errands of her own. Well, she wouldn't miss a few pieces of ice…

Sophie crept quietly over the counter and leaned against the kitchen door.

"…the hell is wrong with your brain!" Nellie yelled.

She was about to scream her apologies for sneaking into the kitchen when Nellie continued, "How dare you send the girl over here with that? I told you, I never wanted to see anythin' of his again! No! Sid, do not—I don't care it's been five years! I don't care!"

Sophie pressed her face into the tiny crack of light. She saw Nellie pacing back and forth, speaking in a Den Den Mushi.

"I told you t' burn all of Darnay's things," she snapped. "I don't wanna remember."

Nellie paused and pressed a palm to her forehead. Only now did Sophie realize a silver wedding band glinted around her ring finger.

"Don't say that," her voice cracked, "Of course I wanted you to come back. You're my husband's best friend…"

Sophie started biting her fingernails. Ohhh this was bad, bad, bad territory…

Nellie broke off and stared at nothing for a long, long time. Finally, she shook her head. "Take the bike back. I'm not touchin' it. When Canary-chan leaves, I'll leave it outside the inn for you to pick up."

A brief silence.

"If you won't do it, then I'll just throw it into the ocean!"

Sophie scrambled away as Nellie slammed the receiver down. Well, so much for not violating anyone's private history…

Clearly Sid and Nellie had some sort of history together. And Sid, who had kept her husband's—his best friend's—bike all this time, gave it to Sophie… she looked at forlorn Roma-chan, leaning next to the bar. That's why Nellie looked so horrified when she saw Roma-chan in Sophie's possession. She rubbed her head. Augghh, what was she supposed to do now? Her chemistry books never taught her how to deal with human problems…

The curvaceous inn owner stepped into view, carrying a box of vintage wines, all smiles again. "Oh, Canary-chan…" She nearly dropped the box. "Your hair!"

Sophie twirled a choppy black strand around her fingers and forced a grin on her face. "Pretty?"

"It suits you," Nellie agreed, after some initial stunned blinking, "But now I gotta find another nickname."

"Or you could just call me by my real name…" Sophie suggested, whirling around on the bar stool.

Nellie didn't seem to hear as she sifted through the groceries and drew out the herbs. She laid them on the counter, the tiny seeds of anise, the bright yellow flowers of Tipton's weed, and the purple buds of the balm of Gilead. Sophie watched, resting her chin on her arms, tapping lightly on the bar counter. Should she say something? But what if Nellie started crying? Sophie was smart, but
not that smart. She didn't think she had the intellectual expertise to comfort someone without completely screwing herself over in the process… besides, she had her own secrets and Nellie wasn't bothered. Not… from what she could tell, anyway…

Wait—what if Nellie already knew that she knew, and was waiting for her to ask? What if this was some social convention Sophie didn't know? No, that'd be too stupid. Pineapples, all social conventions were stupid! Arrgh, why was she so bad at acting normal? Why couldn't all problems be solved with some methyl nitrate and a fuse?

Confidence, Sophie, confidence! She took a deep, determined breath. "Nel—"

The bell on the inn's side door jangled. "Bonsoir, Messieurs!" Nellie greeted.

Sophie flopped over the counter. "Good evening!" replied oddly familiar voices. It seemed they caught sight of Nellie in all of her flowing hair and violet eyes and bouncing bosom, because Sophie was treated to cries of, "Ahh, what a beauty! A true goddess on this forsaken planet! May we have the honor of your name, fair lady?"

"Fufufu… it'll be Nellie-san t' you boys," she said with a wink. "Take a seat wherever you like."

The new customers took a seat next to Sophie and her eyebrows rose. She sat up. "Hey, it's you!" Sunglasses gasped. "What an absolute coincidence we bumped into each other again!"

Penguin Hat jabbed him in the ribs and muttered something like, "Nice subtlety, idiot." Sophie didn't quite catch it; she suddenly remembered how thirsty she was.

"A glass of ice, please, with water," she requested politely. "But really, just ice would also be okay."

"And two rums," Penguin Hat added with a dopey smile.

"I'll be right with ya." As Nellie turned to the liquor cabinet, she called over her shoulder, "Canary-chan, were you about to say somethin'?"

"Eh? Oh. Um… I-I was gonna tell you that I'm hitching a ride on a fishing vessel that's leaving tomorrow morning! I can finally go back home." Sophie stretched, cracking her back. "It's been a very long time coming."

"Oh, what could've made your traveling experiences that bad?" Sunglass grinned at her, and then hissed at his friend, who whacked him on the shoulder.

"You guys aren't from around here either," Sophie observed. "You have no Crawfish accent. Sailors?"

Penguin Hat glowered at Sunglass, who sweated slightly. "We're… we're… uh…"

Deciding she really didn't care that much, Sophie turned to Nellie. "I forgot to tell you this morning, but there was something really, um, weird outside my window last night." She rubbed her chin. "I don't really know how to describe it. It was a strange blue light floating around the swamp… like a ghost!" She moved her arms in a wavy motion to demonstrate. "Like, whooo…"

"You mean the will-o'-the-wisps?" Nellie slid the mugs over to Sunglass and Penguin Hat and peered at Sophie.
"Willow the… what?"

"Will-o'-the-wisps. They're a common sight out here. People call 'em all sorts of things: trickster demons that mislead travelers, pixy-lights, corpse candles. We tell the little ones it's the ghost of a headless carriage driver." Nellie chuckled, lighting her pipe. "Makes 'em mind 'emselves whenever they're near the swamp."

That sounded nice and all, but supernatural-like occurrences could always be explained. Sophie rummaged through her generally substantial knowledge for any tidbits on swamps. She knew that there was an abundance of decomposing matter on swamp bottoms; plants and algae and dead fish and what-have-you. The anaerobic decaying process would lead to the creation of the highly flammable gas, methane, and probably phosphine or diphosphine, which, in contact with oxygen, would ignite.

According to Nellie, will-o'-the-wisps were extremely common occurrences. That meant there must be an abundance of those chemical compounds on the bottom of the swamp, creating these ghostly lights with methane. Hmmm…

It took her all of three seconds to arrive at this conclusion: she wanted to see it in action.

"What about you?" Sophie asked, mentally filing away her findings. "What do you think they are?"

It might've just been the light, but her eyes seemed to darken. "My ma used to tell me they were wayward souls. Hitodama, Lost spirits of those who've died on this island. Those who've drowned, those eatin' by the gators, those who were killed in the fire…"

"The fire caused by Khanwari?" Penguin Hat interrupted.

Sophie recalled the apple vendor. "Oh! He was the one that—"

"—burned down half the island, yeah," Nellie said shortly.

Meep. Stupid, stupid, stupid mouth. Sophie shrank back and nursed her glass of water.

Sunglasses whistled, leaning back on the stool. "We're gonna have a helluva time with this one."

Sophie frowned. Were they actually thinking about going to Cat's Eye Island? What sort of idiot would blatantly challenge someone as scary as this Khanwari guy? Fools, both of them.

"What about News Coos? Or Den Den Mushis?" Penguin Hat pressed on. "Don't they have any contact with the outside world?"

Nellie leaned over the counter so her breasts protruded right up at Sophie's face. She tried not to ogle. The other two had no such reservations. "The Sunflower Kingdom is under a dictatorship. They lock it's people in an' never let 'em leave. Take it or leave it, but that's all we know."

"There's absolutely no way to get in?" Sunglasses wheedled.

Tapping her fingers on the counter, Sophie decided it was definitely impossible for these two. If they even wanted to breach the Sunflower Kingdom, they would absolutely need the most high-grade explosives money could buy. Octanitrocubane, or RDX, or maybe some pentaerythritol tetranitrate… twelve, thirteen, fourteen, went her fingers.

Nellie took a long drag from her pipe. "Definitely none."
They'd also have to infiltrate the place, right? With their weird boiler costumes, there was no way… she was good at being inconspicuous, though… used to play hide-and-seek with the chemistry department—when they tried to ignore her, she'd just steal some extremely volatile explosive to get them in the mood… ah, the memories…

"All possible entrances checked?" Penguin Hat inquired.

"About a hundred times over."

Sophie's mouth was moving before she could register thinking it. "Even for a submarine?"

Sunglasses and Penguin Hat glanced over at her.

Nellie frowned. "Even for sub, it's impossible. What do you mean by that, anyway?"


She trudged up the stairs—sixteen steps even, thank pineapples for small mercies—and lumbered to her room, opened and closed the door exactly four times, and fell onto the bed. She didn't even take off her boots.

After nearly a minute of lying motionless, Sophie got up, grumbling, yanked off her boots, and set them in a perfect side-by-side arrangement beside the bed. She wiggled her toes experimentally; at least her foot didn't sting anymore. She rummaged through her satchel, glaring at the stupid scalpel she'd stolen from the stupid doctor—she'd personally blow that one into smithereens when she returned to G-13—and grabbed her lighter and smokes.

She needed to relax. She was going home. This was final. End of story.

After all, going home was what she wanted… right?

Sophie wanted to hit herself.

No question marks. No hesitation. It was what she wanted. It really, really, really was.

…Really.

Smoke lazily unfurled in the air. Sophie watched it dance around in swirly ribbons before floating out the window. The sky was blood red, spilling over the swamps and broken-hinged wooden houses. A lonely, broken moan of a harmonica drifted in the breeze. Gator Town was old. Old and dusty and filled with lost spirits and wildness. It was fascinating and haunting at the same time.

…And dirty. But for the sake of romanticism, she tried not to dwell on it.

Sophie leaned her head against the wall. She couldn't go to sleep tonight. Sleep was evil. Sleep was the detriment to humankind. Searching for something to do, she grabbed the old book from the nightstand and flipped over to the last page she'd read.

In the dead of night, he and his troops carved an opening in the belly of the cat. They found the mechanic in the castle's highest tower and raised their swords, ready to slay him where he stood.

Then hundreds of villagers leaped out of the dark, headed by the swamp princess herself. They defeated the king's men and he was left powerless. But to his surprise, the mechanic showed mercy to the king. Ashamed and defeated, he gave the two lovers his blessing.
Together, the mechanic and the swamp princess ruled on Apolleon, the Sea Cat island, leading their people into an era of prosperity.

And they lived happily ever after.

What a typical ending.

Sophie set the book aside and rested her head beside the window, one hand lingering against the cigarette. Flying cats… they could fly her back home, if only they were real. Flying ships maybe, or flying islands…

She was on her fifth—eighth? twelfth?—cigarette when her hand fumbled the lighter and it slipped somewhere off the bed. Sophie muttered 'pineapples' quietly under her breath, but before she could crawl over and grab it, a hand with the letters DEATH tattooed on it reached out and held the lighter for her.

"Mangoes, not you again," she said wearily.

He twirled the lighter around his long fingers. "What could you possibly gain from going to the Cat's Eye? Don't tell me I awakened a lust for danger in you?"

"The only thing you awakened in me is my strong desire to hit you with a frying pan," she muttered, looking away.

"Careful, Canary..." His voice was smooth, quiet, detached, but his eyes were a delighted sort of wicked. His breath fanned over her neck. "Aren't you the one dreaming of me?"

Her whole face burned. Pineapples, Subconscious Sophie! She was about to aggressively inform his face to go away, when Trafalgar Law shifted. He folded back in on himself and morphed into a ragged Viran soldier, covered with gore and soot. Blood pooled around where legs should've been, sinking and spreading into the dirt—

Hysteria overwhelmed her. She thrashed, trying to kick off the sweaty blanket so she could start running far, far away, but her feet got tangled in the sheets and she promptly crashed onto the floor.

Sophie lay there for several horrified minutes, hugging her stomach and inhaling rapidly.

They'd underestimated the casualties. The medic squad was short two dozen, so anyone who had good aim and a basic knowledge of medicine were pulled to the front lines. 'Learn it as you go,' they'd told her. 'You're the daughter of Charaka Hippo, aren't you?'

And they gave her a pistol—just in case, they'd said, you find a soldier you can't save.

"Stop it, stop it, this isn't real, you're not real, get out of my head!" She clutched her hair and screamed into her knees, "Get out!"

She didn't know how long she spent there, laying on the floor. But it was long enough for a familiar numbness to overtake her body, to coil around her like polished steel armor, ready for war. Vira was just a thing. Just a simple thing. People died there, but people died all the time. And the pirate, too—he was no one. His existence didn't matter in the least. They were nothing to her, for she was beyond them all, miles and miles beyond, flying for home.

Something poked her back. She reached behind her and tugged out the empty cigarette packet.

She should've felt angry. Disappointed. Anything.

But Sophie felt nothing.

She rose to her feet and tossed the packet into the waste basket. The metal *ping* echoed in her eardrums.

Breathing normally once again, she glanced out the window, at the swamp that lingered just outside Gator Town. The moon shone over the canopy of trees, painting them the color of bone and pale shadows. She raked a hand through her black curls. Sleep was bad.

So she shucked off Nellie's clothes, changed into her faux-Criminal shirt and shorts, and stomped into her boots.

Seconds later, the door quietly swung shut.

—

"He already left? What was the point of spending the whole damn day keeping tabs on the woman?" Penguin groaned, leaning against the doorway. "Changed her hair, but not her eyes or her voice. Gone all black and short now."

"And she's still fine," Shachi commented with a thumbs-up. He was largely ignored.

"Captain said he was going to the swamp," Bepo said.

Penguin rubbed his face. "Ah, their meeting's gonna be messy." He paused. "What's with the brain?"

The polar bear was carrying a glass jar filled with a dissected grey mess floating listlessly in formaldehyde. "Captain told me to put this in his office."

"Doesn't he have other brains to play with?"

"He says this one is his favorite."

Shachi shrugged at Penguin. "Right," he said. "And why is he heading to the swamp again?"

"To find glow-in-the-dark mushrooms," Bepo said brightly. "Except he said it was bioluminescent fungi. But I think they're basically the same thing."

Penguin considered. "Well, I'm going to sleep. You guys rest up, too," he called over his shoulder. "The Log Pose already locked onto Cat's Eye, so we're setting sail tomorrow."

Shachi suddenly started. "I didn't have the chance to tell Captain something important!"

He swung around. "What? *What is it?*"

"I didn't ask him to save some of her hair for me!"

Penguin promptly whacked Shachi over the head.

*to be continued*
Mud squished under her boots as Sophie followed the well-worn trail deeper into the forest. The swamp smelled like earth, rich and strong and musky. Mosquitoes buzzed around her ears, frogs croaked by her feet, and the full moon shone wet silver through the foliage. The trees were huge, unlike anything she'd ever seen. This was the amazing force of nature in the Grand Line. She wished she had enough time to do more research.

Sophie glanced over her shoulder. She was still close enough to see the light of the inn. This should be the place where the will-o'-the-wisp was yesterday…

She squatted down on the edge of the trail and gingerly lowered the lantern to the surface of the muddy waters. Tiny bubbles emerged from the bottom of the swamp—the methane, probably. But the swamp was too shallow in these parts and there wasn't enough decayed material; the methane wouldn't be as abundant. She'd have to wade deeper into the water to…

Her nose wrinkled. "Pineapples."

If there was anything Sophie hated more than the existence of germs, it was those germs getting on her skin. And her clothes had finally dried off, too.

Perhaps the heart of the swamp held more methane than the outskirts.

Squaring her shoulders, Sophie followed the trail deeper into the gloom. The lantern swung loosely by her side, and she wished it held more than a small candle and dripping wax. The night rustled with flashes of movement. The jagged tree bark adopted half-shadowed faces of the dead and every time Sophie looked away, she could hear them crying out to her.

Don't be silly, that stuff isn't real. There's no such thing as haunted swamps—

A loud snap in the quiet made her jump.

She whirled around. "Who's—"

With an ear-piercing shriek, the owl battered her with its wings as it took off into the gloom. "Ow," she muttered, rubbing her head. What, it was just an owl…

Sophie froze mid-step. Her skin crawled. Something… was… scuttling… up… her… leg—

"Noooo!" She flailed about violently until the feeling was gone and braced her hands on her knees, panting. "Guuh… don't give up, Sophie! Even th-though this is t-terrifying…"

This would be the only time she'd be able to see something not generated artificially in her lab. She wanted to observe and… remember why she loved chemistry in the first place. She'd have no more chances once she arrived back at the base; the Vice Admiral would never allow such a thing…

The trail almost tapered to an end. Some distance away, remains of a moss-covered bridge poked out in the swamp; clearly no one had passed beyond for quite some time. Sophie frowned at the still water and then eyed the bridge. There was a good chance decayed matter lay beneath those ruins, beneath all that disgusting swampiness she'd have to cross…
"But I'm a chemist at heart," Sophie muttered, rolling up her sleeves. "Before anything, I'm just a girl who loves chemistry."

With a deep breath, she sloshed into the swamp. The water reached almost mid-thigh and mud slipped down between her toes. Goosebumps popped up her arms. *Don't think about it, don't think about it…*

As she drew nearer, Sophie lowered the lantern to the surface of the water, which bubbled slightly. She sniffed, but knew it had no point. Methane was colorless and odorless. If only she could see the decaying matter that generated the methane…

Grinning excitedly, she bent closer.

Two black slits stared back.

Sophie distantly heard herself scream before the alligator lashed at her, jaws reaching for her skull. And then she was suffocating, pulled back by the scruff of her shirt and thrown onto the muddy trail. Pain jolted through her shoulder and she inhaled sharply through her nose, *what the mangoes was going on—*

The snarling growl slowly retreated.

"Alligators are *attracted* to light," a voice snapped. "For a relatively intelligent person, that was an extremely foolish move."

A pair of shoes blocked her line of sight. Sophie's eyes rose to the mud-splattered jeans, the yellow-on-black hoodie with the weird smiley face, higher and higher and more despairing… Trafalgar Law met her gaze evenly. A long, black sword lined with white crosses rested over his shoulder.

Sophie slowly got to her feet, forcing herself to keep calm. "I will immediately go review my chemistry books," she mumbled, averting her gaze. "Alligator facts are, of course, what *all* intelligent people should be aware of. Thank you for the tip." She gave a tree the standard Marine salute. "Goodbye."

The glow from the lantern flickered over the gleam in his grey eyes and the slowly-forming smile. "Is that what you say to the man who saved your life? Any more of that and you're liable to get hurt, Chemist-ya."

Sophie stiffened. *How did he—*

Don't panic. The only people who knew her name were Nellie and Sid. Pantano Town. Two men in white boiler suits. Sunglasses and Penguin Hat. Trafalgar Law's crew members. They were Heart Pirates. Okay, there, see? She already figured it out. A part of Sophie felt mild anger at her hair—she'd cut it off and dyed it for nothing.

She exhaled quietly. "Um. Why are you here?"

"Ah… research."

That was most lazily-disguised euphemism Sophie had ever heard! He was going to kill her, she knew it!

*Dear god,* some desperate part of her thought, *you should've just left me to the alligator.*

Sophie held out the lantern like a weapon. "Research," she repeated, and tried to ignore how badly
her hands were shaking. "Alright, I can work with that. I'm also here for research. I was l-l-l-looking for the will-o-the-wisps. I thought I might get a chance to see an incredible chemical r-r-reaction."

Sophie swallowed. "S-so, um, if you could lay off the killing, it would be… highly appreciated?"

"I'm not sure if I can agree to that," Law said conversationally. "After what you did to my operating room."

Sophie bristled. "My options were l-l-l-limited! You think you got the worse deal? You might remember that you poisoned me!"

His quiet chuckle caught her off guard. "That's right, I did. How's that foot of yours, anyway?"

Oh, that was nothing to be proud of. Jerk.

"Better," Sophie replied swiftly, "no thanks to you."

"Does that mean you can run now?" he inquired, and she heard the subtle, mocking threat beneath his courteous tone.

Well, he could take his fake courtesy and shove them up his apricot. "If you'd like, I'd be willing to try it out," she offered curtly, walking slightly faster, swamp muck squishing between her toes. Law effortlessly matched her pace. Grrr, him and his unreasonably long legs!

"I'd like my repayment," he corrected.

Agitation prickled across her skin. "Sure," she agreed through gritted teeth, "let's just stop by the Marine base and I'll coerce some money from my boss. Though you'd probably end up in Impel Down afterwards."

He laughed softly through his nose. "You're certainly full of it. Have any bite to back up your bark?"

She wanted to punt his sarcastic smile all the way into the New World. Control, she needed control. This little repartee clearly wasn't going in her favor. Sure, the pirate had his weapon. So what? Sophie had her brain. Back in his sub, he'd mentioned something about wanting a higher bounty. He and his crew burned down a Marine base after they already destroyed two battleships—it was obviously to get his name into the papers. Judging by his age, he was a rookie pirate. His crew probably didn't have any bounties yet; they walked freely into Pantano and Gator Town without anyone recognizing them. Sunglasses and Penguin Hat followed Sophie, probably on Law's orders. So that meant they were loyal. And given their determination to set foot on Cat's Eye Island, she didn't think they would be part of a weak man's crew.

"Trafalgar Law, rookie pirate," Sophie said aloud. "I'm guessing your bounty is around forty to seventy million. But you're strong, so you definitely aren't going to settle for that." She sighed. "I was thinking there was no way I could ever hope to beat you… but then as I thought about it… this is a strange turn of events coming from you, Surgeon of Death."

He studied her. "Strange?"

There it was. Sophie pointed at him. "You must lead an incredibly boring life if you're chasing after me."

"…You're underselling yourself."

Well, maybe, just a little. But Sophie smiled. "I'm sure you have better things to do… more important people to kill… so save yourself some poison. I'm just—"
"—a chemist working for the World Government, as you had so kindly divulged to me," Law finished. There was about a yard between them, but Sophie still felt the pressure of his gaze. "You don't think I can't see the potential in that?"

Her fingers twitched. She wiped her sweaty palms on the back of her shorts. "Potential?"

"Well, that was an exaggeration," Law admitted after a moment's thought. "There's nothing a chemist can do in this situation, is there? Nothing you try will work, Chemist-ya. So go on and bark all you like. It won't make a difference."

"You—I—" She huffed, equal parts angry and confused. "Be that as it may, at least I am not a pirate!"

"Oh, the sting," he droned with an unmistakable roll of his eyes.

Pineapples, that was a bad choice of words. Sophie felt control slipping from her fingertips. He was right. There was nothing she could do. She watched him lazily stride ahead, and clenched her fists. "And I don't try to kill every unconscious Marine who stray across my path!" she yelled.

He paused. His back glowed orange and shadows curled around every step he took. "Marine or no, it was merely convenient."

"Death," she returned edgily, "is rarely convenient."

"Depends if you're on the giving or receiving end."

"It's problematic on all sides," Sophie muttered, brushing away a mosquito that buzzed too close to her ear. Then, because she refused to fear him: "Your subordinates weren't very inconspicuous when they were following me."

This time, Law looked over his shoulder. "Not subordinates. Crewmates."

"The goons in the boiler suits." Courage taking over, Sophie stepped in front of him. "What do you want from me? I'm broke. I have nothing to give you! And sure, you can kill me, but between us science-minded professionals, I highly doubt you will derive any satisfaction from my death."

His eyes were dark and cold, even while he was smiling. "Perhaps…but that hasn't stopped me before."

All of Sophie's courage instantly vanished.

She mentally ran through possible escape options: Law might take pity on her if she wept and groveled at his feet. If that didn't work, she could always kick him in the nuts really fast, sprint into the swamp, wailing at the top of her lungs, and hope the alligators preferred eating strong and lean over weak and skinny. Her breath came out in short, shallow spurts. Think! Look at your surroundings! What can you use to your advantage?

And that was when Sophie registered something shining in the darkness.

A blue, ghostlike flame flickered briefly just over Law's shoulder. A will-o'-the-wisp.

There was methane nearby.

Sighing hopelessly, Sophie hung her head and buried her face in her hands. "If you wish to end my life," she said in a tired, miserable voice, "at the very least let me finish what I came here to do."
"To see your chemical reaction?"

"I know there's no way out of this," she mumbled, and walked back into the swamp like she was approaching the gallows. "I know how weak I am. I know there's no point trying to struggle. So, please, just let me finish doing what I love best."

*Be a good pirate and stay still while I burn your head off, Sophie thought.*

She held the lantern close to the surface. Given the pure amount of natural gas in the swamp, the atmospheric quantity of methane might even be above five point one percent. Her hand would get seared in the process, but it would be a small price to pay once she flung an exploding lantern into Law's stupid face. She flexed her mottled fingers. It's not like she'd never been burned before, anyway.

Sophie held the light over the tiny bubbles, keeping an eye out for any will-o'-the-wisps. *Methane, CH₄, violently reactive with halogens, oxidizers, and heat...*

"It's curious."

She didn't look at him, but even so, her stomach churned. "What is?"

"Everything about you."

Sophie was not disconcerted. "Please, I'm about as unfathomable as a puddle of water."

"Between the alligators and me, you'd choose the alligators?"

His voice was impassive, careless, even. It took her a moment to process his meaning.

*He thinks I'm going to kill myself.*

Sophie bit back a hysterical little giggle. She tightened the grip on the lantern and held it lower, willing it to catch ablaze. "Compared to what you'd do, it'd be an easy death."

"Most likely," Law agreed, and she heard the sounds of water splashing. He was approaching. "But it would also be a waste. I have all my instruments already laid out. And I reattached new leather restraints and sanitized the operating table."

Her eyebrows rose. "G-g-goodness, a whole operating table just for me?"

"Fluffed the pillows as well."

"You take great care in making your patients comfortable, doctor."

"Only for those who have escaped me once. It never happened again, oddly enough."

Sophie supposed the pillows must've strangled them. "And they tell me I was born under a bad sign."

"Well," Law conceded, "you did meet me."

Her fingernails dug into her skin. *Burn, burn, burn, please burn...*

The lantern stayed frustratingly whole. There was too much air, too much dilution, and too little methane. Now she just looked like an idiot, standing there in the middle of a swamp, awaiting her death. Perhaps this really would be the end of Strangways Sophie. But still… she'd die screaming
and biting and clawing before giving him the chance to operate on her again. Better make it a quick one.

"Get rid of the light," Law said suddenly.

Sophie broke out in cold sweat. Did he realize? "Ah, what?"

"The candle. Blow it out." His lips barely moved. "I don't enjoy repeating myself."

"No, I think I'll—"

He was next to her in two steps and gripped her wrist. Shrieking, Sophie abandoned the lantern and wrenched her arm from his grasp, sloshing backwards into a tree. The flame vanished. Night shrouded everything and for one wild moment Sophie half-expected a sword to come swinging against her neck. When the touch of cold steel never appeared, she cracked an eye open.

Ever so slowly, something green and glowing unfurled through the darkness. Little specks of light clung to trees and shone like luminescent jellyfish, like a web of fireflies and stars. Cool green washed over Sophie and she drank in the sight in amazement. Will-o'-the-wisps? No. They weren't nearly as beautiful.

"You're rather jumpy," Law said, breaking the silence. Half his face was cloaked by shadows, but the look he sent her was no less amused.

Sophie hoped it was still dark enough for her blush to go unnoticed. "What is this?"

"Bioluminescent fungi—or foxfire, as they're commonly called. They're normally present on decayed wood; I thought I could find some in this swamp." He idly examined a particularly large, radiant, mushroom-shaped plant. It illuminated the dark shadows under his eyes.

Sophie tapped her fingers against her thigh and asked finally, "This is what you were researching?"

"Fungi have medicinal properties," he said, by way of explanation.

Antiviral. Anti-inflammatory. Vitamin D. It wasn't really her interest, but she'd heard of it.

Tensing, Sophie watched Law draw out his nodachi. He looked almost ungainly handling a weapon so long, and she held her breath… perhaps he wasn't a good swordsman… perhaps she could outrun him after all…

With a quick flick of his wrist, the plant tumbled from the side of the tree and into his palm. She exhaled and slumped in defeat. Ugh. Pineapples.

A frog croaked pityingly. Sophie glared and muttered, "Don't look at me like that."

"Miss," Law said.

Sophie flinched and barely caught the shining plant. It was wet and squishy, but cool to the touch. "W-what?"

He nodded toward the small will-o'-the-wisps rising over the swamp. Oh… the methane. Was he offering some sort of peace treaty? Sophie scowled suspiciously, but edged closer to the gas bubbles. No matter what he said or how polite he was, she would not let her guard down. If Law made any funny moves, she'd bonk him with the fungus.

Sophie raised the plant over the water. The green light shimmered over rotten leaves, algae, and dead
moss. A large catfish swam leisurely around her legs. She lightly pressed the tip of her boot in the muck and a multitude of bubbles emerged, effervescing at the surface.

Then they bloomed out of the swamp, little orbs of blue fire.

"Hitodama," Sophie whispered.

Law chuckled. "That's surprising. Does the woman of science believe in lost spirits?"

"It's not that I necessarily believe… it's just… how did you put it? There are so many possibilities… in this world…" So many she wouldn't ever be able to see, once she went back to G-13. She shook her head. "Of course, speaking scientifically, the will-o-the-wisps are produced by a complex anaerobic process—"

"—that methanogens use to produce methane as a metabolic byproduct," he continued.

"Which results from the breakdown of fats, proteins, and cellulose in the sediment on the swamp floor," Sophie finished quickly.

"Correct. Impressive."

"I'm the chemist here; I should be the one impressed!" She broke off, sighing. "You know… ah, whatever." Sophie held up the plant. "This fungus is pretty amazing, though. I couldn't see anything with the lantern, but with this…"

"When luciferin reacts with oxygen in the presence of a luciferase enzyme, the products are water and one photon of light," Law summarized. "That's where you get foxfire."

"That's fascinating," Sophie murmured. She looked at him earnestly. "Really, it is."

His lips quirked up, too small for a smile, but too… not-murderous for a bloodthirsty grin. "That's nature."

Not only was the pirate scary strong, he was also rather intelligent… which was never a good combination. She wondered what Hippo would think, if he ever met Trafalgar Law. The thought was both humorous and incredibly appalling…

Lily pads floated over her reflection. Sophie almost didn't recognize herself. Her face was streaked with mud and those golden curls she'd taken care of for so long were black and wet and hideous. Worst of all… the reflection was smiling. A little part of Sophie shriveled and her tiny smile abruptly morphed into a grimace. She splashed the water and her reflection disappeared in wave of ripples and lily pads. Still disgruntled, Sophie turned around.

Law was standing right behind her.

"Holy mangos!" she gasped, instinctively raising the fungus like a cleaver. He caught her wrist in an instant, fingers pressed right over her fluttering pulse. The fungus slipped from her hand and fell with a splash. She tried to pull away. "Don't touch—"

His grip tightened. "You've seen your chemical reaction," he said, clipped and business-like. "Are you prepared now?"

Sophie's mind puttered to a blank stop and she abruptly realized: 1) Law hadn't made a move to kill her this whole time just because she wanted to investigate the will-o'-the-wisps, and 2) That was a disgustingly efficient way to lull her into a sense of false security!
Calm down and think this through. You're scared, not stupid.

"Y-y-you said I had to compensate what I took," Sophie said, allowing him to walk her backwards. A wall of trees and shrubbery lay behind them. "One l-l-life is surely w-worth more than a box of heart medication, a broken door, and an a-a-atropine pill."

His smirk was easygoing, even when he looked about an inch away from killing her where she stood. "That's certainly true. I was thinking more of a small item. A foot. Or a few fingers. Or an ear. I'm not a fastidious man."

Sophie clenched a sharp branch that poked into her back. "A-a-and you're gonna get it n-no matter wh-what?"

He gripped her chin. She flinched at the contact—he must've felt her tremors, but there was no amusement in the way he regarded at her. Intent flowed through every pore of his being… and for the briefest instant, Sophie wasn't sure if she could look away. Law leaned just close enough so his breath puffed against her lips.

"I'm a pirate, Miss. What do you think?"

She stared up at him, mouth agape. And slowly, all her shock… turned to wrath.

"And I am a chemist!" Sophie shot back fiercely, because how dare he say that to her, she who had lost everything in the war, who had lost Hippo, and he was the only person who'd ever mattered. What the hell kind of reason was that? "We have s-something called balanced equations. You tried to take my life, and I t-took it back! I don't o-owe you a-anything!"

Law raised one hand. "That's where you'd be wrong."

Sophie gritted her teeth, snapping the branch with a sharp jerk—

Suddenly, he froze. Law glanced up at something above them with a strange expression, almost in disbelief. Hardly believing it herself, Sophie touched her neck as if to make sure her head was still attached to her body, and also looked up. A soft light glowed faintly over the trees, dusting the sky with orange and hazy grey.

Sophie frowned. "It shouldn't be dawn ye—"

"Quiet."

Her mouth snapped shut, more out of reflex than anything else. Out of the silence, she heard crickets chirping and frogs croaking and the quiet rustle of wings. A shrieking hoot came somewhere from the canopy above. Sophie became more confused. Law stared intently at the brightening sky. What was he listening for? There wasn't any—

She smelled it, rather than heard it.


"Gator Town," Sophie breathed.

Law narrowed his eyes. "Pirates."

—

Everything was on fire.
The wind carried the flames from the port and pushed them northward, ravaging through the market and the gambling houses, encroaching upon the fringes of the town where the inn stood. Sophie slammed through the doors, but the dining area and the kitchen were both empty. She raced up the stairs of the inn, grabbed her satchel, stuffed The Tale of Apolleon into it after a moment's consideration, and dashed back down, hollering, "Nellie-san! Where are you? Nellie-san?"

When it was clear the inn owner had gone, she grabbed her bike and pedaled into town in a crazed frenzy. Houses were crumbling. People everywhere made a run for it through the blaze, dragging along children, clothes, money. Complete chaos.

Sophie grabbed the nearest person and bellowed, "Where's Nellie-san?"

"I-I don't know! Haven't seen her!" the man cried, and wrestled free. He dashed away, shouting over his shoulder, "Best leave right now! Before the pirates come!"

She pressed onward, dodging around the fleeing townspeople.

"Daddy! Mommy, help!" a voice pleaded over the din.

Sophie doubled back. A little girl clawed weakly at the air, trapped between burning pillars. She leaped off her bike—nearly tripping herself in the process—and wrapped her hands with the old Marine shirt she'd kept in the satchel. The fire roared and hissed, a dragon incarnate, but Sophie already had so many burn scars, what were a few more to her?

Wheezing from the smoke, she heaved aside one pillar and snatched the girl out of the way before the others fell. The fire gobbled up the house just as they hit the dirt. Hissing, Sophie tore the smoldering Marine shirt off her hands. The little girl sobbed, calling for her parents.

Sophie seized her by the collar. "Have you seen Nellie-san? Manette Nellie!"

She flinched. "N-no—"

"Rika! Let's go!" a man screamed, and she was dragged out of Sophie's grip.

Nellie probably already left with the majority of the town. That was all she could hope for.

Sophie kicked up her bike and held the handlebars gingerly as she started pedaling again. Law had taken an alternate route on the way back to Gator Town, and all she could hope for him was for his submarine was docked directly in the path of the fire.

She tried to stay out of the crowd's way as they swarmed down the southern road. The worst of the conflagration was in front of the port, so escaping on a ship was impossible. The horizon burned, sea and sky melting together in a haze of blood red.

"Like all of heaven was on fire," Sophie whispered, remembering.

And then the crackle of flames turned into the snap of lightning. Thunder pounded over her head. Explosions rang in her ears, dull and heavy. Marines were everywhere and her hands were streaked in——

Sophie struggled to drown out the screams. This isn't Vira this isn't Vira this isn't Vira…

Flames spread through the market. One moment she was coughing out soot, and the next she was sprinting through a smoky battlefield as bullets whizzed past her ears—Sophie jolted violently, clutching her chest and panting, like she had really just been running for her life. Pineapples, it wasn't
enough she was going crazy, but she was also hearing violins?

She listened hard. Wait…

Sophie evaded scorching stalls until she found the source of the music. The bike screeched to a halt. Her jaw dropped.

Right in the middle of the flames, smack-dab in the center of all the bedlam, people were dancing.

The apple vendor jumped from one foot to the other, his violin in hand. Arm-in-arm, the dancers twirled beneath smoke and blazing houses. With a jolt, Sophie realized they all looked as panicked as she felt; some were crying and pleading for it to stop. Stop? Stop what? What were they—

Battering rams slammed inside her skull. Sophie would've been screaming from the pain, had her throat not been seared raw.

Carbon monoxide poisoning, she thought faintly. She'd inhaled too much smoke.

"Get away, girl!" the apple vendor hissed. He was still jumping like the ground was scorching his feet. "Get away before it's too late!"

"What's going on?" Sophie rasped. "Let me help—ffleggh!"

She coughed, nearly choking on a pink feather.

_Pink feather?

There was something she hadn't noticed before in the middle of all those dancers… she'd thought it was just an odd-looking pile of blackened timber, but now that lump moved. The large figure stood up on the pile of scorched wood; the awkward shape was because of all those feathers… like a bird… or maybe a giant pink jacket…

Sophie's eyes widened in recognition.

"Dance, everyone!" he roared, wild and ecstatic, arms flung wide open. "Make merry, have fun, and you, play the violin louder! More, more!"

Royal Shichibukai Donquixote Doflamingo.

"Go!" the apple vendor shouted.

But Sophie was too bewildered to even move. Why was a Shichibukai here? Why were so many people dancing? Was this a hallucination? Had all the chemical asphyxiates in the air finally gone to her head? Why was he laughing and… walking towards her and… _oh, pineapples…_

Several heads taller than her, Doflamingo bent down to look Sophie square in the eye.

"This is odd," he said with a leer. "You don't seem like you're having fun." His purple sunglasses reflected her frightened, dirt-streaked face… she looked like she was about to pass out…

"I… I work for the World G-Government, stationed at G-13." Her voice got stronger. The Shichibukai were good pirates, he could save her and this town, and he could capture the criminals who'd started the fire. "My name is Strangways Sophie! I can help you stop this mess! Just tell m-me what to do!"

"World Government? Oh my, that's a problem." He stroked his chin and tilted his head back and
forth, unsmiling. "What should I do? This is going to be a pain now that someone from G-13 saw me here. Oh my, my, what should I do?"

"Wha… what are you talking abou…"

The building next to Sophie suddenly crumbled with a roar. Flames licked at her ankles and the sparks singed her arms. She eeeped a little and cringed back.

Doflamingo's smile widened. "Fuffuffuffu… don't like fire, do you?"

Sophie hesitantly shook her head.

"You like water?"

Short, rapid nods. He could help! She knew Shichibukai were good…

"Good. You're going to swim to the bottom of the ocean, and you're going to stay there," Doflamingo said cheerfully.

Sophie smiled blankly. "What?"

"Poor little marine. Drowned while trying to escape Crawfish Island. Cause of death: accidental. Once the Marines find your body—and they surely will—they won't have any reason to stick their noses into this fire. Sounds pretty *authentic*, right? I am nothing if not thorough."

Even as he was spoke, Sophie's feet began pedaling, turning the bike around. "Wait—wait, *no*, stop it!" *This has to be a joke, this has to be a joke...* "Why are you d-doing this? You're a Shichibukai! You w-work for the W-World Government!"

Doflamingo reclined back on his lump of wood and tilted her head at her. His gleeful smile seemed even more malevolent than Trafalgar Law's.

"And they gave me two orders: light this disgusting, backwater island on fire and retain ambiguity." He looked terribly entertained at her stunned expression. "Ironic, wouldn't you say? The very organization you serve is playing a role in your unfortunate demise." Doflamingo flicked a hand at her, fingers moving like he was controlling a marionette. "Well, don't take it to heart! No one in this world would weep for the deaths of a few ants!"

Before she could even register her actions, Sophie was pedaling furiously through the flames. She seemed like any other escaping townsperson, except she was heading in the complete opposite direction.

"Help!" Sophie screamed painfully. "I can't stop this stupid bike! Please, anyone!" She coughed. "*Someone, help me!*"

But no one heard her above the fire.

The horizon beyond was dark and enigmatic. She wondered if Cat's Eye could see the fire, if any of Nellie's family over there could see it. Maybe if Khanwari truly was a righteous king, he might send help. Maybe… maybe…

The satchel beat against her hip. So she'd saved the storybook for nothing.

Sophie barreled straight into the breaking tide. She shrieked as icy seawater splashed over her burns and filled her ears with the sound of thunder. The ocean flung the bike away from her feet and
dragged her down, farther and farther away from the moon spinning lazily in the night sky.

Her final words… she had to make them meaningful…

"Damned pirates," Sophie gasped, before she submerged.

*to be continued*
Death stared up at her, black and gaping, jaws wide open.

The pain in her hands had frozen over and her lungs throbbed, like a heavy weight being slowly, methodically jammed into her chest. Something brushed her leg. She jolted, unable to stop swimming but instinctively searching for the glowing yellow eyes of a Sea King or a shar—

Her ankle jerked back and whirled Sophie around, bubbles bursting from her nose. A viselike grip clutched at her waist. She swallowed down a frantic scream, no, no, I'd rather drown, he said they'd find my body, at the very least I'd be with sensei again—

Her feet kicked out, glanced off the side of something, and it attacked, hauling her through the water—

And then Sophie was flung unceremoniously onto the sand.

She immediately rolled on all fours and retched seawater. Her hands fisted, sand squeezing out of the spaces between her fingers, the raw, burned flesh angry and throbbing. Pain was good, pain meant she was still alive.

Inhaling rapidly, Sophie peeled away the clumps of hair plastered across her face and gazed up at her savior. The man was setting his hat back on his head and wore a familiar, smiley-faced insignia on his chest. She wanted to both laugh and cry at the same time.

Instead, she clambered to her feet and stammered, "W-w-why did y-you s-s-save me?"

"You have my captain's favorite scalpel," Penguin Hat responded, pulling on his boots. "He'd bitch at me for days if I'd let it get away."

On the pretext of wringing out her shirt, she did a quick, inconspicuous check on her satchel. Though soaking wet, the book and scalpel were still there. She kicked off her own boots and dumped out the water and flopping fish. At least all the swamp mulch had been washed away, a small consolation.

Penguin Hat lingered just behind her. "What were you trying to do, escape by swimming?"

"No! As if I'd actually try to drown myself! It was that horrible Shichibukai—Donquixote Doflamingo!"

His jaw dropped. "You—what—wait... what?"

"I thought he was sent to help put out the fire! And next thing you know, he's making townspeople dance and sending me off to drown!" Sophie threw her hands up. "Honestly, I have no idea what's going on."

"Damn, this is getting troublesome," Penguin muttered.

Sophie didn't hear him, too focused on the fire still blazing through Gator Town. It had blackened over half the town and was encroaching quickly upon Nellie's inn, nearing the swamp where all the trees were awaiting destruction. Dread unfurled in her stomach.
"The methane," she whispered.

"Methane?"

"The methane! CH4 c-combined with heat, it's diluted but not d-d-diluted enough, there's t-t-too m-much methane, the fire will—five p-point one percent atmospheric amount—"

"Slow down! I can't tell what you're—"

"People are still back there, we have to w-warn them!" Sophie rammed on her boots and scrambled over the beach. "Gator Town's going to e-explode!"

"Oi! You're not serious!"

"Decayed matter in th-the swamp generates methane!" she bellowed over her shoulder, "It's a h-h-huge pit of natural gas! If the swamp starts t-to burn, the whole thing will—"

Sophie saw the explosion before she heard it. Massive flames erupted from the swamp, shooting high into the air, swallowing trees in a burning blue coffin (no no no no) taste of fire dripped like honey into her throat (this can't be happening this can't) will-o'-the-wisps and foxfire and alligators and Nellie—

She turned around and screamed, "COVER YOUR EARS!"

A rush of heat blasted through the cold ocean breeze, followed by the thundering clap of the explosion. Broken tree branches and pieces of timber littered the ground. The pirate had just barely heard her—he, too, laid on the ground with his hands over his head.

Curl up on the sand, Sophie shakily lowered her arms and listened to the flames crackle.

It was too late.

Natural gas fires could not be put out by water. They had to wait for it to burn out completely, and on an island like this… it might take hours… or days…

After a beat of silence, he hastily scrambled to his feet. Sophie sat up at a much slower pace; she was numb with shock, the same dry-eyed, deadened numbness that seized her all those weeks.

And then she was blinking at Penguin Hat's proffered hand. Hesitant, Sophie held out hers, smeared with red as they were, and he grimaced. He grabbed her wrist instead and hauled her upright. She could still feel the firm, scarred toughness of his skin after he let go.

"How did you know that was going to happen?" he asked, a bit uncertainly.

"I'm a chemist." It sounded strange and heavy on her tongue. How often had she'd said those words, and how often had they proved to be even remotely useful?

"Right. Well. There's not much time left." He stepped closer, silhouette outlined in blue. "Give me the scalpel."

A thought crossed her mind: what if the pirate killed her after he got what he wanted? Knowing his captain… And even if he didn't, she'd be stuck on an island that was being razed down by an explosive wildfire. What could do Sophie do? Relinquish the scalpel and let him leave her to die? She'd been poisoned, threatened, bombed at, and had nearly drowned twice all in the one week she'd been on her own in the Grand Line. And now, after all of that, she'd willingly accept this death? No.
Not a chance in hell.

Sophie felt lightheaded, like she was floating slightly out of her body. She was a World Government scientist. She was always, constantly in control. She had to be, because one little slip up could destroy an entire experiment… for years and years, she had suffered under the pressure of talent, bled and burned for the sake… for the sake of…

For your job? For Hippo-sensei? the voice in her head whispered. Look at how much those two have helped. Ever since the war, her tightly-held grip on life had been slowly wrangled away, piece by piece… and now, for the time in her life, Sophie was the subject of the experiment and could do nothing but watch the world collapse around her.

She raised her eyes to Penguin Hat. There was no time for self-pity. No time for hesitation.

"I'll give you the scalpel on one condition. Take me with you to the next island. All of Crawfish is a ticking time bomb. I'm not going to survive if I stay."

"What makes you think I won't just take the scalpel from you right now?"

"Because there's an ocean fifteen feet away, and I'm a fast runner."

He didn't look impressed. "I'll tackle you again."

"You'd do so with the chance that I'll toss your captain's favorite scalpel into the ocean. Besides, you caught me by surprise the first time—now I'm expecting it. Me onboard your submarine, or you losing the scalpel. Which bet are you willing to take?"

He crossed his arms, a bit affronted. "Are you seriously threatening me? I saved your life."

"I'm a scientist," Sophie retorted, "not a saint."

The blue flames stretched their shadows across the sand. Penguin Hat was the first to look away.

"Right," he conceded with a reluctant sigh. "The Heart Pirates have ourselves a hitchhiker. Shachi is going to love this…"

With a relieved smile, she returned the scalpel. "Thank you."

Two spots of pink appeared on his cheeks and he abruptly turned around, muttering under his breath. Sophie took one last glance back at Gator Town. It was engulfed by a blaze of cerulean, flames licking at the underbelly of the night sky. There would be nothing left come morning. Gator Town was gone. Romarin the bike was gone. Maybe the whole island would be gone.

She turned her back on the burning town and caught up to Penguin Hat.

"Before you get any ideas, my captain'll decide what's to do with you," he warned. "Don't blame me if he tries to dissect you again."

"He won't," Sophie replied in a voice more confident than she felt. "Because I know a way into Cat's Eye Island." After another brief silence, she turned to him and said, "By the way, I'm Sophie."

"Penguin."

"…Really?"

"You got a problem with that?"
Yes, because 'Penguin' was much too cute a name for what she'd imagined as Trafalgar Law's burly, pox-ridden crewmates. Sophie thought about it for a second and shrugged.

"Nah. Nice to meet you, Penguin-san."

---

The deck of the submarine was bustling with movement when Sophie and Penguin arrived. It was docked in a tiny bay on the western shore of the beach, floating beside a long, crooked pier. Sophie kept to Penguin's shadow and swallowed nervously. 

*Be cool. Cool like an Aokiji ice cube. Cool like an Aokiji snowman. I've never actually built a snowman before... NO STOP THIS IS TOTALLY NOT THE TIME.*

One of the men noticed Penguin. "You're late! We're on a tight schedule here!"

" Shut up, Shachi!" another shouted. "I smell her on him. You bastard, Penguin, you've been with a woman!"

Penguin blushed. "Well..."

She nearly tripped over a broken plank. "Don't agree!"

Law froze as he was about to descend the sub. Shachi paused, brow furrowing in recognition.

Mangoes. There was nothing else for it.

Steeling herself, Sophie stepped forward. The pirates stared down at her.

"Um. Hello. It's me again. But you probably already know that... look, I'm just as surprised as you are—that I'm here, I mean. Trust me, I'd rather be anywhere than here! No, Sophie, that's too far. Uh. Pineapples. Okay." She sucked in a very deep breath, as if trying to inflate her embarrassment away. "I kind of—I mean, I really need a f-f-favor. The port is burning, ships are on fire, and I have no other way of leaving. So... um... I—it's just—oh, screw it—TRAFLGAR LAW! PLEASE GIVE ME A LIFT TO THE NEXT ISLAND YOU'RE SAILING TO!"

She sagged over her knees, wheezing. Penguin's shoulders quivered.

"Are you laughing."

"No," Penguin choked out and had to tug the ear flaps of his hat lower.

"Can you step a bit closer to the light?" one pirate called.

Sophie blinked. "Light?"

The lamps on the sub flickered on, half-blinding her. Sophie cringed and stumbled back a few steps, her vision swimming. Rotten mangos, of all the times to see her... she was a horrendous, sandy mess with drenched clothes clinging to her skin. But she couldn't back down now.

"In r-return, I'll tell you about the secret of Cat's Eye Island."

To her enormous surprise, loud cheers erupted from the crew. "Captain, pleaaase!"

Sophie almost took a step back. The pirates really seemed to want to get to that island, though for what reason she had no idea.
Law evaluated her. "From what I've gathered, you're of no physical danger to us." Well, ouch. "However... the moment—the moment—you cause trouble... you'll wish I'd killed you at the swamp." He turned to his men. "Anchors up! We're leaving now!"

"CAPTAAAAAJN!!"

Sophie released a breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding. Penguin beckoned her over. The pirates were alarmingly eager to help Sophie onboard, but they didn't seem like they were about to stage a violent bloodbath—in fact, they didn't seem like crewmates of Trafalgar Law's at all (actually, she had suspicions the Heart Pirates were a brigade of sociopaths in evil white lab coats). All the smiles were rather... perplexing.

"Those are some awful burns!" one pirate in a grey cap exclaimed. "You should have the captain inspect that."

She hit her hands behind her back. "Uh—it's nothing."

He curled his mustache. "If you say so, little lady! I am Pescado Manta! It is an honor to be in your presence!"

"Yes, of course—ah, wait! I mean! Th-th-thank you!" Manners, Sophie, manners...

"Hai Xing," a dark-haired pirate wearing a newsboy cap muttered. "Don't expect you to remember it, though, no one ever does..."

Sunglasses popped up. "Sophie-chan, right? I'm Shachi! Sorry I didn't introduce myself earlier. The situation was, you know, kind of weird."

Sophie hastily bowed. "Don't worry about it. It's, um, nice to finally meet you... sort of..."

A voice roared from the bass tube. "Get to your stations, lazy punkasses! We're setting sail!"

"Watch your mouth! We have a lady onboard!"

Sophie's weak, stammering protests went unheard.

"I-i-i-is that so? H-hello, my name is Anko, age twenty-three, helmsman, blood type X. I like to eat seaweed noodles, and my hobbies are—"

"Hey, I thought we were supposed to be setting sail!? Don't mind him, Anko has that speech prepared for every woman he meets." Shachi smiled winningly and ignored the plethora of angry spluttering. "Come on, Sophie-chan."

They ushered her inside. "Careful, careful, those stairs can be slippery, stop smelling her, dummy, you'll get sand all over your nose..." She went along, chuckling with a rather fixed smile, completely bewildered by the attention and unsure if she should be watching out for a saw to come swinging at her out of nowhere.

The pirates dispersed down the hallway and ladders, shouting their goodbyes to Sophie. Only Shachi lingered behind.

Anko's voice echoed through the submarine. "Navigation sensors are on. Air tanks are full. Temperature is stable. All systems are go."

There was a clicking sound from the door, like a lock snapping in place. The metal under her feet
shifted slightly and Sophie braced herself against cold steel pipes. Water climbed above the portholes, and as she watched the ocean rise, she had a sudden impulse to hold her breath. Fish flicked past the window and then the submarine's lamps switched off.

Crushing black.

*Body won't stop, oh god someone please help, need air can't breathe don't want to die—*

Her breath hitched. An cold, unnatural chill seeped down her neck. It's over, Sophie reminded herself, because her hands wouldn't stop *shaking*, it's over, it's—

"Pretty cool, right?"

She glanced at Shachi and nodded. "Amazing, actually. To think only a wall of steel separates us and the ocean…"

"This wall of steel is pretty solid." He rapped the metal with his knuckles. "It won't break so easily. Anyway, I'm supposed to be in the engine room. Sophie-chan—"

"Chemist-ya."

Those two words sent prickles of fear up her spine. Ugh, that weird 'Chemist-ya' again… Sophie glanced over her shoulder. On the other side of the hallway, Law jerked his head, motioning her over. He was leaning against the wall, arms crossed around his nodachi.

"See ya around," Shachi said with an amiable grin and a wave.

Hopefully.

With a reluctant sigh, she dragged her feet over to Law—his entire crew was running around the sub; didn't he have anything to do? Was bullying helpless chemists the only thing on his agenda?

Sophie didn't bother forcing a smile. "How may I help the captain?" she asked dully.

"The captain would like to show you to your room."

She stepped away. "Would that be code for 'torture chamber'?"

"It's code for 'the place you'll be sleeping in'. Unless you'd prefer my men's cabin?"

"I'll go with the first choice," Sophie said quickly.

"Smart of you, Miss."

Discomfited, she focused on counting the steps as they walked down the hallway. Her satchel was a reassuring weight on her shoulder; worse comes to worse, she could always threaten the book's livelihood. Hopefully she didn't overestimate how desperate these pirates were for some answers… Sophie looked down at her boots, searching for something to break the uncomfortable silence.

Deciding she couldn't stand the heavy tension anymore, Sophie coughed to get his attention. "This really is… um, nice of you, Law-san. I'm grateful. Truly."

"That's good to hear. I enjoy having others indebted to me," he replied with an even smile. Something drew his gaze downward… right at her burned hands she held gingerly at her side. Law assessed that with disturbing calm. "You're wounded."
She hid her hands behind her back. "No, I'm not."

Quick as a snake, he grabbed her wrist and held them to the light. From palm to finger, shiny red welts covered almost the entirety of her hand.

"Oh," Sophie said in a tiny voice, "those wounds."

"You shouldn't lie to a doctor," Law told her, carefully examining the burns. "Your hands will be infected soon. There will be discoloration and discharge, and the burn may extend deep into the skin. You also might be stricken with sudden shock… potentially fatal, due to dehydration."

"If you try to help me, I am c-c-c-confident two or three fingers will disappear in the process," she snarled, trying to tug back her hand.

He laughed softly. "It's better than all ten."

Horror curled in the pit of her stomach. "W-w-wait… you w-wouldn't… you wouldn't…"

"Aren't you taking this too lightly? You don't seem to care about your body at all. You don't mind losing one or two hands, is that it?"

"Th-that's… that's not…" Sophie pressed flush against the wall and had a horrible flashback to the swamp, the operating table, parathion. "D-d-don't c-c-come n-near me," she gasped, cringing away as far as she could. Anymore and she was likely to fall right through the wall. "Please, please, d-don't —"

"Relax, Chemist-ya. It'll all be over soon."

His hand lashed out. There was a prickle of pain on her neck and Sophie fell into a haze of nothingness.

Pineapples, not again…

—

Sophie woke up to a blurry IV drip and a strange sense of déjà vu.

A machine beeped repeatedly next to her. The respirator attached over her mouth misted as she breathed in time to the heart machine. Hesitant, Sophie tried to move her stiff fingers and pain laced through her bones.

Oh god, no.

She shot upright. Her arms were bound with bandages up to her elbows. Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnine. She still had ten fingers. Sophie wiggled her toes. Yes, and ten toes, too. She felt her face. It all seemed to be in order. No eyes taken, no mouth carved up, no nose stitched onto her forehead…

"Yo," Law greeted.

Sophie nearly jumped out of her skin. The pirate lounged in a swivel chair, a stethoscope hanging from his neck, twirling a quill around his thumb. He hadn't stuck her in the operating room again; that was a relief (though with the current circumstances, it didn't exactly count for much). The sick bay was larger, hospital beds lining the walls and a desk situated in the corner, beside Sophie; it was strewn with stacks of books, ink-stained quills, and papers. Her forehead creased. Unclean. Way,
"You suffered minor carbon monoxide poisoning," he informed, breaking her inner diatribe against the poor desk. "I treated the burns on your hands—along with many of your older wounds that had opened. It should all heal within the week, Chemist-ya."

Her skin prickled. With some difficulty, Sophie pulled the respirator mask off. "I suppose I should thank you for not taking any of my fingers," she said stiffly.

"I suppose you should. I like others feeling indebted towards me, remember?"

"Well, when you put it like that," she rolled her eyes, "thank you for forcibly knocking me unconscious and treating my wounds under my explicit disapproval."

Law rested his cheek on his knuckles and said, after a beat, "Do you bitch at everyone who saves your life?"

Sophie turned beet-red and began stammering nonsensically at very loud volume.

"You won't be harmed unless you go out of your way to ask for it. You're my guest, after all." His voice was quiet in the assurance. Too intelligent, this pirate, all controlled calculations and relaxed refinement. Was there anything about him that was... human? He looked like a man who could make no mistake.

But he did make a mistake, Sophie reminded herself. He failed to kill me. I escaped. And I'm alive. What must he feel, to look at me and see his own errors?

Calming herself, she replied, "Guest is such a malleable word."

The caution did not seem to be lost on him. "I swear it." He tilted his head and added, "Upon any honor you think me of having."

Which was none. Hm. Wonderful.

"There's food." He indicated toward a small bowl of soup next to the bed. "You've slept about fifteen hours. You need your nutrients, Chemist-ya."

"Just call me Sophie," she burst out, before she could think about regretting it. "Just Sophie is fine. Even at work people just called me 'brat' or 'kid' or 'hey, you'."

"...Since you asked so nicely, Sophie." She flinched and colored a sickening shade of green, clearly realizing the gaffe she unwittingly made. Law wheeled over to her, smiling mildly. "Your bosses really should have better manners."

"Oh—they were my subordinates, actu...aaaugh!"

He stuck a tongue depressor in her mouth. Law shone a light down Sophie's throat, ignoring her warbled choke. Just when she was about to do something violent and hysterical, he replaced the tongue depressor with a spoonful of soup. Sophie swallowed... and holy mangoes, it might've been the three months of military rations talking, but that was the best thing she'd ever tasted.

"So... so yummy..." She made little grabby motions, but Law set the bowl out of her reach. "But whyyyy? I'm injured. I need my nutrients."

"Stay still and don't blink," he ordered, and shone the light in her eyes. Sophie let him, jiggling her
leg restlessly, even when he was pulling on her face and feeling up her throat with the perfect grip for strangulation. After he was done with that, Law set the stethoscope in his ears. "Breathe in."

Her hospital gown wrinkled as Law listened to her heartbeat. A part of her was mildly anxious at where his hands were moving towards, the other part pointed out that it wasn't like he was seeing anything new (that part was quickly murdered and stuffed into a dark closet), and a third part was focused on the stethoscope… Sophie remembered when she accidentally almost ruptured Hippo's eardrums when she was a kid… she needed to flick the black diaphragm really hard—

("The moment—the moment—you cause trouble… you'll wish I'd killed you at the swamp.")

Sophie swallowed and pressed her hands together.

"Respiratory and circulatory signs are good. Heart rate normal, and your lungs are healing from the smoke damage." He eased the IV needle out of the crook of her elbow and quickly wrapped on a bandage strip.

"Right. Thank you." She was determined to show she was not 'bitching'. Sophie returned to the soup and muttered in-between gulps, "Actually, I suppose I have that Shichibukai to thank for my new scars."

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "…You really saw Doflamingo?"

"Hey, I have nothing to gain by making this up." But to be fair, it sounded absolutely crazy. With a sigh, Sophie set the bowl down. "I know what I saw. It was him, it was definitely—but I just… can't comprehend it. How is setting a peaceful island on fire profitable? Crawfish only has three things of notable importance: swamp, mud, and houses that are barely managing to stay upright. There are no valuables, no gold… so what's the point?"

Law kicked his feet on the desk. "Senseless destruction doesn't need a point. They'll cover the fire up by blaming it on my crew. Anyone who knows of the Shichibukai's involvement is already dead—except you, of course. Doflamingo was careless." There was something… odd in his small smile. Something like satisfaction.

Sophie’s head ached. "But—but the Shichibukai are… they're supposed to be righteous. Soldiers of justice."

"Justice," he scoffed. "Justice is written by the conquerors. The World Government has been fortunate enough to be on the winning side of all wars in recent history—that's where your justice stems from. It's a fabricated web of lies used by weaklings to rationalize each other's actions. This world is ruled by strength and influence. If you keep on thinking like an idealist, you'll follow Crawfish Island to the grave."

She stared down at her hands. She didn't know why his words stung so much, but it did.

"I'm not an idealist."

"Oh?"

"It's different for you," Sophie spat, "you're a pirate, you don't have anything to believe in. But me, I've grown up with the World Government. If I don't trust in this, this fundamental thing, then what did I fight for? What was Vira? They have a good reason. They must have a good reason. I've—"

she swallowed and said in a voice painfully small, "…a lot of people gave up their lives for them."

There was a small, peculiar sound, like a… scoff, almost. Law's hat had fallen over his eyes and his
"The World Government isn't horrible, you know," Sophie said with an angry twist of her lips. "They protect people—innocent people—from those who would do them harm. Those such as yourself."

"And Doflamingo," he interjected. "You work for hypocrites and I doubt I'd find many marines who share the same pure sentiments."

"First! I am not a marine. And second, be that as it may they are still working for justice. You wanna talk hypocrisy? A doctor's duty is to save lives, and yet as a pirate you kill people—nearly killed me. Go ahead and explain that one, Law-san."

"It's dangerous to label others based on your preconceived notions." He pulled his hat back to stare her down. "Doesn't matter what I am—I do what I want. I don't bear the burdens of society. I don't have a duty to uphold. I bow down to no one."

She glared. "Doesn't that just make you irresponsible?"

"It makes me free, Sophie-ya," Law replied sharply. "Perhaps freer than you will ever be."

"…Yeah," Sophie murmured, because all things considered, "I think so, too." She raised her chin. "But I chose this path of my own will and no one, not even the famous Surgeon of Death, can look down on me for that."

There was no trace of surprise in his expression, no amazement or incredulity. But then the side of his mouth crooked up in that slick half-smile, and when he looked at her Sophie balled her fists tight against her stomach but didn't glance away.

"Good answer," Law said, and she had a few seconds to contemplate how weird this guy was before he continued, "The Tale of Apolleon. I read it."

He nodded at a thin, mustard-yellow storybook lay on his desk.

"Wha—hey, wait—you looked through my satchel!"

Law had the audacity to ignore her as he held up The Tale of Apolleon in all its torn and brittle unglory. "You know how you spoke of the secret of Cat's Eye?"

"Yeah?"

"It's from a fairytale."

"…Yeah."

He leaned back and laced his hands behind his head. "This is the part where I listen to your reasoning and then decide whether I want to butcher you or not."

Sophie's eye twitched. Law… sounded serious.

"Apolleon could be Cat's Eye if you think of it as a moving island. Not unheard of. Or perhaps Crawfish and Cat's Eye were once one island, and then broke apart later due to geological forces… it would explain the close relationship they had before Khanwari took over. They would've had to drift here from South Blue—but why not? Stranger things have happened in this world." Yes, like the doctor from Pantano Town had told her. "Regardless, the tale says the way into the island is from
"In the dead of night, the king and his troops—"

"—carved an opening in the belly of the cat."

"Yes. Most legends are simply exaggerated history, aggrandized by time. There really may be an entrance underneath the island. And because of Khanwari's defenses, it's most likely the only way. Don't waste time doubting. This is the Grand Line; common sense is never enough to survive."

He appraised her with a hooded gaze. Sophie had been subject to scrutiny many times before… it was stifling, but nothing new. This time, however, she couldn't read anything from Law's expression.

All he said was, "I'll save the butchering for another day. We'll steer a course for Cat's Eye."

The door crashed open. "Captain! This was the forty-eighth time Shachi asked me to—"

Penguin stopped short. Sophie waved a little, but he looked away.

"Uh… never mind… it was something stupid."

"This is good timing, actually." Law nodded at Sophie. "Your clothes are in your bag. Penguin, show our guest to…" he smiled grimly and lightning flashed in the background, "the storeroom."

She sighed. That sounded menacing.

Nevertheless, Sophie swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her satchel was lying against the wall; she picked it up and, just in case, searched through its contents. Clothes, boots, and… oh no he didn't… She swung around. "Where's my lighter?"

He tilted his hat over his eyes. "As if I'm going to give you a weapon. Nice try."

Sophie was promptly reminded of the seventy-five reasons why she hated Trafalgar Law.

"But that's—that's my favorite… look, I'd have to be completely deranged to harm anyone—"

"I'll return it when we reach land. Besides, as a doctor, I am inclined to warn you about the hazardous effects of smoking." Law held up a familiar silver instrument. "Turnabout's fair play, isn't it?"

"I don't even have a cig—" She stopped abruptly; her eyes widened, breath catching in her throat. Of course it hadn't just been about payback, how could she not have seen? "You followed me across an island, had two of your men tail me, and attacked me in the swamp… all for a scalpel?"

"It's a good scalpel."

And she was left gaping at the closed door. "You—you're positively infuriating, you know that!?"

"This way," Penguin said, nodding down the corridor.

"How the—I can't believe you'd—for a scalpel, honestly—!"

"Come on."

He sounded exasperated. It took all of Sophie's strength to tear her gaze away from the door and trudge after him. She gave up the issue—pirates could think whatever they wanted, it didn't matter to her because they were all wrong and weird and some—she side-eyed Penguin, admitting silently to herself—and some were half-decent people.
But that certainly didn't apply to their captain.

They walked in silence. Sophie was grateful she didn't meet any of the other pirates along the way. She was tired, her hands stung, and she just wanted to have a nice, comfy corner where she could curl up and sleep and try not to dream.

Soon enough, they reached a bland-looking door which Penguin opened with a slow creak. Sophie perked up.

She stopped breathing.

Dusty jars filled with dismembered organs, severed limbs, and bones rested on cobwebbed shelves. Her lungs began working again and Sophie inhaled a sickly sweet stench—as sweet as death. Formaldehyde. Her eyes watered. She stumbled back, clutching her nose and trying not to gag.

"Captain wants you to clean this room."

Her eyes bugged. "C-CLEAN?"

"He says you gotta make yourself useful if you want to stay onboard. Sorry about this." Penguin picked up a paper bag lying against the wall. "Here are the towels, gloves, and the mop, the bucket of water is over there, and the bag is for—"

Sophie grabbed the bag and vomited soup.


___

Trafalgar Law had planned everything, Sophie knew. He'd said all that nonsense about 'nutrients' and whatnot, but it was only so he could bask in the knowledge of her miserable state of misery. It didn't help matters that once Sophie began something, she couldn't stop. Especially if it meant cleaning. She'd already sorted out half of the storeroom's… occupants.

"Why the mangoes am I even doing this?" She threw the mop down. Water and soap splattered over the floor.

Sophie stared at the mess.

Muttering all the fruits she could think of, she set to wiping it over with a towel. Trafalgar Law never gave away anything, and even if he did, it was masked behind a devil-may-care smile Sophie just wasn't able to pick apart, not like any of her molecular formulas. She bit the inside of her cheek.

Sophie couldn't tell if Trafalgar Law was a mad genius, a murderer with a bizarre MO, or just a lazy bum.

Grumbling, she got to her feet and squeezed out the towel over the bucket. The door was kept open to air out the stink of decayed flesh and cleaning detergent.

Sophie wondered how all these people had died; she could only recognize a few organs that had possibly been poisoned, some maybe corroded by acid, the burned eyeballs… and even then… Sophie stared at one intestine as it drifted almost lazily in the formaldehyde, like a shiny blue eel.

She licked her lips. "What a sadistic pineapple."

Law leaned against the door. "Is that right?"
Sophie shrieked hysterically, flailed, and would've smashed into a row of kidneys had not Law's arm snaked around her waist just in time. That only made her panic even more. She was torn between ripping herself away and curling up in a fetal position or staying very, very still and hoping he wouldn't notice her. Except, well.

Law looked over her trembling head, inspecting the rows of sparkling glass containers filled with body parts.

"Nice job cleaning."

She winced, like he struck her a physical blow, but her voice was deceptively honeyed. "H-How may I help you, Trafalgar-kun?"

He frowned and thankfully released her. "Never call me that again. Dinner. Let's go."

"Trafalgar-kun came to show little ol' Sophie the way to the gall—?" He grabbed the front of her hospital gown with a scowl. Sophie instantly held up her hands. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry! The ammonia made me a little high. D-didn't you say there were going to be fluffy pillows involved?"

He let go, not very gently. "Maybe you'd feel better with a cigarette."

Sophie untied the hospital gown—she'd worn it over her Criminal clothes, so they wouldn't get wet—and shut the door exactly four times before facing him. "No, thank you. I don't smoke that often."

"Ah." He reached into his pocket. "Then you won't mind if I kept this for a while long—"

"Give me my lighter!"

She clapped her hands over her mouth. Shrinking back, a red-faced Sophie watched Law slowly drag his hand out from his pocket. He clenched empty air. Of course.

He studied her like he was probing a lab rat. "Chain smoker, are you?"

"It's none of your—yes," she changed tactics forcefully, because she had nothing to be ashamed of, "Yes, I am. What do you care?"

"I still want to dissect some lungs from smokers." Law let that sink in and added, "Just a passing thought."

Sophie did a very good job of hiding her shudders. He wouldn't. He just liked threatening her, getting all up in her personal bubble, watching her panic. She felt like a tiny, pathetic bug nailed down under a microscope. The feeling was wretched. If not for her protesting stomach, she would've ran back into the storeroom, slammed the door, and curled into a little ball. Yes, Sophie quite preferred the company of dead men over Trafalgar Law.

Determined to put the matter behind her, she strode ahead despite the fact she had no idea where she was going. "At least I'm not a pirate."

He chuckled. "A familiar comeback."

Fury swelled in her chest. Blindingly fast, Sophie whirled around and spat, "You feign politeness in everything you say, but not even that can disguise what a deranged, nutty-as-a-fruitcake PSYCHOPATH YOU ARE! HOW'S THAT FOR A COMEBACK!"

'Comback… comeback… back…' echoed down the hall.
"...and I mean that in a very caring way," Sophie finished weakly.

The shadows beneath his hat were angled sharp enough to cut and Sophie was aware of how very deserted this hallway was. Now would be a good time to run, but her feet seemed to be welded to the floor. As he walked forward, she couldn't even blink, much less move.

"I seem to manage quite well," Law said. His smile was terrifying. "Room."

A blue-green dome encased Sophie. She whirled around, terrified, and wondered, not for the first time, if burning alive may have been the smarter option.

"Shambles."

---

"Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!"

"Drink and the devil had done with the rest!" Shachi bellowed.

"Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!" the pirates cheered, stamping their feet.

The Heart pirates were having a grand time, led by Penguin who was waving Sea King bones like a conductor. As they finished off the song, Shachi raised his mug in salute and chugged it sloppily down his front. Bepo drummed his paws on the table, hollering. Even Law, relaxing in the middle of all the disorder, seemed entertained.

"Hey... can you please..."

His hand bent and tossed the object into the air again.

"Please..."

Toss.

"...please put my head down!"

Law looked mildly surprised, as if he'd forgotten Sophie was still decapitated. "Hm? Sure."

And then he tossed her head at Bepo.

"You are the worst!" she screeched, spinning through the air.

The bear caught her easily. It seemed he had some experience catching heads—but that didn't bother her in the slightest, because his fur was as warm as a soft blanket. "Are you okay?" he asked politely.

"Perfectly fine! Never let me go, I'll stay like this for—WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

Law had her wrists in a tight grip and clutched a surgical knife right at her throat. He blinked.

"Experiment time."

"NO. GIVE ME MY BODY BACK."

Bepo glanced at Law, who just shrugged. The bear picked up Sophie's head and plopped it squarely back on her neck. But she had more important things to concentrate on besides the fact that she nearly died again...
"Food!" she sobbed, and began piling leftovers onto her plate.

The pirates were all quick to offer suggestions on which plate was the tastiest, what part of a pufferfish to eat ("It's not like any of us'll die with Captain here!" Shachi said confidently. Sophie was understandably not reassured), and which had the greatest chance of burning her tongue off. Someone poured her a drink she rapidly glugged down… glugged… and kept on glugging…

Penguin looked mildly impressed. "Damn, you're drinking a lot."

"Don't worry! I can hold my own!" she proclaimed, slumping over on the table. "Don't… underestimate…"

"YOU CAN'T EVEN LAST THROUGH ONE GLASS!"

"Of course I can!" she slurried defensively. "Just… never tried this… what's this… this…"

"WHAT THE HELL'RE YOU EVEN SAYING?"

"It's rum."

Bepo gaped. "Amazing! Captain understood her!"

"A TALKING BEAR IS MORE AMAZING!"

"…I'm sor—"

"WHY ARE YOU APOLOGIZING?"

Sophie snorted rum up her nose and doubled over, coughing. Curse those pirates and their well-timed humor! After the bout of trying not die was over, she clambered back up up, wheezing slightly and red-faced.

"You're taking this rather well." Law smiled at her, the very picture of civility, and she knew he'd just seen her almost kill herself with rum.

"It's not that easy to scare Strangways Sophie. It'll take more than… splicing… off my head…" She took a second to repeat that in her head and then corrected herself, "No, actually, you terrify me."

He smirked a little. "How straightforward."

"Y'know the legend of Cat's Eye?" Penguin waved a drumstick at her. "We've heard the rumors even before we entered the Grand Line. They say the reason the king locked up the island was because he wanted to hoard all the gold for himself. There's a mountain of gold buried underneath his castle, they say." His smile was all teeth. "Imagine."

"We'd be the richest pirates in all of Grand Line!"

"Man, what I'd do with that much gold…"

"Anyway! You have really crazy ability," she said, munching on Sea King meat as the other pirates went into a discussion about the pros and cons about buying mermaid statues. "But really cool at the same time. If I could split molecules as easily as you could split my body apart, that would be incredible."

She took another gulp of rum and savored the lightheaded, giggly sort of feeling that drifted over her. Alcohol was no substitute for nicotine, but she'd take what she could get. "I mean, investigating the
wonders of the natural world is the whole reason why I'm a chemist. There are whole oceans waiting to be discovered. What can I find at the end of the world? Elements I can control, the bombs that I can form, the things I can blow up, the smell of sulfur! Ahhahaa..." Sophie snapped herself out of the stupor and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "But I wouldn't expect a murdering doctor like you to understand."

"—they'd be giant and we could stare up at them all day—"

"And how exactly are we going to fit that in here?" Penguin snapped.

"How about renovating our cabin arctic tundra style?" Bepo piped up.

"WE AREN'T A HOME IMPROVEMENT SHOW!"

Law set his mug down. "In the World Government... and even in your Marine base... there are people who will never appreciate your interests. We aren't so different in that way. Every sane person alive will shun those who don't abide by common thought. So you make bombs for a living. You call me a murderer, but what does that make you?"

His unnerving grey eyes watched her smile die away. "Do you really want to see the end of the world?" he asked quietly.

When she found her voice again, Sophie said, "There's a difference between killing out of cruelty and killing out of necessity."

"Is there?" His tone was devoid of all emotion.

She stared. In the background, Shachi was pointing out all the parts of the submarine he wanted to upgrade with his hypothetical new set of tools, and Penguin muttered to Newsboy Hat about buying more maps.

"I experiment on humans," Law continued, "because it furthers my knowledge and hones my skills. But even so, I don't delude myself in thinking that at the end of the day there's something more than a corpse sitting on my operating table. What difference does it make whether you're buried in a gilded coffin or none at all?"

Sophie's reply was harsh. "Difference is one person might've deserved it."

"Bullshit. Deserving death? And who gets to decide how much life is worth? Don't act so superior when you want to justify killing another human." Law leaned closer, cold grey eyes narrowed, voice cutting. "Death is the same wherever you go. It doesn't matter if it's one, or two, or a million people. Don't avert your eyes from it. Don't try to pretend it's necessary. It doesn't matter how they died, or why they died, but they did. And that's all that matters."

Her fingers were leaving red crescent marks on her palm.

"You're treating death like a statistic," Sophie quietly pointed out.

"Because it is," Law replied. "Am I wrong?"

She stared at the table and said, after a long pause, "Are all pirates cynics?"

"Cynical? Depends on how you look at it." He took another drink of his rum and asked quite plainly, "Have you ever had a dream?"
Sophie wasn't sure she heard right. "…I have…"

"So?"

"I want to eradicate all germs in existence and make odd numbers illegal. I think I sent in a petition to the Gorosei last year."

Law leveled her a flat glare.

"I'm serious," she snapped. "Got a condescending insult to throw my way?"

"That's one of the most pathetic things I've ever heard. I should take off your head again for that."

Ah, demeaning and threatening her all in the same breath. And to think that she'd almost been worried he'd gotten past that stage. Sophie plopped her cheek on her palm, thoroughly miffed.

"Yeah? And what's yours, Doctor?"

Law replied, "One Piece."

She ran her fingers down the cracks of the wooden table, thinking. "…With the things I've seen, I'm the last person who will doubt the existence of Gold Roger's treasure… but… you're wasting your life for an elusive fantasy of gold and glory. Out of all the pirates who make it into the Grand Line, less than one-tenth reach the Red Line alive. And less than one-tenth of that have found a way into the New World. You might—no, you… most likely… will die."

"Yeah," he responded, "And?"

Sophie stared up at Law, unable to process what she'd just heard.

"…Say it again."

He didn't even need to ask her what she meant.

"I'm going to find One Piece."

Law raised his mug at her and threw his head back, draining the rum. She watched his muscles work, searching for the power that rested in his veins, his bones, just there, so close she could almost breathe it in if she tried.

—

Sophie awoke with a gasp.

She crammed a fist under her pillow—gun's not there, okay, where's the rifle—she was on her feet in a half-second, fumbling blindly through the darkness. Panic rose like bile in the back of her throat. She strained to see the dim red remains of a crackling fire, the other sleeping soldiers, the one that should've been keeping watch over the rest—oh god unless they were all—

And then Sophie banged her head on a shelf.

She promptly sat back down.

It took her a moment to remember where she was—the Heart Pirate's submarine, sleeping next to dissected organs. Sophie rubbed her forehead and took a deep, calming breath.

"Okay… very glad no one saw that…"
She fumbled through the darkness and opened the door, bringing in a waft of chilly air. Shivering, Sophie folded the blanket the pirates had kindly given her into a perfect square and slipped on her satchel. As an afterthought, she dusted the jars a bit. There was nothing like a good morning cleaning to pick her up.

"Sophie!"

A mess of black curls poked out door. "Shachi-san! Penguin-san! Good morning!"

Shachi winced. "Ow, ow, ow—n-not so loud, Sophie-chan." It was a wonder that he could still stand up, after that drinking competition last night.

"Mornin'!" Penguin shouted jovially. "What a nice day for sailing, right?"

"Aagh! Whhhyy!?!"

She stumbled over to them. "Th-this is absolutely not a nice day at all. It' so c-c-cold! Shouldn't the Sunflower Kingdom be a Spring Island?"

"That's right, but we're stopping at Drum Island to restock on supplies." Penguin tilted his head. "Isn't this a good thing for you? It's not like you wanted to go to Cat's Eye Island."

"Right," she agreed instantly, a bit defensive. "Speaking of which, I should head over to the deck…"

"Wait! Sophie!"

Startled, she turned around. Penguin was grinning. "It's been fun."

"For you, maybe!" she huffed over her shoulder. "I never want to get decapitated again!"

The pirates howled in laughter. As Sophie walked away, her lips lingered in a tiny grin.

The heels of her boots clacked down a familiar passageway. What a truly bizarre set of circumstances. Just last week ago she'd sprinted for her life in the opposite direction… Sophie glanced out the familiar porthole, where once upon a time she'd wriggled through. The submarine steadily approached a snow-covered island, giant white pillars stretching between long, slanting fingers of sunlight. Her breath caught. She'd never seen anything like it. The drum-shaped pillars, the gleaming ice castle, the pirate flag…

What.

Disbelieving, she pressed her nose against the porthole. Just as she thought. The white-on-black Jolly Roger was unmistakable.

"Why? Drum Kingdom is part of the World Government! Why did they raise a pirate flag…?" A dozen hypotheses assaulted Sophie, each worse than the last. "Don't panic. Facts first, theories later."

On her way to the deck, she passed by a group of pirates. Sophie's thoughts were whirling so fast she didn't pay attention until—

"They're blaming the fire at Crawfish on us! Can you believe those bastards—eh?" The burly pirate wearing a fuzzy ushanka hat jumped slightly when he realized Sophie was reading over his shoulder. "Sophie-chan? Mornin'! I'm Anko, remember?"

The pirate in the newsboy cap sighed. "It would be nice if someone remembered me."
Sophie kept reading. Fire spreading across the island. Eighty confirmed dead, hundreds more still missing. All attributed to the Heart Pirates... just like Law had said...

She pointed at the newspaper. "Can I borrow that?"

Anko nodded eagerly. "Sure!"

She voiced her thanks and walked out on the deck, reading as she went. Her breath misted and she could *taste* the cold in the air.

Guardian of Alabasta, Sir Crocodile captures eight pirate crews this last month. Magician Basil Hawkins rampages across Longben's Skull. Cipher Pol Five apprehends the fearsome Grey Scourge in Oreina. She flipped through the bounties page (Iron Mace Alvida, Devil Dias, Cavendish of the White Horse, Strawhat Luffy...) and stopped. *Revolutionaries successfully overthrow the Viran monarchy.*

It was over, really, truly over. The soldiers, marine and rebel, could all go home. She felt a strange, empty lightness. Of course it was going to end this way, they had predicted as much, but the finality of it was like taking a wrecking ball to the stomach.

The war was over, and she'd lost.

The sub entered a river, cruising against the current. Sophie lifted her head, her lips parting, newspaper forgotten—pristine, untouched snow blanketed towering pines, as far as the eye could see. A News Coo flew overhead, disappearing against the white-blue pillars looming high above the island.

Sophie was so absorbed she didn't notice a shadow beside her stretching an arm around her shoulder. Law pulled her close enough that his coat tickled her cheek and warmth spread through her bare skin.

The expression on her face could either be described as agonizing confusion or extreme horror. "Wh-wha-wha-wha—"

"Careful," he muttered.

Right on cue, a group of hooded figures appeared behind a snow mound, all carrying muskets pointed directly at the sub. "S-state your name and your purpose, pirate!"

Though Sophie was having an internal panic frenzy, he remained unruffled. "Trafalgar Law. Buying medical supplies. I promise you we mean no harm."

With that short exchange, their whole demeanor changed. They lowered their muskets and chuckled to themselves. "Medical supplies, was it? That's fine. Kinda brings back memories of that guy, huh?"

One person shouted at them, "Bighorn is just ahead! Welcome to the Sakura Kingdom!"

Law nodded. "Thanks."

Her bewilderment grew. "Sakura Kingdom...?"

There was a flash of something in her peripheral vision, but before she could see what it was, he moved away, leaning against the rail, and she discontentedly began shivering again. "You saw the pirate flag, right? This island probably wants to proclaim independence from the Government." He frowned. "Not like they should be blamed... the idiot ex-king drove this country into ruin. The best doctors in the world used to come from Drum Island. Now it's only a shell of what it used to be."
Her relief was palpable. "So it's not overrun by pirates?"

"By the way those people welcomed us? Unlikely."

She'd only heard snatches about Walpol before, in G-13. The only thing she knew for certain was that the Vice Admiral hated dealing with him. He'd preferred to let Drum Island be, from what Sophie remembered. But... if G-13 had known this king had harmed his people so badly... and refused to do anything... she shook her head, she didn't even know the whole story, just what Law had told her. Either way, kingdoms were still mostly sovereign from the World Government... G-13 might not have been able to do anything...

As Sophie brooded over this, the submarine dropped anchor beside the outskirts of Bighorn. The Heart pirates piled out onto the deck. "Oooh! We're here! Shit, it's freezing!"

"I don't think it's that bad," said Bepo cheerfully.

"YOU'RE AN ANOMALY!"

"...Sorry..."

"When you arrive in town, get those bandages changed," Law told Sophie.

She nodded. "Yeah. Thanks for... well, not everything, but you know. Good luck on finding One Piece."

He tossed her the lighter. "I will."

She caught it. "Really, your confidence is astounding," she said with a half-smile, and tossed over the newspaper. Then Sophie sidled over to Bepo and clutched the front of his orange jumpsuit. "Farewell, beautiful animal, I'll miss you the most. You were my favorite." She hugged the polar bear.

Bepo was conflicted. On one hand, he had a sniveling girl that smelled like rotted corpses wrapped around his middle. On the other, all of his crewmates were glaring daggers at him. It was a rather novel experience.

"I'll miss you, too," he lied kindly.

"Y-you mean that?"

All this idiocy was too much for Law. "Bepo could take off your head with one swipe of his claws."

Sophie let go blindingly fast. "Oh. Um. I'm just going to... take off now... And I won't miss you at all," she snapped at Law, who had ruined all her fantasies of the polar bear and her frolicking in daisy meadows. "I've had enough of head-taking-off-ness to last a lifetime."

She jumped over the rails and landed heavily on the snow. With a wave at the pirates shouting their farewells, Sophie vanished into the pine trees.

"I hate to see her go, but I do love to watch her leave," Shachi sighed with a dopey grin.

"Shachi." Law beckoned.

His jaw dropped as Law dropped a few strands of curly black hair onto his palms. "No way! You remembered? Captain, you're amazing!" He breathed in deeply. "Smells like... formaldehyde —wow, that stuff's strong," Shachi held it away, coughing.
Law slipped the scalpel back in his pocket. "Be back before the Log Pose sets," he ordered the rest of his excited crew, "And don't fuck around; we're only here to stock up on supplies."

"Cap, you're not... planning on hunting her down again, right?" one pirate spoke up.

A cruel glint flashed in his eye, but Law just grinned and shook his head. "The chemist served her purpose. She's no use to me anymore."

Besides, he honored his promises.

—

"The Den-Den mushi has a severe cold," said the café owner apologetically. "We need to get it warmed up first."

Sophie's forehead met the table. She was bundled up in a thick coat the owner had generously lent her; the icicles that had frozen on her eyebrows had melted a while earlier. Her groan was muffled. "Well, I've waited one week already; another hour won't kill me... much."

She spent the last of her beli on a pack of her favorite Ground King cigarettes and black, bitter, piping hot coffee. Mmm... the nectar of the gods...

The doors were thrown open, sending in a flurry of snow. "How are you doing, Dalton?"

Sophie spat coffee all over the table. The café broke out horrified screams and she tensed, instinctively searching for a gun holster that wasn't there.

The owner nervously scratched his cheek. "Ah... well... Dalton-san went to Robelle... so..."

Young, slim hips were clad in tight pants. Thick blonde hair fell over a purple leather jacket. The cigarette dangled from Sophie's mouth. Back in G-13, she'd heard rumors... rumors about the loveliest of women being born on Winter Islands, beauties as frail and delicate as a white jasmine, their skin as soft and smooth as fresh snow...

The lady turned around—

Sophie's brain malfunctioned.

"At this time?" she frowned, deepening the wrinkles that lined her face, and her nose was as pointy as a witch's. "I saw a pirate ship banked on the river."

"Turns out they're just here for medical supplies. The captain's name was, um... Gora... Tafar... well, something long."

"That's not good. Isn't anyone keeping an eye on them?"

"Hey! You've hoisted up a Jolly Roger; that's practically an invitation to all pirates passing by this island! And I mean..." Sophie shrunk back, realizing how ill-planned her burst of outrage was, "well... aren't you, um, a-afraid of getting in trouble with the World G-Government?"

A hush descended upon the café. The belly-shirt-wearing old lady examined her, one eyebrow crooked up. She took a swig from a large bottle of plum sake and sauntered over to Sophie's corner.

"Listen up, little girl. Pirate flags carry many different meanings. Certain flags are flown with pride and can never be stained no matter how many bombs are thrown at it. Where was the World Government when Walpol threw out the doctors who disobeyed him? Where were they when..."
hundreds of his subjects died of disease?" She slammed a palm on the table, nearly overturning Sophie's coffee. "Our flag is a symbol of faith!"

"I'm sorry," Sophie said flatly, not sounding sorry at all, "but that's a bit stupid."

The rest of the customers seemed to choke on air. What, did she say something wrong?

The witch lifted up her sunglasses. She looked terribly amused. "Heeheehee! What a rude little girl. Yeah, I thought so, too, until a couple of loudmouthed brats proved otherwise." With one foot, she dragged out a chair and dropped herself in it. "Is something wrong with your hands? It's okay, you can tell me; I am a doctor."

"Um, I-don't think I need—"

"Those bandages haven't been changed in about thirty-six hours. It doesn't seem like much, but fresh bandages will help reduce scarring and speed up healing." She took a long drink from her bottle and pointed. "I'll dress them for you, but it'll cost all the beli you have on your person right now."

"That's too bad. I spent the last of my money on this coffee."

"Then two years of indentured servitude."

"…That price is a little steep, wouldn't you say?"

"Kids these days," she groused, resting her sharp chin in her palm. "Miserliness makes you very uncute."

Sophie daintily took a sip of her coffee. "Oh? I wasn't aware I had any cute qualities in the first place." She paused. "Wow, that was totally not what I meant to say."

The entrance bell jingled. The café owner looked up. "Welcome! Are you the pirates that docked outside of town?"

Oh, fudgeapples. It was only logical to assume that the Heart pirates would be staying in Bighorn. Sophie was the one who should've been at a port, searching for a ship that could take her to G-13. She should've, but…

Sophie quietly excused herself and crept out the back door. Everyone in the café, even the witch lady, was focused on the recent arrivals. Their attention was arrested by one pirate in particular, whose bounty had become famous in the papers as of late.

Her smile widened. "Heeheehee…! Now this is a surprise. It seems I'm coming across your face everywhere today, Trafalgar Law."

One customer tugged on the café owner's sleeve and pointed furiously at the morning's newspaper. "We… we let such a scary guy on this island?" he squeaked.

"It's an honor, Kureha-shishou," Law said. His gaze flickered over to the empty seat and the cup of coffee. It was still emitting wisps of steam, and a faint scent of cigarette smoke lingered in the air.

"Shishou? Pretty words from a wicked man. What does the Surgeon of Death want with me? Have you come here to learn the secret of my youth?"

Anko pointed at her. "Captain, who's this old hag? HABUGHFF!"

There was a sound like a head attacked a stone wall and lost.
"Insolent brat! I'm still a very young one hundred and thirty-nine years old!"

Sophie sullenly picked apart a leaf beneath a pine tree. She'd wanted to contact Hippo first before setting off to find a ship… which wasn't unreasonable. And if it delayed her for a few hours… there was no helping it, right?

Crawfish and Drum Island were entirely different worlds—worlds Sophie was only just beginning to fathom. Gator Town had smelled of soil, tree bark, and warm, damp earth. Bighorn was fresh and sharp and bitingly cold. It was the first time she'd ever seen snow, real snow. No one could blame her for wanting to stay out on the ocean a little longer… right? She bit her lip, disconsolate at herself for feeling guilty. There was nothing to feel guilty towards.

She crushed the cigarette into her boot and began aggressively padding a snowball together.

A little rearranging here and there, and a tiny Aokiji snowman grinned back at her. Sophie relished that accomplishment for a few minutes, then looked up as a fuzzy, bipedal rabbit strolled by.

As if sensing that possible death was close, the animal stared at her, whiskers trembling. She reached out for a big warm hug, glittering hearts and flowers shining beside her face.

"Bunny," she dreamily called.

The laphan promptly bit Sophie's arm.

"OH MY GOD, GET OFF, GET OFF!"

"Ai-ai-ai!"

With a single punch, Bepo sent the laphan flying in the air. He turned to her. "You've really got to stop thinking every fluffy animal that comes your way is cute."

Sophie was face-down in the snow. Blood pooled around her nose. "Thanks for the advice."

"No problem!" He stood there in silence, perhaps basking in the fact that he hadn't been told off. When it became apparent Sophie wasn't moving, he gave a shrug and walked away.

"Wait!"

She scrabbled at his suit.

"Hm? What do you want?"

"Can't you stay—here? For a bit?" She wiped away her nosebleed. "Unless you're planning to take off my head, I mean… wow," Sophie laughed suddenly, "you guys are a really scary crew. It's not like I hadn't noticed before, but…"

She fell silent. After a pause, Bepo flopped down beside her, cross-legged.

"You're pretty scary, too. You got burned and you almost drowned and I'm pretty sure Captain had at least three schemes to kill you… but you're still alive. That's the scary thing about you." A wide grin stretched across his face. "You fight back."

"I… well, um… that's kind of funny, actually. Before the war, I've never fought for anything. Not really. Not for things that actually matter." Sophie hugged her knees, cheeks pink from the cold.
"Three months ago was the first time I've ever stepped outside G-13. That's funny, right?" she asked again, even though she wasn't smiling. "I'm nineteen, and this is the first time I've ever left home."

After a moment of contemplation, the bear replied, "You should do what you wanna do. Take it from a pirate. Life's too short."

Her life was measured by how many blueprints she made in a month. Or how many bombs she shipped out in a week. Short? Her life seemed endless. Sophie was sure that even after she died, her skeleton would still be working for the World Government…

She took a deep breath. "That's… um… actually, I was sort of thinking…"

"BEPO!" A loud holler broke through the air, startling them both. "Oi, Bepo, where are youuuu? We're leaving!"

The bear brushed off his suit and stood up. "I'll follow my captain's dream until I die." He patted her on the head. "I hope you find your dream as well."

Sophie watched his orange jumpsuit disappear into the snow, feeling a bit like she'd let a grand opportunity slip from her burned fingers. What a novel concept they had. She'd never thought criminals could say stuff about 'dreams' without making a joke out of it. But… the Heart pirates were… a bit different from the average criminal.

Of course, Trafalgar Law was a lunatic. But she wasn't really of sound mind either. So, there was that.

She fell on her back and stared up at the grey sky. A snowflake landed on her nose. Sophie had generated snow dozens of times in her lab. Yet somehow, they were never like this…

How many other miracles were out there? She wanted to see them all. Sophie was a chemist, a purveyor of intellect, a researcher of the natural world. And there were so many things she didn't know. They all stuck out in her memories, vividly sharp: the first time she'd seen an alligator, walked in a swamp, tasted rum, felt real snow beneath her fingertips… meeting Sid, and Nellie, and that horrible Shichibukai… Law and Shachi and Penguin and Bepo…

The war is over, the little voice in her head reasoned, Sensei probably thinks you're dead. What are a few more days of adventuring? It's not like anyone will know…

The iron in her chest throbbed, black and cold. But there was also G-13, her laboratory, her bedroom… it was a perfectly sensible life. And, pineapples, Sophie dearly missed it… the sense of normality, a clear dawn after a storm, something so—unreal after the war it couldn't even seem possible…

"Girl!" the café owner shouted, coming into view. "The Den-Den Mushi is ready for your call!"

Sophie slowly stood up and looked out past the pine trees, toward the river. No time for self-pity. No time for hesitation.

She closed her eyes, briefly. "I'll be right there."

—

With a grunt, Penguin hefted two crates onto the submarine deck. "That's the new dialysis machine, the water, and the food supplies," he muttered, ticking off the items on his fingers, "and last… C'mon, we don't have all day! But be careful. But be quick about it!"
"Which is it?" Anko shouted back.

"Oh, just hurry up." Penguin grinned. "Unless you're too tired after getting beat up by an old granny?"

The bottom of a shoe was still imprinted on his forehead, which Manta and Hai Xing kept sniggering at. "Shut up, assholes," he sulkily told them, tugging his hat lower.

Once the pirates finished quickly (but carefully!) loading the remaining cargo, Bepo hollered, "That's all of it, Captain!"

"We set sail for Cat's Eye Island! Raise anch—"

"Stop the sub!"

Law halted mid-step.

A young woman slowed to a halt, ankle-deep in snow, doubled over and gasping for breath. Snowflakes were caught in her curly black hair, and her cheeks were flushed pink. She stabbed a finger in his direction.

"Tr-Tr-Tr-Trafalgar Law! I refuse to get my hands re-bandaged! If you want to exercise your rights as a doctor, go ahead! B-b-but, I'm w-warning you, I'll resist with all my might unless you bring me onboard your s-s-submarine!"

Shachi and Penguin stood on the upper deck. The former gripped the rail excitedly. "Did you hear Sophie-chan asking for another favor?"

"I got the same feeling," Penguin replied, his tone wary. "Orders, Captain?"

Very deliberately, Law faced Strangways Sophie. Desperation, fear, and something like hope flickered in her blueblue eyes. He was aware that his entire crew was avidly watching from the portholes. She hugged her bare arms, shivering, but never breaking eye contact. Determination, that was good. A talented chemist. Yes, he saw the potential. But she was loud, rash, and World Government… had a good mind, though, and that was something he could use…

With a slow smirk, Law called back—

_to be continued_
Kureha watched the full moon glisten silver over Drum Castle. She raised the sake bottle to her mouth as the footsteps stopped beside her, on the edge of the snowy cliff.

"I heard you met with the pirates in Bighorn. The Surgeon of Death. Apparently he set Crawfish Island on fire."

"Heeheehee! Are you going blind, Dalton? The World Government's fingerprints were all over that story!"

"That's a relief," Dalton chuckled, sitting down beside her. "I thought I was only one who saw that."

"He asked me where to buy ammunition and medical supplies, and went off again. I thought nothing of it. Then he was back half an hour later, asking to buy some of my chemicals—said something about breaking into Cat's Eye Island."

"To liberate the Sunflower Kingdom?"

"As if I understand the way pirates think! He just better put my five percent discount to good use." She drank deeply, wiped her mouth, and said, "I've had enough of shitty kings."

Dalton looked up at the moon. "We've had our fair share of odd pirates recently."

"Isn't that the truth!" Kureha cackled.

Somewhere on a certain desert island, a pirate sneezed so hard his straw hat blew off his head.

—(a few hours earlier)—

In the past three months, Sophie had stared Death in the eye more times she'd ever thought was physically possible. But now, as she met his glare evenly, she refused to cower. It didn't matter that Trafalgar Law had effectively trapped her in a corner, it didn't matter that one of his hands was pressed beside her head and the other clenched the scruff of her shirt, and it certainly didn't matter that Sophie was close enough to know that he smelled like cold steel and winter.

Nope, it didn't matter at all.

Sophie stuck her chin up. "Return—my—hair!"

"I'll lend you my time-traveling device as soon as you hold out your hands." Law shook Sophie a little bit to get the point across. The cigarette almost fell from her lips.

"I had my hair cut exactly six inches down from here." She pointed to her bushy eyebrows. "Did you think I wouldn't n-notice? How long d-did you think it'd be before I'd see my reflection?"

Irritation rippled across his features. "If this bothers you so much, why don't you just shave your head?"

"You don't think I h-haven't tried? It's just…" Sophie hesitated, "well… it isn't… symmetrical. There's a…" She struggled agonizingly and finally wheezed in horrendous emotional pain, "bump."
"...I have some medication—"

"No, thank you!"

"Fine. You want symmetry?" He flipped a familiar scalpel between his fingers. With a flick of his wrist and a sharp tug from the other side of her head, curly black strands drifted onto the floor. 
"There. Now be quiet or I won't be bothered to help you when the opposite is so much more tempting."

He tapped the blade against the tender skin beneath her jaw.

Sophie swallowed, glared a little, and held out her hands.

A few seconds later, Law was dabbing ointment on the burns. The scent was fresh and clean, like peppermint. Still made Sophie wince, though she did her best not to show it. His fingers were cool against her own… and pretty soothing against her flushed skin… she did her best not to show that, either.

"How are your hands feelings?"

"Itches a little. I can move all my fingers fine enough."

Law began wrapping fresh bandages around her hands with practiced swiftness. "Good. Because for the safety of my crew, I can't allow someone lacking motor control handling chemicals of mass destruction."

"I'm a professional," Sophie returned flatly.

"I can see the World Government settling for less."

The slow simmer of rage in her chest was back. "Are you insinuating that I am below par?"

"You'll just have to prove me wrong, won't you?"

A vein bulged in Sophie's forehead. She'd prove him wrong all the way to the end of the Grand Line, and hand him One Piece while she was at it!

He beckoned her forward. "Your laboratory is waiting." Law flashed her a barely threatening smile. "You must pay the boat fare if you want to cross to hell."

Her so-called laboratory had served as an anything-goes storage room that'd been crammed with broken anatomical models to rusting frying pans. And a few spiders which, Sophie was happy to see, had been cleared out with the rest of the junk. All that was left inside was a table the pirates had scrounged up, a few of Law's beakers and test tubes, and half a dozen cardboard boxes. The room was quite a bit more spacious than she remembered.

Shachi hopped down from the table. "I checked the air ducts. The ventilation system should be able to remove any fumes from the sub. What was all that shouting about? You two have a spat?"

Sophie scowled. "He stole my hair without my permission."

"I don't need permission; I am a pirate." Law's chilling gaze shifted a fraction and landed on Shachi.

The pirate coughed. "Ah… um, wow, it's pretty cold in here… I should, uh, check the temperature, um, system thing—bye!" With that, he hurried away.
Sophie strode around the room, inspecting the various instruments. Gloves, goggles, pipettes, a raggedy white coat that was most likely one of Law's. Of course, this was nothing like her laboratory, with all of its state-of-the-art equipment... but it'd do. It was actually quite a bit better than what she'd been expecting. She'd need about three hours for the smaller C4 bombs, but the big one...

Sophie ground the cigarette on the heel of her boot. "How long until we reach Cat's Eye?"

"Eight hours. More or less."

That was good, symmetrical number. And it'd work. "Gotcha." She snapped on the goggles, which gave her a rather disjointed, bug-eyed look. "This'll be child's play." She peered at the chemicals. "Literally, I used to play with this stuff when I was a kid."

"Where did the Marines find someone like you?" Law leaned against the door, looking interested despite himself.

"World Government. And on their doorstep." She shrugged. "Tell the rest of your crew to not disturb me. If anyone does, I can't guarantee your sub won't be blown sky high and we won't all turn into bits of ash." She let that sink in and beamed cheerfully. "This is going to be fun!"

—

Penguin checked over the auxiliary engine one last time. Shachi was resting against the wall behind him, munching on a piece of takoyaki. Hai Xing had also wanted to deliver an early dinner to their hitchhiking chemist, but Law immediately shot that down with a 'Under no circumstances short of the end of the world would Chemist-ya be distracted'. Naturally, Hai Xing didn't take that very well, as he usually never did with anything.

"Okay," the pirate had sighed. "Bets on when we're gonna die. I call five thousand beli on four hours. Let's go. Put 'em up."

Shachi whacked him. "Have some trust in Sophie-chan! And all of us!"

"Please write 'killed by trust' on my tombstone."

"Don't be so gloomy!"

"You know that tingly feeling you get on the back of your neck whenever you're in mortal peril? That's happening to me right now."

Shachi pinched his cheek. "ARE YOU TRYING TO JINX IT."

"I don't jinx anything," Hai Xing said glumly. "Life jinxes me."

"If you don't wanna distract the little lady, you can start by not yellin' outside her room," Manta drawled as he passed by.

Shachi and Hai Xing dwelled on that.

"...Ten thousand beli. Two hours."

"I am going to punch you now."

Penguin chuckled as he recounted the past few hours. For a crew that had a World Government chemist boiling away on their submarine, they were surprisingly relaxed. Then again, the Heart Pirates were quite used to the screams coming from the Captain's fun room to be worried. He
supposed it was systematic desensitization.

Shachi began whistling Bink's Sake. Penguin almost joined in, but his mind drifted to the stranger onboard.

If Law acknowledged her talent as a chemist, so would he. However, his captain had almost killed her barely a week ago. Penguin liked her well enough, but that was before the current circumstances. She had a perfect motive to blow up the submarine, and Strangways Sophie was smart. Penguin just wasn't sure if she was the stupid kind of smart or the cowardly kind of smart.

…And what was with all those 'pineapples' and 'mangoes', anyway?'

"Wanna piece? I'm stuffed." Shachi waved his plate of takoyaki at him. "Y' got that stupid look like you're thinking too hard about something again."

"You could do with more thinking sometimes," Penguin retorted, but kicked back anyway.

The other pirate snickered. "People this handsome don't need to rely on their brains."

"Shut up, tomato."

"Shan't be talking, man. I might feed you to Bepo one day."

Penguin finally cracked a grin. "I'll kick your ass to the Red Line and back first. Oi, are you gonna give me one of those things or not? Damn shame if you wasted the rest."

A resounding crash threw them to the floor. The takoyaki splattered against the auxiliary engine as alarms began blaring wildly throughout the submarine. The great cabin door slammed open as Law skidded out into the hallway, just in time for another thud against metal. In her makeshift laboratory Sophie hugged the table for dear life, screaming about her unhealthy life choices as empty beakers smashed across the floor.

Anko's voice roared from the speaking tubes, "We're surrounded by mines! BRACE YOURSELVES!"

—

His words were still echoing through Sophie's ears when she careened into the control room. She clutched four small packets wrapped in a thick, waterproof material, each with a black device attached to the top.

Anko and Bepo sat in front of the massive control station, and Law, standing at their backs, turned sharply. The soft red light of the navigation sensors washed over him and—she wasn't sure if it was just the light, but—the corners of his mouth were crooked up. The man was grinning faintly. Actually grinning.

"The bombs are all f-finished and st-stabilized. They won't be set off by s-shaking or p-physical force."

"We're not actually getting hit by the mines," Bepo interrupted while examining the multiple screens. "If we were, half the sub would be gone already. It's the shockwaves we're feeling."

"Most likely the sensors aren't working right because they're so old," Law muttered.

"Oh," Sophie said faintly. She was overcome with the conflicting urges to hide under a desk in terror.
and attach herself to Bepo's back like a koala. Nope. Resisting the cute.

Bepo studied the water current. "There should be an underwater cave around here, underling."

"I'm not your—I thought we agreed you'd stop—why do you never—oh, screw it. Seven degrees down bubble, heading north by northeast." Anko flicked a few gauges lining the control board. "Taking her down to three-zero-zero meters."

He spun the wheel hard. Law and Bepo braced themselves, but Sophie nearly lost her balance again. "C-careful! The m-mines—"

"Hey, have some confidence," Anko interjected. "This is a world-class submarine, and I'm her helmsman."

After steady maneuvering, the submarine found a path through the mines and entered a small cave half-hidden by kelp. The lights illuminated enormous stalagmites and silhouettes of strange fish nestled in its crannies. Sophie drank it all in, like a sponge absorbing water. She'd probably have a better view through a porthole…

"There's a giant rock ahead of us," Bepo alerted. "Judging by the currents, there should be more water behind it, probably leading to an air pocket. We could try using a torpedo, but that might bring down the whole cavern…"

"I have a better idea," Law cut in. "Chemist-ya here swims quite well."

Sophie paused, halfway out the door. Her nose scrunched up in bewilderment. "…Eh?"

Five minutes later, she suited up in a bigger, bulkier version of the Heart Pirates' boiler suits. The pirate in the newsboy hat fixed cylindrical tanks on Pescado Manta's back as Law relentlessly plowed through instructions. They were all gathered in the diving chamber, and Sophie wasn't exactly sure when she fell through an alternate dimension portal into Crazy World.

"This is a bad idea," she said firmly.

Law ignored her. "The cable holds you to the sub and also serves as a communication device in your helmet."

"This is a really bad idea."

"There are various ways you could die, it's true," Newsboy Hat supplied. "Asphyxiation, drowning, arterial gas embolisms…"

"The diving tanks will last for at least one hour, and it's durable in case of impact," Law continued impassively, spinning her around and checking for defects.

"Just because I swim well doesn't mean I regularly go deep-sea diving!" Sophie protested as she waddled in a circle like an oversized duck.

"…animal stings, animal bites, animals swallowing you whole…"

"The suit protects you from the pressure. The gloves are made with a special material that will give you dexterity underwater. All you need to do is attach the explosives." He tapped the bag on Sophie's shoulder.

"…the bends, differential pressure, immersion pulmonary ed—"
Manta flung his wide-brimmed hat into the pirate's face. "Take care of that for me, Hai Xing." As he attached on his helmet, he said to her, "Little lady, you're the only one who knows how to work those things—and not explode in the process. But fear not; I've dived hundreds of times before! You'll be safe with me!" A glint appeared beside his shiny white teeth.

"This is s-such a bad i-idea, I'm already stu-stuttering."

"Sub rigged for dive, increasing pressure to outside environment," Anko's voice announced from the ceiling.

"Have fun." Smirking, Law closed the door, effectively trapping her and Manta in a small section of the diving chamber.

"Just follow my lead!" Manta boomed encouragingly as the airlock slowly filled up with water. "This'll be as easy as reloading a short-barreled shotgun with your feet in the middle of a bar shootout with twelve guns pointed at your head!"

Sophie was suddenly, frighteningly assured that she was going to die.

As the floor opened up beneath them, she took a deep, steadying breath. There was nowhere to go but down. With a strong kick, Sophie followed Manta into the black depths.

The lights from their suits flickered on, casting shadows across scuttling crabs, mounds of coral, fleeting silhouettes on the ocean floor. Her breath misted on the thick glass of her helmet. She swam down to a swaying anemone, and a bizarre sea creature with tiny little fins peeked out. She stretched out a finger, but it fled back into the anemone. Sophie nearly had a nosebleed then and there.

"Check, check," Anko's voice appeared in her helmet. "Sophie, can you hear me?"

"Wha—oh, uh, yep. Loud and clear."

"Good, because from the way you're breathing, you're going to use up all your air in ten minutes."

Sophie immediately sucked in a breath and held it.

"Don't do that either! Holding your breath just increases the need to breathe and builds up carbon dioxide in your body. I learned that the hard way, unfortunately…"

She exhaled shakily. Right. Cool. She was cool. She could totally do that.

The light from the submarine cast an eerie blue-green glow over everything. Sophie swam between two stalagmites, tall and ominous. Glowing crystals rippled along the ceiling, a startling contrast of blue and black, light and dark.

Sophie hadn't realized how close she was to the cave's end until the wall emerged from the darkness, looming over her. The Manta guy had floated off somewhere, but she didn't need his help. She dug out her small C4 explosives; they were already wired to a detonator in the submarine, good to go.

Once finished, she touched her helmet to the bombs and pressed her lips to the glass. Precious little things. They weren't so dangerous, not really, not if you handled them right. Like children. Volatile and set for temper tantrums, but acted real sweet if you were nice enough. This was going to be a small, concentrated, precise explosion.

So fixated, she didn't notice a shade in the corner, coiled tight and ready to spring. In the split second when a cold chill ran down her back, she whirled just as the monster lunged and—
—shrieked—an explosion of static in her ear—

The bite never came.

She peeked through her fingers to see Manta floating over her, clutching the creature with one big, beefy hand and steadily choking the life out of it. He carted along two enormous, horrifying fish, red mist clouding the water behind them.

"Already got it, Captain," he reported in. "How does frilled shark for dinner sound?"

Sophie gaped at him as he gave her a thumbs-up. Alright, so there had been a real reason why he had ventured out with her. And that was because Pescado Manta was able to throttle a seven foot shark with one hand, while the other held two sea creatures that probably weighed over three hundred pounds combined.

He was so cool.

They swam back to the submarine, and as the water drained out from the diving chamber and the pressure stabilized, Sophie clumsily yanked off her helmet with a big grin. "Let's do that again!"

Manta took one look at her and started laughing.

—

The pirates sloshed through the shallow lake, their steps echoing loudly. Uneasy, Sophie appraised the cavern. Under the submarine lights, craggy rocks stood out in jagged relief. The air was unsettlingly stagnant, as though nothing had moved for hundreds of years.

Law stepped up beside her. Without turning, without expression, he said, "Going forward means you don't look back. This is your last chance to get out."

Sophie thought about that for a moment.

Then she gripped the railing and leaped into the water. She slipped a little—shakily caught her balance, *brush it off, brush it off*—and glared at Law over her shoulder with a determined set to her chin. Sophie stalked over to the rest of the pirates. If she had looked for just an instant longer, she would've seen his lips curl up in a small grin.

"There should be tunnels or whatever leading us out of here, right?" Sophie asked as she neared the other pirates.

Shachi rubbed his chin. "Mmmmyeah, should be… SOPHIE-CHAN, LOOK OUT!"

An eight-legged shadow on the wall jumped at her. Screaming, she stumbled back—and then the shadow was doing a little jig, then morphed into a bird and flew away into the darkness. Shachi and the rest doubled over, laughing.

Irritated, Sophie raised an eyebrow. Shadow puppets, *really*. Right after almost being eaten alive by a frilled shark. These pirates needed to be taught something about not being butts. She bent down, clenched a small pebble, and waited until the noise died down.

The pebble splashed by their feet.

"SNAKE!" Sophie bellowed.

The shrieks were disproportionately high-pitched.
Chuckling to herself, she turned and nearly bumped into Hai Xing. The dour pirate seemed a bit…
reminiscent. "My father was bit by a snake once. He died."

Sophie squinted. "Sorry… for, uh… bringing back… pained memories?"

"It wasn't painful… at least, not for me." With an enigmatic look, he shuffled away.

Nodachi and medical bag gripped tight in his paws, Bepo walked out onto the deck. Law scanned his surroundings; mossy rocks proliferated higher up than there were on ground-level. Moss only proliferated near water. "Do you hear that?"

Bepo tilted his head, listening. "…Sounds like a river."

A cold droplet splashed on Sophie's cheek. She craned her neck all the way up to the black ceiling of rocks.

Shachi held up his arm, opening and closing his fist. "Kinda looks like a hand."

"Maybe a giant lived here," Bepo snickered.

*The king's might grew so much in his rage that he picked the island up and strode fearlessly into the Sea of Terrors,* Sophie remembered. Or maybe someone as strong as a giant…

"There's our way out," Law declared.

"Captain! We'll be leaving now!" Manta called.

He nodded shortly. "We'll contact you with the Baby Den Den Mushi if we learn anything new. Until then, stay hidden!"

The big man saluted. "Aye, Captain! Stay safe, little lady! Anko, don't get beat up by any more grannies!"

"Screw you, asshole!"

Sophie rubbed her neck. "So… how exactly are we going to get up there?"

A blue-green dome enveloped Law and Bepo on the submarine deck, and the other five standing out in the lake. "Room."

Sophie was immersed in freezing water. *Mother of pineapples!* She swam furiously and emerged, gasping, in the middle of a shimmering river. Heart pirates were surfacing all around her, breaking apart the reflections of clouds. Shachi and Penguin hoisted a coughing Law up.

Anko kicked a large rock over the gap, stopping the river flow downwards into the cavern. That must be how Law's powers operated, like how he teleported her (and her head) to the galley the other night. Free Modification meant he could manipulate anything within his sphere of influence, such as replacing the rocks along the river bottom with his crewmates. From what Sophie had observed, that seemed to be the gist of the Ope Ope no Mi… splicing, teleportation, substitution… the theoretical possibilities were fascinating…

Still, the rotten plum tossed her into a river.

"How about a w-warning n-next time?" Sophie demanded, glowering behind strands of wet hair.

Her only answer was a mocking laugh, if a little out of breath.
Bepo surfaced with a splash and shook himself dry, to the loud dismay of his crewmates. They all looked ridiculous, with their wet, sagging boiler suits. Silt rose up around her ankles as she glided toward the riverbank. Dragonflies skimmed the water. The sounds of nature were back—bees humming, birds cawing, the ripple of grass in the wind. Just like Crawfish Island. She took a moment to bask in it.

Her boots squished as she climbed up the riverbank. She wrung her hair out, wiped the water from her lashes, and opened her eyes.

Rolling fields of sunflowers stretched into the golden-orange horizon. It was as if all her life she'd been wearing blurry glasses and only now, after wiping them clean, she could see how yellow the petals were, how green the grass was, what eternity looked like. The night air was thankfully warm—summertime, most likely. A whisper of a breeze caressed her eyelids and cupped her face.

Something smacked her round the head.

Sophie glared at the rough brown cloak—lots of irregular patches, she was going to have to fix that later—and said very deliberately, "Ow."

"Might as well put that on, you're not getting any drier," Penguin called.

Sophie stuck her tongue out at his back. Nevertheless, she knew it was better to stick with uniformity than look like the odd pineapple out.

Seven cloaked figures trooped onto a dirt path. In the distance, a castle spire poked into the belly of the sky. Sophie pointed. "That's where we're heading?"

"The capital of Cat's Eye." Law threw his hood up. "Anatole."

—

The city had secrets tucked away in her sharp corners and smooth cobblestones, all dimly-lit darkness.

Occasionally Sophie passed men in their fancy hats and women in their airy dresses. Carts rolled beside them, big, fluffy animals plodding sleepily, chickens squawking in the coop. The moon had vanished behind clouds, leaving Anatole a labyrinth of flickering lanterns. Small, burnished, dancing flames, smelling of kerosene. She held up a hand in front of her and studied how her fingers were outlined in orange-gold. She could count the cobblestones before they melted away into the darkness. She could see the rusty brown of the lantern. Light was a glorious thing.

On the way here, the pirates had laid down the plan. They had two days to infiltrate the castle. If they weren't out by then, Manta and the others would assume the worst. Instant code red. If everything went smoothly, they'd be off the island with an Eternal Pose to Ruluka Island and Bepo's weight in gold. And from there she'd take a ship straight to G-13.

"This is a good place," Law announced, stopping.

The Tournesol was everything its name was not. Boarded-up windows, slathered with rusting, peeling paint, creaking under its own weight. There even was something suspicious about the customers; a little too cautious, glancing over their shoulders a little too much.

But the pirates (sans Bepo) threw down their hoods and followed their captain through the doors, and she had no choice but to do the same.
The tavern was packed, buzzing with shouts and the bang of beer mugs against wood. Smells flooded over her, rich and subtle: wood, wine, smoke, warmth. The pirates leered at pretty serving girls, and turned red when they laughed and winked back. Sophie stared intensely at her surroundings, as though trying to burn it into her mind. One door. Thirteen windows, seven unboarded. She began sniffing the wall and only stopped when Penguin squinted at her.

A puckered old woman with a wooden leg came thumping forward. Her right cheek was marred with scars and her right eye was milk-white. Sophie shuddered internally. How unsymmetrical. "Seven o' you? Like this place ain't crowded enough."

Crawfish Island accent, wiry grey hair, sun-browned wrinkles... and a pistol strapped to her hip, Sophie noticed. Old lady was a badass.

"Two rooms," Law said. "Two nights."

She considered Bepo, who was the biggest and most suspicious out of the group. He nervously sidled behind Anko, who was grinning at a rosy-cheeked lady drinking her companions under the table.

"What've you got to trade?"

They had surmised Cat's Eye's only source of economy was bartering. Thank pineapples they'd guessed right. From his medical bag Law pulled out one bottle of painkillers and one bottle of rubbing alcohol. The less they gave, he'd reasoned, the less suspicion they'd raise.

The woman's face lit up. "Done," she said immediately. A minute later, she came back with two large keys, but before handing it over, asked, "Which part of Anatole did ya say y' were from?"

"The hamlets, not the city," Law lied with ease. He had his most disarmingly polite mask on, Sophie could tell just by his voice. It still gave her nightmares sometimes. "Came out from the fields because we're interested in what this fine establishment will provide tonight."

That was new. Sophie stared at the back of his hood, willing him to explain.

The old woman nodded. "Stick 'round, then. Dinner's served, so eat quickly 'fore all the good bread's gone." With that, she bustled away.

Law tossed a key to Sophie, who caught it out of reflex. At their captain's nod, the pirates began dispersing around the tavern (Anko made a beeline for the rosy-cheeked lady), but she stayed where she was. There were people with lots of guns, sitting in the corners. Closed expressions. Pacing. Textbook secrecy, right there.

The hairs on the back of her neck rose. She knew, she knew, and even worse he'd known it all along.

The stupid pirate doctor was just beginning to walk away when Sophie swatted him on the arm and forced him to stop. "This—is—a—rebel—hideout," she snarled through clenched teeth.

Law shrugged off her grip and brushed his cloak. "Of course. How else will we find information?"

Sophie was seized by a massive, almost insane sense of disloyalty to the World Government. This was so wrong, it felt so—she was standing on enemy territory—if her platoon knew she was taking refuge alongside rebels of any sort, she could never face them again!

"You couldn't have picked someplace a bit more—" she flailed a little, hissing, "not dangerous?"
"Danger makes life interesting," he confided with a smirk.

"Why didn't you tell me beforehand?"

Other tavern-goers glanced over, startled. The amusement vanished in an instant. She was jerked back by a claw on her shoulder, his lips too close to her ear. The door was seven paces behind her and all of Sophie's instincts screamed to run. Or stomp on his foot, which was just so invitingly there.

"Let me remind you that you are the one who struck a deal with me. The treasure doesn't take a backseat to your indignation. Unless you want to blow our cover and suffer a very gruesome death, I suggest you be more..." the claw dug painfully into her skin, "flexible."

She jerked away, rubbing her shoulder. "You don't... trust me." Sophie didn't know why she sounded so—she'd built him a weapon of moderate destruction, stayed the night on his submarine with an unlocked door, let him send her down into the depths of the ocean. She couldn't have done that without at least a shred of confidence he wouldn't murder her where she stood.

Law shrugged. "And you don't trust me either," his grin was small and sly, "remember?"

And yet it felt like he was saying either way, you're too weak to do anything about it.

—

Her room was on the second floor, fourth to the right. She glared at the small and sparse contents—rebel bed. Rebel candle. Rebel bathtub.

Her resolve dented.

The water warmed up quickly and Sophie leaned back with a sigh. Steam rose up in thick, heavy wafts around her. She sat there for a few minutes, staring up at the dark rafters, and then crossly splashed the water. The other pirates were all right (for pirates, anyway), but their captain, holy mangoes, how could someone be so genuinely insufferable?

(But it wasn't like he didn't know what he was doing, which maybe-possibly-sort of irritated her more.)

Pain jolted through her shoulder. She craned her neck and examined the sensitive welt. It'd be purple and blue tomorrow, but on the one to ten scale of Suffering at the Hands of Trafalgar Law, bruises rated pretty low.

Being around him seemed to always bring her pain. And the things he'd saved her from were usually caused by him anyway.

The candle flame cast long shadows across the water. Droplets glistened dimly on her skin.

Sophie touched her shoulder and remembered that grin, washed over in red light and delighting in the possibility of death. He seemed to have no fear. She closed her eyes and thought, Heretic. Such elation is akin to blasphemy. No one man should claim so much power. She hadn't realized then, but he'd given her a glimpse of his fangs. The nodachi swinging by his hip wasn't the scariest part of Law, nor even his Devil Fruit.

Her fingers tightened briefly. She ducked underwater and rose up again, slicking her hair back.

Though pain was no stranger to her, it'd still be a waste if she'd endured everything that had happened for a two-day adventure in an isolationist kingdom hanging around pirates (especially the
hanging around pirates). Strangways Sophie never risked her life for nothing. But her ideas were her own business, and it's not as though Law trusted her with his plans.

Sophie sunk lower and steamed quietly.

—

After the tavern owner locked the doors and lit the candles, the conspiring began.

Lurking in a shadowed corner, Law propped one foot up on an empty chair and listened. It was a tiresome thing: a list of grievances, accounts of horrors, reminders of past brutalities. The old tavern owner raised her cup when freedom of press was mentioned. He refrained from yawning; he still felt a few gazes on him across the room. They were on guard. Distractions would be necessary when the time arrived.

A young man leaped on a table, scattering plates and cups about his tattered shoes. Couldn't have been older than Shachi or Anko, but there was a feverish glint that made Law look twice. He was no stranger to charismatic insanity.

"It's true not all of us want a rebellion!" he shouted as silence settled over the crowd. "The youngest who've never seen the world outside, and the oldest who want to live out their last days in relative peace. But for us, at least, we will never stop struggling for freedom. We will never be content living in a cage! We will not have our paths laid out for us! We should be able to mark our own destinies upon the world!"

They roared and stamped their feet.

"I would ask you, what is royalty without the people!? Khanwari would not even exist if there is no one to call him king!" He held up his hands, a conductor tuning the orchestra. "The principle of all sovereignty should reside with us!"

"Liberty, equality, fraternity!" the tavern bellowed in response.

"Women, will you have your rights taken from you!? Or will you be free and equal, to choose where to go and who to love!?"

"Freedom or death!" the serving girls hollered. Anko was yelling with them, looking delighted by his present company.

A shadow on the staircase shifted, drawing his attention. Half-cloaked in darkness, the chemist watched the proceedings through the banisters. Her mouth had a displeased twitch to it.

The chair screeched. Penguin paused in his efforts to fend off a drunk Shachi trying to use his shoulder as a pillow. "Cap?"

"Let him sleep it off. I'll be back soon. Bepo, you're in charge."

The hooded figure preened. Penguin looked scandalized as Shachi began drooling on his arm.

Law creaked up the stairs. Her expression hardened when she saw him and gripped the quilt tighter. The anger was meaningless; they both knew if she made a fuss he would rip out her tongue. She'd looked so wounded when she snapped at him… it was almost impressive how the girl wanted her trust to be reciprocated over one non-binding agreement they'd made on Drum.

Law dropped the tin plate on her knees, balanced with a cup of wine. "Dinner."
The chemist poked the steaming fried bread as if she expected a severed hand to pop out, sniffed it, licked it, side-eyed him with the greatest suspicion, and then nibbled a crumb.

The transformation was instant. Ravenous, she bit off a great hunk of bread and ripped into the chicken leg dripping in fat, hissing when it burned her fingers. The bandages were damp, ah, that explained the smell of soap.

Mouth smeared with grease, she grabbed the wine and took a big gulp. Her expression immediately pinched and she swallowed with agonizing difficulty, glaring wide-eyed at him.

"I don't waste poison. It's actually that bad." Law took a drink from his own cup. Revolting. Granted, not the worst he's ever tasted.

"I'd rather drink black coffee than this," she muttered, and laughed, sudden and cutting as fragments of glass. "Hippo-sensei used to—" The chemist broke off as instantly as she started and frowned. "Don't get comfortable with me, pirate."

Law leaned closer—she pressed herself against the banisters—and divulged, "I'd never. Now hold out your hands and let me treat your wounds."

Her gaze flitted left and right, as though searching for an escape route. "I—I'll go along with it, but under p-protest."

Naturally. He unwrapped the bandages and dabbed ointment on her burns. The scars would never fade away, but they were all superficial and had no effect on her nerve system. The oldest ones were still visible, light brown marks streaking across her palms. It was an ugly sight, but Law found the deformities interesting. Three fingernails had grown back misshapen, and two more were still in the process of reforming. A dark, peeling scar stretched over her scaphoid and trapezium bones. There was a tiny burn right in the middle of her ring finger's distal phalange, shaped like an asterisk.

As he finished bandaging, the tavern floor was getting louder.

"Is it true some o' the king's men are comin' to our side?"

"Our inside informant tells us the soldiers are restless. They're tired of this just as we are! She says with confidence that half their number will throw off the yoke of tyranny and join the cause!" Jacques Straw thrust his fist in the air and the orchestra shuddered. Cymbals crashed, violins trembling.

"There should be a better way to deal with their anger," the chemist said, and the music was instantly drowned out. "Like having a piñata in the shape of Khanwari's face and battering it to death. Much more therapeutic. Also, candy." She belched and covered her mouth. "Scuse me."

There was something rather solid about her complete lack of sympathy. He might've grinned a little. "I highly doubt the effectiveness of that idea."

She shot him a glare that was eerily reminiscent of an angry goose. "You're supposed to go along with these things."

"Ah, my apologies."

Huffing, she wrapped herself in her quilt and squished closer to the banisters. She took well to the dim candlelight; it outlined her sharper and melted away everything that kept her soft. Darkness suited this girl.
"There's nothing you can do," Law said as she kept watching at the crowd, "Get some sleep. They will have their war one way or another."

After several long, motionless seconds, she replied, "The rebels shouldn't be angry with their king. He gave them land and shelter and food for many years. They live reasonably good lives. How dare they be so ungrateful?" A pause. "Did you expect me to say that? The king is terrible. He's performed appalling acts of violence; he should be punished for it." She waved at the tavern below. "But what they're doing is still treason."

Spoken truly like the World Government. He ran his tongue along his teeth. "And what about Vira?"

She stiffened. "What about it."

They were dancing on a tightrope now. "The former king actively participated in the slave trade and had sixteen mistresses. He fled Vira when the war began, probably around the time you were shipped in. The World Government granted him amnesty for his black market dealings and gave his family political asylum in Mariejois." Law rested his cheek on his knuckles. "But you'd be aware of this already."

She spun her cup between her hands and said nothing.

"Is it treasonous to revolt against oppression that is already violent?" he asked mildly, more out a whim to continue the conversation than any real sympathy for the rebels. On a personal level, he didn't care either way. "Would you rather them be sheep, blindly doing whatever they're told?"

"It is universally accepted that sheep are one of the cutest animals ever, so I wouldn't actually mind that." She slowly took another drink and grimaced only a little. "Freedom is also a responsibility. Listen to what they're saying. It has nothing to do with how they plan to run the kingdom. Have they even thought about the government system? Will it still be—"

She turned away as a hooded woman stepped between them, murmuring an apology. They waited until the footsteps faded up the stairs.

"Will it still be a monarchy? A democratic republic? And who will be the leader? It takes one rigged election for everything to collapse. They say pretty words now, but these people will descend into anarchy, fighting for power like wild animals, if no one is there to guide them. That's how humans are; we're savage. We need order to survive."

"And here I thought you believed in the goodness of humanity," Law mocked.

"How could I believe that when there are men like you?"

His own chuckle caught him by surprise. She could not have possibly heard the bitterness. "You've never met anyone like me."

"I know a fair number of callous buttwipes back home who can give you a run for your money," she murmured, then paused. "Though to put things in perspective, I'm the first one on that list, so. The Vice Admiral, definitely… his annoying secretary who I may or may not have poured acid on when I was younger… those dweebs from the maintenance division…"

Her fingers tapped like a metronome. There was scientist in the way she touched and smelled and examined. Her eyes spoke military, constantly darting looks at him—not him, but where he kept his hands, how near they were to his bag. The burns on her hands would've said negligence, had he not known her. Now they whisper wildness. Love of fire.
"Right. What do you have to say to people who've acquired peace without a monarchy or the World Government?"

They were back to that, which visibly threw her off. Her legs shifted under his gaze. "I know. I know, but—they're the easiest ideas to trust in because they've been done before, hundreds of times throughout history. It's safe. Reasonable. Don't go against the flow. Don't ask questions. Just obey."

The chemist scrunched up her nose and took another drink. Wiping her mouth, she muttered, "Look, I don't even like talking about government. Can't understand most of it, all the stupid politics and whatever. Science is easier. Do what you're told, get it done with, and go back your lab. Why should I disagree with them if they're financing everything I do?" She rested her head against the banisters. Her eyes were red and watery, but that was probably because of the shitty wine. "Make bombs, make chemicals, make poison. So long as I get to do what I want, why should I care?"

This was an interesting turn of events.

Her tone had no trace of bitterness or self-pity—only bland indifference. How illuminating. For all the justice and responsibility she spoke of, this girl wasn't a good person. She seemed to recognize that… and yet still remained desperately devoted. Well. The World Government was doing something right.

"You didn't," he said at last, because sincerity was a harsh weapon. "That's why you made me those explosives and didn't even ask if I was planning to hurt civilians. That wasn't based on trust. That was a decision based on practicality."

She remained still. A quiet whisper came from the quilt: "No one in this world would weep for the deaths of a few ants."

Law froze. He knew those words, how did the fuck did she—

She tucked her face into her tortoise shell. "Go away. Please."

The nape of her neck curved gently. He remembered how the fine tendons fluttered at every stroke, how skinny her wrists were compared to her tough callused hands, not unlike his own. Law was a man of many wants and desires, and they floated through his mind as fleeting as the next: he wanted to touch the intimate soft flesh behind her ear. He wanted to curl a strand of clumpy wet hair around his finger and yank her head back. He wanted to laugh as she squawked and squirmed and snarled. But later; maybe. Because right now he was sure that if he forced her to look, she would not snarl. She would not even see him. And he didn't want that; of this Law was certain.

He stood and walked away.

Though he wasn't yet aware of it, it was precisely this moment Trafalgar Law stopped thinking of Sophie as 'the chemist'.

—

"A storm is coming," Penguin said. "Late afternoon or early evening."

"NOOOOO," Sophie wailed, "OOOOoOOOOOOOO," she flopped on the table, "ooooooOOOOOO," the pirate watched her blankly, "ooooooOOOO," she clawed the air, "ooooooOOOOOOOOOO..."

Penguin chewed on another slice of bacon and went back to studying the map of Anatole.
It was just the two of them sitting in the back corner of the tavern; the other pirates had gone out to scope the castle. Penguin informed her that he was to stay at the Tournesol and learn any new information (not part of the conversation, Sophie had conveniently appeared the second after a certain fuzzy white hat disappeared out the door).

"Anko's here, too." He'd looked at her meaningfully as she tripped over and began inhaling food. "Didn't sleep in his room last night."

At that very moment, Anko sneezed. He rubbed his arms, shivering. He'd actually slept on the rooftop because the woman he tried to woo kicked him out on his ass. Well, what else did he expect?

She laughed—spat chunks of carbohydrate and saliva into Penguin's face.

"Sophie! Gross!"

"Ah'm sowwy!"

"Stop talking!"

(He kept a careful distance after that.)

"How do you know it's gonna rain today?" Sophie dipped her bread in honey and munched. Her hair was frizzier/more bird-nest-like than normal, but she'd attributed that to her chaotic sleeping habits rather than humidity. "The Universe could be pointing a giant middle finger at you. It does that to me a lot."

The shadow of a bird flapped past the window, wings beating like sheets of rustling paper. Crows cawed in the distance.

"See those clouds? They're signs of an oncoming cold front—basically one giant mass of cold air," he explained to her perplexed look. "It forces warm air higher because of the difference in volume."

Weak sunlight reflected off the knife blade. Sophie played with the angles, aiming it at the floor and then up at the corner of a customer's face. After a few seconds, the man flinched and glanced around. She quickly tilted the knife away and went back to eating her bread. For being surrounded by a bunch of rebels, Sophie felt she was handling herself rather well. Especially considering she had approximately twelve seconds of sleep and spent the rest of the very early morning doing curl-ups.

"I only know the basics, though. Bepo's the real expert. I'm more old school. The salt shaker, for example," he pointed as she was beating the shaker with her palm, "Moisture makes salt clump and wood swell." He patted the table. "See? Feels a little damp. No condensation on the windows or grass this morning, either. It's these little things that tell you the big picture."

"Hmmmm yes STP and hydrogen molecules, yes good." Sophie stroked her invisible beard.

"...You didn't understand any of that, did you."

"You lost me at 'clouds'."

Penguin gaped. "But it's so basic!"

She instantly became defensive. "You're basic. You're so basic you're practically drain cleaner—shut up."

"Do you really work for the World Government?"
"I will spit food on you again," Sophie warned. Penguin started laughing. She flung bread crumbs at his face.

"Ow, my eye!"

She could synthesize sunlight in a heartbeat, but others areas of science were so annoyingly difficult to grasp. Her platoon had tried to teach her something similar back in the war… when the storms first arrived… aughh think happy thoughts! Happy! Thoughts! Oooh kitty…

Dozens of stray cats prowled along the street outside (she made a mental note to hide one in her satchel before leaving. There was something very Old Beauty about Anatole, with her red-roofed houses crammed tightly together and labyrinth of skinny cobbled alleys. In a younger time, she would have been magnificent. Sophie really wished she could have seen it then, when the streets were bustling instead of tumbleweed silent, punctured only by the call of crows.

A burly ox covered in white wool clopped by. Sophie plastered herself against the window. There may have been drool and heavy breathing involved.

"Fluffy Oxen. Draft animals native to this island," Penguin muttered distractedly over the map.

"*Can we steal one please.*"

He gave a long-suffering sigh. "Is there a point to it?"

"CUTE."

"…Is there any other point to it?"

She mimicked his exhausted drawl and dialed it to ten thousand levels of obnoxiousness, "Does there haaaaave to be?"

He ignored her after that, but let her steal his leftover bread. Smearing sunflower butter over it, Sophie watched the tavern owner fuss behind the counter. It reminded her of a different woman on a different island with burned legs and scarlet lips and purple eyes.

She licked the buttery knife and examined her reflection. Something fluttered on the edge, right above her in the corner of the window. In her blind spot.

"Wait," Penguin said suddenly, "you shouldn't—"

Stark against the cold grey sky, three corpses swayed in the breeze. *Kingswhores* had been carved across their red bellies. Crows circled around them, cawing and pecking. She'd been listening to those birds the whole time.

"Kingswhores," Sophie repeated. "They were swinging right o-over me this whole time, and you d- d-didn't even—" she didn't know how her voice sounded so calm when all she wanted to do was punch Penguin in the throat, "I was laughing—"

She broke off, breathing hard.

"I'm—sorry, I didn't think you needed to see… or even… wanted to."

The knife rested over the table, point first. She twirled it with the tips of her fingers. "If th—" She took another breath to calm down. "If this was the World Government, they'll received a court martial. After that, a long rope and a short drop." The light curved along the blade. *When I come*
back with G-13, I'll make them all pay. Everyone on this island will get what they deserve.

"There is no court martial out here in the wild," Penguin said after a deliberate pause. "No rules at all, in fact." He coughed, then reminded, "Our priority is the gold. Whatever you plan to do, it comes second."

Her jaw clenched. She covered that up with a snort. "Don't worry. I follow orders for a living. Besides, if I do anything to compromise your crew, Law-san will have my head. Again."

"True enough." Penguin rolled up the map and stood. "I'm going to contact the sub. I'll be back later."

A part of Sophie wondered if Law ordered him to stay not to gather information, but to keep tabs on her. "You trust me here all on my lonesome?"

"I trust you," he said firmly, "not to do anything stupid."

"Because your captain will kill me," she concluded.

"No." Penguin pressed his palm flat on the table and leaned over. "Because I will. If I have to."

Why did conversations with pirates always end so seriously? And… badly-sounding for her? Sophie was not liking this recurring theme. "You walk like a hyperventilating dinosaur!" she called after him.

His back became noticeably straighter and stiffer as he climbed the stairs. She sunk low in her seat. To think she was so nearly on the road to the valley that led to the river by the path towards trusting a pirate. The very thought was as terrifying as mismatched socks. A flick of her lighter later and Sophie exhaled smoke, looking around the room. The tavern owner seemed to be having difficulty cracking open the lid of a barrel labeled salted pork. This would make a decent conversation opener.

"Hi!" Sophie popped up, smiling brightly. "Want some help there?"

The tiny old woman wiped her brow. "That'd be 'ppreciated." She handed Sophie the crowbar. The scars on her cheek wiggled when she smiled.

Sophie pretended to push. "Any estimates on the king's army? Numbers and weapons and all that? I know I should probably know, but… I… don't know." Pineapples, Sophie, if you were any smoother you'd be a row of metal spikes.

"They're numberin' nearly ten thousand, not includin' the loyalists. Our informant listed at least two hundred cannons, though 'bouts fifty are in disrepair. They have 'em muskets, too, an' the guard towers."

"And our side?"

"Ten thousand as well. Still, it's about a sixth of Anatole's overall population. We have a road of brambles ahead of us, hm?"

Ten thousand wasn't bad at all. Four, maybe five G-13 warships could handle that. This was going to be way simpler than she'd expected. Sophie pushed once on the crowbar and the lid immediately popped off. "Was salted pork always this black and… gunpowder-y?"

The old woman merely laughed like she'd told a particularly amusing joke. "Put that behind the
"One last question," Sophie huffed, tugging the barrel over. "What happened to those women outside? The ones..." She examined the fleshy, vulnerable back of the old woman's neck. Her hands curled. "...Strung up."

"Terrible business. Terrible for business! Those stupid lugs would hang 'em right out my tavern! I dunno who did it, but if I did, I'd kick their asses straight into the river. Have a nice cold bath t' clear their damned tiny brains. The soldiers will be on us like a pack o' bloodhounds. I keep on tellin' 'em, we ain't ready yet!"

"It's vulgar," Sophie muttered

"'Course it is," she said briskly. "Just as vulgar as when the king chopped off my husband's head an' paraded it on a spike. Ah, I forgot—y' were probably too young to remember. We ran a newspaper, him and I. Got pretty popular, too. The king didn't like that so much."

Sophie made a noncommittal noise which could be taken for sympathy or awe (tip four of Hippo's etiquette lectures). The old woman patted her with the handle of the broom and craned her neck as five men walked in the tavern. "Welcome! Grab a seat wherever ya like, we got a breakfast special of duck eggs, warm bread, an' ale."

"I hope it's not laced with poison." Sophie recognized that lean stature and needle-sharp smile—he was the orator last night, Jacques Straw. He'd be served the rope, naturally.

"Ah, hush, with you sayin' that it ain't a joke. My alcohol's just as cheap an' disgustin' as the next inn over."

Sophie tuned out their laughter as she watched the men proceed past her. They all wore the same sunflower-shaped cockades on their hats and pistols on their belts, and were greeted loudly by the other rebels. Ringleaders, she saw instantly, and memorized their faces and marked them for death row.

"Could they have done it?" Sophie asked after they left. "Killed those women, I mean."

The old woman glanced at her, then went back to sweeping. "Jacques Straw? No. But the others... Danton, Brissot, Roux, Couthon... I can't be certain. Don't dwell on it," she said as Sophie's expression darkened. "Think of the future instead. Soon, you'll be free to go anywhere in the world. You'd like Crawfish Island. Quiet, kinda sleepy place. Great big swamps everywhere, though; y' should seem 'em at least once in your life."

*Not after Doflamingo burned them down.* Sophie kept her lips pressed around the cigarette and smiled.

"Most nights y' can see some strange glowing lights bobbin' through the trees," she said wistfully. "Lost spirits, I used t' call 'em."

"That's... pretty cool..." Sophie's brow furrowed, her memory itching.

Before she could place exactly what had felt so *off* the floor knocked. Three long, three short, three long. It came from right underneath her feet. Sophie stumbled aside as the old woman brushed past her and thumped the broom handle. A second later, a small trapdoor opened up and a freckled, sweaty face shadowed by a purple hood peeked out, a burning torch in one hand.

The old woman gaped. "What're you *doin'* here? If the king found out—"
"Is that a smuggling tunnel?" Sophie broke in. It was a short drop into the darkness, and the stone walls glistened with cobwebs. There was a faint whisper of a breeze she wasn't sure was imagined.

"The soldiers are advancing." The girl gulped for breath, glancing at Sophie. "Their arrival is imminent; we have been compromised. You and Jacques Straw must leave for a safe house."

"Tha—that's imposs—how did they know?"

"They must have their own informant, I am unsure, I rushed over immediately when I heard!"

The old woman looked as though she'd been forced to swallow a barrelful of her own cheap ale. "But last night you told us there were soldiers who wanted to come to our side—"

"A falsity," she whispered hoarsely. "Jacques Straw asked me to. No soldier will forsake the king. It was—it was to boost morale, you see. To give hope in a desperate hour. I must return before anyone discovers I am missing, please, you must leave at once!"

She fled back into the darkness with her flaming torch and the old woman slammed down the hatch.

Sophie drummed her fingers against her elbows. She needed to warn Penguin and Anko, but first…

"So whatcha gonna do?"

"There's no time to run," she murmured. "We must fight." Her face twisted like the bark of an ancient swamp tree. "Jacques Straw! Citizens! Khanwari's soldiers are plannin' to smoke us out! This is the time to stand!"

As if she flipped a switch, the rebels instantly stood up and drew their weapons, shouting at each other. "Olympe, begin the evacuation!" Jacques Straw was ordering as he loaded his pistol, "Danton, send out a third of our troops to the guard towers! We'll take those closest to the city; they have cannons! Invaluable cannons!"

The havoc became a blur of noise to Sophie as she wrenched the old woman aside, screaming, "Not yet, you said you weren't ready yet!" She needed more time for G-13 to get here, she could fix this if they just let her!

She shoved Sophie away with much more strength than a half-blind old lady should have. "Are you the spy!?"

Sophie stumbled into the wall, horrified. "N-no… No!"

Faster than she could blink, the old woman pulled out a shotgun from underneath the counter and pointed the black tunnel of the barrel straight at Sophie. The darkness was infinite, like the ocean current dragging her down down down and Doflamingo's laughter turned into pink crows peckpeckpecking out her lungs.

Her vision swam dizzyingly. Her breath came out in short, frantic spurts and her heartbeat wouldn't stop racing. Oh god, Sophie thought faintly, what's happening to me?

"From the hamlets, my ass. You won't stop me from goin' home. I don't even remember what my daughter looks like, they took me away from her so long ago." Those scars seemed to come alive, like writhing, furious snakes. Her white eye blew open in rage. "They left Helene to burn!"

The doors blasted apart, roaring swears, and—
She was back in a trench, laden with heavy medical supplies. A cacophony of exploding mortar shells, blazing pistols, and garbled yells rang through the smoky haze. She wasn't Sophie the hitchhiking chemist, but Sophie the combat medic who had never been anywhere but—

And then she was back in the Tournesol, on her feet, ashen-faced.

The green-armored soldiers aimed their muskets at the rebels, who responded in turn by pointing their weapons, the old woman included. Forgotten in the corner, knees trembling, Sophie slid down the wall and discovered how to breathe again.

"YOU ARE HARBORING TRAITORS IN THIS TAVERN," a soldier bellowed gratingly. "IF YOU DON'T RELEASE THEM, WE WILL BE FORCED TO FIRE. WE ARE THE KING'S MEN, WE SPEAK WITH THE KING'S VOICE, AND YOU ARE REQUIRED BY LAW TO OBEY THE KING."

"The king sure has an annoying voice," someone near her muttered.

This was it. She had to escape. Get the gold and sail to G-13 as soon as possible. One door. Thirteen windows, seven unboarded. She could make a run for it. Penguin and Anko could find their own way out; they were both stronger and faster than her. She gripped her satchel, where she'd snuck in a few small bombs made with the witch doctor's leftover chemicals… if she timed it just right…

"OUR PURPOSE HERE IS TO BRING THE REBEL JACQUES STRAW AND HIS CONSPIRATOR, ROMARIN, TO THE KING."

Romarin.

Why did that sound so—

Her bike. Sid—Sid gave her a bike. Roma-chan. It burned down in Crawfish Island, but Romarin was still alive and Romarin was—

Sophie felt the world open up beneath her feet. The old woman's right eye was milk-white, but her left… purple.

—

"Manta, you have the ships in sight!?"

"Just barely; they're still a long ways from the island." The Baby Den Den Mushi was calm, unlike its sibling which must already be dried up from all the sweat pouring down its little snail body.

"And the colors they're flying?" Penguin demanded, restlessly smoothing out his hat brim.

"Hold on, I'm adjusting the periscope… it looks like… something blue on a white field… I think it's —"

Footsteps thundered down the hallway; the Tournesol seemed to be shaking on its very foundation. In the street below, people were coming out of their houses with pitchforks raised.

And Penguin's mouth curled in a slow, dangerous grin.

—

Romarin.
She pulled a gun on her and was very nearly about to kill her and she was Romarin. But Nellie thought her parents were both dead. Oh, pineapples, Nellie. She should know. Right? Right!?
(Sophie was sawing off her fingernails with her teeth at this point.) What were the chances the Heart Pirates would say yes to her kidnapping a violent old lady and bringing her onboard?

"The hell's going on?"

Sophie peeked over the counter. Anko stepped off the stairs, right in the middle of the stare-down. The whole tavern seemed to blink as one.

And then a gunshot ripped through the silence and people were shouting and there was white on red on white. Anko curled up on the floor, his stomach bleeding and his mouth violently scarlet, gasping, "Shit—what the motherfucking fuck is going on—"

Sophie immediately dropped to the floor and crawled past the counter. Think, Sophie, think! She could drag him away by the feet if they were all looking the other way. Good plan. If Law knew she'd tried to help his stupid crewmate before he died, he might not totally kill her.

Jacques Straw jumped on the table just in front of her (stop being so dramatic! she wanted to scream). She stopped short and bit out all the fruits in the Rutaceae family. Anko was bleeding out just barely two yards from her.

"You can kill one person, but we'll never die!"

The tavern bellowed in agreement.

"I'm still alive, morons," Anko gargled weakly from the floor.

"…Never mind that! We are all prepared to give our lives to this cause! Brothers and sisters, we stand together!" He cocked his pistol and there was some otherworldly light glowing above him, shining down from the heavens. "The voice of the people is the voice of god! We are the kingdom and the kingdom is us!"

A soldier shot point-blank.

Jacques Straw fell with a thump. His eyes, widened in surprise, bore straight into Sophie's—passionate, charming, dead.

That was when the screaming began.

She still heard everything, the gunfire, the panicked voices, the running, but it all blurred slowly together like colored dye spreading through water. The corpse wouldn't stop staring at her. A pool of red and bits of grey spread across the wood. A little more acne and lowered cheekbones, and he would've looked a bit like one of the junior scientists back at the lab. What was that scientist's name again? She couldn't remember. She couldn't remember anything, suddenly.

Something wrapped around her waist and the world jerked. The face above hers was streaked in crimson. Penguin. He hoisted her up; her legs were shaking nearly as hard as her hands. "I'll hold them back!" he shouted, "Find Captain!"

"A-Anko-san—he was h-h-hur—hur—"

The smell of singed flesh and blood was overwhelming. There were still people fighting through the haze. She glanced down at the corpse of Jacques Straw and had to force down her breakfast.
He looked at her warily. "Are you going to throw food in my face again?"

She pushed away from him, biting back the urge to vomit over his boots out of spite. A fire was starting in the back corner. Ah, snap, the gunpowder.

"I'll take care of Anko! Go!"

"B-b-but—"

Penguin gripped her shoulders. "I thought you said you could follow orders!?"

All the molecules in the universe realigned. She had an objective. A purpose. Everything else could come later.

Going forward means you don't look back.

Sophie snapped to attention. "U-understood. Watch out for the g-gunpowder!"

And she was running past the swinging corpses and dodging around panicked crowds. Penguin said the pirates were scoping the castle, but as she narrowly escaped the third riot (and a flying bloodied saucepan), Sophie realized it'd be too dangerous to go by ground.


Sophie pulled herself up with a grunt and balanced on the ridge, surrounded by a sea of gritty red roofs against an iron-grey sky.

Half the city was in flames.

Everywhere she turned, it was the same: furniture tossed out of windows to form barricades and soldiers and rebels gunning each other down on the streets. Smoke billowed out over the southern end of the city. Distant booms heralded the cannonades. Just one block away, a ramshackle building was swallowed by fire and collapsed with a mighty groan.

A tile creaked behind her.

Sophie spun, grabbed the outstretched forearm and slammed him into the roof, digging her knee into his back. Her messy ugly livid snarl vanished as she took in the brown cloak and newsboy hat.

Expression bland as always, Hai Xing glanced over his shoulder. "If you're planning on killing me, might as well hurry it up. I warned Captain you were going to double-cross us."

She grabbed the scruff of his cloak and slammed him back down, screaming, "Your comrades are back there f-f-fighting alone! Anko-san m-may be dead!"

He stared down at her bloodied bandages. Their gazes met—wait, she was about to say, not their blood, but he shoved her aside with enough force to send her stumbling. "Come on!" he shouted, sliding down the tiles and disappearing off the edge.

Those freaking pirates, honestly! Sophie took a half-second to catch her breath and slid down after
him.

Her feet slipped against the tiles and in a gut-wrenching tug, she was thrown into the wind. For one horrifying moment she thought she must’ve tripped, but then pain ripped through her scalp as her head jerked back, a gasp catching in her throat.

Oh, pineapples.

I would've preferred tripping, thanks.

Then nothing.

—

There were no footsteps behind him. Hai Xing skidded to a stop. "Strangways?"

A huge blast rocked the buildings around him. Thick black trails of smoke came from the direction of the Tournesol.

—

Sophie woke up with a strained wheeze, heartbeat thundering frantically. A shadow flickered over her, enemy alert! She was moving in a split-second: shot up, kicked away the weapon, and dug her hand into the soft flesh of a mouth.

The girl's whimpers were muffled as Sophie lifted her up easily with one arm. Soft slippered feet swayed over the rug.

She couldn't have been but two or three years older than Sophie, draped in a loose white dress. Long nose, small chin, eyes as dark as aubergines… the girl from the Tournesol. Anko getting shot, Jacques Straw dead, the old lady with the name Romarin—it was all coming back. Her fingers tightened viciously.

"Name, location, motive," Sophie snarled.

"Odin," the girl rasped, "stop."

A slow, cold shiver ran up her spine. Sophie looked up.

A hulking beast of a man loomed over her, so massive his head brushed the tapestry on the ceiling. Scars crisscrossed his arms, neck, and what little of his misshapen head the iron mask couldn't cover. Even though he filled up practically a third of the room, she hadn't noticed his presence at all. Even though his enormous fist was frozen in the air—right over her head.

The girl tapped her. "It would be advisable to release me."

Sophie did.

Her back hit the bookcase. The mask had two pitch-black holes to see and a jagged slit to breathe. Dog tags glinted on his chest. He somehow reminded her of a bull—like he could bulldoze her over any second. Sophie clutched her arms to stop herself from trembling.

"This is Odin. He is not exactly garrulous, but he will not harm you. He brought you here on my orders." She patted him as though he were some grotesque pet, and cleared her throat. "I am Lisbeth, daughter of King Khanwari and heir to the Sunflower Kingdom." She picked up the damp cloth Sophie had kicked away earlier. Her voice was as soft as crushed velvet. "This is my bedchamber in
the castle. You are safe here."

"...You're kidding, right?"

Lisbeth shrugged her small shoulders.

Sophie backed away, catching her breath. "Okay. So. We have a rebellious princess spying for rebels and her..." Odin remained silent. She rubbed her forehead. "I should inform you I know e-eighteen ways of k-killing myself," she set her tongue between her teeth, "tho you may wanna ma' this quickh."

"Unnecessary! Abundantly, capaciously, uh, uh, u-undividedly unnecessary!" She clutched her braid like it was an anchor. "I know you found a way inside Cat's Eye! And I know you are from the World Government."

"You're... wrong?" Sophie tried.

"I was at the Tournesol yesterday. I traversed up the length of the staircase and we were in close proximity for a short moment, and I... overheard your colloquy with the gentleman in the white hat. There will be no torture or harm or any egregious action of any sort, you have my word."

At least she didn't know said gentleman was actually a cutthroat pirate out for her gold. But here was the real kicker: Khanwari and Lisbeth were both World Government-affiliated royalty she had taken oaths to obey. They were both legitimate and had formidable powers backing them up. And from the... minute or so she'd known her, it was glaringly obvious this princess was an ocean saner than her father.

Sophie crossed her arms. "Fine. You know who I am. What now?"

Things were falling apart faster than she expected.

"to be continued"
The Tournesol was in smoking ruins.

Law landed roughly, skidding on the dirt, Shachi following close behind. Dust rose in the thick, ashy air. A wall post creaked and thudded on top of a massive pile of blackened timber. It'd be difficult to find anyone underneath the rubble. Most would've been charred by now, he could tell from the grease collecting on his lips.

Hai Xing kicked aside a piece of the door and uncovered a twitching, bloodied hand. He prodded it with the tip of his boot.

"Not them," Law observed, and walked past the dying bodies.

Shachi climbed on the remains of the counter, up the tallest support beam. "Penguin! Anko! Stop messing around and get out here! You idiots can't die yet, we still have stuff to do!"

The pile of wood shuddered. Arms windmilling, Shachi toppled over and rolled into a summersault right as the trapdoor opened.

"Hey," his face lit up, "you're alive!"

Penguin held the hatch up from under a huge heap of wreckage. He was streaked in soot and half his sleeve was missing; all in all, he looked reasonably irritated for someone who survived a gunpowder explosion. "Did you just call me an idiot?"

Shachi beamed. "Yep!"

Law shoved away the wreckage with a single push. "Where's—"

"Down here." Penguin dropped down the ladder.

The only light came from the small square of the trapdoor, but it was enough. Shachi covered his mouth with a low, "Shit." Anko lay on the ground, cloaks pressed over the wound on his side. He grinned as Law knelt by his side.

"Hey, Capitaine," he rasped. "I ever tell ya how pretty yer eyes are?"

When Law exhaled, it may have been something akin to relief. "Trust me—you say that all the damn time. Room!" A small blue glow enveloped him and his medical bag. White gloves, a needle, and bottle of rubbing alcohol appeared in his awaiting palm. "I'm starting the operation now."

"Are you gonna be alright? Do you feel okay?" Shachi leaned over and asked loudly, "Can you hear me?"

Anko showed him his middle finger.

"He'll be alright," Shachi told the others. As the muffled screaming began, he peered down into the long, gaping tunnel of darkness. "Where does this thing lead?"

"No idea. It was pure luck we came across it." Penguin leaned against the rough wall, sharp stones digging into his back. "Does this place feel familiar to anyone else?"
For the first time, Hai Xing spoke up. "The cavern under the island." The light from above fell against his hat and obscured him in shadows. He pressed his ear against the stone, running his fingers along the cracks. A whisper in the wind, salty foam, tide breaking against shore. "Can you hear that? She's calling us."

The street along the burned Tournesol swarmed with battle. Blood ran down the cobbles like spilt wine.

—I wish to escape this loathsome island," the copper-haired princess said. "Please explain to me the circumstances of your arrival."

Sophie processed this information and found herself gripped by hostile dislike. "Hold up. You're telling me… you want to abandon your country?"

"Well—not the most ideal way to put it—"

"Are you serious? You—you cast your lot in with the traitors already, now you w-want to save yourself? You want to leave b-behind e-everyone now!?!?" She couldn't believe this. It was Vira all over again. "They are your people! S-screw everything else, you have a responsibility to p-protect them, you… coward!"

A growl ripped from the monster's throat.

Sophie stumbled back into the bookcase. The door was eight feet straight in front. Could make it. Windows, three. Could jump.

"Odin," Lisbeth touched his arm, "please return to Father's side before he remembers to be suspicious. I am secure here," she added with a bit more force.

Those terrible scars running over his joints and his neck had signs of experimentation written all over it. There were numbers carved on his dog tags, and as he finally ducked out of the bedchamber she glimpsed: J141789. Now that was familiar… where had she seen… oh.

Oh.

"What is it?"

The latch snapped into place. She glanced sharply at Lisbeth. "What's what?"

"You…" Her fingers found her braid, tugging at it. "Forgive me, it appeared you had a look of d-dawning cognizance…"

Sophie tilted a slightly skewed painting of an orange lily. "It's nothing. You talk weird."

"Is—is my sesquipedalian grandiloquence bothering you? I am trying to limit my circumlocution."

Sophie opened her mouth.

Sophie shut her mouth.

"…Right." She shook her head. "Can we just get right to it and do something about the war? Because, I mean, the fiery pits of destruction outside are a rather pleasing shade of utter chaos—"

"Do something about the'—have you been listening at all?" Lisbeth directed her glare at a tasseled
pillow, not making eye contact.

"Pff, forgive me if my bodily functions might be a little skewed on account of being _kidnapped_ by your mutant pet."

Her mouth sharpened into a thin line. She looked up. "Odin is not my pet. Please do not—do not speak of him as such again."

Princess, Sophie reminded herself, she was a princess. Obey royalty. Obey the sovereign leader. Obey the old ways and tradition. If only the World Government had step-by-step instructions on quelling a civil war in ninety minutes or less. Clearly she'd have to author the book when she got back.

"Jacques Straw is dead," Lisbeth said. "Anatole is rising. No one can stop it now. If by eschewing my country you mean my people, I would challenge that assumption. But if by country you mean this island, then—yes. Caitiff as I am, it is the only way for anyone left to survive. Now, my father still has a boat locked up somewhere, if we use that—"

"I don't help traitors," Sophie responded flatly.

Lisbeth stepped back. Her shoulders crawled up to her ears. How passive, Sophie observed. This sad, passive princess with a skinny neck and white dress. Jacques Straw (and Romarin, assumingly) had been the main force behind the movement. Lisbeth was desperate. Most likely the only thing she could do was make a run for it, easing collateral damage.

Sophie rubbed her forehead with the insides of her wrists. She couldn't give the Heart Pirates away. Not because it was the right thing to do, but because Law would definitely find a way inside the castle and murder her where she stood.

"But," she continued, "if you answer one of my questions first, I'll consider it a fair trade."

Lisbeth swayed on her heels, pulled on her braid, and nodded.

"Tell me where Khanwari is. I want to talk with him."

Lisbeth stared at her. "...What?"

"Here's how it's gonna go down. I'll convince Khanwari to destroy the wall surrounding the island. The rebels' main grief is that they can't leave, right? Once they see they have the option to, they—they'll just leave! War over, peace established. Easy as diagramming dipole-dipole interactions. And he'll have to listen to me because I'm basically an emissary from the World Government."

She didn't care if she sounded high on optimism sugar-dust; if she focused all her atoms into believing in it hard enough, it _would work_. It _had to._

Without responding, Lisbeth walked past the armoire and the vanity, over to the arched windows. Her dark profile took on a faint red glow as she pulled the curtains back. Clouds of smoke rose in plumes over Anatole. Whole rows of buildings were up in flames, the sky roiled like an angry god, setting itself on fire.

Lisbeth pointed. "There."

It was a section of the grounds, surrounded by small trees, barely in Sophie's view. It was only grass and small mounds every few feet... piled up dirt... _ohhh ewww_...
"Those are the prisoners Father buried alive in order to feed the sunflowers. There are more in the fields. Hundreds more."

"That is horrific." Sophie considered. "And poetic."

"It is not about freedom. The rebels do not want liberation. They want revenge. Do not try to be a hero." Her breath misted on the window. "Darnay was a hero. And Darnay died."

"An underwater tunnel," Sophie interrupted, because at this point Lisbeth was just repeating everything she’d been telling herself for the past twenty-four hours. "That's how I entered. It's impossible to swim to the surface unless you have a steel-reinforced body accounting for water pressure and can hold your breath for about half an hour. Or if you're a fishwoman. Are you a fishwoman?"

"Then how did you—"

"I thought so," Sophie chirped. "Now let's try my plan."

"How are you so lionhearted?" Lisbeth asked quietly.

The absurdity of the question made her stop. She couldn't remember a moment in the past week when she hadn't been terrified of dying. Death was constant, Vira had drilled in her, and she knew with certainty she'd never see how old age looked on her. It wasn't the inevitable act that caused her so much dread, but the lack of everything that followed. No more chemistry, no more Hippo…

"The World Government bows to no one, especially not some insignificant, upstart tyrant," Sophie laughed. "He can't even tyrant right. He's p-putting us to shame." She gripped her left wrist, forcing it to stop shaking. "Obviously I'm s-scared. I want to escape just as b-badly as you."

But for what other reason did the war leave her alive? Why else had she been allowed to live but to achieve the victory they never could? Law rescuing her, meeting Sid and Nellie, Doflamingo burning Crawfish Island—it seemed as if an invisible hand was setting up the game and guiding the cards as they landed. In the back of her mind, if she listened closely, Sophie could hear a grand clockwork scheme ticking down.

Cat's Eye had to be her reason.

It had to.

"But if I do, there will never be another chance. So if I'm going to do something about it, I'm going to do it right." This was for G-13, for the Vice Admiral, and for the ghosts she was finally putting to rest. No more nightmares after this, she promised herself. "I'll send Khanwari off to a World Government tribunal and have him tried for crimes against humanity."

Lisbeth was quiet.

"I approve," the princess said finally.

Sophie tapped her chin. "Aren't you suppose to love him? The whole parent thing?"

"Until this afternoon, I had allied myself with a group of revolutionaries determined to overthrow the monarchy which will likely result in his violent death."

"Fair point. Family dinners must be awkward."
Lisbeth gave a very unprincesslike groan. "You have absolutely no idea."

A chuckle escaped Sophie's mouth. She touched her lips, blinking.

"Tentative agreement," she said with a nod. "Let us try it your way. We shall wait until the sky is vespertine to strike."

"What?"

"...Nighttime."

"Okay, one last thing." Sophie took out a weighty blue tome and flipped it around, enjoying the musty old book smell. It would be an effective bludgeoning tool. "You wouldn't happen to know about those girls outside the Tournesol, would you?"

"I inquire upon the import of the question?" At Sophie's blank look, she scratched her cheek. "I was in the castle all day except to warn Romarin. What happened?"

Sophie patted her on the braid. "Nah, I didn't think it'd be you anyway... well, it's time to formally introduce myself. Strangways Sophie, genius chemist, combat medic of the Twenty-First Regiment's Third Battalion Alpha Company, lover of squishy things." She stuffed the book under her arm and held out her hand. "Let's cooperate for a bit, Princess-san."

Her palm was surprisingly rough and callused. "I trust you, Strangways Sophie."

Sophie grinned. Things were finally going right for once. Make-it-up-as-I-go-along wasn't that bad of a tactic. Now she had the princess on her side, along with her monster in an iron mask...

"And those men who came with you? They are your crew, correct?"

Sophie heard her brain screech to an abrupt stop.

—

This was getting to be something of a problem, Bepo decided.

He crossed his paws and thought back to earlier that day. Everything was going smoothly until the mortar hit and he was separated from the others. Then the alley he was wandering in got lit up by a firebomb and burned his cloak off, and he followed his nose right into a riot beside a bakery. Soldier and rebel alike screamed and started emptying their ammunition at him. It wasn't a very nice thing to do, the bread smelled delicious.

Bepo rubbed his cheek, gazing at the pile of bodies strewn across the alley. Well, Captain would find this more amusing than anything else.

"P-please... don't... hurt m-me..."

His gaze skipped over to a soldier curled up against the side of the bakery.

"Do you know which way the Tournesol is?" Bepo wiped the blood off on his suit, instantly morose again. Boiler suits so rarely came in size XXL these days...

"I... I d-don't..." She swallowed. "Maybe a view... f-f-from higher up... would be m-more practical?"

He'd seen something tallish rising above the city a few blocks back! He'd have a bird's-eye view of
all of Anatole. "Great idea, thanks!"

"They won't attack the castle, I think… I'm pretty sure? Seventy-five percent?" Sophie nervously rearranged another shelf of books. "…Fifty-five? Which is still a slight majority, if you're counting."

Lisbeth wasn't. She paced around the room, muttering, "I am trying to have a positive outlook. I am trying to see ways we can achieve this. I am trying to see the glass half-full."

"Good. That's good!"

"But there is no water!" Lisbeth wailed. "There is not even a cup!"

She rested her head against the wall and just stood there.

Sophie pulled out one of the mushrooms popping up on her head. "Not so good." She tossed the mushroom over her shoulder and said bracingly, "Look, I've been around them for like, barely two days. I don't know them at all. We're basically strangers. I… don't know why I'm telling you this. But their captain is crazy smart and I know for a fact they'll only raid at the most opportune time."

A loud knock sent surprise jolting up their shoulders.

"Princess! Stay in your room and don't open the door! We've been alerted of a mysterious group of men invading the castle!"

Lisbeth stared at Sophie.

She cracked a weak smile. "Um. Yeah." What the pineapples was Law doing, getting seen? "There's no helping it, we gotta move."

"Time for the deraignment," Lisbeth said quietly. "Be brave. Lionhearted."

She hoisted a yew bow Sophie thought was only for decoration off the wall, and disappeared around the side of the bed. "Two guards are stationed in the hallway." She popped up, pulling on a glove covering her first three fingers and a leather chest-guard over her dress. "We should be able to render them unconscious."

She paused and glanced at Sophie.

"I'm strong," Sophie said defensively. "Are you strong?"

"Decent, I suppose." Lisbeth slung a quiver of arrows on her back. Feeling rather unprotected, Sophie raised her satchel over her chest.

"There are a dozen secret underground tunnels I know of in the castle; the nearest is in the Cat's Eye Tower. We shall escape down there, take a shortcut, and arrive at the throne room. Do not fret, it is a straight path. No branching tunnels." Lisbeth nocked an arrow. "The rebels will be targeting the castle. Their goal is to free the remaining prisoners and most likely scorch this place down."

"Got it. So that leaves…" Sophie took a step back and hefted the thick blue book. "Move aside, Princess-san."

"…Pardon?"

The door crashed open into the guards, sending one smack-dab into the floor. Sophie skidded off the
door and rebounded off the wall, barely brushing the other guard with her kick. *Too short!*

She glimpsed a raised musket and held up the book right as a gunshot blasted. Blown back by the force, Sophie stumbled against a vase of orange lilies. Glass shattered by her feet.

Arrows *twanged* through the air, catching the guard by the sleeve. She toppled backwards, swearing. Sophie glanced down; the tip of the bullet poked through the back cover. A shiver ran down her spine. *Too close.*

"I could have unlocked it!" Lisbeth cried, her hair wisps of fire as she spun around.

"But this has more of an *effect!*" Book in hand, Sophie walloped the handy-with-a-musket guard over the head.

"Look out!"

Before Sophie had time to move, Lisbeth was already there, hollering, "Sorry! Sorry!" as she cracked her bow over the other guard's face. He crumpled to the floor.

Grinning, Sophie examined their handiwork. "Fist bump me, yo."

"You are quite accomplished yourself."

Voices echoed down the hallway—and then came the thud of footsteps.

Sophie backed away. "Time to make with the feet and *run!*"

They hightailed it down the hallway. It was quite fancy, with high ceilings and fleur-de-lis wallpaper and gold trims. Sophie ogled at the marble busts as she passed by. Lisbeth panted, "Run—faster!"

"You're the one lagging behind," Sophie pointed out, posture perfect with straight knees and trained breathing.

Out the window, thunderclouds crackled with lightning. A storm was coming. A fierce one. Her hope to get this all settled before the storm failed so miserably it tore itself up to pieces and turned into a cantaloupe and jumped off a cliff.

"They are right behind us!" Lisbeth shrieked.

She glanced over her shoulder and swore.

"You wish to do *what* with a mango!?"

"Princess-san, grab onto me, hold your breath, and close your eyes!"

"Par—par—pardon!?"

Sophie fished around her satchel and found a small pellet. Sucking in a lungful of air, she hurled it behind them.

Black smoke burst through the hallway, knocking one soldier off his feet. Eyes squeezed tight, Sophie could only tell Lisbeth was there by the tug on her shirt. Arms raised, they exploded through the smoke. Lisbeth tugged her sharply to the right and they swerved around a corner.

Sophie chanced another glance back and saw indistinct shadows moving through the haze. "They're still on our tail! Have any trick arrows or something? A timer arrow? An arrow that becomes a
"boxy glove and punches you in the face?"

"None of those, no," Lisbeth wheezed. Her eyes widened. "Epiphany! Take me hostage!"

Sophie nearly tripped. "Wha—um, no, that is rule number one of stuff I do not do!"

"Sophie—"

"I'm not a lawbreaker! I don't even bootleg music!"

"Do not be so fatuous!"

Sophie gasped. "Did you just call me fat!?"

"I am the princess and I order you to take me hostage!"

Well, freaking fruitcakes.

Guards lined the hallway in front of them. Cold sweat bloomed over her upper lip. Apologizing profusely to her platoon, she grabbed Lisbeth around the waist and tossed her over her shoulder.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot, don't shoot!" Sophie screamed as she careened past dumbfounded soldiers.

Lisbeth nocked another arrow. With a few fast twangs, she subdued the ones who starting giving chase—by pinning them to the wall with their clothes.

"I DID NOT AGREE TO THIS!" Sophie stepped on a soldier's face and leaped down a short flight of stairs. Gorosei forbid the Vice Admiral ever finding out.

The princess—dear mother of pineapples—the princess was actually laughing. "Make a left here! The tower is just beyond!"

Sophie smelled them before she saw the distant figures running closer. Lisbeth, facing the other way, suddenly began kicking and trying to look over her shoulder and shoving hair into Sophie's mouth. It became steadily clearer they were soldiers, who were giving chase to…

"RUN," Anko roared, "RUN—LIKE—A—MOTHERFU—"

"You have to be joking!"

"Second door on the left!" Lisbeth pointed to a small passage branching off the main hallway.

Anko and Hai Xing must've heard, because they diverted course. Sophie did a wild side-step grapevine as she scrambled after them, chucking another bomb over her shoulder. Opaque strands of slime blasted over the ceiling and trapped the soldiers closest to them in a web of sticky goo. The rest stopped and tentatively poked the slime with their muskets.

"How did you accomplish that?" Lisbeth shouted breathlessly.

"Water, glue, and sodium tetraborate. You know, kindergarten stuff." Anko and Hai Xing pushed the heavy oaken door open and Sophie barreled inside. As the pirates moved a wardrobe in front of the door, she sat Lisbeth on the carpet and pointed. "The past five minutes," she said darkly, "never happened."

While the princess' bedroom was large and airy and warm, this place was cold, sparse, and rather small. All the curtains were drawn and the fireplace was covered in ash.
"Father's room," Lisbeth sighed. "We will be safe here for a short while."

Sophie had expected something grandiose and possibly decorated with the heads of his victims, possibly with drawn-on ink mustaches. This was… sort of dismal. She rested against the wardrobe. Only one bomb left. Two had barely been enough to shake off the soldiers.

"By the way, you smell like a public bathroom," Sophie informed Anko.

He patted his side with a grimace. "Sophie-chan, it's been a very long day and we're both bleeding to death, give us a little credit."

"How'd you even get here?"

"There're a whole buncha tunnels running underground, like a maze. We took a wrong turn and got separated from the rest."

"You… should not have entered the tunnels without a guide," Lisbeth tentatively spoke up. "People have been lost there and never found."

Anko nudged Sophie. "Who's she again?"

"The princess."

Her bangs swayed in the small breeze. Sophie realized with a startling jolt of disbelief—what the mangoes, didn't even see it—the tip of Anko's spiked knuckles grazed Lisbeth' nose. The princess stared down at it, cross-eyed.

"Wait—" Sophie gasped, and took a faltering step forward.

"There's this little code I follow," Anko said offhandedly, "you're a threat to my captain, you die."

Sophie's hand snapped over his wrist. "Cut it o-out! She's n-not your enemy; I explained e-everything already."

His gaze snapped to her and something dark flashed in his eyes. For a frightening instant she thought he was going to hit her, but the moment passed and he lowered his arm.

"The gold is nothing to me," Lisbeth said. "Take it all. I have more pressing concerns."

Anko blinked. "So I don't get to kill anyone?" Silence. "Fine."

Sophie was startled to see a cloak wrapped around Hai Xing's forearm. "You also got shot?"

"Adrenaline," he sighed. "Don't really feel it."

She didn't know how far to extend her politeness. Their last conversation involved him stoically accusing her of betraying the Heart Pirates and then her disappearing into thin air… so she felt a little bit extremely self-conscious. "Should I—d-do you want me to do something a-about—"

"Nah."

"Okay." A small flare of the lighter casted shadows over the four of them. Beside her, Lisbeth silently counted her remaining arrows. "Um. Did the others—are they alright?"

"Dunno."

"Anyone?"

"Before he invaded," Lisbeth said suddenly, quiet as raindrops slithering down the windowpanes, "the women of Cat's Eye... when they had the same jobs as men, they were paid less. In the castle they could hold no position higher than lady-in-waiting. There were no females who served as a court official, even while they comprised fifty-one percent of the kingdom."

Sophie frowned. "A kingdom actively discriminating against women? I thought they'd all just... disappeared through time."

Lisbeth scrutinized the iron tip of an arrow. "If there is one positive thing my pernicious father has done, it is that he abolished the outdated way of thinking. He named me his heir, when before the throne was passed from father-to-son. Or distant uncle, as was sometimes the case. Agnatic primogeniture."

It left a foul taste in her mouth. Not that it excused Khanwari... but maybe the old rulers weren't all great, either.

"I do not plan to be his successor. I would rather see a democratic republic come to fruition. And one day, hopefully a seat at the Reverie..." She patted her cheeks, blushing. "Ah, but I am getting too ahead of myself."

After everything Cat's Eye had gone through, a democracy would be the best choice. True, there weren't many successful examples to draw upon (Water 7 and Machinastein were the only ones coming to mind)... but the Marines would be setting up a base here to provide support. She'd bring it up with the Vice Admiral when she got back.

"Hey," Sophie was overcome by a strange pull of curiosity, "you ever heard of The Tale of Apolleon?"

A crack of cold grey light ran over Sophie's face, but Lisbeth was shrouded in the gloom. "My mother wrote that."

"Wait—no, seriously? I liked the fancy castles and stuff, but the plot was pretty formulaic—no offense. I thought it might've been connected to Cat's Eye somehow."

"So legend has it, yes. I researched the history books. Do you wish to know the real ending?"

Without waiting for an answer, Lisbeth continued, "It is true the royal lineage can trace itself back to Crawfish and Cats Eye, but according to the records... the two people who could most closely be identified as the swamp princess and Alabastian mechanic never reunited." Her smile was faintly bitter. "The king killed them both, then took the crown for himself."

"Ah," Sophie said. "Um."

"Sometimes I think Father invaded this island because she was so fascinated by it," Lisbeth murmured.

Sophie patted her on the braid. "Your family's pretty weird."

Hai Xing leaned over. "My mother died, too."

"Shut up, you little freak," Anko said.
It wasn't all hard, climbing up the guard tower. The wind was a bit of a pain, but the stones were loose enough to be used as footholds. Bepo leaped through the window and landed noiselessly. A guard stood with his back facing the polar bear, peering out into the dusk.

"Hello."

He turned and screamed. "B-b-b-bear! Talking bear!"

The musket nearly slipped from his fingers. He caught it, fumbled, caught it again, fumbled some more, and finally managed to raise it shoulder-height. It was facing the wrong way.

Bepo politely threw him off the tower.

Bursts of white flared in the depths of iron-grey clouds. His fur rippled and he could taste the static in the air. He scanned the long stretch of ocean—the yellow speck was the submarine… but just behind it…

Jagged forks of lightning cracked through the black horizon, illuminating a fleet of battleships.

—

"You lost Bepo!?!"

Anko almost cringed. It must have been the blood loss. "He's a grown bear; he can take care of himself."

The only words she could find that properly expressed her rage came out as a mess of unintelligible blubbing, "hablaburaugh—stop it, Sophie!" she wheezed at herself. "He's a pirate! Why do I feel so wildly conflicted about this!?"

"So are you, like, into bestiality or something?"

Sophie casually elbowed him in the throat.

Lisbeth shushed them. Sophie ducked low and pressed herself against the wardrobe. "Do you hear that?" the princess whispered, her right eye glowing tyrian in the dusk.

Sophie cocked her head, ears straining. Nothing but the rain and the muffled rumble of thunder.

"Feel like 'm gonna die," Hai Xing mumbled.

"You always feel like that," Anko said sourly, rubbing his throat. His expression cleared. "Shit!"

Sophie glanced at Hai Xing and, for the first time, noticed how glassy and unfocused his eyes were, the sweat dripping down his brow, the shallow breathing.

"Uh—um—no one panic, but he's going into shock and losing too much blood." The cloak was so red it was unlikely anyone could've known it had a previous color. "Anko-san, rest him on the floor over here and rip his sleeve off. Princess-san, does Khanwari carry any medicine in—"

"You're not touching him," Anko growled.

She wondered if she should spoiler!alert him that his crewmate was dying.

"I heard it again," Lisbeth breathed, trembling.
"I'm bringing him to Cap, he's fixing him up," he muttered, slinging the other pirate's arm around his shoulder.

"He'll die before you reach Law-san! Do you even know where he is!?" Argh, she should just let them both die! But she owed these pirates a debt, that was it, and if Law found out she could've saved Hai Xing but didn't, he'd take her head again and put it through a paper shredder (he wouldn't, though, and maybe that was part of the problem). "Look, I'm right here and I can help him!"

Anko glared, and it stunned her frozen. Not one of these pirates, not even Law, had ever looked at her like that.

"Sophie-chan, I trust you about as much as you trust me." He shoved past her. "Outta my way or I'm gonna revisit my policy on not hitting women."

Then, several things happened at once—she heard a gut-wrenchingly familiar wheeeeee from the sky, the floor lurched horribly and slammed her into the wardrobe. Anko tripped into the fireplace. The windows exploded, a shudder rippling through the walls.

"Cannon fire!" Lisbeth bellowed over the howl of the storm. "Rebels are attacking the castle!"

Rain pelted the glass-littered carpet. Sophie made a crazy grab for Hai Xing as he rolled across the floor (while having a deep philosophical discussion with himself about the possibility of an afterlife) and kept two fingers on his pulse. Still discernible. But even more impressive…

"How are you s-still spe-speaking?"

"High pain tolerance. Used to life-threatening danger. Part of the job description." He sounded fantastically bored.

She elevated the wounded arm above his heart, checked his back—no exit wound. The bullet was still lodged in his body. Sophie gripped the sleeve—whatever, she'd just do it herself—and tore the fabric away with a great yank. The smell of metal flowered in the air, thick and heavy. Lisbeth visibly paled and backed away into the wall.

"Anko-san, r-rip those drapes in long strips. Khanwari won't need them anymore."

He clawed ash from his face. "I don't—blegh, blehhfh—take orders from you!"

Sophie opened her mouth furiously.

"Stop being so puerile!" Lisbeth ordered, startling them both. "Now focus all your auditory senses on Sophie or you shall enlighten your captain why you let that man die!"

Ten seconds later, Sophie pressed the strips over the gaping bullet hole.

"I believe the emergency medicine is in here." Lisbeth tried to jimmy open a drawer with a candleholder. "Ugh! Pirate, I request your help to demolish this uncooperative object."

He was looking at her in a vaguely stunned hit-over-the-head-with-a-chair sort of way. "Breaking things? Down with that."

Sophie wiped away beads of sweat, dragging red lines across her skin. Her thoughts came in a chaotic spinning rush: keep the pressure on, elevate the wound, monitor the heart... what else, what else, what else? What was she forgetting? Should she also put pressure on the brachial artery? It'd cut off oxygen flow, only for amputations—but. The human body carried on average five point six liters
of blood. Able to lose up to forty percent and survive. *This is a lot of blood,* the voice in the back of her head whispered.

The walls shook as another mortar hit the castle. This was the first time she was treating someone without a medical pack, IV drips, catheters, the simplest first-aid treatment—and, and if she needed a tourniquet—but she had her lighter, she could maybe try to burn the wound and close it that way if it got really bad—or the shards of glass could be used to cut—

Hai Xing watched her. His hat had fallen off. He had black hair, she realized, and his nose was crooked.

She forced herself steady, *controlled.* "I won't double-cross you. I'm not letting you die."

"I know," he rasped. "M sorry about that."

Her hands paused. She stared at him, incredulous.

Hai Xing squinted. "Who're you again?"

Annd yup. "Princess-san, where's the medicine!? I need anesthesia, bandages…" Lisbeth and Anko stood over the remains of the shattered drawer. "What the pineapple are you doing!?"

Lisbeth slowly turned.

The item she held was shockingly familiar… Sophie couldn't even begin to count all the times she'd seen it in the Vice Admiral's study…

"Why," Lisbeth began slowly, "is Father in possession of a World Government Den Den Mushi?"

Sophie's jaw dropped. "Oh my god—th-this great! Of all the places for the heavens to have finally answered! Anko-san, take over for me, put pressure on the wound here—I can wire the Den Den Mushi to G-13! We can call for help right now! They'll get here in about half a day if the winds are fair. It won't be too late, how much destruction can the rebels cause in twelve hours? …Don't answer that."

"Oi!" Anko pointed to himself and Hai Xing. "Hi. Pirates. Y'know?"

"Oh, you guys'll be far away from Cat's Eye when they arrive. I can't express the magnitude of how much no one cares about what you're doing."

"Should I get angry?" he asked Hai Xing, who responded by briefly falling unconscious.

The Vice Admiral's secretary picked up at the first ring. She could recognize the stiff, nasally voice anywhere. "Vice Admiral Lettidore's office."

Sophie motioned Lisbeth to speak into the receiver. "Y-yes, hello… am I doing it right? I am the princess of Cat's Eye Island, I would like to request aid from G… 13? G-13, yes. Civil war has broken out, please send… help?"

Sophie cringed. Weak attitude. Timidity would get her nowhere.

"We don't currently possess the warships or the manpower," the Den Den Mushi replied in a monotone. "We're deeply sorry."

That was a lie.
She mentally recounted all the warships sunk in Vira… even adding five… ten more, it still wouldn't be half the number G-13 possessed. This didn't add up. The World Government didn't take orders from kings, much less kings of tiny islands who weren't even in the Reverie.

Sophie grabbed the receiver. "'Sup, can you put Charaka Hippo on the line?"

"I can transfer you to his assista—"

"This is Strangways Sophie," she said brusquely. "Service number 396-26-483. I'm with the princess right now, we're both under siege from rebels, and we're probably going to die very shortly. Check my voice for identification, do all the things, whatever, just get me those warships!"

The Den Den Mushi's eyes bugged. "YOU!? What the hell are you doing there!? We thought you were dead!"

Erk, they were going to interrogate her relentlessly when she got back. "I'll explain everything later. Look, I'm playing my ace now. I outrank you, I outrank practically everyone you work for, now get me help or it's your incompetent apricot on the grill!"

There was silence at the other end. Finally: "We can't help."

"If you let this Khanwari idiot continue to make a mess of things, there won't be an island left. For Sengoku's sake, put Sensei or the Vice Admiral on the line!" When the silence came again, she lowered her voice. "Seriously, if you're screwing around with me? I will literally shove my foot so far up your butt crack it will take fifty Hippo-senseis to get it back out."

"Good to hear your voice again, Miss Strangways."

She went rigid. Coldness pooled in her gut.

"L-long t-time no s-speak…" She swallowed and her trembling hands clutched the cord. "Vice A-Admiral." Eyebrows drawn together in concern, Lisbeth touched her arm. Sophie flinched back and avoided looking at her. It was hard enough focusing on the blurry carpet. "Did—did your stupid secretary fill you in?"

"Out of respect for all the work you've put into G-13, I'll tell you this. Starting from the invasion of Cat's Eye twenty years, to the situation now… it goes beyond you, beyond me. All the way to the top."

The room seemed to shrink, closing in all around her.

Her common sense, which suddenly reappeared after its brief departure over the last three days, pointed to the only logical answer. "How—how can that—this whole thing… is a c-complete farce?"

"I can't sail to Cat's Eye unless given express permission from the king. If you really are on that island, you're as good as dead."

"You're… abandoning me? After everything I've been through?" she whispered, turning away from the others because she couldn't hide the panic and shock flashing over her face.

The Vice Admiral's voice was emotionless. "Any last words for your father? I'll relay them to Hippo."

"You can't do this to me." Her eyes, god, her eyes were burning. "I—" I don't want to fight
anymore. "I'm tr-trying to help these p-people, isn't that what we're supposed to do?" I want to go home. "I deserve—I gave you—I g-gave m-my whole l-life to G-13." She cleared her throat, blinking rapidly. Silence on the other end. "…H-hello?"

He'd hung up.

Anko and Lisbeth watched her. Turned away from them, Sophie squeezed her eyes shut. The only way to save herself was leaving with the pirates, even if that meant deserting Cat's Eye and Lisbeth. If she was a World Government scientist, who did she owe loyalty to? G-13 or the princess? She could live aided by criminals or die fighting a World Noble. Which one to choose, which was the right answer—True or False? A or B? Loyal or traitor?

Muscles aching, she got to her feet.

"Khanwari's a World Noble," she told Lisbeth.

Lightning flashed, illuminating the alarm in her eyes. Purple, Sophie registered dimly, her eyes are purple. "Pa…pardon?"

"Why else c-could G-13 not send warships? Because he ordered th-them not to. The only non-Marines with more authority than a Vice Admiral are World Nobles. That explains the treasure, doesn't it? The mountains of gold he carried from Mariejois—he's rich, Princess-san, he's so figging rich he can fund armies and build giant walls around islands!" Her fingers shook with spasms. "And that's w-why the World Government never i-intervened… that's why they never helped Darnay."

"That does not mean anything!" Lisbeth cried.

"Who was he before he usurped the throne? Do you know anything about his past?" Sophie demanded.

She sat on the bed, staring blankly. "Not… not enough, no."

"Shit," Anko breathed. "Holy shit, we have to leave, like, now—"

"Not until I talk to the king!" she snapped, and the anger felt good. It filled up the gut-wrenching emptiness with flames, with something. "I can save everyone and end this war! I can do it!"

"Are you for real!?" Anko flung back, storming up to her. "So you're just gonna drop my crew in serious danger? 'Case that shit's getting pretty damn old!"

"Getting shot like a dog was entirely your fault!"

He held up his fist. "You're making me really regret—"

"Regret!? Regret what?"

"Do not fight!" Lisbeth forced herself between them, and said to Anko in a tightly-restrained tone, "Sophie saved your crewmate's life. Probably all of ours, actually."

"I'm trying to help the princess!" Sophie shouted over Lisbeth's head.

"That's fan-fucking-tastic!" he snarled, practically shoving his face into hers. "You think you're strong enough to fight against these guys by yourselves!? Sophie-chan, get that stick out of your ass and come back to reality!"

An inhale of breath. "Sh-shut up."
"You're going to die and take this whole island with you!"

"Shut—"

"I'm pretty stupid, but even I know you have no fucking idea what you're doing!"

She whipped around and screamed, "I DON'T CARE! I have to this! I have to! I'll stop the stupid king even if I have to use my own guts to strangle him!" Her hair crackled around her face, as if electric. "I don't care if this is suicidal. I don't care."

"It… it seems we are all in agreement, then?" Lisbeth piped up, twisting her braid fretfully.

Anko curled his lip up, but nodded.

Glaring at the pirates, Sophie hefted an empty candleholder. "One more item to take care of."

She reared her arms back, waved it around like a baseball bat, and slammed it into the Den Den Mushi.

Lisbeth shrieked.

Shell pieces and squishy snail bits flew all over them as Sophie ruthlessly bludgeoned the Den Den Mushi to death. Flecks splattered over her blood-stained cheeks. Six hits even and she tossed the slimy candleholder to the side. She began pacing, ignoring the puddle of mush and tangled wires on the floor.

"Fuck!" Anko scrubbed his face. "What the fuck is wrong with you!?"

"I don't know how many more of them the king has; he could still be able to call the World Government," Sophie said, her voice hard practicality. "The Vice Admirals will blow this whole island apart. We have to get to him before he calls them."

"Why didn't you just remove the receiver!?" Lisbeth wailed, practically sobbing.

"I made you a promise," Sophie told Lisbeth, "but I never said anything about World Nobles. G-13 will give you asylum. They can take care of you."

She swallowed. For a second, the ever-present hesitance flickered away. "I would rather die on my country's soil." She drew an arrow from her quiver. "And I can take care of myself."

Anko hefted Hai Xing over his shoulder. "My captain is my first priority. I'll leave you both behind if I have to. Just so you know. Let's move."

"The treasure is hidden on the highest floor, beside Cat's Eye Tower," Lisbeth informed. "It is a shortcut to the throne room. A small detour, but still on the way. I will lead you there, but I cannot guarantee we will not encounter guards along the way."

Sophie blew hair out of her face. "Well… how badly can we fail?"

—

"You had to inquire," Lisbeth sighed.

Sophie considered the calamitous situation in front of them. "Applying logic, did we even have a statistically significant percentage of winging this successfully?"
"Sophie-chan!" Shachi waved vigorously, perched on top of a pile of unconscious soldiers. "Who's the pretty lady beside you?"

"Someone shoot me now," Sophie groaned.

"Or use a candleholder," Hai Xing coughed.

She glared. "Unnecessary. Totally unnecessary."

The three pirates had taken out quite a few of the soldiers in the vast, barren hall carved out of marble. Penguin stood on the steps leading up to the throne, and Law—all of Sophie's ingrained World Government instincts jeering—reclined on the throne as if he owned the freaking thing. He really deserved a swift gouge to the eyeballs.

And then there was the matter of Khanwari himself, who was looking at Law like he very much agreed with Sophie's sentiments. He was a lot… shorter than how she imagined him. He was the same height as Lisbeth, who was only a few inches taller than Sophie, and his glittery crown and stylish plum cape was sort of throwing off the whole Big Bad vibe.

Her group was backed by soldiers with their muskets raised, having been caught right as they stepped outside Khanwari's bedroom (which X'd out plans A through H, fantastacious). Lisbeth seemed to have already fainted standing upright. Anko yawned, half-carrying a limp Hai Xing under his arm.

"How are you not panicking?" Sophie hissed.

Anko picked his nose and asked Hai Xing, "Should we be panicking?"

"Don't talk to me, I'm dead."

"Stop saying that!" Sophie cried, pulling out tufts of her hair.

Anko shrugged. "We found Captain and it's fine if we kill all the soldiers here and go back for the gold."

"No," Lisbeth hissed, "that is most certainly not acceptable! …Is he the captain?" she whispered to Sophie, staring doe-eyed at Law, who gave a lazy, two-fingered salute.

"Unfortunately." Sophie tugged her closer and glared, emitting hostile brainwaves that said clearly don't try anything weird to this girl, I will bite you.

"I see now why you are traveling with him."

She turned an unnatural shade of chartreuse. "I could go on a two hour and forty-four minute rant bulletpointing the hows, whens, and whys of the repulsiveness, but—"

"I will not be threatened by someone as lowly as a mere pirate!" Khanwari blustered.

"This lowly pirate found a way into your island and onto your throne." Law grinned, clearly having the time of his life. "What do you say to that? Cat may look at a king? Or would this make me king now?"

…There were other vile things to shudder about. Wringing her hands, Sophie tried, "W-we're just looking for the b-bathroom." The only other two segues that came to mind were Does Khanwari know his beard is lopsided and Can anyone else see that Khanwari's beard is lopsided!?
Penguin tilted his head. "Has that ever worked for you?"

"This nonsense ends now!" Khanwari thundered, and stepped threateningly toward Sophie, and then at Law. He paused, looking conflicted.

Sophie waved her arm around, snapping her fingers for attention. "Important public service announcement, listen up! Khanwari's a World Noble!" Shachi dropped the musket he was playing with. Penguin froze. "I repeat, the king of Cat's Eye is a World Noble!"

Law's grin vanished. He turned a cold gaze on Khanwari.

"I'm from the World Government." The halo of glorious justice shined behind Sophie. "And I'm firing your sorry butt. Effective immediately. Go clean out your castle."

"Odin, kill the intruders," Khanwari ordered with a dismissive flick of his head. "And get him off my throne."

Pineapple. Sophie actually thought that would've worked.

A sphere of blue barely coated Law's hand when the ground exploded, throwing slabs of stone into the air. Out of the dust hurtled a now dented throne, burying itself three feet deep into the wall.

"Well." Khanwari frowned. "That's one way of doing it."

Anko snatched Sophie and Lisbeth out of the way at the last second—the rubble hit the soldiers behind them—but as he was also carrying Hai Xing, they ended up sprawled across the floor. Sophie helped a groaning Lisbeth up. To the side, Anko shoved the nearly comatose pirate into Shachi's arms, "You take him, I'm fucking tired of looking after his gloomy ass."

Law appeared next to Sophie, snarling, "What exactly was that supposed to accomplish?"

She blinked. "Should I have added a 'please'?"

"What the hell is that?" Penguin said sharply.

Odin's shadow fell over them. There was something awfully disturbing about that blank iron mask.

"I don't know, but," Law rubbed the blood off his lip, "calling dibs now."

Behind him, Penguin raised his fists and Anko snorted and tightened his spiked knuckles. "You always take the good ones, Cap," Shachi called as he tried to balance Hai Xing against his arm.

"WAIT!"

Lisbeth stepped in front of Law, hands held up in a pacifying gesture. "They are not our enemy, Odin. Do not take up arms against them. I—I will not have you… or anyone here hurt."

Anko sidled by Sophie. "Are they… together?"

"You know, it's a bit unclear…"

She spun to Khanwari. "They are pirates, not rebels! Give them the treasure and they will leave in peace."

"You don't know anything about them. Come here—"
"For once in your life, listen to me! I do not care if you are a World Noble! Y-you—your kingdom doesn't w-want you." Her gaze flashed to Sophie, and she took a breath, and her shoulders straightened. "Step down from the throne. From this day forward, the monarchy will end."

Khanwari's brow furrowed in disbelief. "Do you really think you can stop me with pretty words?"

Her lower lip trembled. "With Odin's help." She nocked an arrow and raised her bow. "With my people's help, I—"

"My crew is on a tight schedule," Law broke in, motioning for the dramatics to get a move on. "I propose we get to the fighting and blood-spilling."

"And I propose you stay quiet, sir," Lisbeth snapped.

"You have a badass princess," Sophie said to the nearest soldier holding a musket to her face.

"Thanks…?"

A slash of wind and the soldier was missing his head. Like a domino stack falling across the throne room, dismembered body pieces plopped to the floor. "Oh my god, get down!" Sophie tackled a panic-stricken Lisbeth to the side. "It's raining men! It's raining men!"

Law kicked a head right to Khanwari's feet. "About that staying quiet thing…" He directed an insincere smile at Lisbeth. "Not really my style."

"Finally!" With a wild grin, Anko slammed his spiked knuckles into the nearest intact soldier.

"Come on, I actually managed to keep my suit clean for once!" Penguin complained as he kicked two flailing, headless soldiers into the wall.

The floor rumbled as an explosion—a very, very close explosion, she could smell the gunpowder—hit the side of the castle. Sophie braced herself and Lisbeth against a pillar. The ceiling cracked and rained dust. Her gaze found Odin as he leaned back—the posture, she'd seen it so many times before—and kicked in one wide, fast, zigzagging arc.

*Rankyaku!*

"DUCK!" Sophie yelled.

Bursting off the ground, Law deflected the slice—just barely. The wall behind him split in half. *Soru*—that was how Odin appeared so suddenly back in the streets! The force of the kick threw Shachi and Hai Xing into the air, and they slammed into a pillar behind her. They slid down, motionless.

The high, stained-glass windows shattered, showering glass over Khanwari. He pulled out a solid silver gun and fired a shot into the air. "It's over!" he bellowed over the thunderstorm. "Take her to the Cat's Eye!"

Soldiers melted through the haze, and Sophie shoved Lisbeth behind her. "Don't you t-touch her! She's your princess!"

Lisbeth strung an arrow, whispering 'Sorry, sorry, sorry', and the guard closest to Sophie fell to the ground, clutching his arm. A knee came out of nowhere and slammed into Sophie's gut. Crying out, she fell to the floor and the remaining soldiers pinned Lisbeth's arms to her sides.

"No—get off, I will not—Sophie! Sophie, help me!"
She panted harshly, her face screwed up in pain. Rage pounded in her temple. Sophie yanked the arrow out of the soldier and, ignoring the fresh screams, staggered to her feet. Was she the only one who still understood the meaning of loyalty? Her fingers tightened around the shaft. She never asked to be a part of this screwed-up conspiracy—

Above her, Odin and Law were having their insane, superhuman battle of which she was staying clear of. Running after Lisbeth, she cupped her mouth and yelled, "Law-san! He's an experiment! The World Government experimented on him! Giantification, probably! And he's a Rokushiki user!"

Law barely avoided another kick that blasted through two pillars. A new glint in his eye, he scrutinized Odin. "That's quite interesting."

That should keep them occupied for at least the next ten minutes. The pirates were irrelevant now.

"Sophie, how did you know—HRMPHH!" Covering her mouth, the soldiers dragged Lisbeth through a side corridor.

Her teeth gnashed together. She only noticed Anko hurtling through the air when a vein of lightning cracked from the broken window behind him. Khanwari was right in his line of fire.

"Wait! Don't hurt him!"

His fist slammed down on a loose crevice in the wall—he barely caught himself. "Why the hell not!?"

"Because he's a World freakin' Noble, you stupid pistachio!"

Right in front of her, another soldier raised his musket at Anko. Nope, that wasn't good either.

She grabbed the arrow with two hands and thrust it into his throat.

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut as blood sprayed along her face. She didn't falter. It was their duty to die serving. Arms slick and dripping, she wrenched away the musket, braced herself against the kick, and fired off two shots into the corridor.

One went down with a shout. A copper braid, shining like a red thread, vanished through another door; this place was a labyrinth, all masks and winding staircases and dark bedrooms. The others raised their guns—twenty feet straight down the hallway—and she threw her flash bomb into the air.

A thousand white stars burst behind her eyelids. The second she heard the screams—go, go, go—

The earlier explosion had torn the hinges off the door and caved in the entire ceiling. Sodden wreckage separated Sophie and the other half of the chamber, where Lisbeth must've disappeared into. Rain pelted over her skin, over everything; broken, gold-embellished furniture, fancy curtains lying in a puddle on the floor.

Khanwari stood before her, hunched over like an overgrown bat. His beard matted to his tunic, cape torn to shreds, the lightning emphasizing his sunken cheekbones and heavy brow—he seemed to have aged over ten years in the span of ten minutes.

He raised his gun at her and fired.

The gun clicked. Sophie didn't blink.
"Wet ammunition," he sighed. "Put them down, we'll get nowhere like this."

The three soldiers surrounding him complied. The one with the scar on his nose did so more slowly.

Sophie took a step closer. Her hair clung to her cheeks and the nape of her neck. "Did you order Donquixote D-D-Doflamingo to b-burn Crawfish Island?"

"I did." Zero hesitation.

"W…why?"

His dull, beetle-black eyes held no light. Sophie had seen enough corpses to recognize this king looked… dead. "I was bored."

She took another step. The smell of wet earth wafted beyond the collapsed stones. Outside lurked the spread of grass and grave mounds. All those buried prisoners.

"Why d-did you invade Cat's Eye?"

"I was bored," he murmured again.

It must be a lie, Sophie thought numbly. She must have gotten something wrong. How could the World Government obey someone like him? How?

"What are you to my daughter?" he murmured, contemplating her. "She seems to value you, and vice versa."

Anger seared in the pit of her belly. "We made a promise to take this country from you and give it back to the people." Sophie tightened her hold on the musket. "Unlike either of us, Lisbeth is a genuinely good person. I won't let you hurt her."

Something flickered back to life in Khanwari's expression. "And I will not let you hurt her. I've worked twenty-two years for this."

"You are working some creepy obsessive father vibes—pineapples!"

A soldier swung his musket at her; she parried with her own, but the surprise got the better of her and, grip slipping, her musket flew into the air. Outnumbered three to one. The wreckage was a little over ten feet tall; climbing was possible. Escape was the number one issue. She couldn't afford to be cornered.

Sophie turned and ran into the wreckage.

"She's going after Lisbeth! Throw her in the garden! I won't let my daughter see the body!"

Sophie wiggled through a small gap between the wall and an overturned sofa, and found herself in a small, enclosed space. She spun around—step on that étagère with the vase, climb up those rocks, use that plumbing pipe to pull herself up and over—

Marine-honed intuition twirled her around, vase in hand. The soldier yanked on her arm, dragging her closer, and Sophie smashed the vase against the side of his head.

The soldier shook away his daze. "Alright, you wanna play the hard wa—"

She plunged a jagged ceramic piece into the bottom of his jaw and slashed sideways.
Inhaling in a frenzy, Sophie kicked him away. Something clattered behind her. Another soldier came through the gap and stared at the blood pooling at her feet. "What the shit—"

She ran at him, another shard biting into her bandaged fingers. She grabbed his throat and shoved the shard through his eye.

His scream was so loud the storm couldn't muffle it. Mangoes, he just alerted everyone to her position! But that became the least of her worries as he knocked her back and slammed her into the encoignure. Rain fell between her lips. Her heartbeat clanged like heavy metal bells in her ears. Oh—this again. Even as she was getting the living cassabananas beat out of her, Sophie was aware of how familiar the taste of ozone on her tongue was.

Last time, she'd been decked out in a full Marine uniform, an extra fifteen pounds weighing her down thanks to the medical pack, her boots ripped three ways from Wednesday, and running for her life through mud and hell and rain.

God, she hated thunderstorms.

As the soldier reared back to punch her again, Sophie jerked forward and attached her teeth on his neck. She jammed her thumbs into his eyes, pushed him back, and kneed him in the crotch over and over and over. Don't let him take you to the ground, Hippo lectured as she grappled with the other marine, her feet skidding on the mat. Keep your center of gravity low. As his attacks weakened, she slammed an elbow into his gut and cracked a guéridon over his head for extra measure.

Spitting out blood, she clambered over the étagère and onto the rubble. Wet stones crumbled under her squelching boots, but Sophie caught her balance out of instinct.

She pulled herself over and grabbed onto the pipe. The soldier with the scarred nose blinked at her. Ah, papayas.

She punched him in the face.

He landed on a flat plane of rock—lucky, lucky, lucky—as she scrambled to yank the pipe from under the debris. A hand wrapped around her ankle, tugging her back down, pipe and all. Sophie seized the overhang of table and kicked furiously, catching him in the mouth. He didn't check where he put his back foot and slipped, oh, bad mistake. Sending a prayer of thanks to Hippo and her marine instructors, she twisted, balanced on her aching toes, and jumped over to his rock with a solid metal greeting.

He flopped on the floor, stirring faintly. Sophie slid down on the back of a commode and landed with a splash.

"S-silly error," she kicked him over on his back, "but then a-again, you never fight in rainy, r-rat-infested trenches."

Sophie stomped on his face. Petals of red flowered in the rainwater.

She turned around—and the king was there. He evaluated her beaten state with the same expressionless gaze.

"You know, I'm really craving pancakes," Sophie panted, wiping away her bloody nose. "With like a mountain of whipped cream and extra butter. But—th-there's this part of me that wont—can't—rest until I understand what's wrong with you."
"Deranged evil man isn't good enough? If it helps, I enjoy stealing pacifiers from babies and switching the salt and sugar shakers."

Sophie sighed. "Oh, whatever."

With a battle cry, she swung her plumbing pipe and charged at Khanwari. He easily smacked the pipe away and grabbed her by the straps of her satchel—ow, ow, there may have been some underestimation on Sophie's part—and hurled her to the floor. Raindrops splattered between her fingers and glass cut into her elbows. He stepped on the back of her neck, mashing her face to the soggy carpet.

"The Government is pathetic. It's so enthralled by itself it won't even acknowledge any of its faults. Tradition over truth. Faith over change. Words to live by," he added with vicious sarcasm. "If any Marine battleship demanded entry into Cat's Eye, I would have conceded. I don't have the force to stand against them. But now the rebels—"

"This isn't about them! This is about a World Noble taking a massive dump on the World Government!"

"You think I'm bad? Think of the scum who let a genocide continue for twenty years right under their noses. Places like G-13 and the Marine base at Crawfish Island—not one of them put up as much of a fight as you're doing right now. In fact, no one's ever come as far as you, not even that Darnay fellow. Good-hearted man, but a complete dolt. Congratulations are in order."

Her stomach twisted in outrage. It wasn't their fault; not even lunatics would go up against a World Noble. They were sacrosanct, inherently better, the lineage of the great twenty kingdoms. That was just how the world worked; he couldn't trash-talk the system while reaping all its benefits!

…Or maybe he could. Because he was a World Noble.

"You have that expression like you're thinking up any scrap of excuse for them. Almost comical." He clenched the satchel straps and lifted her up by the throat. "Laugh. I order you."

She clawed at the straps. "Ha… ha…"

His laughter seared the air. Rasping, disbelieving mirth.

Anger and humiliation burned behind her eyes. This isn't going to shame me, she assured herself with a terrible wrench of her heart, this doesn't even come close to cleaning a room of dead bodies.

"Can you even think for yourself anymore? They've tacked a list of beliefs and ideals onto an assembly line of worshippers. How ingenious is that? Your fanatical loyalty has made you less of a person, less of a self. Who are you? Who are you and what do you fight for?"

Sophie stared at him.

"You talk big, but don't stick to your guns. Twenty years I've steered this country into its rightful course, my hairs turning white due to stress, my great soldiers all turning fat and old, without a single word from the rest of the world. I put myself in this hell so I could accomplish my goal!"

What the hell do I care?

She flicked the lighter open, fingernails digging into the scratch marks.

The flame whistled by his ear and set the side of his head alight in an alien orange glow. He
stumbled back as the crown flew off his head. She slipped under the straps and threw her arms around his knees, sending them both crashing back to the floor.

Moving quicker, Sophie yanked him up by the scruff of his tunic. "I'm risking my life to help this island out loyalty, how does that make me a bad person!?!"

"The whole world is meant to revere my existence," he spat, "just because someone said I was born holy. Isn't that the illogical thing? What excuse do you have, you entitled little shit? You don't know how much harm you're doing, you aren't burdened with the duty to help these people—you are an interloper! And you know nothing about this island!"

What little color was left in her face drained away. "I d-don't seem to recall the World Government ALLOWING YOU TO BE A B-BUTTHOLE, YOU—"

"I AM THE WORLD GOVERNMENT!" Khanwari roared.

Her fist froze in the air. Her fingers dug into her palm. G-13 chemist, combat medic of the 21st Regiment, protégé of a Vice Admiral. She was still desperately clinging to the thin strand of hope over the gaping abyss—this institution she built weapons of mass destruction for, this obscure concept of justice… had some semblance of rationality.

"They trained you too well. My soldiers are the same. When they look at me," Hippo's mouth moved, "they see who they really live for," her platoon murmured.

A small sob pulsed in her ribcage, sounding a bit like laughter.

The scarred soldier limped up from behind and punched her in the head.

Sophie was tired.

As Hippo carried her on his back, a deep and profound sense of security settled over her. This, this was the one place in the world she could never be harmed. This was her special place. She pressed her face into his back, hiding herself from the world. She liked the little bumps of movement as he walked, like the smell of antiseptic and whiskey.

She wouldn't mind sleeping her whole life away like this.

The ground rumbled.

His arms loosened, ripped away, vanished—

The wind dragged him from her desperate reach and she fell into the ocean, hands outstretched with no one there to catch—

She gasped and her eyes flew open. The smell hit her in a wave. Rotting bones. Dead skin. Decaying organs. It came from beneath, filling her nose and mouth. Complete darkness. Complete silence. She pounded firmly on the wood surrounding her and felt it creak. With a little hiss, something grainy fell onto her shirt; she maneuvered her arms and touched it gingerly… it felt like sand, or… dirt…

With a corpse sleeping beside her, Sophie slammed her palms on the coffin and screamed.
The tunnel seemed endless.

Lisbeth glanced back at the stumbling soldier, one hand covering his nose. Blood seeped down his neck. "Um—we should really be taking him to a hospital. He cannot even stand in his condition, much less fight." He ignored her. Her hand moved to the quiver. "What happened to Sophie? If you hurt her, if you so much as touched her—"

"He'll fight if I order him to," Khanwari said shortly. "A small group of my most loyal guards are waiting."

"Stop this madness." The stony edge in her voice finally made him turn. "Have I ever been anything more than pawn to you?"

"Pawns can be promoted to queens." The torch he carried crackled, red sparks drifting in the air. "Everything I've done has been to prepare you for this moment."

Her eyes widened in bewilderment. Purple. Just like her mother's.

"I am in pain," the soldier croaked. "Very, very much in pain."

"I will tell you everything after." He walked forward and cupped her face. "It can only be you. Or else the past twenty years will have been for nothing!"

The loudest explosion by far boomed through Anatole. Cobwebs fluttered down from the quaking tunnel walls as it echoed through the very foundation of the island, throwing shadows across his expression full of terrified wonder…

"They're here."

…followed by the distant roar of a thousand stones crumbling.

——

Out of the smoke, a massive civilian army appeared. Sand-plastered boots came stomping through the gaping hole in the wall. Metal cannons screeched. On burned-black swamp tree branches, they raised flags emblazoned with a blue crawfish.

Bepo leaped down to the meet the leader. Long red nails danced over a bazooka hanging by her hip. "That was one damn fine explosive," she said appreciatively.

The Baby Den Den Mushi he carried beamed. "You can thank the little lady when you see her."

"That's the target point." Sid pointed to the castle as he slid down the gravel beside them. "Mortar shells will be expected. Rebels are short on armor and weapons."

"Thank goodness we have both," Nellie replied with a grim smile. "Polar bear, you wanna do the honors?"

"Let's kick some ass," Bepo said solemnly.

_to be continued_
Six Feet Under in an Old Pine Box

Her throat was raw from screaming.

Loud, wheezing gasps filled the darkness. Sophie tried holding her breath. *Calm down*, the still-cognitive parts of her brain blubbered frantically. She was *trying*, but—

How long had she even been there, laying in the coffin? Suffocation was a slow death. Sophie couldn't even think straight, the smell was so terrible; the areas in her mind where she once drew strength out of knowledge were now blank holes of terror. Even the snarky voice in the back of her mind was silent.

"Help! Anyone! LET ME OUT! SOMEBODY!" She kept pounding as dirt sprinkled over her forehead. "HEY, YOU STUPID PIRATES!" They couldn't hear, they weren't coming, and she was going to die embraced by a cadaver. "Princess-san… Nellie-san… someone…"

Anko's words came back: *Holding your breath just increases the need to breathe and builds up carbon dioxide in your body. Keep your cool.*

They would rescue her, surely. She could imagine it: Law's smug smirk as he yanked open the coffin, or Lisbeth's sweet-voiced concern. Maybe even Hippo, because he'd be out sailing, looking for her by now. He might even be on Cat's Eye, standing on the dirt above her, digging frantically.

As time ticked on and the darkness grew more deafening, Sophie floated in a curious, detached plane of time. *Death*, a new thought trickled in, *could be a gift*. No more pain to go through. She'd tried her best. Wasn't that enough?

It would be so easy letting go. Like an exhale. She wouldn't even have to think about it.

Aside from Hippo, no one at G-13 would miss her. Other geniuses, smarter and younger than her, will appear on the playing field. They'll remember her as a warning to little girls who strayed too far from home. At least she'd have a friend to rot together for eternity with. In her final moments she'd name him something like Larry, or Butterscotch. Or, going by the appendage nearest her face, just Butt.

She never said goodbye to Hippo.

She'd been planning to tell him all the stories—plants curling serpentine around great swamp trees, the crunch of snow under her boots, Nellie and Sid and Lisbeth, storm warnings, witch doctors. All because Khanwari put her there—

…All because Khanwari put her there.

A strange clarity came over her. Like a spark in the gloom.

He buried her alive, like what the holy shipovas, who *does* that? And you know, it didn't matter that she had no friends, or family members who knew she was still alive, or people in general who cared about her well-being—it didn't matter at all. There were still oceans to see, new elements to explode—

She was unsettlingly aware of her own heartbeat.
Thump, thump, thump.

I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive.

She touched the lid. It had already caved in a lot. It was probably an old coffin, judging by the rancid stench coming from the mostly decayed body under her. The wet dirt would be packed tight, thanks to the storm, so no immediate droppage of weight and crushage of lungs if she broke through the coffin. Think, Sophie, think. She painstakingly wiggled her shirt up and tied the sleeves together, effectively creating a sort of cloth bag over her head. It would have to suffice.

She took a deep breath and focused on the clarity, the clear, shining light.

Khanwari put me here.

The spark turned into a sun. And then a miniature imploding supernova.

Khanwari put me here.

Her hands hunched, fingers tightening into curled teeth. This was real.

Gritting her teeth, Sophie smashed her fists into the wooden planks.

—

Law crashed through the belfry and slammed against the clanging bell.

Unsteady, he dropped to his feet, mentally taking note of the blood loss and his two broken ribs. Kikoku had fallen out of his grip some three blocks back, and Odin was pressuring him so hard he was in emergency defensive mode. He couldn't even see the bastard, much less Room him.

Law leapt away, movement in his left peripheral vision, twisted sharply in the air, no one there—

A swift punch hurled him straight into the side of a terrace. He managed to get a grip on the slippery surface and jumped over a wall of flowerpots, barely avoiding a rankyaku. It was amazing how much that body was capable of—he could see the scars of experimentation set into his skin, knew enough about giantification to understand—

Odin silently appeared on the edge of the rooftop.

Rain drummed on Law's skin, between his lips when he grinned viciously.

At the flick of his finger, roof tiles shot upwards in a wave of red. Odin leaped in the air and skidded along another building.

"Doesn't seem like you know the other four forms!" Law taunted, fingers flexing behind his back.

"Cipher Pol kick you out before or after they experimented on you?"

His blank exterior changed in a split-second. Law could read the tension rolling off him like typhoon. Odin vanished again and all of Law's senses sharpened, feeling every drop of rain, every gust of wind whipping his shirt back, straining to discern the smallest movement. Tiles clacked on the terrace, he jerked back—a window on the opposite building rattled—

The sphere grew—one second from impact—not fast enough, more, more!

For a tenth of a second, Law saw him, kicking against the roof, so close he could see into the black slits of his mask—
"FIRE!"
"ROOM!"

The massive copper bell appeared where Law stood just as a rocket-launched projectile exploded in Odin's face.

Back inside the belfry, clutching the wound in his stomach, Law glanced down at the street. The Crawfishers Penguin alerted him about ducked behind a furniture barricade and stared back.

"Th-they said they'd help us, but can we really trust them!?!"

A woman carrying a bazooka shoved them all aside. "Don't crap your pants now! We have more important things t' worry about!"

Fluffy Oxen raced down the street, soldiers on them aiming their guns—and suddenly the back row was missing their riders. The ones to the side were dispatched in a blur of white, and there was Penguin, roundhousing the leader straight into a nearby cart of pitchforks. Manta grabbed the last two flailing soldiers, tossed one to Shachi, who grinned and smashed their heads together.

As rain cleared away the smoke, Odin wasn't moving. Law squinted. He was holding up a—necklace. Dog tags, partly burnt brown. He took a moment to wrap it around his fingers before disappearing in a blur. The tiles ripped apart from the speed he was moving at.

Law dodged and dove onto a skywalk as the bell tower crumbled into pieces. Odin cut the skywalk in half with a rankyaku, and sent another spinning at him as he jumped back.

"Captain!"

He turned to see Bepo throwing Kikoku.

Law unsheathed it in mid-air and slashed wildly with a ferocious yell—through the rankyaku, through Odin. His right arm, dog tags and all, spun into the air. A corner of his mask crumbled apart.

"You're so damn muscular I can see all your pressure points." Law righted his hat, smirk gone. "Let's end this."

——

The World Government helped him, protected him, without a single thought to people like her. Sophie brought her left fist swinging and broke through. The porous, maggot-bitten wood fell against her covered face. She'd seen her comrades die for a king who would never know their names, and for what?

The dirt came in a flood. Loyalty was her only belief system and that, in itself, could not be wrong. Sophie pushed against the solid mass of soil and insect particles and bacteria. But at what point did loyalty mean making excuses? When had it gotten out of control? When had she started viewing her life, Lisbeth's, the pirates', and this stupid war as a means to an end? At what point did it become a desperate attempt to reassure herself what she stood for actually meant something?

It had always lingered like a seed in the back of her mind, why she hid all her fury and disobedience and tears as a child, kept her anger quiet like a smothering blanket. Because she was ordered to. No logic or want behind it.

Just once—just once—she tried to something heroic, semi-altruistic. Put her life and ideals on the
line, and this—this coffin was a testament to how far she got. This was how the world repaid blind faith.

Her whole body felt like it was going to break apart. She was a fireball imploding in a collision of fission atoms and fever-rage. Sophie was no superhuman being like Law or Odin, she had no ways of manipulating the laws of physics to her favor; she wholly human—and her faith was dying in the hardest, fiercest way possible, the cruel gods of her universe were exploding, and she was burning alive, boundless and infinite and broken.

Charisma and fanciful speeches couldn’t save Jacques Straw. Power—the ability to fight—only the strong survive. Everything else was a performance. A theater of manipulations and illusion.

Give up or keep crawling. Give up or keep choking down dirt. Give up or keep fighting for every inch, every centimeter.

_I gave you everything_, she howled at the inferno, _I gave you my hands, my platoon, my childhood, my entire identity!_ She stretched, screaming against the blistering torment, the violent dying of the fire, and pushed her knuckles through the mud.

The earth cracked—splintered—

(the fire blew out)

—broke.

Her fingers dug into the ground, and then came her head, her neck, her shoulders. Sophie fell over and wrenched the shirt off her head, simultaneously inhaling in a frenzy and hacking out dirt. Had air always tasted so sweet?

The acid taste of bile rose up in her throat. She pressed her wrist pressed against her mouth.

Raindrops splattered over her. She was covered in grime and mud slid down her hair in thin ropes.

And yet.

And yet she was alive.

A discarded shovel lay on the grave. Someone had been in a rush to get it done; the grave was filled up less than halfway with dirt. That probably saved her life.

She looked up at the Cat's Eye Tower. Khanwari would not win.

—

She found herself back in the collapsed parlor, hefting a heavy rock.

Locating the tunnel was easy; it was hidden in a small alcove leading down to a wooden door, which she kicked in. It was a little harder knocking out the soldier guarding it, but at least his gun was dry (her gun now). Lisbeth said the tunnel was a straight path.

It was a peculiar feeling. There was no fear in her as she moved through the dark, not even when she broke through another door and found three soldiers waiting on the other side.

The first bullet was instantaneous: one fell and toppled into another, who went down swearing.

"Don't move!" Sophie yelled to the third lunging for his musket—_her_ musket.
The rosy-cheeked lady.

"I know you. Anko-san talked to you yesterday." Her eyes narrowed. "The king's informant. You sold out the Tournesol."

"This is what I believe in," she retorted, and spread her arms out. "I regret nothing. Shoot me."

"I hate traitors," Sophie said softly.

A flash of movement from the floor—

_Bang!_

Blood splattered the stone wall. Sophie stepped over the crumpled soldier; the pistol he'd raised at her went rolling across the floor.

"If only everyone was as loyal as you," she finished. "The king has a hidden boat somewhere, yeah? You know where it is?"

Ashen and shaking, the woman nodded.

"You have ten minutes to prepare it." Sophie nodded at the door. "Go."

She stumbled over the mess on the floor and hesitated at the threshold, looking back.

Sophie pointed the musket. _"Go!"

She went.

Sophie stuck the abandoned pistol in the back of her shorts, checked the ammunition in the musket, and quietly slid open the next door. It led to the bottom of a tall, spiraling staircase in a windowless tower. Three orange flames moved up and down the darkness. Covered by the roar of the storm, Sophie took them out one by one. She didn't even have to move from the spot, just follow the glow, aim carefully, and watch them fall.

It had always been about loyalty. Only loyalty. Sometime after she'd been promoted to director, she expected that loyalty to be returned. She expected heroics. She thought her trust—in G-13, in Law—was worth something.

She heaved the latch off the last door, and it banged open. Wind and rain pummeled her face.

The top of the Cat's Eye Tower was small and circular, four pillars holding up the spindly tower roof. The scarred soldier was holding Lisbeth's hand over a large stone tablet in the middle. Khanwari whirled around and stared at her in all of her mud-covered, dirt-stained fury.

Lisbeth looked wildly at the door. "Sophie! Help!"

"Please don't hurt me, I'm so sick of working for this freak." The soldier instantly let go, and Lisbeth ran into her arms.

Khanwari's eyes bugged. "Stop! I order you to—"

"Do something yourself for once," he snapped, and shoved him aside.

"No time to talk. There's a boat waiting to take you away—"
"I am not escaping by myself!" Lisbeth said instantly, straightening up.

"It's a necessary precaution. Can you find it?" she asked the soldier, who nodded quickly. "You have to go. I'll see you when this is over."

Lisbeth grabbed her wrist. Her touch was warm. "Be careful, but—please, do not hurt him more than you have to. Every person deserves a fair trial."

Sophie made herself smile. "Don't worry, I'm unarmed."

She nodded and disappeared around the door with the soldier.

"NO!" Khanwari bellowed, leaping forward.

Sophie pulled the pistol from the back of her shorts and fired point-blank. The recoil sliced through her bleeding knuckles, but she hardly felt it. Khanwari clutched his hand as blood spurted out between his fingers. Now that she thought about it, there was nothing special about the molecules in that withered old body. Science and logic decreed him mortal. There was nothing special at all about World Nobles.

"You… little cheat… you said you were unarmed!"

She walked forward. "Yeah? When did fighting suddenly gain rules? That was for stepping on me. You want to know what I fight for?"

A bullet ripped through his other hand.

"That was for attempting to bury me alive."

Another in his left foot.

"That was for Manette Nellie!" Lightning cracked past the tower, illuminating her face full of terrifying rage. "ON—YOUR—KNEES!"

He slumped to the ground, laughing through the pain. "What a change. Where's your loyalty?"

Pure adrenaline pumped through her. The fury was so intense and fevered it swallowed up all doubts.

Sophie took two steadying breaths. "Tell me your name. Your real n-name."

"I abandoned it when I left Mariej—"

"Cut the melodramatic shtick or I s-start a-aiming somewhere a l-little closer to home." Her arm lowered. The gun pointed between his legs.

Jaw clenched, he finally spat, "Kasimir."

"Alright. Saint Kasimir…" She glanced at the tablet. There was a circle in the middle, surrounded by strange blocky shapes that looked like the ones on the floor. Was this some weird human sacrifice he was trying to pull? And she used to think World Nobles were enlightened. "…Why did you come to this kingdom? And w-why did you burn down Crawfish Island? What w-were you trying to accomplish?"

"It doesn't matter anymore." He swayed and staggered like an overgrown bat. "You pirates have ruined it… Lisbeth was…"
A chill ran up her spine. "What did you do to her?"

"I tried… to make her… queen."

Her gun faltered and dropped an inch. "…Huh?"

"If she could ever be the ruler of Apolleon… then she must have the love of the people…” His chest rattled with coughs. "You must know the myth… my wife was the last descendant… and as her daughter, Lisbeth is the rightful heir. It was her dying wish to have her claim the throne."

Sophie felt as though a cinderblock just punched her in the stomach.

An invasion, hundreds murdered by the king’s guillotine, Crawfish Island burning twice, and now this rebellion.

All done for Lisbeth?

"Every time my wife begged an audience from the old kings, they laughed at her! Because she was a woman! A female heir to the throne!? They called it madness!" He clutched at the wall, panting. "I vowed to end that fake royal family with as much blood as possible. And I did."

"Then why d-didn't you capture Cat's Eye as a World Noble?" Sophie demanded. "With the Government's help? It w-would've been easier."

"I wouldn't ask those military dogs to lick the bottom of my shoes!"

"You asked Doflamingo, didn't you!?" And she shot at his kneecap just because he really deserved it.

"ARGHH! That was obviously meant—to be a secret and an exception, you stupid girl! If I had done that twenty years ago, none would dare rise against me, and I needed resistance—anger." His lips were white and sweat gleamed on his brow. "Everything was already set in place. The hatred of the people, the Crawfish islanders setting up another siege, two islands reuniting under one valiant cause… and then—Lisbeth, kind, strong, beautiful, rising up… a new, prosperous reign would begin… my daughter, the queen… the true queen… they should've been glad to die for her!"

Sophie covered her mouth, feeling physically ill. This guy was legitimately insane.

"The sham was supposed to end today! I've spent twenty years… and now… now if you kill me… it really will all be for nothing."

Stunned, Sophie met his eyes.

"Saint Kasimir," she snarled through gritted teeth, "you are—and I mean this in the politest way—SO BRAINLESS YOU LITERALLY SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO EXIST!"

A flash of blinding light immediately followed her words. A great spark of energy burst beneath her feet as lightning struck the tower and for an instant, she and the king were suspended in midair. Gears on the ceiling whirred erratically, shuddering off centuries of dust. The floor chugged and clanged—and it wasn't a floor at all, but a maze of hissing labyrinthine pipes. A loud mechanical vibration vrooom'd from the stone tablet.

The next second, they dropped like bricks. The tower went silent.

Disorientated, Sophie staggered to her feet. Her fingertips tingled. "W-w-w-what just happened!?"
He looked ecstatic. "Khana wasn't wrong! All it needed was a boost of energy!"

She grabbed the end of his cloak. "W-what's the d-deal with this tower?"

"The legend, do you remember the legend!? H-h-her name was Apollo, the m-mechanic's was Leon. The people named the moving automaton cat Apolleon, a promise to the future return of their king and que—"

"There is a reason why they don't call it Apolleon anymore!" Sophie bellowed disbelievingly. "Times! Change! You crazy! Old! Man!"

*Four bullets, four divisible by two divisible by one—*

"Screw it, I'm not a decent enough person to care about how many people you killed. What I care about is that you r-refused to be a halfway-d-decent ruler!" Sophie slammed him into the pillar, blinking agitatedly. "Is war f-fun for you?" They were bloody nose-to-bloody nose. "Is it a little game you play where you distribute execution sentences as post-dinner entertainment and line your soldiers up as target practice!? Do you think the entire world is your plaything!?"

He gasped for breath. Sophie sneered, blue eyes frigid.

"You know, for a guy who hates his family, you really need to stop acting like them."

*Four bullets, four divisible by two divisible by one—*

She released his throat. His knees bottomed out and he sank to the floor. "You threw me in a c-coffin to hide my b-body from Princess-san."

"She's too sentimental… too easily attached… better if you were just… forgotten…"

"You don't love her," she snarled. "You don't even know w-what I-love is anymore."

This was all wrong. This was madness, this made no sense at all. He was a fake. Him and this whole terrible, fake kingdom and their terrible, fake wars. One person causing a genocide. One person manipulating the lives of thousands of others. One person forcing an entire group of people to be an *accessory* for his daughter. World Nobles and the World Government and G-13 were all the same.

They just used people irresponsibly, illogically, without giving anything in return.

"…I did this for the good of the kingdom…"

*I can end the war, I'm with the World Government. G-13 chemist, combat medic. Let me help.*

She was an interloper. She never cared about helping Cat's Eye. Truthfully, Sophie didn't even know or remember what she wanted to do. The only thing she knew for certain was...

"No. You did this for yourself."

In a sad and pathetic sort of way, they were the same.

"The moment you pull the trigger, you'll be dead to them… you'll live on the fringes of society… always running, always looking over your shoulder…" His smile dripped red. His eyes laughed at her. "My death will be… the start of your lifetime of misery…"

Her hands stopped shaking.
She stared at him, then slowly lowered her gun to his throat.

"Your beard is uneven. I can fix that."

Five bullets divisible by five divisible by one.

—

Odin reached the edge of the roof. Right on his heels, Law gripped Kikoku with both hands. He wasn't getting away.

A rankyaku blasted through the air. Without even seeing it, he ducked and cut into empty nothingness, wickedly fast. No, not nothingness—Odin reappeared, his legs thudding on the rooftop, and he fell from the building.

Law leaped down and landed heavily on the scaffold. Water splashed up from the puddles, dancing around him. Wincing slightly, he fisted the collar of Odin's shirt as he passed by and dragged his limbless torso to the guillotine.

"Pardon the intrusion," he muttered.

One slice and his mask clattered to the ground. Scars twisted over a rotted eye. Bone and muscle protruded from the side of his jaw, up his cheek. His face was a terrible mess, as though the World Government patched him up with spare parts.

Law's face warped into a terrifyingly twisted look of delight. "You're actually a monstrosity!"

"Tsubaki!"

Two shadows emerged from beneath the scaffold. A soldier and, in front of him—the princess, horrified. The remnants of Odin's features were suffused in anguish. Perhaps this was the first time she was seeing his face?

"Apologies," Law murmured into his ragged ear. "I wanted to spare you as much pain as I could. Thank you in advance for the information your body will be providing me."

He released the blade.

His lips moved soundlessly.

Her mouth opened in a silent scream.

—

Sophie walked through the destroyed city. Blue Crawfish flags flew on every remaining building. A few rebels hastily stamped out a small fire breaking out on a Fluffy Ox's cart. Windows cracked open, voices calling to one another in the cold, still twilight.

Shouts of victory broke out behind her.

At the beach, Lisbeth and two soldiers drifted in a dinghy. A raucous crowd barred them from returning ashore. Tramping across wet sand and broken seashells, Sophie shoved through them until she reached the front.

"Sophie!" Lisbeth cried thickly, her eyes bloodshot. "There has been a ceasefire announcement, it is safe for me to stay now, tell them... what happened?"
Blood stained the side of her cheek. Mud caked her boots.

"Sophie," the people muttered behind her, "did she say Sophie? Strangways Sophie?"

Sophie tossed the king's crown to Lisbeth, who barely managed to catch it as she was staring at the flintlock resting by her side. "He wanted you to have it. It'll sell for a lot of beli." Spinning around, she yelled, "The king escaped! He surrendered Cat's Eye!"

The roars that erupted drowned out Lisbeth's dumbfounded voice, "You said… you were unarmed…"

"Get out of here!" one man yelled.

"If she stays we'll have another dictator on our hands!" someone else hollered as others voiced their agreement.

Sophie took a deep breath, forcing herself into detachment.

Lisbeth shook her head. "This is ridiculous, I am returning home." She hiked her skirt up and stepped up on the side of the dinghy. "My kingdom needs me!"

"This country doesn't want you," Sophie retorted.

Lisbeth jerked back, speechless.

"And it's not your home anymore."

"Odin died!" she suddenly screamed, her body tensing as if she was barely holding back from lunging at her. "That pirate killed him! I trusted you and he killed my best friend!"

Sophie wasn't any good at these things. She only knew how to handle problems of which dynamite and the like were the solution. None of this diplomatic talking nonsense. She bit the inside of her cheek and said finally, "No one wants you here. No one needs you." She could never know the truth. "No one owes you or Odin anything." It would destroy her. "If you love this island so much, y-y…you have to leave it."

A shadow of a cloud passed over her, and Lisbeth became unsettlingly, unrecognizably calm.

"Traitor."

Sophie closed her eyes, as if to ward off a physical blow.

"I trusted you." She nocked her last arrow. "I trusted all of you and I especially trusted you, you reprehensible, disreputable, ignominious—pirate!"

The crowd scrambled back, leaving Sophie to stand alone. without thinking, she raised the flintlock. One bullet left.

"Lisbeth-san, don't—"

"What am I going to do now!? You banish me from my own island, deposit me in this little boat, and what! What am I supposed to do!?"

"Escape. Live. Buy a house." She shrugged helplessly. They both knew it wasn't going to be so easy.

A tear tracked down her cheek. "And then?"
"I don't know, plant some sunflowers?"

Her face hardened, as though a door had slammed. Sophie wanted to shoot herself in the foot. Oh, wait. She just did.

"I'm sorry! I didn't—look, I'm sorry!"

"Go to hell," Lisbeth spat, and released the arrow.

Pain burst on the side of her leg and people were screaming, and she felt a sharp tug on her waist. The world went black for a few moments. When she came to the first thing she heard was her own hysterical voice, "Oh my god, oh my god, she shot me, oh, god, what happened—"

Fingers pressed into her knees and back. "...barely a graze... fainted a little..."

"She shot me, Hippo-sensei!" Sophie cried deliriously. "I actually took an arrow to the knee, oh my god! Oh my god..."

Next thing she knew, she was lying on something soft. Movement blurred in the corner amid the sound of pained breathing. Her vision spun.

"Lisbeth-san, where is she, where did she go—"

"She fled after screaming something about avenging Odin and raining hellfire on both of us."

A sickening feeling lurched in her gut. She gazed at Law's blood-stained back with a sensation of being lost in a world that didn't make sense anymore.

"It was a good speech. Pity you missed it."

He continued rummaging through the drawers and dug out some thread and a needle and bandages.

She shakily got up on her elbows. "You... you were right about the World Government."

"I know. Now sit," a firm grip was on her shoulder, "down."

Sophie pushed him aside. "I bet you loved watching me make a fool out of myself. You were right the whole time. Every terrible thing you said about them is completely justified, completely—are you h-happy now? She shot me—god, she shot me—"

Tears, hot and sudden, welled up in her eyes.

She had to sit back down and wipe her face with shaking hands. Except her knuckles were bleeding too much, so she pressed her head into her forearms.

"What are you going on about? I told you it was just a graze."

Sophie hated him.

"You did what you came here to do. The war ended."

She loathed how cold Law sounded. How he watched her like he was waiting for a gale to pass.

"It's why you asked me for help, wasn't it?"
It was about Vira. It'd always been about Vira. Her platoon believed so much in the World Government, and they died, they just died, and she was still alive, and somewhere along the way she became convinced Cat's Eye was some apology. As if she could make up for losing one civil war by winning another. She'd always been so selfish. She used a whole island as a means to an end, just like Khanwari.

He thought this was just about Lisbeth. He had no idea.

"I don't care about this stupid war!" Sophie shouted, and a mountain lifted from her shoulders as she said it. "I won nothing! The war won, you won! G-13 left me behind to die! I'm an expendable resource. I've always been." She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling tears tracking down her cheeks. "I obeyed, I followed orders, I would've sacrificed anything, and now this—now after Vira—how could they do that to me? It's not fair!" The grief was so mindnumbingly painful it was splitting her chest apart. She was one of their brightest, she was going to become famous, they called her special, full of potential, that Strangways Sophie. "I hate G-13! I hate them so much! They're disgusting, and two-faced, and they hurt me, and—and I—"

Memories of home flashed through her mind. The hope of returning had always been there, like a guiding lighthouse.

"I loved them," she sobbed into her arms, with a distant feeling of being lost in an ocean with no light, not even from the stars. I loved them, and I can't even say goodbye.

—

The only light came from the window. Sundown melted on the sick bay floor and cast everything in a fading glow.

Sophie stared at the ceiling for a long time.

She slowly raised her right hand, clean bandages wrapped stiff. A drumbeat soreness thumped steadily in her knuckles.

She took her time sitting up, testing out all her sore muscles. She was tired in the way only crying for hours could make you. Someone left a glass of water, which she drained it in one gulp. Wiping her mouth, Sophie reflected that it seemed the only time she ever got a good night's sleep was when she was knocked out. Huh.

It was then she realized Law was hunched over the desk.

He slept with his head in his arms and, if the bloodied doctor's coat and the smell of damp meat were any indication, just got back from an operation. No one except for Hippo had seen her in such a wrecked state, but she didn't even have the energy to feel mortified.

There was a bandage on her thigh. Sophie looked at dully.

Her rustling movements woke Law. Without making any move to turn around, he asked hoarsely, "How are you feeling?"

"Like a big, fat bruise. But probably better than you."

His back cracked as he moved, followed by a barely muffled grunt of pain. Something glinted on the corner of his desk. His elbow pushed the necklace chain under a book as he turned stiffly. A purplish-green atoll swelled in the corner of his mouth. Even the bags under his eyes seemed sadder and baggier than usual.
"Get it out of the way," she mumbled. "Whatever you want to say, say it."

"You really fucked up your knuckles."

Sophie stared.

"If I didn't possess this particular Devil Fruit, even I wouldn't have been able to completely salvage your right hand. You'd have physical therapy for months, at least. No writing. Shooting would be out of the question."

She flexed her fingers.

"What happened?"

_Broke out of a coffin._ "Smashed faces in and stomped over them with my stylish yet affordable boots." Which was also true.

"I think you'll want this back."

He reached behind him and tossed her deerskin satchel on her stomach. She gasped. Sophie tore it open and feverishly groped around for the cold metal of her lighter.

"The Crawfishers are helping excavate parts of the castle for survivors. One of them recognized it—a Manette Nellie."

Sophie stared. Nellie? _Alive? No way._

"She commanded the army. Led three battleships from Crawfish Island to here."

_No way!"

Law rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I know that's merely an expression used for surprise, but does it have to be so irritating?"

She scowled at the opposite wall and took deep breaths. Beating the Surgeon of Death over the head with a stethoscope would only result in catastrophic destruction. "Please explain how this happened."

"The huge mess the Crawfishers made chiefly ended the war. It was faster than I expected. Though it took a while for Manta to convince them we didn't burn their island. We're being hailed as heroes, you and I. Mostly you, actually," he grinned sardonically, "they're still listening to common sense and staying clear of me."

"…Hold up. Back at Drum Island, when you asked me to make you that big explosive—it wasn't so your rough-n'-boiler suitin' crew could bust in to save the day?"

"They don't need your help to scale the wall."

She ignored the snide comment. "So you theorized the people of Crawfish were coming all along."

"It was a highly plausible scenario."

"That's… kind of amazing," she admitted reluctantly.

Law stared at her. "…Thank you."

Sophie scratched her cheek and Law remained perfectly motionless. They opened their mouths at the
same time.

"Go ahead," he offered.

"A-after you."

"I insist."

Where was this courtesy when she was bawling her eyes out? Apparently Law didn't like dealing with petty issues, such as the spectrum of human emotion. Sophie cleared her throat. "You, um, heard anything about the king?"

"Rumor has it he's hiding somewhere on this island. No one's seen a boat aside from the princess' leave shore."

\textbf{RARRGHH!}

"Ah," Sophie said calmly.

"Nobody is aware of his true identity apart from for me, you, and my crewmates who were there. I took care of the soldiers present." Law scratched a band-aid on his cheek. "It seems you were with him last."

It sounded more of a suggestion than a comment.

"That jerk overpowered me and fled," she replied loftily. "Jerk."

"His gun would've been unusable in the rain."

"So was my musket," Sophie snapped, and caught herself. She crossed her arms. "Soldiers knocked me out. He must've escaped right after."

"And left his crown behind."

"I don't know how the mind of a crazy man works. What is this, an interrogation?"

"If he did happen to die, and if his body is found and if word reaches the World Government, the likely suspect isn't you. It's me." He leaned forward and she leaned back. "And I'm sure I didn't kill him."

An invisible shudder ran down her spine. He was right. Just like with Doflamingo in Crawfish Island, newspapers would blame Law for the death of Saint Kasimir. But better him than her, after everything the pirate put her through. Sophie had no qualms about it. Not that anyone could call him innocent in the first place. Even if he did occasionally save her life—roughly about as much as he threatened to kill her.

She met his gaze evenly. "Then pray he wasn't swept overboard after running away."

Law frowned. \textit{Don't freak out}, one half of her brain reminded as the other half screamed, \textit{nicotine!}

"You can take off your bandages in a week, so don't do anything strenuous with your hands." He wheeled back to his desk and began jotting down notes. Sophie exhaled silently. "And only one smoke a day," he added tersely, as she dug out a cigarette pack. "Doctor's orders."

"Pffine." She rolled a stick around her fingers. "Hey, how's Hai Xing-san?"
"Alive."

"Oh." A thought just occurred to her. "Um… you're only experimenting on Odin, right?"

Law narrowed his eyes.

Sophie sweated nervously. "I mean, what? Who said that?"

"Hai Xing's sleeping off the pain meds over there." He jerked his head at a bed with the curtains drawn on the other end of the room. "The way you wrapped his gunshot wound lacked proper workmanship. Not bad," he amended. "A line above that."

"I was trained to get the job done," she snapped. "He came back alive, didn't he?"

"He did. Thanks."

Sophie opened her mouth in retaliation before registering his words. He didn't stop writing, focused on the paper, the perfect image of indifference, and yet the way he said it was entirely different from his earlier 'thank you'. There was something about it that made Sophie… angry. She didn't know who or what it was directed towards. The anger was just—there.

"Sure. Don't mention it. Ever again." She curled her fingers into her bangs and examined the black tangles. "I was saving my own hide. You'd kill me if you knew Hai Xing died when I could've saved him."

"Am I that terrifying a creature, Sophie?"

"Creature, no. Monster, yes."

Law was unfazed. "Says the chemist who made bombs for this monster."

"Fair point." She swung her legs over the bed and stuffed on her boots, padding to the doorway. "Either way, it helped the Crawfishers end the war. I have nothing more to contribute to history, thank you very much."

"I could have used them on you," Law commented idly, dabbing his quill into the inkwell.

Sophie felt she'd come a long way when she was only mildly terrified of him. "But you didn't."

"I don't know if that attitude is bravery or foolishness."

She looked past him, looked out the window, into the dying light of the sun. "A leap of faith. Or something."

He cracked a sarcastic grin. "In me?"

"In myself."

His quill paused.

She lit a cigarette. "I guess this is goodbye."

"Where are you heading?"

"Do I spy concern?" She smiled bitingly, and shifted her satchel over her shoulder.
He made a noise of irritation. "Forget it."

If Sophie was being honest with herself, she'd say it was easier this way. Things about Law, about the Heart Pirates, were far more intricate than she thought them to be. Complicated men with complicated pasts. She remembered how he looked at her when she cried, and made up her mind.

"The Log Pose sets in five days," he said, tapping the quill against the desk. "We'll still be around."

When Law finally did look up, she was already gone.

—

"You saved Hai Xing. We're even."

Like the rest of the pirates, Anko had bandages plastered all over his face. He set the oars down and the boat stopped a few feet from shore. Waves lapped at the side of the boat.

"Did I ever owe you anything?"

"...Nah." He shook his head. "Never mind."

Sophie got to her feet. The boat swayed. "That pretty woman you talked to at the Tournesol—"

"Oh, she was a real babe." He paused. "Kicked me out on my ass."

She rolled her eyes. "No kidding?"

"It's alright. I take what I can get."

Sophie giggled. Anko chuckled quietly, rubbing the gunshot wound on his side. "Well, if any consolation," she said, "she was a soldier in disguise and basically the reason why you got shot."

"What? Shit, I hope you beat her up."

"Not really. She sailed off with the princess." Sophie hopped into the ocean, the water rising just below her knees.

"Same difference." He shrugged. "They sure as hell been eaten by a Sea King by now." He grabbed the oars and grinned at her. "Take care, Sophie-chan."

Mango. Things were getting rough if her heart ached when Anko of all people said goodbye.

—

Dusk drifted over Anatole in a nebulous haze, punctured by streets of flickering lanterns and prowling cats. The road was sparsely scattered with those still searching for survivors. Three wrong directions later and Sophie arrived at a little house that miraculously remained intact after the carnage dealt to the buildings around it. She raised her arm, tried counting to five, and gave up on thirty.

Sucking in a breath, Sophie knocked quickly.

"Be right there!" a familiar muffled voice called, followed by running footsteps. "Need help? You Cat's Eye—" the door opened, dim lamplight washing over Sophie, "—or Craw…fish?"

The welcoming smile promptly disappeared from Nellie's bandaged face.
"Erm… hi, Nellie-san." She waved a little and glanced around, fidgeting. "I'm… um, not dead. As you can see. I wanted to ask if you have room in your—I mean, if you don't, I can leave. Just wanted to say hi. And the whole being alive status update. Thought that was a bit important. I mean. From my per-per-perspective. Okay. Well. You're probably busy. You stay, I'll go."

Without saying anything, Nellie wrapped her up in a fierce hug.

"Why do you always look so uncomfortable," she mumbled into Sophie's hair.

Sophie pressed her nose against Nellie's shoulder and choked out, "It's my natural state of being."

Romarin had been badly injured after the battle and rested in a bedroom upstairs. When Sophie excitedly asked Nellie how meeting her mother again was like, she just responded with an ambiguous, "It's been… interestin'" as they crept quietly into an area that had the least amount of structural damage. Judging by the crate and four chairs, it was a makeshift kitchen.

A big man with a bigger grin greeted them. Even with two of his teeth knocked out, Sid's smile was something else. "Seems y' owe me a bike, Strangways Sophie."

"Think my bomb can make up for it?"

He considered. "Yeah, alright."

Sophie awkwardly patted him on the elbow. Having none of that, he pulled her into a bone-crushing hug.

Nellie made them all sunflower tea and Sophie laid stomach-down across the two cleanest chairs, warming her hands over the kerosene lamp in the middle. It was much smaller than a big crackling fireplace in an inn, but somehow, as Nellie passed her a cup of tea and she and Sid sat down on either side of her, it was also much warmer.

"How did they manage to convince you? Being pirates and all." Sophie took a sip of tea without waiting for it to cool. She'd burned her tongue so many times on hot coffee she stopped caring somewhere along the road.

"They mentioned your name, actually," Sid answered. "An' even though I hate pirates, there was one among 'em who had decent common sense—Pescado Manta!"

"Eh? Manta-san?" Not Penguin? Not Shachi? …But then again, she didn't know any of them particularly well, so why not?

Nellie sighed. "What does he look like, Canary-chan?"

"Big. Muscley. Has a mustache that deserves its own hat. I still don't—"

"Who's also big and muscley in this room?"

Sophie blinked at Sid.

He flexed his arms, biceps bulging. "Men bond over their muscles!"

"Don't do that at the kitchen crate," Nellie tutted.

They spent the rest of the night talking about the fire at Crawfish Island ('Still burnin', but we
managed to contain it, thank goodness'), how Sophie met the Heart Pirates ('It's a boring story'), and how she ended up traveling with them, what the hell, girl, do you have a death wish? Some of the questions she answered with poorly-timed jokes at the Heart pirate's expense, but most she shuffled around and excused herself to the bathroom. Eventually they just stopped asking. The topic shifted to the war, and Sophie was reminded that she… actually didn’t know all that much about Nellie or Sid. She faded quietly into the background and just listened.

The loyalists and soldiers had escaped without a struggle; no one wanted to fight anymore. All but one of the Crawfish ships were transporting the seriously wounded back to their island, where more doctors where waiting. People were already backing their belongings. It sounded like the entire population would leave once more ships came. Not a single soul was rebuilding. The past would not be restored. There was no past.

It was around when Nellie and Sid, their voices soft as nightfall, discussed unknown names and places that Sophie drifted off. Her dreams were filled with old memories of gunmetal and hot chocolate in cold laboratories. They blurred in an out, like a Den Den Mushi with a jammed signal. Her consciousness flickered into Hippo's library, her old bedroom, peered out the tiny square window into the sea.

Hippo used to take her sailing around the base. G-13 was a huge white castle in the middle of the ocean, shining in the sun.

'Land, ho!' he'd shout as she leaned as far out of the bow as she dared, the salty breeze blowing through her hair. 'We're homeward bound, Sophie!'

She shifted in her sleep, her cheeks wet, lighter clutched in her fist.

_to be continued_
"Are you sure you don't want t' join?"

"Mm."

"They were really lookin' forward to meetin' you."

"Mm."

"Canary-chan, you've done nothin' all day but stare out the window. And you did some interior decoratin'…" The entire floor was covered with drawings of the peptide hormones in the human body. Altogether, it made a complicated labyrinth in the form of a giant smiley face. "…How'd you even do that?"

"I made my own chalk. Limestone and clay."

Draped over the dilapidated sofa, Sophie watched an upside-down Nellie blink at her. Her eyes dropped lower. Two perfect oxygen molecules.

"Ain't my house, I don't care. Let's go."

She grabbed Sophie's arm and hoisted her off the sofa. "Noooo, I want to brood. Can't I eat somewhere else?"

The dingy little kitchen was crowded with people; Romarin chatted with them as Sid set the table. As she entered behind Nellie, their eyes shifted to her and they began clapping. Someone patted her on the back. "Good to see you," a woman with an eyepatch said grinningly. There was a moment in her life where Sophie would've loved the attention (okay, most of her life), but now she just wished she had more hair to hide behind.

"You were right about her eyebrows," a man with a square jaw said to Romarin, pumping Sophie's hand. "I've always said a fine pair of eyebrows makes a good hero."

"Thanks. All natural bushiness."

"Hah! She's funny, too." He slapped her back.

Sophie quickly took a seat beside Nellie and Sid as they passed around potatoes and roast chicken. From eavesdropping she found out the man's name was Couthon, and he was a powerful figure in the rebellion. He sat across from her, talking amicably with the man with the square jaw about the Heart Pirates. She arranged her potatoes with two X's for the eyes and a flat line for a mouth.

Speaking of the pirates, were they planning on leaving soon? Would it be weird to try to talk to them? Did Law finally start his own fashion line, Haus of Trafalgar?

'Most likely' suited all the questions. Sophie pushed her potatoes around sullenly. They were nomads
of the ocean with no ties to anybody. She already said her goodbyes and made her peace. Law was
the sort who sparked someone's curiosity every island he traveled to, and there were probably pieces
of them collecting dust in the dark depths of his storage closet. She just wasn't one of them, that's all.
She was smarter than that.

As the night dragged on, the kitchen was getting louder and drunker. After the initial novelty of
Sophie wore off, the conversation kept turning to Romarin. The old woman was glowing, totally
relaxed as she bantered back and forth. The two Crawfishers by Sophie's side weren't doing too
badly, either. Personally, she was only staying for the food.

"So, Sophie, when did you join the World Government?" the woman with the eyepatch asked.

"I, uh, never technically joined. I was, um, born into it."

Couthon wiped his mouth. "Then why are you traveling with the Heart Pirates?" It was a perfectly
reasonable question. She imagined stabbing his jugular with her fork and didn't reply.

Most around the table were too absorbed in their own discussions to notice her unrestrained
glaring… except for Nellie, as usual. "Try the chicken."

"It's dry," Romarin said thinly. Nellie looked pointedly at her mother. She sighed and tapped her fork
against her cup. "A toast for Jacques Straw and to the departed who couldn't be with us on this warm
night."

Murmured agreements came around the table, punctured by heavy sniffing. Sophie raised her own
cup. "And a toast to the princess who was disinherited and thrown out of her home by the very
people she fought for."

The table went silent.

Romarin coughed. "A toast to reunion with old friends and family."

"A toast to deportation and having no family at all."

"Is she drunk?" someone whispered.

No, she was just feeling extremely hostile. And yes, maybe a little. There wasn't much else Sophie
had been doing that night.

The side of Couthon's mouth curled irritably. "Didn't the Marines train some manners in you, girl?"

"If by manners you mean standing up to jerkbutts, then, yes."

He slammed his palm on the table. "I will not be attacked with childish insults!"

She got to her feet so fast her chair banged on the floor. "Would you rather I carve it out on your
stomach instead?"

The silence was shocked and horrified. It was a long time since she wrecked a social event this badly
—although it was their fault as much as it was hers! Behind her, she heard Nellie say, "Dinner's
over. Everyone, please get out."

Sophie huddled up on an overturned barrel in an alley beside the house and lit a cathartic cigarette.
Anatole was livelier at night. Celebration noises echoed down the street.

Fine, she'd killed a few of Khanwari's soldiers. But that was their job—they'd been prepared for it,
and they were armed as well. Besides, she wasn't strong enough to hold back during fights. It was all out or nothing. What Couthon did was different. Law could argue all day long about how 'death is always the same', but Sophie was sure it wasn't so black-and-white. Thinking about this was frustrating. She didn't want to change the world. Breaking out into arguments over dinner wasn't fun. Then again, the little voice in the back of her head prodded, it wasn't like anyone else was going to deal with this problem. How messed up was that?

She… didn't actually know. Everything she thought was right or wrong was just her regurgitating a list of rules the World Government signed, stamped, and bow-tied. G-13 defined her whole life. Who was she now? What was she supposed to believe in? Science, she thought glumly, loyalty. Those were her two biggest foundations. And look how far they brought her.

Sophie supposed she could always join a traveling circus. Rig up the colorful smoke and stuff.

Something clattered by her feet. A cat sprang past her and she relaxed… until she noticed the much larger shadow. Couthon staggered into the alleyway.

"I don't know what you think you saw, but it's not true."

Sophie exhaled smoke through her nose. "You're drunk. Go home."

He raised a gun at her.

Great. Let the record show he started it.

She groaned. "Really? Why don't you threaten me with something more creative, like a hedge trimmer? A slice of cheese? Even Law-san could stretch his imagination, not many people would consider death to foot by injection. Have some fun with it. Branch out more." Sophie picked up the nearest heavy metal object. "For example, have you ever thought about how effective a trash can lid thrown at, say, thirty miles an hour could be?"

"Well," he admitted, slurring a little, "no."

She shrugged. "How about we find out?"

—

Sophie had finished tying up a clothes line when the door knocked. Wrapping a towel around herself, she hid Couthon's flintlock under the mattress and dumped the dirty water out the window before unlocking the door. Nellie carried a change of clothes. "Just what y' asked for."

She thanked her while stuffing an oversized blouse over her head. Nellie laid out the rest on her bed and flopped on it. Definitely tipsy. And she still looked like she stepped off the cover of a magazine. How did Nellie do it?

"Couthon is a bastard an' a half," she muttered.

Sophie toweled off her hair. "It doesn't matter anymore. Can we forget about the dinner?"

"Please," Nellie groaned, hugging Sophie's pillow. "There's a Crawfish ship sailin' back tomorrow to make sure the seriously ill get help. I can pull a few strings with the captain… if y' wanna leave."

"Thanks, but I still have something I need to do."

She sat up. "Is it about the Heart Pirates?"
"…Surprisingly, no."

She nodded in poorly-disguised relief and watched Sophie, moon-bleached by the light from the window. "You've changed, Canary-chan." Sophie's shadow laughed, because that was undeniable. Nellie took it as disbelief. "Really, y' have. I should start calling you Crow. Matches your hair. Hell knows this place has enough of 'em…"

Deeply unsettled by that remark, Sophie covered her head with the towel. "I like my real name better."

"C'mere—" Nellie grabbed her wrist. "No, sit down! Sit. Yes. Good. Sid made puddin' that no one ate because I kicked 'em all out. My ma threw a fit. She's so different from what I remember. 'First thing I'm gonna do is get hitched again! Helene, you should do the same!' Ugh. Good for her for sortin' out her priorities …" She frowned at the ceiling. "No, really, good for her. I don't even know what I'm gonna eat for breakfast. I don't even know what day it is."

"We're adults. We do adult things. You rescued a kingdom from basically eating itself." Sophie started to feel extremely protective. "Do whatever you want, you deserve it."

"Hell yeah, I do. I don't wanna get married again. That shit was too stressful first time around."


Nellie slapped her arm. "You. Hey, you," she kept hitting Sophie, ignoring her 'ow, what, stahp', "you, look at me. Look. Look at me. Look at me. The first thing you do if a boy comes onto you an' you don't want that, you eat him. Remember this. But if you do want it, then you do it, an' then eat him. It makes no difference in the long run."

Sophie absorbed that information. "But what about pudding?"

"Puddin'," Nellie said seriously, "is the priority."

The ruined pieces of Anatole tumbled together like an iron and rose garden. She wished she could've seen them explode into smithereens. Basking in images of liberating fiery destruction, Sophie's gaze was drawn to a man wearing a sunflower cockade strolling down the street. Hm. It seemed they were heading in the same direction.

Four blocks later Sophie entered a bar, scuffing mud off her boots and smoothing her bangs down. Loud, cheerful voices faded away as she walked past.

"One beer," Sophie told the bartender.

"Free of charge for you, Sophie-san," she called brightly. "Coming right up!"

She turned to sit at the counter, and froze. Mangoes. In the corner of the bar counter, exactly where she was heading, Penguin and Law were drinking by themselves. Even mangoeser, they had noticed her. And the mangoest part, the other customers called out, "Sophie-san, sit with us! Share a drink or two!"

"Um… I was actually… meeting…" She pointed to the general direction of the area slightly above the pirates' heads. "Maybe some other time!"

Sophie dusted off the empty seat beside Penguin and sat down. Not meeting their eyes, she grabbed
a few napkins and started cleaning off the flintlock. "Must've been some brawl," Penguin said to her.

"It's nothing. I lead a sanitary lifestyle," Sophie said primly as the bartender set down a tall, foamy glass of beer.

"You have blood on your dress." Law peered around his crewmate. "Judging by the angle and shape, it doesn't seem to be your—"

"I'll wash it when I get back to Nellie-san's place." Sophie wiped the foam from her upper lip. "I feel fine. Excluding being around my present company. Oh, hello, little thing!"

An oblivious cat was sleeping on the bar counter. Delighted, she reached out to pet it. The cat sprang up, all its fur sticking out as though it had been electrified, and venomously hissed at her.

Offended, Sophie hissed back.

Law looked skyward. "Don't martyr yourself on my account."

"You're overestimating me. I would do very little on your account," she said pleasantly and mouthed over her glass, *Wasn't talking about you.*

Unfortunately caught between them, Penguin coughed and held his cup up. "This could possibly be the nastiest shit I've ever tasted. What about you guys?"

The bartender shot him a dirty look.

"Ah, it can't be your free-of-charge fan club?" To the rebels, Law smiled his stupid disarming evil mock-smile of evil...ness.

"Is someone jealous?" she muttered.

He pointed to his own beer. "This is my third on the house. In fact—bartender, another one."

She barely restrained herself from kicking the wound he got from Odin. Actually, she missed and caught Penguin's leg instead. He yelped. "I'm just here to get a little buzzed. I'll be on my way in precisely three hundred seconds, think you can not be such a durian for that long?"

"Depends if you stop bothering me with that sound coming out of your mouth," Law fluidly replied.

"That's my voice."

"Precisely."

"...I bet you practice these insults in front of the mirror every day," Sophie said into her glass. *When backed into a corner, aim low.* Hippo's etiquette lesson number five.

"Yooo," Penguin interjected.

"This conversation is beneath me," Law drawled, but leaned across the counter all the same.

She met his glare with fierceness, but there was some strange familiar comfort with that. This was comfortable territory. "As well as everything else, apparently."

"Chose your words carefully. I haven't harmed you yet—"

"Any more than you already have," she corrected, lighting a cigarette.
Law plucked it from her mouth and dropped it into the beer of a passing customer, continuing, "But that can change very quickly."

They had all but forced Penguin off his chair. He went back to his drink, miming vomiting noises every few seconds. Law and Sophie ignored him.

"You know what I find vastly foolish about you?"

She tossed her hair back (the curly mass hit Penguin in the face). "Aside from my voice, my job, my wide-eyed Pollyanna idealism? Surprise me."

"What's your problem with hanging around rebels when you've been traveling with pirates? More of us are wanted by the World Government."

Okay maybe he was being serious. Sophie tapped the counter, debating whether to tell him. "...I'm going to say something and you aren't going to laugh and the World Government has nothing to do with it—"

"Doesn't it always?" he said knowingly, smirking.

"Please don't confuse me with some Absolute Justice nut. You're the first pirates I've met in my life. But before you, I've had three months of bad experiences with the Revolutionary Army, and I'm kind of still not over that—not out of pro-World Government reasons, but because of... they-really-hurt-me reasons. I don't value pirates over rebels, I value your crew over rebels. I valued that since the night you let me onboard your submarine." Wow, that was embarrassing to say. But Sophie didn't break eye contact. "I don't have any deep-seated personal hatred against pirates." He opened his mouth, but she cut him off, "And I know this isn't a True Fact, capital T capital F, for all revolutions, but this is what I've experienced, so... there it is. Have a nice day."

Beer bottle in hand, Sophie left the bar. She weirdly felt a little better. Condescending Law was sort of therapeutic, who knew?

Law took a deliberate drink and noticed Penguin staring at him. He scowled.


A toilet flushed in the bathroom next to them. Shachi walked out and paused when he noticed the tension. "Did I miss something?" He sat down and made a face. "Gross, my seat's warm."

People were always coming and going, informing them of small celebrations, how the injured were doing, and the like. Nellie, Sid, and Romarin had their hands full with one thing or another, leaving Sophie to suffer upstairs, unable to sneak into the kitchen with all the dreaded strangers (and potential conversations) blocking her path. She did, however, hear one disturbing rumor of the Heart Pirates' captain robbing the bodies of dead soldiers.

Meh. She didn't even react to it anymore.

But being left to her own thoughts was stifling. Borrowing one of Sid's hooded jackets (no one seemed to recognize her without her seeing her eyebrows), Sophie walked to the castle and retraced her steps to Lisbeth's bedroom. Part of it was demolished thanks to a mortar shell. Sophie kicked the debris away and brushed off dirt from the bedcovers.

She noticed a thin storybook peeking out beneath the pillow. Sophie picked up The Tale of
Apolleon and, for the first time, noted the name of the author. Khana.

This writer lady convinced him to abandon his World Noble life and take back this island for their daughter. Kasimir renamed himself as Khanwari as… what, some sort of tribute? He must've been desperately, insanely in love with her. Or maybe it wasn't love at all. Maybe it was… worship or something. Khana may have been the real monster. Hippo often said the pen was mightier than the sword.

None of this was Lisbeth's fault. But what did it matter now? Her parents were both dead. She had to live with their mistakes. Suddenly furious by the book and how much trouble it'd caused, Sophie hurled it out the hole in the wall. She tripped mid-throw and hit the floor with her face.

…She lay there for a long time contemplating how evil it truly was…

Sophie snuck back in the house long after midnight. The smell of firewood permeated the air. She could hear their voices fluctuate from the not-as-demolished area of the house that served as a living room. No one noticed as she tracked mud up the stairs.

Even while scrubbing away the dirt and blood in the bathtub upstairs, she could hear the indistinct, comforting thrum of their voices.

—

This was not comforting at all.

On the fourth day, cats prowled behind the house. Sophie edgily observed through the window. Why was the conference of fluffy animals in the exact and only place she didn't want them to be? Why didn't they run into her arms instead? Sophie threw the mop aside and plastered herself against the window, telepathically willing the cats to purr at her.

"...gruesome work, but someone's gotta do it," came Nellie's voice from downstairs, diverting her attention. "That crazy loon's been buryin' people alive for years, can you imagine? We're goin' through the city's records, but most of the graves are nameless…"

The cigarette fell out of her mouth. They were digging up the graves?

"What about Khanwari?" Sid's voice asked. "No one's seen a ship leave harbor, they say he's still be here somewhere."

Pineapples pineapples pineapples! She slid down the window with a sick squelching noise. There was only one person who could help her now.

—

"LAW-SAN!" Sophie burst into his cabin.

Law jerked up from his desk, eyes wild. His hair stuck up around his ears.

Without letting him get a word in, she frantically summarized what was happening in Anatole and finished with, "...I know I should've told you earlier but it doesn't matter now and you have to stop them, I stuffed his body in a mostly vacant coffin, mostly vacant because there was actually a pile of bones there and I feel really bad for whoever it was but I had no other choice, and then I borrowed a boat and rowed here except I didn't borrow so much as stole because LIFE IS REALLY HARD—"

"Sophie-ya," he said, and she shut her mouth. "Leave."
"But I—"

"And close the door behind you."

A scream built up in her throat. Violently clawing the air, she whirled around and slammed the door shut.

"Knock," his voice ordered through the metal.

She kicked the door five times. It hurt.

"Come in," he called graciously. Sophie threw the door open to his cool smirk and heavy-lidded eyes. "Was that so hard?"

"LAW-SAN," she wailed. "PLEASE STOP SCREWING AROUND!"

"You shot and killed Khanwari," Law summarized, lacing his hands together, "and you buried his body where excavations are now taking place." He stared calmly at a point over Sophie's shoulder. "...I see how this could be troubling."

"You don't say!"

"I'll take care of it."

"I swear, if I have to shove this submarine up your—what?"

Right in front of her, Law stood up and pulled his coffee-stained shirt over his head. The tattoo on his back and shoulders took up most of her line of sight; his obsession with his jolly roger was heading into bizarre territory. It even distracted her from appreciating (nay, observing!) the flexing of his muscles.

She glimpsed a flash of another swirly tattoo on his chest before he stuffed on a clean black shirt. He picked up his hat and nodachi.

"If they find his body, my crew will be blamed just like at Crawfish Island. I'll be back soon." A blue sphere spun in his palm. "Stay here."

"Don't hurt anyone!" Sophie said helplessly, but he already vanished.

She slumped on the edge of his bed that groaned under the weight of orthopedic books. She was going to die on this godforsaken island.

—

After ten minutes, he still wasn't back.

Law's room was minimal, nothing but the basics, save for the bookshelves on either wall. An entire shelf was dedicated to biochemistry, she was thrilled to see. Beneath that were books of unfamiliar islands and lore. She tugged out a particularly threadbare book stuffed in the very back. A History of Dressrosa. She straightened out the pages and set it carefully in the front.

Now that she thought about it, she didn't really know that much about Law. Did he have any hobbies besides medicine and being sarcastic? His room had a slightly unsettling atmosphere, but it was pretty bland, all things considered (aside from the jars of eyeballs, but that was another thing she'd gotten used to). A chessboard in the corner, a fish tank saturated with books instead of water.
After spending some time going through the shelves trying to find something incriminating, like fuzzy underwear with paw prints, Sophie walked around the desk. He'd fallen asleep reading a book on giants, judging by the little drool puddle on the page.

A necklace chain was halfway hidden behind the cover. She pulled it out.

J141789.

Sophie flipped the burnt dog tag over. Odin / 14 y.o was the only thing still recognizable.

His experimentation was long before her time, but she remembered reading his file. Grew up in G-13’s laboratory, where they gave him his tags and moniker. Favored aggression and brute force. Slated for a guaranteed spot in CP9. Bought by a World Noble twenty years ago. Project shut down, records erased. Human experimentation became taboo.

The second tag only had a poorly carved camellia flower. Like a kid had done it.

"Tsubaki," Sophie murmured. It was a terrible mockery, to name him something so beautiful. The old chemical warfare division had some pretty messed-up people before Vice Admiral Lettidore took over.

She should keep the tags. Lisbeth would find her someday, and she'd want them back. Sophie looped necklace around her neck and tucked the ice-cold metal under her collar.

The cabin door opened and she spun around. Law kicked the door shut.

"Oh my god!"

Blood stains covered his jeans—not his, he was walking normally. He set his nodachi down, carrying something in his other hand. "I took care of it."

"What happened!?!"

He just looked at her.

"Right… okay." Lightheaded, Sophie sank to the floor. "Um… th-thanks. Thank you."

He turned and revealed what he'd been holding—a bottle of bourbon and a glass. "I was unaware you had the guts to kill a World Noble," Law said, choosing to forgo the desk and stretched out beside her on the floor. She shifted a little bit to the side.

"I mean, he asked that Shichibukai to burn Crawfish Island. I told him I figured it out and was going to help Lisbeth-san, and seeing how his modus operandi is burying people alive…" Sophie shrugged.

He shook his head. "You get in the strangest situations."

"One could say I was… in a grave condition." She elbowed the air.

Law eyed her.

"Good thing you're a doctor, because you could cure my coffin."

He glanced at the bookshelf while pouring bourbon. "You're taking an extremely traumatic incident rather well."
"Of corpse. Who the pineapples do you think I am?"

"I can hear your tell. You tap when you're agitated."

So she was. Sophie forced herself to stop. "Yeah, well… f-fake it 'till you m-make it has become my new motto."

"That working out well for you?" Law offered her the glass and, as Sophie was busy sipping it, tossed the dusty *A History of Dressrosa* back into the shadows.

She licked the side of her mouth. "I sometimes fall back on my clever wit and dashing good looks."

Law showed her a glint of the top row of his teeth. She supposed it passed for a smile. He drank from the bottle and reclined on the floor, one leg crossed over the other. He was like a big cat or something, completely unaware of his own personal bubble.

Sophie started talking. She told him what Khanwari was trying to accomplish, and everything that led up to the fatal shot (except the part where she tortured him by aiming for painful yet non-vital areas… though Law might've figured that out by looking at the corpse). "Things are going to be so different now," she finished. "I mean, I knew that when I—I made the choice consciously. But it's not like I had a bad life at G-13. No sob stories more than your average genius. I got everything I wanted." Sophie picked at the bandages on her hands. "As long as I did what I was told."

"Sounds like you were part of a cult."

"Says the stinky pirate!"

He raised his eyebrows at her.

"Right. I keep forgetting I don't have to defend them anymore." She took a long drink and absentmindedly shuffled the papers strewn around them. "It was worth it. I'll be on the run for the rest of my life, but I can also choose what to do with my life. And my knowledge is for *me* only." Nothing like Vira would ever happen again. "I'm thinking fireworks maker or demolitions expert. I can pull off a hardhat pretty well. And I don't have to hate you out of obligation anymore."

"No, you'll simply hate me out of spite."

"Exactly."

Yes, fireworks maker or demolitions expert… somewhere in a sleepy little town in an even sleepier island… there weren't many places in Grand Line where she could hide. Maybe the quietest corner in East Blue. A simple, banal existence…

"…I have another request. Long story short, I need to make a few people disappear."

"You want me to kill them? That's a new low."

"They're already dead." Law already had enough dirt on her to sell her to Impel Down. It didn't really matter now. "Experiment on them or toss them into the ocean, I don't care. I just want them gone. I'm sure you can hide them somewhere beneath all the corpses you robbed."

He shrugged, totally unashamed, and contemplated the ceiling. That was the weird thing about him, it was so hard to tell if he was judging, if he judged at all. "What did they do to you?"

"Not to me. They're just… bad people."
"...I see."

Sophie felt like she had to explain herself. "I mean, I would've loved to sentence them to a lifetime of hard labor at Tequila Wolf. But those men were respected here. People like them. I had to do it. I was here, I knew about it, so I had to."

He shot up and grabbed her hand, appreciating her jolt of surprise as she whipped around. His fingers were cold.

"Fine." The way he looked at her. "Out of the kindness of my black heart, I'll help you out."

Her traitorous brain suddenly thought to the curve of his spine vanishing into the top of his jeans. He was so close she pushed herself against the wall, equal parts flustered and panicked, every muscle in her body tensed to oblivion—and all she could do was stare at him and the blotchy dark stains under his eye and the cracked mosaic of his lips. Her heartbeat skipped.

"Pudding," she said.

"...What?"

Bright red, Sophie ripped her hand away so fast it smacked the wall. "Don't ever again—ow, pain!"

Law drank from the bottle, but she could tell he was smirking from the way his eye crinkled at her. He was acting... different, lately. Instead of being totally apathetic to her wellbeing—he was now treating her like she was a person. Was this... respect from a pirate? She scrambled to her feet, blinking nervously, muttering she had to go back to Anatole. This was too weird. She didn't want to figure him out. She didn't care about his past, or who those eyeballs originally belonged to, or what sort of coffee he drank (black, she knew without asking).

"The murder spree a recent development?" he called as she hurried to the door.

Her hand paused on the handle. She bit her lip to stop herself from grinning.

"If you weren't so stupid powerful, I would've tried killing you a long time ago."

"If you weren't so shrewd, I would've managed to finish the job." Law held up the bottle. "Cheers."

—

Law put a stop to the manhunt, reasoning that if they hadn't found the king yet he probably escaped a long time ago, and wouldn't their resources and time be better spent to help treat the wounded? Sophie didn't know what happened to the king's body, but the excavations continued at the castle and there wasn't a single word about it. She went to the remaining Crawfish ship afterwards and discussed the possibility of them dropping her off at one the islands near the Calm Belt. (But my plans might change, I'm just wondering if it's feasible, she adding, thinking back to the Heart Pirates).

All's well that ended decently, she decided.

That was when the door knocked.

Nellie went to get it, as Sophie was busy jumping up and down, whacking away cobwebs with her broom. The door opened and a lean, fluffy-hatted pirate turned around with a charming grin.

"Good afternoon," Law said pleasantly.
Sophie was so surprised she hit her head with the broom handle. Nellie gasped and stepped back. Before either could say anything, Sophie muscled herself in front of Nellie, gripping the broom like a sword.

"Just visiting." He smiled at Nellie. "Think of this as a… courtesy call with an ally. Shall we have tea?"

Nellie found her voice again after several flabbergasted seconds of blinking. "$I… well…” Sophie shook her head furiously, nonononono. "$Y-yeah, c'mon in…”

As the older woman went to brew more sunflower tea, Sophie stomped over to Law, who was examining the shabby little house with polite interest. He looked down at the floor and the chalk drawings of molecules Sophie made.

"Peptide hormones. Nice."

"What are you doing?" she practically spluttered.

Law nodded towards the window, where two familiar hats and one familiar orange boiler suit tiptoed around the corner of the house. Bepo carried shovels and Shachi and Penguin dragged a rickety cart over to a big pile of debris in the back of the alley—Sophie's impromptu burial site.

"When I asked you to help me, I didn't mean like this!" Sophie hissed.

"What do beggars say?"

"This isn't what I didn't pay for!"

"My crew is extremely busy and we're leaving the day after tomorrow," Law said with a hint of irritation. "$I was either now or never."

"What, you're taking scheduled field trips around the island?" she fired back.

"I believe that was in Shachi's plans for today, yes. Do you want our help or not? I can call it off." He waited expressionlessly, because he had no stake in this and she was totally depending on him.

She grabbed a fistful of Law's shirt and yanked him to her level.

"…Sometimes I really hate you."

"I try my best."

"Tea's ready." Nellie stood by the kitchen door, regarding them with a befuddled frown. Law reverted to his easy, plastic smile.

Sophie immediately pushed him away. It felt like hitting a tree trunk.

"Follow my lead," he muttered under his breath, and walked into the kitchen complimenting the 'wonderful smell'. Sophie hoped there was a traveling circus troupe nearby accepting applicants.

"What brings you to this humble abode?" Nellie passed out two cups of sunflower tea, her back facing the window. Which was good, because the pirates just unearthed a maggot-ridden hand and started poking it.

"I've heard many things about you from Sophie-ya," Law said. "$Courageous fighter and spectacular inn keeper." Sophie nodded in support while making mental gagging sounds. "$How is Crawfish
Island faring?"

Outside, Penguin and Shachi struggled to pull out a body. The arm popped off and sent them flying into Bepo.

"We'll manage. So." Nellie gestured to him with her steaming tea, somehow not spilling a single drop. "Where ya from, Trafalgar?"

"Pirates call the ocean their home."

Sophie tapped her knee, watching Bepo accidentally decapitate Couthon. Great evasion. Ten points.

"Uh-huh. How long have you been a pirate?"

"A long time." He suddenly switched subjects. "Sophie-ya told me you—"

"No, no, I'm not done with the questions," Nellie said swiftly and took a sip of tea. Through the window, Shachi waved at Sophie with the corpse's arm. Penguin thumped him in the head. "Tell me about your relationship to Canary-chan."

Sophie tried to drown herself with tea. This wasn't happening.

"We are temporary allies. There's nothing more to say." Beside him, she nodded... though not as fervently as she could have.

"Excellent," Nellie said, though she wasn't smiling.

Outside, crows landed on the pile of corpses. Shachi and Penguin tried shooing them away, to no avail. More appeared from the sky. Sophie kicked Law's ankle. Crows swarmed over Shachi and Penguin as they fought for their lives. Bepo ran at them, waving a broken saw.

Nellie frowned. "What was that?"

"Look at this!" Sophie grabbed Law's wrist and held it up. "Look a-at his... uh... tattoos! Aren't they weird? They're so weird."

Law did some complicated wrist flippy thing and somehow he ended up holding her hand, which he set back on her knee. She could practically feel the *let me handle this* waves radiating off him. Nellie appraised this interaction with narrowed eyes.

"Are you two sleeping together?"

Choking on air was an actual thing, Sophie discovered. Law's grin immediately strained.

"We aren't," he said.

"WE AREN'T," she repeated vehemently.

"Definitely not."

"I feel like washing my hands just thinking about it."

"Mentally, psychologically, physically, spiritually, and emotionally if I had to pick a fifth—"

"Nellie-san, how could you even—"
"A gross assumption of epic proportions—"

"I WOULD RATHER DIE."

Nellie seemed taken aback with such vigorous denial. "Pardon the accusation." She stood up. "I'll get more tea."

"Wait!" Law said quickly. The exhausted, traumatized pirates were hurriedly shoveling dirt back into the ditch. Feathers stuck out of their boiler suits. "…Sophie-ya had something she wanted to tell you."

She would strangle him in his sleep later. "Law-san has a giant tattoo of his jolly roger on his back. That's pretty weird, right?"

Though he merely looked at her, she got the sense he was deeply offended. "…Expand."

"Not only that, but all your shirts have your jolly roger on it."

"As a Heart Pirate, and especially as their captain, it would be ridiculous of me to not wear it. Why? It shows group morale and inspires confidence."

"It's literally everywhere. If it's a clever way of advertising yourself… oh. I can buy that."

His groan was poorly muffled.

"…Are you sure you two aren't—"

"We aren't!" Sophie yelped, Law snapped.

Penguin, Shachi, and Bepo finally finished loading up the cart and covered the bodies with a tarp. Nellie walked around the table just as they rolled out of the alley. Sophie breathed a sigh of relief and met Law's gaze. He gave her a my-dear-Strangways-ya-let-this-be-the-point-where-your-confidence-in-me-and-my-jolly-roger-is-restored sort of smirk. She grinned back in a shut up kind of way.

Law stood up. "Thank you for the tea." He'd hardly touched it.

"One last thing." Nellie walked up to Law. "I really hope you're not plannin' to make her a pirate."

The sound of Sophie's heartbeat intensified rapidly. His neck suddenly corded with tension, and then relaxed just as quickly.

"Canary-chan has a good life, so don't you go tryin' to steal her away." She poked his chest with a crimson fingernail. "She has a proper job an' a proper home, an' she doesn't need irresponsible people messin' up her future. Especially an all-male pirate crew."

"In that case, you needn't be worried about me."

Sophie actually had to repeat that line several times in her head, and nearly missed the rest of his words—"I agree with your views, besides… piracy is a particular occupation only suitable for particular people." When Law said that, it felt like he was speaking directly to her face. "I have my hands full with enough matters as it is. Have a good evening, Nellie-ya."

Sophie focused on the tea at the bottom of her cup as the front door closed. She didn't know what the worse slap was: the lack of hesitation, or how he didn't even look at her as he said no. Which was fine, because she wouldn't have accepted anyway. There were far too many variables and unknowns, and she'd probably last a week before going crazy or getting killed, and it wasn't the
lifestyle she wanted, and… and…

Nellie sat down beside her, repentant. "Sorry if I went a little overboard."

"No, it's fine." Why would she be hurt about it? She wasn't hoping for anything. "Law-san and I, you know… it doesn't matter."

"He's not that bad. Him an' his crew."

No, they weren't. They were going to explore the world and meddle with the World Government and make headlines and somehow inexplicably sail all the way to the end of the Grand Line, One Piece or not. She was going to live out a lonely, miserable existence on the most boring island imaginable with a dozen cats who hated her, and she was going to die alone, and no one would ever appreciate her genius, and she'd never see Hippo again.

"Not that bad," Sophie echoed.

She was rejected before she even sent in the application. Ouch.

—

Her dreams were stuck on repeat. Running and running and running. Fingernails black with dirt. Thunderstorms in her ears. Returning fire. Winning. Adrenaline. Every night it was the same tune, difficult to sleep to, but not a cacophony… except for this night. The record was scratched.

It was a blurry, stream of consciousness sort of thing: they were stationed at Blithe District, a prominently loyalist area. She made note of how perfect her brain had conjured up the setting: her rifle's grip, the stiff band-aids on her jaw, the crackle of a storm on the dusty-tan horizon. All the same. A little girl wearing Lisbeth's face lay on the ground, her cheek swollen orange.

Her bloated, bleeding squad collapsed one by one.

_Huh._ Even the bomb in her hand was just as she remembered.

Someone jerked her shoulder. Her eyes flew open in panic, and, not even half-awake, Sophie leaped from the bed and smashed her knuckles into—

Nellie lay on the floor, clutching her nose.

Blank shock slammed into Sophie. Her fist froze in mid-air.

And the next instant Sid grabbed the scruff of her shirt and shoved her into the wall. He was yelling at her, but she could only see Nellie—on the floor—

"I'm s-so-sorry, I d-didn't—didn't know—"

"The hell you mean, you didn't know!?"

"Shid, Ah'm fahn," Nellie said through her nosebleed.

Odin's tags were choking her. She fumbled at them, stuttering, "I-I—re-record s-scratched—"

"Why did you hit her?"

"Shid, ish okay!"
In her disorientated state, Sophie did the first thing she could think of.

She ran.

"TRAFAKLAR LAW! GET OUT HERE!"

Sophie stomped around the deck of the submarine. It was still dawn and her breath came out wet and misty, but she was filled with rage. She wanted to pound a thick ton of metal into cookie dough. She wanted to smother herself in cigarette smoke.

Why coffins? Why did it have to be something as tacky and nightmare-inducing as coffins? Hey, she could go farther. Why rain down fire on a swamp island filled with natural gas? Why stick a syringe filled with parathion into her foot? Why, why, why!?

"I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME, PIRATE! WAKE UP AND G-GET YOUR BUTT DOWN HERE!"

The door slammed open and a haggard, sleep-deprived captain appeared. He was wearing yesterday's clothes. "What," he began, "is wrong with—"

"It's not fair!" Sophie screamed at him.

Law blinked groggily. "…Huh."

"It's not fair! How are you always getting what you want!? You—you f—" Her hands clenched the air in front of her, as though it was his throat. "They should be ch-chasing you off with p-pitchforks and torches! Instead you g-get free b-beer and people l-like you and—and I—I'm so p-pissed off!"

"Shut up!" a distant voice yelled from inside the submarine.

"Then hit me," Law rasped.

"Wha…" She screwed her fists tight, her face red. "What the p-p-pineapples are y-you talking about!?"

He rubbed his forehead with his palm. "Free hit. Do it."

"N—no!"

"I can handle it."

"It's not—I-I'm n-not psychotic! I don't have a d-death wish!"

"Last chance."

To him, one of her punches would have less of an effect than a mosquito bite. He wouldn't even feel it. She reared back her fist, putting all her anger behind it, and remembered how Nellie crumpled to the floor. Her face wrinkled furiously, like, god, she was so pissed off and the only thing she felt like doing was bawling.

His flat gaze shifted from the horizon to Sophie as she dropped her fist and crouched down on her knees.

"Why do I keep hurting the extremely few people I care about? Is it a curse?" She looked at the sky.
"Are you angry with me!?"

Law closed his eyes briefly in impatience. "Should I ask what you did or do you have someone else to yell at?"

Okay. Maybe she deserved that.

"Sockied Nellie-san. Right in the face. I think. I woke up really fast, I couldn't tell what was happening until after I—" A revelation. "I don't feel safe. That's it. I've only been sleeping with a gun under my pillow, and that's not enough, not close to enough. I should get some—some trip wires, a few knives, flash grenades. Sleep right next to the door—next to the window. Whip up some tear gas in the meantime…"

He frowned. "When was the last time you got more than three hours of sleep?"

"In succession?" she asked miserably.

Her rowboat swayed on the waves. Sunrise spread over the ocean like watercolor on canvas.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Hungry?"

…What?

Sophie raised her eyes to his.

"We have cold leftovers and coffee." A corona of gold formed around the black fringe of his hair as he nodded at the door. "Come in if you want."

He started walking without looking back. Partly because he actually extended an invitation this time, and mostly because she couldn't go back to Anatole, Sophie followed. It was pretty much impossible for her to become a Heart Pirate anyway, Law said so himself.

"Hey… what sort of coffee do you drink?" It wouldn't matter in twenty-four hours, so what the mangoes. Carpe diem.

"Black. You?"

"Ten sugars."

The galley and mess were empty. Law punched a few buttons on a vacuum coffee maker and fired up the stove. Out of instinct Sophie stood by the door, beside a towering pile of pots. The galley was cluttered in a thoroughly-lived-in sort of way, from the sauce-stained recipe books to the little remains of spice jars having been spilled and quickly picked up again. Dishes still drying from midnight snacks. Scuff marks on the floor from repetitive turning from counter to stove, counter to stove.

"Captain, when did you switch jobs with Hai Xing?" a voice behind her said. Sophie stepped aside as Penguin entered the galley, yawning. Their eyes met. "Oh… hey."

"Good morning."

"That you screaming outside?"

"I think it was a crow. You know how vicious they can be."

She could've sworn the corner of Law's mouth twitched. Or it was a trick of the light.
"Yeah, you're welcome, by the way." Penguin went to the refrigerator.

Slowly, pirates began trickling in. She tried to keep out of their way. Shachi gave her a high-five when he entered and showed her an epic battle scar he got from the soldiers, and then he was running back out, shouting something about investigating the underground tunnels.

"Captain, are you feeling alright?" a pirate asked nervously.

"Is that really food?" another whispered. "Remember what happened last time Captain had the galley to himself?"

Law waved the ladle at them menacingly. "Do you want to eat or not?"

There seemed to be a sort of ritual chaos to the early morning habits of the Heart Pirates. They all grabbed their own plates and whatever food they could find—cold pasta, biscuits, something grey and mushy Sophie took as porridge. Some filled up their plates and disappeared; others ate where they stood. The galley was constantly moving. She caught snatches of conversations—"Inspecting the ballast tanks in a bit, how's the barnacle thing going?" "Not well, the annoying little suckers seem to double every day…"

"Now this is a rare sight," Manta boomed, staring at Law.

He gave an exasperated why-does-everyone-keep-saying-that exhale. "I'm just warming it up."

"A brain?" Manta queried eagerly.

"Food."

Sophie had to bite her lip to stop giggling. A few pirates drowsily shuffled by her with toothbrushes stuffed in their mouths. Anko came tramping in gargling mouthwash, "Bathroom is always too damn cramped—oh hei Sohwie-hwan!"

When Hai Xing limped in, the whole galley burst in applause. According to Manta, that'd been happening everywhere Hai Xing went since he woke up yesterday. Laughing, Anko smacked Hai Xing on the back and threw him into a bowl of raw Sea King meat. That had also been happening as well.

Hai Xing met her gaze (maybe; it was hard to tell underneath his hat) and nodded at her. She drew a happy face in the air with a spoon. He didn't smile. It was worth a shot.

Law handed her a cup of coffee and a plate of leftovers... porridge, some oysters, and fish balls. Sophie wolfed down her plate in record time, barely noticing the bowl of sugar cubes he set by her elbow. Hai Xing went to work at the stoves as the pots started boiling over; he took one look at it and just said to his captain: "...Really?" The galley broke out in laughter, and their captain—Sophie was floored to see—was grinning as he raised hands in apology.

The aloof mystique of Trafalgar Law was dissolving by the second.

_I'll leave in ten minutes_, she thought, chugging her coffee, and remembered Nellie. One hour. She'd leave in one hour.

Somehow, she ended up spending the rest of the day on the submarine.

Penguin was partly to thank for that, as he began intensely discussing the complicated inner processes of the submarine when she just asked how the oxygen thingamajig worked underwater,
and then he started walking, and she decided to follow him. The hallways rang with shouts to recalibrate the log systems already damn it to Roger, followed by explosions of colorful swearing (that immediately stopped when they noticed Sophie's presence). A group of the same pirates kept appearing behind every corner they turned—keeping an eye on her because of suspicion, she reasoned, as Penguin facepalmed and made threatening motions at them.

The engine room was extraordinary. Awed, Sophie carefully ducked under pipes and crept past humming machinery. Wires and buttons, like the capillaries of a heart, crisscrossed the walls. The science, the science! She liked the comfortable, ordinary items here and there—pillows in the crook between two machines, dishes and coffee mugs stacked in the corner, newspaper clippings of the Heart Pirates' exploits plastered on the walls. Two mechanics, who just woke up judging by their sleepy-eyed yawns, were startled at her appearance.

"We're heading up for food," one of the mechanics wearing a bandana said, sparing Sophie a short glance over. "Don't make yourself at home. She staying long?" he asked Penguin.

"She's staying however long your captain's fine with," Sophie replied, her grin full of barbed wires.

Bandana laughed. "Or you'd lose your head again, right? We should make a game out of that." She scowled, ears red, totally unfair—"Come back later when we actually have time to show you around," he called over his shoulder.

…How did pirates always manage to catch her off-guard? Were they trained?

Penguin set to work on a valve in silence. Sophie entertained herself by going through the newspaper clippings—was that Bepo on the bottom of Law's bounty poster? Yeesh, that was a lot of zeros...

The polar bear knocked on the doorway, examining the Log Pose. "Captain says to check on the rudder system."

"Aye."

"I'm the navigator," the polar bear said to Sophie.

Stars appeared in her eyes. "So cool!"

"Bepo, stop trying to start a fanclub," Penguin muttered.

"...I'm the navigator."

"You're sooo cool!"

From the speaking tube, Anko began singing, "You saved me from that soldier, yeah, stuck an arrow in his neck, blood spraying everywhere, yeahhh…"

"He does his actual job well," Penguin muttered, almost apologetically. She was too busy smiling at Bepo while trying to not stare or smile too widely, except she ended up looking like a demented scarecrow.

Bepo waved a paw at Sophie. "Do you fish?"

---

It was late afternoon by the time the Heart Pirates finished stocking up their food stores. Fishing was too troublesome (and worms were slimy and ew), so she rolled up her sleeves and helped Bepo haul
up the nets. "I was wondering why the Marines haven't arrived yet," he said, throwing two flopping nets over his shoulder and sniffed them hungrily.

"W-what do y-you want to know?" Sophie grabbed the main net and hurled it on the deck with a thud. She wiped her hands, noticing the sting. Pineapples. Did one of her wounds reopen? "The ships sailed back to Crawfish Island, but they don't have a line to the Marines. Only Gator Town sort of did, but the Shichibukai took care of that."

"What about calling other islands around the vicinity? And then having them call G-13?"

"S-say they called four days ago, the earliest they could've arrived at Crawfish. Accounting for the time it'll take to reach the top, forces available, preparation, and weather, it'll still take another… two days or so for G-13 to get here."

The rest of the pirates headed inside with their loot. Penguin stuck behind, listening to their conversation. "There could be other Marine ships around Alabasta ready to go."

"No," Law said, arriving from below deck. "They won't be able to spare any forces."

He held up a newspaper.

Bepo read the headline and crossed his paws. "We've rescued enough kingdoms for a while. We can let another pirate crew handle Alabasta."

"They're too preoccupied with a civil war on a major economic country whose leader sits in the Reverie. Cat's Eye is one of the least significant islands this side of Paradise. Only the highest chain of command should know the king's true identity, and this news has to pass through everybody else to be heard by them. That won't happen… not until we're all long gone."

"Khanwari left Mariejois," Penguin said. "He left the World Government. Why should they still care about him?"

"They care enough to follow his instructions twenty years later," Sophie pointed out. "He could've prepared for this, have people looking, warned someone. I say we all leave as soon as possible. Vice Admiral Lettidore knows I'm here, he's probably keeping an ear to the ground."

Law nodded. "The Log Pose already locked on to the next island. Tomorrow morning, we raise anchor and set a course to Ruluka." He clapped his hands once, as though to signify the end of the conversation.

She planted her hands on her hips, pensively watching Law. There was still one more thing she'd meant to ask him… it wouldn't stop bothering her and was nowhere near as prying as asking about his past (which she was completely indifferent about, ahem). The pirates were walking inside, but he held back, as though sensing she had more to say.

"This is going to sound out of the blue," she scratched her chin, "but if it's okay, I'd like to see Odin. Specifically, what the people I work for did to him. Even more specifically, the legacy of her division. But Law didn't need to know that.

"You'll see what I did to him as well."

That meant blood and guts and sinew. "Nothing new to me."

He considered her. The lengthening shadows stretched over his face and made him all dark sharp angles.
"Feel free to say no, I just wanted to ask before I leave," Sophie added.

Finally Law said, "Follow."

—

"His vocal chords were removed. The giantification process was a botched job, you can see some of the ligaments appearing shrunken." Law indicated to the muscle mass on Odin's thigh. "Parts of his body couldn't keep up. That's why he appeared to be an abnormally big man, rather than an actual giant. His pain receptors have essentially been shut down to make the agony of his organs growing at different speeds somewhat bearable. I found a lifetime of neurolytic block injections in his bloodstream. It wasn't an experiment the World Government did—it was a mutilation."

He sounded disturbingly cheerful. The smell of death and sweet rot soaked the air.

Sophie walked around the table, finding her gaze drawn to the space between his head and his neck. "He was a kid," she muttered with distaste. "G-13 did this to a kid."

"What is done is done. Don't pity him. All murderers start out as children."

She made a face at his creepy smile. "Gross."

"The last thing he said was the princess' name," he said conversationally, amused by her discomfort.

"But he can't speak?"

"I read his lips right before I cut his head off."

Sophie made herself look at Odin's face and tried to imagine how Lisbeth saw him.

Lisbeth grew up like her. She never went outside her home, only had one real friend who protected her since childhood, and when she did leave her castle to help a cause she believed in, it failed. Now she can never go back. She deserved better, better than this war and her parents and Sophie, better than to see someone she loved killed.

Pity wouldn't help her now. Sophie realized her fingers were biting into her palms and winced.

"I think one of my wounds reopened…"

Law nodded. "For old times' sake?"

With a roll of her eyes, she yielded, "Fine, but the smell in here is too—"

Her knees hit the edge of a bed in the dark sick bay. She sat down hard. Argh, you'd think she would've expected this by now. He scooted up to her on a swirly chair and unwrapped the bandages. The sick bay was so quiet she could hear the faucet dripping. She gazed meditatively at the smooth motions of his fingers.

"Not a lot of people have seen my hands," she said, without really thinking.

"Hm."

"I usually wear gloves. They're kind of horrifying."

"No one should die without a few scars," Law murmured and traced the chemical burn across her palm—fourteen years old, lye accident. Shivers ran up her spine.
She watched the moon rise over the ocean through the porthole, because it was safer than watching him. "W-we're going t-to see her again, you know. Lisbeth-san."

"I don't doubt it. The enemies you make in this line of work are often lasting." He sounded... chillier than normal. Law bandaged up to her knuckles, leaving her fingers uncovered. "What are you going to do when she finds you?"

"Hope I have some personal burial money." Sophie shrugged. "I want a nice big coffin next time. Solid gold. Lined with cushions and maybe a nostalgic chemistry textbook or two." Waiting for the day she'd be assassinated was better than waiting for her wrinkly, decaying death.

"Sounds like you're looking forward to it," Law said, with a soft edge to his voice Sophie probably would've heard if she'd been looking for it.

Her lips twisted in a small grin. "I won't hurt Lisbeth-san again. And you know how stubborn I get about my principles."

He let her hands drop to her knees. "You've killed five men."

"And a Den Den Mushi. To be frank, I feel worse about the snail. What's your point?"

"That's exactly what I mean." He sounded... stern, almost. "Sentiment is archaic."

What was he saying? 'Sympathy is last year's black'? "I disagree on the basis of that's stupid."

"Do you have a better reason?"

"No. But it's still stupid."

Law leaned back and, though his face was impassive, she got the feeling he was surreptitiously analyzing her. "All the times I've tried to kill you, and the only way I could was for you to hurt me so irredeemably you'd die from the guilt?" He went quiet for a few seconds (she counted three and half faucet-drips) and said at last, "That is the worst strategy I've ever heard of."

Sophie lit a cigarette. "Yeah, probably because I don't consider my life as one huge chess game."

"Perhaps that's why you have a bad habit of losing," Law said calmly.

Sophie stared at him, ash falling from her cigarette... and then a smile burst across her face, genuine and sun-bright. "You're totally lecturing me."

A crease formed in the middle of his forehead. That reaction was not at all what he'd meant to provoke.

"You are!" she said happily. "You're trying to give me advice in the meanest way possible so it won't give away your true intentions. "That's why you have a bad habit of losing," she mimicked in his low voice, and brightened. "That is exactly what a big bad evil pirate would say to his archenemy as they part ways. Thank goodness I'm leaving tomorrow, because a few more days around me and you'd be monologuing your entire villainous plans for the future."

One eyebrow crept up. "I do not... monologue."

"And you don't joke around with ex-World Government chemists, yet here we are."

His lips twitched upward in what was definitely a smile, for which Sophie gave herself a mental pat on the back. She'd take it. This famous super rookie wasn't so much enigmatic as he was a
competitive, smug meanie. *When did it get so easy to talk to him?* Before she even finished the thought, she was speaking again.

"I'm heading to Idyll tomorrow." An unremarkable little island close to the Calm Belt, very much off the beaten path. She planned to stay there for a while to figure out what she was going to do with her life. "So, um… goodbye and thanks. You know. The whole farewell shebang." Sophie tried to look cool as she blew smoke at the ceiling.

Law leveled her an expectant gaze. "Are you going to cry again?"

Splotches of red colored her cheeks. "N-no!"

"Hm. Pity."

"Do you feast on the tears of babies? Is that how you gained your powers?"

"Yes," Law confirmed.

"Sadist."

He laughed at that, low and brief. Telling *her* she needed to abandon all sentiment, ye who enter the Grand Line, when he was the most laidback pirate she'd ever heard of. Laidback, mocking, with a gruesome sense of humor… *I'll miss him,* Sophie realized with a stab of shock… which slowly morphed into delight. She'd miss him! Him and his crazy schemes and his crazier ambitions. It was so ridiculous, so absolutely *silly* and pointless and every other nonsensical thing in the world, and she couldn't stop grinning because she'd tried so hard to avoid this outcome and it snuck up on her anyway.

He held out his hand. "Take care of yourself. Not all pirates are as nice as I am."

She laughed a little, tucking her hair back. "If I ever meet someone else who tries to kill me with poison, I'll let you know." His skin was hard and callused. This was probably one of those things she'd think back to later and swoon over or something. *Ah, Sophie.* "Good luck with the, you know, One Piece thing. Burn some Marine ships for me."

Law smirked. "I'll see what I can do."

The door crashed open.

"Shit!" The pirates leaned too far out from their eavesdropping corner and tumbled over each other. Shachi was the first to recover and ran up to them. "GROUP HUG!"

Law visibly paled.

"Shachi, you know I don't—"

He slammed into Law, closely followed by Penguin, and Bepo scooped the three of them up. Sophie ducked under them and whirled around just as Anko appeared.

"YOU'VE BEEN SUPER COOL AND WE'LL MISS YOU!" Anko threw his arms wide open.

"*Gah!"* Sophie punched him in the face.

"Ow, my eye!"

"Sorry! Reflex!"
Sophie's good mood siphoned away as she walked back to Nellie's house. This was more terrifying than the chem certification exam she took when she was thirteen.

You can do this, it's a simple apology. She knocked quickly on the door. A stony-faced Sid received her and all of her courage deflated like a balloon. She shuffled to the kitchen. Nellie was stirring a pot when she entered, a bandage plastered on her nose. She didn't look up, so she was either ignoring her or... she was definitely ignoring her.

"I completely understand if you hate me—in fact, please do everything in your power to hate me," she said in a rush. "There was a nightmare, you know—and. And I wasn't hitting you. But, I mean, I did, but—I'm sorry. I just... I'm s-sorry. I'm so sorry."

Nellie kept stirring. Sophie felt woozy. Good thing she already made a nest in a cardboard box outside.

Guts! You fought in two wars, for crying out loud!

"Nellie-san!" With a sick sort of desperation, she stood her ground. "I-I'm go-gonna keep s-saying sorry u-until you e-either kill me or r-respond! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm—"

"The bell peppers aren't gonna wash themselves."

—sorreeeh?"

"You. Wash. Bell peppers."

It took a minute to register. Bewildered, Sophie dragged her feet over to the sink, watching Nellie carefully in case she was going to chuck a boiling hot pot at her head. The older woman peeled and deveined shrimp with astounding swiftness. "Idyll, huh. Not headin' home?"

"I have about half a dozen years of vacation days to use."

"There must be people back home who miss you," she said neutrally.

"Um, y-yeah. I mean—person. Just one person."

"Chop the peppers when you're done." Nellie ruffled her hair as she passed by. She flinched in surprise at the act of fondness. "Here, Sophie, you'll need this." She handed her a knife.

Sophie was so relieved she didn't seem to mind her inability to function as a social creature, she didn't even realize Nellie called her by her actual name. Now that she thought about it, Nellie never minded. She accepted her, nervous tics and all, from the very beginning...

"Thank you," Sophie said, taking the knife.

She tilted her head, smiling. "Yeah, of course."

Romarin stuck her head in and gasped. "I haven't smelled that in twenty years... are you makin' jambalaya?"

"Sure am. Wanna help?"

Sid came in with a new batch of pudding and a quiet apology for Sophie, who turned white as a Horo Horo ghost and spluttered that it was completely my fault and you need to stop saying sorry
right this minute, okay. Romarin handled the sizzling pans as Nellie diced tomatoes and celery with ease. Cooking was a warfare Sophie was glad to appreciate from a distance. She lost herself in the repetitive chop-chop-chop and the smell of something faintly nostalgic, something that reminded her of humid swamps and dust on her brow.

She temporarily stopped counting escape routes and stopped fearing tomorrow—because this moment, it was okay to feel at ease.

—

five days previous

"Saint Kasimir, you are—and I mean this in the politest way—SO BRAINLESS YOU LITERALLY SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO EXIST!"

Lightning hit the tower and traveled downwards. A massive burst of electricity shot through the island.

In the depths of the ocean, something stirred. Creaking slowly, the metal slid open and overturned centuries of rock and coral.

Apolleion opened its eyes.

*to be continued*
It was a beautiful day to leave her life behind.

Through one of the many shattered windows in the castle, Sophie watched the Crawfish ship float gently on the waves. The sky was robin's egg blue, real pretty, the kind you'd want on the day of your funeral. *I've become awfully dramatic lately.* Sophie indulged herself another sigh of self-pity. Not that she was dying or anything, just… taking a permanent vacation. Ugh, that sounded bleak.

But trying to shake off the vortex of doom and misery eating at her insides left her more anxious. She continued hiking through the rubble, her thoughts drifting to G-13. They weren't going to roll over and let her escape. Vice Admiral Lettidore was like a bloodhound; he loved the hunt. He also had close ties to CP5. They'd be searching for her if they weren't already. She'd have to find some way to prepare for the inevitable.

Sid told her she'd find Nellie at the top of the tower. Sophie didn't want to go back there, but the ship was leaving soon and it was best to say goodbye in private. Den Den Mushis were ringing off the hook and she lost track of all the waterworks and spontaneous jubilant dancing that was occurring around… well, everywhere. Law threatened a few Crawfishers to not mention his crew's name under the pain of alarmingly creative torture—come morning the whole city was tiptoeing around Sophie, who was shooed into the pirates' sphere of influence by association. That was kinda cool.

The tower was as small and mechanical as she remembered. Rain washed away the grime and the rusty, chipping gears shone in the sunlight.

Sophie tiptoed over. "How's your nose?"

She asked the same question every five minutes she was around Nellie. It got to the point where the older woman gave up making comforting noises and instead replied with aggravated sarcasm. "Dead. My nose died because of you. I had to fashion a new one out of the flesh of kittens."

"Funny," Sophie said in relief and joined her looking over Anatole. Well, Nellie looked out and Sophie looked down at the dirty berets of some grave diggers doing their job far too early in the morning. "What are you doing up here?"

"People kept tellin' me to bask in the presence of some pointless yellow flowers." Nellie waved at the sprawling sunflower fields.

Sophie remembered how gorgeous it seemed a few days ago… a week ago? Had it really been that long? But this time, an awful caged feeling crawling up her spine replaced novelty. Staying on one island for the rest of her life and seeing the same things over and over would be torturous. How did she ever manage to spend nineteen years in one Marine base? Sophie couldn't imagine living like that ever again. Clearly, she'd been on Cat's Eye far too long.

"And that ugly brown thing in the middle looks like a mouth," Nellie was saying, motioning at the sunflower fields.

"Points for being well-fertilized."

"...Sophie."
"Sorry. Hey, you're not wearing your ring anymore. And you're wearing shorts." Burn scars trailing down her bare legs. From what she remembered, Nellie always hid them.

"It's a warm day," Nellie responded blithely.

Sophie leaned against a pillar. A yellow speck drifted on the ocean. They must be busy preparing to leave, going off on their next big adventure. It wouldn't take long for her to become a blurry afterimage in their memories… whereas she would remember them for the rest of her life. She sulked in her arms. *Unfair.*

"The Evil Ruler's defeated, our scrappy hero triumphs, loose ends tied up. Happy resolution, curtains close, roll credits. Why do you look so down?"

"Perfect formulas don't exist in the natural world. If everything fell into the statistical norm, \( x \) bar equals satisfied ending, there wouldn't be bell-shaped curves and standard deviations. No potential outliers."

"Um."

"I may have found the thymine to my adenine."

"Uh-huh…"

"I wanted to join the Heart Pirates."

"Oh."

—

"I've never seen *One Piece*, but this has got to be pretty damn close," Shachi said in an awed voice.

Having broken into Khanwari's famous treasure room, the Heart Pirates were finally able to reap the rewards of their adventure. Law cut open the locks on the treasure chests. Bepo immediately dived in a huge pile of dusty gold coins.

"A mermaid statue! My life is complete!" Penguin pressed kisses over it.

"Hold on," Shachi said sternly, getting the pirates' attention. "The Crawfishers want to take this back to their island to rebuild their towns. We should let them have it."

Penguin dropped his statue. Law opened his mouth, then shut it.

Shachi burst out laughing. "Kidding. Rob 'em blind and leave nothing behind!"

—

Nellie's face was the closest thing Sophie had seen a human resemble a flabbergasted owl. "…As a joke?"

"I know everything you're going to say, because I've said it myself a thousand times," Sophie said quickly. "Realistically speaking, this is one of those passing phases. Like dyed red hair and anchor tattoos. Things people typically regret later. And he already said no! What am I thinking?"

She slumped over. There was a great big stretch of silence. "…This is when you give me an optimistic speech about chasing my dreams. Something like, 'are you happy when you're with them'? Yeah, and it's so easy to be myself. 'Do you care about following the rules of society'? Profound *no.*"
'Are you a decent, respectable adult'? Well, I have obsessive tendencies, I get anxious when things aren't in a straight line, and I suspect I may have built up a system dependence to adrenaline! I'm a pirate in all but name already!"

"...You put a lot of thought in this, didn't you."

Nellie didn't even know. Sophie hadn't slept for two days because she was so stressed out. "But the thing is—I'm talking about wanting to help the maniac who tried to kill me! More than once! This is weird. It's weird, right? I made it clear we're professional acquaintances. Does this mean I think of Law-san as a... f-friend? Though h-he has saved my life a few times... and his attitude towards me has definitely changed... we're totally getting along now! I... I think..."

Sophie was normally all about being decisive, but this was so out of her territory it was making her feel sick. Strangways Sophie did not job hunt. She did not care about the opinions of Pirates, Honestly! Except... now she kind of did.

"It's a simple q-question. What am I so afraid of? I have nothing left to lose. If you look at my credentials, he has no reason not to a-accept me. I'm a certified genius, I work well with others—" Sophie came to an abrupt stop. "He'll laugh me right off his submarine." She covered her face. "I don't know. I don't know what I want. I'm supposed to be a genius, and I have nothing figured out."

Nellie had been silently puffing on her pipe the whole time. Sophie slumped her shoulders helplessly. "$do you think I should do?"

She blew out smoke from the side of her mouth. "$No damn idea. I can't make your life decisions for you."

"Whyyyy nooooot?"

"Here's a truth: the only one who has to feel comfortable about your choices is you. Everyone else can kiss your ass." Nellie thought that sentence over. "Unless you kick puppies or are a generally awful human being... what the hell am I sayin'?" She slapped her hand on the pedestal. "$Don't be a pirate! Anyway, aren't you with the World Government?" A mechanical noise came from the stone. "$Hm?"

She peeled back her hand. Blocky shapes were carved across a device she accidentally pushed down. The last Poneglyph reader in the world had recently abandoned her Miss All Sunday title and was now taking refuge aboard a certain pirate ship. As such, neither have them could have known the tablet read the ancient equivalent of DANGER DANGER DO NOT TOUCH.

Crows flew past the tower. The sunflower field rippled in the breezeless morning air. A quiet, rumbling sound came from the distance.

Nellie stood still. "...Do you hear that?"

Sophie had that familiar, queasy feeling in her gut. "This is probably an appropriate time to run."

"Why do you say that?"

The tower groaned. Quaking vibrations spread throughout Anatole. Sid and Romarin stuck their heads out the window, calling for people to get inside. Down in submarine Anko yelled for all hands on deck as the radar system flashed erratically. Sophie pointed at the stairs. "$Because I think I'm a black hole of bad luck—get to ground level!"

The pipes on the floor whistled to life. Steam blew out of the cracks in the wall.
This would be the point where 'please fasten your seatbelt' would have flashed across the pedestal in archaic text.

The ground threw Sophie into the door. Ugh! Her cheek and the flat of her palms met the wood with a thud. The line of gravity shifted the other way. She was weightless for an instant, the latch slipping away from her fingertips. She jerked off her feet, flying backwards—objects that are in motion tend to stay in motion until an external force acts upon it, said the little voice wearing giant glasses and a graduation cap—and her spine slammed into a pillar. The breath blew out of her lungs.

Hanging onto the pedestal, Nellie screamed, "Sophie!"

Searing wind peeled her eyes open as she tilted halfway off the pillar. Anatole rushed up in a vertical ascension, red-roofed houses slanted sideways. The grave diggers below clutched the bushes for dear life. Waves crashed into each other at cataclysmic levels to fill up the gap in the ocean Cat's Eye had left behind. The yellow submarine vanished under the upsurge. Oh, no…

At the last second, her arms tangled around the pillar and she pressed her face to the stone. Now she understood what Khanwari was trying to do. With the power of a giant flying automaton, even with just the threat of it, Lisbeth could've gone on to conquer oceans. The calculated theoretic possibility of that—

—wasn't important at the present moment!

The island climbed higher and higher at breakneck speed. The tower soared through a cloud and Sophie was momentarily blinded by wisps of fog. "What is this, what is happening!?!" she heard Nellie shriek.

"Don't get anxious! When you get anxious, I get anxious, and when I get anxious, I get gassy!"

"What?"

"I let it rip all over the place and you do not want that!"

"…Why would you tell me that!?!" A stifled snort broke her yell.

Even in this situation, Sophie couldn't stop herself from smiling. "It'll be fine! You're laughing!" she shouted right as the pillar she was holding onto broke.

Nellie's blank-eyed surprise was the last thing she saw before she plummeted head over heels. The velocity whipped her hair over her eyes and tore the scream from her lips. Nothing was solid, everything was air—

Sophie jerked to a sudden stop. "Ow!"

Law leaned out the window, holding onto her wrist with a ferociously strong grip. She swung over a hundred feet from the ground, kicking frantically. "You dislocated my shoulder!"

"It's not dislocated!" He gave it a swift once-over as she dangled by the grace of five working fingers. "Just bruised!"

"Let me remind you that I am in very much pain!"

The island jerked again. The floor of the treasure room tilted like a jammed pendulum and Law kept Sophie from flying away with monumental strength. "Hang on!"
"No, I'm going to let go!" she howled back sarcastically.

Her eyes widened. Facing her, Law didn't see the scrambling pirates, their gold, and an enormous mermaid statue sliding towards the window.

She braced herself with a whimpered 'pineapple'. Law glanced over his shoulder just as his crewmates slammed into him. The side of the castle smashed open in a big, chaotic mess of flailing pirates and an explosion of gold that rained upon the grave diggers.

Sophie plunged downwards with fresh screams. Having bore the brunt of the impact, Law was unresponsive as he fell headfirst into the sky. Giant chunks of debris, mollusks, and sea sponges hurtled past them like meteorites. The ocean canvassed above her, the sky beneath. When you experience freefall for the first time, it's indescribable. No outside forces acting upon you except gravity, the wind roaring, the abstract feeling of wonder… ends when you realize you left your parachute at home. Cue the incoherent gibberish.

Or in Penguin's case, once he realized the bag of gold was leaving a trail behind them—

"MERMAAAID!"

His scream of horror woke Law. On one side Sophie tumbled through the air, and on the other Penguin pawed desperately at the statue.

Law grabbed her arm and Bepo's paw. An ocean of white spread as far as she could see, scattered with ice crystals. There was no sound but the wind. Law motioned to something in the distance—miles away, the giant, blinding sun framed a mountain peak.

The wind swallowed up Law's shout. A blue sphere encircled the five of them and flickered away. Come to think of it, she'd never seen him make a sphere bigger than a few yards…

Sophie began chanting to the gods of gravity and random variables. "If I get out of this alive I promise I'll never smoke again, no alcohol, no meat, squeaky clean and apple cider—"

Again the blue sphere disappeared.

"—well not all the time, maybe you'll give me weekends and holidays, and I'll stop with the killing people and the explosions, except the first one is sometimes necessary and the second is usually done in good cheer—"

Penguin, Shachi, and Bepo clutch ed each other for support. Sophie was trying to reach a mental state of peaceful nirvana.

Law seized the sun.

It just so happened that a flock of birds soared over the island. Aside from the bumbling confusion when five of them found themselves teleported several miles away, no animals were harmed in the process. But there was a small miscalculation… seeing as how the birds were already in flight…

They were still falling. And the rest of the flock was still flying.

The island ballooned in size and Sophie could make out patches of trees, which was made more disorientating by the birds that collided into their downward path. Flapping wings and talons burst in their faces. A feathered football-shaped mass crashed into Penguin's chest, tearing his grip away from Bepo. Penguin, Shachi, and the bag of gold shot off in the opposite direction, vanishing through a cloud. Law forced his eyes open, a bare-your-teeth sort of mania, and they were eighty feet from the
ground, her ears popped about three times—

He pulled out a handful of gold coins from his pocket and threw them into the air.

A cedar tree replaced it and wallopéd her in the gut. Once again, Sophie saw her life flash before her eyes.

Using it as a buffer, they crashed over the brush and down the slope, which helped absorb the shock of their landing. Sophie clung to her branch like a terrified squirrel as the tree smashed against another and split in half, throwing the three riders off its gnarled back and she dived into the blue depths of the sea.

Bubbles escaped her mouth like cigarette smoke. Sophie swam up to the halo of light on the rippling surface.

She woke up lying on a grassy slope, covered in twigs and dirt. Her head pounded miserably. She was missing a boot. How long was she out?

"I need a smoke," Sophie groaned.

A wave of nausea hit her. She limped to the flattened shrubbery and unloaded her breakfast on the poor plants. What a fabulous start to her day. This whole morning had been something straight out of a Murphy's Law book.

She yanked her boot out from underneath fallen bamboo trees and made a face at the crumpled pleather. Autumn leaves peeked out from the mist and the air was cool. Whatever mountain they landed on, at least it wasn't a one-way ticket to the gaping maws of hell. Though she couldn't cross that off yet, realistically—realistically!—speaking.

She hobbled back over to the polar bear sitting in the midst of broken tree parts. Bepo was hunched over his unconscious captain. Still quite out of sorts, she didn't notice his distant gaze or trembling paws.

"I let go of Penguin's hand," Bepo whispered.

Sophie looked blankly at him.

His eyes watered and he burst into sobs. "They're deaaaad!"

—

"So," Shachi said, "that happened."

"Yep," Penguin replied.

"At least we still have our gold."

"Yep."

This particular mountain was home to a semi-mythological flora species documented in *Brag Men* as *cushionii arborae*, or Cushion Tree. These fantastically soft trees were the nests grinning macaques. About a dozen of them surrounded the two upside down pirates. Vines crisscrossed their legs and their arms dangled pitifully.

"The monkeys are going through our gold," Shachi observed.
"They sure are." A macaque, inspecting a pearl necklace, chattered cheerfully on Penguin's torso. Another one of its furry fellows modeled Shachi's casquette. "Lemme get this straight: the underground tunnels weren't actually tunnels, but walls built at pressure points. The island—which isn't an island—is completely hollow on the inside. And the architectural engineering predates modern technology by a few centuries."

"At least," Shachi added.

Penguin growled as a macaque stepped over his face. "And you didn't tell Captain because?"

"My proof is an ancient, flying war machine that looks like a Sea Cat!"

"…Fair point."

The leader of the macaques examined her reflection in a gold coin. Finding it pleasing, she chattered to the rest of her clan; they scrambled past Shachi and Penguin, hoisted up the treasure bag, and made a quick getaway into the treetops. Their jaws dropped.

"My hat!" Shachi wailed.

"We stole that first!" Penguin roared, swinging his legs madly.

—I—

"I'm sure they've managed somehow, you guys are super strong—"

"How could I let go of his hand!? I'm a monster!"

"We can't jump to conclusions. We can't get distressed, we have to just calmly evaluate our options —"

"I don't wanna search for their dead bodies!"

"They're not dead!" Sophie practically shrieked. "They must have a Den Den Mushi, I can just call her and it'll be fine, she's not dead!"

She stopped, breathing hard. Bepo gazed tearfully up at her.

"…Do you know the Manette lady's number?"

"No," she admitted.

"I feel like there's a flaw in your plan."

Sophie wanted to punch something. Sophie wanted to shrivel up like a dried mushroom. She slumped down beside Law. Nellie's fate was literally up in the air… and Sid's, and Romarin's, but she didn't really like the old lady, so that was that. But she couldn't get distracted. "First things first: we have to find a way off this mountain. Let's wait for Law-san to wake up and then search for your crewmates." She glanced at Law. "Hey… that's a lot of blood."

She reached over. Bepo put an arm over his captain, shielding him.

Definitely not a reaction she expected.

"Uhhhh…" Bepo and Sophie both said nervously.
She held up her hands. "I'm going to check his injuries. It'll be fast, I promise."

She waited as Bepo shifted back. Distraught, he watched closely as she held two fingers against his carotid artery. Little bristles of his beard brushed against her skin. *One... two... looks younger without his hat... seven... eight... not that I care... liar, liar, pants on fire...* His pulse was normal. She checked behind his ears, his head—gross, his hair was mangy, when did he last shower?—and opened his eyelids. No sign of a skull fracture. That X'd out a slew of problems Sophie couldn't handle on her own.

The wound was shallow, thankfully. "Law-san, can you hear me?" No good. She leaned in close and yelled in his ear, "Bepo's dead! Someone else found One Piece! Everything's on fire!" Sophie waited. Law continued to breathe quietly. "...He's unresponsive. I'd say he has a concussion, but to fall unconscious because of it is serious."

Bepo worriedly hovered over her shoulder. "When Captain uses his Devil Fruit a lot, it tires him out."

"You think he passed out from exhaustion and not because of head trauma?"

He mumbled something like 'mmmdone it beforeauhh'.

"I'll monitor him until he wakes up. Will you be uncomfortable if I use my shirt as a bandage?" Despite looking a bit alarmed, Bepo shook his head. She took it off and knotted it around Law's forehead. Her sports bra was basically a tank top, so whatever. "This wound isn't any danger to him; I'm more worried about a possible concussion."

Her problem was how to survive the night. Their safest bet was to camp here and wait until Law regained consciousness. But who knows how long that would take? Sophie had no medicine supplies and scary animals could be prowling around. It was only her and Bepo, so it was basically just Bepo.

So... she could either stick with the bear... or go off on her own, and somehow impale herself on a porcupine. Yep, her options were clear.

"So what's the plan?"

"Find Shachi and Penguin, and get back to the submarine."

Sophie tightened the shoelaces of her damaged boots. "Okay. Let's do this—are you really going to keep the hat?" She cringed. "It's... so disgusting..."

"The hat stays!"

"Fine, but don't put it on Law-san! Bacteria... and stuff..." Bepo set the blood-stained hat over his head. Sophie made a face. Cuteness level diminishing.

She helped the polar bear carry Law on his back and trotted after him into the mist. The weather was too foggy for a proper signal fire, but his ears picked up on a waterfall. If he followed that downstream, he might bump into the others. Sophie ouch'd and ow'd as the low-hanging bamboo branches eased past him and ricocheted into her. She was right, Shachi and Penguin were too strong for that fall to kill. They were still alive. They had to be.

"WE'RE DYING WE'RE DYING WE'RE DEAD WE'RE DYING!" Shachi screamed as a
carnivorous lotus flower the size an elephant chased after him and Penguin.

—

It wasn't that the mountain was so steep that was the problem.

The paths that vanished into thin air, the poor footing, and the humid, misty haze that felt as though they were walking through a cloud, combined with the steepness... well, it led to a strenuous afternoon. They didn't speak to conserve oxygen and after a while stopped by a small waterfall to rest. A family of cranes took flight as Sophie sat down at the edge of the stream.

Bepo went to check the surroundings for any signs of a crash-landing. She saw him climb up a cedar. He was spry for a three hundred pound polar bear. Sophie checked Law's vitals again, mulling over how his Devil Fruit power took such a heavy toll. When she still considered him an enemy Sophie would've gleefully cackled, but now she felt worry... and sweaty.

She washed her face in the stream, stuck her toes in the water, and cleaned her skinned knees. Law slept beside her, his face gross and bloody. "I don't have a towel or anything—I'm already lending you my shirt. It's not my fault you need to wash your hair more."

Unconscious Law seemed to judge her.

"...Fine, but you better not wake up," she muttered, and scooped up some cool water. She rubbed off the dried blood on his cheek. Her fingers grazed over his forehead and, after a lingering pause, swept back his hair.

Law was dangerous, in perfect control of himself, and you could see the threat in every cut and crease of his posture... all alluring in their own way, fine, she could admit that. But now he lay relaxed and unguarded in front of her. He breathed evenly, the traces of pain and stress in his brow wiped away. Even the shadows under his eyes, normally the size of shopping carts, was the opposite of ugly in the clear morning light...

Any second now, his eyes were going to fly open and he'd grab her wrist... the corner of his mouth turned up into a lazy smirk...

Little fish nipped her toes.

"Ouch!" Sophie pulled her feet out of the water, accidentally jamming her elbow on Law's stomach. He didn't so much as stir.

"Uh... whoops... sorry about that..." She wrapped her arms around her knees and gazed at him. His face looked marginally better now. "Wanna add a chemist to your crew?"

Of course Law had no response.

Bepo came back disheartened and crewmate-less. They waited another half hour before picking up Law and continuing their trek downstream.

They passed a den of giant pandas during which Sophie was determined to live among them try to stop me, I will fight you! As Bepo found out, her method of fighting was a) flailing and b) playing dead. But Sophie couldn't stay mad at him for more than five minutes. As the hours passed, they ended up making aimless conversation about breakfast foods, the weather, and sports. Apparently the Heart Pirates didn't watch the Annual Marine Kayaking Championships. Bepo was astonished she never heard of the Dead End Race.
"Hey, isn’t there a constellation called Apolleon somewhere?" Sophie asked.

"Over South Blue. That's the archaic name; now they call it Leo."

"Why do people do that? Names stars after myths?"

"Dunno. I’d name one after myself."

"Ha! Same here."

"My star would be bigger," Bepo said confidently.

"Mine would eat yours and become, like, a monster chimera star spewing star flames and blood and stuff."

When they arrived on a narrow cliff, the real trouble started.

Two tigers prowled from the bushes, blocking off their path in front and behind them. Sophie glued herself to Bepo's side with a tiny 'eep!'. The polar bear prepared to spring forward.

"W-wait! You can't fight! Not while carrying Law-san! We have to run!"

The tiger leaped at Bepo and somehow Sophie found the Surgeon of Death dropped straight in her arms. Oh, great. She knew where this was heading. "Please don't make me go down that cliff," she whispered.

"Run! Ai-ai-ai!"

Sobbing, she picked her way down the wobbling rocks. Law's head lolled dangerously back. "Argh! No! I do not have the proper arm length for this! Why do heads weigh so much!?"

"Catch!" Bepo threw down Law's nodachi.

"Stop giving things to me!" she screamed as it thunked on top of Law's stomach.

She half-slid, half-climbed her way further down into the fog, using the occasional wispy mulberry tree to brake. As long as she got to solid ground, she and Law would be—

A clouded leopard jumped down on the rock beside her. Sophie managed a weak smile. "Uh—is this your t-territory? I don't m-mean to trespass. I'll get out of your way immediaatelly!"

The leopard sprung into the air. Keeping a tight hold on Law and screaming her head off, Sophie ducked under the leopard's claws and tumbled sideways—

"AI-AI-AI!"

Bulleting downwards, two unconscious tigers slammed into the leopard. Bepo lifted Sophie off her feet and bounded downhill until they landed in a jewel-hued forest. The blanket of red leaves over white bamboo looked like fire burning over snow.

She waited until he unloaded Law off her arms before sitting on her ankles and breathing hard. "Let's n-never do that again."

"I thought you could fight," Bepo remarked.

"Not bare-handed against vicious animals! Remember the lapahn? I fight far away, camouflaged,
with a sniper rifle and an escape plan.”

Of course, there had been those soldiers she took down that night of the storm. Except she didn't so much as 'fight' than 'attack blindly with a sharp weapon'. And they didn't so much as 'fight back' as 'get caught off guard by said sharp weapon'. Surprise and dirty tactics carried her well enough… but right now, she couldn't afford that. She wasn't as lionhearted as the others, but she couldn't take a backseat and expect them to do everything for her.

She ducked her head, contrite. "But you have to protect your captain, and find Shachi and Penguin. The least I could do is hold the line. Thanks for counting on me."

Bepo grinned. "Thanks for holding the line."

Pause.

"…If you nosebleed too much at this elevation, you could die…"

—

A rainbow aureole shone over the treetops and basked the object of Shachi's gaze in light—a Bed and Breakfast sign hammered in the ground in front of a cave. The two pirates shook off plant saliva and twigs, dragging their bag of gold behind them.

"Nearly being liquefied in acid really put me in the mood for some bacon crisps," Shachi said brightly.

Penguin fanned himself with his hat. "This place looks pretty sketch, man."

"H-hello there," a tiny, shriveled woman called meekly from the entrance. "I'm a harmless old hermit who owns the place. Won't you come inside for some food and rest?"

"See?" Shachi nudged the side of his skeptical friend. "Totally unsuspicious!"

A few minutes later, they were tied up on a roasting spit as the harmless old hermit lit a fire underneath them.

"I did not see this coming," Shachi said.

Penguin glared furiously at him.

"Don't blame me—"

"I blame you."

—

Dry leaves crunched under Law's arms. Warmth from a fire brushed over his face. The air smelled like fish, and a river coursed nearby. He was leaning against something soft. Law registered this without opening his eyes. He felt a weight settle over his left side, and two scarred fingers at his throat, monitoring his heartbeat. The other hand brushed his hair aside. He felt anchored.

"Do you think Penguin and Shachi can smell it? What if they're running over right now? They'll be hungry! I'll go catch more fish!"

The weight left him. Law floated on his back in the middle of the ocean.
"Let's… wait and see if they show up first. Law-san looks pretty comfortable… don't move…"

You call this comfort? was his last conscious, irritable thought. The voices faded away and currents washed him farther and farther into the expanse of blue.

When he came to again, the riverside was alive with frog songs and cricket chirps. Sparks from the campfire floated up into the dusky sky. Bepo acted as a sort of pillow for Law; his back moved up and down with every breath the polar bear took. Sophie sat beside him, crunching snake off a stick. The light from the fire flickered over the musculature of her bare shoulders. "…how did you two meet? I bet it was one of those he finds you sick in the snow and nurses you back to health sort of thing."

"That's either from a kid's book or a very disturbing romance," Law muttered, picking up his hat. Why was it so dirty? He set it on his head anyway.

Sophie started. "Law-san!"

"Captain!" Bepo bolted upright, practically throwing him into the air, and squished him in a tight hug. Law was smothered in fur. "I was so worried! Shachi and Penguin flew off somewhere and we're searching for them and I kept telling Sophie you'd be alright—"

"Of course I would." He returned the embrace with a one-armed hug. How long had he been out? The last thing he remembered was the sun glaring too bright and birds attacking his face…

"The patient owes me a shirt, by the way." She grinned that little self-satisfied grin of hers.

He pulled off the t-shirt and inspected his blood on the green Criminal star. No wonder his head throbbed so much. But the wound was closed and clean, and Sophie did a good job for the resources she had… which was not much at all. She blinked.

"…Why are you staring at me?"

Her external oblique abdominal muscles belong in a museum was his last distinctive thought.

"There's a spider next to you," Law said blandly.

Ignoring her screams, he picked up a stick carrying half a paddlefish and bit into the skin. He was ravenous, exhausted, and his muscles ached. "Searching for Shachi and Penguin will go faster with my abilities. I need a few more hours of rest." Contacting the submarine was also a problem, but that could wait until they were reunited.

"What'll we do if we don't find them? What if we're walking in one giant, endless maze?" Bepo fretfully munched on his half of the fish, still hugging Law with his other paw.

He patted Bepo on the belly. "We'll find them." Law leaned on his navigator with a groan. "Sophie-ya, I'll take you to Idyll when we get off this mountain. If you can't find another way there," he added.

"…Oh." Her smile became fixed. "Thank you."

Her tone sounded hesitant. Before Law could assure it was pure cordiality and they'd been in a working relationship too long for her to doubt him, she finished off her dinner and chucked the stick into the fire. His guard instantly rose. He'd been on the end of her fury many times. Far be it for him to care; he found her red-faced, acerbic wit entertaining and a good mental sparring activity.

"What do I not have that you need?"
"You said piracy is for particular people..." She scratched the mosquito bites on her legs, busying herself to keep from tapping. "I'm curious, why wouldn't I make a good addition?"

Sophie congratulated herself on not puking. He took some time to craft a neutral response.

"...Some crews buy slaves. Others force captured sailors to join or die." A scathing edge curled into his voice. "I'm not on the same level as the garbage who can't form their own crews without buying or intimidating their way to loyalty. Commitment is a two-way street in my book. I don't have time to pressure the reluctant—"

"I'd be a decent pirate!" she blurted out. "I'm good at following orders. And I don't hesitate on a battlefield. And I know basic first aid, so I can... I don't know, look after Penguin-san or Shachi-san if they're hurt and you're far away... I'd fit in with them, I think. They seem to like me well enough. Most of G-13 are men, and I've spent my whole life stumbling into... I'm... saying it doesn't bother me!"

Complete silence. Sophie heard the air go—pop!—sucked out like a vacuum.

Bepo gaped. "You're asking to be a Heart Pirate!"

"Pff, as if!" Sophie said immediately. Her face puckered. "...M-maybe. I d-don't know—I—yes, okay, fine!"

Law stared at her, thoughts flitting haphazardly behind his blank exterior. She studied the engrossing shape of her knees, trying not to hyperventilate. Oh my god throw me back into a coffin!

"Even after what I've done to you?"

"Law-san..." Sophie sighed. "Y-you're a sarcastic, gruesome... t-terrifyingly ambitious pirate. And y-yet you stick to your ideals, and you have g-genuine affection for your crew." She had to practically choke that last part out. "I'm n-not trying to idealize any of this, but what I should feel towards you and what I don't feel towards you are p-pretty much... the s-same... thing..."

It was unavoidable, she had to fling herself off the mountain immediately.

Bepo felt secondhand embarrassment. "Awww, Sophie..."

"It's still no."

Bepo ping-ponged between Sophie's frantic, crestfallen expression and his captain's impassive frown. Feeling very uncomfortable, he returned to his position of Law's Pillow.

"I-is it because I k-killed a World N-Noble?" she stammered. "If I'm d-discovered, everyone who has a c-connection to me would..."

The mocking laughter she expected (and feared) to see was, in fact, complete seriousness. "There are three issues I have and it goes in a circle. One: You're asking because I'm convenient. We've spent the last two weeks together, and you consider me an escape route."

"Wha—you think I'm running away? I'm not!" Sophie stood with a stomp of her foot. Why couldn't he get that she was trying to help him?

He stared up at her. "Are you going somewhere?"
"I'm standing because this is how one argues in a civilized world!"

His body protested like a pathetic noodle at the thought. Law gave up and just waved a tired hand at her. She could stand if that's how she got her kicks. "I think the World Government left a wound the size of a sun in you. You're trying to patch yourself up using the closest thing. Me."

She scrambled for defenses. "Well—yes, but—that's still——"

"You're scared of living an average life, because that's the most horrific thing that could happen to a scientist who's grown up secluded in a military setting." He calmly watched her pace around the campfire. "Second: your skill is exceptional. We both know this. You could walk one thousand different paths; it's unnecessary to resign yourself to piracy."

The anger on her face changed into unwillingness… and a glimmer of pleasure she quickly tried to hide in a scowl. "I'm not resigned——"

"My third point. I don't want someone who's going to half-ass things. If you were a seasoned pirate veteran, I'd accept your offer without question. But you're green, you've just left the World Government… I'm not sure if I can trust you to fight for me, as you're asking because I'm convenient." He spun a finger in the air. "Circle."

Her heart sank, followed by a surge of resentment. "Are you worried I'll sell you out?" Because that was her greatest fear, that they'd call her traitor for the rest of her life. "I'm not a b-backstabber! Except I am to G-13… but that's d-different! They're your enemy so you should be okay with it! I mean—you know how I am. You know how stupidly loyal I can be. I'm n-not saying you could do w-whatever you want and I'd be okay with it, but——" Sophie covered her face. "I underestimated how difficult this would be."

She was likely to get a bounty soon. How did criminals with smaller bounties survive? By handing over the bigger fish. It was the small-time rookie you had to worry about; the established powers were predictable, but the little ones had nothing to lose. Law himself was a perfect example. And yet when he recalled the stone-steady stare when she—I have faith in myself—he saw a strong ally for his crewmates.

"It would be in bad taste to let you join without telling you what you're in for. If I just wanted gold, I could've marched into Cat's Eye and taken it myself."

Sophie stopped pacing and looked at him weirdly. "So… why did you stick around?"

"Vira, Alabasta, Cat's Eye. You don't get to see the outcome of civil wars every day."

Her eyes widened. "Is that why you were Vira in the first place? You wanted to see how the war ended firsthand?"

Law nodded. Then picking me up was a throwaway addition… She was either terribly lucky, or terribly unlucky. Sophie shook her head. "I still d-don't understand."

He looked her dead in the eye. "I want political power. I want the ancient regimes to crumble. Times are changing and the Heart Pirates are going to be a big part of it."

After several seconds of stunned blinking, she said finally, "I thought you wanted One Piece."

"It's the same thing. Sailors and merchants are the backbones of island societies, but how many young pirates took to the ocean after Gold Roger died? Uncountable. One Piece is the harbinger of radical political and economic change. The world is shifting. An entire generation is adopting new
ideas, values, and perspectives." Law nodded at her with a knowing glint in his eye. "Look at you."

What he was saying was crazy. It was almost too much to take in. Who was he? Seriously, who was Law and what sort of piss-poor childhood did he have?

"You know, you… sound a lot like Jacques Straw."

He was affronted. "I am different from that idiot in many ways."

She gave him an unreadable look, but conceded, "He did have better fashion sense."

He huffed at her. Well, the Law equivalent of huffing, which had a lot of eye-rolls and was actually quite sassy now that she thought about it...

She didn't manage to stifle a sigh. "Thanks for explaining your reasoning."

"And thanks for… well, not laughing at me."

Law was genuinely surprised. "Why would I do that?"

She grimaced. "You kind of yelled at me when I had a meltdown." The word sounded ugly. Meltdown. "Let me say it another way. Your creators left out compassion when they programmed you."

The chuckle snapped over his tongue like a whip, vocally unapologetic. As Law was with everything. "I wouldn't laugh about this. You see worth in my crew. Your admiration is understandable."

He was teasing her! "You pineapple," she groaned, turning pink.

"You're embarrassed."

Sophie threw her hands up, her deltoids flexing. He found himself drawn to the lines of her serratus anterior. Scratch museum, this was collector's edition.

"Of course this is embarrassing!" she complained, jolting him back to earth. "I have no home, no money. I'm a serial killer… killer. And now I'm talking to Trafalgar Law of all people."

He barked out a laugh that was either sleazy or terribly attractive depending on who you asked. "This day will forever be known as the day Strangways Sophie asked if she could join the Heart Pirates."

Sophie knew she should be angry, but she ended up stifling her laughter. It was weird, huh? "Hey, I'm serious about that!"

"So am I," Law said, not missing a beat. "If you really want to join—prove me wrong."

Her smile faded. He made it sound so easy. From what she understood from him: she'd make a good pirate, sure, but not a good Heart Pirate. He had specific goals in mind that involved upsetting the status quo, overthrowing the world order, blah blah, etcetera. Maybe this was too much for her at the moment... and there was a boat to Idyll with her name on it...

Hold on. 'Prove me wrong'? He wasn't saying no, even if that was what he'd been reasoning for the past ten minutes. He gave her all the justifications why she wasn't qualified, then spun it around and said, if you want to do it, do it anyway? Sophie's eyes narrowed as she stared into the fire. It sounded
like he didn't care if she joined, and had no problem if she did join. So basically... it was all on her. It was *her* choice to motivate herself, or walk away... and he was simply waiting.

Law lurched up and grabbed his nodachi. "Bepo!"

"Ai-ai-ai!" The polar bear leaped into a fighting stance while Sophie was still reeling in alarm, and Law pointed his sword at the shrubs.

The leaves rustled. She held her breath. A leopard? A bear?


*A massive monster with steel teeth and laser eyes,* Sophie thought frantically, *oh god maybe the Vice Admiral—*

A red-faced man stumbled out from the bushes. He did a double take at the sight of Law and stumbled back. "Shit! Shit, shit, what're you—don't hurt me! Oh my god, is that a polar bear!? Shit!"

Bepo blinked. A tiny giggle burst from Sophie's lips. Law slowly sheathed Kikoku. "Where did you come from?"

He pointed his beer bottle at him. "Don't tell me whadda do, asshole!"

A few seconds later, Law held up the man's head.

"Kunlun! Kun—the cliff!"

Sophie saw the tell-tale blue flash before they warped to the precipice of the waterfall cliff. She clutched Bepo with a shriek. Law was too string bean-y to use as a cushion if she fell!

A massive, glittering-gold city clung to the side of the mountain. Yellow lanterns flickered over stairs and bridges. From out the buildings grew mulberry trees, where macaques and jays made their nests. The *sound,* vibrant and orange-tinted, grills sizzling with a snap of grease, made Sophie wonder if she stepped into a dream somehow. The lush forest surroundings vanished in a blink of an eye, and Sophie found her feet hitting the soft grain of a wooden bridge. Law transported them in front of a teahouse, displacing a small crowd. He let the drunkard crash through the roof.

"Oh my god, a severed head—*oh my god, it speaks!*

"Burn it! That's *so* creepy!"

A rickshaw driver screeched to a halt. "Watch where you're going!"

"My moon cakes!" A woman shook her fist at Law.

"Hey, I know you!" Someone in the crowd pointed at him. "That was one helluva stunt you pulled at Crawfish Island!"

"Thanks, we fell out of the sky," Bepo chirped.

He boomed in laughter. "You should talk to the sky islanders! There's a group of them in the cabaret two bridges down."

Sophie yanked on Law's shirt. "Did he say s-s-sky island? I've never seen a real—" Her jaw dropped as three fishmen walked past. One of them—a betta, judging by her sweeping red fins—met her awestruck gaze and snapped her fangs at Sophie, snorting when she jumped.
"Don't goggle," Law murmured.

She puffed up. "I do not—" Sophie bumped into a clownfish fishman with a little squeak. "Oh, I'm s-sorry, h-h-hi! I like your g-gills!"

"Did you see that fight? I bet on Burgess. Pulled the wings right off the sky islander—blood everywhere!" a gambler chatted to her friend as they passed by. "No wonder they call him the Champion!"

"Crocodile's gone off the deep end," a grizzly white-haired man hollered, bent over a newspaper. "The hell is this, 'Baroque Works'?"

"…Oh, pineapple," Sophie uttered, staring at the numerous liquor and weapon shops, the bar fights, the dancing silhouettes back-lit by neon red windows, the lively, rowdy everything. "I know where we are."

"Kunlun is the wealthiest pirate haven on the Grand Line." Law eyed the unscrupulous bar patrons with a growing smirk. "I heard it was a city hanging off a mountain, but I didn't know there was a forest above it."

"CAPTAIN!"

About five heads turned at the shout, though only Law was greeted with two of his crewmates rushing at him. Bepo scooped the three of them up in a huge hug.

Law raised an eyebrow at their charred uniforms. "What happened?"

"Thieving monkeys, flesh-eating flowers, and a crazy hermit lady," came Shachi's muffled voice from around Bepo's armpit. "We even broke into a musical number at one point. It was an eventful day."

Sophie drifted past them, her mouth hanging open. Animals clucked and barked, kids sat on the rooftops dripping popsicle on unsuspecting passersby, and mothers scrubbed their children in buckets out in the open. Kunlun was completely different from anywhere she'd ever been. It was dirtier than the eerie, crow-ridden streets of Anatole, louder than the marketplace of Gator Town, freer than the snow hills of Drum Island. Gaudy lights flickered on a casino, painted mermaids beckoning bystanders to enter. A crowd gathered around two roosters duking it out, bets wagered and beli changing hands. Kabobs of meat sizzled along vendor stalls.

"Throw the cheat overboard!"

Someone on a higher level chucked a man over the bridge. A screaming blur hurtled past Sophie and disappeared into the clouds. She blinked and continued walking. Vendors banged on pots and whistled to get her attention. "Hand-carved mahogany imported from Water Seven! Bargain price! Stolen—ahh, legally raised Den Den Mushi! The latest version on the market! Look at the design! So sleek! Amazing signal!"

Sophie walked by a bar. "Sailed here from West Blue over the Reverse Mountain," a guy was saying.

Another pirate jumped around in excitement. "I'm from Ilusia!"

"Whoa, same here! …Don't tell me you're from the Gouda District—you are? You gouda-eating asshole!"
They pulled out knives. "No one likes blue cheese, you sick bastard!"

"It's fine dining! Prepare to die!"

Golden necklaces and shiny bracelets caught Sophie's eye. She stepped closer, enthralled by the pretty glittering things.

"Ah, someone has good taste. So cheap, only a few hundred thousand beli, it'll make your neck look fabulous." The vendor held up a string of rubies and diamonds. "I'll cut you a discount. What do you think of ten percent? Come on, you're not gonna find this on another bridge! What do you say? Oh, it brings out your eyes! Er, brown? Blue? Blue, sure! What do you say?"

Sophie was frazzled. "I, um, sure, I don't know?"

"Not interested," Law said and lightly kneed the back of her thigh.

"Ow!" She glared at him as he shepherded her away from the scowling vendor. Law walked so closely behind her that he kept almost stepping on the backs of her broken boots, forcing her to walk faster. "How are even doing that—witchery!"

"Everything here is either stolen or paid with blood money. That thief wants to get rid of those jewels fast. If you don't watch out, you'll have a target on your back—oi!" He watched her prance to the edge of the bridge. "Are you even listening?"

Spots of color flickered way, way down into the night fog. Sophie leaned over the heavy rope railing, the noise and brightness sounding like the most beautiful music she'd ever heard. Kunlun was…

Law pulled her back and she stumbled into his arms.

"Kunlun is amazing!" She grabbed his forearms before he could say a word, flushed and speaking in a rush. "I counted six casinos and three bathhouses. Monkeys are everywhere and I've never seen a real fishperson before, not outside of a cage at least, and god, that smell!" Why was he looking at her like that? Did he not get it? Did he not understand? "I don't even know what it is but I want to stuff my face full of food and how is this even hanging off the side of the mountain—"

She reminded Law of the sense of wonder he used to get when arriving at new, unexplored islands. Though his appreciation for beautiful things was also combined with a desire to kill them. "Right, I get it—"

"I have to explore!" she yelped, and her sweaty palms left him. "Give me money! Uh… please?"

His antics back then surely hadn't been this excitable. He stuffed his hand into his pocket and bestowed upon Sophie a small handful of gold coins. "Your share of the—"

"Thanks!" Sophie threw a careless smile over her shoulder. "Bye!"

Before startled agitation could flicker over his face, Law schooled himself. "See you around."

He doubted this was where he'd see the last of the chemist. She'd probably land herself in the counterfeit beli business going on behind the noodle shop (Law recognized it in five seconds, idiots), or something equally as ridiculous. Hell, they both survived a five hundred foot drop from a flying automaton. And now she wanted to join his crew. Had it been worth the effort, helping her, saving her? Did she still have room to grow? Law glanced out into the open, empty darkness, where she had almost toppled over, flexed his fingers, and then he turned on his heel and disappeared into the
What did a shark and a Trafalgar Law have in common?

Both were patient.

Sophie was floating on air. She was going to visit the first well-lit bathhouse she came across, then find a decent inn with a warm bed. Oh! But before that, she was going to buy some nail clippers, a pack of smokes, a sick pair of combat boots that could kick someone's teeth in, and—

'See you around'?

The penny dropped. Sophie stopped in the middle of the bridge. Someone knocked into her shoulder and another shoved her into the side of a building. She would've snapped in anger, but she was too distracted peering over the heads of the crowd. The Heart Pirates were nowhere to be seen. Sophie rubbed her chilly arms as unfamiliar faces passed by her without a glance, without an offhand 'Yo, Strangways' or a kind 'Canary-chan'. Bathhouse, decent inn, she repeated futilely. Her feet wouldn't move. The sea of strangers moved past her, unconcerned, uncaring, like she was just part of the wall. How could it be that Kunlun, which seemed so splendid a minute ago, now felt so… alone?

—

Someone was tapping on his window. Law's first thought was that it was a bird, but birds didn't sneeze or hiss, "Law-san, it's freezing please open the window."

Curly black hair and blue eyes greeted him. This did not surprise him anymore—judging by the steaming plate of food in her hands, it appeared she was here in peace instead of to screech at him like a banshee again. He rolled out of bed, scattering the newspapers he was reading last night, and stuffed a clean shirt over his head. Careful not to wake Bepo as he slept on a blanket nest on the floor, Law unlocked the window and let a draft of cold air inside.

Sophie perched on the windowsill, decked out in warm clothes and two cups of coffee. "Did I wake you?"

"I was already awake. Slept a lot during the day."

"Oh, right." She rolled up her jacket sleeves and picked little crispy fried sardines off the plate. "Some vendors are already selling food, which is great for me since I always get hungry around this time, actually I'm always hungry, oh, and coffee."

Law had trouble following that sentence. How was she so energetic so god damn early?

She pushed a cup over. "Have some."

"I don't want—"

"I got it for you," Sophie said, and promptly looked annoyed with herself. "Never mind, I'll drink it."

He took the cup before she could say another word. Black, just how he liked it. "Why are you here? If you need help, it'll cost you a look inside your brain."

"I know you're serious about that, so unfortunately for you, I managed to stay out of trouble." She stuffed sardines in her mouth and licked the grease from her fingers. "Did you call your crew?"
She avoided the question. "No one was hurt. They'll get here tonight."

"Wow. Fast."

Law felt an inkling of pride. A submarine didn't heed the wind or the currents. He decided not to mention that the Crawfish ship had been wiped out and his crew helped themselves to whatever stray valuables they could find. That would probably kill the atmosphere. He took a sardine off her plate.

They watched sunrise lighten the sky.

"Kunlun is gorgeous," Sophie sighed. "I met this guy who showed me these weird Dial things, did you know they're sky island inventions? And there was this scary dude with funny looking eyebrows who told me I wouldn't die today, so that's good. And there are some cool bookstores I'm going to check out later. So many things to do."

"There are lots of jobs available," he mentioned. "Pirates protect this place from marines and trade is always good. You could do well here."

She was quiet for a minute, then gave him a reproachful look. "I could do well anywhere; I'm a genius."

Sophie knew she was an amateur when it came to piracy and had a lot of things to work on. And it was true she didn't fully understand the extent of his goals. But she liked what he was selling. Traveling. Adventures. Danger. His smartassery and calculated aspirations made her feel right at home.

"Did you knock on my window at five in the morning just to ask me about my crew?" Law grinned at her, a burnt-brown sardine flopping between his teeth. Ah yes, and there was that strange fluttery aching feeling in her ribcage.

He wants to make the world his enemy, she thought.

He'll die young, she thought.

He's a super creepy doctor who made me organize his collection of severed limbs, she thought.

None of that mattered anymore, because she was already smiling at him. "I want to join the Heart Pirates. This is like some super cheesy declaration of war or whatever."

"Don't need it," he said, because he knew the next thing she'd spit out would be—

"I'll make you eat those words!"

Here are some truths: A half-drowned ex-princess washed up on the raining shores of Alabasta. G-13 ships arrived at what used to be Cat's Eye Island and found a great big chunk of ocean. Two disguised CP5 agents were walking around Kunlun looking for a blonde girl with unusually large eyebrows. As Law closed the window and turned his back to Sophie, he wore the same dark smirk as when he jammed poison into the heel of her foot.

The circumstances were too abnormal for him to simply let her join. He had to be entirely sure of her commitment, and that inexperience wouldn't eclipse her usefulness. Sophie existed in extremes. The more you tugged the more she resisted, even if it meant choking. It was a petty, childish way of thinking, but Law didn't mind the challenge. He approached it with finesse.

Case in point: soft words said at the right time, a challenge, and a notion of camaraderie. The two of
them, sitting around that campfire, was all sorts of *personal*. He didn't have to budge an inch on control; in fact, his leverage over her strengthened. Did it really matter in the long run if she joined or not? No. She had personal baggage and she was physically weak; by all means, Sophie was a pawn. But there was something about the brilliance of her mind, her lack of hesitation, that made Law decide *now* that she could make a terrific weapon for him. For *his* ambition.

Investment made. Now to see if it would pay off.

—

(Here is a truth.

A good pirate captain makes use of people who should know better.)

*to be continued*
"The whole cave's on fire and we're both medium rare and Penguin, this asshole, turns to me and goes—'let's get some barbeque after this'." Shachi threw his hands up. "Fuck you, thank you!"

Penguin was practically crying. Bepo had to thump him on the back.

In the light of the lanterns, everything in the bar had a musty red glow. Pirates danced and taunted each other. Kunlun was free from any government regulation or central authority, which meant crooks, hoodlums, and vagabonds found solace here. Hands grabbed at your pockets and the bulge in your pants was more often than not a flintlock. One wrong glance, one wrong word, and a knife would be at your throat.

This environment made Law feel at ease.

Long ago when Mount Kunlun was still vast, untamed, and overrun with wild animals, Marines dropped off criminals there to die. But that didn't happen. They stacked buildings upon buildings up the sides of the mountain. Rooftops had stairs, bridges had rooftops, and trees grew out of everything. Kunlun was converted into a city, like how one would convert an ancient forest into a metropolitan sewage dump.

"But who cares when the structural design is badass?" Shachi finished.

Penguin raised his drink. "Here's hoping this one won't dump us into the sky." Scattered laughter went around the table.

"We weren't dumped, we soared," Shachi snapped. "The machine was powered by primitive windmills and watermills, just like early irrigation technology invented in Alabasta hundreds of years ago. There'll naturally be turbulence." He buried his head in his arms. "My lost love…"

Penguin and Bepo thumped his back, pressing him to drink more.

Not really listening, Law skimmed the World Economic Journal. A Shichibukai Who Deceived a Nation! Commodore Smoker Saves the Kingdom of Sand! the headline shouted. He couldn't help but curl his lip at the newspaper. The world was surprised a pirate was acting like a pirate...? What would be tomorrow's headline? Water is Wet?

He tossed the newspaper on the table and got to his feet. "I'm going to visit the 'medical facility' we passed by." With a lingering smirk, he continued, "Wonder how many organs they harvested."

"Steal a pretty girl's femur for me," called Shachi.

"We're on a break, so no fights if you can avoid it," were Law's parting words as he squeezed out of the bar.

"Yeah, yeah!" Penguin shouted, waving him off.

He, Shachi, and Bepo sat in companionable silence. "...Wonder what Anko's up to?" Shachi finally asked.

"Let's go find them," Penguin said hastily.
Penguin was halfway up his chair when a long shadow fell over the three of them.

"When did these brats waddle their way to our table? Grown-ups only, kids."

The Longarm grinned and his scary posse chuckled. His face resembled a plowed field, and his eyepatch was a pothole sunken into his leathery skin. This man was known as Fish Breath Fabio, a notorious slaver with a spitfire temper. 'Fish Breath' was the kindest nickname he had, and was unfortunately honest.

"Ew." Shachi pinched his nose. "Go stink up another bar—hey!"

Fabio grabbed Shachi's rum and downed it in one gulp.

"Hope that backwash tastes good…"

Fabio either didn't hear or didn't mind. "Not enough space to go around. I say we sat here first," he tapped the flintlock stuffed in his pants, "get it?"

Shachi exchanged a glance with Penguin and Bepo. Ain't worth it, their eyes communicated silently.

"Okay, we were leaving anyway," Bepo said in a pacifying voice, standing up from his creaking chair.

Fabio did a double take and blinked at the polar bear. "Hey." He snapped his fingers at Penguin and Shachi. "How much are you selling your freak pet for?"

The instant the word left his mouth, they stood up so fast their chairs left black streak marks on the floor. Shachi cracked his knuckles. "No one makes fun of Bepo but us, fuckwad."

"Piss off," Penguin advised.

Fabio grinned dangerously, drawing out his cutlass. "Two against five," he snarled. "I like our odds."

A beer bottle shattered on Fabio's head. Alcohol dripped down his eyepatch. Glass fragments glittered around his boots. Penguin and Shachi's fists lowered as surprise darted over their faces. They, along with Fabio, Fabio's bulging eye, and the rest of the bar, looked over at Sophie, who was chewing on her fingernails so fast she was a one-woman sawmill.

Sophie did not take well to being in a pirate bar. The amount of pickpockets rivaled the piles of wet garbage. She had one hand glued to the back pocket of her jeans (where she kept her beli) and someone shouted at her, "Are you gonna feel yerself up all night?"

The manners on these ruffians…!

She was only in this crowded, smelly place to talk to the Heart Pirates. Even if Law gave his approval, Sophie didn't think they'd be fine with a stranger thrown into their midst. Their home, their lives, their submarine. They liked her well enough, but as Cat's Eye proved, when push came to shove they were the real deal.

Pirates. Ruthless, undiscriminating pirates.
Seeing as all her friends were either dead, possibly dead, or developed an intense hatred towards her, Sophie knew she had work to do.

Nursing a beer to her chest, she squeezed around a giant sky islander. Right as she was edging around him, her foot smacked a table leg, *bam*. She lost control of her surroundings for an instant. Her mouth opened in a slow-motion 'noooo'… the bottle went sailing into the air… and shattered on someone's head. A smelly, oily head.

"*Arrrgh*!"

The bar went quiet.

Fabio whirled around. The Longarm looked like he lived on a diet of barbed wire and babies' tears. "Hey! You!"

Sophie, who was pretending to be part of the wallpaper, pointed at the person next to her.

"Not him—you! You wanna go?"

She backed away. "G-go as in… 'g-go out the d-door'? Sure…"

The Longarm stormed up to her—and then Penguin and Shachi were at her side so fast, she didn't even see them move. "Calm down, Strangways." Penguin crossed his arms. "This loser only approached us after he saw Captain leave. He's just fucking around."

Shachi helpfully contributed by making chicken noises.

"Real mature," Fabio snapped and gave Sophie a once-over. "You with them, princess?"

She jolted at the nickname. People in the back of the bar stood on chairs to see what was going on. She made herself as small as possible next to Shachi and Penguin.

"Um," she began meekly, "we're… b-b… b-b-b—"

Fabio's crewmates started laughing. Even the spectators were chuckling. Sophie mentally kicked herself in the teeth. *Business partners! Get it together!*

"You broken, sweetheart?" Fabio demanded. She looked away and turned closer to Shachi, biting her lip.

"Truce," Penguin proposed. "We'll leave without any trouble. You get your damn table."

"Little missy over here poured beer all over me!"

"It's an improvement," Penguin observed.

Fabio's angry sneer vanished. "Rookies like you don't know *shit*. I've killed people in ways that'd make you wanna go crawling back to your mother." He jerked a thumb at his eyepatch. "See this? A savage in the wastelands of Tiburon cut out my eye... and fed it to his pet aardvark."

"Is it bad I think that's awesome?" Shachi whispered to Penguin. He was kicked in the ankle.

"That's why if it were me," Fabio touched the tip of his cutlass to Penguin's chest, pushing him back a step, "I wouldn't let my woman out of my sight. Listen to your elders, eh?"

Oh.
It dawned on Sophie why he called her pet names—'princess', 'little missy', 'sweetheart'. Though he was three centimeters from getting punctured, Penguin glanced at her, uneasily gauging her reaction. Shachi was also unsure if he should make a move. She examined this rude-mouthed, terrifying pirate. Hippo's etiquette lectures never covered this... but having been trained by a marine marksman and having fought under three female commanders—one in Vira and mother and daughter on Cat's Eye—Sophie did the first natural thing that came to mind.

"Call me Ma'am," she enunciated, and broke a plate of mashed potatoes over his head.

The eyepatch snapped in the air; Fabio yelped, two perfectly healthy eyeballs swiveling to focus on Sophie.

Penguin and Shachi shared gapes of mingled astonishment and delight. She gawked. Her cheeks reddened in anger. To think he called himself a pirate!

"That eyepatch isn't even real!" Gripping another plate with two hands, she smashed it into his face. "Pathetic!"

"FIGHT!" the giant sky islander bellowed and slammed a table over the first head he saw.

Chairs scraped back. Blades whistled as they were drawn from their sheathes. Penguin grabbed Sophie's shoulders and whirled her around right as Fabio lunged with his cutlass. With a sharp twist of his heel, Fabio swiftly attacked again. Pineapples! Sophie didn't think he had the skills to back up his mouth! He did some fancy two-step maneuver and dove at her. Before Penguin or Shachi could move on the offense, an orange blur unhinged Fabio's jaw with one kick.

"That's for calling me a pet!" Bepo sent him flying with a roundhouse kick to the pelvis. "I'm not cuddly; I'm a weapon of mass destruction! Ai-ai-ai!"

"Holy," Sophie began.

"That's our navigator!" Shachi hollered, kneeling a Fabio pirate in the balls.

"Wait... I was all... I've considered you a..." A pet. Oh my god. Bepo tilted his head. "I've been kind of... condescending." She covered her mouth, as a screaming bar-goer was thrown past her by Penguin. "I've been condescending to you."

Bepo shrugged mildly. "I'd rather not kick someone who can't kick back."

Wow, Sophie's world did a one-eighty. She bit the inside of her lip.

"And on that note—" Shachi hurled a pirate through the window with a crash, "this is our getaway!"

Penguin hoisted Sophie over his shoulder, hugging the back of her denim-covered legs. The disorientating swiftness made her elbow him in the back of the head.

"Shit! Watch it!"

"You watch it!" She grabbed the top of his hat, both as a threatening motion and to balance herself. "Don't touch anyplace weird!"

He spluttered. "You can't keep up with us unless I carry you!"

"Keep up? Why would I—"

Fabio forced himself out of the rubble like a bloody zombie with utensils sticking out of his face. He
clutched his sideways jaw and pointed at Sophie. "Ahha haeh!"

"Go go go!" She thumped Penguin's shoulder. "Giddy-up!"

"Oi! I will drop you!"

As Penguin hurried to the exit, Sophie snatched up a beer bottle from the wreckage. She swished a mouthful of alcohol between her gums and spat it out in a fine mist over her lighter's flame.

Penguin felt the heat right at the back of his neck. "What the hell—"

Shachi yelped. Bepo shielded his eyes. With the alcohol as fuel, a massive fireball hissed from her lips and came like a swinging punch to the Fabio pirates. They skidded backwards, sleeves and eyebrows and hair all aflame. Sophie flicked the lighter shut and hurled the beer bottle at the smoldering Fabios. The tip of her nose felt burnt. Almost as therapeutic as a cigarette.

They left the smoking bar behind and leaped over the rope bridge, into the air. Sophie shrieked—she couldn't help it, the last time this happened she was almost flattened into a chemist pancake!

Penguin got an evil look in his eye. "Bepo!"

The instant Sophie felt her center of gravity shift, she screeched. "Nononono—!

Penguin tossed the screaming chemist into the air. Bepo caught her easily. Shachi whooped, "And he throws a fastball! Home run!"

*Oh, he's so fluffy*— She jerked back as far as she could without falling to her doom. "I'm maintaining a respectful distance, Bepo—er, Bepo-san!"

"I gotcha!" Bepo hoisted her so she was sitting on his shoulders.

Sophie shrieked and held herself steady on top of his furry head. And then—she didn't know which moment it was, but—all the breath in her lungs lifted up into her throat. Shachi vaulted over a clothesline and snapped a bra in Penguin's face. It was completely different from before; she knew Bepo wouldn't drop her, and Shachi howled in laughter (they were all laughing, really, and doing such a simple thing together with them was just—)

The moon appeared so close she could almost pluck it out of the sky. *This is nothing like falling*, she thought giddily, *I'm flying.*

She threw her hands up and let out a wild holler. Their shadows glowed like scarlet ghosts all the way down the mountain.

---

Pirate ships, from dinghies to galleons, crowded Kunlun's vast seaport. Bawdy songs filled the night. Macaques scampered over the masts and riggings. The harbor had its own distinct perfume: saltwater mixed with peach trees, grease, smoke, and sweat. Bepo stepped over two chickens and a scrawny boy chasing them with a coop, and Sophie swayed along with the motion.

"There was this dude that got sliced right here," Shachi drew a line across the middle of his face, "and the rest of his head was peeled back. Inside out. And I got my rare steak in this hand and, I mean, I was practically eating the dead thing in front of me!"

"Three points. Two for grossness, one for the steak." Penguin passed a bag of candied ginger to
Bepo, who took a handful and tossed it up to Sophie.

"Okay, okay, I got one. I knew this guy who stuck a blasting cap in his mouth for fun." She ripped into a candied ginger and dropped it down into Shachi’s hands. "These things are super sensitive, right? It blew off half his face. And he’s still alive."

"What the hell!"

"That’s sick!"

"Disgusting," Bepo said approvingly.

They continued sharing stories about gruesome scenes they’ve witnessed from piracy or military life. Bepo went into stitches when Sophie described a training accident involving three barrels of gunpowder and an unfortunate soul who now had one butt cheek. They stopped by a stall where a vendor was painting animals using molten liquid sugar on a griddle. When Bepo was distracted, Shachi poked her knee and hissed, "I think Bepo's starting to like you."

A long time ago (okay, a few minutes ago), that would’ve made her cackle hysterically in glee. Now, she merely nodded. "Cool."

"Rad as radishes," Shachi put in.

She grinned. "Hey, are you stealing from me?"

"You got a copyright on ridiculous fiber puns?"

Sophie kicked his ear and shrieked in laughter as Shachi chucked a ginger at her, which hit Bepo instead. Penguin brought back four sugar animals on a stick. Sophie chomped on her sugar bird, swaying on Bepo's shoulders; she had an amazing view of the crowded harbor. Pretty boats danced along the waves like red fireflies. Her gaze landed on a pirate stepping onto one of those boats. A handsome man invited her inside and the beaded curtains slipped shut.

She averted her eyes upon reaching the submarine. Having just gotten back himself, Law leaned on the railing, examining a bloody jar with a brain inside.

"Looks like you had a fun night." She smirked, climbing on deck. The pirates remained on the docks, just stopping by to drop her off.

Law balanced the jar on the pads of his fingers, gazing at it introspectively. The organ stealer had no idea how to preserve his goods. So Law went out of his way to show him. "Boring, actually," he sighed. "Shachi, get up here. The sub needs a check up."

He almost choked on the stick. "Wha—by myself? That'll take hours!"

"Better start now." He waved a hand at Bepo and Penguin. "You two are free to do as you like."

The submarine went through a massive tidal wave, Sophie recalled; checking it over was standard. Shachi muffled a groan as he slumped below deck. Bepo and Penguin shared a laugh at his expense and belted out, "We'll bring you back food, Shachi! See you later, Ma'am."

Law raised his eyebrows. Sophie shrugged. "It just happened."

—

"This is Esmeralda, the love of my life." Beside a sappily grinning Anko sat a woman dressed in
gossamer and silk and candlelight, with oyster pearls braided in her hair. He leaned over the window ledge and whispered, "We're going to elope.

"Twenty thousand beli to woo, darling," she informed Penguin, and pointed at Bepo. "You can't bring that in here. Last time I had polar bear, I got indigestion."

Bepo choked.

"Isn't she perfect?" Anko sighed in adoration, then reached for his wallet. "...I'm broke. How did this happen?"

From the next window over, the matron of the house booted out a naked pirate. Girls peeked through the curtains, giggling and wolf-whistling. He staggered to his feet, drunk and disheveled and sporting a ridiculous grin. Wait a second…

"Manta! They took all your clothes!" Bepo cried.

"And all my money," Manta replied proudly.

"Can we stay forever?" Penguin asked breathlessly, handing over a wad of beli.

"I'll sell my kidneys to get more cash," Anko told Esmeralda seriously.

Bepo had had enough. The polar bear grabbed the back of Anko's collar and yanked him over the window, pinched Penguin by the ear, and threw Manta over his shoulders like a man-baby.

The ladies of the night stuck their heads out the windows. "Come back soon! We love rich pirates!"

"Okayyyyy!"

"Stoop ittt!" Bepo howled, shaking his crewmates.

—

His ink was beautiful. Like he ran a calligraphy brush over skin.

The sub was warm and Law had rolled his sleeves over his tattooed shoulders. More hearts. How predictable, she thought with a tinge of affection. The symmetry didn't hurt. Something about it, the heart tattoos, the Jolly Rogers, it felt familiar in some way… Or she was just feeling dizzy from the bar and the noise and the lights. She still saw bright lanterns when she closed her eyes.

"I usually fine thieves a tongue for stealing from me," Law murmured.

"Hm?"

His fingers slithered under the back of her shirt and lifted up Odin's burned dog tags. Sophie jerked away from him and backed into the closet door, the same place where she built the C4 bombs.

"Wait! No, I—I didn't think you'd m-mind! Th-this is a piece of garbage, and—" She broke off, winding her fingers in the chain. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken it. I should've asked."

"I wouldn't care if you wanted that as a keepsake, but you're keeping it for someone." He ambled closer to her, doing that thing again where he remained in his own personal bubble yet somehow smothered hers. "You want to meet that woman again, as a pirate of my crew?" He smelled like Kunlun, like fire and the ocean and sweat. The scent must be all over her, too.
Sophie scowled, shaking the mental parasite out of her head. What was wrong with her, thinking about that at a time like this? Man, it'd feel good shoving him back, shouting in face. Was he still going to treat her like some throwaway thing? Or was Law going to actually respect her like a proper crewmate? She was trying so effin' hard here!

"I'm not going to drag the Heart Pirates into my problems. You said you thought I was gonna use you to run away. Well, I'm not. I have every intention of facing the consequences of my actions. If that doesn't fit on your ship, then we have a conflict of interest."

A line in the sand.

Law tilted his head back, glaring at her through hooded eyes. "You got cheeky."

"I'm not the one holding a brain."

Point.

She stepped forward and he backed up without meaning to, without even realizing it. "And face it—you'd be bored otherwise."

He raised an eyebrow. One long, brown finger crept up along the wisps of her curly hair. The ugly yellow light from the outside ships painted her hair golden-orange, almost like its original color. Even in this awful lighting, her eyes were the fiercest blue he'd ever seen. She watched his hand warily, hoping beyond hope he wasn't able to hear her heart hammering between her ribs. They weren't even that close, not really, not enough—

"Doubtful." Law tugged on a curl. "But good try."

"Ow."

He pointed at her neck. "The tags are yours. A token of good faith. If you ever steal from me again, I will—"

"Turn my face into an impressionist art piece, I got it," she assured. "And if you ever mess with my bombs, I will dip you in oil and fry you for dinner."

He waved without looking back. "Hope you like fungi."

Fungi? Law disappeared down the hallway. What did that pineapple plan... With a sense of foreboding, she opened the door—and gasped.

The closet was dim with gentle green light. Glowing mushrooms and something that looked like squishy moss spilled over a glass jar hanging from the ceiling. The floor was spotless and smelled like clean metallic oxygen. She stuffed the tags in the satchel and tossed it on the empty desk. With an exhausted sigh, Sophie collapsed on the hammock. It swayed softly, like a rolling ocean wave. And in this cool light, she could've been sleeping underwater. Sophie swept her fingers in the air like an orchestra conductor, pretending to nudge through a forest of kelp. If she squinted, the mushrooms became the smooth shells of sea turtles.


Sophie rolled over on her side, hugging the pillow. She still hadn't contacted Hippo. What would he say?

"Sophie, you're playing a dangerous game." She wagged her finger. "Trafalgar Law is a bad
influence and a borderline sadist and he goes around burning brains. I'm your authority figure, I let you join the chemwar team. I wanted you… to be happy…”

Guilt chewed on her insides. She didn't want Hippo to find out she became a pirate by flipping through the morning newspaper and choking on his cereal. A long time ago, he was the only one she had cared about. How… funny. Tonight, she laughed harder than she ever had in a long time. It was fun being here.

It was fun being around the Heart Pirates.

—

Law walked down to the engine room, immersed in his thoughts.

'I want a nice big coffin next time. Solid gold.'

What a shame. Her usefulness only extended so far… But Law just wanted the weapons she could produce. After that, he'd cut his losses and wipe his hands clean. What Sophie decided to do with her life was her choice entirely. If she wished to prepare her own funeral, he respected her enough to let it be so.

Hearing his captain's footstep, Shachi looked up from inspecting a pipe. He had the pout of a kid who was denied ice cream.

"Just started," he muttered sourly, "don't mind me, why don't you go off and have fun like everyone else—"

The wrench fell to the floor with a loud clang. Law pushed him into the wall, shoving his finger in his face. "You ever stumble across something—"

"Oi!"

He pressed his palm against Shachi's clavicle and slammed him back into the wall, "—that big again, tell me. I don't care how impossible it sounds. Don't jeopardize the fucking crew."

"How was I supposed to know!?"

"You did know, and you didn't trust yourself to believe. We're on the Grand Line; common sense is never enough to survive. I will not have hesitation on this ship. What do I always fucking say? The crew comes first, no matter what. You killed us yesterday." Law dug his finger into his chest. "Remember that."

Shachi's face turned ashen.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry."

Law stormed away from the engine room… and let the façade drop when he was in the clear. After he hobbled inside his cabin, he forced himself to choke down food and dress his wound. He almost passed out earlier when he tried Rooming himself two feet across his cabin. Odin, that damn flying cat, now an island full of dangerous bounties… they were cutting it close. Lately it felt like they were doing everything they could just to scrape by. The look on Shachi's face ran over and over in his mind.

He slumped on the edge of his bed and winced, clutching his side.
"Fuck."

"I don't know what Cap's thinking, but you're not part of my crew yet," Penguin muttered.

This was what Sophie walked out to, first thing in the morning. She froze, panicked and confused, her hand still on the doorknob. The grim pirate was leaning against the wall. Her mind kicked into overdrive, going through everything she said and did in the last twenty-four hours.

"Messing with Bepo is a privilege, not a right."

She jumped and words poured out of her mouth in a frenzy. "I—I know! I w—wouldn't ever—I'm sorry if I—"

Penguin sniggered.

"…Seriously? Don't do that!"

"Right, right, my bad," he choked out. Sophie couldn't decide if she was relieved or furious, and ended up settling on it's too figging early for this. "Later. I told Shachi to take the day off, me and Valross are double checking his work." He straightened out his hat and headed for the mess for breakfast. She heard his voice echo down the corridor: "Oi! Talking polar bears are weird!"

Bepo's voice cried back, "I'm sorry!"

Sophie sighed and slumped against the door.

Pirates. Honestly.

"Here's all the peach and apricot pits, matchsticks, thermometers, raw sugar, and saltpeter we have! Now get out."

Sophie tossed a few thousand beli on the counter and swiped up the bags with a leer. "Thank you!"

"Are you gonna empty the whole damn store, too?" the irritated cashier asked the next customer.

"Gimme a cherry pie."

"Take me down to the piratedise city," Sophie hummed under her breath, teeter-tottering on her heels. The big fellow behind her held the door open. "Steady as she goes, lass." He peeked into her bag. "Huh? Garbage collector?"

"Excuse you, these are chemical resources! Saltpeter is an oxidizer and sugar is a fuel source. Melt, stir, and voila! Smoke bomb. Matchstick heads contain sulfur, thermometers carry mercury. Peach and apricot pits? Cyanide. The trick is to react the cyanide and sulfur to create thiocyanate, then synthesize the mercury to—" Sophie stopped. "Even if I explain it, it's not like you'd understand."

His eyes flared. "Are you calling me stupid?"

"Wha—I don't know, I only met you ten seconds ago!"

Cherry Pie Man doubled over laughing. Sophie blinked at him owlishly. He didn't seem dangerous. In fact, he seemed like someone's uncle who got lost walking down the street every Thursday. He
chomped on his giant cherry confectionary and said, as though this decided everything, "Pirate?"

"In all probability, yes, but… I'm still evaluating my options."

"No rush," he assured her. "The worst thing is divin' headfirst in something you're not prepared to do. Gotta stick to your guns! Even I did something that made enemies out of old friends…" He shot her a grin full of broken teeth. "It was worth it."

Sophie looked at him in a new light. That was actually a bit inspiring.

It was just then that she noticed a raucous circle forming beside the general store. People poked their heads out the door to observe the commotion. A gunshot broke through the noise and a wounded pirate fell to the ground, clutching his leg.

"—be the last time 'One Piece' comes out of your mouth!" the Longarm with the gun laughed.

Sophie hid a gasp. He was a Fabio pirate! And the eyepatch beside him…

"Pineapples!" She hid her face behind the bag. "Walk faster!" she hissed, prodding Cherry Pie Man in the back.

"Only weaklings need ten people to gang up on one." He finished off his pie and licked his fingers. "Well, I don't judge…"

Alas, Cherry Pie Man didn't bother to lower his voice. Fish Breath Fabio was in front of his face in a second. She squeaked and raised the bag higher. He had a bandage wrapped around his jaw and a glare that promised anyone who said a word about his face a long drop off the side of Kunlun.

"Suhhh huh huh huh huhh?"

"Want something, shithead?" a Fabio pirate translated.

Cherry Pie Man raised his hands. "I'm just tryin' to pass by. Don't hurt me!"

"You call yourself a pirate? Pfff, you wouldn't last a second in the New Age, grandpa."

Sophie attempted to sidle behind Cherry Pie Man. The bag in front of her wasn't exactly inconspicuous, and the Fabio pirate grabbed her and pulled her around face-to-face. She waved. "Nice jaw."

Fabio pointed at Sophie. "Yuh!"

"You!" the translator cried.

"Me," Sophie agreed.

"Huh?" Cherry Pie Man contributed.

"Attack: Taking Advantage of the Confusion and Surprise Attack!" Sophie slammed the bag into Fabio's chest. Did she feel bad for hitting an injured person? No. Even one with a broken jaw and multiple bruises and a black eye? Still no. "Run!"

Sophie and Cherry Pie Man laughed as they reached the lower ring, as she finished telling him how she whacked Fabio with a plate of potatoes. He had a funny old laugh; she'd never heard anything
quite like it before.

"See here, Miss, I been on the seas for the better part of my life and I know for certain there ain't nothing more chicken shit than a fake eyepatch," he chuckled.

"Right? Mangoes, punching someone always feels so satisfying." She skipped down the rope stairs, Cherry Pie Man clumping after her. "Oh, but sorry for almost getting you mixed up in that."

"Not at all," he returned, his smile all saccharine. "It'd be mighty obscene of me to leave you to their clutches."

Sophie giggled internally; what a sight to see this pie-loving pillowsack fight off Fabio.

"You can back me up next time," she told him.

He seemed amused. "Deal. I'll see you off here; my crew's a-waitin'." He pointed at an alley up ahead, leading in to the dark bowels of Kunlun.

"Sure! Oh, you never told me your—" They strolled past a food vendor and upon noticing red hair and sunglasses, her feet stopped. "Shachi-san! Are… are you okay?" She'd never seen someone eat food so sadly.

"I'm eating my pain away," he grumbled. "Who's he?"

"A friend." She turned to Cherry Pie Man and pointed at Shachi. "This is my 'presumably yes'."

"Heart Pirate…" he murmured. Shachi felt a shiver run up his spine like a knife. Even though he was wearing sunglasses, he got the feeling he was looking at him square in the eye. "Your captain's head is worth a hefty price for a rookie…"

"Sophie-chan, get away from him," Shachi said sharply.

"What? Why?"

Fast as a viper, Shachi grabbed her wrist and yanked her behind him. He stood between her and the big pirate. What was Shachi trying to do? Make sure he didn't lob cherry pies at her? Or laugh her to death? Eager spectators stopped on the bridge to watch, waiting for blood.

Cherry Pie Man seemed a bit miffed. "Look, now you made a big fuss. Pirates don't hunt pirates on Kunlun, that's just decorum," he patted his chest, a false simper in his voice, "and I ain't nothin' if not mannerly." He shot Sophie a giant grin, and despite her misgivings, she waved goodbye. "Well, I'll be on my way. Tell your captain to steer clear of Jaya. That'll be Blackbeard territory for a while. And remember: the New Age is a load of shit! Zehahaha!"

This was Sophie's first encounter with Marshall D. Teach, future Warlord and Emperor of the New World. But for the time being, he was just a hairy, no-name pirate who liked cherry pies.

—

Shachi leaped onto the edge of a rooftop and plopped down, scattering birds. Muttering under her breath about annoying super athletic pirates, Sophie took the longer, safer route down the ladder. The rooftops slums were mostly empty and peaceful. The ocean was only three rings down, and she could see the entire harbor, sparkling in the sunlight.

She sat down beside Shachi. "What's the New Age?"
He wiped his mouth with his wrist. "People call the current times the Golden Age, right? The New Age is… one of those things you hear whispered on the street, or see it graffitied on a building. A cultural phenomenon. I don't really get it myself, but—it's something like what happened to you on Cat's Eye. I think. That's happening to a bunch of people around the world."

"Huh." That was unsettling to imagine. She motioned to the jian bing. "Can I try some?"

"You're a stickler on being clean, but you don't care about my slobber?" He let her take it anyway.

"When you've lived on moldy bread for months, you learn not to be so picky about food. Also, the rare rat."

"Rat?"

"It was a good day when we found a healthy rat. You gotta be careful, because, you know, disease carriers." Sophie wolfed down the jian bing and moaned. "Wow. Wow, this is good. Spicy. I forgot food could be this spicy."

"...You can have the rest."

Sophie made a happy noise.

"Oh—here." Shachi opened up his palm. "A Kunlun delicacy." He offered her a large rice ball filled with pickled vegetables and bah-sang.

"I didn't even see you nick that!" Sophie was impressed.

"Heh. Hai Xing's the real thief. He blends into the background so easily you don't even know he's there." Shachi considered that. "...Poor guy."

"Fanks. Yuh nah hungwy?"

"Wouldn't be offering if I was."

She stopped stuffing her face for a second and swallowed. "Oh, come on. You're so sweet on girls. Which, I mean, I don't mind. Unless you do something weird, and I'll shank you. But I don't mind when you guys are soft around me." She bit into the rice ball. "Like carrying me and giving me food."

Shachi shrugged. "No one gets by in this world by themselves."

"I got no complaints. Pity tastes good."

"...I got knifed in the gut when I was thirteen." He held out his hand.

"Alright, alright, alright." She broke off a large chunk and gave it to him.

Sophie finished off the rice ball in even bites. The flavor, the texture, everything was so much better than food at G-13. What did they even serve there? She couldn't remember.

"Captain didn't tell me to join him today," Shachi mumbled glumly.

Her first reaction was to say So? But then she remembered they respected Law to the point of adoration. Must be a big deal, especially if he was confiding this to her of all people. She reached into her pocket. "Here, this'll cheer you up."
He held up the drawing. "What is this, a butt?"

"It's Penguin-san as a hyperventilating dinosaur."

"Amazing," Shachi said slowly, glee replacing sadness. "I'm gonna frame this and show everyone!"

Sophie had to thump herself in the chest because she accidentally choked on her spit. "N-no! He'll be f-furious with me!"

"Yeah and it's gonna be hilarious! When Penguin gets angry, he gets this constipated look on his face like a wrinkled potato—"

She tried to snatch the napkin. "Shachi-san! Either give it back or throw it away! Or let me throw it away!"

He looked from the disturbing sketch to her furrowed brow and wide, scared eyes. "Fineee… I can't resist the heartfelt pleas from a cute—"

She belched in his face.

"Ugh." He fanned the air.

Well, serves him right. She kicked her legs on the rooftop, picking at her teeth. "So? Feel better?"

"You spit in Penguin's face, you burp in mine, this is an unsettling trend—"

"You know what I mean!"

A little smile tugged at Shachi's mouth. "Yeah, yeah." He folded the napkin, creased it, and folded it again.

"What's Law-san up to?"

"Gathering information." He tossed the paper crane into the air and watched it soar into the city. "Boring stuff, really."

Sophie felt something drip on her hand. She glanced down and cringed. "Aw, seriously?"

Shachi's eyes went round, his cheeks puffing up. "I'd hand you a napkin, but…"

"Ugh, now I need to go sanitize myself," she muttered, shaking bird droppings off her hand.

Unable to hold his laughter in any longer, he thumped her on the back. It might've been worth it, though, seeing Shachi laugh so heartily. Maybe not entirely, Sophie groused, but a little. She could spare a little.

—

In three neat slices, Law cut through flesh and bone. The serrated body parts landed by the feet of his three crewmates. Anko carelessly kicked the pieces across the filthy floor, laughing.

A man in the corner raised a shaking gun. "Who the hell are you?"

"Can we kill him?" Anko was practically salivating. "Can I kill him?"

Bepo patted Penguin's shoulder with a dismembered arm. "Need a hand?"
"You're hilarious." He slapped it away.

"I said—" the frantic man began.

Bepo scratched his back with the severed arm. "Ahhh, this feels nice…"

"Listen to me! I have a gun!"

"Oh, he has a gun." Penguin looked at his crewmates. "I guess that's it. We have to surrender."

"…Wait, really?"

In a flash of blue light, the gun in his hand warped into Law's. It was a nice weapon. He stuck it in the back of his jeans. "You want to know who I am?" He raised the business partner's face like a mask, having skinned it off the head. "A simple bookman profiting off of Kunlun's underground wrestlers."

"Stop that!" the bookie cried, and grimaced. "That's disgusting!"

He tossed the sack of flesh away, chuckling. "I'm just a doctor. You're far more interesting, Mister Bookman, Gunrunner, Human Trafficker." The bookie's face turned more ashen with every word that came out of Law's mouth. "Bodies vanish all the time on Kunlun."

Anko started laughing maniacally.

"I-I d-don't have a-anything to do with Fish Breath! He wasn't even that good of a slaver anyway! Beat some to death, and they were valuable merch!"

"Hell if I care about that. You're his connection to Kunlun." He unsheathed Kikoku and pointed it at the Jolly Roger painted on the wall. The slashed smiley face grinned at them. "You're going to tell me everything that's going on in the black market. Not the surface, but the deep, dark black. And then I might consider killing you quickly."

When it was all over, he didn't.

—

Sophie spent the rest of the morning cooking up bombs in the junkyard. The homeless squatters had well-organized garbage piles and kept it quite clean. They were surprisingly hygienic. By late afternoon, she finished and took the gondola to a higher ring. It was easy to find which bar the pirate doctor haunted; all she had to do was eavesdrop on the conversations around her like a mouse sniffing out cheese. Word traveled fast on Kunlun. Pirates were delightful gossipers.

Sophie leaned over Law's shoulder and read: "Straw Hat Luffy… one hundred million?" She wrinkled her nose. "Kid looks like an idiot."

"Doesn't he?" Law agreed idly and flipped the newspaper page.

She sat down on the empty chair in front of him. "What'd you say to Shachi-san to get him so upset?"

He skimmed the newspaper and said nothing. Didn't even look at her. She got the picture. Private matter.

"I cheered him up, though, so I think he's cool now."
He raised his head. "You did?"

She popped a nectarine in her mouth. "Yeah. I mean, I hope I did."

He gazed at her with the oddest expression. Relief, with a tinge of… gratefulness? A sliver of satisfaction coursed through her. Law had never looked at her like that. "Good," he murmured, and stuck his nose back in the newspaper.

Sophie held back her grin (boy, that took a lot of self-control) and nabbed pieces of crispy duck from his plate. She was always famished after she finished cooking. She looked up quickly, just to make sure this wasn't theft and/or Law wasn't going to chop off her kidney.

"Go ahead, I'm not hungry. Ate earlier."

He had blood on the side of his shoe. Safer not to ask.

Law spoke her name and Sophie looked up, barely managing to catch a silver revolver. It glistened like a sleek whisper, not a speck of dust to be seen. "Beautiful," she breathed, holding it up to the light. It was already loaded. ".44 caliber. Top-notch. The grip is nice. Where did you…?"

"It was being wasted on a trash heap. Thought it suited you," he lied. Well, the good intentions were still there. She did right by the Heart Pirates, cheering up Shachi.

Sophie smiled at him and looked down quickly. "Thanks." She stuffed the gun in her pocket and dug out a cig and her lighter.

There was something he'd noticed but never cared to properly inquire until now…

"Twenty-one Three Alpha," he read the scratches on the lighter. "You had that lighter since the day we met."

"Twenty-First Battalion, Third Platoon, Alpha Company." She took a deep puff, flipping the pocket tombstone over her knuckles. "We used to bum lighters and cigarettes off the bodies we ran across. Walking across no man's land, you lose one, pick up three. I must've carved the same letters on a dozen lighters."

"Why?"

"You sew your jolly roger on everything and you got hearts inked on your skin. It's the same thing."

His eyes narrowed minutely.

She shrugged again. "But hey, morale, right?" She shoveled duck in her mouth and raised her eyebrows at him. "That's definitely what it's all about."

It was kind of twisted—when you fight a war for a cause you believe in, you go the full length, fight the good fight—green light. Resume play. Life moves on. Peace talks. Treaties. There's a garden hose in your hand instead of a gun. You're standing in the crossroads as life passes by you in a monochrome blur, while you hose the dust off the combat boots you're wearing.

"Do you… care about what happened at Vira?"

He paused for a tenth of a second. "Not particularly."

The plum wine was tasty. She licked her lips. "It's not something I enjoy remembering."
Surprise crossed his features. "Really."

Sophie narrowed her eyes. "What's with that tone?"

"It's not one I'm familiar with, but I imagine G-13 must teach secret versions to their marines. Must be second nature by now, or you wouldn't be doing it on reflex, which seems to be occurring. Sometimes psychological trauma manifests itself in little quirks, proving that you can never… fully… escape the battlefield."

Psychological trauma? Second nature? Was he saying she was—

"Nothing's wrong with me," she said fiercely.

"When you tap, you tap out codes."

She froze in the middle of drumming her fingers. Pure instinct—subconscious, repetitive, going-through-the-motions instinct. She'd been taught tap codes since before she could hold a pencil, but it was only until Vira when she started to use it regularly, where life-or-death meant knowing your ciphers. She insisted Vira was done with but her lighter and her tapping—she didn't blame Law for thinking otherwise. She *did* think about it constantly, but it was filtered out as background noise—ooh pretty monkey *bangbang two shots kill it in the neck* Law has nice hands *orange hands sick with disease* haha *Cherry Pie Man's hilarious cherry red bullet lodged in left thigh burst artery*—

Sophie set the fork down and laced her hands together on the table.

"How'd you pick up on this?"

"I watch you," he said simply.

Three words.

It was only three words.

The last three words that made her heart skip like this was hexamethylene triperoxide diamine. *It's not even in that way,* she scolded herself. Law was informed enough to be able to spot it, which means he had to have been counting, too. One-two-one-two-one-two. With all the subtle manipulative vibes he had, she should've known observation was one of his talents. But to the point where he was able to dissect a nervous habit just by watching her? That was insane. That was brilliance.

"Wow." Sophie laughed a little, her gut clenched. "You're terrifying."

"And yet you're still here, which says more about you than it does me."

He took a drink from the wine cup and handed it out to her. After a brief pause, she accepted. *What did* it say about her? she wondered as she took a long sip. That she was a thrill seeker? Desperate? A mix of both, she decided. There wasn't a single answer on why she wanted to be a Heart Pirate.

"Machinastein's next. We set sail in three days," Law said, shaking Sophie out of her thoughts.

She rose to the edge of her seat. "For real?"

He smirked. "Knew you'd be excited."

"Of course! That place is famous—"
"Captain!" Penguin and Bepo waved from the door, over the heads of the crowded bar.

"So I'm traveling with the Heart Pirates to Machinastein," Sophie summarized as he stood. "Does this mean I'm in the crew?"

"It means you've impressed me. And that's not easy."

"Why do you have to be so horribly vague?"

"I'm told it's one of my better points, along with my lack of empathy and fascination for dead things."

"I think it's charming."

He paused.

She rested her chin on her hands and batted her eyelashes. "I also think you have a voice like melted chocolate and your smoldering gaze pierces my soul."

Law flipped her off with one hell of an acidic smile and went off to talk to his crewmates. She giggled into her fists. The tough fabric of the bandages scratched her lips. Hm… the wounds should be healed by now. She'd ask Law once he came back.

*tap, tap—*

She caught herself, her fingers motionless over the table. Why did it always have to come back to Vira? All the progress she made running away somehow made her run back, like a giant circle. But it didn't matter, now that she was a pirate.

*The past is the past,* Sophie thought firmly. Run fast, run far, don't look back. And all would be fine.

A sharp dark woman in a sharp dark suit slipped in Law's seat.

She speared the duck with Sophie's fork and bit into it. "Good flavoring. I might order a plate myself."

"It's poisoned," her mouth uttered.

"Don't get cute with me, Director," the CP5 leader replied silkily.

Sophie stared at her, repressing her horror.

"I'm sorry, what?" she laughed. "Do I know you? I've had amnesia for two weeks, ever since I got lost on the ocean. That doctor was helping—"

"G-13 exports weaponry worth billions every year." Teresa took a sip of the wine. She looked nearly the same as when Sophie saw her last; early forties, long black ponytail, tattoos crisscrossing her neck. "Your disappearance is costing them a lot of money, especially after the mess at Vira. No one has yet been capable to match the standards of your war science."

She adjusted her suit, drawing attention to the ax and morningstar on her back. Twin hook swords rested on her hips. She was the exact opposite of her predecessor, who was an incompetent buffoon and by some means tripped his way into becoming chief of CP9.

Sophie's mind raced. She couldn't scream for Law, or else that'd put the whole crew in danger. She had her smoke bombs and her pistol in her bag, but if she made any sudden movements Teresa would knock her out instantly. Time to go back to the basics.
"You have the wrong person, I told you, I have no clue who you—"

Teresa swung her ax forward and buried it in the cushion by Sophie's thigh.

She flinched. Okay, lying was out. "God, it's always business with you people. Don't I at least get a hello?"

An eyebrow rose. "Look who grew up."

Dyeing her hair was pointless if literally everyone she wanted to escape from still recognized her! It was the eyebrows, wasn't it? "I can't believe you have the actual ovaries to waltz in here and sit down." Sophie leaned over the table. "You can't touch me on Kunlun. I'll yell f-fire. Right here, in the m-middle of a bar f-filled with pirates."

"Go ahead. These many opponents could probably put up a challenge." Teresa watched hesitation flicker over her face and smiled without emotion. "Ah, but you won't. Because that would be outright mutiny and you are treading on a thin line. We have you down as a political threat. You're one misstep away from being on a hit list. What is Trafalgar Law to you?"

"Law-san tried to do me in!" she snapped. "As if I care what happens to him."

Teresa repeated softly, "'Law-san'?"

Sophie slowly looked down and closed her eyes.

Calm as ever, showing no trace of triumph, Teresa tossed some beli on the table. "For the meal. I'd hate to be in your debt." She tented her hands. "Let's say Trafalgar captured an important World Government asset and is holding her hostage. We would be forced to hunt him down. She came running to us and sold you out for her own freedom. Strangways Sophie got close to you because she wanted a bargaining chip. In exchange for your arrest, we've granted her amnesty for her crimes."

Sophie stared glassily at a point over the agent's shoulder. She couldn't bluff her way out of this one. She couldn't fight Teresa, or outsmart her. This was it. The end of the line.

"How ironic," she went on, "that you, of all people, would trade family for pirate scum. Deserting the World Government is one thing, but to grow fond of this man? I never thought you'd become so soft-hearted—"

The next thing the agent saw was the inside of a gun barrel right before Sophie shot her between the eyes.

_to be continued_
Up until Vira, there had been few times Sophie experienced genuine fear. She never had a reason to. Her reckless urge to explode *everything* she could get her hands on, or "accidents" as Hippo wrote on the liability statements, usually just gave her a slap on the wrists and a complaint to Lettidore (later to be mysteriously found in the paper shredder). She abused her status gleefully, without repercussion. But while childish behavior could be forgiven, professional mistakes weren't. Whenever she made an error in her blueprints, Lettidore would drag her into his office and *roar*—loud red noises that scrambled her eardrums—but we're getting off topic. The point is, Sophie had a sheltered life that fulfilled at least two of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. More than a large portion of the rest of the world.

But like a pendulum, her life was thrown from one extreme to the other. After the past two weeks, after Law, Donquixote Doflamingo—*after free-falling one thousand feet*—and getting into a bar fight with a Longarm slave trader, very little could scare her anymore. Now, if someone tied her to a wall and started revving a chainsaw, she'd most likely yawn and tell them to put some more effort into it.

That's what Sophie believed until this moment, right now.

*Teresa didn't even blink.*

The agent stared at Sophie as she instantaneously did the following: 1) registered the gun, 2) heard the gunshot, 3) followed the trajectory of the bullet shot at point-blank range, and 4) tilted her head three inches to the right.

The bullet shot into a bottle of gin as a waiter was pouring it, and all hell broke loose.

Sophie floored it. Flinging a smoke bomb at the ground, she leaped on the table and crashed through the window, glass shards spilling behind her. The alley below was a ten foot drop and her momentum was so great she blindly slammed into the ramshackle wall.

She braced herself and took several gulps of air. The agent's frigid jet eyes burned themselves into her brain like a scorch brand. Sophie would frequently revisit those eyes in her nightmares, though she didn't know it yet.

Her mind was on autopilot; the bar was a compromised trench, and her only goal was *get to shelter*. She stumbled forward, her mind spinning as bystanders scrambled to clear the alleyway. And the yelling—the *yelling* started, and it wasn't just in her mind, she wasn't flashing back to Vira—

Sophie looked up and paled.

Six agents in black were walking towards her, an immovable line spanning the entire tiny alleyway. Sunglasses obscured their eyes and skull bandanas wrapped over their mouths.

From the roof of the bar, a street urchin stomped her feet and howled, "Get off the streets! It's another pirate brawl!"
Her blood ran cold. Pirates…?

The skulls on the agents’ bandannas weren’t just skulls… but Jolly Rogers.

Those cheaters!

An agent fired a shot into the air. That was enough incentive for the kids to scatter. He turned the pistol toward Sophie, who automatically raised the revolver in response. "End of the line, Director. Put the gun down."

Should she run? Surrender? Start shooting like a mindless idiot and pray for the best? But there were six agents, and she only had five bullets left. Even if her marksmanship was on point, it would be a waste of ammo. What to do? What to do? Her best chance was surrendering, pretending to cooperate, and then wait for a chance to escape. A chance that might not come. The agents were yelling at her now, to put the gun down, put it down NOW. But she couldn't. She couldn't go back to G-13, not after killing a World Noble. Her finger slowly pressed on the trigger. She couldn't surrender after coming this far. If they wanted a bloodbath, fine—

Before she could make a move, a white and orange streak slid in front of Sophie.

Penguin and Bepo stood between her and the CP5 agents.

"Getting real tired of other pirates picking on you," Penguin commented, cracking his knuckles. "If Shachi were here, he'd ask why you didn't invite us to the party."

"Let's break their legs a little," Bepo proposed.

It felt as if someone swept her legs out from under her: Sophie completely forgot about the Heart Pirates. The surprise and relief were so sudden she could only manage fishlike blinking. It was a formidable sight: the two Heart Jolly Rogers smiling at her from the backs of their uniforms.

Penguin raised his fists, and Sophie snapped herself out of it. "Wait! We gotta m-make a run for it! They're n-not—"

"Director! You have until the count of three!"

"They're not p-pirates!" Sophie grabbed Penguin's shoulder and Bepo's elbow. "They're Cipher P-P-Pol!"

Penguin went still. Instead of demanding why Cipher Pol called her Director, his face turned an angry fuchsia. He pointed at the agents. "Take those Jolly Rogers off, cheaters!"

"One!"

She desperately tugged on their sleeves. Mangoes, it was like tugging on two boulders. "W-where's Law-san?" Our trump card, fearless captain, fearsome Surgeon of Death?

"Bathroom," Penguin snapped.

"When you gotta tinkle, you gotta tinkle," Bepo added.

Sophie made a noise like an enraged porpoise, searching for a more intelligible response than WHY?

"Two!"

Penguin brushed her hand off his shoulder. "Sit back and relax. We can handle these Cipher jokes."
He appraised his opponents with a head tilt that reminded Sophie of the cocky air his captain sometimes (always) had. "Wait a second," he said suddenly. "Why are they after you again? And did they just call you 'Director'?"

"Three!"

The CP5 agents opened fire.

Penguin and Bepo easily dodged the first two bullets with practiced speed and efficiency. On the other hand, Sophie did an arm flail maneuver and a bewildered jig of indecisiveness. Her knees hit the rope railing of the bridge, and—*lurch*—she felt her balance rapidly drop while her gut did the same.

"Help me!" she shrieked, her arms windmilling.

"Catch her!" Penguin and Bepo shouted in their fighting stances, and blinked at each other. "Huh?"

Receiving no help whatsoever, the chemist tipped over backwards and plummeted over the bridge, cursing loudly.

"After her!" an agent roared.

"Like hell," Penguin retorted, and leaped forward—

The agent released a trademark G-13 smoke bomb with a distinct pineapple scent—a certain way chemists sign their work—and it exploded in the alley.

Penguin and Bepo scrambled up on a rooftop, coughing and waving away the smoke. When the haze cleared, the alley was empty. The two pirates looked at each other… and Penguin waved a hand at the polar bear. "You call him, I'm going to grab some fried dumplings."

Bepo dialed a number on his Baby Den Den Mushi. "Captain, we have a problem… oh, are you flushing? I'll wait."

---

A few moments earlier, Sophie was busy calculating the prime position to fall as she hurtled downwards. She squeezed her eyes and braced herself for the pain. "Hardcore parkour," she squeaked, and crashed through a roof. Luckily, due to the fact Kunlun was populated almost entirely by impoverished slums, the 'roof' was a big plastic lid poorly taped to a cookie tray.

"Seven times seven is forty-nine," the little girls were repeating, before Sophie broke the roof in half and nearly sent them sprawling like bowling pins. She rolled forward on her shoulder, shot to her feet out-of-balanced, ran face-first through the wall, and tripped into the bridge-street outside.

The school shack promptly collapsed in a neat little circle around the girls and their befuddled teacher.

"Ow—off—s-sorry!" she panted, wincing. "Keep studying!"

*Gonna be feeling that one for days…*

Sophie hobbled down the bridge. Trouble happened every ten seconds on Kunlun, so the onlookers only dropped a leer and a few laughs at Sophie's expense, without batting an eye at the damage she just caused. She threw her hood over her head and hurried past street peddlers, walking fast but not
too fast. As much as she wanted to bolt, blending in was better than making a big scene. The agents were hot on her tail, she could feel it.

A sudden sliver of anxiety and disbelief pierced through her mental state. God, what have I done? Sophie knew she'd be on the run from Teresa, but to have actually pointed a gun at her? What's wrong with me? What the actual pineapples is wrong with me?

Sophie didn't even remember raising her arm, only that white-hot anger throbbed in her skull and the revolver Law gave her found its way into her palm. She gritted her teeth as she easily jumped a chain-link fence. She could try to justify it all she wanted, but it was really when Teresa threatened the crew that Sophie immediately decided she had to end her. Right there. It seemed like an obvious choice… but wow, major regret. She was the weakest one here! If Teresa was the heavyweight champ, Sophie's level was literally five hundred miles away from the boxing ring.

Speaking of fighting—Penguin and Bepo would be alright, they could easily fend off the grunts. In the meantime, she'd find a place to hide, wait, and run to the harbor. She told Law she wasn't going to drag her problems onboard his submarine. The crew was still recovering after Odin and Cat's Eye; she was not going to let Teresa get her beefy, tattooed hands on them.

She jumped over a moon gate, scurried past a line of cramped zen gardens, slid down a sloping twisted roof constructed entirely out of a giant peach tree. Stumbling over the crags and burls, Sophie scanned her possible hiding spots. The roots of the tree tangled up into a long bridge, populated with people all cheerfully going about their daily lives, oblivious to Sophie's dilemma. Where to hide? Wait a minute… She looked down at the tree. Ah, I'm standing right on top of it.

"Hardc…core… parkour…" she wheezed, dropping down with a thud and rolling into a somersault.

Someone had built a monastery inside the peach tree. It was mostly empty inside, save for a monk lighting incense. She kept to the shadows and slunk out into an unoccupied hallway. Enormous twisting gnarled roots formed the walls. There was kind of an earthy, stagnant smell that reminded Sophie of the grotto entrance at Cat's Eye. Maybe it was the time of day, or maybe because faith didn't find faithful clientele in pirates, but the place was pretty quiet. Faint disembodied laughter echoed from somewhere down the hall. Altars lined one side of the wall, decorated with dusty fruit bowls, hardened sweet cakes, and incense ashes. Her nose wrinkled. Whoever ran this place couldn't be bothered keeping up with the maintenance. Sophie swiped a pack of King Ground cigarettes someone left for the deceased.

"Thanks," she told the cigarette, before lighting it. It wasn't much, but she used to say the same to the corpses she looted at Vira.

She coughed after inhaling and made a face at the stale cigarette. Ah, well.

"At least I'm safe here…"

Someone grabbed her jacket.

With a sharp jerk, Sophie was snatched into the shadows.

An arm snaked across her chest, pressed her close, covering her mouth. She was about to scream, but one whiff of antiseptic and steel, and all her fright vanished. A lean brown hand pulled the cigarette from her mouth and flicked it away. Law's lips were at her ear, whispering; "Don't make a sound," which she barely heard over the furious jackhammer of her own heart that had nothing at all to do with her pursuers.
The CP5 agents waited outside the wrecked bar. Teresa strode outside, straightening her suit and brushing dust off her hands.

"Chief, we lost her." The agent did a double take. "This again? You don't need to keep paying for the damages!"

"You know I hate—"

"Being in debt to other people, we get it," the agents groaned. "This is why we hate making a scene in a crowded area—this always happens!"

One agent with a sniper rifle reprimanded, "The Director escaped right from under your nose."

"This is a waste of my time," Teresa complained. "If I'm going to be Chief of the Intelligence Branch before my mid-forties, I should be hunting real criminals."

"Tell that to HQ," the sniper suggested, with an air like she'd heard this complaint before a million times.

"HQ can go fuck itself," Teresa spat. "In fact, the Gorosei can go fuck itself. I'm sick of a bunch of old dried fruit telling me what to do while I'm trying to protect the goddamn world. Lettidore had me chasing this kid for two weeks. Do I look like a fucking babysitter to you? Did he think I have enough time on my hands to chase some juvenile brat over half of the Grand Line? Christ on a corndog." She shook out a black Jolly Roger bandana and tied it over her mouth. "Let's finish this job and get some goddamn sleep, how about that?"

When Sophie finished describing the amount of boiling hot water she landed his crew in, Law immediately began prioritizing. Abandoning the chemist to her doom was pointless (disregarding the brief yet biting urge to do so); Cipher Pol already discovered his personal involvement with her. Surrendering was laughable. Punting their asses to the Red Line seemed like an appropriate option. He pressed his palm against the throbbing wound on his side. But given his current state…

"We're in the deep now, Sophie-ya," Law said seriously.

"Going forward means no looking back. I know." Her hands were shaking as she lit another cigarette. Law had to force himself not to smack it out of her fist. "I-I had to, she f-found out—she—she knows I'm w-with you guys now."

Getting ahead of herself, wasn't she? "You're not a crewmate until you wear the uniform."

"Teresa-san—I m-mean Teresa—why d-do I keep doing that?—she was gonna go after your crew."

"If you hadn't been so trigger happy, we wouldn't be in this situation."

She exhaled smoke through her nose in one sharp breath, reminding him a dragon with ridiculously poofy hair. "You're right, I should've used my time machine and paused. Oh, I forgot—we're not all like you, Sir Amazing Telekinesis Powers. Us lesser beings don't have the luxury to lay out a whole treatise on hypotheticals before shooting!"

"Yet I'm the one who has to clean up your mess," Law rightfully pointed out, lip curled.
She stared at him.

Without speaking, Sophie turned and walked out of the alcove.

Law closed his eyes briefly. He should leave her. He should leave this whole fucking mess behind.

"Sophie," he said, just that word, without anything attached.

She whirled around, the ties of her jacket slapping her in the face. There was no angry snarl he was used to seeing. The look on her face was so vulnerable, so 'I was an idiot for thinking this was a Marine ship', he wasn't entirely sure if she knew she was showing him such an expression. "I said I wasn't going to involve you," she said lowly. "And you know what? I didn't ask for your help."

His hand flexed. Places of worship weren't good. This temple was making him edgy and snappish.

He shifted the subject. "Why is CP5 after you?"

"…Vice Admiral's orders."

His hand tensed into a fist. "And why would a Vice Admiral order a Cipher Pol agency to pursue you?"

"I'm the Director of G-13's chemical warfare division and the Vice Admiral's protégé," she said, bitter and at the same time unapologetically prideful. "I made them an annual sum of half a billion beli. You could've gotten a lot of money if you ransomed me."

Of course she was. It was one of those unspoken things you knew all along. He heard it in the smugness clicking between her teeth like the metal of award plaques. He could read in the way she walked and talked. She was trained in academics, marksmanship, and combat… to varying levels… but trained nonetheless. She was raised to be an elite. This girl, who now had no home, who betrayed her family, who lost her faith, she had everything the world could offer.

Funny. Law once knew a thirteen-year-old boy who was just the same.

As if hearing his thoughts, a shock of electric blue met his gaze. Sophie was glaring at him.

"I was good at it," she muttered fiercely. "I was the youngest Director, which meant that I made the stupidest decisions, but I was good where it mattered."

He didn't doubt her. "Now they want you back," he said instead. "It's personal."

"Right. But I think Lettidore-san wants answers about Cat's Eye…" Sophie tensely rolled the cigarette between her fingers. "…And Kasimir, and Lisbeth-san."

He expected as much. Sophie had ridiculous luck at pissing off World Nobles, he thought derisively. He fished out a baby Den Den Mushi from his pocket and dialed. "Penguin, Bepo, get to the monastery on the third ring," he commanded when his navigator picked up. "Bring anyone close by. Have Manta ready the sub."

"Aye!" the grainy voice responded. "Is Sophie safe?"

She was by his arm in an instant. "I'm here, Bepo-san."

He glanced at her. Where did the newfound respect come from?

"We're on our way! Sophie, stay by Cap's side!" Penguin called from the background.
His crewmates were getting unusually attached to the chemist. And it wasn't their typical vapid, meaningless affection they had for women; it sounded… much more personal. But addressing that could come later.

"We can make it to the harbor if we stick to the darkest parts of Kunlun," he began.

"We shouldn't risk that, especially with you still injured," Sophie rebuffed. "Just Room us down the submarine."

Law was generally the strategist of the crew, so he didn't quite expect his final word to… well, not be treated as such. His eyes narrowed and his mouth pinched up.

"...I can't."

"Yes, you can," she said as if he was dense. "The other day you transported us freakin' miles. Just be all—Room!" She wiggled her fingers. "Shambles! Ope Ope blah blah!"

Law gave her a pointed look that said everything.

And Sophie understood. "...You're kidding."

"My body still hasn't recovered from the other day," he muttered. "But it's fine. I'll take them down with Kikoku."

His assurances fell upon deaf ears. Sophie was tapping a whole cadenza on her revolver. "We sh-should split up. Probability-wise, we have a h-higher chance of o-one of us making it down to the harbor. They're a-after me. If they find m-me, they won't go after you. It's one thing to risk my own neck, but g-getting you guys caught up in this m-mess is—"

"Fuck that and come on."

She was practically pulling out tufts of hair. "What if you have to fight? What if you lose?"

"Then I lose. The weak don't get to pick their way of death."

He said it so flatly, so without emotion, without care. Her nose scrunched up in an effort to dig up more arguments. "But your wound…"

"This is nothing compared to the things I've gone through. Cut the shit and follow."

"You don't understand. The last time CP5 arrested anyone of infamy, it was the shipwright of the Oro Jackson. A fishman from Water 7. But then a few years ago, Teresa came along. She never collected a bounty in her life—"

The tree creaked. Just the wind.

"Like hell I'm running from some third-rate spy," Law snapped.

With a great splintering sound, the wall—or rather, the tree roots that made up the wall—peeled off like a paper shredder. Law shielded his eyes from the onslaught of leaves and falling branches. A seven-foot-tall figure stood backlit by the outside light. Teresa pulled out an ax, sleek as hell all the way down to her clean-pressed, boot-cut slacks. She glanced at the tree splinters sticking around the gaping hole and said dangerously, "I'll pay for that."

"—because she k-kills all the c-criminals she comes across!" Sophie squeaked.
Law followed Teresa's eyes. In a split second, he saw what was going to happen and moved.

Springing off his feet, he tackled Sophie around her midsection, barely avoiding the ax that came swinging through the air, and they crashed into the row of altars. Lightning pain shot through the wound on his side. Arms shaking, he raised himself up amid the debris, having shielded her from most of the impact. Beneath him, Sophie curled on her side and coughed, spitting incense from her tongue. Barely a week ago he would've left her for dead. Maybe shoved her on the sword tip if he felt particularly kind. What was his life coming to?

"Go!" Sophie pushed him off and Law moved on his knees. "Split up!"

Teresa rushed forward and was about a foot away from Sophie before Law yanked her back by her ankle. He caught her as she fell and shoved the gleaming sharp edge of Kikoku against her chin.

"One step and I'll cut her head off," he snarled.

The agent stopped.

Then she opened her mouth.

"Do it. Less paperwork for me."

"Seriously?" Sophie cried. "Both of you?"

Before she could react, Kikoku sliced a thin line down her throat. The shock clearly hurt more than the pain—she inhaled sharply and jerked away, but Law tightened his hold on her, crushing her to his chest with his other arm. He forced her neck to extend, exposing her throat to the fullest. "Don't fucking test me."

Instead of getting into the act, Sophie pinned an outraged glare on him. "Poison in the foot wasn't enough!?"

"I got this," Law hissed pointedly. It was rather impressive that he controlled the six foot blade to make such a tiny cut, didn't she think?

"You don't got this," Sophie hissed back with the fury of a thousand lit petrol cans, "people who got this don't say they got it, they just got it—"

Teresa muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'fuck me with a meat cleaver' and interrupted, "Director, you're going to surrender, return to G-13, and explain to Lettidore why Cat's Eye Island disappeared."

"Yeah, okay, let me schedule an appointment for seven years from next Friday."

Law snorted. He caught himself with nary a blink and continued glaring at Teresa, though with a decidedly smug twitch in his cheek.

"But if you can't fit that on your agenda, I understand," Sophie continued. "And for the record, I'm not being sarcastic at all. Let's get some mimosas and I'll walk you down to your ship and you sail away in safety. I attempt to kill you, you attempt to kill me, we're even. I accept your peace offer."

Even in the pit of hopelessness, she always made time for bullshit. That took talent.

Sighing, Teresa raised her ax in the air. She waited one second.

Law was still being impressed by Sophie's ineffectiveness, so it took him a second and a half to
realize—

From the opposite bridge, the CP5 sniper pulled the trigger. Law felt his gaze pull away from Sophie to the bullet speeding towards him, too late—his body immediately braced itself, taking a bullet was nothing new, it happened a dozen times as a kid—and then an anchor slammed into his bones and his muscles stopped functioning. Kikoku slipped out of his hands. Law's knees buckled and he was pushing her forward, away from him. He collapsed under the ocean, clutching the cherry red gash on his thigh, unaware if the scream resounding in his ears was from Sophie or him.

"About time you got here," he heard Teresa's voice bubble up from somewhere on the surface. "Let's get this over with. I think I'm getting a migraine."

He was being dragged underwater. Air bubbles escaped his nose. Someone howled in laughter... a ghost with a furious, hungry smile. "That seastone bullet feel nice?" a high-pitched voice chuckled from Doflamingo's mouth. The fuck? "Three guesses to who made it."

The sniper agent kicked him in the ribs, right in the wound Odin gave him.

"Stop it! He's not part of this!"

"You're in her arms right now," the agent laughed.

Another face, a different face, appeared above him rippling like moonlight on the surface of the ocean. Shaggy blonde hair tucked under a hood and a cigarette—damn, don't light yourself on fire again—but then he threw the hood off his head and—oh. The chemist touched the side of his face, her bandaged fingers coarse against his stubble. What was she still doing here? Why hadn't she already ran off? His thoughts were all sluggish. 'I'm trigger-happy, I burn bridges way too fast, and I used to be a chemist working for the World Government," she murmured. "Do you trust me anyway?"

"Almost," Law rasped, and he very nearly believed it himself.

She raised her head to the approaching agents. "I hate you!" she wailed suddenly, and began throwing whatever she could find at Teresa. "You're Lettidore-san's lackey! All you're good for is following his orders; can you even think for yourself anymore!?" A half-burned incense stick, a fistful of leaves, a small vial that scattered white powder over their shoes. "You're just part of—an assembly line of w-worshippers!"

"Stop this. You're embarrassing yourself," Teresa snapped. Law agreed, though he was too busy focusing on Not Dying to voice that opinion.

"Wait! Okay, you're right! Don't come any farther, I surrender," Sophie whimpered pathetically, throwing herself on the floor. Her sudden mood change actually did make Teresa stop. "I'll come quietly, just don't hurt me, please don't hurt me, please, I surrender, please..."

Teresa blinked, then asked one of her agents, "How long did that take?"

"About twenty minutes," he responded.

"Nineteen more minutes than I expected," she sighed, yanking her ax from the ground. "I'm losing my edge, I think. Director, put your hands where I can see them."

Her shoulders shaking, Sophie raised her hands.

Her expression morphed from despair to demonic delight.
Teresa took one look at her smile, then at the chalky residue on her feet, and hissed, "Don't you fucking dare—"

Sophie spat her cigarette at the powder and it burst alight like flaming stars.

Enormous coiling tendrils burst from the ground like some gross hellish octopus with flaming tentacles. Under normal conditions mercuric thiocynate would've encompassed little more than a bowl, but thanks to Sophie's radioactive thumb, the tendrils smashed into the agents like a vengeful airbag and exploded out of the Teresa-made hole in the wall. On the side of the monastery there was now a spiny tumor hemorrhaging poisonous fumes. "Motherfucker!" came a distant, unprofessional scream from somewhere in the mass.

Law didn't even notice that Sophie scooped him up bridal-style, picked up Kikoku, and bolted.

…Wait a fucking second.

"Put me down!"

"If I can b-bench press two hundred pounds, I can bench p-press you! Also, I ate a lot for lunch, my muscles are jacked." He could've sworn he saw a little ding appear next to her smile.

He yanked on the ties of her jacket. "I'm not fucking around—"

"I can handle this, I've had a lot of practice!"

"What? What did that mean?" She dashed past the great hall and out onto a bridge. Law shook that out of his head. Seeing as how she was far shorter than him, he felt like an unbalanced whale being held by a baby bear. This was humiliating.

"I don't believe this; you can bench press two hundred and you can't fight?" he demanded.

"I only fight when I have over n-ninety percent chance of winning!"

"That's a terrible philosophy!"

"CAN YOU JUST SHUT UP AND LET ME RESCUE YOU?"

For fuck's sake, he was an infamous pirate bleeding all over his pants and yelling maniacally at the woman who was carrying him. What the fuck. He snapped his fingers. "Make a left! We need cover!"

"But the way to the harbor is on the right!"

"Go left!"

"Argh—fine!" Sophie jumped down a long, narrow staircase deep into the darkness of Kunlun. She stumbled into a shadowed side street, where humming plastic-bright shops and red lanterns were the only light sources. She searched for any traces of Cipher Pol, sighed, and rested against a crooked signpost. Nowhereland, one arrow read. Murder Mountain, said another. Eat your veggies, the last reminded.

"You are such a m-mango," Sophie scolded, breathing heavily. "I'm gonna set you down over there, I need a break…"

Law said nothing; he was just trying not to faint.
Sophie was about to plop him down when he felt a change in the wind. Something snarling and livid was streaking after them at breakneck speed... it was closing in, five hundred feet... four hundred... He grabbed Sophie's shoulder. "Go! She's right behind us!"

She didn't need to be told twice. Sophie tightened her grip on him and barreled down the dark alley, prepared to mow down whoever got in her way. He felt his shoes and the back of his head scrape against the walls. The alley was barely wide enough as she stormed down flights of stairs and flew past grimy-looking Kunluners huddled over mahjong and noodle bowls. Law had always known she was physically fit, but this was just...

She swerved around a corner—and brightness flooded over them.

Sophie scrambled back with a yelp. The alley ended abruptly in open, sunlit air. He heard an audible inhale as she stared down the long drop into a lower ring.

"We can lose her if you jump," Law told her.

She looked at him nervously. They were nose-to-nose. "Uhhhh... s-still not over the f-first time when we nearly fell to our d-deaths."

A drop of blood trailed down her neck, where Kikoku had kissed her.

His hand pressed over the wet, bleeding hole on his thigh. He could feel the bullet; it was lodged close to the surface of his skin. It'd be a pain in the ass to do, but... "You trust me?"

Sophie swallowed. "Conditionally."

That wasn't good enough. "We're both going to die in ten seconds if you don't—" He tugged on the strings of her jacket and leaned his weight to the side, gravity tilting them both closer to the edge, and the tips of her combat boots dug into the dirt, "—jump!"

"God, this is taking years off my life!" Sophie whimpered, and stopped resisting gravity.

They tumbled through the air, their positions ending up reversed as she clung to his neck, practically throttling him. He jammed his fingers into the bloody gash—

But his wrist jerked up before he could.

Sophie eep'd as they jolted to a sudden stop. They were about fifty feet from solid ground, dangling by the end of Kikoku. Law's fist tightened painfully on his end of the sword.

"Oi!" the familiar voice of his mechanic greeted. "Better late than never?" From the rooftop they just fell past, Bepo and Penguin clutched Kikoku's handle.

"Oh, thank pineapples," she sighed, resting her sweaty forehead in the crook of his neck.

His arm hooked around her waist. She felt like how he thought she'd feel—muscular, thick, warm jacket, soft jeans. Her ribcage expanded and contracted under his palm.

"Sophie-ya," he said quietly into her hair, "you're heavy and I'm about to pass out."

She raised her head. "Wow, rude."

"Captain!" Bepo called down. "We're gonna pull you u—OMMPH!"

From behind the pirates, the CP5 sniper slammed her rifle into Bepo's head. The polar bear tripped
over Penguin and Kikoku slipped out of their hands. "Captain!" they screamed, which was drowned out by Sophie's blood-curling shriek: "NOOOO I DON'T WANT TO DIEEEE!"

"My sword!" Law shouted over the wind.

She understood his idea in an instant. He held out Kikoku and she unsheathed the blade with one powerful swing. While clearly having no training whatsoever in swordsmanship, she had the strength to drive Kikoku into the building they were currently falling past. The ramshackle structure had nothing on a cursed sword. Cheap metal shredded under the blade. Sparks flew as the sword heated up, screeching, cleaving the building in two. Her wail of desperation reverberated in his chest… his eyes drifted shut… his arms slithered off her shoulders and he felt himself falling…

"Law-san!" At the last second, one hand left Kikoku and seized his.

Pain laced through his wrist—fuck, that one might've sprained it. They finally slowed to a stop; suspended in midair, Sophie hung onto Kikoku with one fist and clutched him in her other. Her inordinately large biceps were the only things keeping Law tethered to the earthly world.

"Two hundred pounds, remember?" she sang.

Law exhaled and squinted up at her. "Swing me up!"

After a few tries, Sophie tossed him to the rooftop a few feet away. He tumbled as gracefully as he could, which meant A) not at all and B) he was basically a mess of swears and mortification. When he had landed in relatively one piece, she grabbed Kikoku's handle like a gymnast bar and began rocking, preparing to jump to the roof.

Far above them, Teresa stood on the ledge of the alley and appraised the scene. She stuck her hands in her pockets and did a neat pencil drop straight off the ledge.

Sophie never saw it coming.

He reached out, his hand forming the characteristic motion, demanding the blue sphere to appear. But he was left watching helplessly as the bottom of Teresa's shoes slammed into Sophie's face and the force snapped her head back, right in front of him. Her body twisted in the air, blood, and Teresa's eyes met his in a split-second—and the two women plummeted downwards. He lurched to the rooftop edge, but the movement was so painful he blacked out for a few seconds. When he came to, all Law could do was stare up at the endless blue sky, unable to move a single muscle. They were his fucking crew, and he couldn't take care of them. Sophie must've saved his ass half a dozen times in the past five minutes.

Kikoku was sullenly stuck on the side of some wall and he couldn't do anything about it. A bird landed on his hat, and Law couldn't do anything about that either. Even though he was the Surgeon of Death. Even though he was Sir Amazing Telekinesis Powers.

The feeling in his chest was far more agonizing than any physical wound could've caused him.

—

"Our captain's probably killing your captain right about now. No hard feelings." The sniper smirked as she aimed her rifle at Penguin and Bepo. The black-suited agents blockaded the two pirates.

A fight like this would be fun, but they really didn't have time to waste. Penguin scratched his chin.

"I have an idea. Bepo—"
Already done, Bepo held up a Den Den Mushi. It was wired to a set of speakers on the bar.

"You're the best," Penguin thanked him. "Shachi should be the one doing this… he's got more flair than I do… but might as well…" He strode to the edge of the roof. "Ahem, testing, one, two…" His voice was amplified to the whole street. Pedestrians slowed down to watch. The agents glanced at each other, one nervously tightening her bandana, but it was fine. Kunlun was pirate territory. No one would ever believe World Government agents would voluntarily walk on this island.

"Hey!" Penguin suddenly roared. "Hey, fuck you! Fuck you and your ugly-ass mothers and especially fuck your depraved, horse-wanking fathers!" The pirates walking along the bridge below whipped their heads up. Heavily-tattooed, vicious pirates. Pirates that could smash Penguin's head in like a water balloon.

"Holy shit." Aghast, the sniper lowered her rifle to watch the performance. "Holy fucking shit, this idiot." She glanced at her team. "This fucking idiot, am I right?"

"That's right, I said it! You! Is that a face or a raccoon's butt hole? Do mirrors break every time you look at them?" A crowd began congregating beneath the roof, shouting obscenities and growling. Penguin pointed. "God, I bet you pay prostitutes to sleep with you, you disgusting bucket of camel diarrhea!"

Bepo nodded sagely. "I best he does."

An orca fishwoman stomped up to them. "You wanna go!?" Penguin screamed at her. "You wanna fight, you ugly sack of genital warts!?"

"I'll pull your liver out of your fucking throat!" she growled.

Brightening, Penguin jerked his thumb at the agents behind him and chirped, "My bosses will be glad to take you on. They're in the black suits. I repeat, black suits, bandanas, and sunglasses."

Immediately the sniper fired her rifle in the air. "Clear out! He's lying! This is a fight between two pirate crews!"

Her voice was drowned out by the roar of the mob as they surged forward. The agents began backing away. Six-on-two just turned into six-on-twenty.

She turned a horrified glare on the Heart Pirates. "You lying little—"

Penguin slammed the dial down. "You wanna play pretend? This is how real pirates do it, fuckers."

"No hard feelings." Bepo waved and they dropped from the rooftop, disappearing among the crowd hungry for blood.

"Oof! Ow—ARGH—blargh, bleh—!"

Cringing, Sophie spat out leaves as she hung on the arms of disheveled bamboo trees. She'd been saved at the last second by a grove of springy flora. The bottom of Teresa's shoes left a red imprint on her face—particularly her bloody nose. And she got my clothes dirty! Sophie had to take several deep breaths to calm the disproportionate rage. After some desperate wiggling, she detached herself from the tree branches and landed on solid ground… solid, earthy ground? Wafts of steam rose over the lush hanging peach trees. The sound of a roaring waterfall echoed from over the high walls of bamboo. Hot springs?
But the momentary delight was quickly overshadowed by a sense of dread.

Behind her, trees cracked and splintered in half. Teresa brushed dust off her suit, still looking impeccable how did she do that—

Sophie stared at her, twigs sticking out of her hair and blood dripping all over her face. Sighing, Teresa unhooked a pair of handcuffs from her belt. "I have been lenient," she exhaled. "I have warned you about the consequences. I am still willing to take you in without resorting to violence. You can die here or get a slap on the wrists from Lettidore and return to your old life."

She wouldn't go back. It's not that she couldn't—she could lie very well, and as far as she was concerned Saint Kasimir killed himself by tripping down the stairs—but Sophie didn't want it anymore. Who would return to the cave after experiencing sunlight for the first time?

"You are such a fucking disappointment," Teresa said quietly. "I can't imagine what Hippo must feel."

Ouch. "Yeah, well—you—" She raised the revolver, groping for a reply, waiting to see if Law was going to swoop in to save her once again, "y-you got my clothes dirty!"

Teresa's show of emotion: zero.

Beanpoles with stupid hats swooping in for the rescue: also zero.

Sophie was saved from further self-inflicted humiliation when a side door banged open and a bunch of laughing pirates walked out. She took one look at this new development, dropped everything, and bolted into the bathhouse like the chicken she undeniably was. Teresa's roar was cut off by the door slamming shut behind Sophie. She hurriedly snapped all the locks in place and rushed into the long, dimly-lit hallway, through a maze of paper doors and tatami mats. She had no idea where she was going, only that death was chasing her and no way was she slowing down.

"Stop running! You don't have anywhere else to go!" came a distant shout behind her. "No one will take you in after Vira!"

The hallway came to an end with a fancy paper door. She wrenched it open with both hands. Sophie stumbled past a sign saying that the bathing areas were closed for cleaning. Multiple tiny waterfalls and a waterwheel chugged away, surrounding the opulent bathing pools.

Stairs led up to the second level. The washing areas were above her… and so was the door. Pineapples. She wasn't going to make it. And she was out of smoke bombs.

Sophie squeezed one eye shut and fired three bullets at the humming pipes.

The caps blasted into the air. Steam whistled out and swallowed the bathing room in white fog.

Instantly an unnatural quiet drifted over the haze. The noise from the waterwheel became muted. White air currents curled over Sophie as she crouched behind the stairs. She could barely see in front of her own nose. Obscured shadows wavered on the edge of her vision. A flash of metal caught her eye. Ah, this bathhouse had its own communication devices…

"You had everything. Clean labs, good food, money." Teresa's incorporeal voice bounced over the grandiose walls, coming from everywhere. " People would've killed to be in your position. People who've only known wars and suffering their whole lives, do you know how privileged you are compared to them?" She sighed. "You were always a weird kid, but you did your job well. You know what your file says? 'I like the challenge. I like figuring out puzzles. It's like a game where
everyone speaks a language I know.' You're different from normal civilians. Freaks like you need to be reined in."

There was no response. Her eyes flickered from the shadows of the lush bathing pools to the waterfalls splashing indistinctly.

"Hundreds of marines died at Vira. Is that why you want to leave? I understand where you're coming from. I really do. But think about it—are you prepared to risk your life every single day? To take on the might of the World Government? I'm not saying you're a criminal, or even a bad person. I'm saying you're young and negligent, and you can't run forever from your problems. G-13 will protect you, and you can do whatever you like. Can't you use that famous brain of yours? Continue being who you are, but do it in a place that guarantees your safety."

A sound like footsteps echoed through the fog… or it could've just been the waterwheel…

"You came from a good place and you threw it away. You chose this path."

"They shoved my baby inside out and made it a monster!" Sophie's voice exploded from the stairs.
"They didn't even tell me!"

Teresa's eyes flashed to the stairs, locating the sound of her voice. "Kid…" She raised her ax. "We fucking own you!"

She swung her ax into the shadow and felt it crunch. Surprised, she pulled her weapon back. Bits of goo dripped down the ax. "What the—shit, I have to pay for this, too!?"

Racing up the stairs, Sophie tossed away baby Den Den Mushi number two. She had a real talent for murdering innocent snails. She made it to the top of the stairs, ten feet from the door, when she looked back and squeaked, "Uh-oh."

In five seconds flat, Teresa pinned her to the wall and handcuffed her to a pipe.
"Pirates cause too much destruction!" she scolded, smacking her over the head.

"Ow!" Sophie glared. "You know what my file doesn't have on me? I'm also ambidextrous." Sophie tossed the gun from her cuffed right hand to her left, and missed completely. She and Teresa watched it sail inches over her fingertips and clatter sadly to the floor. "…I also have very sweaty fingers."

Teresa shoved her fist into her gut.

Sophie wheezed in pain and managed to gasp, "Waitwaitwaitwaitwait!" She raised her free hand in a surrender gesture. With narrowed eyes, Teresa stopped in the middle of pivoting her fist for another punch. "You're right; I am a freak. But that doesn't mean I'm a bad person." No, what made Sophie a bad person was that she had almost no morals. But anyway. "The compound, the Viran compound, wasn't even in its test stages when the Vice Admiral stole it from me. Did he tell you that? Did he ever mention that I was not involved when he decided to use it!?" She shook her cuffed fist, the metal banging against the pipe. The pain felt like relief. "I didn't even want it sent to Vira! It was experimental, I hadn't written up safety guidelines, I hadn't even checked to make sure I stabilized it, but I was already on the ground when I saw—"

"You're acting high-and-mighty for someone who left the World Government to sail under a notorious murderer," Teresa pointed out.

Sophie swallowed. The movement made the red line on her throat tremble, where Kikoku had left its mark.
"He r-respects me."

"Trafalgar Law is a liar. He'll use you as a weapon. This is how the world works. He'll do anything to get to the Red Line. Don't delude yourself, Director. You're not pretty, well-connected, nor strong; he'll toss you overboard when you're not useful anymore."

The paper door was about ten, twelve feet away. She curled her thumb inside her fingers, preparing to pop it out of its joint.

With effortless grace, Teresa swung her ax and stopped it a hair's breath away from Sophie's neck. "Tangent aside, let me be clear. One: I'm arresting you for leaving the World Government, and only that. I couldn't care less about what happened at Vira. Two: because of Vira and instances like it, Lettidore wants you back. And three: because of Vira and your fallen comrades, you have an obligation to come back and see your job to the end. Kid, you're the fucking Director of G-13's chemical warfare division. Act like it."

There was an empty feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her face was ashen with a cold sheen of sweat.

Teresa tilted her head, evaluating her captive. "I have orders to find out everything about some tinyass island. Cat's Eye. But you wouldn't tell me even if you did know, would you?"

The tiles were very pretty. Very symmetrical. Two by two by two. "Why haven't you knocked me out and towed me to your ship yet?"

"In my opinion, it's pointless to bring you back to G-13. You're universally loathed there."

"Wonder if it's my sunny personality," Sophie rasped.

"Too many marines died at Vira, and many more are dying as we speak. They've called it Strangways Sickness. History will remember you as the executioner."

Her head rose. "Seriously? Strangways Sickness? That was as far as their creativity stretched? They couldn't have thought of literally anything else?"

"Funny, that's exactly what I said." Shrugging, Teresa wiped the edge of the ax on her sleeve. The metal glistened like the side flank of a shark. "I'd rather give you a merciful end. I never go back on my orders like this, but you did your job well and that deserves some acknowledgement. Close your eyes. It'll help."

If Teresa dragged her back to G-13 she was going to die anyway. Law had lost too much blood—he was finished. It was so stupid, so damn stupid, thinking she could use Law because he was strong. He seemed invincible to her, but of course he wasn't. He was fighting for his life just like any other rookie pirate. This was her fault. She brought this on the Heart Pirates… on him.


"I hate the smell of cigarettes," Teresa replied flatly, and her ax swung down.

And she got the wind knocked out of her by a jump-kick from a Heart pirate screaming, "BANZAI!!"

Teresa spun like a whirlwind and regained her balance. The two women both stared at the new arrival, who looked incredibly self-assured for someone who was only sporting a small towel over his nether regions.
"Sophie-chan!" Shachi exclaimed brightly. "I got lost on my way to the other bathing room!" He pointed at Teresa. "Is she another friend?"

"No!" Sophie shrieked. "Oh, I feel faint…"

"That's a sign of depression."

"It might also be because this is an extremely traumatic experience!"

"Backup is pointless," Teresa snarled, unsheathing the morningstar from her back and now wielding two dangerous and rather large weapons.

Seeing as how her hand was cuffed to a pipe, Sophie had to resort to kicking the pirate's ankle. "Get out of here! She'll kill you!"

Completely ignoring her, Shachi pointed at the CP5 agent. "Say hello to my little friends!"

The paper door crashed open with two more butt naked pirates bursting through with a loud battle cry: "Woooo-hyaaaa! Hiiiyaa!"

Sophie let out a holler of shocked disgust. Anko and Hai Xing somersaulted in front of her, and while she didn't bat an eye at male anatomy because marine upbringing, she couldn't believe — "Please tell me you didn't use the time you could've spent saving me practicing that!"

Shachi snorted. "Of course not, we aren't amateurs."

"I was supposed to say the cool lines!" Anko shouted, swiveling to Sophie and conveniently mooning Teresa.

She smacked her forehead on the pipe. "Can you three put on some clothes!?"

If there was a word for an confounded-by-your-stupidity–yet-still-preparing-to-rip-out-your-eyeballs expression, that was the perfect descriptor for Teresa's face. Sophie saw the subtle shift in the grip of her weapons as she prepared to attack. "Pineapples! Buy me some time!" she called to Anko and Hai Xing, and pointed at Shachi, "Not you—I n-need your help!"

"Who am I to refuse the call of a damsel in distress?" Anko sighed.

Sophie mimed vomiting and snapped, "Turn around! No one wants to see that!"

Anko leered. "Then why don't you stop looking?"

"I wouldn't mind if you killed him a little bit," she told Teresa.

"Please, like I can't handle a—" Whatever Anko was about to say was lost as Teresa's kick knocked his head back, blood spurting from his nose, and a second kick and set him flying into the far opposite wall with a massive thud! His body was now a dent in the painting of an octopus mermaid wrapping her tentacles around a scantily-clad man. "I'll pay for that," Teresa muttered. She flipped the ax and morningstar around her wrists and turned her eye onto Hai Xing.

Hai Xing swallowed. "Can I call a time-out?"

While Teresa proceeded to decimate the pirates, Shachi ripped a thin pipe from the wall and jammed it into her cuffs, forcing them open. Sophie pointed out a water storage tank in the corner and laid out her plan to the mechanic. The walls rumbled as Shachi proceeded to peel the tank open with deft fingers. Hai Xing somehow managed to press Teresa to the lower floor, spinning a mop around his
hands like a bo staff. A recovered Anko, strengthened with his massively wounded pride, jumped in the fray.

Teresa flung Hai Xing into the waterwheel and Anko into a pile of boulders. On the floor above them, Sophie mentally calculated the surface area and volume of the tank, and reached for some handy dandy salt in her satchel. Hai Xing’s legs wiggled in the hair like a hapless fish. Before Teresa could land the finishing strike, Anko yanked the entire waterwheel off its hinges, dodging the ax slice. The two pirates slid and slipped to their feet a few paces away from the murderous agent.

"Teresa-san!"

Teresa, Anko, and Hai Xing looked up.

Sophie stood over them, bloodied but vaguely triumphant. "This is for getting my clothes dirty."

Shachi yanked on the shower knob and the showerheads he and Sophie held sprayed bitingly cold, supercooled water over the bathing pools. Hai Xing shoved Anko back underneath the stairs, into safety. The fog instantly vanished in a whiff of smoke and snow burst out from the contact between the sub-zero water and steam.

In a second, the bathing pools transformed into a winter wonderland. The waterfalls froze in jagged icicles. Spiderwebs of ice formed in midair, directly in front of Teresa’s eyes, before coalescing all around her in a Teresa-shaped ice cube, freezing her to the spot. Her ax was still raised and her frozen expression was one of wide-eyed disbelief. She was a shiny, motionless statue.

Shachi gazed at the delicate snowflakes drifting over the rubble and the agent who would not be moving any time soon. Sophie examined the outcome with pursed lips. Not her best snow show, but hey, it worked!


"I supercooled the heating system by adding sodium chloride," Sophie chirped.

"You just carry a bunch of salt with you wherever you go?"

"Yes."

"…That’s kinda badass."

Shachi high-fived her. Anko gave her a thumbs up. Hai Xing didn’t appear to be as despondent as usual… or it might’ve just been because his face froze that way. She beamed and picked up her revolver. After a second, Sophie realized something off-putting. She looked down to double check, her brow furrowed in surprise. Her hands. Her hands were steady, unmoving, not even shaking the tiniest bit. She flexed her fists with a little exhale. If Hippo could see her now, she knew with every fiber of her being that he would be happy for her.

Sophie suddenly gasped. "Oh my god, we have to save the others! And Law-san!"

Shachi bounded forward. "Lead the way, Sophie-chan! Hey, and if we meet any other weirdos…"

He clapped her on the shoulder. "We got your back!"

The universe worked in a funny way.

Looking back, Sophie didn’t know when Shachi’s smiling face was replaced with a morningstar
impaling the side of his cheek. It happened too fast, too absurdly, her brain couldn't follow. One second he was there, the next, he was sinking to the floor with bloody spikes sticking out of his head. When Sophie turned to follow the movement with vacant eyes, twin hook swords flew from the emptiness and skewered Anko and Hai Xing through their chests like pirate shish kabob.

She spun around shooting bullets so fast her hands burned from the recoil, screaming into the frosty chill.

Teresa moved faster.

She was so close Sophie could count the ice chips twinkling on the edge of her lips. The revolver clicked. Didn't matter. She kept desperately firing blanks as though it could make the agony go away, as though it could do something, anything, please, this can't be happening—

With one swift motion, Teresa severed Sophie's head from her neck.

The head bounced a few times and rolled to a stop by the ajar door.

"I warned you," she said softly, lowering the ax. Though no one would believe her if she said it aloud, it was true that Teresa didn't want this outcome. She loathed to imagine the look on Hippo's face when they'd tell him—

The Director's arm shot out and latched itself on her throat.

She choked out a gasp. The grip squeezed, crushing her windpipes, but she was still smaller, and weaker, and decapitated. Teresa swiftly sliced the arm off her shoulder and kicked the body to the ground. She yanked the hand off her neck and threw it on the corpse with a sneer of disgust. Even in death, the Director was still full of surprises.

The pirates weren't moving. They'd bleed out soon, if they hadn't already. Brushing snowflakes from her hair, Teresa opened her baby Den Den Mushi and called the rest of her team. "Target death confirmed. Mission over—what do you mean, you're under attack?"

When Teresa finished rescuing the other Cipher Pol agents, she came back to find the bathhouse in smoldering ruins. Someone had set off a bomb in the time she was gone, and the dazed survivors described smelling a curious scent of pineapples lingering in the air. But as for the many human remains, Teresa had no way of identifying them.

Rival gangs, the survivors murmured, happens sometimes. Territory disputes. Bet it was those damn fishmen. Dirty things, they are. Not even human.

Her scouts could find no trace of a yellow submarine on the harbor. She paid for the damages dealt to the bathhouse and the monastery as her agents licked their wounds. Kunlun was far too big to launch a full-scale investigation, and she certainly wasn't getting paid to do one. Her superiors were pleased with these results, anyway. They accepted this odd outcome and wiped their hands clean of Strangways Sophie. All that was left to do was tell Lettidore and Hippo…

So this was how Teresa left Kunlun: standing on the deck of her ship, several thousands beli lighter. She watched the mountain fade from sight with a twinge of uneasiness. As if mocking her, the pirate city continued with the cheerful hustle and bustle of life. Bar fights and glittering bordellos shined like tiny stars over the horizon.

—

Deep below the surface of the ocean, a sunshine shadow cut through the current. Inside, past the pile
of bloody clothes in the laundry room, past Bepo scanning the navigation systems—Shachi sat on a stool before the body of Strangways Sophie. He leaned on his elbows and cradled her head. After cleaning the blood off, he stuck it back on her neck.

"A little to the left," the head directed. Shachi obliged.

Sophie sat up straight and cracked her neck. "This is like the fifth time I died."

"How're you feeling?" Penguin asked.

"Rad as radishes," she croaked.

Shachi laughed, half of his head plastered with bandages. He didn't look so hot, either. Law spent an hour in surgery, repairing Shachi's partially crushed face with his powers. Shachi refused to take a bed, though, saying that his legs and arms were fine and he wanted to get back to work ASAP. Hai Xing and Anko slept on the two beds beside Sophie's. Small kerosene lamps illuminated the bay in a comforting sepia glow.

She huddled up against her pillow. She could still feel the ghost of Law's touch digging into her skin as he carried her. His fingers were slippery and smelled like copper—he had dug out the seastone bullet from his leg with his bare hands. From behind the bathhouse's door, he perfectly copied the angle of Teresa's slices with Kikoku. Then he dropped one of her grenades and Roomed them all to the submarine. But it was a hollow victory. She felt no joy that she managed to scrape through it. It took Teresa mere seconds to decimate Shachi, Anko, and Hai Xing, and just thinking about it made nausea sour her throat.

"So..." Penguin started with an air of attempted lightheartedness, "we've been harboring a World Government G-13 Director for the past half a month."

Sophie hugged her knees, her face carefully blank. "Ex-Director. And what do you want me to say? Sorry for not telling a bunch of pirates?"

Said pirates traded a glance.

"Nah," Penguin continued. "I'm just disappointed we couldn't stay on Kunlun longer."

Her voice turned chilly. "What a great loss you've suffered."

"Don't act like a brat after we saved your life," he reprimanded.

"Why would I tell you I was their lead chemist after they basically told me to shove off and die? After the shitstorm I caused on Cat's Eye because of my own incompetence?" Her voice was steadily rising. "Before this, I had all the lab chemicals money could buy and now I'm presumed dead and on the run, so sorry I didn't inform you of the amazing human disaster that I am."

"...Apology accepted," Penguin said after a pause.

"That was dramatic," Shachi voiced.

Sophie rolled her eyes. "Don't act like you're better at me at this talking thing, we're all socially inept in here." (She noticed with another awful sinking feeling that her fingers were once again tapping nervously on her elbows. It wasn't going to end this easy. Nothing ever did.) "I'm not the director of anything anymore, and I don't want to be. I'm just Sophie."

Penguin nodded. "Yep."
"Got it, Sophie-chan."

And that was that.

The sick bay's door opened and their captain entered. Shachi averted his eyes. With help from a crutch, Law limped over to the edge of Sophie's bed. His eyes were red and sunken. The clean clothes and shower didn't quite take attention away from the ugly bruises on his... everywhere.

"Wow," Sophie said. "You look like poop."

Penguin snickered. Law did a little bow for the peanut gallery. "But still standing thanks to you," he said courteously. "You saved my life."

It was the first time he showed her gratitude in front of his crew. She felt a subtle vibe change in Shachi and Penguin... there was a different look in their eye when they offhandedly glanced at her. A flush of warm embarrassed pleasure colored Sophie's cheeks. "Ye—um, yeah." She coughed. "It's whatever. Y'know. All good."

Law moved to his red-haired crewmate, who was suddenly very interested in his feet. He clapped his hand over the back of Shachi's neck—who looked terrified—and pulled him closer, so their foreheads bumped. Unspoken forgiveness and acknowledgement passed between them, and for a second, their faces lit up with grins, the two men didn't look like they'd ever met CP5. Sophie met Penguin's eyes. They shared the same smile.

"Well, I better go see if anyone needs any help—or another seat at a poker game, whichever comes first," Penguin said breezily, and left.

Shachi stood up with a wobble. "I should get back to work."

Law nodded. "We need extra hands in the galley now that Hai Xing's out of commission."

"Er, I was going to go down to the engine room—"

"Yeah, we're starving," Sophie added. "Potato peeling is tough business. Shachi, go to the potatoes."

"But I have maintenance to—"

"The potatoes need you," Law insisted flatly.

Shachi glanced from one stony face to the other. "This is my job. I have to take care of the sub—I have to take care of all of you."

"That's my job as captain. Your job is to follow orders. So follow them and get some fucking rest."

Shachi was smart enough to recognize a losing battle when he saw one. He shuffled his feet a little, adjusted his hat, and grinned. "See you guys at dinner."

With his crewmates either gone or sleeping, Law dropped his composure and sat down with a heavy thud on Sophie's bed. He buried his head in his hands and exhaled one long, quiet breath. His spine folded like a weary frown. How did he manage to age decades in the span of three seconds? She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear—the dye was fading, yellow peeked out at the roots—and commented, "I thought you were stronger when I met you."

"Fuck off."

"But I also thought you were a monster."
His head rose out of his hands and Law looked at her, his mouth slanted wearily.

"Wish I was," he said roughly. "Maybe then things might've gone different."

You tried your best. It's not your fault. All's well that ends well? Ew, anything she'd say in response would just sound stupid. She awkwardly stared at her knees. The silence made it worse. Law seemed to get irritated with himself, because a few seconds later he scooted closer to her. "Show me your hands."

She did. Uncomfortably. With much fidgeting.

Law's fingers grazed her skin as he unwrapped the bandages. "I can do it myself," Sophie murmured. "I am a certified medic."

"Barely."

"Shut up."

No one gets by in this world by themselves, Shachi told her. But was it really okay? If Lettidore found her, could she let Law shoulder the burden by himself? And what if he decided her usefulness didn't make up for the weight of her baggage? Law prioritized his own goals first, which was perfectly reasonable. But could she do the same with how things were? Could she choose Law over herself? The rest of the Hearts could answer that question without hesitation.

But Sophie couldn't.

Law said he thought she was using him as an escape, and Sophie had actually agreed with him then. She relied on the Heart Pirates a lot. Like, a lot a lot.

She relied on him to help her get rid of Saint Kasimir's body, to keep her secrets, to fight on her behalf. To clean up her messes, basically. To give her pretty guns. When she hurt Nellie, she ran to him. She used to rely on Hippo and Lettidore to make excuses for her. It was like that her whole life. God forbid she became strong enough to fix her own mistakes. She tried and epically failed, and the missing princess of a lost kingdom paid the price.

But it was worth trying again, wasn't it?

She couldn't stand back and let these pirates take care of it all for her. They couldn't. It wouldn't be like today; they had their captain's goal to take care of. And Sophie still had to find a way to take care of herself, first. After all, for everything Teresa goaded her with, the agent was honest. G-13 probably thought she was dead, which was great, but there was still Lisbeth, and there was still all those weapons she made… all of her children in Lettidore's hands…

Law tossed the bandages on the nightstand. He held her hands to the light, his eyes tracing over her disfigured skin. She ignored the shiver crawling down her spine. "Well, patient, all the burns have healed. You're finally free."

It was the first time in almost three weeks since she hadn't felt the stiff presence of antiseptic-smelling cloth. Her hands drifted over and touched the tips of Law's fingers. It wasn't much, but it was the only comfort she knew.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he twined his fingers around hers. He was so cold. Like dipping her hands in ice water. Her thumb brushed over a thin scar on his knuckle. The veins on his hands twitched. His grip was loose enough to pull away from, if she wanted to.
"You're clammy," she said with a small laugh, holding tighter.

Law made an offended noise.

"Don't be mad, my hands feel like sandpaper." Sophie smiled, and then wondered if she looked like a complete idiot with her black eye and cut up face. She could feel dried blood crusted around her ear. Ah well, Law looked worse, so. "Sometimes I worry if I'm growing overly fond of you."

The side of his mouth twitched. "I hear that's a common trait among my crewmates."

"Not a crewmate. Still don't have a uniform." She threw his words right back at him.

"That can be fixed," Law smoothly returned.

She smiled at him slowly.

"...You're like the perfect escape. Being with you is so easy. I'd love to set sail on this submarine... but it's not that simple. Our goals aren't that simple." She wished it was. But Anko and Hai Xing were unconscious on either side of her, bandaged and bruised. "I brought this on you. Teresa was after me, and it wasn't cool to burden you with that. Not quite crewmate material."

His fingers tightened. "On the contrary, you've met my extraordinarily high expectations. A captain helps his crew... provided the crew has abilities the captain can use."

He was a good captain, she saw that. And he had it tough. Especially now, after Teresa, he had a lot of rebuilding to do. "Law-san..." How to explain? How to tell him when it hurt so much to remember? "I... used to think war was some epic, grand thing. But it's not. It's... mercury in the water. Nights huddled in the mud, tapping codes until you can't feel your fingers anymore. Marching endlessly." She shook her head. "It doesn't matter anymore, but... the point is I'm paranoid, Law-san. I'm a paranoid, anxious, tightly wound ball of cigarette ash, and I will not be a means to an end."

He was so close she could map all the bruises on his face like constellations. The lamplight made his grey eyes flicker bronze. "I won't exploit you like G-13 did."

Sophie laughed hollowly. She didn't believe him. Her fingers looked quite lovely wrapped around his, the color of gold against his dark skin. Law remembered when he used to enjoy looking at her in this light—her face was half shadow, darkness kept secret. Not anymore. He wanted her in the blinding sunlight, squinting, with a toothy smile like razorblades. He wanted her with her hands open and showing the world every pretty mutilated finger.

"My life was destroyed by a chemical sickness," Law told her.

"...What sickness?" She sounded terrified all of a sudden, gazing at a fixed spot over his shoulder.

"Amber lead."

He felt her pulling away, but he held on tighter. He had to, or else Sophie would never think of them as equals. Now more than ever the Heart Pirates needed all the help they could get. "I know more than anyone what a brilliant chemist is capable of. You won me over. If you find it easy to be around me, then it's simple: don't leave."

Just three days ago, in almost this exact spot, Law told her to take care of herself and have a nice life, see you sometime never. Oh, how funny the universe could be.
"I want you to take me to Idyll Island. I'm going back to G-13."

His hand slackened for an instant, and she pulled back. Sophie gazed stonily at him, half her face shadowed but for cold steel blue, and there was once a time when he liked her that way.

"I'm going to burn my files, kidnap Hippo-sensei, and then I'm going back to Vira with a cure."

Anko let out a snore and rolled over. Hai Xing stared at the ceiling, making no sound. Bepo's upbeat voice carried from the speaking tube: "We anchor at Machinastein in a week! Smooth sailing from here on out."

_to be continued_

Chapter End Notes

(11.17.2017)

This is a checkpoint for readers who are binging this fic in one sitting. Congratulations, you crazy kids! You've officially read over 100k words as of this chapter! Now please just drink some water and go to bed. This story will still be here when you return. :)
Contrary to the long pause following Sophie's announcement, the way Law spoke next was abrupt and precise: "Don't be foolish. Even if you survive, finding a cure for a chemical disease will take years."

"That's why I have to start now. Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"You know," Law began, and paused. "I got shot for you."

"And I am truly humbled and gracious," Sophie replied sweetly.

He scowled. "You have a plan, I assume?"

She told him everything; the layout of G-13, the patrol times, how many people work on each level, what her sensei's schedule was, what the mess served on weekdays. Everything. Not a single muscle in his face twitched. She was impressed with how stoic the pirate doctor could be (wow, massive urge to poke his cheek). Sophie crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out at him.

"And you thought of all that just now."

"I'm kind of brilliant, remember."

"Don't smoke around me," Law snapped as she was pulling a cigarette out. "How could you possibly think of doing something so foolish?"

"What? I haven't been diagnosed with cancer yet—"

"You're trying to infiltrate a Marine base—"

"Which has also been my home for the past almost twenty years," she shot back, shoving the cigarette back in the pack. She lowered her knees and criss-crossed them in front of her. "I'm not some… vagabond orphan or a country gal running away from her little hick village or… you know, whatever. I had a life before I met you. I had a family. Which means I have loose ends to tie up. Do you just want me to throw that part of myself away?"

Yes, he thought.

"The Vice Admiral still has of my blueprints for things I hadn't built yet. And he's already made it clear he can't use them properly. I want them back—" and right there Law saw something pulse in Sophie's expression, saw her eyes spit fire and her teeth grit, "—they don't belong to anyone else, they're mine."

She took a breath and her face rearranged. Sophie hadn't realized it. She doesn't even know.

"Besides…" She hesitated. "If there had been a cure for a-amber lead poisoning, wouldn't you… have wanted to find it?"
Law rolled his eyes upward. "That's neither here nor there. The past cannot be rectified."

"So you'd leave your people to die?"

His cold gaze traced daggers over Sophie, who realized the loaded gun of a question she just asked.

"I'm s-so sorry, that's n-not what I—"

"No, it's a clever tactic, going for someone's weak point," Law said apathetically. This just proved that Sophie was what he was looking for: ruthless without even realizing it. He shouldn't have made himself vulnerable in the first place. "What I was saying was, it's pointless to dwell on what you can't control."

"I know, and I—I shouldn't have said that," she mumbled, tugging at her shirt as though she wanted to disappear into it. "What I t-ried to say was that, I s-still have a chance to fix things. And I sh-should at least try."

Sure, she had good intentions. He tilted his head, thinking about the situation that would be most favorable to him. She was dead-set on returning to her old home, fine. But her ultimate goal wasn't leaving the Heart Pirates. In fact, what Sophie wanted in essence was something Law could be interested in… could even help her with. "Go to G-13, bring your shit back. I'll help you find a cure."

"But… but it'll take years."

"Not when you have me as a partner," he explained, obviously.

Sophie didn't clap and beam like how he expected. "Thank you," she murmured. "But I want Hippo-sensei to be with me. Would you let my father into your crew?"

"…You're fucking kidding."

"Not even a little."

He tried his best to keep calm and clear-headed and oh I could knock her unconscious so fast, one swift pinch to the neck, and then off to Machinastein we go. Law rubbed his aching leg, rolled back his shoulders, and commanded, "Let's approach this rationally."

—(two days previous)—

Only a few Heart pirates were awake so early in the morning. Not one for much sleep, Sophie headed down the stairs to the first deck, muttering under her breath and coughing on a cigarette. "Down the steps… past three doors… paw is three letters, Bepo has paws, B as in Bepo as in bathroom…"

Sophie squinted at herself in the mirror. Her reflection's yellow roots were showing; the black dye fading at last. She gingerly poked her black eye and winced. Come on. You're supposed to be smart.

She peeked in the empty washroom, locking the door behind her and tugging off her clothes (spare shorts and a tank thrown at her by a groggy Penguin far too early in the morning). The sound of her feet padding over the icy cold floor echoed over the line of shower heads, the deep-soak bathtubs. The stillness made the cramped washroom seem three times as big. Sophie cranked the shower as hot as it would go and sighed happily as steam rose up around her.

After scrubbing herself raw and tying up Penguin's shirt so it fit, she headed to the galley. The
interior lights all along the hallway were dimmed. Cerulean light speckled with the colors of sunrise filtered through the portholes.

Shachi was the only one in the empty galley, fixing himself leftover Kunlun dishes. "Morning," he croaked, bandaged up like he went through a cheese grater. "Hydraulic system's gotta be vented out. Gonna get an early start on it."

"You'll sleep when you die?" Sophie asked sympathetically.

"That's the game plan."

She poked his wounded shoulder.

"Ow!"

"That may be sooner than you realize if you don't get more rest," she pointed out, rummaging through the refrigerator. "Do we have any pudding?"

Shachi pouted at her, then clutched his cheek with a pained cringe.

Penguin entered, drowsily greeting Sophie with a pat on the head. "What are we arguing about now? Did Shachi put his boots in the dishwasher again?"

"They needed a good wash!"

"Hey, pass the congee." Penguin motioned at the big pot beside Sophie. She ladled out three bowls of the rice porridge, keeping two for herself. "You planning to eat us dry?" he mused, accepting the bowl.

"That's actually a good idea. Why didn't you suggest that sooner?" Sophie scooped up what Shachi got: salted duck eggs and a side of fat sausages fried with red chili peppers. Manta ducked inside and sniffed.

"Smells saucier than a conga line of hookers on a tomato farm. Shachi, ain't it a little early for you to be up?"

"No rest for the wicked," he responded.

Manta boomed in laughter. "Well, 'justice never sleeps'. Ain't that how the Marines say it, little lady?"

"How should I know?"

The pirates all gave her a Look.

Sophie sighed. "Yeah, that's a thing."

Laughter followed her as she hopped on the edge of the counter. The pirates busied themselves, turning on stoves, grabbing whistling kettles, and passing around utensils. Manta tossed bowls to the two other pirates, who caught them without looking. Penguin jostled Shachi to get to the stove. He blocked him, dramatically going on about how Penguin was cutting before a cripple.

"Sophie-chan! Help me!" Shachi cried, gleefully beating back Penguin's hands. "No able-bodied pirate should get food before us!"

"Oh, shut up, it's a flesh wound! I'm hungry, damn you!"
Manta picked them both up by the scruffs of their boiler suits and set them aside. "Let's all take a deep breath—and let Manta have first pick of the food."

"Wha—I don't fucking think so!"

"Yeah, get in line!" Shachi turned to Penguin. "This is so your fault."

Penguin promptly smacked the hat off his head ("Oi!"), and Sophie burst out giggling. Shachi narrowed his eyes at her. "Sophie-chan, are you wearing different clothes?"

Mouth full, Sophie pointed at Penguin.

"You're wearing Penguin's clothes?" he wailed melodramatically, clutching his face.

"Oh, yeah," Penguin said, blinking. "Get that washed before you give it back to me."

"I can wash it," Shachi offered. "You can give it to me when you're done, or, like, whatever, I'll definitely drop them off in the laundry room if you want, not a big deal or anything—"

"What about your boxers?" Sophie asked, licking her fingers.

Penguin shrugged. "I have a bunch. You can keep it. You need it more than I do, anyway."

Blank-faced, Shachi turned to Manta. "I think my heart just had an aneurysm."

"Good morning, Hearts!" came a loud, peppy voice from all the speaking tubes on the submarine. "This is Valross filling in for our beloved helmsman who is recuperating from near death. I'd like to welcome a very special chemist onboard the Cruise of Love—" here, Sophie had a choking fit, "—destination: The Democratic Republic of Machinastein. Sailing duration will be around six days and we're expecting a smooth trip. Once again, thank you for choosing to sail with us today and we hope you enjoy the voyage. Just a reminder I'm holed up in the control room if you ever wanna stop by—oh hey, Cap! What are you—"

"Your attention, please," a chilling voice interrupted from the ceiling. Shachi switched off the stove, so the galley became quiet. "Our destination has changed. At the behest of Strangways Sophie, our submarine is sailing towards Idyll Island. Let me remind you all it is a small divergence from our main route, and we will be back on course within a day after the drop off is concluded. After, we will be back on track to Machinastein." A pause. "This has been your captain speaking." Another pause. "...Over."

The galley was dead silent. Sophie dabbed her mouth with a napkin like a proper gentlewoman.

Then, Valross' voice in the background: "Why is Sophie-chan leaving?"

The galley's speaking tube was located between the cabinets and the freezer. The pirates parted wordlessly as Sophie walked through them and spoke into the tube, "I'm going back to G-13."

Shachi burst out laughing, then went quiet when he realized Sophie wasn't kidding. His spoon fell out of his mouth. "That wasn't exactly how I was gonna break the news," Sophie said after a pause, looking around at the pirates. "Um. So. Thanks for the food." She sped walk out the kitchen, pushing through the door, her ears bright red.

Penguin stepped forward, his arm raising, but Manta pulled him back with a shake of his head. Her boots stomped down the hallway. Her face was so hot it hurt. How dare Law put her on the
spot? She made it quite clear last night that if she didn't have the massive knot of guilt, responsibility, and righteous anger at G-13, she would become a pirate without skipping beat. She was headed for Law's cabin, prepared to give that stinking pineapple a piece of her mind, and coming from a girl who's only superior aspect was an engorged brain—that was a legitimate threat. But then, at the last second, Sophie pivoted and strode up the stairs to the second deck, threw open her closet door, and hopped on the hammock. Burying her face in the pillow didn't distract her from the pain in her stomach. (Probably acid reflux.)

Law had every right to tell his crew about her intentions to leave. It wasn't supposed to be a secret. Getting angry wasn't going to change anything. What right did she have, anyway, when she was already hitching a free ride to Idyll Island? *Just keep your mouth shut and you'll be gone in two days.*

Sophie lit up a cigarette and took a deep inhale, then rested her hand on her stomach.

She glowered at the ceiling for so long bits of ash wrinkled her shirt. She didn't know that at this moment, Shachi and Penguin were in Law's cabin, arguing to make Sophie stay. She didn't know that at this moment, Hippo was being notified his daughter had died at Teresa's hands.

Really the only thing Sophie was aware of was that she wasn't leaving this hammock until she couldn't ignore her bladder anymore…

She tossed and turned on the hammock, too angry to nap. Two more days.

And then she'd be out of Law's hair forever. She hoped he'd be glad. She freaking hoped he'd sob out of appreciation. No more stupid little *sentimental* chemist to look after… Yeah, she'd gladly skip off into the horizon with Hippo, that was gonna be her happy ending even if she had to blow up the entire planet to achieve it.

Sophie rolled over, biting back the burning sensation behind her eyes.

Two more days…

A blue light flashed over the closet.

She dropped to the hallway floor with a shriek. Law stood over her. She scrambled to her feet. "W-what is wrong with you? I c-could have been changing! I could have been handling really dangerous objects like… h-hydrochloric acid, or—my shoe! Look at how dangerous this is. Look at it."

He was leaning on his crutch, appraising her coolly. She couldn't tell if he was glaring or the bags under his eyes had mutated.

"You have no sense of coordination or combat technique. How do you expect to take out a Marine base?"

"My grotesque caterpillar eyebrows have terrified people into cardiac arrest before," she replied seriously. "If I cross my fingers and pray really hard…"

Law stuck a broom and a dustpan in her hands without even a grin. It's like nothing had changed from when she first came aboard, all the way back on Drum Island.

"Since you've made it clear you're staying on my submarine as a guest, you will receive the guest treatment. You'll gain access to commodities such as food or bathrooms by pulling your weight. Get to work."
"Wow. Not even a good morning?"

"Cancer." Law plucked the cigarette from her lips and Roomed it overboard. Sophie gasped and raised one hand to her chest. "Just trying to save your life."

"I could quit anytime," she sneered.

"Coming from you, I can believe it."

He was looking over her shoulder as he said it, and for a second Sophie wasn't even sure she heard right. The accusation was just there, hanging in the air, bland and inelegant. Without a word, she spun around, swallowing the urge to pummel him with the dumb broom and the dumb dustpan.

She didn't notice that Law made sure she rounded the corner before limping back to his cabin.

She spent the rest of the day making the submarine spotless. It was well-maintained to begin with (of course, with Law being their captain), and it was mindless work. The mechanics didn't let her clean the engine room (way too many hazards for a submarine newbie), and the crew's cabin was barred from her by several flustered pirates, so she stayed in the hallways. It gave her time to think, anyway. To ponder, panic, have multiple existentialist crises, all that boring stuff. She passed through lunch and dinner quickly, grabbing a plate in the galley and rushing back to her closet, not wanting to bump into anyone troublesome.

Later that night, she moved into the sickbay. She waited around the corner for half an hour until the doctor had finished check-ups and vanished back into his cabin, before peeking in the door.

Half a dozen candles were lit, bathing over plates of food and newspapers. A newsboy cap and an black ushanka were lying on the nightstand, freshly washed. It was the first time Sophie really looked at these hatless pirates, without ear flaps or a bill to shadow their faces.

Hai Xing, bandages wrapped around his no-nonsense buzz cut, was immersed in knitting. Faded scar tissue lined the side of his temple, cutting into his hairline. He was skinnier than Anko, the bones of his wrist more pronounced. The brown, beaky-nosed pirate beside him was training with weights; he looked up as the door creaked open, light washing over the visitor.

"Hey."

She shuffled in, sweeping as she went. "G-good evening. How's rehab going?"

"Captain said it'll take another week to be back at one hundred percent," Anko replied, doing a bicep curl with one hand. Sophie went quiet. His smile turned leery. "Shedding tears over my poor, worn body?"

"Yeah, that'll never happen," she replied with complete seriousness.

"Ah, well, the internal bleeding would've hurt less if I'd been saving a crewmate."

Her face turned an interesting shade of maroon and she went back to sweeping, chewing on her bottom lip to keep from saying something stupid (Hippo's etiquette lesson number six, eleven, and eighteen). Turned away, she missed a sewing needle hurled into Anko's face.

"I'm just kidding, Sophie-chan," Anko amended, rubbing his cheek and throwing a sour glance at the cook. "Getting beat up is the funnest part about this job. Don't take me too seriously."

"Won't be hard," Hai Xing muttered. He seemed to be knitting a potholder, or maybe a scarf.
"Hey—"

"Do you find me selfish?"

They turned their heads and blinked at the chemist. She stared back at them evenly, not betraying her stuttering heartbeat.

"Go to confession," Hai Xing advised.

Anko shrugged. "Yeah, basically."

Surprised laughter burst out of Sophie. "R-really? Th-that's it?"

Anko was examining the contents of his nose. "What do you want us to say?"

"I don't know—something about how I'm putting myself first, or giving up freedom—"

"We're professionals in the act of sinning, not on caring if other people do it," Hai Xing said expressionlessly, his needles flashing.

"Huh." Sophie paused. "Well, when you say it like that." She pondered over it. "That makes a lot of sense! Thank you, Hai Xing-san!"

Anko looked earnestly at Sophie, but she just went back to sweeping. He turned to stare at the silent cook, who was immersed in his knitwear. "Well, I'm fucking bedazzled."

Hai Xing didn't look up. Anko turned away with a sulk, and muttered something that sounded like "friggin' midget" under his breath.

"Anko-san!"

"What?" He gave Sophie an innocent look.

"Bullying is destructive for morale because not only does it tarnish relationships among the squad, it also leads to poor communication during times of armed conflict, which puts everyone's lives at risk," she recited.

"Okay, marine, don't get all wet about shit that don't apply here—"

"It's about teamwork," Sophie said forcefully, shifting her weight.

Anko snorted. "I work better alone. Could've taken out that psycho axe murderer by myself, but I got dragged down by this one and Shachi." He held up three fingers. "Dream team: me, Captain, and Bepo. Maybe Penguin as backup. Fuck everyone else."

Silent as ever, Hai Xing was weaving himself into a cocoon. Sophie whacked Anko's head with her broom.

"Hey!"

"Don't be crass!"

"You just hit me in my black eye! I could've died!"

"Hai Xing-san, say something to protect your dignity!"
"I'd really like to get some sleep."

"No, something else! Something passive-aggressive! Make fun of his penis!"

"Underlings, stand down!" came Bepo's voice at the door. The polar bear and the two mechanics walked in, padding across the floor in socks.

"I thought we were done with the underlings thing," Anko complained.

"We are," Bepo said cheerily.

"That's what you said last time."

"And yet you keep coming back for more."

As Anko pointed out 'We live on the same damn ship' in the background, Penguin extracted the broom from her hand. "We can take it from here."

"Oh, um." Sophie stuck her hands in her pockets, digging her nails into scar tissue. "…Okay."

Loud, hearty goodnights were passed around. Penguin refilled their cups with more water. Hai Xing showed his quilt thing to Bepo, and grudgingly allowed Shachi to snuggle with it. The pirates leaned on each other, sitting around the candles, and they always belonged like this, they had never not belonged like this. Sophie shuffled back into the shadows, then turned away.

"Sophie."

She glanced over her shoulder. Penguin was smiling. "Thanks for stopping by. It's been fun."

Her nails pressed deeper into her palms.

"For you, maybe!" she huffed, sticking her tongue out. "I'm sick of being decapitated!"

—

three days previous

—

"Let's approach this rationally. You want to break into a fortified Marine base while not being a combat fighter—"

"It's a stealth mission. I don't plan on fighting. If Teresa-san reports back that I'm dead, and she will, I'll be fine."

"Have you read today's papers? The Kid Pirates plundered three Marine branches near Jaya. G-13 is still recovering from Vira, and they must know they're vulnerable to pirate attacks. Patrols will be tighter, guards more vigilant, monitors everywhere—"

"Some which I helped set up. It'll be like if you ever were to break into this submarine—"

"Without the risk of being captured and executed," Law snapped.

"Well." Sophie paused. "We all have our flaws."

A headache pounded in his skull. It was like his exhaustion and incredulity were fighting to one-up
"And these blueprints you're planning on stealing are located where?"

"My highly secure three-tier laboratory."

"Alright. Say you do get in, and you make it through without a hitch, and you somehow manage to kidnap or coerce your father into leaving, and this all happens without anyone spotting you or your ship. You still have to deal with navigating the Grand Line. Returning to a country taken over by the Revolutionary Army." It was like Cat's Eye all over again. What exactly was her plan?

"True." She laughed a little, pleased by his concern for her. "Do you want to help me?"

"There are only certain things I'm willing to risk my crew for."

Crew, as in **his** crew. Crew, as in **you-are-not-a-part-of-mine**.

Her small smile remained in place as she nodded. "I know. Anyway, I can handle whatever they throw at me. Lived through you, didn't I?"

He ignored the uncomfortable nudge right between his ribs. Sophie rocked back and forth, running her fingers over the dancing flame like she was plucking the strings of an oud. No wonder she carried so many scars. The flickering shadow-play made her face surreal, alienesque.

"I'll come back. I want to come back. If I get out of there alive, I'll go to Machinastein and find you. I want to be a Heart Pirate." Sophie swallowed. "But if I don't do this, it'll just feel like… I don't know… it'll feel like everything I put my heart and soul in now is just—like I'm avoiding it. Do I, you know, do I really want to join your crew? Or is it because I'm just running away? I'm only a few days away from G-13 as it is; I might not ever have this chance again. I could die tomorrow for all I know."

Law listened silently.

"Don't get me wrong, somewhere down the line I'd still like to be part of your crew. This is just something I have to do before that, you know? You're—you all became important to me… and I'm not taking you for granted, because I honestly did put all my effort into becoming a good candidate for your crew—" She was babbling before she realized it, trying to put it in words how much she wanted to stay, and yet, and yet. "It would be wrong to shed my responsibility, like, I have to put myself first, patch myself up and work from there… instead of staying here with you and forgetting who I am, where I've come from—and it's everything you said, you know, it's an escape, you're just an escape." Law's expression tensed. Her eyes widened and she shook her head. "No, that's not what I—"

"You don't need to say any more, Chemist-ya."

Sophie flinched. He gazed past her, totally neutral, because he wasn't about to lose it over some foolish kid, some **ex-marine**.

"I understand," he continued dispassionately. "The fact we used each other's abilities and resources is nothing more than an exchange of services. So you should… you should do what you want." He cleared his throat, hating that his voice didn't come out as strong as he wanted it to.

"Right," she agreed. Law's reasoning was so… analytical. Even a bit… cold.

Which she expected, yes, but he sounded as if everything that happened was just some sort of transaction, and neither of them did the things they did because they *wanted* to. But wasn't some of that true? She demanded he drop her off at Drum Island in exchange for his scalpel, and then at Cat's
Eye in exchange for a few bombs—but, but everything that happened afterwards was different, and nothing about it was self-serving, not when she fired her gun at Teresa, not when she carried him in her arms. And she'd never admit it, but it'd destroy her if the small, empathetic things Law did—inviting her in for breakfast after she woke him at dawn to yell at his face, setting up the bioluminescent fungi lamp in her room, holding her hand like it was something precious, something—if he had done that because, what, it was his part of the deal? It was far too late when Sophie felt herself unraveling.

"No," she corrected herself, the back of her eyes stinging, "n-no, wait that's not how I-I feel at all—"

He opened his mouth without thinking, without pausing to regroup and compose himself. "It makes no difference," Law heard himself say. "After all, you had a life and goals and dreams before you met me. So go back to it and stop wasting my time—your sentiment bores me to fucking tears."

Sophie stared at him—and swung her feet to the ground, yanked on her boots, and stalked past him without a word.

This was familiar. He had seen this before.

She turned around right before the door, just as she always did, and he wondered when, when, when will it be the last time?

"I heard monsters can't cry."

After she was gone, Law buried his face in his hands, then immediately raised his head when he caught a whiff of gunpowder and cigarette smoke. "God—" he hissed, squeezing his eyes shut.

She was leaving. Good. He couldn't fucking stand her silly suicidal bravery. Good for her, leaving now rather than delaying the inevitable. He was disgusted by how protective her arms felt as she carried him down half a mountain, how her wretched cigarettes made her smell just like—

Law stopped that thought. There was no reason for this pathetic agitation. Things would be better come morning, when he had his head on straight. When he wasn't working on adrenaline fumes and negative hours of sleep. When she came to her senses and pounded on his door at some godforsaken hour in the morning, begging hysterically to be taken back…

Marginally less grumpy, he used his crutch to stand and did a routine check on Anko's vitals. Satisfied, he walked around to Hai Xing's bed and paused.

His eyes narrowed at the slow rise and fall of the pirate's chest. After a long silence, he swept his gaze over the machines, nodded, and gently tugged Hai Xing's blanket over his shoulders.

Thwarted of his powers at the current moment, he limped all the way back to his cabin. Fortunately the submarine was quiet; he didn't think he could've mustered up the energy for anything more than a grunt should someone pass by. He made it into his cabin and right as his legs buckled, his last thought was free-falling through the air with a scarred hand holding him tight—Law fell asleep before his head hit the pillow.

—one day previous

The next day, Sophie rested her chin on the mop handle and watched a three-way spar between
Bepo, Shachi, and Penguin.

Law OK'd them for some 'light' physical activity, though this was anything but. They were a flurry of punches and kicks and shit-talking that almost seemed choreographed ("Dumbass, you're using your right leg again to block," Penguin yelled right before Bepo jump-kicked him in the gut). Shachi did a powerful roundhouse flip kick Penguin and Bepo both dodged practically without looking. They must've helped him perfect that move.

There was nothing more entertaining than watching three profoundly close friends fight each other. They each had their own personal style. Penguin was fond of linear attacks and lightning-fast palm strikes, Shachi had a penchant for grappling moves, and Bepo freestyled with flashy kicks and flips.

During their water break, Shachi invited her to join a two-on-two match. Sophie laughed until she started wheezing, then replied, "When Hell freezes over." There was a time and a place to get her butt kicked, and it was not going to be by three of the strongest Heart Pirates punting her around like a deflated basketball. Maybe later, if she came back... when she came back. Sophie brushed the broom idly over her boots.

Her sleeping schedule was bad as always. She woke up every half hour in cold sweat, fell off her hammock around three in the morning, and started cleaning. Nicotine helped with the anxiety, as did coffee.

Ever since Idyll Island went under the protection of Whitebeard, pirate and marine steered clear. It might take a week to hitch a ride to G-13, it might take a few months. Sophie had time to spare. The island was safe, peaceful, and... well, true to its name. How fearsome a reputation one must have, she contemplated. If Law wanted to find One Piece, these were the pirates he'd be going up against...

"Ow! God, right where I was almost stabbed to death!"

Shachi's yell shook her back to the present. Sophie gasped as he fell to his knees, clutching his shoulder. Stammering apologies, Penguin and Bepo dropped their stances and moved to help him up—and Shachi twisted into a windmill on his back, hitting them both with a spinning kick.

"Suck on that, fools! Whatup!"

Sighing fondly, she leaned on the mop handle.

Finished with the spar, the three pirates sat in the middle of the room, drenched in sweat and high-fiving each other. This was her cue.

"Right, guys, your captain wants this place sterilized." Sophie splashed the mop on the floor. "Step aside if you don't want to be on the receiving end of my violence; I have a mop and I know how to use it. No way of guaranteeing your safety. I could decimate you all in seconds."

She went to work scrubbing down the training room.

To her surprise, the pirates washed their sweat towels in the bucket and began cleaning alongside her. They were polite about it for maybe five seconds, and then Bepo splashed Penguin, Shachi snapped his towel at Bepo, and Sophie—on the pretext of roaring stop in the name of cleanliness—accidentally tripped all three of them up with her mop. "Oh! Oh g-god, I'm sorraughhhht!" Her arms windmilled as she slipped on the wet floor—Penguin and Shachi caught her by the arms, and Bepo flicked water at her shirt. She flailed after the laughing pirates as it escalated in a sudsy free-for-all.

"You guys suck," Shachi declared, when the cleaning was finally done. Bepo shook the water off
his fur like a happy puppy. He rubbed his stinging eyes. "God damn, which asshole thought it'd be fun to get into a soap fight?"

Bepo glanced slyly at the camera.

"Sophie! C'mon!" Penguin yelled from down the hall.

She arranged the supplies closet to glittery spotlessness and followed after the pirates. "I'm ready!"

The Heart Pirates would dock at Idyll Island next morning, and so it was an unspoken agreement upon the whole submarine that tonight they would throw a feast for Sophie's goodbye. Which honestly was just an excuse to drink and eat more Kunlun food. Hai Xing said he felt good enough to make a big dinner, so he did. The kitchen roared with fiery pans and whistling kettles, fridges banging open and knives chopping loudly against a cutting board. Wiping his brow with a dirty shirt, he emerged from the kitchen to the claps and cheers of his crewmates.

The last time she was in the galley, the portholes were pitch-black. This time, someone switched on the lamps outside the submarine and the dark ocean was lit up. The submarine eased through a garden of blue moon jellyfish, floating around crystal rocks and seagrass. They danced past Sophie as a school of catfish sharks glided overhead. Blue light washed over her face as she gazed out the porthole, her eyes glowing.

The long wooden table quickly filled up with pirates. A glorious array of plates, bowls, and flagons were piled on top of the groaning table. Sophie sat beside Bepo and Penguin, almost missing the dark figure limping to his seat.

Once they were settled in, Law knocked on the table. The galley went silent. Sophie gazed firmly at Bepo's elbow.

"Tuck in," the captain said.

The galley became a flurry of clattering chopsticks, knives, and spoons. Hands grabbed slices of char siu pork, dug into honey duck, plucked up sizzling greasy dumplings, sipped winter melon soup, and scooped out rice for each other. She grabbed a little bit of everything as the pirates passed around dishes. Sophie pushed food around her plate so each separate item was in their own section, arranged based on their hue and saturation, then dug in.

"Sweet Roger, we have to go back to Kunlun soon," Penguin groaned.

"Who has the hoison? Pass it here!"

"Sophie-chan, take more! Shit, it's still moving—okay, here ya go!"

"Hai Xing-san, this is so good!" she called, munching happily.

"This mushroom is undercooked," Shachi complained. Hai Xing chucked a duck bone at him.

"I cook a bit myself," she said. "Some salicylic acid, some acetic anhydride, with a dash of phosphoric acid—boom, aspirin."

"That's completely different," Hai Xing, and Bepo, and Penguin, and everyone in her immediate vicinity replied. Law pushed around his sad-looking broccoli, then took a long drink.

"Hey, good luck tomorrow," Penguin said, slurping down braised abalone. "You gotta have a plan of attack, right? Gonna storm down a Marine base and raise hell?"
"Stealth mission. I'm bagging all my research and getting my sensei to leave the Government with me." Sophie beamed, because it was easier to fake confidence. "And in a week or two, we'll be living like a normal family on a normal island."

Shachi wrinkled his nose. "Suburbia. Ew."

"Well, I mean, it won't be 'normal' in the sense of conventional normalcy. Way before Hippo-sensei adopted me, he used to be a huge freak. He used to treat criminals when they're being interrogated so they don't bleed out. As soon as I could hold a pencil, Sensei taught me how to dissect frogs and starfish, then he'd let me try it on a recently deceased cadaver because the blood was fresher," she boasted. "Not to brag or anything, but your dads could never."

"Everything makes sense now," Shachi whispered to Penguin.

"You're so lucky," Valross groaned, staring with envy at the pirates' bandages. "Man, I wish I could've been there, right in the thick of it."

"This lad was busy wooing some fine dame who had better respectabilities than a pirate," Manta laughed.

"Respectability?" Anko guffawed. "They're whores!"

"And so was our mothers, dumbass, so shut up," Hai Xing said.

The table quieted. Sophie peered at the normally stoic pirate, who blinked slowly and kept eating like nothing was wrong.

"The cook speaks," Law spoke up, his gaze resting on the helmsman.


Shachi grinned at the uncomfortable silence. "Remember the last time Hai Xing got all riled up like this?"

The table burst into laughter, clearly remembering something that spoke for itself. Each pirate had something to add to the 'remember when's', and it was all things she'd never heard of, places she'd never been to. Sophie faded in the background, not sure if she could participate in the conversation but wanting to. She earnestly looked from pirate to pirate, but they were all too excited and reminiscent to notice.

"Hey, have you tried the duck?" she cheerfully asked Bepo. He was busy laughing at something Shachi said and didn't hear her.

Sophie forced a smile on her face, staring at her plate with flushed cheeks. From the opposite end of the table, Law contemplated Sophie, then looked at the biochemistry book in his hands. He glanced at her again, and then scooted back his chair to stand up—

"You would've loved it, Sophie!" Penguin elbowed her with a shout.

Relieved, she laughed in agreement (not entirely sure what she was agreeing to). Strengthened by being added to the conversation, she asked awkwardly, "Remember, uh, when Penguin-san and Shachi-san were nearly, y'know, eaten by a cannibalistic plant?"

"Oh, hey!" Shachi yelled, as everyone else laughed. *Score!*
Anko smacked the table, laughing so hard he had to quiet down or risk his stitches loosening. Law finished brushing crumbs off his bench and sat back down, his butt planted firmly in his seat.

As the night wore on, Penguin had a card game going (Sophie lost spectacularly and to much applause), Bepo, Shachi, and the other pirates drowsily sang off key, and Manta was conked out on the floor, with Hai Xing dozing on his belly. Law had finished off at least five pints and still remained perfectly cognizant. He was even speed-reading a book in his lap. What even. She was only on her second and was already feeling quite tipsy.

With a small sigh, Law shut his book and stood up. "Superb dinner, Hai Xing. Have a good night, the rest of you."

Sophie stretched, feeling a sleepy food coma catch up to her.

"Just a sec, Cap!" Penguin called. Law stopped, and to Sophie's horror, the mechanic nudged her in the side. "Sophie, since you're leaving, this is our last night together as a sort of team. I mean, if you wanna say a few words…"

"No, I'd rather not," she said quickly.

The pirates' eyes gleamed at this chance of mob mentality. "Speech! Speech!" they hollered, banging on their plates.

She cleared her throat. "Okay, so a neutron walks into a bar and—"

"Come on!" Anko yelled.

"Cap, sit down!" Shachi yanked on Law's hoodie when he tried to make a quick getaway. "And don't Room yourself away!"

Bepo patted the bench. "Stand here, Sophie."

"Speak chur hair out," Manta slurred. Hai Xing muttered something about muffins and rolled over.

"But I d-don't know what…" Bepo was already holding her arm to keep her balanced on the bench. "Oh, p-pineapples, okay…" Sophie staggered, swallowing down her nausea. God, I'm such a lightweight...

"I… okay, hi, I'm Sophie, and—"

"Hi, Sophie," the pirates intoned.

"Ha ha, very funny. Anyway, I dunno, thanks for all this. I mean," she started over, because that was so wimpy, "I mean, we got off to a bad start. I know I'm hard to get along with, and you're—pirates, you know? You're not supposed to help marines. We're natural enemies and yet you watched my back anyway. That's so stupid, right? Like, it's impractical. It's so beyond the levels of scientific explanation, of pragmatic survival, an' yet y'all show me so much kindness—" Shachi clasped his hands together and did a little 'awwww', "—listened when I was upset—" Bepo beamed, "—and saved my life, over'n over again. I… I'll miss you guys, you know. I'll miss you somethin' fierce."

Penguin's grin faded when he caught the look on his captain's face. Sophie, turned away, didn't notice. She raised her flagon. "To the Heart Pirates!"

A dozen cups rose into the air. Yeah, it was a good toast.

Sophie chugged down the rest of her beer, which was not her smartest decision. She didn't remember how it happened, but one second she was tripping over a bowl of noodles, and the next she was in darkness, being rested on her hammock. In the light of her glowy mushroom jar, she could make out
Law's features. He tugged the blanket over her shoulders, and everything was fuzzy and warm like hot chocolate.

She rolled over and poked him in the chest...ish area. "Why ya gotta be so mean, huh... why's that, ya big baloopa..."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"Y'should be," she mumbled, curling up under the covers, her eyes drifting shut. "Y'really should be."

He leaned on the hammock, resting his weight on his arms. "I don't want to fuck up with my crew. I don't want them to see me like this over anyone."

"Just be chill..." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Yer good at that... yer important, y'know... t'me..."

Her tousled hair fell across her face, but he did nothing to brush it aside. It was charming.

"I know how aggravating loose ends are, and why tying them up is important." It was his whole reason for being on the Grand Line. It would be hypocritical of him to cut her into pieces and lock her up where she'd never be able to leave. Not that he had planned that, no. Certainly not. "Do you what you have to do," he murmured. "And then come back to us."

His answer was a snore.

He had an urge to twirl a curly strand around his fingers, but fought it off. He noticed earlier in the galley he could see her blonde roots showing again. She was still wearing Odin's dog tags around her neck. Little things like that about Sophie were so... strange. She seemed to have no morals, unless it related to Vira. She didn't hesitate to harm others, but was stubbornly pacifistic towards a princess who threatened to take her head off. She was immensely selfish, and then... wasn't at the same time. What a hypocrite, Law thought, eyeing the puddle of drool collecting on her chin.

I'm important to her. Good. After everything he did for her, he should be important. She would've made such a loyal...

Sophie looked so peace, washed over with dim green light. Like she was drifting in the ocean. He felt sleepy just looking at her. I'm important to her, he thought again, and it sounded... satisfying.

"Law-san..."

His gaze shifted at the sound of her quiet, husky voice.

She rolled around to him, her eyes still closed, lips slightly parted. One arm was splayed over her head and the corner of her shirt was halfway off her other shoulder. Her breathing was long and slow. "I wanna puddin' tomorrow... an' stop watchin' me, it creeepyyy..."

Law allowed himself three seconds to absorb this new situation, then got his shit together and Roomed himself away. Fucking alcohol.

—

threedaysprevious


Sophie listened to the sound of humming and creaking of an engine, the obscure notion of very large things in constant motion. She swayed on her hammock, thinking about their conversation. About Law.

He had such an intensity about him, it was almost frightening. She liked the way his chapped lips pursed in thought, the acidity of his foul language, the way his eyes would smirk at her sometimes. Whenever he was near, her stomach felt warm and her chest hurt.

Perhaps Sophie required an antacid.

‘You’re not sleeping together, are you?’ Nellie’s voice echoed in her mind.

A few days ago, she would’ve mimed vomiting. A few weeks ago, she would’ve preferred throwing herself off a steep cliff. But this feeling had sneaked up on her, when she wasn't careful. And Sophie didn't like it. She didn't like not being able to brush off Law’s harsh words, and she hated how light-headed and off-balance he made her feel. It was so… unnecessary. And it made her feel bad. Not a bad person, but… a bad almost crewmate.

Infatuation, lust, all hormones, all chemical. All explainable. She wasn't getting involved with the Heart Pirates for the wrong reasons. Law would throw her off the sub. Above all else, Sophie was a professional. Who also had a suitcase full of personal issues to work through. A long-ago conversation flitted through her mind.

(I bow down to no one.

Doesn’t that just make you irresponsible?

It makes me free. Perhaps freer than you will ever be.

I think so, too... but I chose this path of my own will and no one, not even the famous Surgeon of Death, can look down on me for that.)

Sophie closed her eyes. This was something people chew over right before they fall asleep, forgotten by morning. She was the scientist here, she was in control. Bepo, Penguin, Shachi, Hai Xing, Anko, Manta, and everyone else—they were just as important. There’s a reason why relationships among marines in the same division were forbidden. It jeopardized the lives of the whole team. Brain chemistry worked different when you were in… infatuation or whatever. It was dangerous. There were so many things that could go wrong.

She was above this. She was in control. And god knows she had enough shit to deal with.

Sophie pummeled this absurd feeling into the darkest recesses of her heart and buried it.

(Shed eat some pudding in the morning.)

—

now

—

Whitebeard’s flag rose over the canopy of palm trees, like a guardian protecting the pristine white beach and squawking seagulls. About a mile out at sea, Sophie stood on the deck of the submarine.
"Kinda funny. I thought he'd always been frolicking around the New World."

Law shrugged. "It was a long while back. Even Emperors were once rookies."

"Mmm. You know the Phoenix dude? Now that's someone I'd like to poke around with my test tubes." She clicked her tongue. "Get some pipette action going."

It was only the two of them on the deck. Sophie preferred a quiet exit, while everyone slept away the alcohol inside. She dropped Penguin's clothes off in the laundry room and wore her clean Kunlun outfit; ripped jeans with the shirt tucked in. Law was already awake when she knocked on his door, and agreed to see her off privately. The tension between them evaporated. She would've been way more embarrassed about drunkenly falling over Law last night, if she hadn't already embarrassed herself multiple times and in far worse scenarios. Such is life.

Law stood beside her, relaxed, the breeze ruffling his hair and one eye squinted against the early morning sun. Balancing on his crutch, he outstretched his hand. "Good luck."

She shook it with an obnoxious, "Nahhhh, you don't mean that."

"I do. You'd be wasted as a corpse."

Sophie contemplated him, his tired but well-meaning half-grin, his baggy eyes, his hair still smushed in the side from sleeping on a book, probably.

Then, gripping his hand, she yanked him into a hug. Sophie wrapped her arms around him, her cheek pressed against his chest. Whaddya know; Tin Man has a heart.

He froze, like he wasn't quite sure what to do. After a brief hesitation, he rested his arms on her brawny shoulders and returned the hug lightly.

"You know," she whispered, "I still find you vastly insufferable."

He bit back a secret smile.

"But it's a bit less than completely, I suppose."

He leaned his chin on her windswept hair as the blue Room flickered over them, across the ocean, onto the edge of the beach where the ocean surf met sand. It was a beautiful day. The sky was the clearest he'd seen in a while. He felt her breathe against him.

"What, you gonna miss me?" she teased.

"I thought that appeared quite obvious."

Her head lifted. Wide blue-blue eyes met his for a split second—

Shambles.

And just like that, his friend was gone and Law stood alone on the deck.

—

The Idyll villagers were whole-heartedly welcoming during Sophie's stay. It'd take another week for the Heart Pirates to arrive at Machinastein, and the Log Pose would set after two weeks.

So, she had time. And time, for once, felt amazing.
Since she had no money, Sophie ran around the village doing odd jobs for people. She washed dishes for the local bar in exchange for salt, sugar, and baking soda. She helped fisherwomen gather sea turtles in exchange for wonderful, home-cooked food. She stood in front of the blacksmith's shop and recited all the minerals, their chemical properties, melting points, and uses, until the old blacksmith yanked her inside and chucked a broom at her. Score. She'd been meaning to make herself a proper gas mask.

Idyll's economy was pretty much isolated, though merchants occasionally found their way to the island. All the island's shipwrights only built boats for rivers and fishing, not for the rough weathers of the Grand Line. They didn't have the wood to spare on a bigger ship.

Which was why Sophie was biding her time, waiting for a passing merchant ship heading west. She planned it so when the ship passed by G-13, she'd steal a rowboat and vanish into the dead of night.

Not the greatest idea, but it was either that or someone had to hurry up inventing the jetpack.

When she had free time, she spent it weight-lifting coconuts, doing chin-ups, or sitting cross-legged in the middle of her hut, mentally walking through the layout of G-13. She imagined passing by marines on her way down to Kong Dining Hall, through the training courtyards as marines ran laps around her... she heard the drill sergeant count push-ups for new recruits, the thud of boots stomping in line, the faint laughter of young cadets secretly sharing a drink while on duty. She could see it in her mind. The North Tower where her laboratory and all scientists were stationed at; the South Tower where the Vice Admiral and higher-ranking marines lived; and the massive Central Tower with the silver G-13 emblazoned across it...

This focused mentality made it quite easy to live by herself again.

Every morning she passed a seacow shepherdess, floating on a sampan and herding manatees. Every evening she'd fish for dinner in the shallow, crystal-clear ocean outside of her hut. She liked to sit on the pier and watch the sunset burn against swaying palm trees.

(A few 'only's:

Only one case of food poisoning. Sophie spent the whole night squatting in the bushes and quietly dying.

Only two slip-ups, when she heard loud, laughing voices outside her hut, and woke up groaning, "Mornin', guys..." to her empty hut.

And only three anxiety-ridden, sleepless nights.

Was that last one an improvement? No, but it sure was nice to make it sound like one.)

Other than that, she kept herself busy and (tried not to) didn't think much of Law. She almost wished he would say he'd help her fight off her demons, to take on all her burdens for her. But who was she kidding? There wasn't anyone like that in this world.

Flying on the breeze, a piece of paper whacked her in the face.

"Ow!"

Sophie wrenched the bounty poster out of her face and crumpled it in her fists. Straw Hat Luffy could find some other unsuspecting face to terrorize.

On this morning exactly ninety-nine hours and thirty-three minutes since leaving the Heart Pirates,
Sophie trekked to the blacksmith's shop after a brisk ten-mile swim around the island. She was gaining all her weight back after Vira—one hundred and thirty-five pounds, so far. With the added bonus of watermelon-crushing thighs.

The blacksmith greeted her, already hammering away at the furnace. The islanders spoke in the same easy, relaxed accent evocative of their home. Sophie's biceps flexed as she threw charcoal into the furnace and poured white-hot liquid metal into cast-iron molds. Payment for the gas mask the blacksmith was making, as she tinkered away at the back of the shop with all the small parts.

Sophie took a break in the front of the shop, out where the fresh breeze came in, sweating and fanning herself with a palm leaf. The sun rose high and hot, baking her tan skin darker.

The blacksmith walked up behind her.

"Wonder what that Whitebeard fella's doing?" she muttered, and cupped her hands around her mouth, "Hey, there! Careful not to get heatstroke!"

Sophie's blood froze.

A dark lump under the shady palm trees tipped his cowboy hat up. He stretched and sprung to his feet. Golden sunlight fell across him from the waist up, and on his back the emblem of the most powerful pirate in the world glowed like some kind of divine mark. Her breath caught. All the fearsome rumors she heard in G-13 came back to her at once.

He bowed at both of them, the jolly blacksmith, and her, a sweat-stained disheveled blob. The healthy glow of weight gain? Gone. Sophie appeared to be shriveling up into a sea mollusk.

The monster patted sand off his shorts. The monster had freckles. "Hello, um. You guys doing okay? No, uh, pirate attacks anywhere? All good?"

Fire Fist Ace, one of the youngest rookies ever, with a half a billion bounty.

Fire Fist Ace, who was once offered a position of Shichibukai.

Fire Fist Ace, who fought the Knight of the Sea to a standstill.

Fire Fist Ace and the blacksmith continued to talk like old friends. Sophie stood rigid, her hands balled into fists.

Right as she was about to slip to the back of the shop, Fire Fist spoke, "Nah, just here for a pitstop. You hear anything about Teach passing through these waters? He's calling himself Blackbeard now, stupidest fucking name if I've ever heard one."

Blackbeard…

(Tell your captain to steer clear of—that'll be Blackbeard territory for a while—and remember: the New Age is a load of shit! Zehahaha!)

Sophie gasped.

The second that noise left her mouth, she slammed it shut. She felt a scorching gaze land on her and coughed, "Oh—oh, oh b-boy, I think I just s-swallowed some sand. Hey, I think I hear s-someone calling me—"

Fire Fist leaped in front of her. "No, no, no. I have a better idea: let's take a walk."
Sophie edged back like a terrified pineapple knowing it was in the presence of a juice maker.

"She's an old friend," the monster told the blacksmith. "I think we should catch up."

"Off with you," the blacksmith shooed Sophie. "Don't worry about the gas mask anymore; no friend of Ace's pays for anything."

"W-well that's very kind of you—but I'm n-not his—" Sophie waved her arms at this—this five hundred and fifty million bounty, what the everloving— "I don't e-even know you! I mean, I know you as in I've h-heard of your exploits, but—"

"So modest." He pressed a hand lightly on her back. "Onward!"

Fire Fist grinned winningly at her. She took one look at that charming smile, those freckles—and bolted.

"Hold on!"

"L-leave m-m-me alone!"

"Lady, I'm not gonna hurt you!"

"Right," she scoffed under her breath, dashing around a lei shop.

Fire Fist was in front of her faster than she could blink. Sophie dug her feet into the sand and almost stumbled into his chiseled pectorals.

"You're not from around here, are you? If you were a villager, you wouldn't be scared of me." Fire Fist's expression was still a mix of interest and humor, but he narrowed his eyes. His pupils glowed a faint orange and started smoking. "So talk."

"Okay!" she squeaked. "I m-met a guy named Blackbeard on K-Kunlun a few days ago. And I'd tell you if I r-remembered where he said he'd be, but I don't, I swear—"

He crossed his arms and stepped closer, forcing her back. He did the thing Law did sometimes, not touching her in any way, able to push her back with the power of his personal bubble. "My crew has a pretty big responsibility to keep an entire island protected from hordes of ravaging pirates. Not only do we defend Idyll, but our territory stretches from Fishman Island all the way into the New World. Do you know why these people are living in peace? Why marines and pirates avoid this place?"

He opened his mouth to tell her why.

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut.

And then Whitebeard Second Division commander, noticeably shirtless Portgas D. Ace, in all his majestic muscular glory, collapsed on top of Sophie with a snore.

WHAT THE FRICK-FRACKIN' PINEAPPLES.

She threw his body off her with a disgusted grunt. He rolled into the sand, his hat tilted askew. Did a Whitebeard pirate just die on her? Was it okay to just… leave him there? She poked him with a stick. He remained motionless, facedown in the sand.

"H…hello? Are you… like, dead or something?"

He snored.
…Oh, whatever.

But he'd get horribly sunburned out here. Sophie dragged him into the shade of a palm tree, threw a bunch of sand over his beautiful pecs, covered his face with a palm leaf, and hustled back to the village. Everything was fine! Nothing to see here!

She made mini fireworks for a farmer's kids in exchange for a few qava roots and candle wicks. Qava was a powerful sedative. Long ago, it had been illegally imported all over the world and was responsible for Idyll's decline and eventually, conquered Whitebeard territory. It was capable of knocking out groups of people without harming them, which was perfect for her plan. Sophie rounded out the day by cleaning the baker's pots and pans in exchange for leftover meat pastries.

The island was quite small. She kept away from windows and transported herself by practically crawling on her hands and knees. But as the day wore on, Fire Fist was nowhere to be seen.

That only made her more paranoid.

Late afternoon, Sophie dashed back to her hut. She passed by a hammock tied between two palm trees right outside.

Fire Fist was chewing on a fishbone between his teeth. "Yo."

Sophie let out a long, trailing wail that ended in a quiet, "Why meee..."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I... I still don't um r-remember whu—where Cherry P-Pie-san is," she mouth-flailed, sweating. "How d-did you find me?"

"The kind villagers. I don't really have anywhere to be, so until you remember, I'll chill here for the time being." The pirate stretched out on the hammock, grinning.

"...What."

"You're the only lead I've got."

Her cheeks colored pink. "Go t-t-to Kunlun! Ask around there!"

"About a five day trip on my boat, not including sleeping time," Fire Fist reasoned. "More advantageous if I wait for you to jog your memory. Besides, you don't seem to be going anywhere either. No merchant ships in sight. Again, the kind villagers filled me in."

She took six long inhales, and kind of shouted, "You're Fire Fist Ace."

"That's my name." He pointed at her lazily. "Don't wear it out."

*How uncouth! This man could give Law a run for his money. "W-why are you looking for Cherry Pie-san anyway?" Sophie shook her head. "Actually, never mind. I don't wanna know. You come into my house, I'll splash you with seawater."

"I'm quivering in my boots," he drawled, and flicked his cowboy hat so it covered his eyes.

*Weirder things have happened,* Sophie decided, plopping in her hut with another annoyed huff.

Then goosebumps popped up her spine and her whole body shuddered with cold shivers. Sophie rubbed her arms. She was grateful he had a laidback, amicable personality, but most prolific pirates
were the same; they were so strong they really had nothing to fear. She once read in a file that Red Hair refused to fight a group of rookie marines and instead invited them to drink along with him. Why would Fire Fist hurt her if he knew he could just raise an eyebrow and her knees would shake? Sophie closed her eyes, calming down. These pirates were not only strong, but also logical. He wouldn't hurt her for no reason.

She wracked her brains for the island Cherry Pie Man said he'd be, but came up short. It felt like so long ago, and many things had happened between. She'd just have to find a way to deal with Fire Fist. Sophie spent the rest of the night making smoke bombs and flash grenades, and got some sleep around dawn. She dreamed about maps, barracks, and running in endless circles around Hippo's shiny bald head.

―

True to his word, the Whitebeard pirate had nothing better to do. He was respectful of her boundaries, but often wandered over to watch her do training exercises. Which was, on this morning, breathing.

Sophie broke through the ocean's surface with a loud gasp. She counted five minutes. Not bad. As she floated back to shore, a long shadow fell over her. Fire Fist stood on the pier, glistening in the sunlight like some sort of primordial sea god.

Sophie glared enviously. "Ew, make your rippling abdominals stop."

He shot her an amused look.

"Wear a shirt!" she called. "No one wants to see that! Have some decency."

He ambled over again a while later, while she practiced fighting maneuvers in a grove of shady palm trees. Sophie jammed her knuckles in the air, imagining she was punching her opponent's solar plexus, then the throat, then a kick at the groin. She did a Shachi-inspired high kick, sand flying in an arc, and stumbled. Fire Fist leaned against a palm tree, munching on a raw fish skewer. Sophie's cheeks burned, but got up and kept going.

"Ah," he said.

She lowered her fists, breathing hard. "Yeah?"

"Your form's good." He swallowed and continued, "Don't do any of that fancy shit, just focus on footwork and stance."

She went back to training in silent concentration, though almost immediately broke it when she accidentally stuck her foot through a coconut.

"Do you have any other hobbies besides beating up tropical fruits?" Fire Fist chuckled.

"I'm a chemist," she said sourly, wiping her foot on the sand.

"Huh." He bit down on his skewer as she tried another kick combo. "Remember what I said earlier."

Sophie huffed, stopping again. She glared at him and stuck her hand on her hip. "You know, I can fight pretty well when I'm in a tight spot."

"That's called luck."
"Or maybe I'm just good at street brawling," she suggested.

"No," the world-class fighter denied flatly.

"I've heard it both ways."

He picked his teeth with the skewer and shrugged.

"Wait!" Sophie called quickly, and chewed on her lip. "Please show me what I can do better."

Fire Fist demonstrated the right way to fall, the right way to take a punch, and let Sophie transform theory into practice. He treated it like a fun sport while Sophie spat sand out of her mouth and brushed sweat out of her eyes.

"Again," he'd say over and over, easily dodging all of her elbow strikes and kicks. "You'll get the hang of it in a few years." He held her by the ankle. "Hey, remember anything about Teach?"

She glared at him, upside-down. "No."

—

Her gas mask was finished. All black, with tinted eyepieces. Walking back from the village, Sophie stuck it in her satchel and sat on the edge of the pier. She kept a weather eye on the horizon for any ships. By now, the Heart Pirates should've arrived at Machinastein…

"You have a particular fighting style for a chemist," Fire Fist noted, sitting beside her. "Aggressive counter-attacks. A habit of targeting the body's weak points. Academic, efficient."

She stretched out her sore limbs, a hint of challenge in her expression. "So?"

"So what's a marine doing in Whitebeard territory?"

"Not a marine." A shrug. "It's a boring story."

Fire Fist shrugged as well and didn't press further. She supposed it didn't interest him much.

They both sat in comfortable understanding of their strangeness, their unfamiliarity, their cordial not-friendship. He took off his hat, letting it rest on his back. Sophie reached into her pocket and took out a handful of qava roots.

"Fire Fist-san, can I see your knife?" He flicked it out and passed it to her, handle-first. "Thank—"

He flipped it out of her reach. "Heh."

Sophie observed him warily.

"Just kidding." Fire Fist tilted his lips, freckles wrinkling, and set the knife on her knee.

"…Thank you." Sophie started methodically cutting the roots into little pieces. "I once read about the qava trade. Back when it was on the black market and everyone wanted to control it." With the knife, she motioned to Whitebeard's flag snapping in the breeze. "Would really suck if that disappeared.\textit{Now that's something I thought I'd never say.}

He grinned. It didn't quite make it to his eyes. "My job is to make sure that never happens."

Sophie's eyes lit up. "Oh, hey, you've been to the New World, right? Can you tell me about it?"
He shot her a surprised glance.

"You d-don't have to," she said hurriedly. "Sorry if I was being—er, too intrusive. It's just one of those things, one of those f-f-far-flung dreams to venture past the world you know." She paused. "Um... sorry."

"Don't be." The easiness of his smile comforted her in a strange way. "A healthy dose of wanderlust is required for a sailor."

He told Sophie about an island with an everlasting lightning storm, one where you could run on air, where trees were as big as mountains. He told her about a country of samurai and a Yonkou's headquarters that was entirely made of cake. He grew more animated, hands spinning through the air as he described the migratory travels of whales as big as islands, and Sophie listened, delight shining through her as though she could feel the image in her soul.

And for a moment they were just two kids sitting on a pier in the Grand Line, filled with awe at the world they lived in.

"I really like this," Sophie told him. "The way pirates do their own thing, whether it hurts or saves others. You do what you feel is right, and you don't apologize to anyone for it." Her toes dipped into the cool ocean. The horizon was on fire. "It's freeing."

Ace threw his head back and laughed. "Damn straight!"

Smiling to herself, Sophie finished cutting up the qava roots and threw them into a jar. Qava... qava... something about that sounded familiar... like it rhymed with something important... A place where Cherry Pie Man said he'd...

She gasped and grabbed Ace's elbow. "Holy pineapples, yo."

---

Stars scattered across the black sky like diamond dust. Sophie leaned on Striker, Ace's one-man boat. It was a warm and humid night. When she closed her eyes, she could pretend she was pressing her cheek against a sturdy chest, as tattooed fingers drifted across the nape of her neck.

Sophie opened her eyes, gazing up at the tapestry of constellations. Islands away, Law would be looking up at the same moon as her.

Ace came back shortly after paying his respects to the Idyll villagers.

He threw his bag inside—filled with food the Idyllers had pressed onto him—hopped on his boat, and untied the rope. "Striker isn't built for two people, so I'm going to have to do a little improvising." He sat down, his back leaning against the engine. It was here that Sophie realized the disadvantage of being in a small boat. She sat between Ace's legs, her knees pulled up. He snorted. "Don't make that face at me; you're the one who wanted a ride."

His back glowed orange and spat out fire into the engine. The rest of his body remained normal, shielding Sophie from the heat. Striker glided forward and Ace threw in a little more juice. The engine exploded to life. The paddle-wheels spun furiously. Sophie felt the wind and ocean spray against her face and shrieked in delight. She heard distant laughter from the Whitebeard pirate. The crescent moon shone above Idyll Island, but soon it vanished and there was nothing but the wide open sea around them.
Ace took a break around midnight, lowering the sail and letting Striker cruise.

"You never told me why you were looking for Cherry Pie-san." Sophie fumbled with her a cigarette. "Oh—you don't mind, do you?"

Ace shook his head, then leaned over and lit it with the tip of his finger. He settled back against Striker. "What was he like when you met him? Did he seem happy? Scared?"

Sophie gave it a thought. "Cheerful, I guess. He… came across like someone who doesn't care what anyone thinks of him. Someone who's ready to take on the world, you know?"

"Huh," Ace said. "He killed a member of my crew."

_Oh._ Sophie played with the hem of her shirt, then asked, "Are you going to kill him?"

He gazed at the moon for a second longer and then grinned at Sophie, starlight reflecting in his cheerful eyes. "Of course."

God, this pirate was terrifying.

_You had a good run, Cherry Pie Man,_ was her remorseless parting thought. He was nice, but he wasn't _that_ nice.

Soon Ace started up Striker again. The stars brightened, diffused, then faded as the sky grew lighter. He was going fast, exponentially fast, and it felt like the boat's speed was only increasing. Every so often, he'd take out food from his bag and munch on it, to keep his energy up.

Dawn came too soon. Three massive white towers appeared over the horizon, right in the middle of the ocean, as beautiful as the day she left it. Nostalgia rose in her chest, tightened, but the firm exoskeleton of remembered hurts crushed it to pieces. She wasn't here to play nice.

Ace slowed down far enough so they weren't in sight of the watchtowers. He whistled. "Hell of a castle."

The sunrise backlit G-13, and the fortress shimmered in the light.

She picked her ear. "Never liked fairytales."

"Hey—oi, oi, _what are you_—" Ace jerked away, holding his hands over his face. "Jeez, give me a warning!"

Naked from the waist up, Sophie was in the middle of taking off her pants. "Come on, pirate, like this is anything new," she scoffed. She pulled out a heavy rock from her bag and tied her clothes around it, then tossed the bundle overboard.

He heard the splash and peeked through his fingers. "Er… won't you… need clothes?"

"Marine uniforms tend to blend in better among marines."

The blacksmith had gone a step further and turned her deerskin satchel into a form-fitted leather belt that she wore around her chest. It had several small compartments where she kept her bombs. She turned to him. Jaya was a few hours due southeast of here and that was where Ace would head next, hunting for the Whitebeard traitor.

"Thanks for the lift, Ace-san."
Ace stared resolutely into the sky. "Take care. Impel Down is a nasty vacation spot."

She would later recall this conversation with considerable irony. Little did they know they would meet each other again soon, before the Summit War, before she'd watch his screaming brother cradle him in his arms.

But now Sophie just gave him a lingering grin. She tapped her platoon's number on her chest for strength, then inhaled long and deep.

Sophie plunged headfirst into the cool dark depths of the ocean, heading home.

_to be continued_
One Good Day

There were only so many ways one could infiltrate a Marine fortress.

Through the front door was one option, with an invitation and a twenty-one gun salute. A bit too cliché, and Sophie didn't want to remembered as the idiot who got blown to bits on G-13's doorstep. Second: navigating the sewage system. Out of the question. For as long as she lived here, she never learned how the sewers worked. Finally: every morning at five, when rookies on fishing duty open the shipyard gate and cast nets for the fresh catch of the day.

"The way to a fortress' heart is through its stomach," Sophie mumbled. Alas, no one was here to appreciate her cleverness.

She hugged the gate shadow, treading water right underneath the southeast guard tower. Warm and bountiful was the sea around G-13; anemone tickled her feet and oysters and abalone cluttered the watery depths like opalescent jewels. She remembered the hot days when she used to pick them off rocks and slurp them down raw.

Well, there were oysters and abalones everywhere in the world. So this… whatever feeling in her chest was just because she ate some bad spam.

But thinking of food made her think of the Heart Pirates' loud, crowded galley, which made her think of well, duh. She wondered if they were upset they never got a goodbye. Would they be terribly cross with her if she came back?

If I don't—

Whoa. No.

Sophie ducked into the ocean, water rushing into her ears. She shook out her hands like a boxer underwater and cracked her neck. Focus. Right.

Silver-fished marlins decorated her vision. Hedges of graceful coral thrived, carving the rhythm of the sea.

It really is a pity that doctor can't swim, she thought before she could help herself.

Looking back, she nearly couldn't believe she spent her last days with him silently fuming and refusing to look him in the eye, what a shame, not that she cared anyway, but what a terrible—

The G-13 gate creaked open.

Focus, Sophie! she shrieked, but that window had closed. Osmosis shoved her inside the clear-blue bay, right as Warrant Officer Spinach looked up from his comic book and did a routine sweep of the ocean. Sophie straightened out and dodged around trawls sweeping up fish. The black plume of her hair slithered like the shadow of an eel beneath hooks casted by yawning marines and floating dry docks.

She emerged underneath the wharf.

Massive brigs and schooners concealed her in plain sight. In the early morning, most of the
shipwrights were still snoozing. Sophie did a double take and rose out of the water in shock, forgetting she was supposed to be hidden.

A dozen warships were slumped in ‘got my stern kicked all the way back home’ weariness around her.

But they weren’t just any ships. They were the *Intrepid*, fastest line-o-war this side of the sea; *Lady Nemesis*, a frigate armed with a hundred cannons; and the elegant *Rani Victory*, the very clipper that had carried her to Vira. She couldn’t have recognized them if not for the few patched letters on the side. It wasn’t just ‘they’d seen better days’—these ships were blackened by fire, broken-helmed and empty. White Marine flags hung in tatters like lifeless ghosts. But they were her friends, they were—*hope*, and…

Sophie bit the inside of her cheek.

*Focus*, she reminded herself.

—

"I DON’T KNOW, BUT I’VE BEEN TOLD!"

"OUR SEAGULLS’ WINGS ARE MADE OF GOLD," the recruits chanted through coughs and wheezes.

"I DON’T KNOW, BUT IT’S BEEN SAID!"

"WE’LL HUNT PIRATES UNTIL THEY'RE DEAD," they half-screamed, half-wept.

Marines ambled over the skywalk connecting the Central and South Towers, as the shouting continued below and bugle calls blared over G-13. Just another morning.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS? ARE YOU CRAWLING BECAUSE YOU JUST FARTED IN FRONT OF EVERYONE AND HAD TO LEAVE QUICKLY? YOU ARE? FINE! CRAWL FASTER! THE SMELL IS CATCHING UP! YOU THERE! CHIMICHANGA! I CAN SMELL YOU A MILE AWAY! CRAWL FASTER, YOU EASY BAKE OVENS!" The drill sergeant chased after his terrified recruits, shouting into a megaphone, as they struggled under a net of barbed wire whilst assaulted with mud and failure.

"I’d kill for the day we can wake up to Bump of Chicken," a medic complained as she and her friend hustled across the skywalk.

"Bring it up to Hippo, he and the Vice Admiral are like *this.*" The scientist crossed his fingers. His name was Eban and he was a junior assistant to Lettidore’s golden child, which meant he was superbly overqualified and yet still passed over for a teenager.

"Easy for you to say. I haven’t seen him come out of his room once in the past week. I’ve had to take over all his patients. I know he’s still in shock, but jeez, we’re in a state of emergency here. Three more died from the sickness—oh, sorry, man." She side-stepped an old maintenance officer sweeping the floor.

"I wonder which hurt more, the fact that Sophie-san took to piracy, or that she met death at the hands of the Valiant."

A loud clatter came from behind them. They looked back. The maintenance officer scrambled to pick up his mop.
"You alright?" the medic called.

"Yeah, yeah, git with ya," was his gruff reply.

The marines shrugged at each other.

"I gotta get going. The new director will be announced today."

"Sending good vibes to you! Wasn't Sophie-san chosen at seventeen?"

"Right, but I don't have anyone playing nepotism for me." Laughing, they parted ways.

The maintenance officer finally raised her head, adjusting her beard with a grimace. Wasn't anyone mourning her? They sounded far too blithe for her taste. Hmph. Also, her beard smelled like old cheese, and was actually made out of a mop. Wrinkling her nose, she rearranged it to make sure it covered the gas mask she wore around her neck.

She heard a cry behind her from Central: "Help! Someone's passed out in the laundry room!"

Her steps quickened. Marine uniforms weren't that easy to come by; they often had the price of one tranquilized marine and a very unfortunate surveillance Den Den Mushi.

Marines passed her without a second glance. They raced to breakfast, chattering about mail from their family that came in, or comparing target practice records. She remembered this, all of this. She really was back home. With all her (now sheared short and dyed black) hair tucked in a cap, eyebrows hidden, Sophie floated through them easily.

"How long until we find a cure?" asked a marine, passing by her without a glance. "What will happen to G-13 now? Half our troops are dead or bedridden. How could Sophie-san authorize such a deplorable weapon? The Vice Admiral never should have trusted her…"

Sophie stood still, the broom shaking where she clutched it. Her eye twitched.

"Look at this," two of her scientists passed right by her, right by her, "riots in Vira because of lack of clean water. Cholera outbreak. Death tolls climbing daily. The Revolutionary Army's gonna bleed itself dry trying to handle this! Let's make that the headline of tomorrow's newspaper. Oi! Call HQ and see if we can front page this!"

She fumed all the way up the South Tower and found herself outside the Medical Division director's bedroom in a rage.

Perhaps it was good that never before had she been possessed with such a strong urge to be stupid, death be damned, because all that anger surged out with one glorious purpose: you will kneel before me, pathetic door.

She shoved it open with her shoulder, threw the mop down, and kicked it shut.

A shadow rose from the window. "What the hell are you doing!?"

"I—"

"You are out of line, marine!"

His hair had grown back, a black wiry mess, and he'd lost so much weight. But most of all, Sophie was struck by Hippo's venomous glare. Her throat was stuck. She stood there, stupidly transfixed, numb to the bone and unable to say a single word.
"Get out," Hippo rasped. "I'm not going to warn you a third time."

Her lips peeled apart.

"I-i-i-it's... it's m-me, sensei."

Irritation flickered over his face. "Who?"

They stared at each other for a few seconds.

"Dad," Sophie whispered, "it's me."

She bitterly watched his eyes widen. How did he not recognize her? It had barely been a month, had she changed that much? And, and how could he look at her like that? Her breath hitched and Hippo saw the tremble of her lip, her nose wrinkling in an effort to fight off horrible, angry tears. She'd been so alone, so afraid. And she tried to come back to G-13. She tried to come back home, before it sent Teresa and death and she survived that anyway and how could he look at her like that?

One second he was across the room; the next he was squeezing her as tight as he could. He smelled like whiskey.

"I like your beard," he mumbled. "It's very... it's pretty."

Sophie laughed, burying her face in his shoulder.

—

"Trafalgar Law is a total creep!"

Aghast, Hippo goggled at her as though she announced she was running away and joining a gang—which, well. "Why don't just shove a sword in my gut and call it a day?" he gasped over-dramatically. "Dealing with that would be far less distressing!"

"They were nice people! You can't say anything, you've done horrible and weird things to prisoners of war," Sophie reminded, locking the door and shoving a chair in front of it, and investigating the windows to make sure nobody could see inside.

"But I'm endearing." Hippo pouted. "I have folksy charm."

Sophie snorted. Right.

He was by her side again, fussing over her, brushing off her shoulders and straightening her already perfect necktie. "You look like you've been eating well, good, I'm always scared of you being thrown around like some muppet—your hair!"

He brushed aside her hat. And to think she was almost worried he'd ran out of Horrified Disapproving Dad expressions.

"Oh, yeah." Sophie curled a strand around her finger. "I also got a tattoo of two emus conjoined at the butt—that was a joke, please close your mouth or I'll be tempted to find out what happens when someone swallows a smoke grenade. No, I'm just kidding. I already tested that years ago. Anyway, I'm sorry, but I have to blunt about this—"

"You can still come back to G-13," Hippo said earnestly, and a dark cloud passed of Sophie's expression. "I can make some changes to Teresa's report, like you were being held hostage by pirates—Lettidore will let you stay, albeit barricaded in your lab for a few decades—but it'll be like nothing
changed!"

"Hippo-sensei—"

He spun her around with a jubilant laugh. "I made sure to keep your lab spotless! You can get to work right away!"

Sophie's boots skidded on the floor, stopping short. "Did you know about the Cat's Eye genocide?"

His blinked at her. His smile vanished.

"We both know what I'm talking about, so please answer honestly."

"Sweetie," he said, and it sounded so much like Nellie she physically smacked his hand away from her.

He took a step back and regarded her chillingly, the way all parents do when they're actually terrified. "Listen, Sophie-chan. It was the furthest thing from my mind. I had you to raise, my own marines to look out for. There was nothing I could do. Now stay right there, I'm gonna call Lettidore—"

"How much was the Vice Admiral paid to look the other way? Same thing goes for that stupid Wapol jack-off from Drum Island. Where does the revenue I bring in with my weapons go to? I thought my purpose was to help end wars, not fund them."

Hippo slowly set down the Den Den Mushi. She couldn't see his face.

"I thought marines hold themselves to a higher standard. I—" Her cheeks, or eyes, or whatever was twitching. She pressed a hand to her face, trying to get her stupid body to calm down, just breathe. Pineapples. "We were s-supposed to be the white hats, the good guys."

"I fix kids up so they can go home at the end of the day. You don't think that's good?"

"But y-you let the Vice Admiral send Teresa after me. You let her kill me."

"No!" Hippo flew to her and grabbed her by the shoulders, on his knees and almost sobbing. "I didn't want that to happen!"

"And calling it Strangways Sickness?" Sophie asked numbly. "Was that you, too?"

"No, no, never—but Lettidore made a point that since you were already dead, and we needed to protect G-13's reputation—"

She moved his hands away from her, feeling ill. It had always been like this, how had she forgotten? Hippo had always loved G-13 more than he loved her. She had known this. She might've been his adopted kid, but G-13, this place Hippo had cultivated and perfected, was his legacy.

Something in his expression changed.

"...You're not coming back," he realized at long last. Those three doctorates really paid off.

"No, I'm here to get you and steal my blueprints," Sophie pointed out the window, at the ocean. "This is our only chance to get out of here and live in peace, take up baking or scrapbooking or other mindless activities like normal families."

Hippo had to process this. "You came back here, to this place that wants to see you hang, just to ask
me to leave?" His voice grew progressively louder. "Are you out of your mind!?

Bang!

She slammed her fist on a chair so hard the wooden back splintered.

"I didn't come all this way to take no for an answer," Sophie squeaked through stinging eyes, her palm bright red. "Oh my god that hurt—"

"Hold on, just—wait a moment—"

"I had friends! I actually found people who valued me, and I left them! Do you know how rare that occurrence is?"

"Sophie," Hippo said with forced calm, "I got a report of your death. I spent a week thinking my worst nightmare came true, so can I have a few minutes to think?"

"...Yes, I took necessary precautions to outline time limits on my plan. I'm actually early for the next stage. You have an hour."

Hippo picked up a wooden board, because apparently all quirky doctors had to have a hobby.

"Would you like to play a game of Go?"

Sophie sighed. She'd be lying if she said she didn't expect this. "Would it matter if I refused?"

Her mentor shook the board rather threateningly at her.

—

It wasn't much of a game. Hippo was crushing her.

"Still awful at strategy, I see. Some things never change," Hippo murmured. Sophie stuck her tongue out at him when he wasn't looking. "I saw that." Oops. "If you plan to search for a cure to Vira's sickness, being in a military base is your best option. Where else are you going to find the necessary chemicals?"

Sophie sat cross-legged, her chin cupped in her palm, scanning the desperate position she was in. What would Law do in her place? Probably decapitate him and call it a day. Or maybe... Her gaze lifted to Hippo, watching him study the board. "You tell me; you've been working on it for a month. How far did you get?"

His frown dipped. He set down another black piece.

Sophie swiftly followed in a counterattack.

"Let's sail into the world and see what we can find," she proposed. "A first-rate doctor and a mad chemist."

"We have dozens of marines all over Grand Line working on finding a cure."

The empty spaces in the board quickly decreased. Hippo's brow furrowed, a bit perplexed that triumph was still out of reach.

"But Vira's Revolutionary territory now; do you think this hypothetical Marine cure would reach them? And the Revolutionary Army doesn't have the science we have. The only one I can think of
who could've done real help has been locked away in Impel Down." She watched him rub his chin, the concentrated gaze bittersweetly familiar. "You know, everything that kept me alive for the past month, I learned from you."

"Sophie…"

"Or from my lieutenants. Or my own prodigious knowledge."

"You really know how to ruin a moment."

"I should put that on my resumé. I feel like that could be valuable in certain situations."

*Click*, went the Go pieces. *Click. Click. Click.*

Hippo scanned the board with the same amount of intensity Sophie usually had on her face when she thought about food. *I always could read him like an open book,* she thought with a touch of fondness.

"If we do go to Vira, and they find out we're from the World Government, never mind actively participated in the war, things will get very dangerous. Danger was never your strong suit…"

He examined the last empty spaces on the board. There was no way for either of them to win. Sophie managed to wrangle a tie out him.

He glanced up at Sophie, who had been observing him the whole time.

She shrugged. "Things change."

The oddest expression was on Hippo's face. She wished he'd grin or crack a sly joke, like the pirates might've in this situation. Finally, Sophie conceded defeat. "If you don't want to come with me, I understand. I have prior commitments anyway, so…"

"That's why no child of mine sails into the Grand Line alone."

Her shoulders rose with a shaky breath. Sophie pressed her lips together and struggled with something painful. "This… this is your home."

The weight in her chest fell away at the sight of Hippo's shrug and his smile.

"You're my kid."

—

"Here's the game plan: take this jar of qava, dump it into the giant bucket of soup in the kitchen, and —"

"Sophie, this is a very rare black market depressant. And you want to put dump it in *food?* Supervised by cranky old ladies in moldy hairnets?"

"…Maybeee…?"

"Okay, here's what I'll do. Central has a heating system which uses a water supply to heat the building. A bit outdated, but it still works. Qava in its gaseous form is probably the most powerful natural analgesic I've ever seen, so it'll be strong enough to knock out most of Central for a good while. I'll add this to the water in the boiler room. I have key card access to the Maintenance Office and I can get past the guards no problem. Lettidore will be at Central announcing the new director in
an hour, so North will be entirely vacant. We'll meet up at the shipyard later. Is that enough time for you to get in, back your research, and get out?"

Sophie blinked. Hippo just brushed aside the plan she'd been working on all week and immediately came up with a better one.

"Yeah, th-that was exactly what I—good. Yep."

"Take this backpack. And this Baby Den Den Mushi. Also, can I ask what you were planning to do if I wasn't gonna join you?"

"Probably… just start blowing stuff up and pray."

"Ah."

"…Yep…"

"Well, don't die again or I'll ground you… my little scientist."

"Ew! Stop! That's so gross!"

"Ow! Jeez, you've gotten violent…"

—

Inside the North Tower, two marines on patrol duty sipped coffee as they read the newspaper.

"Look at this Kid kid, destroying one town after another. What's the world coming to?"

"I keep saying, we should be sending more marines out instead of worrying about security," the other groused. "Only an idiot would try to break into a marine base. At some point we gotta talk about some standards for human intelligence—mornin'." He absently saluted back at a bearded marine passing by. "Anyway, like I was sayin', my friend from G-8 tells me they have over a hundred cannons armed up to the ass, that place is untouchable…"

Gleaming metal floors and Surveillance Mushis greeted marines walking into North Tower. Loading equipment with hazard signs, announcements over the loudspeaker, and the ubiquitous smell of ethanol and lemon cleanser. Itching her beard and keeping her head low, Sophie quickly hurried up the stairs. A gaggle of scientists turned the corner and walked down.

Sophie pressed closer to the wall, letting them pass. They were enthusiastically taking bets on who Lettidore was going to appoint as the next director.

They all seemed in good spirits! Well, Sophie didn't expect them to be showering rose petals on her alabaster gravestone. Traitors didn't get to have their names inscribed on the memorial wall and receive tokens of appreciation posthumously. But still, Sophie was their ex-boss! She'd gone on coffee runs for them! She'd gone on overtime quite frequently! Without pay! (Come to think of it, she never really did get paid… Hippo and Lettidore took care of all her finances…) Did that deserve an epic ballad on her tragic death? Some would say no. Other smarter, better, and prettier people would say yes.

The scientists celebrated that they no longer had to work under an eccentric, socially awkward teenager. Cursing them with bad data and acid burns, the eccentric, socially awkward teenager sidled past them, unnoticed.
"Hey," a marine greeted, strolling into the elevator.

The other occupant nodded. "Morning."

"Nice weather we're having, eh?"

"Yup."

Ding!

Right as the doors closed, the elevator ceiling crashed open and a figure in a gas mask landed in a crouch between them. A slurred shout of alarm… and they plopped to the ground unconscious, tranquilizer darts filled with qava sticking out of their necks.

"That went a lot better than I thought it'd go!" Sophie said enthusiastically, and then tripped over a flabby arm and smacked her face against the door.

north tower underwater, level two; laboratory

The mask filled her mouth with the taste of recycled air.

*Found you.*

It wasn't the insecticide Sophie created to help luckless farmers within World Government-allied islands, though it did have the same base. It wasn't the hydrogen cyanide Sophie thought Lettidore turned it into. He made a new nerve agent entirely.

*Preliminary testing ground… Blythe District, Vira… a countermeasure against the Revolutionary Army… up to seventy percent of combatants affected… no cure as of yet…*

Her finger chased beneath the words.

…recommended that we halt production… G-13 will continue further research and will not reconsider its plan to keep PSNOHC11 in stock at this time… ultimately, the reward will outweigh the risks we have taken…

Snarling, she ripped out the papers and folded them inside her bra. She emptied out as much of the Archive as she could into her backpack and left it spotless. No one could tell it had just been cleaned out (while being cleaned up, how was that for a twist?). She had already logged all the data in her brain years ago, but it wouldn't hurt to keep hard copies. Besides, they were hers. And if they weren't, Lettidore didn't deserve them anyway.

"Sorry," she muttered, stepping over the ashes of yet another poor Surveillance Mushi.

Sophie crept out the Archive and punched in the code for her laboratory. The dense metal doors hissed open and lights flickered on one by one. She stepped on the mezzanine. Here, she
oversaw all her worker bees. Abandoned clipboards and data analysis spreadsheets were scattered on her old desk and—

Sophie screeched to a halt and leaned closer, squinting at the papers.

Unable to help herself, she grabbed a quill and scrawled arrows over the papers, crossed out formulas, and rifled through the data sheets while muttering to herself. "I still got time… I can fix that, and that one… what in the Gorosei's crusty old bears have they been doing since I was gone? Honestly…"

*I wasted too much time*, Sophie thought half an hour later, clutching her hair in mute panic, and gave the desk and evil glare. She delicately set the quill down and punched the air a few times, before hurrying down the glass stairs.

Sterile, bleached white, shining with a chemical glow. Machines whirred and chugged in the center of the floor. Workbenches and glistening microscopes and empty seats surrounded her. The noises became louder. A scientist precariously measured an ounce of hydrochloric acid. Grumbles, groans, and calls for advice rang over the chamber, permeated by the ever-present smell of coffee. Her assistant stood on a tank of liquid nitrogen coolant and droned out reminders of lab safety. Papers were crumpled in frustration and lit on fire with a blowtorch. Molecular compounds drawn out on whiteboards, spiraling over the glass floor and walls, as a round-table discussion of the latest product descended into a excited shouting match on the significance of hematopoiesis.

She walked through the empty lab without a pause.

Sophie pushed through a door, plugging in another code, and walked down another flight of stairs, metal now, echoing with every *clang* of her boot. The second floor was hidden deep in the bedrock. It was the second time in her life where she visited this place. Her breath fogged out of the gas mask, due to the chilly temperature.

It had to be freezing down here, to cover up the smell.

She lifted the keyring off the wall. The rattling noise clearly upset some, as feeble whimpering noises filled the air. All the lights were broken but for the one right over Sophie's head, and it seemed the rows of cages stretched forever into the darkness. Something *hissed* at her. There were little scratching noises, like claws against metal. She took a shaky breath, then schooled herself.

Sophie dialed Hippo's number. He picked up on the first ring.

"Almost ready," she whispered.

"Same."

"You're not our regular jailer," came a rasp from the corner.

"Who was that? Soph—"

She hung up, swallowing. On the other side of the wall were the cells G-13 kept for war criminals, serial killers, and anti-World Government terrorists—Impel Down level six worthy. Instead of death row, here, they were fodder. They looked up at her, at the gas mask gleaming diabolically.

"Here to end our lives?"

She didn't respond, her gaze pulled in another direction. In the back of the chamber were high-pressure gas cylinders pumping clean air and serving as an energy source for all the electricity
running in her lab

"Marine!"

Sophie spun around, stuffing the keyring into her back pocket. A marine strode through the hall of cage, shivering and peering through the gloom. Mangoes! She recognized her! They once did training together!

"Thought I heard a voice down here. What are you doing?" Her gaze snapped to Sophie's side, where a skeleton hand was reaching toward her back pocket. "Oi! Back off!" She kicked the cell bars. The prisoners shrunk away and huddled up under their blankets.

"I—I'm new, from Maintenance. I w-was looking for the b-bathroom." Sophie bowed twice in apology, making sure her voice was dropped an octave.

"I'm Maintenance, too. I noticed a surveillance feed cut out and—why are you wearing that thing?"

"Um. My face is ugly. Also, I figured I could clean out the fume hoods and air vents. Got my b-bag of supplies right here." She patted her puffy bag of invaluable chemistry blueprints.

The marine glanced suspiciously at her, then shook her head when she decided her intuition was unfounded. "Well, alright. Come with me back upstairs, then." She motioned for the other marine to walk with her.

An ear-splitting siren blasted through the laboratory. The maintenance worker jumped and swore loudly. Sophie's eye twitched.

"CENTRAL TOWER IS UNDER ATTACK," blared the loudspeaker.

She was out of time.

"I REPEAT, CENTRAL TOWER IS UNDER ATTACK. G-13 HAS ENTERED LOCKDOWN. ALL HANDS, REPORT TO YOUR STATIONS!"

A distant rumbling echoed down the lab. The prisoners began yelling loudly, laughing and hollering at the marines, promising G-13 was gonna explode, better get their asses outta the way.

"Let's hurry upstairs!" Sophie urged. "Come on, o-or the animals will get even more freaked out." They were making anxious noises and rattling their cages.

"Those things aren't animals anymore," she muttered under her breath, then shot her a wary glance. "Show me some I.D."

"Don't get all paranoid now…" Nevertheless, Sophie handed over her badge, blinking quickly beneath her mask.

"AN UNIDENTIFIED GAS HAS BEEN DEPLOYED THROUGHOUT CENTRAL," the loudspeaker bellowed. "COMMISSIONED OFFICERS RANK ENSIGN OR ABOVE, REPORT TO YOUR NEAREST ARMS DEPOT FOR ISSUED GAS MASKS."

"Shou," she read. "Enlisted two weeks ago."

"That's me. There's my service number and our division leader, Jody-san. All in order, ma'am?"

"Yeah, alright," she said finally.
Sophie breathed an internal sigh of relief.

"Just one more thing," she said lightly. "Take off the mask."

Sophie paused. "I don't think you understand. I'm really ugly."

The marine raised her gun.

"I see what you're getting at, but I don't think impromptu surgery's gonna help," Sophie said, staring right into the barrel.

She fired point-blank, the same time Sophie jerked back, flinging a smoke pellet into her face. She heard a scream, followed by bullets pingiing over her head as she crawled on her hands and knees. Sooty gunshot residue coated the side of her ear. Her gas mask was sturdy enough to take a bullet graze, she really had to go back to Idyll and thank the smith—

The marine stopped shooting blindly into the fog, and she could hear her stumble to get to the emergency Mushi.

Sophie pulled out the keyring, unlocking cages left and right. "Be free! Ow! D-don't attack m-me! I'm s-sorry for a-all the years of abusing y-you and your friends! It wasn't my fault—or, well, y-yeah, it was pretty much—"

"I'm at the North Lab! I've engaged the enemy!" she heard the marine roar, beating aside furious birds riding chimera monkeys. "We have a traitor on the inside!"

Claws, paws, and hooves stampeded over her as the animals made for the door. Locks thumped to the ground, but there were still too many of them. "Here! Toss it here!" a prisoner rasped, arms sticking out of the bars. "We'll do the rest! They're our friends!"

Sophie threw the keyring into the cell and it vanished beneath the ecstatic prisoners. With that, she sprinted to the propane and oxygen gas canisters, grabbed a wrench hanging from the wall, and started twisting and whacking off every valve in sight. They started to shake, gas whistling out, steam blasting Sophie right in the face. The force was so furious she held up her arms, stumbling a few steps back and biting back a shriek from the sudden heat. Gauge needles flickered to red.

The prisoners were evacuating the last few animals. "Go go go!" she cried, herding them up the stairs. The maintenance officer stumbled after them, swearing and fighting off a fanged gerbil.

Her lab was in disarray. Broken beakers spread toxic fumes in their wake. Fiery acid dripped through the floor and there was a whirlwind of papers and torn wires. A very real, very horrified part of Sophie wanted to wail and shield her precious lab from further destruction, but it was too late. Don't lose focus. Hippo's waiting. Sophie raced up the broken glass stairs, past the Archives, down the wrecked hallway. She took one last glance over her shoulder and then faced forward, leaving her chemwar division's legacy to its inevitable destruction.

"Stairwell!" she cried, and the prisoners broke through the door and herded all the animals through. Sophie was the last one, making sure everyone got out safely.

Ding!

The elevator doors opened and a cavalry of marines aimed a dozen rifles at Sophie. "HANDS IN THE—"

She whirled and punched the emergency button, her fist smashing through glass. The elevator doors
slammed shut again and shot up to the ground level right as her lab exploded. Sophie threw herself into the stairwell, a spike of pain lacing through her torso. She fell over on the stairs as the ground shook and—

The roaring ocean crashed in.

Saltwater swallowed her chemicals, gathered up all her shrieking machinery, and dragged them out to sea. Heat pressure roared through the hallway and blew open the stairwell door. Sophie screamed, but not out of fright—she clutched her side, pressing over a wound with a jagged piece of glass lodged in it.

—

The North Tower was sinking.

Marines across the battlements were throwing ropes to those jumping from windows. Massive plumes of smoke suffocated the noon sky and turned it ash-dark, as though G-13 was trapped inside a fiery hellscape. The upper half of the tower cracked apart and the structure hurtled towards the battlement. "Hold the line!" an ensign thundered. A marine bellowed in fear, throwing his rope down and bolting.

A hulking shadow leapt on the falling rock and in seconds, all the flaming debris rained down in a gentle shower of tiny granules.

Vice Admiral Lettidore landed, his white cape billowing behind him. Cheers and hacking coughs rose from the marines.

"Lift the lockdown! Rescue squads, take ships and search for survivors! Contact HQ and all nearby bases and request support! And someone get Hippo! I need him with the rescue ships! While you're at it..." Lettidore pointed at the fleeing marine who had been caught by his comrades. "Leave him out at sea. Cowards don't belong here."

"All our work!" Eban wailed, falling to his knees. "Our precious research!"

Carrying said precious research, Sophie dragged her feet past the rabble of marines racing to help. Cinders drifted through the air like dandelions. She turned her face briefly towards the red pandemonium, her gas mask slung around her neck. She saw something fly out a window and vanish in the flames—it looked like her old bed, maybe, or a dusty lab coat. It looked like vindication.

"Get to the infirmary!" a marine shouted, sprinting past her. How kind.

She made it down to the empty training yard, her vision blurring. Shipyard... yes, Hippo was waiting for her at the shipyard...

Sophie leaned against a cold pillar. She could taste soot in her mouth and blinked slowly. Her hand rested on her bleeding stomach, red and dripping. Need medicine... need to steal...

Footsteps approached her. They stopped right in front of her—scuffed black shoes, pointed at the tips. A wry laugh. "What did I tell you?"

Shut up.

"It hit your liver. You only have a few more minutes." He walked past her. The scent of winterfrost and red hollies drifted behind him. "It's too late."
Hey… wait…

His tattooed hand waved at her. "See you on the other side."

Wait, you dumb pineapple—

Sophie jolted forward—

—and tripped over her feet. A livid stream of invectives involving fruit cobblers and their mothers came from the twitching mess on the ground. Mashing her hand against the bloody faucet that was her side, she pulled out her lighter with a trembling hand and flicked it open, staring at the flame.

We fucking own you, Teresa snarled.

Can you even think for yourself anymore? Kasimir demanded. Who are you and who do you fight for?

Sophie clenched her jaw and yanked out the glass. Then she shoved her lighter against the wound, feeling the flesh bubble and burn and destroy her nerve endings. It hurt so much, this was what it felt like to die, because she was surely dying—

She felt herself sliding into unconsciousness… then shook herself awake through pure force of will. And anger. Mostly anger.

"People with superpowers don't understand how lucky they have it, they really don't," she hissed lividly. "This would be nothing to Bepo-san, mangoes, he would've been able to dodge it in the first place or it'd bounce off him like a marshmallow probably, oh my god, this is so unfair, I'm just a normal girl trying her friggin' best, bad luck should just leave me alone, holy muffins…"

She stuck the lighter back in her pocket, breathing heavily, her head still spinning. The blood had lessened. It was enough to get her to Hippo and have him perform surgery on her. Daylight was a-wasting. She had a lot of one-liners planned and she was running out of time to say them.

Above her, debris burst in the sky like fireworks. All I need is one good day.

Sophie started laughing. "These are gonna be some long, drawn-out minutes…"

If Law had really been here, she was certain he'd be laughing with her.

She arrived at the loud, crowded shipyard, scanning the mob. Shipwrights scampered over the sails, making last-minute adjustments. Where was Hippo?

Out of nowhere, a hand tugged on Sophie's wrist and pulled her behind a stack of crates, hiding them from view. Her panic gave way to warm relief and she threw her arms around her sensei with a welcoming hug. "Thank god," he whispered. "I was so worried when I heard explosions from North, that wasn't in our plan, I—"

Sophie yelped. "Ow! Ow ow ow ow—"

He backed off immediately and gaped at her bloody shirt. "You weren't supposed to get hurt!"

"I thought my collection of burst blood vessels was a little lacking."

He wrapped his jacket around her shoulders. "Don't give me sass."
"Okay, but then all our conversations will be mostly one-sided."

Hippo sighed… then held up two flintlocks. "Twenty-two caliber or the thirty?"

"Gimme a sniper rifle." Sophie painfully stuffed her arms through Hippo's jacket. "Thanks."

He passed it over. "When we secure a ship you're immediately going into surgery, young lady."

"You're not the boss of me." Sophie loaded her rifle with ammo and snapped on the safety. Hippo glared at her. "Just kidding. That was just for the sake of being a rebellious daughter, I have to take advantage of every chance I get." He kept glaring. "...I am grateful that you, Hippo-sama, would deign to help a blubbering child like me."

He nodded. "And don't you forget it. You have all your research in that backpack?"

"Yep. And not only that, decades of other projects G-13's worked on, too."

An unreadable expression flickered over his face, but as quick as it appeared, it vanished. "Okay." Hippo peeked around the crates. He held his hand up, signaling her to wait. "Sophie, I just want to remind you—we don't go for the kill today. These people are our friends."

"I know."

"Right, I just—"

"I know," she assured again, and Hippo shot her a relieved smile.

"I missed you, kid. We really are a good team, aren't we?"

"Ew, you're getting gross again."

The world tilted haphazardly and Sophie caught herself on a crate, with a groggy, mildly stunned look on her face. Hippo grabbed her arm before she could stumble over something and stab herself in the eye with the rifle. "Shit—okay, it's okay, just breathe. You're fine." She felt him lift up her eyelids. "I think you fainted for a second, the blood loss is probably... what the hell, you cauterized the wound? On your own?"

"I'm... I'm o-okay... I c-can g-get through this." She struggled back on her feet, pushing down her shirt and ignoring the doctor's alarmed gaze. She could smell her own acid flesh. "I wanna leave," Sophie said very quietly. "N-now."

"Okay," Hippo said, and she could feel his hands shaking where he held her arm. "Okay."

Their ship was the first one out into the bay, two more following swiftly behind. Hippo stoically manned the helm as the lieutenant gave orders from below. It was a small ship, built for speed.

A young marine came loping by. "Salutations, sir! Just wanted to say I'm a big fan of yours."

He briefly glanced to the side. "Thank you."

"And I'm really sorry about Sophie-san."

"Ah... it's okay."
They were nearing the end of the bay. The shipyard gates were halfway open. They had to time this just right…

"We were in the same class together as kids," the young marine recollected. "I've always admired her. It's a shame that had to happen to her. I've heard a lot of marines go crazy on the battlefield. Their minds just go kaput. Terrible shame." He scratched his head, laughing. "Well, I hope I fare slightly better when I head off to war!"

"And kill Revolutionaries, huh?" Hippo asked.

"I'll kill as many as I can, sir!"

A gunshot fired.

The marine let out a shout and doubled over. Several more cries came from all over the ship.

"What are you doing, you incompetent buffoon!?!" the lieutenant bellowed.

The sniper on the crow's nest swiveled her rifle directly to the officer and shot him in the leg.

"We're under attack!"

"CLOSE THE GATE!"

"No one move or I decorate this ship with his brains!"

A spray of bullets peppered around Hippo. He flinched with a loud curse. Smoke rose up from the perfect circle of bullet holes arrayed around his feet and Hippo was almost impressed. He didn't remember her being this good at shooting.

Sophie turned her rifle at the crew. "Jump into the ocean!"

"We outnumber you!" one marine roared, the same time another shrieked, "Did anyone here bring weapons!?"

Death glares promptly followed.

"No one thought—this was supposed to be a rescue mission! I mean, we, um, have some rope and life jackets?"

Sophie threw her last smoke bomb at the marines and fired in the complete opposite direction, into the ocean. But the sound of gunshots was terrifying enough and in blind confusion, they leaped overboard. They turned into small black dots swimming towards the other rescue ships. Hippo breathed a small sigh of relief and glanced over his shoulder. The North Tower was wrapped in an inferno. Firelight rippled like smooth pebbles in the reflection of the bay. It looked peaceful, in a way…

It was right about then that Warrant Officer Spinach realized something was off and slammed down the lever that controlled the gate.

But it was too late. Their ship cleared the gate right as it slammed shut.

"OPEN THE GATE!" came the distant roar of the marines.

A gust of wind pushed the ship cheerfully along the open waves. Sophie leaned on her bag and unenthusiastically acknowledged she probably couldn't stand up without fainting. It's finally over…
As the smoke cleared, Sophie and Hippo had a surprising revelation that there was still one marine standing on the deck. Or not.

"Sensei!" Sophie leaned over the crow's nest. "Hurry up!"

The marine stared at her, in the gas mask, then Hippo, realization dawning over him. "Sir—are you a traitor?"

"Shit," Hippo muttered.

Her throat went dry. All along the battlements, two dozen cannons rolled forward. She peered through the scope; she could see a blurry Vice Admiral arriving in a billow of white cape, giving orders. They had no more time left.

"Are you in this together!?"

The marine whipped out a flintlock. He took a hesitating step forward, glaring at Hippo.

"Hold on, hold on, hold the fuck on—"

"What's going on!?"

"Sensei!" Sophie pressed her sweaty eye to the rifle scope.

"And who the hell are you!?" the marine cried.

"Don't shoot!" Hippo roared.

The marine aimed his flintlock at Hippo's leg and squinted one eye shut, and a horrible vision entered Sophie's mind. Hippo was going to break his facade and punch this idiot, Hippo with a bounty, branded as a traitor, on the run for the rest of his life, unable to be a normal family ever again—

All I need is one good day.

Tattooed hands held her rifle steady. Lips pressed next to her ear, and she felt them lift in a small smirk.

For a second, as her finger pressed the trigger, she wondered whether Hippo's shout was directed at her or the marine.

—

"Zero casualties, sir. No one was caught in the explosion and the gas in Central was found to be merely sleeping gas. Everyone is expected to wake up in an hour or so—"

"Vice Admiral!" A group of marines came running up the battlements. "They took Hippo hostage!"

"Impossible!"

"It's just one enemy! A sniper in a gas mask!"

Lettidore raced over to the edge of the battlement as outraged cries rose around him. The little ship was fleeing as fast as it could. He squinted, searching for any sign of his brother-in-arms. That sniper, that coward, taking his dearest friend hostage. A distant gunshot echoed from the ship and agitation buzzed from the crowd behind Lettidore.
"Was that Hippo!?!"

"What happened!?!"

"Raise the cannons!" Lettidore ordered. "But just break the ship a little!"

"Sir, what does that mean!?!"

He struggled for a moment. "Do we have eyes on Hippo!?!"

"No!"

After coming to the only possible choice for him to make, he raised his arm. "On my word, light the cannons! We can't let the intruder escape!"

"We have movement!"

The sniper in the crow's nest stood up and, clearly wounded, fumbled with a large bag. Several marines pulled out telescopes.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE!" bellowed not just the Vice Admiral, but also a horde of scientists who had also made their way to the scene.

The bag opened.

Papers blew out into the wind, years of research stuffed inside like common scrap. In their other hand, the sniper raised a cigarette lighter.

"No!" G-13's chemical warfare division all screamed.

The sniper rolled up a bundle of precious notes and set them alight. They lifted the burning torch high, so all of G-13 could see, from the recruits leaning out windows, to the shipwrights and maintenance officers watching in the guard towers. The scientists around Lettidore were all yelling in horror, telling him to let them go, think of their research, the years they spent. "Even Sophie-san wouldn't stand this," one of them sobbed.

"Prepare a ship," Lettidore ordered.

"Sir, it might be safer to leave them be," an officer spoke up. "A swarm of typhoons are approaching from the south. We're in no shape to be chasing anyone into a storm."

Free and untouched, the ship bounded towards the horizon.

Lettidore slammed his fist on the battlement wall. It splintered in half with a deafening crack! "PREPARE! A GODDAMN! SHIP!"

Once they were out range of G-13, Sophie hid in the crow’s nest.

"Come down so I can treat your wound!" Hippo called.

"You'll yell at me!"

"No, I won't! I'll smack you 'round the head, because that's real corporal punishment!"
Sophie climbed down the ratlines at the pace of molasses. When she reached the deck, setting her backpack down, a loud splash alerted her attention to the starboard side and there was Hippo, his head bent over a pool of blood. Sophie hobbled up to him, listening to his quiet prayers. Grief clouded his features. She felt worse than she did when she killed Khanwari.

"I'm sorry," Sophie said meekly. "I thought he was gonna—I'm sorry."

Hippo took a deep breath. He did indeed smack her 'round the head. "I'll grab a mop. Blood isn't good for the wood. Sit over there, I'll bring the first aid kit over… you doing okay?"

"Just really craving a cigarette."

He looked at her oddly. "When did you start smoking?"

She didn't hear him. Sophie was already settling down, pulling up her shirt and examining her wound. Didn't look too infected. Hippo shrugged.

"Hey, kiddo, I'm gonna lock your backpack in the hull for safety."

"Right." She nodded, still focused on her wound. After a few minutes, Hippo came back. "Sensei," she said without looking up, "this is so cool, from the right angle it kinda looks like a duck drinking tea. Do you see it? Or maybe it's a butterfly—"

Her arms were forced behind her and a thick, scratchy rope compressed her wrists together.

Sophie shrieked and tried to bolt away, but he yanked her back and pain shot through her body. Her knees collapsed underneath her.

"I secured the ship, Lettidore," Hippo said into the Den Den Mushi. "I can't clear the oncoming storm. I'm going to divert my course to Alabasta and meet you there."

"Good. Can you identify the traitor?"

His merciless eyes focused on Sophie, who was sure she was dreaming.

"You won't believe my words. I'll let you see for yourself," he replied and hung up.

Hippo hoisted her on his shoulder and carried her to the cabin. Sophie was so stunned she didn't even try to kick or scream. This must be another part of the plan. This was just—Hippo had to trick the Vice Admiral, that's why. There was a great explanation for this. He set her down and tied her ankles together. Why was he still looking at her like that? Wasn't this act over?

"...Dad?" Sophie whispered, and hated how small and frightened she sounded, how child-like.

"Don't." His voice was flat and he wasn't looking at her.

"Dad," she said again, stronger, this doesn't hurt, this is nothing, "to think they call me a traitor."

Hippo tightened the rope so it'd bruise, and finally looked at her. "This isn't your world."

Sophie stared at him, not understanding.

"This world..." he sighed, rubbing his face, "this world wasn't made for people like you and me. Marines build fortresses not only to keep criminals from wreaking havoc, but also to keep criminals contained. There are the prisoners in cells, and then..." With an apologetic look, he waved his hand, "there's you. I mean," he laughed suddenly, running his hands through his hair, "we were all worried
about you growing up. You were so different, you didn't care about anyone or anything aside from science. Sometimes you barely showed any interest in living. How can you possibly survive outside of G-13?"

Sophie's head spun. She wanted to laugh, she wanted to crack a joke, because he was kidding, right? This was just a screwed up, stupid joke, _this was so stupid, why was he being so stupid_—

"Being a Director means your skills and creations are property of G-13. Well, you know that." He tied a gag over her mouth, his gaze sorrowful, and he sat next to her, like they were two people at a confessional. "I wish it didn't have to happen this way. But I'm so happy you're alive, and I do want you to _be_ happy again." He reached out to pet her hair.

Sophie jerked her head away. Outside, the waves grew stronger and battered the ship. Hippo didn't seem to notice; he was gazing down at his hands.

Her whole body was shaking, her tics coming back in full force. Sophie tried to suppress her agitation, tried to take back control of her muscles, tried to make sense of this, and failing at all of the above. It was all she could do to just focus on breathing. Hippo didn't seem to recognize that she was having a fit, or maybe he thought she was just upset, which, _clearly_.

"This work… twists people. Just look at those poor, disfigured hands of you. if only I had never let you become a chemist, maybe you wouldn't have turned out like this…” He shook his head, not seeing the startled outrage crossing Sophie's face. He smiled sadly. "I think… G-13 is the only place for you now. Without it, you'd be a pirate, wouldn't you?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. _You're breaking my heart._

"This hurts me, too," Hippo said quietly, and in the back of her head, she heard Law's dry laughter, heard his mocking clap and his sneering _Oh, go fuck yourself._

Her eyes flew open.

Nostrils flaring, Sophie cracked her forehead against his.

He fell back and she hopped to her feet, jumping across the cabin like a demented jackrabbit. She threw all her weight into the door and slammed it open. An onslaught of rain poured over her. Sophie frantically grabbed at her lighter in her pocket and flicked it open against the rope on her wrist. She didn't even feel the pain, not a bit—her foot slipped as she jumped down the stairs and landed face-down on the drenched ship deck. A muffled groan escaped the gag. Okay, she felt that one.

"SOPHIE! Shit—" Hippo grabbed the wheel and forced it counterclockwise.

She rolled over on her back, her sputtering lighter still eating away at the rope, forcing her twitching hand to stay still. _Come on come on come on—_

The sky was singing with lightning. Tumultuous waves flooded the deck. Sophie tore through the burnt rope with a phenomenal flex of her biceps and quickly untied her ankles, then ripped the gag away from her mouth. She had to find something to hold, or the ocean was gonna sweep her under. She grabbed onto the ratlines with all of her limbs, gulping down air and struggling to calm down. _Square numbers, detergent, soap, oh pineapples—_

A colossal wave loomed over the helm where Hippo was standing.

Sophie was there in a blink, seizing onto the rail with one hand and Hippo's with the other. And then
she was submerged, pieces of driftwood and fish swimming past her head, and it must've been an infection-induced fever because she was drowning in Viran waters and the G-13 ship was leaving her behind—

The wave passed and they fell to the ground, panting and coughing seawater. Rain streaked over his face and if she didn't know any better, she might've thought he was—

But I know better.

She was numb to the bone. Sophie scrambled away from him and wrenched the wheel due—south? North? She couldn't discern anything. There was only raging waves, blinding rain, thunder crashing through the skies in the endless Grand Line. This must be karmic retribution. God, I hate storms. Somebody clearly wants me to die today.

Maybe that someone heard, because a bright glow illuminated the sky right above the ship and a split-second later, a lightning bolt collided into the deck. All Sophie saw was scorching whiteness before she faded.

—

The water lapped against her ears, a greeting from an old friend.

She drifted in the shallow lagoon of clear, tropical-warm water. Sophie kept her eyes shut. If this was a dream, this was the best dream she's ever had. She felt the sun kiss her face and in the distance… in the distance…

"…survivors?"

"…just two… don't know much about the 'surviving' part…"

Fish Breath Fabio leaned in close, smelling the girl's wet hair. "Well, I'll be," he murmured. "What's a pirate like you doin' on a Marine ship?"

"Captain, the patrollers are right behind us! We haven't cleared Machinastein waters!"

A fly buzzed over the longarm's hand and jerked away, kicking Sophie over on her back. She didn't move. "This be a ship of death! Nobody touch the bodies!"

Footsteps thudded across the deck, and they left the Marine ship and swung back to their own vessel.

"I know of her! I know the girl!" came a cry from the slaver ship. "I have witnessed her in many dreams." A ghostly face pressed against the bars of her cage, and shrunk back when Fish Breath Fabio nearly planted his boot on her face.

"If you're smart enough to speak all fancy-like, you should be smart enough to keep your mouth shut."

The Alabastian captives whimpered, their chains slithering on the floor. She reached out to the bloody, dying girl on the bloody, dying ship. Her fingers curled gracefully. "I have witnessed you," Lisbeth whispered, tufts of copper-red hair hanging around her gaunt cheekbones.

"Says she was a princess in another life," a slaver laughed to another. "Ain't that grand."

"Weigh anchor, you bilge rats! Sabaody's a long month's sail ahead of us!"

A sigh on the breeze.
Gentle waters crested between her toes. Sophie knew, without opening her eyes, that she was surrounded by palm trees and hot white sand and big puffy clouds. This was heaven. This was peace.

She drifted in the shallow lagoon of clear, tropical-warm water, and in the distance, if she listened hard, she heard the metal heartbeats of a submarine calling her name.

to be continued

WORLD ECONOMIC JOURNAL

A Traitor Within G-13! A Formidable Fortress Falls!

Explosions yesterday rocked G-13, as the North Tower collapsed and years of research documents were stolen. This is the first time in history where an entire Marine fortress has been compromised by a traitor on the inside. Due to this incident, Vice Admiral Lettidore has been demoted to Rear Admiral.

A mysterious sleeping gas was released over G-13 right before the explosions began—early reports say that it was qava gas, a black market favorite.

The nearest marine branches, the 22nd and 25th, are protecting the currently defenseless base from potential pirate attacks. Vice Admiral Garp has been named interim Vice Admiral of G-13 for the time being (despite his noisy objections, sources say). G-13 is known for being a base that specializes in chemical warfare. Just last week, the Director of the Chemical Warfare Division, who had gone rogue for the past month, was successfully exterminated by Cipher Pol agents. She is believed to have been traveling with the Heart Pirates, captained by Trafalgar “Surgeon of Death” Law.

Strangways Sophie has been described by her colleagues as an ‘obsessed’ ‘pyromaniac’ with ‘narcissism and crippling arrogance’. She was elected to her position at the age of seventeen and is the shortest ever serving Chemical Warfare Director, barring Dugas Yon, who was forced to retire after scandalous accusations arose of him spending too much time in the animal cells, which could neither be healthy for him nor the animals.

"It's her ghost," one marine swears, who wishes to be unnamed. "The fire, the explosions, they all felt like her. And then Charaka-sensei—her adopted father—goes missing. It's a sign."

Charaka Hippo, 40th Director of G-13’s Medical Division and experienced trauma surgeon, had been taken captive during the invasion. In his youth, Charaka received medals of valor during the Tiburon Revolt and the Battle of Greatcastle, alongside comrades "Mustachio" Lettidore and Teresa the Valiant. The latter is rumored to be on the short list as the next World Government Intelligence Branch leader.

Fifty million beli has been placed on the head of Gas Mask (identity unknown).
"You look happy," Bepo noted.

Law folded the newspaper and didn't bother hiding his smirk. "Today's a good day."

Shachi leaped onto the table. "Oooooh! Guys! Sophie-chan's on the front page!"

"OOOOH!"

"Holy fuck, that bounty." Anko jabbed a finger at the newspaper. "Are you fucking kidding me? There's no fucking way!"

Penguin snorted. "Oh my god, she looks so stupid in that picture. It's like she's posing as an action hero."

"Wait, is that her?" Shachi squinted. "Dude, you can't see her face at all."

"Yeah, that's her bicep."

"You can tell who someone is by their muscle?"

"You can't? That's because you're a total novice."

"But look at the bounty!" Anko shouted, waving the newspaper.

"Bets on if she makes it out alive?" Hai Xing proposed. The pirates quieted and glanced at each other.

"Um… well… I support Sophie-chan and all…" Shachi said nervously.

Penguin threw down his beli. "Dead."

"Dead!"

"Dead for me, too!"

"You lot are so unsupportive!" Bepo reprimanded, then whispered to Shachi, "Can I wager chore duty? For dead?"

Hai Xing groaned. "I'm gonna be cleaned out… but, alive, I guess."

"I'm going back to sleep," Law proclaimed.
The Democratic Republic of Stars

The Feast of Moons took place on Machinastein in the dead heat of summer, during a cloudless night when the stars shone brightest.

On one day of the year, a moon vanished away from Paradise and a new one took over. The island that was the origin story of astronomy and mathematics was the place to be. Tourists flocked to attend, and pirates gathered in a temporary truce. Drinking competitions and arm-wrestling notwithstanding; gotta defend your team somehow.

But it was a festival, and as with all festivals, it wouldn't do if there wasn't at least one thing amiss.

Unfortunately for Sophie, that thing amiss—or rather, 'a chemist, pterodactyl screeching into the abyss of the night'—was her.

Now, to go back a few steps: on the night of this grand jamboree, a rooftop garden on one of the highest temples in the city was the emergency landing site of a particular pair whose fates had been knotted together by some capricious god, laughing madly over vodka shots in their cosmic abode.

"W-w-what in the n-n-name of the Gorosei's saggy b-bottoms is your p-p-p-p—problem?"

"My problem? Why were you running!!?"

"Survival instinct, you rotten plum!"

Words of a tender reunion.

"What the pineapples was that!!?" she hollered, yanking feathers out of her hair. Seething, she tugged her disheveled silks away like he would contaminate it with his scummy pirate fingers. "I c-cannot believe you had the audacity—"

And here Sophie went a coughing spree from all the potting soil she inhaled.

Law was untangling himself from birds-of-paradise and ivy creepers. What the hell, his peaceful night had already been abandoned by the wayside of a highway to nowhere. To cement this fact, Sophie headbutted him with her floofy Medusa curls and snarled that he was to stay on his side. The garden was decently large space, filled with large native plants. She was determined not going to waste a single inch. This led to several minutes of strained, awkward silence that neither was willing to break.

Law looked up at the two moons. He wondered which one was brighter. He wondered what happened to the little boring cottage on the little boring island she and her father were supposed to sail to. He thought both were rather senseless questions.

Sophie, on the other hand, would've beat him over the head if she wasn't certain Law would fashion a glider out of her robes and see how far she could fly. Instead, she threw a feather at him. The breeze buffeted it back and attacked her face, which she spent a good minute fighting off in a dignified manner.

It would've been great—well not great, but better—if they had bumped into each other at the grocery. Then they could've made the customary polite hello and feigned interest about each other's
lives, before promising to catch up sometime soon and never see each other again. This situation that she—nay, Law! Part-man, part-butt, all uncouth dastardliness—plopped her in was so, so, so uncomfortable.

Except instead of cackling at his malicious exploits, Law was just kinda… sitting there. Cross-legged. Fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. He pulled out a long thread and flicked it off into the air.

"Littering."

"Already going to hell," he assured.

Law gave her a smirk. He had a bruise over his panda eye and a cut lip, and it was so offensively normal and almost endearing she nearly barfed. Nearly. It wouldn't do to get her nice clothes ruined, especially ones she borrowed from the President.

"So?" She brushed the hanging plants away from her eyes, like a leafy wig. "Don't you have a plan to get us down from here?"

"Yes." Law paused. "We wait."

Sophie buried her face in her hands, conveying her vexation in one long, monotone groan that she stretched out for as long possible.

And today, of all days? When she was supposed to blow out a beautifully even twenty candles on a three-tier rainbow ice cream cake? Sophie thought about the cake melting away in her guest bedroom and shook her fist at the moon.

"You want to tell me now what you're doing here?"

She considered sticking her tongue out. She did. Law poked it.

Sophie threw up a little and made a real effort to shove him two hundred feet to his doom, which he fended off with one hand.

"Can't you Room us down?" she demanded desperately.

No, because he'd pass out after, and that would be a rather uncaptainly sight. So Law did the mature thing and ignored her.

"Fine! Fine, w-we'll sit here until the e-end of time in total awkward silence, contemplating how uncomfortable this makes us."

Three weeks wasn't a long time, in the great span of the universe, Life itself, etc, etc. But. But her hair had grown out, feathering over her neck. Her arms were bigger, bulkier. She winced earlier, when they crash-landed, gripping the side of her stomach. New wounds, new scars.

"I'll have to poop here," Sophie reminded.

"That is a normal bodily function," Law agreed.

"Got a look at my bounty yet?"

That threw him off guard. Before he could think of a counter to the wholly reasonable question, Sophie shot him a sharp glance—it was always sharp with her, fast and fidgety and graceless, and he almost felt relieved at this familiar thing—and grinned nastily. The temple lights below lit her eyes blue-green, like the phosphorous depths of an iceberg.
"Familiar things, he thought."

"No."

With that firm reply, Law mulled over when exactly his life had spun so madly out of his control.

—

*two weeks earlier*

—

Fifty million.

Chin flab.

Hint of black hair? Or it could just be the shadows under the marine hat.

(He couldn't believe the only picture they got of Gas Mask was in a marine uniform. That was just pathetic.)

Fifty. Million.

And the appaling photography had to be intentional. The lighting was bad, the angle was frankly horrifying…

"*Did you fuckin' hear me?*

Someone walked in front of him, blocking Law's view of the bounty posters.

The pirate captain stood in a seedy warehouse on the outskirts of Machinastein, with half a dozen chop shop workers surrounding him. He analyzed their walking gait, the way they held the wrench/toilet seat/meat cleaver they were planning on pummeling into his head. Law loosened up when he realized they were amateur fighters at best, sighing, and steadied himself on a cane Hai Xing lent him.

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "My crew's waiting outside. I'm not going back until I get the evaporator."

"I told already 'em it's not going for less than half a million."

"And I'm offering you ten percent of that."

"Fuck off."

'Did he really just', 'god it's too early for this', and 'but fifty million?' crossed his mind. The evaporator wasn't even the best model, and it was clearly smuggled like everything else in the warehouse. His mechanics were insistent they needed to replace the one onboard, which was great because clean fucking water was high among his priorities. But then Law had to make a personal appearance when he heard they were trying to swindle a bunch of fucking pirates. In particular, one irritated pirate who had spent the past few days comparing a chemist's height, weight, bust, hip, and waist ratio to that of a certain bounty poster's, and hating his own remarkable memory.

Law readjusted the cane to keep pressure off his leg. "I'm not here for a fight—"
"You got thrashed on Kunlun, Trafalgar," one of them laughed. "Six on one, you're not gonna win."

"I heard you got your ass kicked."

"Yeah, obviously. He still looks like shit. For the love of everything evil, go take a shower."

He was either talking about the furry creature over Law's face, his sweatpants colored with unidentified stains, dead-eyed gaze, or a combination of all three. Either way, they surrounded him. Six on one, who also happened to be incapacitated with a cane, it was an easy win.

"This is your last chance, Trafalgar."

Law just stared at them.

Then he thrust the cane into the closest eye so hard it _squelched_, turned the man into a human shield, and put him in a headlock.

"Gentlemen, this is your last chance," Law said in a flawlessly polite tone, over a face that was gradually turning blue and crying blood. Then after a moment's contemplation, he shrugged. "Well, no, that chance passed."

He wrenched the cane out, eyeball attached at the tip.

It really was quite early, and he hadn't had his coffee yet.

—

"What are we still doing here?" Penguin asked on the fifth day of landing, when their stocks were full and the sub was checked thrice-over and Bepo had finished his spring shedding.

Information.

(Black market. World events. Rival pirates.)

Recovery.

(Got a splitting migraine whenever he tried to Room. Hai Xing was still limping. Won't do to progress through the Grand Line in this manner.)

Relaxation.

(The crew deserved it after all they went through.)

His mechanic nodded— _what else was he supposed to do?_— and handed him a newspaper and a bounty poster.

"Came in this morning. Thought you'd wanna read it."

—

Law had accumulated ways of entertaining himself during his caffeinated life. Sometimes he'd leave the submarine at midnight and explore the dark spaces of whatever island they were at, half wanting someone to jump him as a breather from his gnawing boredom. When they were out at sea, he'd be in the training room until dawn or hang around Bepo when he manned the control room.

He slept in brief fits, often in the diving chamber where he upped the oxygen concentration to
hyperbaric therapy levels. The bullet wound CP5 so kindly left him healed over with new skin, raw and pink and itching like a motherfucker.

It still burned when he dreamed.

More than once, Law jerked awake thinking his leg was on fire, his arms outstretched like he was trying to block the swing of an ax.

Though Anko and Hai Xing were recuperating well, wherever they were on the submarine, Law wasn't far behind. Sometimes when Shachi lingered in the corner of his vision, red hair covering most of his face, he stopped whatever he was doing and twisted to squarely look at his mechanic. Just to make sure the tissue and muscle were still there.

Sleep was continuing to be a problem.

On this particular morning, day ten of Machinastein Landing, erstwhile known as Satan's Sweaty Pits, Law did not 'wake up on the wrong side of bed', so much as 'wake up under desk, confused, hit head on bottom of desk, bump head again on chair, which unloads week's dirty dishes on face.'

All in all, not his worst morning.

At least Penguin hadn't barged in raving that the showers were broken and they required a new distilling apparatus stat, pronto, Captain please get up from the pile of garbage you're drooling on, we have an all-male crew and this is a dire predicament. Which begot Law smelling like the refuse that invaded eighty-three percent of his room. The other seventeen percent being oxygen and other questionable fumes.

He was just trying to turn his Room, Shambles into a literal meaning, that was all.

(The captain, the crew decided unanimously, was not taking his recovery from Crazy Axe-Murdering Cipher Pol well.

"Why don't I knock on your door every few hours to make sure you're still alive?" Bepo had taken to asking. Law saw no point in disagreeing with this. "And the newspaper?"

He blinked like he'd forgotten he was cradling it. The picture of Gas Mask who was Undeniably Strangways Sophie But Could Be Someone Else, What the Fuck Did Law Care Anyway was smack-dab on his chest. He practically threw it at Bepo and retreated back in his cabin. Bepo sniffed the air. Yep, his captain was definitely developing a new strain of mildew in there.)

Law gave the trash heap a noncommittal middle finger. Too lazy to even raise his arm for a proper fuck you. He rubbed his eyes and left for the galley, passing by the storage closet, door open, fungi jar gathering dust. He didn't spare a glance.

The galley was bustling when he arrived. Penguin mock-gasped around his fried plantains. "Captain, there's an animal sleeping on your face."

"Someone capture it!" For this, Shachi had the distinction of getting his sunglasses flicked.

Hai Xing's cane was on the drying rack, scrubbed clean of eyeball tissue and other miscellaneous artifacts. "Captain," the cook mumbled, passing him a cup of coffee, "the dishes you have in your cabin..."

"I'll clean them."
"That's what you've been saying for the past week…"

The submarine's temperature system kept it nice and cool inside, but the pirates were prepared for a day trip on the island. They wore light, colorful cloths around their waists, Machinastein-style, patterned with stars and suns and flowers. They were gathered around the counter, discussing the infamous newspaper article. Law's eyes narrowed.

Penguin was saying, "Even if it is her, she doesn't actually have that bounty until they identify her. Gas Mask: Fifty mil. Strangways Sophie: zero."

"Ah, you're just jelly your bounty isn't half that high."

Penguin told Shachi where to shove his pinto beans. Meanwhile, Anko was muttering under his breath about how long it'd take him to sail to the closest Marine fortress. Shachi shook his head, disbelieving. "Fifty million, dudes. Fifty million! I don't think I could earn that much in my life, even if I started stripping."

"You'd make a great stripper," Law said supportively.

"Of course I would. But this? I'd have to be, like, Pirate Empress or Red-Haired Shanks status to earn this much."

"That's it." Anko left the table with a steely glint in his eye.

"Let's frame it if she comes back," Bepo suggested.

"'If'? You bet on her death, too," Penguin said coldly. (This somehow spurred on Hai Xing to list a variety of interesting ways to die adrift at sea, involving an anchor, a lightning rod, and three pairs of underwear.) "And we should stop treating her like something she never was and move on with our lives."

"Is Sophie-chan an A or B cup?" Shachi asked distractedly, squinting at the photo.

Law waved for the poster, which the mechanic passed over, innocently waiting his captain's verdict. He mashed the stupid thing in his fists.

"Captain!" Shachi protested.

Bepo made pawing motions at the crumpled paper ball, which Law steadfastly ignored as he marched over to the galley's porthole and yanked it open.

"What's Anko doing?" Law asked suddenly.

Dead chemist theories forgotten, they joined their captain in peering out the porthole.

"He's gone rogue," Penguin remarked.

"Bounty!" Anko screamed, paddling into the horizon with a stolen boat.

"Sophie-chan broke him."

"He'll be back for dinner," Law said, and tossed the bounty poster off the starboard side. It vanished undersea with a satisfactory little blup.

"NOOOO!"
"It's just a bounty poster—we can find more in the town," Bepo reminded. The resulting silence was punctuated with an 'ah, yes'.

"Keep it away from me, I have better things I need to focus on," Law said tersely.

"We're going out today, Captain," Shachi chirped.

"Fine. Ask Hai Xing for funds."

"Moooom!"

As Hai Xing swatted Shachi away with a shamonji, Bepo enthusiastically clarified, "And you're coming with us!"

Their captain got that tense, stoic look about him, which the Heart Pirates knew meant he was about five eye twitches away from a tantrum. They backed off quickly with a chorus of *alright, alright, alright*.

He relaxed and stepped over to Hai Xing's bubbling pots for breakfast. Taking advantage of his dropped guard, Bepo picked up his captain, to the horrified stares of his crewmates, and fled out the galley with Law's face buried in two feet of polar bear pelt so he couldn't threaten to replace all of Bepo's meat rations with unspeakably evil celery sticks. They passed Manta, who held the door open with a blink. "Oh, Captain! Long time no see!"

"You're suffocating him!" Shachi hollered, bolting after the polar bear's abducted, who was muffled-screaming celery sticks!

"Shit, we're gonna get the worst chore duties after today," Penguin declared, slamming his hands on the table and running after them.

—

Having been dealt a harsh climate that lesser islands would've buckled under, Machinastein turned itself into a city of green friendliness and renewability.

Pebbles of yellow glass formed every rooftop. Crystalized Lamp Dials, Penguin explained, tech from Sky Islands. Superheated into glass, capable of storing a shitton of solar energy. Law did not pay much attention to this, as he was busy using Kikoku as a) a cane, since Hai Xing got upset that Law used his in spontaneous eye removal, and b) to passive-aggressively jab at the heels of people were walking too slow in front of him.

Their first stop was, of course, food.

Law loitered outside the tamale shop, half-listening to a heated debate breaking out among astronomy priests by the bakery next door. The sun baked the white sacbe roads and he hung his hat on Kikoku's hilt, sweating lightly underneath his shirt. The heat on Machinastein was languid, the sort that made you want to lie on a couch with nothing on and curl up like a lazy cat.

But it had no effect on the islanders. They went about decorating the street with signs like 'Guess the Weight of THIS SEA KING?' and 'Bump of Chicken Performs'. The Heart Pirates arrived in time for festival preparations.

His mind wandered to another place, where plum wine lingered on his tongue and cranes nested among bamboo trees. A crowded bar where the tables were sticky with old grease.
He thought of a chemist smiling, duck sauce smeared on one cheek, and shook his head.

Getting tired from standing, he sat in the shade of a jaguar statue. His eyes closed, feeling the siren lull of an afternoon nap. If he drifted just so, in the realm between wake and sleep, he was back in Flevance. Rattling carriages. Intermingling voices. The taste of apricot still between his teeth, freshly stolen from his mother's garden.

"—recovering in the Civic Hospital, the chemist—President's new favorite—"

His eyes flew open. The crowd milled around the bakery, voices lost among the chatter.

"Captain!"

His crew bounced towards him, their arms laden with Machinastein delicacies. Law accepted a tamale, blowing on his hot fingers.

Nothing. It was nothing.

But Law kept his ears sharp as they strolled around the plaza. G-13 was in Alabasta searching for Gas Mask. If the rumors were true, the Nefertari princess didn't take any shit with marines infringing upon the reconstruction of Alubarna; she kicked them out the city gates within the day. And then there was something about another strong pirate crew docking in Machinastein, one that Law personally thought did their shopping in a Halloween store.

The city cooled pleasantly when sunset rolled around and Penguin, Shachi, and Bepo decided that their captain had enough wholesome recreation. It had been a decent day. He hadn't wanted to lie facedown on the street in passive protest as much as he thought he would.

When they got back to the sub, he mentioned in merry passing that the three of them were in charge of barnacle duty and laundry for a week. This led to three pairs of watery eyes and a synchronized wail of despair that was quite melodramatic, in Law's opinion.

When he was checking Shachi's vitals, the redhead talked about Machinastein's train. It was the city's main way of transport, from the ballgame courts in the back alleys to the fish markets.

He could guess why Shachi would mention what he already knew. Law was edgier than normal when he was out in public, but it was worse when he was alone in the sub while everyone else was out. And lately everyone was enjoying Machinastein. Anko went off to empty his pockets in the gambling houses; Hai Xing and Shachi were out shopping for food. Their recovery was speedy; by the third week they were running through the submarine while he was still choking down antibiotics and using Kikoku as a cane.

He'd watch from the porthole as they strolled into the city. He'd spend the day researching how to expand his Ope Ope no Mi powers (sitting by the Den Den Mushi) and jotting down notes (waiting for a panicked call from his crew, for an explosion, for something gone terribly wrong).

But Shachi's insinuation made him think. If it got to the point where they were unnecessarily worrying about him, the least he could do was get out of the submarine.

So Law covered his head with Penguin's new Mach silks and limped aboard the train, clutching Kikoku a little bit tighter. No one in the crowd recognized him. His unshaven reflection gazed back at him, with eyes that hadn't seen a good night's rest in weeks.
No one in the crowd recognized him, and why would they?

Maybe something called his soul there (or maybe he felt a kindred spirit to drills, needles, and other torture devices), because on this morning, he ended in front of the Machinastein Civic Hospital.

Law entered a massive atrium. Sunlight streamed through the high, arched ceiling, shaped like a glass flower bulb. Amapola trailed up the walls and twined around golden railings. A spectacular fountain gurgled in the center of the atrium. The air was fresh here, not scrubbed and recycled through ventilation. It smelled of life, of cleanliness, of affluence. They say a nation's prestige can be measured by its doctors; if that was the case, Machinastein was at the pinnacle.

Doctors passed by in a flurry of white robes. A busy receptionist was checking in patients. On the other side of the fountain, a father rocked a baby and cooed softly.

Gold silk flashed on the edge of his vision.

Law was walking under the mezzanine when he saw it again. Behind a row of baby palm trees. It made him pause and look twice.

"Here again?" his sharp hearing picked up. "Your father hasn't woken up yet."

And there—a sliver of a neck, yellow-on-black curls.

Law stopped—

He wasn't even sure he knew what he saw, but—

But then his baby Den Den Mushi rang and he didn't remember picking it up, only thinking fire, gunshots, CP5.

"Come by the ball courts!" Penguin shouted over a buzz of static that sounded like a cheering audience. "They're hitting the ball with their hips and the hoop is like fifty feet in the air, and they're going into overtime, it's insane—"

Telling him he'd be there soon, Law glanced up at the mezzanine. It was empty.

All this fresh air was getting to his brain.

—

It was midnight on the submarine, and Law and Hai Xing were the only ones awake. He was silently patrolling the hallways when he passed by the galley and saw dim candlelight through the door, nudged it open with his foot. The cook was bent over the sink, studiously peeling carrots.

"Can't sleep?"

He flicked some carrot skin off the knife. "Something like that."

"I have pills."

"And they work?"

"Fine as any."

"Why aren't you on them?"
Law leaned heavily on the counter, listening to the submarine's quiet hum. The noise seemed larger in the empty galley.

He dropped the carrots in the bowl and threw away the shavings. "I don't need pills. Gotta die sooner or later."

"Don't say that."

Hai Xing shrugged.

"Captain's orders," he said tersely. "Finding another cook would be troublesome."

When a few minutes passed and Law didn't leave, Hai Xing wiped his hands on his apron. He boiled a cup of hot water and tossed in freshly dried flowers and leaves from his herb jars.

It tasted bitter, but it wasn't bad.

Law watched Hai Xing prep tomorrow's breakfast, drinking his cup of tea slowly, listening to the submarine hum and the quick chop-chop-chop of the knife.

The next day, he went back to the Machinastein Civic Hospital. And the day after that. And the day after that.

He told himself he wasn't looking for anything. And he wasn't. The hospital was big enough that he could investigate something new every day: the green courtyards out back, the little cafés across the bridge, the patio where interns took their lunch break and debated Machinastein's healthcare policies…

And sure, he may have passed by the receptionist's desk, and the patients list may have accidentally fallen into his hands, and his eyes may have glanced to see if there was a name he recognized… yes, what a random coincidence… life, incidentally, is full of coincidences… But there was not a name on the list he cared for, and it was sitting back on the receptionist's desk right as the man wondered where he misplaced it.

"The wharf's got an octopus wrestling match going on, let's check that out," Anko whined, his sandals slapping the granite floor.

"Feel free to go. I'm not forcing you to stay."

"Come on, Cap. There are only dead people here. Or people who're about to die—what? Yeah, I'm talkin' to you."

Law had to drag Anko away from starting a fight with the terminally ill.

He sat on the edge of the sun-dappled fountain to rest his leg. Outside, people were decorating trees with colorful streamers and hoisting up big festival lights. Some nurses went out to help them and clapped along as drummers practiced their songs. He glanced at his helmsman, wondering if he was bored yet. Apparently not.

Anko was crouched in front of a bush, his mouth stuffed with honeyed flowers. He uncurled his sticky palm. "Want some?"

"No. Bring some home for Bepo."
A good samaritan pointed at the pirates. "That's stealing!"

"On second thought, take the whole bush," Law added.

Anko cackled in glee.

His eyelids drifted lower as he relaxed in the sun. Then he heard it again, underneath the bubbling fountain:

("He hasn't woken up yet—"

"—two weeks is a long time, is that safe?"

"—stable condition, don't worry, I know the President's keeping you busy with research—")

Anko paused from hefting the entire hedge of flowers. "Alright, Cap?"

A spark of gold in the corner of his vision.

It might've just been the sunlight gleaming off the floor, the reflection of the fountain—

But there, a shimmer, a ghost—

*Room!*

A blue sphere appeared around his palm for a split-second, then vanished, compressing back into his skin, his bones, and squeezed. His brain was on fire. He could distantly feel Anko's callused hands grabbing his arm, but he couldn't see; he was doubled over, palms screwed tight against his face, flames searing behind his eyes.

"—Cap?"

"I'm fine," he growled, shoving Anko aside harder than he meant to. He took the stairs up the mezzanine two at a time, as Anko yelled from the ground level, "Dude, what the hell!"

A hand clapped his shoulder, yanking him back. He caught his balance and swung around, reaching for Kikokku and realizing he left it by the fountain.

"Why, you're the Surgeon of Death! I recognize those tattoos!"

He quickly tugged his sleeves down, but it was too late.

"In the flesh!"

"My god!"

A group of medics congregated around Law, talking all at once.

"We're big fans of yours! Well, not the burning of islands—but everything else!"

"Get out of the—" He stopped and stared at them. "What."

"I'd love to have you peer-review my thesis!" another gushed, investigating his beard. "Wow, you look so different from your bounty poster!"

"Are you sure it's him? I didn't think he'd look so…"
"Maladjusted?"

"Unkempt?"

"Do you need to see a doctor?" someone asked worriedly.

"Homeless," the first doctor finished. Jaw clenching, Law tugged his hood lower over his forehead.

"Oi! Back off, ass maggots!" Anko was elbowing people out of the way, stuck in the back of the crowd. "I'll save you, Captain!"

If they weren't convinced before, they sure as hell were now.

"I work for a pharmaceutical company, we could use your talents!"

"Have you considered going on a year-long expedition to research the migratory habits of turtles!?"

"I am a killer," Law told them. "Of many people. A deadly killer. These hands have strangled the life out of things."

Someone yelled at him to autograph their face.

Anko was threatening bodily harm and started batting the doctors away with his sandals. That distracted them long enough for Law to untangle himself and clamber up the mezzanine. Hospital staff leaped out of the way as he slammed open doors and glanced inside, one after another. No. No. No.

A nurse gasped and dropped a stack of papers with a shrill, "Pirate!"

"Did you see a woman—" Law began, then stopped.

He pointed at the doctors. "Is there a wounded marine here? In this hospital?" They immediately all spoke at once and Law closed his eyes, gritting his teeth. "One at a time!"

"Absolutely not! Get back to work, you're all on the clock!" the nurse interrupted with authority. After making sure the doctors scattered like scared hens, she turned and wagged a finger at Law. "That's none of your business. You're not welcome here."

Anko was at his side, passing Kikoku to him and glaring at the old nurse. "Is she fucking with you? You want me to kill her?"

"I raised five children," she snapped. "Don't try me."

"I'm looking for someone," Law said. "A… girl. A girl in gold." This was the most stupid fucking thing he'd ever said. He suddenly felt like decapitating the pretentious, stuck-up chemist all over again.

The nurse tsked. "If you need your eyes checked, I can refer you to an optometrist."

"Talk to him like that one more time—"

Law raised Kikoku in front of Anko and he fell silent. If the nurse wasn't threatened at this point, she wasn't going to say anything.

"Thank you for your hospitality," he murmured. "Happy festivities."
The nurse gave them one last *harrumph*, picked up her papers, and strode off with an angry click of her heels. The noise of the atrium died down as the two Heart Pirates trudged past them and out the hospital. Well, that was a fucking waste of time. And he was pretty sure he lost his 'trolling about the hospital' privileges. Law was angry at himself, but more than that, he was angry at this goddamn hospital and these goddamn people and especially the goddamn people whose goddamn fucking voices wouldn't leave him the fuck alone, but this was going to end. This was bullshit, no, this was medically diagnosable bullshit and he wasn't going through that again, he was putting his foot down —

A group of white-robed, college-age medical students crept past them.

Law's hand curled around the arm of the closest student and he said, "Hi."

They jumped back, properly frightened. The girl squeaked and he relaxed his grip, though not enough for her to completely pull back, and he could still pop her arm out of its socket if he wanted to.

The kid made rapid hand motions to her friends. Law discerned the letters of his own name. He wasn't rusty on his sign language, not by a long shot. Cora-san taught him what he knew and he coached himself for the past eleven years. He let go of her arm and signed, *Do you know of a marine recovering in this hospital?*

She blinked in surprise, then slowly—after glancing at her friends—signed back, *No, sorry.*

*What about a woman who recently arrived on this island? Yellow or black hair, blue eyes, unpleasant to be around.*

Her reply was even slower than before. *I don't know. Lots of immigrants here. We're quite late for class—*

*What class? Law's reply caught her off-guard and she looked desperately at her friends.*

*Advanced Human Pathology,* another kid signed.

*That's a difficult course.*

*Are you offering to help us with our homework, sir?*

Ah, these tenderfoot young students with bright futures and cheeky mouths. Law politely wished them good luck before they scampered away.

"Hospitals are lame," Anko said, which was his way of comforting people.

He glanced at Law furtively, like he wanted to say something else, but got distracted by a group of people limping into the hospital and complimented them on their bloodied clothes.

—

Still, however lame Anko thought Law's hobbies were, he stuck around for the rest of the day. The library temple was adjacent to the hospital, nestled between a café and a small cloister of trees. Inside, frantic students appeared to be testing how much coffee they could swallow before overdosing. Nothing unusual there.

In fact, there was nothing unusual, period.
No pineapples or mangos or mentions of sticking dangerously sharp objects up apricots, nothing. It was when Law was banging on stalls in the ladies' bathroom that security threw them out.

He sat on the library's high stone steps, watching dusk give way to the dark blue of evening. This was a conspiracy in which the whole of Machinastein was involved in, though others, namely Bepo, would've called it a delusion.

There was a sinking feeling in his chest that he might have noticed if he wasn't so irked. Law ignored the fact that he didn't truly care, that he wasn't actually bothered by a couple of lying kids and pissed-off nurses, and focused on the easy feeling of irritation. Fucking nurses, fucking doctors, fucking kids, he thought, even as he picked apart the busy streets, searching for curly hair and bronze skin.

This was pointless, he eventually decided. He looked over his shoulder, searching for Anko.

Gas Mask stared back at him.

The bounty poster was plastered on a pillar, among dozens of other bounty posters.

Law leaned over and ripped the poster down, crumpled it in his fists, squeezed the paper ball so tight it hurt. He wanted to throw it down the steps, wanted to watch the flimsy thing roll into the street below and get crushed underneath the carriages and oblivious passerby.

He carefully unwrapped the poster and smoothed it out on his knee.

The photograph was crinkled, but he liked it better that way. It really was a terrible photo.

He folded the poster into a glider, something that was both familiar and not, nostalgic and not. He creased Gas Mask's face into crisp wings, the eyeglass, the only part of the mask that wasn't stark black, reflecting the light of a fake sun. Not even her eyes were visible. The fucking photographer couldn't even give him that.

Law examined his handiwork, then jerked his arm back and hurled the wrinkled little glider into the air. It drifted lazily with the wind, over street lights and garden rooftops, further and further until the train came rushing by and when it passed, the glider was gone. He released the breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

He was getting sick of this island.

"So," Anko squatted beside him, setting down a humongous bush of honeyed flowers, "you think Sophie-chan's here."

Law did not need this right now. "Where the hell is this coming from?"

"I'm kinda offended you think I'm that stupid."

"...Had to try."

"I missed an octopus wrestling match for this."

They sat in silence, watching the faint outline of the second moon drift over the horizon.

"Better off this way." Anko nodded, and Law didn't think he meant the octopus wrestling match. Proving his point, he continued, "Her. Us. Two different worlds."

"Yeah," he said, and was glad it didn't sound as hollow as he felt.
Law thought of his bedroom—and the withered cockroach he found in the pillow yesterday—and was enticed to spend all night skulking around the hospital. But his crew was waiting. He stood and Anko followed, hefting the stolen bush in his arms.

"Everyone in there had a total fucking doctor boner for you. Gross shit, man."

"I have that effect on people."

"Pfft," Anko said, trying and failing to pretend like he'd never felt The Effect before and did not believe the existence of it, at all. "Anyway, that nurse. Think she had the hots for me?"

"The old lady?"

"Yeah."

"Not a goddamn chance."

—

"We'll head to the next island immediately. There's nothing left for us here."

Shachi stopped on the mat. "What? Can we at least stay for the festival tonight?" Caught off-guard, Penguin's kick came out of nowhere and smacked Shachi straight into the ground.

Law considered. "Alright, but we have to be ready by tomorrow."

The redhead stood up, running his sore arm. "But Sophie-chan—" He stopped when he caught the sour look on Law's face and adjusted his sunglasses. "I heard rumors around the city that reminded me of—"

"I don't see how that matters."

"She could be back in the city! She could be here!"

"We already said our goodbyes."

"Not to us," Penguin cut in. "Not even to Bepo."

Shachi blinked at Penguin. "I thought you didn't—"

Before he could finish, Penguin shoved the redhead back on the mat with a single-handed push. "Your loss."

Swearing under his breath, Shachi stood, made several rude gestures behind Penguin's back, and stomped off to the punching bag. They were getting itchy feet. Being marooned on an island will do that to a sailor. They might start thinking they were staying in Machinastein for a reason. A cringeworthy, unpleasant reason, which was in no way true, ever, until the end of time. But he also knew what empty talk sounded like.

Law shucked off his shoes and shirt. "Penguin, let's go."

He stood in the center of the mat with a calm expression. This was just a simple test to see how well his leg was healing, nothing more.

Penguin lowered his canteen and regarded him warily. "Hand to hand?"
"It'll be fist to mouth if you don't shut up and fight."

Penguin finished toweling off, tossed his junk down, and strode over to the mat. The training room was charged with static energy. With a primal sort of eagerness, the pirates watched their leader assert his superiority.

Penguin sized him up—and his grin was all teeth. "Yes, sir."

Law sensed danger and for a hot second wondered if he hadn't just made a terrible mistake.

When the fight was over, he peeled himself off the floor. His crew was hollering ("Fatality!" Anko shouted), or it might just be the ringing in his left ear…

"Have you been practicing your kata?" Penguin asked, though he sounded giddy.

Law rolled his eyes, impressively unconcerned for someone who just got his ass kicked. "Would it be deceitful of me to say that I have?"

"You're my captain, I'm supposed to forgive you. It's kind of in my contract." Penguin grabbed his hand and hauled him upright. He took a deep breath, like he was trying not to laugh. "To be fair, I think the little pet you're keeping on your face was throwing off your balance."

"Don't get cheeky, kid."

"I'm older than you!"

"Barely."

The training room buzzed with reinvigorated laughter. All talk of their earlier conversation was forgotten after Penguin showed off his chi sau moves. Law stepped away from the group, wiping his brow with his shirt. "We leave at daybreak," he told his men.

A chorus of distracted 'yeah, yeahs' followed.

This is how you lose a battle, but win a war.

—

On the day of the festival, the streets were packed. He picked out Alabastian accents and even languages from the distant Blues. The sky was a crisp, clear twilight, and people gathered on rooftops with their telescopes to watch the moons.

Law fished out some coin and bought a cotton candy ("Rough day?" the vendor asked sympathetically; "You should see the other guy," he responded through a cut lip), then sat on a bench and just stared at it. He was either going to set the cotton candy aflame or make passionate, angry love to it, bystanders were certain.

Eventually, he picked off some cotton fluff and ate it.

"Want some?" Law offered some candy to Bepo.

"No, I've seen what stuff that does to the little niblets," he refused politely. "It's a drug to induce mania."

"That's called a sugar high."
"Hi, Mister Bear!" a niblet chirped, passing by.

"Hi."

She screamed.

"That's actually an appropriate reaction to a talking bear," Law noted calmly (asshole).

"I'm so sorry, sir, your costume is just so realistic." The dad picked up his kid and hurried away.

"Or that." (Asshole).

Bepo absorbed this, took Law's cotton candy from his hand, and stuffed it in his mouth.

Law partook in the local festivities by watching Bepo play the how-many-goldfish-can-you-scoop-up game. He felt a surge of pride when Bepo's honed instincts bested the other children, resisting the urge to gloat to their mothers. The rest of his crew were off having fun, but Law was just here for the fireworks.

Bepo snacked on the goldfish as they ambled along the road. He stopped, sniffing the air, ears pricked.

Law was on alert. "What do you smell?"

The bear tilted his head, almost… puzzled. He turned abruptly and walked fast in the plaza, where the noise was loudest. Thousands of people were crammed in the plaza. Dancers in fierce masks rattled shells, sending prayers to their Mach gods, and drummers rang thunder over the music.

"Can a nation vanish in a single night? Impossible, you say!" A street performance. An actor shouting to her crowd. "Well, my friends, listen closely to the Tale of Apolleon…"

*Did he smell a fresh seal?* Law wondered as he squeezed through the crush. "Bepo, if this is just for a fucking fish, I—"

Cora-san was walking across the street.

Law and Bepo both stopped.

He glanced around, as though uncertain where to head next. A light robe covered his head—but underneath that were blonde bangs and bright red lips. His face was a blur, and then there was a crowd between them, and the ghost disappeared under a small archway.

*Not real*, he thought blankly, rubbing his leg.

*Wait a minute*, he thought again, *wait, Bepo also saw him—*

Oh.

The hair.

Yellow roots bleeding into black dyed tips.

Bepo's roar echoed over the music, the noise, and even Law felt a shiver race down his spine.

"SOOOOPHIE!"
Gallivanting off into the festival, it didn't take long for the Hearts to get into a fight. In fact, they were sitting at a bar when Anko swiveled around on his stool and called, "You wanna fight?"

The man in the mask looked up.

Penguin snorted, his butt planted firmly on his seat. "I'm going to drink in peace, thanks."

"I recognize him." Shachi snapped his fingers. "His bounty's larger than yours, Penguin."

Penguin stood. "Let's kill him."

The blue one rasped over his shoulder, "Wire! Get over here!"

The six pirates met each other halfway, right in the middle of the bar.

"Kid," the masked man introduced.

"Heart," Anko said, because manners were manners, and cracked his knuckles. "You wanna dance, flotsam? Let's dance."

Sophie froze in the middle of licking the grease off her fingers. She'd eaten fried sausages earlier. The oil around her mouth, with the scarlet glow from the festival, made it seem like she was wearing lipstick. Big, greasy, red lipstick. She heard her name shouted again, followed by people screaming.

When she turned, this was what she saw, in order:

A homeless man sprinting full-tilt at her.

A polar bear thumping through food stalls and lighting them on fire.

And a horde of festival security charging after them with pointy sticks.

So it could be forgiven that her first instinct was to pick up her skirts and bolt. *Wait,* she thought, dodging around a drunken conga line, *I know that man. I know that bear.*

…*Why am I running?*

Sophie chanced a glance back and saw the horrific glare of a very pissed Surgeon of Death in pursuit.

*Run!* she screamed internally, *Run run run run!*

Law caught up to her in five seconds and scooped her up around the middle. It wasn't a friendly or gentle embrace—Law picked her up under one arm like a heavy log and threw her, kicking and screaming, "ABDUCTION! ABDUCTION!" on a nearby Giant Quetzal. The driver of the carriage jerked awake, blinked at the homeless man with a crazed glint in his eye, the screaming burrito, and then turned around with a drunken snore.

"I found you," he hissed in her ear and oh god, Sophie wasn't ready to die!

The second Law unhooked the bird from the reins, it shot off into the sky like a cannon. Bepo tried to belly-flop on, but he was too heavy.
"Leave meeee!" the bear cried, disappearing into a white dot beneath them.

Afterwards, Sophie wished she had said something cool and witty to the Heart Pirates' captain's reappearance. But she looked at Law and her first word to his face after three weeks was, "AHHHH." She looked at the bird and went, "AHHHH." And then she looked at her surroundings and, "AHHHHHGGHHH."

Then she hysterically floundered right off the bird, shrieking at sixty miles per hour.

This brings us to the doctor and chemist dropping amidst piles of dirt and manure on a temple two hundred feet in the air.

Fast forward a bit.

"Please let this terror end," Sophie beseeched the stars. "Can I just go home and have a nice, relaxing evening with a hot bubble bath? I've learned my lesson! Don't get kidnapped by men with gross beards! Please, just—I just w-wanna go back and stuff myself with pudding and roll around in a potato-esque fashion, is th-that really so much to ask? Tell me! T-tell me, you pitiless balls of cosmic flatulence! Teeeell meeee…"

Meanwhile, Law was thinking about Bepo. He'd be alright. It wasn't like he'd get lost. The stars were too bright.

She exhaled and looked at him glumly. "I thought I heard your voice in the hospital the other day. I thought you might've become involved in a smuggling scheme, or turned into a gun-for-hire. But you know what?" She jabbed his shoulder with her finger. "Screw! That! You don't need to do horrible things to be horrible! I can't believe what just happened! You went so overboard!"

In retrospect, Law did once strap himself with grenades and threatened to blow himself up if a band of pirates didn't accept him into their crew. Sophie had a point.

"I heard your voice, too." It was an awkward admission, and he scowled at the city lights as he said it.

She faltered.

"But you left."

"…That's kind of what I do, isn't it?" She grinned, like she meant it to be funny, but it wasn't. Sophie cleared her throat. "I see you haven't changed a bit. Except for that bush. Do you, like, pick berries out of there?"

He scratched his neck. "Been meaning to shave."

Sophie scoffed like she didn't believe that. Law was sceptical himself. Either way, she ignored him. He went back to examining the plants. Ah, chamomile. Hai Xing might find a use for them. He ripped a handful of flowers off their stems and stuffed them in his pocket. Her jaw worked like she was aching to reprimand him, but she only huffed and didn't say a word.

The air was thick with unasked questions. But as one had been living with severe emotional trauma for fourteen years, and the other was recently called a monster by her father, Dealing with Feelings in a Healthy Manner for Dummies was a guide book quite out of their price range.

Law was growing more and more certain Sophie wasn't about to break the silence. She was tracing a finger along the edge of a pot. Her brow was furrowed—in anger, he assumed, but she was actually
fighting off embarrassing flashbacks of her earlier unintelligible screeching.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "How's this?"

"Th—what?"

"This meeting."

"...Inelegant," she replied, and his eyebrows rose. "Yep. Really uncoordinated, you even lost Bepo-san there. I'd have thought you would've sent Penguin-san or Shachi-san to scope me out before making a move. You know, to see if I've dyed my hair again, maybe talk me up a bit. And then you'd accost me in some dark, empty alley, demanding an eye or a thumb, but I cleverly dissuade you with my winsome smile and endearing chemistry puns."

"That never happened," he said flatly.

"Says you."

"I'd rather strangle myself with my hat."

"Poor hat." Sophie stuck her tongue out again, then quickly covered her mouth and faced forward. Then she smiled. He could tell by the ways her eyes crinkled. It was a small smile, but it was there.

She was laughing all of a sudden, and Law's cut lip stung as his mouth pulled into a grin.

Things weren't back to normal, but it was getting pretty close, and she was smiling at him in a certain way Law wasn't entirely sure she was cognizant of. But it didn't matter, because he was feeling lighter than he had in weeks.

A cold breeze rustled the plants and she wrapped her robe tighter around her shoulders. "So, Fearless Surgeon? How are we going to get off this thing?"

"We wait," he said sagely.

"I think I can knot some of these plants together and make, like, a rope—"

"Sophie, that shit doesn't work in real life."

"Non-believer! I will not accept that from a prime example of a bad science fiction novel."

Down in the darkness, the train whistled. A single, bright light grew steadily larger and brighter. Law gave her a Look: eyebrows raised, smirk cocky. A chill crawled up Sophie's spine.

"Don't do it," she said lowly.

His smirk widened. He was waiting this whole time.

She held her hands up as though to ward off the Devil. "Stay away!"

He leaned in close and she scrambled away, all of a sudden prepared to live on this tiny garden for the rest of her life. "You know, actually, I'm pretty comfortable here? It's roomy if I, like, huddle up and crouch. Yeah, I think I'll just stay here for the foreseeable future, really, there's no need to worry about me ha ha ha—"

"What's the point of being a criminal if you don't fuck around sometimes?"
"Law-san, don't you d-dare discuss e-ethical principles with me right now—OOOMPH!"

He tackled her straight off the ledge.

Stars flickering past her eyelids—

(freefalling wind roaring in his ears)

His fingers gripping her waist and her back—

(harsh blue meeting his eyes and)

weightless

They slammed on top of a train carriage as it zoomed by. Law absorbed the brunt impact, Sophie's elbows digging into his stomach. He rolled over with a sore chuckle, his hands resting on her back. His eyes were closed, savoring the wind and the exhilaration, and he could hear Sophie swearing up and down a pineapple. Her voice thrummed into his chest.

She pushed him away, the wind blowing her silks up like a hurricane. Machinastein flashed by in silvery temples and blurring festival lights. The moons rose high, fat and naked and dusty.

Finally, the train slowed to a halt at Central Station. He jumped down first, unconsciously reaching up and helping Sophie hop down, steadying her as she regained her balance on solid ground. She patted down her clothes and calmly thanked him.

"Law-san?"

He inhaled as she wrenched his shirt collar.

"N-n-next time you th-throw yourself and me—mostly me—into the p-path of a s-speeding l-l- locomotive, how about you give me a proper warning?"

It was the adrenaline, increasing blood circulation and breathing and impulsiveness. Even pirates were at the mercy of biochemistry, for it was only explanation as Law smirked at her pink face and assured her that he was making no promises.

—

"Three… two… one… chug!"

Heat finished first and banged his flagon on the table.

"Unfair!" Anko shouted immediately. "You had less beer than we did!"

"Blah blah blah, bitch to your captain, bitch!"

"Hold on, Anko's right," Penguin interjected. "The winner of a drinking contest is someone who can't even open his mouth all the way. That's only possible if he had less beer to start out with."

"You," Killer pointed calmly, "are a fucking nerd."

Anko was personally offended by Heat's aesthetics. "Why would you do that to yourself?"

"We ain't the ones prancing around in marshmallow costumes!"
"These are clothes outfitted for battle, you uncultured swine." Shachi slammed his palms on the table. "Can you believe this, Anko? Coming from a guy who's late to his job as a birthday party clown?"

"Shut the fuck up and drink!" Heat snapped.

"Don't tell him when to shut the fuck up!" Penguin got to his feet.

Killer stood up as well. "Don't tell my mate what to do."

Penguin's eyes narrowed.


—

Fireworks set off when they left the station. Law's eyes were lit up in blazing colors. Sophie didn't take him as someone who'd enjoy fireworks, but he was watching them with a soft expression. Softer than anything she'd seen before.

…No, that was false. She'd seen that look once, when he threw her decapitated head around a dinner table and laughed with his crew.

Funny how one notices these things only in retrospect.

The fireworks were distant enough that they could still talk to each other without shouting. Sophie asked, because old habits died hard and she wanted to join them so, so badly, once: "How's the crew?"

"Doing well."

"And your wound?" She tapped her thigh, where CP5 shot him.

"Itchy as hell."

"Why, you're a poet and you don't even know it!" At Law's expression, Sophie laughed so hard she snorted, and the ugly pig sound made her laugh even harder. When her tortured gasps for air finally died down, she nudged his elbow. "Hey, Law-san."

"Hm."

"I missed you."

"Of course."

—

They bumped into a forlorn and sweaty polar bear a few blocks down from the station. Bepo took one look at Sophie, who stuttered a hello, and glomped her in a giant bear hug. She looked just as surprised as Law before she vanished into a Death By Fluffy Asphyxiation. Law had to haul him off her.

"This is a glorious way to die," Sophie's voice wheezed from somewhere in the fur.

It was a storm of cyclones, she said. Blew them off track and straight into Machinastein. The next thing she remembered was walking up in the hospital. The island's patrollers bumped into her ship en
route of chasing slavers. They didn't manage to catch them, but they brought her back for first aid. Since they weren't a World Government protectorate, Machinastein had to fend for itself when the slavers attacked.

They were passing by the Civic Hospital when a nurse did a double-take and called, "Miss! Your father's awake!"

At this point, Law would've wished her a good night and left. He didn't care about her father. But dawn was approaching fast, and the Heart Pirates were all set to leave for the next island… they'd only have an hour together, at most…

Law and Bepo glanced at Sophie, who's face was eerily devoid of any emotion. The pirates shared an unspoken look and followed her inside. She remained silent on her way up to his room. She spoke only once to Bepo, and that was to ask if he could stand guard by the door.

"In case anyone tries to kick me and Captain out?"

"In case anyone tries to stop me from committing fratricide," she snarled and stalked inside.

The marine was sitting upright, sipping a bowl of soup. His skin was nearly as dark as Law's and he had wiry black curls: he and Sophie looked nothing alike. Maybe the curls… and if the mother had a lighter complexion…

A bolt of realization crashed through Law.

Ah, he thought, quite stupidly for a man of his intellect, she's adopted.

The marine paused, taking in the sight before him. His expression was a whole cocktail slurry; Law saw some guilt in there, a shot of relief, and a lemony hint of trepidation. What was this? Wasn't this man supposed to be Sophie's most important person? The one she gave up a spot on his crew for?

Sophie was shaking in anger. The look she was giving this man was reserved only for those messing around with her bombs, or Law.

Mostly Law, now that he thought about it.

"Sophie-chan," the marine began.

Her eyes blazed in righteous outrage and he stepped back to enjoy the show.

—

By the tenth round of beers, Penguin and Killer descended into arm-wrestling that neither were sober enough to properly engage in. They kept missing and drunkenly slapped each other's faces, culminating in a karaoke session of Bink's Sake that they wailed together.

Needless to say, when they left the bar after the bacchanalian orgy of glitter and song, Killer muttered, "This never happened. My ship sets sail tonight an' we leave as enemies."

"I look forward t' kickin' yer ass an' maybe drinkin' with y' again sometime in th' future maybe," Penguin slurred with as much dignity as he could muster. "But mostly kickin' yer ass."

"The sentiment is mutual," said Killer, before lifting up his mask and vomiting in the trash. The other two helped him teeter down the street.

The Heart Pirates stared at their retreating backs.
"Oh my god," Penguin whispered.

"He was pretty," Shachi whispered back.

"I'm sooo drunk!" Anko yelled at the sky.

Penguin and Shachi clapped him on the back, laughing so hard they tripped over themselves. The sky was lightening in hues of rosegold and all the temples pointed like arrows up to the stars.

—

With the reflexes of a marine veteran, Hippo dodged or caught every pillow thrown his way. "I know you're upset—"

"Ohhhh, th-that d-doesn't even come close to what I'm f-feeling right now!"

He missed one and it hit his bowl. "Ow! This is hot soup!"

Sophie gasped. "Did I burn you?"

"Yes!"

"NOW Y-YOU KNOW W-WHAT IT FEELS LIKE, MANGO!"

She crawled on the bed and was trying to bite Hippo's shoulder off. Called over by the screams, a nurse rushed into the room. The face of a Chthonic Deity of Vengeance stopped him in his tracks and howled at him to get out.

"Aren't you a doctor?" the nurse pleaded at Law. "Can't you do something?"

Sophie gnawed on Hippo's shoulder like a rabid chipmunk as he screamed bloody murder.

"Sophie." Law pointed at his neck. "Aim for the jugular."

Bepo tapped the nurse's head and opened his jaw wide, showing off his shiny teeth. He left quickly and Bepo shut the door with a quiet, "Kill him, Sophie! Good luck!"

Hippo finally threw Sophie off him and they were both yelling at the top of their lungs, trying to out-shout the other. When she took a second to inhale, he pointed at Law. "And who the hell are you?"

Law gave him a cheerfully indifferent smirk.

"Wait a—I know who you—she told me about you, Trafalgar!"

"I'm flattered," he said in a pleased voice, directing it to Sophie, who mimed vomiting.

"You did this to her!" Hippo snapped. "You brainwashed her with your stupid tattoos and piercings and over-designed pants!"

"I didn't make Sophie do anything that she wasn't already capable of on her own."

"'Make'? Who allowed you to make my kid do anything!?"

"Calm down before you get an aneurysm," Law said evenly and ducked just in time to avoid a bowl slamming into the wall, spilling soup everywhere.

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO, YOU UPSTART LITTLE SHITSTAIN OF A DOCTOR."
He was struggling to get out of bed to throttle Law with his bare hands. "HAND ME A PHONE, I'M GOING TO CALL CIPHER POL AND GET TERESA TO FINISH THE JOB."

"Sensei! D-don't you r-remember w-w-what I told you about him?"

"Like what!?"

"He s-saved my l-l-life!" Sophie shouted as Law replied, "I stuck a needle full of poison in her foot."

He did a little two-step away from Sophie as she attempted to kick him. Hippo swelled into a maroon balloon.

"I'M GOING TO SEND A BOMB SQUAD TO BLOW UP YOUR STUPID SUBMARINE. WHO EVEN SAILS A SUBMARINE? YOU'RE AN IDIOOOOT."

"Do I h-have to tranquilize you?" she roared and pinched his cheek.

"Ow! Sophwie, stahp!"

Well, now he knew where Sophie got it from.

She huffed and smacked him around the head, then stormed back to Law's side on the other end of the room.

Hippo glowered at him. Then, in a strategic move that piqued Law's interest, changed tactics. "That bounty's going to kill you."

"It's technically not Sophie's until they identify her as Gas Mask," Law reasoned, studying Hippo with a lingering smirk.

Sophie crossed her arms over her chest, a defensive reaction.

"And when they do? Sophie, this is hardball. Fifty million is Big Leagues. We both know this bounty isn't based on your own abilities. This means the Marines want you dead as fast as possible. If you had just let me take you back to G-13, none of this would've happened. Lettidore would've been angry, but he wouldn't have killed you like he's going to now!"

Law watched Sophie's expression go from indignation to uncertainty as Hippo continued his verbal onslaught. She hunched her shoulders, making herself smaller. And he was angry, suddenly.

"You don't know that," he interrupted. "It's highly probable they would've executed you on the spot."

Hippo stared at Law, incredulous. "Why are you still here?"

"Whatever you did, it kept you alive," he told Sophie. "That speaks for itself."

She shot him a look of... gratefulness? Then her expression hardened again as she stared down the marine.

"I am not having this conversation with a pirate in the room," Hippo gritted out.

Law studied the marine with thinly veiled distaste. He didn't know what went down between them, but he didn't have to. He could theorize it, with the conflicted look on Sophie's face and the guilt on Hippo's when she entered the room.
"Sophie," Law said, "this man is a hindrance and should be taken care of."

He picked up an empty chair sitting beside Hippo's bed and hefted it.

"Law-san!" ("Law-san!?" Hippo repeated with a choke.) "You are not beating my sensei with a chair!"

"I was thinking about euthanizing him with a lethal injection of sodium thiopental, but the cabinets are locked and I don't have a pick."

"L-L-L-L-Law-san!"

"It'll be quick," he defended. Sophie wrenched the chair away from his hands. "…Fine. Would've gotten messy, anyway. I'll smother him."

She stomped. "Honestly! You're being ridiculous!"

"I have seventy-eight other ways to silence him using the objects in this room. Shall I run them all by you?"

"Holy frick—I mean, n-no, that's—"

"This marine could put my crew in danger." He pointed at Hippo without looking at him.

Sophie shook her head. "M-M-Machinastein is powerful sovereign territory. It's only allied with the W-World Government on a trade pact. It's impossible to contact them, and he has no friends here. You must've realized it by now," she said to Hippo.

He rubbed his brow and shrugged, significantly more tired than his earlier actions. "I'm all but a political prisoner."

There was a gleam in her eye. Retribution, perhaps? But it was shadowed as she turned around.

"This is a waste of—whatever. I'm done. Come on," she muttered, tugging on Law's elbow, and walked over to the door. He allowed her to lead. She probably wouldn't have heard him if he told her to let go, anyway.

"Wait! What happened to the research documents? Are you leaving with the pirates? You can't show it to them, Sophie-chan, they're World Govern—"

"Do you know," Sophie started, and broke off.

Inexplicably Law thought she was going to cry.

But the moment passed, and she didn't, and whatever it was that peeked through the crack, it was gone. She balled her fist around the doorknob and turned around. "Do you know how it felt," she continued, "when the refugee ship left me behind? Do you know alone I was? How scared? It felt like this."

Without another word, she walked out, tugging on Law, and slammed the door.

In the hallway, Bepo woke up from his catnap. Her hands were shaking as she released Law's elbow. She tapped her thigh, jittery, reaching for a cigarette that wasn't there.

"Bad habit," he said.
"I'm f-fine."

"I'm not talking about the nicotine."

_You have a bad habit of losing_, he once told her. Her lip curled. "Sentiment is for idiots? Please, I'm not letting you kill my sensei."

"Right."

She side-eyed him. "I really want to kick you in the shin."

"Why?" Law did a decent impression of acting hurt.

"Because you'd deserve it."

She wasn't wrong, in the grand scheme of things. Sophie noisily exhaled and forced lightness into her voice. "This has been fun and all, but why don't we call it a night?"

Yawning, Bepo seconded that. They took the elevator down to the lobby and slipped past a sleepy receptionist. The plaza outside was silent, except for a few festival-goers straggling home. Sunrise peeked over the buildings.

They were heading in opposite directions. Up the street was the President's temple where Sophie was an honored guest and the pirates were taking the train down to the docks, so they said their goodbyes. Law could tell she was distracted when she only gave Bepo a brief pat on the shoulder. The bear, drowsily lagging behind, was ready to go home, but Law asked Sophie one last question.

"What are your plans now?"

"I have a date with an ice cream cake, actually." Her eyes lit up as she remembered. "It's my birthday, though the cake's probably melted in my room by now…"

"Happy birthday," Law said, and meant it.

"Thanks." She bit her lip. "Um, c-can I stop by tomorrow? I have a bunch of G-13's classified research you'll be interested in. And… and I'd like to say hi to the crew."

Tomorrow.

The Heart Pirates were leaving now.

She made a motion to stuff her hands into her pockets, except she had none. Sophie settled for awkwardly planting her hands on her hips and grinning. She didn't need to bait him with research papers, though it was a nice bonus. She didn't need to pretend to laugh about celebrating her twentieth birthday alone in her room, either.

What did she go through, that would make her miss a pirate?

It startled him, then, because he felt something… sting. Before the Heart Pirates, before Bepo, it was just him, sailing alone through North Blue. He remembered when he lived with a loneliness that seemed like all the oceans in the world couldn't fill.

Sophie was looking at him uncertainly, the false enthusiasm slipping away.

What was another week on Machinastein? His crew wouldn't complain.
When Law spoke again, it wasn't with an ulterior motive, or ill intent, or because it suited his purposes. He just… wanted to.

"Get some sleep, we've got a busy day tomorrow."

It was worth it, when a real, small smile appeared over her face.

—

Bepo and Law returned to the submarine by daybreak. As per the captain's orders, everything was packed and ready to go, and the only thing they waited for was the call to weigh anchor. As Bepo left to spread the news, Law set a handful of crumpled chamomile flowers in the kitchen for Hai Xing, then made for the bathroom.

He studied the mirror, thinking about which scourge to tackle first…

As Law set the razor blade down, he heard a distant 'What!?' and Shachi's jubilant screaming echo down the submarine. He glanced at the washcloth on the wall, blue flickering around his fingers, and signed, here.

The washcloth appeared in his hand.

Trafalgar Law was back.

_to be continued_
When morning came, most of the Heart Pirates were waking up from a drunken stupor in the galley. They blinked groggily and shielded their eyes from the sun shining in from the portholes.

"Who's on laundry today?"

A collective groan answered Law, unified in misery.

He rested his palms on the table. "Is anyone sober enough to get work done?"

Valross raised his hand. "Can you talk a wee bit quieter?" he whispered.

"These young'uns don't know how to handle liquor—" And here, Manta pitched forward and puked into a convenient bucket. "I'm fine," his voice echoed from the bucket. "Doing great."

Law rubbed his forehead. "Anyone seen Shachi or Penguin?"

"Sleeping it off in the engine room, methinks…"

The galley doors slammed open and Anko stumbled in, eyes wild. Kamasu coughed loudly. Valross attempted to hide under Bepo.

Law could sense death nearing. "Get your chores done before you kill anyone."

His only response was an aggravated roar as Anko tried to strangle his crewmates with his boiler suit sleeves. But because they were all incredibly hungover, it resulted in little more than a slap-fest and threats to throw up on each other (and all the talk of throwing up made Manta throw up again). Anko grabbed Valross' hat and furiously scrubbed his face, leaving blotches of ink behind.

"Give that back!"

"Sure!" Anko spat on the hat and threw it on the ground, then stomped on it.

He gave him a reproachful look. "That was uncalled for."

"You drew a dozen dicks on my face! You've turned me into a phallic monster!"

"Oh, yeah," Valross laughed as Kamasu reached for another bottle of rum, accidentally punching Anko in the butt, who yelped and grabbed onto Manta. They all toppled on a sleeping polar bear.

"Once you sober up, get started on laundry. That's an order."

"Aye," they sighed, then started screaming as Bepo rolled around and crushed them to the floor.

Hai Xing was finishing up breakfast. The pot was so big he had to stand on a stool and stir the ladle with both hands. Law glanced at the clock; it was already midmorning. He was so focused on getting his crew in order that he hadn't noticed that time had flown by.

"Hai Xing, take care of them while I'm out."

"I can't promise they won't meet a horrific fate when the apocalypse finally arrives and drags us all back to hell." His grim expression was lit up demonically by the fire of the stove. "…So don't expect much."
"Good man."

Law rubbed his freshly-trimmed goatee as he glanced at Kikoku—he was tempted to leave it behind, it seemed unnecessary—but then he thought of Teresa and hoisted it on his shoulder. He was wearing a clean shirt and jeans, both of which he was… pretty sure he never committed any recent murders in.

"Where ya off to?" Valross wheezed as he pulled himself from Bepo's underbelly.

"He's meeting the little lady."

"Wait for me!" Anko sprung up, then tripped over his shoelace and sprawled on the floor, twitching.

"Just force her to join the goddamn crew; broad's been following us long enough," Kamasu grumbled.

Law was about to leave, but that comment made him pause. "I could explain why that's a foolish move, but it won't make a difference because you're drunk."

"I'm always drunk." He fell on top of Anko to prove his point.

"Aghh! Get off!"

"Who wouldn't feel honored being around such a respectable lot like us?" Valross demanded, then showed everyone the hickey he received last night from his true lady love. There were noises of awe and jealousy. "Eh, Captain?"

"I am not inebriated enough to join this conversation," Law declared.

Hai Xing doled out bowls of soup and tortillas, passing them around the table. Anko slung his arm over Valross' shoulders. "Mate, you're gonna forget about that woman in a week."

"Not true! We're in love!"

"Do you even know her name?"

Valross' nose wrinkled. "Give me a few seconds, it'll come to me…"

He shook his head. "Lovers are temporary. But friends?" Anko rubbed Valross' head, smiling, ink dripping down his eyes like mascara. "Friends are forever." Then he dunked Valross' face in soup with an irate, "Fuck you!"

"Violence is an evil cycle," Bepo observed, then went back to sleeping with his little tail stuck up in the air.

Law slipped out the door before any of his crewmates' voices could drag him back in.

—

When morning came, Sophie was still tossing and turning. She was too excited to sleep. How could she sleep?

In a few hours she'd be seeing the Hearts again. What should she say to them? What did people normally say during reunions? According to Hippo, reunions were to brag about your income and military rank to old Marine Academy classmates whom you hated. Though she didn't think that was applicable for the Heart Pirates. Thinking about Hippo made her want to destroy things, so Sophie
left that thought alone.

What should she wear? Something nice? Something fancy? She could wear her dress from last night, her beautiful golden dress, and thought about how impressed they’d be. Sophie giggled into her fists. 

*Actually, they’re more likely to steal my fancy clothes than be impressed.* She sobered up. *How rude.*

Sophie exhaled into her pillow, then peeked at the clock and groaned. It was so early, still hours until she had to leave for the docks. She was, clearly, trying for a timeframe that would make her seem respectable instead of totally desperate. She rolled over to stare up at the vast array of painted stars on her ceiling.

Unable to pretend sleeping any longer, she got up from the floor, neatly folded her blankets, and padded to the adjoining bathroom.

Showering in record time, she came back and found a tray of food on the desk and the windows open, sunlight washing into the guest bedroom. The steward was making his first rounds for the early risers. After some indecision, Sophie dressed in normal clothes. Which meant thin, flowery fabric appropriate for Machinastein’s hot weather, though it was a touch revealing…

Which was perfectly **fine**, because she was twenty now! This was her first day being twenty and this was going to be the start of a glorious decade of non-teenageness for her. She shimmied into the clothes and gave a small twirl. There were some scars and stretch marks the shirt didn’t cover, but she didn’t care. It was just skin, and it wasn’t like the pirates hadn’t seen worse and it wasn’t like Law was going to stop in his tracks, stupefied at how mature she looked, how twenty years old—

**OR. YOU KNOW. WHATEVER.**

She glanced at the clock and groaned. Not even an hour had passed since she got out of bed. She sat down at her desk, tucking a leg under her.

The food smelt delicious and yet Sophie just poked at it, not feeling hungry. Every time her fork clinked against the plate, the noise reverberated in her ears.

*Was it always this quiet?*

It was a loud kind of silence, a kind that made you want to vocalize any sound to break it, make it seem less empty.

She looked at the clock and, sighing, went back to playing with her food. Her fingers tap-tap-tapped the desk, the only noise in an otherwise silent bedroom. Her eyes wandered to the wardrobe, the leafy green plants, to the bed that she never slept in, and sighed again.

Sophie pushed the plate away. She glanced at the clock again, wishing time would go faster.

---

Law left the docks and took the train into the inner city, the heart of Machinastein. The city was cleaning up after last night’s festivities. Workers picked up trash, streamers, and discarded lanterns. Energetic government employees dashed up and down the Jaguar Temple’s stairs, clutching stacks of paper and shouting into Den Den Mushi.

"Law-san!"

A familiar face ran down the steps. She was dressed like herself today, wearing her signature gloves
and dog tags. Odin's dog tags. Her deerskin satchel was replaced by a backpack. It jingled with every step as she ran up to him, smiling radianty.

"Good moooorning!"

"Where'd you steal those clothes from?" he greeted.

"I bought them, you mango! I'm getting a weekly allowance now. I'm not a captive, so President Ursa's paying me all this stella to do some simple chemistry research for her…"

Stella, printed with a crescent moon and various constellations, was Machinastein's unique currency.

Sophie stood on her tip-toes, peering at him. "What happened to your face?"

"The weather's too warm for a beard."

That was Law Speak for 'my beard ran off to hibernate for the summer, soon to return on the first frost of winter as I, a lone huntsman, journey through the woods', she was certain. "I was just leaving to meet you at the docks." She glanced over his shoulder, left and right. "No one else came?"

"Too hungover." Her expression dimmed. Law found himself saying, "They'll visit when they're awake."

Sophie was satisfied with that and nodded. She shuffled her feet. "So… did you get breakfast yet?"

"Yes."

"Oh, me too," she said quickly. "I'm so full. The food that the Jaguar Temple makes is amazing. Everything about it is amazing. I even brush my teeth twice a day now—"

"I thought I described you pretty well."

"Points for a vague sense of effort."

"And can you make your sword, like… less conspicuously 'I'm six-foot-tall and could accidentally take out your eyeballs without knowing it'?"

"I don't need Kikoku to take out someone's eyes."

"Humor the poor chemist? Please?"

He swung Kikoku off his shoulders and clutched it like a walking stick. He waved at himself, as though to ask, 'better?'

She looked him over. The shawl cast a long shadow over his eyes. It cut over the bridge of his nose, across the plane of his lips, and vanished into the dark, secret line of his neck. She imagined pressing her thumb there and watching his shadow bleed on her skin.
"Perfectly adequate." Sophie clutched the straps of her backpack, knuckles biting down. "We're heading there."

Law's gaze followed to where her finger pointed.

Above the cityscape stood a collection of small, irregular pyramids—one was entirely wooden and seemed to be built from plants; others had giant telescopes attached to the top. They were connected by stairs or walkways to form a mega-pyramid, where it is said that the gods brought down the theory of numbers and delivered humanity into the age of reason: Machinastein University.

"Look," Sophie began, and obviously couldn't come up with a good follow-through for what was so great for him to look at, so she finished weakly, "It's… got… character?"

He twisted a microscope. The eyepiece made a nasty creaking sound.

Law inspected the outdated centrifuges, incubators, and water baths. He peered inside empty cabinets and Sophie was glad she spent those three days getting the moths out. She toed a blotchy pink stain on the cement floor. Accidental spill. A derivative of rhodamine, maybe.

"To be fair, they tried to send me to the morgue's lab until I pitched a fit and set the corpses on fire. Then they assigned me this room. It's the only lab space available."

"I recall passing by three empty labs on his way here."

"Shows how much they love sticking it to the World Government." She worried her lip. "I told them I renounced my old titles, but they didn't care."

"Say 'Sengoku eats shit' in front of them," he suggested.

Sophie choked on her spit.

"Too soon?"

"L-let's just get started." She turned around, but he heard her mutter 'shut your pineapple' under her breath.

They stood in the basement of the College of Chemistry. It might've been a big space once, but most of it was covered with boxes or else boarded off. The only visible area was so small that—aside from the various lab equipment—there was only room for one table in the middle. There was also only one window, but it was so scratched he couldn't see the blue sky outside.

He ran a finger along the counter and examined it. Not a speck of dust, but that was certainly because of Sophie. He'd been in his share of shitty labs and this wasn't a problem to work in; more of a letdown, really, given Machinastein University's reputation.

Sophie produced several fat folders from her backpack. "Memorize these. Seeing as how we don't have any samples or bloodwork, I'm going to recreate the gas. The ingredients I already bought."

She lightly kicked the cardboard boxes. "Then we have to expose it to test subjects. Rats, of course."

"Hm."

"Law-san."

"I'll decide when we get to that stage."
"Law-san."

"I'm sure this country has prisoners—"

She clutched her chest. "Oh my god."

"It's too early in your academic career to rule out human experimentation."

Sophie shared a similar look to Manta this morning, right before he puked in a bucket. "Okay, one thing at a time, Sophie," he heard her muttering under her breath.

Law rummaged through the folder. All the papers were about Vira. "Is this the only thing you took from G-13?" It certainly wasn't worth fifty million beli…

"Oh, no… there's way more research, but I hid them. In case."

Law mentally tapped his foot. Fine. He could wait.

As he flipped through the folder, he came across a stack of photos. Law studied the first photo, which was just of marines saluting the World Government flag, and spread them on the table.

It was one bloody scene after another. Bodies pumped full of bullets. Marines dying sick on cots. Bits and pieces of revolutionaries. Shifting through those, he came across more candid mementos of the Viran War. Soldiers huddled around a campfire, slurping noodles out of paper cups. A patrol officer smoking while on duty. Marines kicking a rock between two makeshift goal posts. Another of the medics, their faces covered with white masks, frozen in motion as they carried in wounded soldiers. He recognized her sensei in the forefront.

There was one of a group of soldiers making funny faces at the Cameko Mushi. Law stopped on it, amused, then noticed what she scribbled at the bottom.

21 3 Alpha. K.I.A.

Her platoon was huddled together like old buddies. This was clearly before the toll of the war hit, before their numbers dwindled to one. He'd never seen her in military fatigues before. She stood a little bit apart from the rest, her long yellow hair pulled in a ponytail. He'd forgotten she used to have long hair. She was the only solder not smiling, those still, somber eyes staring at something he couldn't see. She looked… different, somehow… more detached, more…

Sophie—real, present Sophie—slammed her hand over the photographs.

"Th-these aren't important," she said with a short, fast laugh, and tucked them in her backpack. Law tried to reconcile the soldier with the girl standing in front of him, all nervous twitches and tapping fingers.

"Were you a loner or something?"

She tossed him a white lab coat before tugging one on herself. "Absolutely not. My platoon loved me."

"Really?"

"You act like that's hard to believe."

"I'm saying it's hard to believe."
Fine, she lied. Whatever. "What do you care, anyway?"

Law shrugged. Huffing, she bent her head over a pile of documents. She tried working like that for a few minutes, then became frustrated with the bangs falling across her eyes. Sophie yanked her hair in a bushy ponytail. He kicked his legs on the table, thinking back to the soldier in the photo, waves of neat yellow curls spilling beneath her helmet.

"They were all killed in action except for you," he voiced, and she threw her quill on the desk.

"Your past traumas do not allow you to act this impediment, Law-san."

"Impertinent."

"What?" she snapped.

"Never mind. You're asking me for help on this project; I'm merely curious."

"Law-kun," Sophie simpered, batting her eyelashes, "I had no idea how much you care about me."

"I'm invested in the well-being of all my future experiments."

She rubbed her goosebumps. "Never say that again."

"I have a feeling that when I read the death records, I'll find your platoon listed among those who died when G-13 released PSNOHC11—"

She slammed her hand on the table. The silence that followed was almost painful.

"You don't bother me about this and I won't bother you about Flevance," she said hotly. "Okay?"

Sophie would later reflect upon this moment with bitter irony. Two people who went through similar experiences, and their first instinct was to shut each other out. Had they made an effort to try, maybe she would've taken her first step to healing—or some semblance of it—that much sooner. Maybe he would've gotten better at this 'vulnerability garbage,' he'd eventually confide, tracing circles behind her ear… but, of course, this would not happen until much further down the road.

"Okay?" she demanded again.

Law thought about telling her that his demons hadn't let him sleep for fourteen years. But she looked so close to crying, and it was too early in the morning to deal with that.

"Okay."

—

Sophie read through a few more documents, scribbled down some notes, and announced she was taking a smoke break. Law grunted. He was so focused on reading he didn't look up as her footsteps left the basement.

She ordered breakfast at a flowery café next to the Astronomy College and took her time burning through a pack of cigarettes.

One in half a million.

Those were the odds of someone surviving Amber Lead. Out of everyone at Flevance, it had to be
the boy who'd grow up to be a pirate. It was sad. Every atom of common sense in her body told her Law had a sad, sad story. But still, Sophie felt worse for the ghosts who could only live on in the memories of a ruthless killer. How much would \textit{that} suck?

Thank pineapples she bluffed her way out of that. It'd hit her in a split-second, the certainty that the White Town was a subject Law did not want to talk about. And regardless of her ultimatum, neither did she. Listening to him recount the riots and infected corpses burning in the streets wasn't going to help her sleep better.

One in half a million. Not odds she wanted to bet on.

She focused on the smoke curling around her teeth, the firm weight of her feet on the earth. Why were moments like these harder than actual combat? Maybe this was a war in itself. But even as she thought it, that didn't quite make sense to Sophie. The war had been over for weeks.

When she arrived in the basement, Law was pacing around the lab, leafing through papers.

"Operation: Red Sky at Morning."

"Clever, isn't it?" she replied blandly. "At least it's not Strangways Sophie Sickness. Marines are suckers for a good alliteration."

"It was released on the battlefield eighty-five days into the war. Word was slow to arrive to the center of no man's land, the Blithe District. They had done no safety trials on PSNOH—fuck, that name is a mouthful—on Red Sky and its effects reached further than anyone anticipated. For every revolutionary that died, two marines were killed by the gas." He flipped the page. "Unfortunately, as thunderstorms and hurricanes persisted in the last weeks of the war, any effort to bury the dead bodies was… impeded."

Sophie straightened out her papers.

"And the two who toppled the Viran monarchy?" He flipped two photos between his fingers. "First off, the koala can't be older than you."

A photo of a furious woman, blood splashed across her face. \textit{Fishman Karate practitioner, Koala. Highly dangerous. Kill on sight.}

A blurry photo of a young man shadowed by dust. \textit{Chief of Staff, Sabo. Do not engage.}

"\textit{First off, you superhumans are in a league of your own.}" She pointed at the Chief of Staff. "I saw him wipe out an entire regiment on his own. As for the koala? She trapped my unit in a skirmish that gave me this." Sophie raised her left arm and pointed at a pale scar running down her tricep. "I don't even know how I got away."

She really didn't. There were some things she couldn't remember about Vira. Blank gaps in her memory, like someone had neatly cut them out with scissors.

"\textit{Sabo. Koala. What stupid names.}" Sophie cast the photos a hateful gaze. It was a nice visage, he had to admit.

They read on in silence, though every once in a while, Law would ask for clarification on a confusing formula and Sophie would gauge his opinion on the symptoms of the sickness.

Around mid-afternoon, they discovered the basement also functioned as a storage unit. Several college students burst in, carrying folded lanterns and jaguar statues. With the reflexes of a startled
mongoose, Sophie chucked her shawl over Law's head and explained that he was a sickly old doctor, infected with disgusting sores, *do not go near him or you'll turn into a wrinkled zombie*. She kicked him under the table, and he glared at her and gave a rasping cough for effect. The students speedily organized the leftover festival decorations and left. One med student cast a lingering glance at Law and she signed something in the air as she left the basement.

"You know," she said a while later, "this is the longest we've ever sat in peace and quiet together without one of us being unconscious." He was quiet. "Law-san?" she prodded.

Sharp grey eyes flicked up, irritation glinting. "What?"

Sophie glared back. "I thought you'd get another dumb tattoo while I was away. Something to remember me by."

"You know what they say about fools, Sophie."

"We're gonna die young and miserable?"

"I wouldn't know; I'm not a fool," he said, and went back to studying.

She stabbed the paper with her quill. *Terrible meanie durian booger.*

The material was so lengthy and complicated not even the Terrible Meanie Durian Booger finished it by the end of the day. He folded the notes he'd written and hoisted Kikoku over his shoulder. "See you tomorrow."

Sophie watched him pack up, tongue-tied and wracked with nerves. Weren't the Heart Pirates stopping by? *(Say something.)* Could she visit them on the submarine? *(Say something!)* Was he…

"See you…"

The door had swung shut and he was gone. He didn't even look at her, but her voice was so soft she doubted he heard. There was no reason to take it to heart. Law was the kind of person who was always focused on something. Important things. Like tweezing his stupid nose hairs.

Sophie contemplated how loud the silence was with the absence of papers flipping, soft sighs, fingers tapping on wood…

Shoot, she forgot to tell Law to cover his face!

…Oh, well. She'd worry about it if she saw him being chased across campus by teachers with flaming pitchforks.

——

In her guest bedroom, with all its guest chairs and guest bed and fake homeliness, Sophie paced and flipped through a folder on PSNOHC11. Law was right; that name was a mouthful. Red Sky, then. Catchy. Subtly threatening. She still wanted to read more, jot down notes for him, but it only took a few minutes for her eyes to start glazing over. Perhaps she'd be in the mood for studying in the library, or a busy café… but found that her body wouldn't move.

*I should've gone with him.*

"Don't be silly," Sophie scolded, slapping herself twice in the face.

She had so many more things to do! She had to find a cure for Red Sky, and she had to deal with the
whole Hippo thing, and the Marines would be searching for Gas Mask, which was her, and they’d catch onto that sooner or later, and she had to find Nellie and Sid, and—

Her legs collapsed under her.

It took a few seconds for her to register that she was sitting on the floor, and sitting definitely wasn’t on her to-do list, and what was she doing? She should be getting up and getting to work.

But… but she just couldn’t muster up any energy…

Sophie curled up on the floor. Odin’s dog tags slid out of her neckline and onto the rug, gleaming in front of her eyes. Did Lisbeth ever feel like this? She must have. All alone in her ivory tower, so quiet she felt like suffocating.

The thought was too heavy, too sad, so she squeezed her eyes shut and wished it would be tomorrow. Tomorrow, as Sophie used to think to herself in G-13, always seemed better than today.

It was like the more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

—

Someone was in the bedroom.

She knew this because they tripped over her.

Several more voices, male, intruders. Sophie wasn’t even half awake yet, but a shriek rose from her throat and she grabbed the nearest object—an aloe vera plant—and hurled it at the black mass standing above her.

"Fuck, my eye!"

Screaming bloody murder, she scrambled to her feet and frantically searched for another weapon.

"She’s gonna wake the whole Temple! Someone shut her up!"

That only made her scream louder. She aimed a punch at a silhouette moving towards her and felt something soft collide with her knuckles ("Shit, my other eye!"). Where was her lighter? She put it on the bed before she went to sleep—

The fire hissed alive as she smacked into something solid and two hands gripped her shoulders. Sophie squinted at the doctor in front of her, illuminated by the little flame in her hand.

"Hey," Law said. "I told you we’d visit later."

Sophie blinked dumbly. "You… your shoes better be clean." Out of nowhere, something hit her in the face. "Ow!"

"Happy birthday!" chirped Shachi’s voice.

She picked up the cup of pudding. She didn’t like licorice flavor…

Sophie lit a candle and soft light washed over the pirates awkwardly crowding around her room. They stared at the stars painted on her ceiling, the enormous bed, and the luxurious, flower-patterned carpet. Sophie, however, was staring at the pirates, a little bit dazed, a little bit in awe. Shachi, Anko (nursing two bruised eyes), Bepo, and Law… oh, and Hai Xing in the corner; she almost didn’t see him, he blended into the curtains so well.
She barely got an incredulous breath in before Shachi tackled her in a hug. "Dude, your hair," he yelped, lifting up her curls and squinting at the roots. "Was it yellow before?"

"I c-cut and dyed it black so you guys wouldn't be able to find me. L-lot of good it did," she grumped as Shachi snickered. Seeing him smile made the tight, anxious knot in her chest lessen.

She swept him off his feet in a tight hug. Shachi hacked up a little bit of dinner.

"Oh, sorry!" She set him on his feet. "How did you know this was my room?"

"We didn't. There are about," he counted on his fingers, "seven people who are gonna wake up with killer headaches tomorrow."

Anko bounded forward. "Fifty million! Fight me!"

Sophie smacked him away in alarm.

"She just did," Law pointed out.

"That doesn't count! It was very dark and you threw a plant at me!"

"Shhhh! You deserved that for invading my room. Be grateful it wasn't the cannabis plant, that thing is very heavy."

Anko only focused on the last part. "There's weed? Here?"

_She gave the pirate standing beside her a weird look. "Are you… sniffing me?"

Shachi went on a coughing spree and set her hair down. Then it was Bepo's turn to hug her. It was so cute Sophie had a nosebleed and had to sit on the bed.

"Oh, that hasn't happened in a while."

"Sophie-chan, you have a problem."

"A-a-adaptive th-therapy. I just need more h-h-hugs from Bepo-san and I'll be fine…"

"Pass." Bepo nervously watched Sophie stuff tissues up her nose to stem the bleeding.

Shachi was investigating the nightstand's drawers. "Sophie-chan, you wouldn't happen to have a couple thousand spare beli? We kinda bet on your life and lost, so Hai Xing has all our money."

"…Who came here to hassle me for money, raise your hand."

Two hands and a polar bear paw went into the air. Law stuck his hands in his pockets and voiced, "My intentions are pure. As always."

"Captain lost five thousand beli," Bepo said cheerily.

Law gave him a long, long look. "Only by virtue of our friendship will I refrain from calling you a traitor."

"I know." Bepo patted him on the head.

Sophie glared at Hai Xing. "I get fifty percent. Thanks for your hard work."

"Five." Apparently his gloominess didn't offset his business acumen.
"Thirty."

"Five and a cup of pudding."

Five percent must still be a lot, thought Sophie, who used to think finances was some sort of witchcraft done by goblins. "Done!" She then proceeded to examine the measly amount of beli in her palm with a sigh. She glanced at the pirates, a thought occurring to her. "Is Penguin-san coming?"

"What?" Shachi pretended like he hadn't heard, then thought better of it. "Oh, uh, he had some stuff to do."

"Like skulking in the engine room," Anko corrected. "He'll be fine tomorrow."

She felt a twinge in her chest. That sounded familiar.

But Shachi distracted her by producing a pack of beer bottles. He flopped on the floor. "Cheers!"

Sure, go ahead, make yourselves at home… pirates, honestly. Sophie sat beside Shachi and Anko quickly followed, pushing Hai Xing away so he could sit on her other side.

The redhead cracked open a cold beer and handed it to her. "How old are you now?"

"Twenty and one day." She raised a brow at Shachi's bemused expression. "What?"

"For some reason I thought you'd be older."

"I am still filled with the burning passion of youth."

Anko flipped his bottle cap in the air. "Cap's twenty-four."

She hid a smile. "Gross."

"Can you believe this brat?" Law asked Hai Xing, who was twenty-five. The cook muttered 'She has a point', which Law chose to ignore.

Sophie set the candle in the middle of the circle. When they were all settled in, Shachi clapped his hands. "Sooooo, tell us how you kicked the shit out of G-13!"

"You can r-read about it in the papers. It's b-boring." She firmly waved away their protests. "I wanna hear about you guys! Tell me everything that happened while I was gone."

It didn't take much cajoling for them to start bragging about their escapades. Anko grabbed Hai Xing in a headlock and reenacted how their captain took out some guy's eyeball, then Bepo tried to rescue Hai Xing from a cackling Anko, and it somehow ended up as a mock duel for Hai Xing's maiden honor. Shachi did a dramatic retelling of a drinking match against a bunch of Kid Pirates, featuring impromptu karaoke and several air-guitar solos. Sophie was a good audience; she gasped in shock and clapped enthusiastically at all the right parts.

As the night wore on, the circle became a lopsided heptagon. Sophie held the limit to two beers and spent the rest of the night drinking water. Reading about organophosphates while hungover didn't seem like a fun idea, and she wasn't a heavyweight like… well… all the pirates, apparently.

Shachi drunkenly did impressions of Gold Roger, which consisted of horrific squawking noises and insisting that's how he scared off his enemies. Anko disagreed and had to deal with Shachi demonstrating how Gold Roger would fart on his helmsman. Giggling so hard water came out of her nose, she leaned her head against Hai Xing's shoulder. He tried to shift away, but she clung onto him
and he gave a morose sigh and accepted his fate.

"Hai Xing-san, how'd you get those scars on your forehead?"

"Birthmark."

Oh. She'd hoped for something more interesting.

They talked for hours, until all the beer bottles were empty and yawns caught them between every sentence. Bepo was already asleep on the rug. She invited them to sleep over, complimentary king-sized bed included. They were suspicious, but she assured them nothing was wrong with it, it was too soft for her taste. She preferred the floor.

"Anko, go sleep in the bathroom," Shachi groaned.

"I don't wanna. Move over." He squished beside Shachi, kicking Hai Xing further down the bed.

Sophie blew the candle out. She sat on the rug, cross-legged beside the Law-shaped silhouette. He was lying on his back, but she didn't think he was sleeping or inebriated. She took off her gloves and rolled an empty beer glass in her hands, the glass warming up under her skin. *I should tell him how awesome his crew is,* she admitted humbly. *Just do it, Sophie. I believe in you. Take a deep breath and pretend you're talking to Nellie-san…*

"You didn't have to come along," she mumbled, and wanted to cover her face. It was dark, so she did.

"I wanted to."

"…I didn't hide my research in this room."

"Damn. My whole evening's gone to waste."

"Oh…"

Law quirked an eyebrow at her shadow. "That was a joke."

"Oh," she said again, mostly annoyed. "Well. Good."

There came something like a soft chuckle.

Sophie kept rolling the beer bottle in her hands, and then said, "I, uh. I killed a marine, at G-13. Not the first person I've killed, but—first marine, yeah."

"Huh," Law said quietly. Then, "How'd it feel?" Which sort of very sadistic of him.

"I did it with a gun, so I didn't technically feel anything. One shot, clean through the head."

"You know that's not what I meant."

She pressed the cool bottom of the glass bottle to her forehead. "Yeah."

"We do what we have to do, to survive," he said. She thought she saw the corner of his mouth quirk up. "Or does it mean less coming from a pirate?"

She thought about it, then shrugged with a yawn. "I don't know. I think it's meaningless in general, sort of," she mumbled, wobbling to her feet, feeling so tired she could sleep for years. "I'm not a
marine, and G-13 isn't a part of me anymore. It all means nothing now, so."

"Right," Law said, after a pause.

"Right," Sophie agreed, and then, the heel of her foot met the slippery surface of a stray bottle.

He shot up and caught her by the waist.

She ended up straddling him, palms braced on his chest to steady herself, and she was so awake, she had never been more awake.

Sophie recalled the time that she hugged him on the deck of the submarine, when for all she knew she'd never see him again. That earned her total bragging rights. Who else had hugged the Surgeon of Death and not gotten shanked for it? She recalled the sunshine on the deck, his sigh as he made a measly attempt to hug her back. It was actually quite sweet, how chaste and platonic the embrace was.

But now, now his hands—which gripped her painfully in his haste to catch her—relaxed against the line of her bare stomach, unimpeded by fabric. The width of his hand, the slow rise of his chest, made her suddenly impressed by the difference between twenty and twenty-four.

"Well." His voice was soft, to not wake his crew. "You've thrown subtlety out the window."

"Hey, I almost died there." She was mesmerized by the tenor of his heartbeat against her disfigured palms. Or was that her own heart?

"Your lack of warrior instinct is astonishing."

"I'm impaired."

"Right."

This was so inappropriate. This was inappropriate and he was a smelly pirate and his fingers were brushing the hem of her shirt—

She kneeled there, listening to her heart that was maybe his or maybe both of theirs, able to feel with every fiber of her being that she stood at the middle of a crossroads. And for an instant, for the barest instant she gave in and tilted forward, pressing gently over his chest—but the urge passed as quickly as it came.

She reached through the darkness to where she estimated Law's head was and clumsily patted his soft hair. "All clear. No lice."

He let go of her waist. "Appreciate that," he murmured, and there was a cool weight on her wrists as he moved her arms away from him. She heard the rustle of denim as his shadow maneuvered away from her, and then his soft footsteps as he stepped around Bepo to sleep on the other side of the room.

After a long silence, Sophie curled up in the spot he'd just occupied. She listened to the pirates' deep breathing, lost in slumber. She tried to breathe in sync with them to calm her racing heart and felt a little bit miserable, even if she knew she walked on the right road.

*You know what they say about fools, Sophie.*

She inched towards Bepo's body heat and, thankfully, sleep came to greet her with a swift beat of its
Sophie woke up poised to scream.

Took a few seconds to calm down. Breathe. Breathe.

She realized she was shivering. Where had Bepo gone? She rose slowly, peeling back the hair matted to her face, and a blanket slid off her shoulders. Did she cover herself with a blanket before she fell asleep? She couldn’t remember…

Law was also missing, but he’d left his nodachi and hat on her desk.

On her bed, Shachi’s legs were tangled around Anko’s, who was almost falling off the edge, and Hai Xing was curled up between them in a blanket cocoon. A fierce, warm feeling swelled in her chest. She rubbed it. Indigestion?

Sophie found the licorice pudding Shachi had bought for her. She peeled the lid off, picked up the spoon that came with it, and took a bite.

Ugh. She gagged. Disgusting.

She examined the cup, thinking back to all those birthdays she spent locked in her laboratory, rushing to meet another project deadline.

Sophie took more small bites, almost vomiting each time, and padded quietly to the window. She opened the curtains a bit, careful to not disturb the pirates. The sky was bluer and brighter than she expected; she’d slept far longer than normal… than for the past few months, actually. Huh.

Her gaze fell to the garden terrace below and she spotted a shock of white fur among the plants. Bepo stood by the terrace’s edge. And there was Law, standing beside him. Plumerias, red orchids, and trumpet flowers surrounded the two in an ocean of color. They looked so calm, facing the early morning sun.

From this angle, it almost looked like they were laughing…

But she wasn’t tempted to join them, not at all. She was a professional who was focused only on the job. With the determination of your unfriendly neighborhood buzzkill, Sophie opened the window and stuck her head out, calling, "Law-san! Stop having a good time and let’s get to work!"

They spent the rest of the day holed up in the basement. At midday, Shachi and Bepo came to check the ventilation. Well, Shachi did and Bepo was just curious. Law wanted to secure this small, dirty room before anyone tried to make a deadly chemical gas and ended up poisoning the entire island.

It took Shachi and Bepo’s combined efforts to yank open the little window. It’d been glued shut by centuries of rust and cobwebs, which—to Sophie’s horror—cascaded all over the floor. They knocked aside the tower of boxes to get to the air ducts, which sent another layer of dust to the floor. The horror! She zipped out and came back armed with a mop, broom, bucket, several rolls of paper towels, and a crazed glint in her eyes. Her berserk cleaning forced the pirates outside. They stood in front of the door, ordered to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. Bepo covered himself in her fine silks.
Several students came down to the basement, looking to store their lab materials. They stared at the mummified polar bear, then at the other two with books raised over their faces. *How conspicuous.* "What's going on?"

There came a loud *bang* and a maniacal cackle.

The tall one didn't lower his book. "A cleaning witch is on a rampage."

"Should we be worried?"

"Yes," said the shorter one.

"Come back later. We'll be done by then."

They stared at the polar bear. It *was* a polar bear, no matter how many layers of silk it wrapped around itself.

"Woof," said Bepo.

---

"Okay." Sophie clapped her book shut. "I'm ready to recreate Red Sky."

"No." Law set down his quill. "You haven't eaten yet and your hands are shaking."

Oh. So they were.

The window was a hazy dark grey, which meant it was close to sundown. It was already so late? And this dull ache she'd been feeling for the past three hours… yes, that was definitely her stomach attempting to devour itself out of hunger…

Simultaneously, their stomachs gave a loud whine. Law grimaced. He acted cool, but his organs betrayed him.

"Food it is," Sophie agreed readily, cleaning up the papers and ink jars.

He followed her out the University and into an area of the island he'd not yet visited: the night market. Though the evening came with a cooling ocean breeze, the packed crowd, sizzling food, and bright lights made up the difference. Sophie pulled her hair into a ponytail, already sweating.

Law got himself some food and a newspaper. She sprang forward before he could pay. "I got it. As thanks for helping out."

He motioned at the amount of money stacked on the vendor's stand. "That's too much."

"Eh… they'll give me change…"

He rolled his eyes and rifflled through her money. The amount of zeroes surprised Law. If this is what she was earning after a week… what she could make annually was enough for her to live in comfort on Machinastein. Far better than some inconsistent… pirate income.

His mouth tightened into a line. He counted, and gave the exact amount to the vendor.

"Invest in a wallet," he advised, giving the rest back to her. She stuffed it in the back pocket of her tiny shorts. It begged the question how she could fit anything in there.
"Oh, I'm fine."

"Says the ideal victim of a pickpocket."

"I was once called a young Vegapunk; do you really think a simple thief—" She turned to see Law holding a wad of cash between two fingers. Her cash. Sophie digested this. "…Did you just grope me? I didn't even feel that."

Law smacked the stella on her forehead and continued walking.

He spread open the World Economic Journal. 'Mock Town's Hard Knocks by Pirates Running Amok!' shouted the title. Bellamy Pirates thrown into disarray by an upstart rookie, Straw Hat Luffy… and a lively appearance by Fire Fist Ace, who was searching for a Whitebeard pirate gone rogue…

Sophie strode beside him, mouth covered primly as she munched on chili-covered cricket, so she could read over his arm.

He perused a little further (brushing aside articles that sang praises to Black Cage Hina for her recent battles) and read in a tiny paragraph on the bottom of page six—Sengoku called a meeting of Shichibukai at HQ to discuss Crocodile's empty seat, though further information had yet to be released.

Disgust curdled in his chest. He loathed the name Shichibukai, loathed what it represented. The World Government was desperate for leverage against Whitebeard and the Revolutionaries, even if it meant hiring pirates and turning a blind eye to the goddamn havoc they caused anyway. He was fucking sick of this, of the Marines who hated all pirates but made deals with them when no one was looking, who said that they had the unequivocal right to decide whether a murderer was a criminal or not. At least Sophie, when she still loved the Government, had been honest in her beliefs to the point of cussing him out to his face.

'Reports of unexpected attendants Hawk Eyes Mihawk and the Heavenly Yaksha Doflamingo…' What a spectacular fucking operation the World Government ran. To support the biggest black market in the world and not even know it. That took a special kind of stupidity.

"Ya know how Idyll is Whitebeard territory?"

Sophie's voice broke through his thoughts. Somehow, meeting her eager gaze made his livid thoughts decrease to a simmer. She waited until he nodded and grinned, kebab stick jauntily tilted between her teeth. "Well…"

"Fire Fist Ace?" he asked a few minutes later, when she finished recollecting her idyll interlude.

"Shiny, Beautiful, Fire God Ace-san," Sophie corrected. "A deity who has descended from the heavens to grace us unworthy mortals with his magnificent shoulders."

Law was unfazed. "Right. That Ace."

She finished off three tamales and licked her fingers clean. "Why are all the hot ones also infamous criminals? I mean, have you seen Whitey Bay's bounty poster! Whitebeard is so lucky, he gets Whitey Bay and Hot Fire God and all the pretty pirates…"

"Whitebeard runs a pirate fleet, not a harem."

Her eyes glittered. "Do you think he'd be willing to branch out his profession?"
"Give it a try," he supported. "Less enemies for me."

They squeezed through the most crowded area of the marketplace, so she was pressed up against his arm and he was careful to avoid her sandaled feet, toes small against the strappings. She was warm and though it was a hot night, Law couldn’t muster up the energy to move away. He had to keep a close eye on her backpack, after all. Thieves were everywhere.

Case in point, he took a handful of her avocado snack.

"Dirty fingers." She slapped his hand away. "Anyway, while I do think Ace-san would make a great addition to Whitebeard's harem, he is actually quite terrifying."

"That so?" He stole another avocado slice.

"He can blow things up with his mind, Law-san."

"No, he can't."

"And he has freckles! Thirty-two of them. I counted."

He looked at the sky long-sufferingly. "I did nothing to deserve this."

"You poisoned me," she reminded. "And stop stealing my avocado!"

"We both agree that I've made up for that." He stole another one, finishing off the rest of her snack. She let him and gave a loud, laughing scoff.

"Not until you're lying on your death bed will I forgive you," Sophie said with a mildly threatening giggle and disentangled herself from his arm to throw away their food wrappings. With her absence, his shirt sleeve clung uncomfortably to his skin.

He absently wondered in what situation Sophie would know how many freckles Fire Fist had. Then he caught himself. No, he didn't care about the circumstances that involved Sophie and Fire First. It was normal to ponder about the adventures she had when she was gone, now that she was finally back. She'd talk his ear off, anyway; all he had to do was make some vague suggestion that he was interested, and really, that wouldn't be hard to do…

"Captain!"

Shachi and Penguin emerged through the crowd, munching on iguana tails. Hai Xing lagged behind them, arms laden with groceries. Law raised his arm in greeting.

"Didn't expect to see you here, Cap." Penguin grinned. "Did something good happen?"

Law's expression immediately righted itself back into cool neutrality. "It's nothing."

"Hi!" Sophie bounded back, grinning toothily. "The whole gang's here! Hai Xing-san, do you want some fish?" She offered him a bite of her fried tilapia.

"I have enough fish in me already," he replied.

She'd get him to smile. One day. Even if she had to pry his jaws open herself. "There's something very mysterious about you, but I can't put my finger on it. Penguin-san! How've you—"

"See you at home," Penguin said to the others.
"Penguin-san—"

He shot her a glare, then quickly made his way down the street. Sophie blinked after him, then at the pirates, one finger pointing at herself. An invisible question mark appeared over her head.

"That's your cue," urged Shachi.

"The power of friendship," said Hai Xing. Sophie waited for him to finish. He shrugged. "That's all I got."

She squared her shoulders. "I am still expecting that pudding!" she yelled at Hai Xing, and tore after Penguin.

She shouted his name. Yep, definitely ignoring her. She chased after the bouncing red pom-pom through the crowd, yelping every time someone stepped on her feet. Sophie burped and threw up a little bit in her mouth. This level of suffering wasn't fair! She was too full to do a chase scene!

"Penguin-san! Waaait!"

—

There were only two things Penguin knew about the patient: she stole his captain's favorite scalpel, and had an odd fascination with mops.

No one could pay him to give less of a damn.

(He'd take the money anyway, but.

Still.)

When Crawfish Island was burning, when she was sinking into the coldness of the sea, he wove his arms around her like a net and scooped her back to the surface. He once went dumpster diving to find that scalpel, and, really, he thought, flinging the half-drowned girl on the sand, isn't this basically the same thing?

Captain called her 'the chemist', so Penguin did the same. He thought her last name was apt: Strangways. A stranger in the midst of his family. A transient amusement.

He hoped she'd be gone by morning.

But then the chemist killed a World Noble. And then she blew up a bar on Kunlun. And then he became used to seeing her face across the table, hearing her stutters, and he was yelling Strangways before he realized it. And then, and then, and then. He even let her borrow his own shirt, the one he's had forever and probably smelled a little funky, but it was his own, and he didn't even mind.

So, yeah, maybe he didn't think she'd leave. Maybe he thought joining the Heart Pirates was the greatest thing since the invention of tiny marshmallows in hot chocolate.

So maybe that's why he didn't really get it at first, and it only settled in when he tried to think back to the last thing he said to her, and couldn’t remember.

It wasn't fair. Strangways could've woken him up, waved goodbye, given one of her quick sneers to let him know everything was going to be okay. But she didn't do any of that. She just packed up what few belongings she had, snuck out while everyone was asleep, and—left.
Maybe this was a punishment.

Anko, that shithead, started a rumor that Captain was seeing ghosts. Well, he sometimes did see ghosts, but that had mostly to do with a really shit childhood and the lack of a proper therapist. Anko mentioned him chasing after Strangways, or the ghost of her, or the not-ghost of her, and Shachi laughed like he hadn't begged Captain to go back to Idyll Island and then bawled in the engine room until Penguin had to lock him outside.

So when it came down to it, when he saw her standing in the middle of the night market on Avocado Ave, he stomped away. Fast in anger, then faster in mortification. But, much like death itself, that did not deter Sophie.

"Excuse me—coming through—I'M PEEING MY PANTS, LET ME THROUGH—"

"Stop following me!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Are you angry?"

He walked faster. Sophie chucked her fried tilapia at him. It bounced off his hat.

Penguin was understandably exasperated. "Leave me alone!"

"I'm not following you! I am coincidentally going the same way that you are! You're very vain for a man of your stature!"

Penguin was aghast. "I'm taller than average!"

"Are not!"

"Are too! Where are you even going?" he demanded quickly, having had the last word in.

"Uhhhh… there!" Scrambling, Sophie pointed at the first shop she saw. Unfortunately, they'd reached the red-light area of Machinastein.

"…You're going to an adult sex store."

She floundered. "You don't know me! I have a killer sex life!"

Penguin huffed knowingly. "Sophie, you are probably the only virgin on this street."

"THERE'S ALSO YOU."

"SHUT UP."

"STOP RUNNING AWAY AND I'LL STOP FOLLOWING YOU."

He spun and pointed at her victoriously. "Ah ha! She admits it!"

He braked so fast she almost crashed into him. She avoided him at the last moment and then slipped on a banana peel, oh my god, this actually happens!?

Penguin panted, resting on his knees. She picked herself up, dusting off her scraped elbows, ready to shriek, Stop ignoring me or I'm going to make you feel terrible for making a cute girl cry!

"You," he breathed heavily, "you left. You just… left."
It was right beside a grimy sex shop (*Kink to the Machs*, the neon letters buzzed) that his brain decided it couldn't ignore her anymore. She tried so hard to be accepted. He should've tried, too.

Sophie stared, jaw slack. "I—I said bye to Law-san—"

"That's not what I'm saying!"

"It w-was implied that he'd p-pass on the message—"

"He's not us!" Penguin backpedaled immediately. "He's not… Bepo. I mean, you and him had been through a lot and… he thought he deserved a goodbye."

"I… I'm b-bad at the whole… goodbye and hello and words," she said, too loud and awkward in her honesty.

Penguin sighed.

"But I'm trying my best!" she wailed.

"I'm just saying," he replied after a beat, "this reunion has been totally delayed because of you."

Sophie reached for his arm, her ears red. "T-tell Bepo-san I m-missed him. And that I'm here now."

"Okay," Penguin said lamely, covering his face with his hat. This boy who once threatened to kill her if she ever ruined his captain's evil schemes. "Okay, Sophie," he said again, and allowed her to pull him back to the Hearts, who were waiting. Her gloved hand was decidedly not ghostlike at all, but corporeal and warm.

---

The next morning, Sophie took the water-powered elevator down to the first floor and the steward greeted her there. "Good morning, Miss. The President has to reschedule your meeting—"

"That's okay! Tell her I'm free whenever!" Sophie called, running past him and the waterwheel, dodging the flurry of government employees.

She skidded outside the Jaguar Temple, breathing in the scent of sweet plumerias and sun-baked earth. Today was her judgement day. Even the stone of anxiety in her chest wasn't enough to dampen Sophie's mood. After today, she'd be a step closer in discovering a cure. She was filled with determination; strong, fiery determination that would not by stopped by anything the universe could throw at her—

"Sophie!" a tree hissed.

She gave the tree a terrified look. "…Tree?"

Hippo leaped from the shrubbery. Sophie was unpleasantly surprised. And she did not appreciate him ambushing her in the middle of her narration of willpower. "I snuck out of the hospital and I'm on a lot of painkillers," he whispered.

She almost lectured him that he shouldn't be escaping from hospitals; he was a doctor, for crying out loud! She bit her tongue and swatted him away. "Go away. I don't want to talk to you." Sophie sped past him. Judgement day, forthcoming.

"You can't not talk to me forever!"
"I c-can do a l-lot of things when I put my m-mind to it." Forever? Sign her up.

Hippo grabbed her wrist. She shook him off. He collapsed on the ground and croaked, "My heart."

What.

"Ohhh, my heart!" Hippo moaned, clutching his chest.

This. This was not happening.

"Get up, you horrible old man!" she snapped as several pedestrians began murmuring.

Her sensei responded by calmly and rationally spasming on the sidewalk. "THE PAIN, THE HORRIBLE PAIN. I FEEL THE COLD, CLAMMY HANDS OF DEATH UPON MY SOUL —"

"YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!" Sophie shrieked, pelting him with rocks. "THIS IS DEFINITELY NOT IN ANY OF YOUR ETIQUETTE LECTURES, YOU COCKROACH!"

"Did you just call me a cockroach!?" Hippo shouted back, face squishing. Then he remembered he was having a heart attack.

Sophie issued a formal complaint. "I HATE YOU."

When this alarmed several people into helping Hippo and shooting Sophie dirty glares, she pointed and fired off, "Look at his wristband! He's a rogue patient from the Civic Hospital and should go back there immediately!"

Hippo seemed to realize that at the same time she did, and now was attempting to crawl away through the crowds' legs.

Someone jerked his wrist up and pulled back his sleeve, revealing a hospital wristband. A woman pulled Hippo to his feet. "Back to the hospital you go, sir."

"Wait!" Hippo desperately reached out, using his final breath to cry, "Bring me some grapes when you visit me! The food is terrible!"

"Fine!" she screeched, running away. "I hope you choke on it!"

—

Law sat in the hallway outside the basement. There was nothing for him to do. The transester process to make PSNOHC11 had to be handled delicately. Too delicately, according to Sophie, for his 'big clumsy hands that weren't used to handling chemicals for which one mistake could condemn everyone on Machinastein to a slow, torturous death'. He took insult at that. He was not clumsy. But she had a point.

He passed the time rereading her notes. Her handwriting was offensively neat, every letter drawn clear.

*Pay attention to this part!* she'd written and doodled an angry face with puffed up cheeks.

*Now, for all the non-chemists out there,* she wrote before breaking down the chemical formula of Red Sky. *Ask me if you have any questions! I won't make fun of you (Disclaimer: I totally will. MUHAHAHA. But ask me anyway.)*
He read the rest of her notes, disregarded the actual G-13 research. Her handwriting was much more pleasing to look at. Plus, she drew stick figures that he assumed was motivational. A stick figure with curly hair was leaping over a rainbow while farting flowers and hearts. Beneath it was a mystifying blob he suspected to be Bepo, arms outstretched to catch her. One stick figure was definitely Law, judging by the pointy, satanical goatee and exaggerated eye bags. Little Law wore a crown and his speech bubble said, *Future Pirate King Law does not accept failure! Failure is for peons! IF YOU FAIL I WILL ABDUCT YOU TO MY HELL DIMENSION AND FEAST ON YOUR BRAIN.*

How flattering.

So Law waited outside the basement, going through the research. When he finished with that, he read a book on sinoatrial nodes. When that was done, he took a nap.

It was a short nap, like always. He was awake again when the door creaked open.

Sophie dragged her weary body to the ground and pulled off her gas mask. She sighed deeply and winced, like breathing fresh air hurt. She raised a small flask lined with quartz and stoppered with a rubber cork. Inside was about an ounce of beautiful, ruby-red liquid.

"Seventy percent," she murmured.

He stared at her. "You pulled a seventy percent yield out of that shit equipment?"

Sophie shrugged. The highest G-13 got was eighty-two. She expected better of herself, even if this was her first try. She caught herself. *Only try.*

Her head knocked against the wall, eyes puffy with exhaustion. "You ever think about… if we fail?"

"Obviously," Law said, "I'll spirit you away to my hell dimension."

Sophie turned pink and rolled her eyes. She peeled off her gloves and wrapped her hands around the flask protectively, melancholia settling on every curve of her body. He couldn't see her scars in the dim lighting, but maybe that was point.

As they sat in the hallway, a line of sunlight strained in through the crack in the door.

The dazzling line stretched up her arm and arched lovingly on her cheek, a myriad of color in the cool, grey darkness. She squinted at the light and turned to the door, searching for its origin. He thought again to the soldier in the photo. Always looking at something he couldn't see.

"You couldn't spirit me anywhere. I'm too heavy."

"Yeah." He thought about it. "You'll just have to come along yourself."

When she looked at him, her eyes were enormously blue, aglow in the sunlight.

"Pineapple," she called him with great indignation, and kicked his foot.

*to be continued*
After weeks of reckless, wild chaos, Sophie was finally finding some order in her life.

…and she knew the moment that thought popped into her brainspace, the universe began conspiring to disappoint her. She frantically glanced around for a vengeful ex-Princess Lisbeth to come crashing through the window or her ex-boss Lettidore grabbing her and locking her in her bedroom without any food. Not even any pudding. How awful!

And why did she have to make so many enemies? Why did her closest friends (and they were, they just didn't know it yet) consist only of pirates, of all the individuals in the world? Sophie had to hang out with better people. Better, boring people. Like accountants. Wait! No! Accountants were at the epicenter of white-collar crime. Like chocolate makers. Yes. This was going on her short-term goals list, of which also included: survive, live, be alive, continue to breathe, exist, keep soul in body.

Except (and here it was) there was a slight hitch to her newfound order.

The hitch was named Law. In particular, this Law who sorely needed a Don't Try This At Home, Kids warning tattooed on his face. Or a flashing neon HOMEWRECKER sign attached to his forehead. It didn't have to be accurate, just had to do the job. Because maybe, maybe then, Sophie might remember to exercise caution.

(Alas, he reserved his tattoos for his chest and arms, and she didn't glare at those places nearly enough—not for lack of trying, though.)

Sophie knew she shouldn't feel weird about working with him. He was the same irreverent, sleep-deprived punkapple as before. Even the revelation that he was a survivor of Flevance didn't do much to change her perception of him. And it certainly wasn't an excuse for his behavior, either, though it explained a lot…

He cracked his neck and stretched.

Law said something to her, and she grunted because she was tired, and he was doing terrible things to her blood pressure—like now, with the stretching, and the stretching, and sometimes when she slipped on beer bottles, he caught her around the waist and said the world's rudest come-ons, like your lack of warrior instinct is astonishing—

Sophie slapped herself across the face.

His head jerked up. "What was that?"

"I was getting a headache from looking at you," she explained calmly, rubbing her cheek. "But I staved it off."

His mouth crooked into a sneer. "Well done."

Whatever. Sophie wasn't thinking about it. It's what she did best: compartmentalize Bad and Uncomfortable Feelings by pulverizing them between her fists. Which has been working out great,
except she still couldn't talk to Hippo without screaming into a pillow or think about Nellie and Lisbeth without wanting to rip her eyeballs out.

Perfectly A-OK.

She refocused her attention on the situation at hand. Law stabbed the lab rat with the Red Sky sample and Roomed it back in a cage. The basement/storage room wasn't equipped with much, but it had an old rat cage Sophie discovered beneath a life-size reproduction of a jaguar head (after screaming and throwing a chair at it). And, as luck did not have it, because this basement was dark and creepy and a perfect mice sanctuary, Law found one scuttling about in the hallway.

She squinted inside the cage. It kind of feral-looking and twitchy. Like it had seen some shit and maybe owed money to a rat mobster. "We need to name him."

"Subject One. Or, Rat."

"Goliath," Sophie decided. She tapped the cage. "Aw, it likes it."

Law peered inside the cage. "I think it just gave you the finger."

Yes, animals tended to do that around her. "It's an expression of love, I'm sure."

"Denial is a river in Alabasta."

"Isn't that the Sandora?"

"I've heard it both ways," he assured her.

Sophie rolled her eyes. "Why don't we get started?"

They did.

"There's a huge aberration in the nervous system. It matches up exactly with G-13's research."

Goliath's heart, lungs, and brain floated around Law's head like some macabre planetary orbit. "Heart rate: steady. Respiratory rate: fifty breaths per minute. Significantly higher than average."

Sophie paced around the basement. "Whatever Red Sky is doing, one of the side effects is causing the lungs or the diaphragm to work in overdrive. Maybe it affects the alveoli?"

"Lung inflammation?" He rearranged Goliath and Roomed the rat back in the cage. "Chemical pneumonitis?"

She stepped over Law's legs without looking. "But that doesn't match the other symptoms…"

"I postulated from G-13's research that nerve agents affect the body in more chemical ways."

"Well… yeah, I mean, it's a chemical gas."

Law rubbed his chin. "In my case, the mineral properties of Amber Lead mimicked other metals like zinc and iron, metals our bodies actually need. So, involuntarily, the cells would substitute Amber Lead to do basic functions, and that… as you know, went fucking terribly. It even affected cells that produced melanin."

So the old legend that Amber Lead turned its victims into white zombies wasn't a total conspiracy theory.
"Amber Lead minerals also blocked neurotransmitters. Physically, not chemically. But perhaps it's the same in this case. A neurotransmitter."

"…An enzyme involved in neurotransmission?"

"Which Red Sky shuts down through chemical means."

"Oh!" Sophie shrieked, freezing on the spot.

After a pause, Law moved the coffee cups and Goliath's cage away from arm's reach. She had a tendency flail whenever she got excited.

"Okay. Wait." She gazed at the wall in a faraway trance, then violently shook her head. "But, but how would that work, like—medically?"

"Neurotransmitters are released at the end of a neuron's axon. They jump synapses and bind to the receiving neuron's dendrites to start the process again until they reach their mark, the resulting message of which could be something as simple as contracting a muscle."

"Or contracting a diaphragm!"

"Neurotransmitters don't impede body functions unless something's wrong with the signal transmissions. Like a chemical synapse that failed to communicate." He tapped his quill sharply on the table. "Explain how this hypothesis could work from a chemical standpoint."

"Um, um! Okay! So PSNOHC11, as the substrate in a substrate-enzyme complex, has this trait called phosphorylation, which is the addition of a phosphate group on a molecule. It basically becomes an o-o-on-off switch for the molecule—and, and, and it can alter their function, like make a hydrophobic protein hydrophilic, or, or, or just inhibit it—but an-anyway, it can a-also be reversed and the enzyme can be reactivated—"

"So if we figure out what enzyme is involved and reactivate it before it reaches the point where the victim can't breathe—"

"It's possible to reverse Red Sky!" Sophie finished, clapping her hands. "That's the game plan!"

Law nodded slowly, his mouth curling into a small, triumphant grin.

"Don't fuck with us, science," he said, raising his hand.

"Yeah! We're gonna kill you, science! Well, maybe not kill it, because that would set back civilization and life as we know it several million years, but—"

"Sophie."

"Right!" She slapped his hand in a hi-five. Today was the day! Her clutch performance! Her grand hurrah! Bards were going to sing about this day! Dancers would mime-dance how she so thoroughly wrote the words tryptophan hydroxide! They were going to make history!

—

"ANYONE KNOW AN EIGHT LETTER WORD FOR SPINY-SKINNED SEA URCHIN?"

A ménage of sleepy groans and curses yelled back. It was much too early for brains to string together sentences longer than 'five more minutes, mom', which was why Anko chose this particularly aggravating method to wake up his crewmates. Say what you wanted about him, but Law had a real
knack for giving his crewmates jobs that played to their strengths. In Anko's case, he could transform into the world's most annoying rooster. The resemblance? *Uncanny*.

"COME ON, THERE'S A DOZEN BRAINS ON THIS SUB," the helmsman encouraged.

"Yeah, that's eleven and a half more than Anko!" Shachi contributed enthusiastically.

"It's barely past dawn, you bastards," someone sobbed.

"EVIL NEVER RESTS. UP AND AT 'EM, MATEYS."

"Did Anko say he was off to worship Satan?" came Bepo's voice.

"Free Satan!" Valross demanded. This led to several calls of support to Unleash the Antichrist, All Hail the Beast.

"I AM NOT EVEN SURE ANY OF YOU ARE TRYING TO HELP," Anko accused.

"Bears need a full seven months of hibernation," Bepo lamented. This was backed by a number of Heart Pirates who claimed they were officially bears from now on.

"Anko, shut your gob!" Penguin banged on the voice pipe with a wrench.

"OKAY, I'LL STOP."

A pause.

"BESIDES, IF I WANTED TO LISTEN TO AN ASSHOLE, I'D JUST FART." The control room's door slammed open. "Ack! Penguin! You can't just barge in—shit, man, wrenches aren't supposed to look that sharp—!"

Then came several bangs and thuds and abundant crashes, a muffled scream, and then silence.

Penguin's voice, eerily jovial, appeared over the voice pipes, "And now, the weather."

—

Sophie peeled her face off the table. She had passed out somewhere between five and seven am. *What… happened…* She blinked up at the window like a shriveled worm that hadn't seen light in years. *Today was going to be the day,* she remembered thinking, wiping drool from her chin. *Bards were gonna sing… dancers were gonna mime-dance…*

Law was reading on a pile of cardboard boxes, the poor man's couch. Had he been up all… night? Day? *What time was it?*

"Whuh time ih ih?"

"Morning."

"Mawnin? Sin when dih ih become mawnin…"

"The planet spins on its axis, orbiting the sun. I hear sunrises happen in twenty-four hour intervals —"

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut. *Too early,* she tapped.
Hold the pineapples up. Morning. And today's date was...

"Blue on a berry! I need to go to work!"

"Work?"

"D-didn't I mention? The thing President Ursa hired me to work on?" Sophie hopped frantically around the room, fixing her hair into a ponytail and searching for her backpack. "It's only three days a week, but I'm—ugh, I need to brush my teeth—I'm getting paid for a real job—mangos, why d-do I have i-ink all over my shirt!? I don't have t-time to deal with this! Take care of Goliath while I'm gone!"

"...So it finally happened. Somebody actually hired you to tell bad science jokes all day."

Law narrowly avoided the sandal thrown at his head.

—

There were certain agreements among the Pirates of Heart.

Fact: When it comes time to wingman, you gotta wingman. Unless you were there first, in which case it's completely within your right to bully the closest Heart to sell you like you're the goddamn King of the Pirates. If you're the unlucky bastard, them's the breaks. There's always next time.

Fact: In a fight, when things get mighty ugly-lookin', you jump in the fray even when it's not yours to jump into. Pirates don't play by rules, anyway. You get both your asses back to the submarine, back to Captain so he can fix you up. Sure, Kamasu'll be real sore at you for a week or two, and Anko's gonna start a fight soon as he can stand without wobbling. But no one gets left behind, and like Captain'll tell ya, nobody dies without his permission.

Fact: Hai Xing's cooking is the best show on the Grand Line.

On lazy mornings like today, the Hearts hung around the galley, eating breakfast and watching him perform magic. He juggled a flaming pan of seared fish, a bowl of guacamole, and diced a basket of papayas. The galley portholes gave a great view for Bepo, who was dive-bombing schools of fish. Full show.

Once breakfast was over, the thought of the ocean was too tempting not to join Bepo. Hai Xing went to work scrubbing down the countertop and tables. Washing plates—plates that over a dozen crewmates ate from three times a day, plates that built up in the cabins and grew mysterious fungi—took up a good amount of time. He was typically laboring over the sink if he wasn't prepping or cooking.

Footsteps of a late riser padded inside the galley.

"Hey, freak." Anko rummaged through the fridge, scratching his belly.

Hai Xing set a pot on the drying rack. "It's starfish."

"Huh?"

"The eight letter word."

"Anko, you finish laundry yet?" Manta yelled from the hall.

Anko leaned around and hollered, "I'm useless for half an hour after I wake up!"
"We're running out of underwear! Half the men are down to their speedos!"

"Well, fuck off! The more you pressure me the more I ain't gettin' to it!"

They heard Manta huff something about never letting Anko do laundry again as he stalked away.

"Fine by me, ya old fart!" Anko grabbed some leftovers and left, knuckling the lopsided star on his ribcage, near identical in placement to the scar on Hai Xing when the two of them got shish kabob'd by Teresa.

Outside, the seaweed and the beds of blooming coral casted blue ocean-shadows over the galley. This was his favorite part of the morning. When the submarine was anchored and only the lowest deck submerged in the turquoise shallows, he had the best view of the ocean.

A tomato-red mop of hair poked inside the galley. The self-proclaimed president of the Let's Make Hai Xing Go Outside and Have Fun Club.

Upon spotting the cook, Shachi smiled. "Hey there, Xing Xing. You're looking Vitamin D deficient."

Hai Xing raised a soapy ladle. "You're not taking me alive."

The ensuing scuffle was short. Hai Xing tried to escape into the vent shaft. Shachi dragged him out by the ankles, a limbless jellyfish in silent, futile protest. "I got him, boys! Let's go!"

—

Machinastein chocolate was priced at one thousand beli per pound, \( \text{if} \) you bought it inside the country.

That's three thousand a pound exported to foreign countries and merchants.

That's upwards of five, six thousand \( \text{if} \) it's from a real ritzy brand, pure high-grade goodness. Chocolate with bits of coconut. Chocolate squares with hot, molten chocolatey centers. Peppermint chocolate, milk chocolate, seventy-nine percent cacao, dark and…

"Bitter," Sophie mumbled, licking her fingers and looking into a microscope. "Let's see… synthesis of sugar and theobromine looking stable…"

Her workplace was the third floor of the Chemistry temple. The laboratory was beautiful and sterile, with marbled floors and high, arching windows. About twenty other scientists were also working, buzzing like dutiful bees around her.

Officially, Sophie's title was consultant. Her job was to examine various protein matrixes in the Dials and cut out or add different ions to optimize their chocolate-making capabilities. Quite simple once she got the hang of it. Plus, playing around with proper lab equipment again was fun.

Chocolate Dials were in an experimental stage, but funded and backed by Machinastein's government. Chocolate was their greatest export, after all. Dials that could harness solar energy and self-produce chocolate would be something of a minor economic revolution. Sophie didn't find it as interesting as Red Sky and in any other occasion would think of it as a waste of time, but she'd begged President Ursa for this gig, when the realization she had no money and no idea what she was going to do set in. The President was helpful and even gave her a room at her Jaguar Temple to stay in. That was three weeks ago. She had to admit tasting chocolate for a living wasn't the worst job a chemist could have.
Now that she was properly awake, memories of last night's discoveries were fresh on her mind. She couldn't wait to get back to the basement.

She loved the fire-flash-\textit{bang} of chemistry—but ninety-eight percent of the time, science was just this: sitting down, attempting to make sense of data, and hammering out a hypothesis. Probably the most boring, menial work in the history of the universe. And Sophie was counting down the minutes until she could get back to that too-small table, to the smell of ink on parchment, burning a quill against the writer's callus on her middle finger. After all, science was for the curious, who loved the stars and searched for evidence for things unseen, who asked millennia-old questions and kept asking.

—

"Did you make a cure yet?" Penguin greeted.

Sophie stared at the three new pirates in her basement. "WHAT—"

"I didn't let them near the table or the rodent," Law said instantly.

"BUT—"

"And I made them wash their hands."

"Oh, okay." She closed the door and spun around. "\textit{Wait, what are you all doing—}"

"Visiting because Captain looked lonely," said Shachi.

"I was dragged here against my will," announced Hai Xing. "Much like how life dragged me against my will out of utero."

"So did you make a cure yet?" Penguin asked again.

"No," she sighed, patting his red pompom as a hello.

"I've been monitoring the rat and researching enzymes involved in neurotransmission." Law passed over a stack of paper. "Acetylcholine looks interesting."

"Acetylcholine? Let me see…"

None of the Hearts knew the details of her project, only that something awful happened at Vira because of it. They weren't going to ask her, either, since Sophie had a tendency to make things go \textit{boom} when she got real twitchy-like, but Penguin figured they were safe with Law around. "So… in simplest terms, what are you doing?"

"We're looking for the enzyme PSNOHC11 inhibits," their captain answered.

Shachi said to Penguin, "I like how he says it like he expects us to understand."

"I know; it's cute."

Sophie tapped a page of meaningless squiggles, according to Shachi. "But the formula for the dissociation constant for the inhibitor is useless since we don't know where the active site is. Measuring the rates of catalysis at different concentrations of substrate and inhibitor is a no-go."

"I said 'simple', right?" Penguin asked Shachi. "You heard me say that, right?"
Then Sophie shoved the papers back at Law, whining balefully, "What does this meaaaan, I don't geeet iiiiiit."

Their captain went on a long description of complicated, funny-sounding words. At the end of it, he motioned to his own paper. "I need a diagram of NmU."

"A whole neuropeptide! Fun." She drew big hexagons and linked them together, chattering about the valence of atoms and covalent bonds. To the Hearts, the sight of their captain and their hitchhiker working in tandem was akin to a grand pirate battle. Extraordinary and, they got the feeling, not to be disturbed under the pain of death.

Hai Xing sliced a piece of papaya into thumbnail sizes, and had Law Room them inside Goliath's cage. The rat seemed quite happy with its snack.

Sophie went back to work, while quietly dealing with the side effect of all this coffee in her system… Why did coffee make one so gassy? Well, she knew why (coffee had an acidic nature, plus it increased gastrin and cholecystokinin hormones in the intestines), but it still begged the rhetorical question.

Law looked up. "I've been meaning to ask you something."

"I only farted a little bit," Sophie defended. "The rest was Penguin."

He kicked her foot.

"CP5 said you manufactured seastone bullets."

"Oh," she sighed deeply. "For the record, I really hated doing those. Okay, so. I was among the hundreds of scientists who produced seastone weapons for the World Government. Such a pain. I mean, it was simple. Mind-numbingly simple. You melt the stone down, separate some compounds, forge it into bullets or nets or plates to cover the bottom of ships—Vegapunk invented the recipe and all we did was follow the instructions. It was a mandatory quota we were forced to meet every month." She shrugged. "The science behind Devil Fruits and seastone are mega-classified. I hear only the scientists working at HQ know anything about it."

Law sighed. "I figured as much."

"If you have any more questions about World Government science, just ask," Sophie said, and when she returned to work, she saw the shared look of surprise among the pirates in her peripheral vision. It almost made her smile.

—

The next day, Sophie went to visit Hippo. The hospital was three stops away from the University.

A bag of fresh grapes sat in her lap. She rested her head against the windowpane, soft vibrations rattling her skull, and peered up at the clear blue sky. No sign of a flying cat here, either.

She closed her eyes, going through her to-do list. She still had to update President Ursa on the whole… pirate situation. Obviously, she didn't want Ursa to know too much about her experiment. It was safer that way. It was the sort of thing the World Government would, if they knew, use as an excuse to turn Machinastein into Ohara: The Sequel No One Ever Asked For.

Even though Machs were nothing like the Ohara demons, Sophie added mentally. Maybe that wasn't the best comparison.
Exhaustion sneaked up on her during the train ride. She dreamed of vast deserts, mountains connecting heaven and earth, and swamps with souls of the dead dancing about in circles. Gentle methane-blue flames that could look like anything. A dead king, a lost princess, or a beautiful woman smoking a long, elegant pipe.

Sophie reached for the will-o'-the-wisp, but just as she was about to catch it in her palm, it vanished with a sticky-sweet pop as the train jerked to a stop and she woke up.

---

Hai Xing's lunch was a timely affair. Precisely at noon, the men took a break from chores or otherwise came staggering back from a drunken night about town. The mechanics emerged like dehydrated vampires from the dark engine room whenever the hall started to smell good. Anko enjoyed announcing the day's menu on the speaker system; such timeless dishes included 'pan-fried misery noodles' and 'depressing bread buns, with a side of olive oil made from the tears of baby pangolins'.

"AND TODAY HAI XING WILL BE SERVING ROASTED SADNESS ON THE PILE OF CRAP THAT IS HIS LIFE," Anko announced, right on the dot.

When he came back after a long stretch of time, Law had a habit of Rooming all over Polar Tang to check on his crew. The engine room, the control room, the decks. He appeared inside the mess.

"I have yet to woo a Machinastein dame," Anko was saying, "and we all know how noble ladies love pirates."

"Yes, because women love idiots who run away with their jewelry and pride," Bepo said sagely.

"Not always. Sophie-chan had a thing going with the cat princess—"

"But Sophie-chan ran away with her kingdom, so isn't that worse?"

"Ah, Captain." Hai Xing raised his hand, but Law had already Roomed away.

Bepo found him scavenging inside his cabin like a woodland ferret. Law kicked over blankets and pillows, searching for books. "Just came here to pick up a few things," he muttered. He stuffed a few heavy tomes under his arms and rummaged through his bookshelves. He'd meant to clean up his cabin after his two-week bout of lethargy, but he always ended up thinking about Red Sky and never did more than toss shirts into a 'to fold' pile before going back to research.

The bear watched him carefully, noting his tired, slightly unfocused gaze. "When did you last sleep, Captain?"

"Recently. I think. I forget."

Bepo clapped his paws. "Penguin! Shachi!"

They strode inside, rolling up their sleeves. Law's eyes narrowed, suddenly on guard. They nodded at each other and circled him.

"Captain, long time no sleep," Penguin said, wrapping his arm around Law's elbow. Shachi took his other side, and Bepo linked his paws around Law's stomach.

"Oi," Law said, threat curling in that monosyllable.

"Sleep is good for you," Shachi reminded gently.
"Oi!" Law protested again, actually starting to struggle now.

"Yes, yes, yes," Bepo, Penguin, and Shachi said cheerily as they strong-armed their captain to a proper bed.

---

"Sorry!" The nurse clapped both hands in front of him. "He was discharged yesterday. We tried calling the Jaguar Temple but they said you weren't there. We didn't know where else to contact you."

Sophie raised her bag of green fruit. "But. But Sensei told me to bring grapes."

The nurse didn't quite know what to say. "Yes, well…"

She could hardly believe it. Hippo, gone? Wandering about Machinastein? A marine bumming around a city that despised the World Government? Was he drunk again? "Did he at least say where he was staying?"

"Maybe he left a note for you…" The nurse rifled through a couple folders, then shook his head. "Sorry."

The Den Den Mushi rang and he scrambled to pick it up, leaving Sophie standing there, carrying a bag of grapes and feeling like a total idiot. What was she doing here at the hospital anyway? Why had she even come here in the first place?

"Okay," she said to no one, and turned on her heel.

---

Machinastein was an oddity among the great Paradise nations for one reason: they'd pick pirates and criminals over marines, any day.

Take a few centuries-old disputes and colonization attempts, toss in some cultural backlash, and the World Government was simply not wanted on the island. Pirates, at least, contributed to the economy. Pirates knew how to preserve the surface of order. Which was: no murders in broad daylight, no harming students or children, and absolutely no slavery. But even with its limitations, Machinastein's black market was rife.

Criminal activity was confined to the back streets and docks, and only a long grove of low-hanging lluvia de oro separated them from the city proper. It was here that Sophie wandered about in a blue mood after her shift at the chocolate labs ended.

There was something President Ursa had told her two weeks ago, when Sophie asked her to be a chocolate researcher. It was a simple thing. Don't parade around that you're working on Chocolate Dials. Especially not if you're walking in the bad part of town.

Sophie gave exactly zero turds about being inconspicuous and slouched inside the nearest chocolate shop, a quaint little store. She finished off the bag of grapes on the train ride back and, still hungry, used the rest of her money and ordered twenty bonbons and a bottle of honey beer. If all her teeth fell out, at least she could throw them at Hippo one by one for each time he'd disappointed her. She planned to fuel her rage with candy for the next foreseeable century.

Waiting for her order in the corner booth, she spotted a familiar face. The Heart's resident gloomy cook entered the shop to investigate the bonbons. Sophie waved at him. He ignored her until she
started hollering at very loud volume and finally gave up, slouching over to her table.

"Can I see your hat for a second?"

Hai Xing tossed his newsboy cap at her. She nodded thanks in a clipped sort of way, pressed the hat over her mouth, and screamed. She forced all the air out of her lungs and screamed and screamed until she went blue in the face. Sophie straightened up, wiped the saliva off the brim, and graciously handed him back his hat. Hai Xing gingerly wiped it on his shirt before cramming it back on his head. It drooped over his eyes.

"As a close friend, can I ask you something?"

"You're not, though." Hai Xing flipped to a dog-eared page of his book, settling down at her table. Sophie sneaked a glance and read the top upside-down sentence. The Baron sauntered over to the bed, naked, glistening pectorals shimmering in the candlelight…

She squinted at Hai Xing. His expression was unmoving.

"Are you ever happy?"

"This is my happy face."

She tilted her head… and tilted, and tilted, until she was almost looking at him upside-down. "No one will ever want to be your friend if you don't pretend to smile and be friendly. That's etiquette lecture number—" Her face contorted for a quick second. "Anyway, even Law-san can do it. They'll think you're an unsociable creep."

"That's what my mother said to me before she left."

"…Didn't you say she died from a poisoned snake bite?"

"She was actually the lover of a baron, who swept her away to his kingdom." His touch trailed along Marcellus' flustered cheek, sending jolts of pleasure down his—

"…That's the summary of your steamy romance novel, isn't it?"

Hai Xing said nothing. Sophie sighed a little. Nothing could break him, could it? At least her food had arrived.

"Mmmm, the earthy smell of pyrazine. And is that a hint of vanillin I detect? Wanna try?" She tried to offer Hai Xing a fork, then threw it at him when he didn't want to take it. "Anyway, it's so weird where life will take you," she commented, taking a bite. "I never would've thought I'd be using chemistry knowledge to research Chocolate Dials."

"…Chocolate Dials… Dials… Dials…"

Her voice echoed strangely in the shop. Why… why were the other customers running away? Then it was just her and Hai Xing in the corner booth, and why… why were the chocolatiers edging in from behind the counter? Why were the waitresses pulling out flintlocks?

Here, Sophie remembered President Ursa's warning.

"Come around to this side of the counter, Miss," said the cashier, raising a rifle.

An incredulous expression crossed Sophie's face. "Is this really happening?"
"Stand up, miss," said the waitress. "What should we call you? Scientist? Doctor? The last one preferred doctor, right?"

"Before he tried to steal the chocolate fondant recipe and we had to ice him," said one chocolatier grimly.

Her nose wrinkled. "You iced him?"

"We drowned him in icing."

Sophie barely bit back a burst of laughter. She knew a guy who'd appreciate their lust for innovative murder.

It was becoming clear to her that the chocolatiers took her for a young, innocent, recent graduate who bragged about her job at the wrong place. A helpless target. Of course, 'Helpless' wasn't a totally incorrect description of Sophie in her present state. Weapons were banned in the College of Chemistry, for obvious safety reasons (physically and chemically: gunpowder was a fire hazard in laboratories). She had all her knives stored under her bed in the Jaguar Temple instead of her backpack.

The window looked too thick to jump out of, and the door was about fifteen feet away. The chocolate shop was desserted. Maybe this was just a tasteless nightmare. *Ha ha… oh, Sophie, you really pick the worst times for jokes.*

"Tell your friend to leave and get over here," a chocolatier said—the leader perhaps, who was wearing a pink, flowery Kiss the Cook apron.

She stood up slowly, raising her hands. "Actually, he's not my friend. I can't tell him to do anything."

The chocolatier aimed her rifle at Hai Xing.

The bell hanging above the door jingled. A chorus of guns aimed at the door.

Whistling, Anko walked in.


"No, but we're having a ten percent sale on all cake and pies." The cashier waved at the display case.

"Ah, never mind." He waved at Sophie. "See ya."

She inhaled sharply. "NOW HOLD ON. Do you not see the situation we're in?"

Taking his sweet, deliberate time, he glanced at the wait staff pointing guns at Sophie and Hai Xing (who was still reading his book, how was he so relaxed?). "Yep. Major suck." Anko nodded thoughtfully. "Alright, well, don't die."

*Plan B.* "Go find your captain Trafalgar Law and tell him we're being threatened!" Sophie shouted.

"They can't be Heart Pirates," one chocolatier muttered to the other. "They're not wearing those silly uniforms."

"They're called *boiler suits* and this island is too hot to wear them, *obviously!"* she squeaked.

"Why would a chocolate researcher be in cahoots with pirates?" someone else asked, rather
"Yeah… well, um… th-that's—that's a long, boring story—"

Anko swung open the door, but the chocolatiers weren't taking any chances. Their leader trained her gun on him. "Get back in here."

He raised his hands and turned on his heel, smirking leisurely, too compliant to not be up to no good. "I change my mind," he said to Sophie. "I'll take them all out, but it'll cost you a kiss."

"Feel free to kill him," Sophie flatly invited.

"Fine, fine," he sighed long-sufferingly, "you can grope me, too—"

"Tell you what," the chocolate chef said to Sophie, "one of Big Mom's pirates is arriving in two weeks to collect chocolate samples and I want to know everything about Chocolate Dials. I might even get promoted. We'll even let your friends go."

Sophie counted quickly. Three versus twelve. Each of them had to take out four chocolate gangsters. Anko could handle his share. Hai Xing, she wasn't sure. Maybe he could take down someone if he ever looked away from his erotica. As for herself… well… Sophie didn't want to work for them—she didn't even want to work on the Chocolate Dials, but money was money—but they weren't the worst people she could work for. They weren't going to kill her, at least, and they were going to spare Hai Xing and Anko.

"What's it going to be?"

"I'll join your stupid club." Law would break her out in a day or two. And reattach her feet, if necessary.

Anko made a disappointed noise, like he was upset he wasn't going to get beat up.

Hai Xing closed his book with a snap and stood up. Then he said to the chocolatiers, quite simply, "Nobody is joining you. The three of us are going to walk out of here."

"Such friendship warms my heart," the chocolatier sighed. "Knock her out and ice the rest."

She shot Anko in the head.

He staggered backwards and stumbled into a table, falling behind it. Sophie immediately threw over the nearest table in a loud crash, lobbed her bonbons at the nearest gangster's face with a big, "TAKE THAT!"

The waitress grabbed Sophie's shirt and in one swift move threw her on her back. All the wind knocked out of her and she curled up, coughing.

Her eyes flew open and she rolled away just as the waitress' heel landed in the space where her stomach had just been. Sophie jumped upright, grabbed the waitress' other leg when it came jutting forward to kick her in the chest, and threw her into an aesthetically-pleasing platter of cupcakes.

She stumbled backwards, scrabbling for a weapon, found the neck of her honey beer bottle. She shattered it into a gangster's head, then finished off the remaining liquor—would be a shame to waste it.

Leaping back into the fray with a bloody forehead, Anko grabbed an armful of desserts from the
window display and fired off éclairs and pain au chocolat like a Gatling gun.

"You're not dead!" Sophie exclaimed in surprise, wiping her mouth.

"It's a flesh wound," Anko snapped, knocking a chocolatier unconscious with a plate of truffles. "Damn it! This always happens before I say something cool!"

Half a dozen chocolatiers advanced on her.

"Stay away from me!" she shrieked, fending them off with a chair with the menace of a rabid Chihuahua, "I know how to aim my pee!"

They nervously avoided her front. Sophie had no plan other than to cause as much destruction as possible and hope one of them slipped and landed badly on a fork. She started throwing tables and hurling chairs, backing towards the door. Almost there! Almost—then I can make a run for it!

Her gaze found a pink apron in the midst of the chaos, the color intensely bright.

The chocolate chef was aiming her gun at Hai Xing, who was a lithe blur dodging attacks. Anko didn't notice. He was chasing around a gangster, cackling and hurling plates at him like high-speed Frisbees. There were two chocolatiers surrounding the main chef, blasting bullets at Hai Xing.

Sophie ran full-speed at one chocolatier using a chair as a shield, slammed into him, rolled into a somersault, and tackled their leader to the ground.

Sophie was the first to get ahold of her senses. She wrestled the gun away and aimed between her eyes, two hands braced for the recoil—

And then all she could see was Teresa, dodging the bullet at point-blank range, Teresa, thrusting her swords through the pirates, Teresa, beheading her with an axe, unyielding, indomitable—

The chocolatier twisted and slammed Sophie into the ground, wrapping her in a chokehold between her knees. The gun slipped out of her hands. Sophie couldn't breathe. She clawed at the woman's extremely defined hamstrings and croaked, "Your—face is—so unsymmetrical."

She punched Sophie in the nose, which was not optimal, but then released her from the chokehold, which was what Sophie was going for. She rubbed her neck and took deep, gasping breaths.

A blinding pain shot through her face and her cheek felt ice cold; she was laying on the ground, her vision spinning, a wet warmness pooling under her forehead. Someone must've dropped a cake platter on her head. Her ears were ringing. She struggled to get up, spitting out chocolate icing. On reflex she checked herself for a concussion—today's date? Nausea? Headache? Okay, she was fine. Disorientated, but fine.

Someone grabbed her around the middle and she screamed, struggling and kicking… until she saw the familiar scar-like birthmark on Hai Xing's forehead—he'd lost his hat somewhere—as he dragged her upright. With a strength she didn't expect from someone so small, he threw her and Anko—when did he grab onto Anko?—over the side of an overturned table. She landed on Anko's stomach ("Oof!") and rolled onto the floor.

Sophie groaned, rubbing her aching rear.

"What did he do that for?" Anko snarled, clambering to his feet.

The next second made it all too clear. Bullets bangbangbanged into the table and several
more pinged past them, ricocheting off the walls. She shoved Anko to the floor and ducked. It was a relentless barrage of gunshots, the sound of thirty waves crashing over you at once, the sound of crouching in a trench and wondering if the dead revolutionary in front of you was the last thing you were ever going to see. Sophie wanted to reach inside her ears and pull out her eardrums. Hai Xing was the only one still back there, the only one they must be aiming at——

She covered her ears, trying desperately to drown out the noise. A look of dark rage crossed Anko's face as he realized the fate of his crewmate, and he jumped into a mid-crouch, swearing softly.

"Oh, fuck!" someone screamed, and a dismembered foot whacked Sophie in the face.

"Oh my god, Hai Xing-san!" Sophie screamed at the foot, cradling it.

Anko peered at it. "That's not him."

She chucked it away from her with a disgusted screech. The gunfire became more sporadic, interjected with screams, then stopped completely. Gunpowder-smoke drifted past them in eerie silence. Anko was muttering something as he looked over the side of the table. She picked out words like 'break their fucking necks' and 'make them eat their own toenails'.

Sophie peered over the table.

Hai Xing had a hole or two blown in him, but he was miraculously alive. He was surrounded by twitching and groaning bodies.

"Shit, oh, shit…" Anko whispered.

A hedge of black thorns protruded from his forehead, his face, his back and arms. His breathing was harsh and guttural, and it sounded like a recording Hippo once showed her of an old, aching creature from the deep. Deep, discordant moans and watery echoes. His shirt had ripped open and Sophie's blood chilled at the sight of the brand on his chest. A giant, swirling sun. The symbol of Fisher Tiger but warped like he burned it on himself without using a mirror.

"Don't go near him!" someone yelled. "Those things are poisonous!"

He was impaled by a black spine. Hai Xing shook out his shoulders, the things growing on him rustling like leaves on a branch.

"Holy fuck," Anko hissed, "holy fuck, the freak's a——"

"You d-didn't know?" Sophie hissed back.

"No! And if anyone else did, they never told me shit!"

The dust cleared, but something was wrong. Hai Xing's fingers scrabbled against his skull, as though he was trying to dig the spines out of his skin. He scratched until his nails and hair became matted with blood, and he stumbled around as though unbalanced. He started yelling, too, louder and louder until the very air trembled with his voice——

Anko leaped over the table, ran full speed at Hai Xing, and whacked him over the head with a chair. Sophie's hands flew to her mouth, barely holding back a horrified gasp.

He collapsed in a boneless heap, pieces of ex-chair clattering around him.

She walked slowly towards Anko as he backed away from Hai Xing, wary of the black spines that
weren't disappearing. A discarded flintlock rested by her feet. She bent down and, after a moment's hesitation, picked it up. The remaining chocolatiers had fled, and the ones on the ground were not able to get up any time soon.

Anko nudged her. "Go see what's wrong."

She gaped. "Isn't he your friend?"

"Sure, if friend is someone you're forced to live near to. We might as well be prisoners who have an unspoken agreement to not go near each other's nether regions."

On principle, Sophie slapped him across the mouth. Twice.

She walked up to Hai Xing, the flintlock's handle cold against her sweaty palm.

"So, is he, like… dead or what?" Anko called a few paces back, nursing his cheeks.

His chest was rising and falling, slow but sure, though he was bleeding heavily. Sophie edged forward a few more paces. Hai Xing was poisonous, right? She didn't want to poke or nudge him…

"Hai Xing-san?" She winced at how high-pitched her voice was. "Are you… um… okay?"

Even in this form, he stuck with his habit of ignoring her. She was at a complete loss. What would Nellie do? Well, she hated pirates, so she'd probably blow Hai Xing into the stratosphere with her bazooka… And Law? He'd probably say something sarcastic and then offer to remove his thumbs.

Up close, she could see the brown of his skin through the patches of spines. It wasn't all black, now that she could see clearly. It was tinged with orange and blue and yellow, faintly iridescent in the light. It reminded her of the coral banks under G-13. She once went diving and found glittering sparkles hidden inside dull, dark rocks. How they shimmered different colors when she turned them in her hands. She'd cup them and press them to her eye and imagine she was peering inside a tiny world.

"We have to leave," Sophie said urgently. "We have to get back to the submarine. I… I can't drag you there when you're… you know? Can you stand?"

Silence.

And then Hai Xing suddenly made a noise that was somewhere between a snarl and a gasp. "Holy shit," Anko hissed from behind.

Sophie froze. Her hand on the gun twitched.

Then, after a long moment, she sat down, cross-legged. She set the gun on the ground and slid it away. This was Hai Xing, not some monster. He was the same quiet, dour cook who rescued her from Teresa and made snacks for a dying lab rat.

"Hai Xing-san!" Sophie sang, her voice as annoying as she could make it. "Hai Xing-san, Hai Xing-san, Hai Xing-san!"

The cook was lying on his side, his face half-covered by his arms. She saw a flicker of movement in the shadow of his face, like an eyelid slowly opening. Was he… glaring at her?

"You can h-hear me, can't you?" Sophie challenged, leaning forward. "W-what is this, a t-temper tantrum? Get up, or," she waved at the spines covering his skin, "put those things b-back so we can
get you out of here."

Another slow wheeze. Hai Xing really was glaring at her.

Was this how he wanted it to end? Dying on the floor of a chocolate shop, with a ten percent sale on all cakes and pies? Sophie glanced at Anko, who was staring at them from a useless distance away, pale-faced and wide-eyed.

Then, she looked at the door. It was swinging on its hinges, its glass window shattered. Fine, if that's what Hai Xing wanted, she could leave. She could just leave, like how other people had a tendency to do to her. The gloomy muffinfudger wasn't her friend. She could pull a Hippo: go get drunk at a bar and tell stories about the War and How the War Made You a Man and then pass out in his bedroom in front of his student, who didn't yet understand what disappointment meant but only that she was filled with it.

The glint in Hai Xing's eye was familiar. It was angry and it was dangerous and, and she wondered if it wasn't just a little bit like pleading.

"Oh," she thought with great reluctance, "pineapples."

"Okay," Sophie said. With an air like she was rolling up her sleeves, she began doing one of the very few things she was good at: babbling incessantly. "Okay. So, listen. Listen. Just listen to me for a moment. I remember the first thing you made that I ate—oatmeal, I think, and biscuits and s-some kind of squid… Oh! But my favorite dish was something you made from Kunlun's cuisine! It was a spicy b-beansprout… thing. Sorry, I don't know the r-right word for it."

She worried her lip. Her head was aching. Maybe she did have a concussion.

"You know what the coolest thing about it is?" she pressed on. "I could taste the island in your cooking. I don't know how to describe it properly, but I can remember being on Kunlun, walking past the restaurants and the casinos when I eat your food, and the air, the smells, everything. I never even liked pudding before Nellie-san made me some, and now it reminds me of Crawfish Island, and her, and how much I miss her. Sense memory, right?"

She twisted the hem of her shirt. It occurred to her that Hai Xing didn't know who Nellie was.

"I d-don't know the right thing to say," she admitted. "I don't know why you're grumpy all the time, or why you never smile. But … I would—I would be so angry if you died, I'd become a ghost just to beat you up and you couldn't even kill me because we're both ghosts. And you know what? Who else is going to cook? Those useless buffoons would set your submarine on fire, and that—that would be so awful, you know? They'd be entirely lost without you. They'd be lost. You take care of everyone. You're the one everybody comes back to at the end of the day. I can't even imagine what it's like to be so important, I can't. You have to go back to your family, Hai Xing-san. They're waiting for you. Can't you hear them?"

Silence, but for a quiet "What the fuuuuuuck," from Anko.

And then, the spines on his head started receding. Hai Xing was a man again, shivering and pale-faced.

"It's true," he muttered, his voice normal again. "My captain cooking is an exercise in self-immolation."

Sophie looked over her shoulder at Anko. He slumped against the wall and weakly shook his head. "Shit, man," he breathed.
Yeah, that sounded about right.

Sophie found Hai Xing's hat and stuck it back on his head, then bent over and threw up. Ah, so she was definitely concussed after all.

—

Hai Xing was part crown-of-thorns starfish, part human. It had been years since he last 'spiked out', he forgot how to pull himself back.

"I've never seen an echinoderm fishman before," Sophie said. "I've seen fishpeople with… gills, but not…"

"We're not common. I heard there are communities of us living in the New World, but I've never met one."

Sophie rested her back against the wall, careful not to make her mild concussion any worse.

Law had burst out of his cabin when he saw them limping back to the submarine. He didn't seem surprised when Sophie explained what happened to Hai Xing, a confirmation that he knew Hai Xing's secret. Luckily, most the crew was out in the city so there was no one around to ask questions. He bandaged Anko up, made Sophie choke down an anti-nausea pill, and ordered them to rest in the sick bay. After getting his bullet wounds treated, Hai Xing retired into the galley. But Sophie couldn't rest. As soon as Law left, she summersaulted out the sick bay (sick parkour optional, but totally necessary).

She found him in a mysterious room inside the pantry. If the cot was any indication, this must be where Hai Xing slept. An assortment of colorful yarn and sewing needles sat underneath an old nightstand. It was a minimal bedroom, smaller than the pantry itself. There was barely room for one person, much less two. Sophie squeezed into the corner, next to his shelf of romance fiction, and sat on the edge of the cot. He had a large amount of ocean-scented candles with names like 'seafoam' and 'coral blossom', which made the room smell like a flower-covered lagoon.

She wanted to ask him about Fisher Tiger's mark on his chest, but he started talking, and Hai Xing talking was so rare, and probably due to his pain meds. He grew up cooking in the brothel he was born in, preparing extravagant meals for rich clientele. It was alright until they started saying he was an 'exotic specimen' and 'ready to be sold', so he had to run away. He cooked for some other folks for a while, until they found out about the spines and tried to flambé him on a pitchfork.

"I was captured by slavers when I was sixteen," he carried on, speaking to the ceiling, "but I knew how to cook well, so I was more useful than being someone's pet. They put me to work on a Mariejois cruise liner."

No response came to mind but meaningless, empty platitudes. And coming from a World Government scientist, it would sound like a joke. She was gripped by a sudden and slightly masochistic question: did he ever hate her? Had he ever wanted to hurt her for what the World Nobles—and the World Government—did to him? What did he see when he looked at her? A symbol of unimaginable pain and torment?

Sophie swallowed. "You should get some rest."

"Okay." His eyes were already closing as the pain medication kicked in, and muttered, "It could be worse. I could've been born as a male anglerfish. Useless parasites destined to live as a bag of sperm for the more powerful female of the species."
Sure, it could be worse, but Sophie didn't think his life was anything close to rainbows and butterflies.

"I'm so sorry about everything you went through," she whispered, unable to meet his eyes.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Tenryuubito Slayer," he mumbled.

She glanced at him sharply. Her face reddened and she turned away.

A heavily bandaged Anko strode into the galley right as she left Hai Xing's room. She heard him call out, "Hey, Spikes! How are you holding up?" and spun around, about to scold him for being so loud about Hai Xing's secret. He was clearly treated as a pushover by some of his crewmates, because he was quiet and kinda weird and talked about death like an old lover, and Sophie wasn't going to put up with it. But then it became clear she didn't have to.

Hai Xing pulled himself to his feet with great effort, walked up to the door and, without a word, closed it in Anko's face. The ocean-scented candlelight from inside his room panned across Anko's surprised expression, illuminating half, then a sliver, and then nothing.

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Law passed Anko on the way to the galley, but his helmsman brushed past him in uncharacteristic silence. It was dark inside. Hai Xing always had the lights on during dinner prep, but the galley was empty tonight and quiet without its cook. Only the golden flickers of nightlife on the harbor, glowing in the dusk, shone in from the portholes. His attention snapped to a blue shadow sitting at the table. He rested back on his heels when the shadow raised its head and a mess of curls became silhouetted against a porthole.

Sophie looked up as he stepped inside the galley.

"I don't believe I need to tell you to keep this a secret," Law said briskly.

"I can keep my mouth shut. You should be worried about the other, particularly loud person who knows."

"I already talked to Anko. He'll keep quiet."

"Why does Hai Xing hide it from his own crew?" she wondered aloud. "There's nothing wrong with being a fishman."

"Imagine someone whose hands are disfigured. There's nothing wrong with that, and still they wear gloves so nobody can see."

Glum, she rested her chin on her arms and traced abstract shapes on the wood grain with her gloved finger. She winced briefly as he opened the bright, blinding fridge to grab leftovers, and listened to him crank open the stove. She should be heading back to the basement. Sophie didn't like the thought of leaving Goliath unsupervised.

"Do you have any coffee?" She'd take a cup back to the lab. "I'm getting caffeine withdrawal headaches."

"The coffee maker's over there. We have medium and dark roast. Make it yourself."

A good idea, if she knew how to.
"Oh, the pain," she moaned, "I can't stand up… I still feel the phantom pain of when I was poisoned in the foot by a madman…"

Surprisingly, that got him over to the coffee maker. "I'm already preparing dinner," he acquiesced, taking out the dark roast from the cupboard, "might as well make something to drink."

"An exercise in self-immolation…" She hadn't meant for Law to hear, but his sharp hearing picked it up. He directed a scowl at her. She held her hands up, blinking innocently. "I'm just quoting your cook."

"I make a mean tuna onigiri, but I bet he never mentioned that," Law said gruffly, and Sophie could tell he'd been worried sick about Hai Xing.

But thinking of Hai Xing made her wonder if Law ever hated her because she was from G-13. He had good reason to. Flevance suffered a catastrophic ending because the World Government decided the pros of getting rich off of Amber Lead outweighed the cons of letting hundreds of thousands die.

"Why are you being nice to me?" she asked suddenly. "I get we're like… science teammates, but I not even in your crew."

"I can't be nice to people who aren't in my crew?" he replied, leaning back on the counter. "That's not an answer."

"Anything can be an answer if you try hard enough."

He was teasing her again. As delightful as verbal sparring with Law could be, she wasn't up for it tonight. Sophie sighed, her cheek woefully swollen. "You don't have to force yourself to be nice. If you want to see G-13's research, I can bring it to you." Actually, she should've already shown him some projects; that had been the deal. But she couldn't say that, because Law's grin had fallen away, and his expression was—oh, god. Why was she so good at making herself feel like a pile of rotten mango slices? "I'm sorry," she said, resting her forehead on her palm. "I mean, if it had been me—I just don't get it."

"You're just—you," he said curtly, and for some reason glanced at Hai Xing's pantry. His voice quieted as he continued, "And if I—if we didn't like your company, we would've told you to fuck off."

"…But haven't you told me that before?"

Law thought about it, sitting down across from her. "In this case," he said finally, "it was good that you didn't listen."

Sophie didn't know how to respond to that. A shame it was so late, Law reflected. The dust of pink across her cheeks was wasted on the night.

"Well, then… okay." She looked out into the harbor with some sort of embarrassed determination.

This strange, quiet moment between them remained undisturbed for about three more seconds, and then Penguin shouted from the voice pipes, "Captain! We caught a stalker!"

Casting each other a bemused glance, Law and Sophie Roomed up to the deck where the Hearts were grappling with said stalker, dragging him over the submarine's railings.

"Get off me, pirate," Hippo snapped, shaking off Shachi, "I'm not a stalk—ah, Sophie-chan! Um.
Bad time?"

Sophie was so overcome by surprise and righteous fury that she was left momentarily speechless. Law took this opportunity to catch his crew—and the marine dripping in the middle of his deck—off-guard.

"Sensei," he called over Sophie's steaming head, "would you like to stay for dinner?"

to be continued

Chapter End Notes

End notes: I now have useless in-depth knowledge of organophosphates and enzyme-substrates thanks to this chapter. Fingers crossed it makes good small talk at future dinner parties I don't really want to be at. Also, I based the medical metallurgy of Amber Lead off of lead disease! According to wikia, it resembles cadmium poisoning more, but… for the sake of drawing a comparison between Amber Lead and Red Sky, ahaha.

Fun fact: Hai Xing is the Chinese word for starfish. I didn't intend for him to have any sort of backstory during my initial conception of him (he was just going to be a gloomy, kinda weird sort of cook), but around the Kunlun arc I thought it'd be really great if he ended up being a starfish fishman this whole time. Then I could be like "It was in the name, guys! Foreshadowing~" (Well, I guess it won't work now…)

I'd love to hear your thoughts! And as always, anything you're interested in reading about or the characters you want to see appear in this fic.
Growing Pains, or: How to Walk on Sore Ankles, a Treatise

When she and Law arrived on the deck, Sophie scanned the submarine for a stalker-esque figure (her mind pictured someone wearing a floor-length trench coat, and looked vaguely like Law) and her gaze landed on Penguin and Shachi. They were shoving a man to his feet, checking him for live ammo and rigged grenades until Hippo mentioned that he once hid two BA-11s near his deep dark nethers, you better frisk thoroughly, pirate. He said pirate like he crushed a whole lemon between his molars, swallowed everything, seeds and all, and the abrupt déjà vu almost made Sophie miss what Law said next—

"...Dinner," she repeated. "...Here."

Sophie blamed this on Law's complete and utter lack of parental supervision growing up, even though it wasn't really his fault. Except, well. Flevance didn't metastasize into a city of silent stone-white angels by itself and, when she thought about it, he came from an entire country that made decisions so dumb it followed them down the ancestral line, birth to death and death and death. You'd think DNA was impervious to genetic idiocy (she didn't say that, though, because talking about angels when Hai Xing was in line for Best Zombie Starfish award and her head still aching from being assaulted by chocolate cake felt like tempting fate with crooked finger, and Sophie'd had enough casual flirtations with Death—capital D, not the one with the obscenely yellow hoodie standing next to her—to know about tempting fate).

"He looks like he could use a good meal," the surgeon pointed out. "Or just a meal. Any caloric intake at this point—don't look at me like that, I've been known to occasionally help a marine down on their luck."

See, he never had anyone to tell him no. As in no, Sophie, you can't stick your hand down a blender to see what'll happen, and put that saltshaker down, you've melted enough snails to terrorize half the reef's ecosystem, and right there, that was the problem. I bet his parents never even hit him, she thought with a scoff, and then felt a teensy bit bad, because Law's parents were weepy white stiffs in the land of the oh dearly departed, and they never got to see him growing up and tell him he was doing it all wrong.

Hippo raised his thin hands, a placating gesture. Sophie remembered holding that hand when it was a big scarred oyster-shell fist, as she walked on her tiptoes across G-13's battlements, the very edge of her known atlas; he was singing an old sea shanty and she was a half-breeze away from falling a hundred feet into the ocean. He filled about half the sky when she looked up at him, both their heads in the clouds and so dementedly happy at their tiny makeshift family, a girl and her dad, their castle in the ocean.

But his hands now were the wrinkled skin of a snake molt, skinny as the branches of a bare winter tree. Sophie wasn't sure if this was some sort of test and if she was failing it (she never failed tests before, not ever ever ever), but she was hungry and besides, someone had to hide the parathion from Law.

—

On second thought, Hippo decided that 'I am here, ready to kick everyone's ass and rescue my poor confused kid from you suspicious lowlifes' did not fit the situation. He sat in the Heart Pirates' galley, a fresh towel wrapped around his shoulders.
Avoiding her teacher's general vicinity, Sophie stuck to the corner of the galley that wasn't too far away to be obvious but wasn't close enough to be uncomfortable—next to the stove, attempting to make the pot boil faster by telepathically steaming it with the force of her glare. She barely glanced at him when she muttered, "I didn't hide my research here."

"I wasn't trying to look for it," Hippo said reproachfully. He was actually rather impressed by the galley. "This yellow monstrosity is nicer on the inside. I expected to see corpses hanging on the walls."

"We only break those out on holidays," Tweedledumb clarified.

"You're pretty brave, marine. Aren't you afraid we're going to steal your brain?" snickered the other pirate, Tweedledumber.

"I was going to be polite and wait until after dinner," Trafalgar rebuked.

Hippo glanced at his kid. "Are they always this rude?"

"No," Sophie said honestly. "They're usually worse."

"Awww…"

Trafalgar slid over a wooden flagon. "Sensei—"

"Don't call me that."

The pirate snuck a knowing glance at Sophie, who stuck her tongue out. "…Drink?" Trafalgar finished.

Hippo looked at the flagon until the pirate got annoyed and took a mouthful of it himself. "I have better manners than to poison a guest."

Sophie's cough sounded suspiciously like, 'pants on fire!'

"A guest who is also my friend's precious family," he added with a smirk, and his student harrumphed and the pirates laughed at a joke that Hippo did not understand.

This was like… this was like someone telling him that Donquixote Doflamingo was actually a giant pink chicken that'd been masquerading as a human this whole time. It was within the realm of possibility, but he never expected to hear it out loud. The world flipped upside-down. North was South. Purple and green was a good color combination. Pirates were kind benevolent creatures and marines were evil menaces.

Hippo stared at Trafalgar, the pirates, the ceiling, and took a few moments to evaluate his life and his current circumstances. "Don't bother with that." He waved away the flagon and confiscated the entire bottle. "Drinking with pirates aboard their own ship. This must be my finest hour."

"Our commitment to villainy is lazy at best," said Tweedledumb, shrugging. "I mean, sometimes it's bad—"

"It can be pretty bad, yeah—"

"But other times we're pretty laidback—"

"It's not like we kidnap puppies or steal rattles from babies."
"Oh my god." Sophie covered her face with her hands.

"You're murderers," Hippo said flatly.

"...Putting that aside, is it true you kill pirate kids? And not just the famous ones, like Gold Roger's baby and his baby momma."

"She was never found. And god, no. Of course not." Hippo took a hefty drink. "We used to only kidnap them and perform experiments."

"Is anyone still surprised by how corrupt the Government is?" Law pointed out.

"It was a different time."

"Was it, though?" Sophie sneered from her corner.

"Sure. I had less stress wrinkles."

The smell of sizzling fish and peppers wafted over from the stove. The Surgeon of Death nudged open a porthole to let the steam out and a draft of sea-salt wind whispered in, cooling the steamy galley. He watched him and his student whisper; she looked weary and more than a little irritated, and when she shoved her bangs behind her ears he saw a bandage on her forehead. Hold on—

"Kid are you hurt are you okay what did they DO—"Hippo was about to stand up when the happiest song burst from her mouth: Sophie was laughing.

The pirate might've been laughing, too; his head turned slightly and Hippo saw the edge of a smug smile on his face. It was just for a moment that all the fatigue on her brow vanished—just a moment, because she glanced up and saw him, bottle in hand. Her smile fell.

Hippo didn't remember the food so much. The food was fine, apparently reheated lunch leftovers. But the pirates' rum was great. They always did have better rum than us. Sons of bastards. Idiot A and B lightheartedly prodded Hippo to estimate how many pirates he'd killed (he was so tipsy he actually replied—hundreds, probably; he was in his forties in a job that didn't do kind things to your lifetime, by his age you either retired or you get retired). Then the conversation turned to him and his kid until she mentioned that they weren't blood-related, she was adopted as his student.

"You two could be." Idiot B squinted at them, at Hippo's black curls and warm brown face, and then Sophie with her upturned nose and hazelnut tan. "...Well, maybe if you took after your mom, Sophie-chan."

Sophie-chan. Hippo wanted to barf. Into the Captain's hat, if possible.

His kid began tapping on the edge of her plate. (A familiar, if annoying, quirk.) Then she shot a glance at Captain Asshead. (An unfamiliar, and more annoying, quirk.)

Trafalgar gave a half-assed attempt at a pleasant smile. "Sensei, I hear that you're G-13's best doctor."

He grunted.

"How would you treat a patient who's been afflicted with Red Sky?"

Ah, she told him about Vira. That surprised Hippo less than he'd like. He decided to humor the boy: "The burning. You must never forget to do the burning. It leaves contaminative residue, gets into the water and soil, so you gotta burn them and everything they touch." He took another drink, paused,
and shook the empty bottle. "There should still be Revolutionaries out in the Viran fields, digging and burning with their wicker lights, long long into the night… what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Sophie, his emotional Sophie—how he used to laugh at her adorable tantrums—was staring at him like he was a skeleton-hand crawling up from the foot of her bed.

Trafalgar frowned and turned to Sophie, pointing at Hippo. "Why's this fucker useless?"

"Don't call him that!" she huffed. "I told you there was no point… and you got all riled up hearing 'Marine' and 'doctor' together in one sentence…"

"The danger is over. Only Virans and Revolutionaries are still affected by the sickness, and nobody's going to waste their resources on—"

"We're finding a cure. Me'n this pineapple."

She flicked her fork at Trafalgar—who gave a cheeky wave—and glared at him, daring him to scoff or laugh. He did neither.

"Well," Hippo said. "You're brilliant, aren't you."

Sophie's eyes widened in surprise, shining like the sun—"You've planned it all out. How you're going to waste the rest of your life." He didn't remember standing up, but his knees knocked against the table as he loomed over her. "Your life can't amount to this—you can't be saving anarchists and getting hurt and killed and throwing away everything you worked for to frolic with—"

She stood up, too. "Stop it!" It struck Hippo—for the first time, off pain sedatives—that Sophie was bigger than before, fists larger, biceps straining underneath her shirt. It used to be cute when she shouted at him, when her wrists were thin and her voice as high as a bird's and he could hold her upside-down by one ankle as she tried to claw at him. "It's m-m-more than that—"

"Yeah, we don't just frolic," said Idiot B.

"We also make flower crowns and braid each other's hair," said Idiot A.

"What happened?" Hippo pressed, shaking his head. "What happened to chemistry, to, to fighting pirates—this was your whole life, it's what you wanted, it's what you begged for—"

"Can you please listen to me?" Sophie was red-faced—he knew that tone. She didn't want to sound like she was begging, not in front of these pirates.

"I tried to give you everything that you wanted—" He was rambling now, vomiting out everything that had built up for a month. "I, I gave you the best schooling the World Government could offer—I adopted you, even though Lettidore and Teresa were against it—I've done all that I could so you could have a better life than I did, and I—god, I've sacrificed so much for you. Are you listening to me?"

Sophie clutched something shiny around her neck—dog tags? Her expression was like rolling thunder. Why wouldn't she smile at him anymore? She was his kid, for crying out loud.

"Silly girl, you break my heart," he almost sobbed, feeling like he was eight-years-old again, picking through trash for breadcrumbs.
"I don't care, you dumb dooodoo-face!"

The pirates seemed, for a moment, rather tickled by her choice of insult, but Sophie knew how to wrangle every sneering drop of disgust from the word dooodoo. He taught her that, after all. It was infuriating. Hippo reached for her arm, bypassed it, and started slapping her shoulders and her face and any which part he could get his hands on. Idiot A and B grabbed his shirt ("Mister Sensei! Let go!"), and it descended into a mad tug-of-war with Hippo in the middle, dragging Sophie over the table, them pulling him away, everyone screaming their heads off. Trafalgar slid over the table and seized her around the middle and half-hauled, half-carried her away from him.

Sophie bellowed past Trafalgar's ear, "I DON'T CARE! I don't c-care how much you sacrificed for me, I don't! CARE!" Her feet kicked, several inches from the floor. "Gonna hit m-me again? B-b-best be careful, old man; you've gotten skinny!"

He roared in bitter laughter. "And you've gotten fat, my darling."

"What a compliment!" she howled back. "Th-that means I can throw a h-heavy punch—Law-san, d-don't!"

Sophie tried to grab him as he was in the middle of drawing out his giant, compensating-for-something sword, and then ended up sort of smacking him with her torso, and he stumbled backwards.

"Get the fuck out of my ship," Trafalgar rasped, menace curling around every syllable. Idiots A and B stood in front of their captain, their good-natured smiles gone.

A man who had seen a great number of wars, Hippo knew when he was fighting a losing battle. That, and he was getting too old and had seen too many of his friends die from pirates like Trafalgar, to deal with their shit anymore.

He lurched towards the door, but then Sophie shouted after him, "What should I have done? Crawl back on my hands and knees, p-pretending the Vice Admiral didn't send a Cipher Pol agent to assassinate me?"

The Government owed you nothing. You chose to be a soldier. He had paid his dues early on. So had Lettidore and, by god, so had Teresa.

"Yes," he answered, the only truth that he knew. "It's what I would've done."

Underneath the fury and the grief was the unerring certainty that Sophie didn't even hate him. She didn't hate him after he tricked her. She sure as hell didn't hate him now, as she called for her sensei to come back, please, they weren't done, please, wait, wait. He didn't wait. He didn't look back.

The night-desert air was cold as he stumbled down the docks. What a mess. Why did he drink so much? Why… why hadn't he insisted on talking to Sophie alone? What had he been so afraid of? The wood beneath his feet creaked and rocked like a stolen G-13 battleship. And there, the young marine standing 'fore the bow, a flintlock in his hand, raising it at him without a trace of hesitation. There was no fear in his eyes; just silent obedience, the recognizing of a turncoat. Didn't he know it was a ruse? Charaka Hippo, a traitor? Never. Not ever. (Did you die thinking that? You must have. You did.)

And Sophie, panicking in the crow's nest and aiming the crosshairs, her teacherfather in mortal danger. Her bullet passed through him like knife through butter, one shot, The End. How the hell did she do that? She was no crack shot. Did she learn at Vira? (He shouldn't have let her go, shouldn't
have, shouldn't have, stay in your tower, little canary, war is no place for the impressionable.) Hippo saw it again, over and over: he saw the marine-boy-child raising his gun, he saw the marine-girl-child raise hers a half-second faster. If he had just made the sure the ship was empty, if he just moved faster, if he had said or done something!

He stopped in the middle of the road, paved with foreign clay. Far away from home. Home. G-13 was a bombed-out carcass now, ruined by Sophie's hand. When Teresa gave him news of her assassination, he chucked half of Lettidore's office out the window and threw a flowerpot at his head. There was no body for him to bury. They wouldn't even write her name on the memorial. Traitors are not grieved. Why did she have to come back? He would've accepted it as the years went on. He would've made his own memorial for her, abalone shells and oysters from the reef that she loved so much. He even knew where he'd put it—atop the North Tower that she loved, by the battlements. It had the best view of the ocean. But those battlements no longer existed.

The night was dark and still and empty. His ears picked up a faint sound: a record was playing through an open window. The singer's scratchy croon was a hymn to heartsickness, and all he could think about was that it was a damn shame he didn't have a glass of bourbon to raise.

—

"Prick," Penguin said immediately after the galley door closed.

"Shit-faced wet sock." Shachi stuck his tongue out.

"The biggest case of stick-up-the-fucking-ass I have ever diagnosed," Law snarked.

They glanced over at Sophie, who was staring at her feet.

The pirates began giving each other Significant Looks over Sophie's head. Picking up overturned bowls, Shachi made eye contact with his captain and jerked his head towards her. Law grimaced and looked at Penguin. Penguin coughed and pointedly busied himself with wrapping up the leftovers as excruciatingly slow as possible. Law indicated with his eyes, 'What am I supposed to DO'. He was ignored and left to his fate. Well, a captain was supposed to lead by example.

Law strode over to Sophie, who hadn't moved from her spot. Her face was red and splotchy with either rage or embarrassment. Likely a mix of both.

"Sophie," he said firmly.

She gave a slow, wailing moan, like a despondent poltergeist.

"Wait—wait. Stop." Law felt the gazes of his crewmates pinned to his back and quickly attempted to assuage the damage. "Listen to me." He patted her shoulders, decided this was too personal, and moved his hands to her cheeks, squishing them together, her lips puckering. This made her look like a miserable fish, begging for the sweet release of death. "Father figures are a dime a dozen. Your looks aren't bad, I'm sure you could find someone who'll let you call them Daddy—"

Sophie seemed to choked.

"I'll help you search for candidates. I don't imagine it'll take long. I'll tape a sign on your back or something."

"Oh my god, you're horrible!" Sophie shrieked, pummeling him with her fists.

Law lazily blocked her assault. Penguin and Shachi were falling over each other, laughing like
hyenas, as Sophie attempted to murder their captain with a spoon.

Shachi held up his hands, like he was envisioning the imaginary-sign on her imaginary-back. "Burgeoning young criminal searching for an older doctor to call Sensei," he cackled, and blinked. "Ah."

He and Penguin turned to look at their captain. "Ah," said Penguin, snapping his fingers.

A dark shadow crossed Law's face.

Penguin coughed delicately. "Oh, Sensei, I think I'm coming down with something."

"Sensei, pay attention to me," Shachi simpered, hiding his face behind Sophie's shoulder and fluttering his eyes.

Law pinched the bridge of his nose. "We are not going through this again."

Laughter rang out in Heart Pirates' mess. Loudest of all was the unrestrained brassy laughter, an octave higher than the rest: a temporary spell that turned the dark sky into an aurora of purples and blues and a thousand diamond stars, and if you had been wandering the pier beside the yellow submarine, you might've found yourself smiling along.

Wherever Hippo was, he was leaving Sophie alone. The long night had finally passed, and by next morning she was examining her reflection in the bathroom mirror, glaring at the bruises on her face (never again would she underestimate the warfare capacity of a well-baked dessert! Or Hippo's shockingly accurate backhands). She splashed water on her face and gripped the countertop.

"You're fine," Sophie firmly told herself. Her reflection gave her a dubious look. "Okay, maybe not fine, but close. A few miles away. You can see the d-destination, at least. Now get it t-together, you mango."

Her voice echoed in the spacious bathroom. The faucet dripped.

Suddenly gripped by anxiety, Sophie ran to the window and threw it open. Below, the Jaguar Temple's morning rush was swinging in full-force, and it was a relief to hear that noise, to fill this too-big guest room with something more than her own voice. She quickly dressed to the tune of citizens below chanting for better health services for disabled workers, as government officials offered them lemonade and more shade from the sun, and hurried out of the bedroom, not wanting to be alone a minute longer.

—

Law rested his back against the giant ceiba tree, sitting in the courtyard behind the College of Chemistry. The sun flared through the leaves, dappling the ground in pearly gold. The air was heady with Machinastean's summer aromas. If he closed his eyes... allspice and bay leaves, coriander and cinnamon. Warm chocolatey coffee from the café nearby. Sunlight in his mother's kitchen. The smell of hot sulfur. White-knuckled pain.

*My son, my brilliant son*, his mother whispered, *be smart. Survive. Protect your sister.*

"Somebooody's gonna recognize youuuu."

Law opened his eyes, staring into the sun. Then he remembered where he was.
Sophie walked across the empty courtyard and settled next to him, putting down an armful of books.

"I can't help that."

His retort bounced off her like an impenetrable balloon. She reclined against the tree regardless and took a deep breath of not-stuffy-basement air.

"I suppose it's nice to work outside once in a while," Sophie acknowledged, her eyes reflecting the sky's summer-sweet blue. She cracked open a book and stuck her nose in the pages. "Ahhh, the scent of old books is the best… the chemical degradation of cellulose and lignin that produces all these wonderful organic compounds… vanillin and toluene! Mmmm, is that benzaldehyde I smell? Perhaps furfural. A bit almondy. The scent of two-ethyl hexanol is my favorite…"

Her ode to books descended into incomprehensible mumbles and borderline obscene 'heeheehee's.

It was a lovely day to work outside: golden dragonflies buzzed over the grass, cicadas hummed on the ceiba tree. Sophie felt content enough to take off her gloves and stretch out on the soft grass, arranging her dress so it didn't ride over her legs. Baby quetzels roosting in a nest above them cheeped for food. Sophie watched their mother swoop down from the clouds in an arc of emerald to perch at the tip of the nest.

"I wish I knew my birth parents," she said pensively.

Law shuffled his papers.

A dragonfly hummed close by her ear. She absently shooed it away. "Aren't you going to ask me how they died?"

"Do you want me to ask about your personal history?"

"Up to you." She certainly wasn't going to talk about it if he didn't want to listen.

He set his quill down and pressed the tips of his fingers together. His grey eyes narrowed, trained directly at her. "Strangways Sophie. Charaka Hippo. You have different surnames. You were clearly groomed to become a World Government operative since birth, and judging by his personality and strict adherence to tradition, he doesn't seem the type to adopt just anyone's child. Your parents were marines, high-ranking ones and close friends with your mentor. They died in battle. He raised you ever since and kept your surname, feeling beholden to your deceased parents." Law settled back. "How'd I do?"

"Wrong on all accounts!" Sophie chirped blithely.

He raised an eyebrow. She smiled and went back to work.

"You were an illegitimate child," Law deduced, several hours later. "The child of someone who couldn't raise you out in the open, who gave you to your mentor to raise." His eyes widened as he put the pieces of the puzzle together. "G-13's Vice Admiral. And… a pirate. A pirate who either died or left you in G-13's care. Her name was Strangways. You're the bastard child of a—"

Sophie made an X with her fingers. He leaned against the tree, deep in thought.

"You're twenty years old… significant event that happened twenty years ago… Wait… perhaps… no… but, could it be?" Law pointed at her with a triumphant scowl (how did one scowl triumphantly? She needed to learn.) "The World Noble. From Cat's Eye. G-13 gave him Odin twenty years ago, but during that exchange, he gave G-13 a child born on his ship. You.
You're the secret daughter of a World Noble. You're the cat princess' half-sister. And you killed your birth father."

"Somewhere a village is missing its sociopathic conspiracy theorist."

"Truth is stranger than fiction."

Sophie shook her head. "Sorry, but my family tree isn't that sordid."

Law scrutinized her face. "...You and Sengoku have the same nose—"

"I promise you, we don't!"

—

Shachi popped out of the laundry hamper, blowing a dirty shirt off of his head. "I'm missing my socks," he announced to the cabin.

"Anko was supposed to finish laundry last week," Penguin sighed, clipping his toenails.

Kamasu was reading in his hammock. "He's not here. Probably passed out in some bordello."

"Is that why my blood pressure is lower than normal?" asked Manta. "He hasn't woken us up with a crossword puzzle in three days."

"Once again," said Kamasu, flipping the page of a sexy-looking magazine, "passed out in his own vomit."

"Damn you, Anko!" Shachi shook his fist at the ceiling. "I've ran out of underwater, and I've already started on Penguin's clean boxers!"

Penguin stopped clipping. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, that's what I forgot to tell you..."

"Take it off!"

"Right here? Okay." Shachi started opening his boiler suit, as the rest of the cabin sprang up and roared, "NO!"

—

Sophie thought she was still dreaming when she rolled over, her brain shaking awake from a world on fire. The shadow of a revolutionary was burning beneath her eyelids, metal pipe and a singed top hat, sweating in the firelight of the Viran wasteland. She rolled up on her elbows, her shirt hanging low off her shoulders, certain she was back in hell.

"Sophie," the revolutionary murmured, and she heard his voice again, echoing long ago and far away. Goodnight, marine. Goodnight, goodnight.

She lunged forward and tackled him around the knees.

They both crashed over the floor, onto hard dry dirt, bullets peppering past her helmet. Sophie blindly scrambled over him with her calves locked against his legs, and he was saying something, but—she reached for her gun on her holster—her gun? Where was her gun? She wasn't wearing—why wasn't she wearing pants? Oh, mangoes.
In one swift move, he grabbed her by the front of her shirt and rolled them both over. Her back hit the floor, his chest inches from hers. *Okay, you dirty pineapple.* Kill first, pants later. Sophie plunged her hand beneath the bed, searching for the weapon she kept inches from her little nest on the floor.

Sophie tore out a butcher's knife. He seized her wrist before she could poke a hole in his throat—and then they were wrestling for the knife, knees knocking together in a flurry of thrashing limbs. She bit down on his knuckles, drawing a vicious *swear* as his grip tightened. She clenched the knife handle in both hands, arms shaking with the effort to maintain control.

She savagely kicked his chest, ramming her heel into his ribcage, again and again. He swiftly pinned down her legs and rested his head beside hers, and she would've screamed if she wasn't already chewing on a whole mouthful of callused hand. He stopped moving, aside from that one hand on the knife, keeping it in the air, away from him, as he cut off the circulation to her wrist. Sophie struggled and writhed, to no avail. He was like a weighty stone, pinning her down. Something cold pressed against her cheek. Cold, like a pair of earrings. And then—then she smelled something familiar. Metal. Soap. Antiseptic and coffee and…

After a few spasmodic twitches, she began breathing in time to him, slow and careful. The ringing in her ears died down.

She felt his rumble, from her cheek all the way down to her toes: "You alright?"

Law's voice was muffled by her shoulder.

...*Oh.*

She made an '*uh-huh*' noise in the back of her throat.

"Good." He lifted his head. "But by all means, keep biting."

Sophie became aware that she was dribbling all over his hand. She unclamped her teeth and jerked back, wiping her mouth. Pale grey light from the window outlined Law's messy hair and wrinkled hoodie. As soon as it was evident that she wasn't about to disembowel him, he cautiously let go. Sophie lowered the knife, rubbing her stinging wrist. Her fear was gone, abruptly switching into something she was far more uncomfortable with.

"We sure do meet in my bedroom a lot, in the dark," she laughed awkwardly, and wanted to throw herself out the window.

His finger twitched against her knee. "Last time, if I recall, a beer bottle almost killed you."

*Yes, last time*… Sophie had been determined to erase that memory out of sheer will.

He raised his hand to the light and examined the red crescent teeth-marks on his hand. "Do you always have a butcher's knife where you sleep?"

"Do you always a-appear inside someone's b-bedroom unannounced while they're s-sleeping!?!"

"...Fair point."

His eyes meandered to her face, and downwards. His eyebrows rose a fraction. Sophie followed his gaze and squeaked. She yanked down her oversized shirt that had bunched up, up, up around her waist. When she glowered at him again—stammering *a-vert your indecent eyes*—Law was ignoring her, looking around the room as though searching for something…
Sophie brandished the knife, one foot pressed against his sternum. That got his attention.

"What the _pineapples_ are you doing here?"

He glanced at her bare toes, his hands dropping to his side. For one crazy, horrible, crazy, ridiculous, _crazy_ moment, Sophie thought Law was going to wrap his fingers around the back of her knees. She thought he was going to lean forward, ignoring the blade completely, and perhaps investigate how much further her shirt could be disheveled.

Law rested back on his knees, a glimmer of unease flashing across his face.

—I'm leaving. Goodbye, fuckers. It's been real. – Anko

"Oh, dear," murmured Sophie, reading the note. His writing was atrocious.

"I know." Law nodded. "He's improved so much."

It certainly made her wonder how good he was at those crossword puzzles…

Anko was missing, he'd written a note, and his stuff was all gone. It wasn't exactly… subtle. Seeing as how he wasn't hiding out in her room like a dirty vagrant, Sophie was perfectly fine with going back to sleep and letting the pirates sort this out amongst themselves. But then Law picked up a dress that was folded on the vanity and tossed it at her, telling her to hurry, they were wasting daylight.

The dress was halfway over her head when Sophie remembered she did not even want to do this. "Hold on a—"

"Ready?"

Without waiting for her response, a blue Room appeared over her head. She quickly yanked the dress over her middle, cursing him out in fruit names.

The Machinastein transportation system had just begun their morning shift. Law and Sophie appeared in the middle of a compartment full of sleeping commuters. They appeared just behind Bepo, Shachi, and Penguin, who seemed to be expected them. She quickly balanced herself against a chair, the floor rumbling as the train sped through the city.

"Alright," Sophie groused. "Where do you think Anko could be?"

"Gambling house?" Bepo offered.

"In some alley," Penguin said with a shrug. Sophie made a face. "If it was anybody else, I'd be worried. But it's Anko, so…"

"I still think he ran away because he didn't want to finish laundry," Shachi groused.

"Is this because Hai Xing-san's a—" She froze, feeling Law's gaze drilling the back of her head. Shachi and Penguin looked at her expectantly. "A what?"

"A… beautiful man with beautiful eyes."

"Blush," said Hai Xing, from the shadows.
Sophie's scream nearly cracked the windows.

He limped over on a crutch and gingerly sat down. Law had planned to search for Anko by himself, considering it was very early in the morning and most of the Hearts were asleep, but they all agreed the sooner they found him, the better. Also, Bepo elucidated, first one to find Anko could punch him in the face.

Law laid out the plan: Penguin would search the docks, Shachi took downtown, and Bepo had the backstreets. Law himself would scour everywhere else. That only left the desert, a rocky expanse covered with cacti and a scattering of villages. Sophie had been there before, out of curiosity, when she had woken up from the hospital and wanted to explore the island. It was decided that she and Hai Xing, because he had a Den Den Mushi, would investigate this outpost.

To Sophie, this whole thing seemed silly, immature. If any marine dared to run away from their station, they'd sooner be court martialed and tried for treason than welcomed back with open arms. If only she didn't have Red Sky to stress about, or Hippo…

—even I would make a better pirate than Anko.

Sophie felt a little bit guilty for allowing herself to think that. Then she looked at the worry on his crewmates' faces and sat up straighter.

But it's true.

—

She'd seen pictures of Alabasta's desert in books: endless dunes, velvet-soft sand rippling like an ocean current for a thousand miles, everything a soft burnt orange.

Machinastein's desert was hard, stony, and green. Not the kind of fresh, verdant green found on Kunlun's forests, but a dry, tough green, hidden underneath sharp thickets and twigs. The land was so flat it seemed that if you kept walking, you could walk right into the sky itself. She stepped off the rickety old train station, the only respite from the sun for miles around. They passed by silent rangers in their serapes, riding Giant Quetzels out into the wilderness. To the north stretched maize farms, to the west, the sugarcane.

"You know," Sophie said, pulling her hair into a ponytail, "Anko's probably not even here."

"He could be lying in a ditch, blood spilling out of his eye sockets, traces of dog feces found around his mouth, castrated…"

To her relief, talking to Hai Xing still felt normal. He had called her a Tenryuubito Slayer; he had told her she had nothing to apologize for. Granted, the more she thought about it, the more Sophie wondered how he spent the past three months making casual conversation with her, without even attempting to kill her once? Half of Sophie wanted to ask him, and the other half wanted to ignore it forever. And seeing as how she was so good at the latter…

She eyed the walking vortex of pessimism. "I'm glad you're still so lively after being gunned down by chocolate gangsters."

So long as she could pretend everything was normal, it was fine. They just never had to mention anything fish-related until the end of time.

"Hm," Hai Xing said. "Comes with the fish territory."

"OH," Sophie half-yelled, suddenly feeling very panicked while knowing she had no reason to feel
panicked, and as a result made her feel even more panicked.

There was a long pause.

"Um. Yeah. So, yeah, you're a fishman, or, I mean, half of one, I mean, if th-that's n-not a rude thing t-to say. Y'know what, it probably is, and I'm sorry, and you can just ignore me!" She nodded in an attempt to be upbeat, and ended up looking deranged. "Casual segue! I-i-if you w-were Anko, where would you go?"

If Sophie had a gun with her, she would've pressed it to her foot and pulled the trigger.

Hai Xing closed his eyes, tilting his head as though he was listening to something. Sophie couldn't hear anything but the rustle of the wind against grass.

He started limping eastward. Not really expecting an answer, she followed.

They walked for a couple hours, though Sophie insisted they take time to rest in the sparse general stores and bars they came across. Thankfully, the dress Law had thrown at her was airy and lightweight. She didn't mind the heat too much; it reminded her of Crawfish Island, of Nellie's inn and jambalaya and earthy tobacco. Hai Xing, however, looked like what she imagined one long cigarette felt like, burning slowly from the soles up. Did fishmen dehydrate easy?

The more she thought about how simply Hai Xing had told her that nothing that happened to him was her fault, the more she became anxious that maybe he lied. Maybe he secretly hated her. Sophie had never thought about how slaves, liberated or otherwise, felt towards the World Government. She had never needed to; it was a concept so foreign that it belonged on the other side of the universe. She never met a slave or a slave owner before, she barely paid attention when anybody on G-13 mentioned they caught pirates dealing in slave trade… she'd never been affected by it, she couldn't relate to it, so why would she ever care?

They walked side-by-side under the sweltering sky. Sophie looked down at Hai Xing's shadow, running along the grass. She matched her pace with his, in case he fell or tripped on a rock. *Stop it,* she told herself. *It's not helping. You're not responsible for anything. It doesn't even matter anymore; it's in the past. Hai Xing's clearly in a better place now.*

*That makes sense,* a little voice murmured, *because trauma is easy to move on from, right, soldier?*

"AHHHGHH," Sophie yelled, clutching her head.

Hai Xing looked at her.

She coughed delicately. "Swallowed a bug. So, anyway… tell me if I'm supposed to make you stop and rest or something."

He pressed on, tightly gripping the crutch, and she followed. Something about his expression made her curious.

"Are you worried about Anko?"

"I'd have to prepare food for the funeral service if he died," Hai Xing explained, walking vigorously. "But I already have my cooking schedule lined up for the next week."

She didn't know how long they walked until she caught the scent of salt and seaweed. The
tumbleweed and cacti were gone, and the rocky ground became white sand. A beach came into view. They stood on top of a hill, overlooking crashing, short-way-to-heaven seafoam. Here it was, where Hai Xing thought Anko would run to. No bordello, no gambling house, no broken-down alley.

Sophie stretched—*ah*, that was a nice workout—and shielded her eyes from the sun. "There's the city!"

It was shimmering in the distance, down the beach. They had walked halfway back. Hai Xing leaned against his crutch, breathing heavily.

She squinted, searching the uninhabited beach. No sign of the stray helmsman. The possibility of Anko, passed out in his own vomit, was growing ever more certain. "He's probably not here. Should we head back now?"

Hai Xing didn't move; Sophie followed his gaze to a cave right below them, hidden by the tall marram grass. Well, as a scientist she couldn't possibly leave unless she observed all possibilities. She sighed and removed her sandals. "I'll check it out. Don't move."

She slid down the hill and shook out the sand between her toes, walked over to the cave and peeked inside.

Sophie had never truly noticed Anko's tattoos before. She'd seen them, briefly, when he tied his boiler suit around his waist. And she once got a good look when they were fighting Teresa and he was *butt fudging naked* and wow, it was getting warm in here, wasn't it? In any case, now she could see them properly: blue ink swirling around his neck and arms and down his back. The sunlight coming in from the cave's opening framed his naked back in a halo of gold. It was as if he walked into the ocean one day and the waves melted over him and went to sleep on his skin.

He was writing letters over and over on the sand with a long stick. She walked forward, then broke into a sprint.

Anko heard her footsteps and looked up. "Captain—"

Sophie punched him across the face, screaming, "*FOUND YOU, MUFFINFUDGER!*"

Her punch threw Anko into the sand. He rolled several feet before coming to a full stop, and jerked upright with a bright red cheek. "*What the fuck—Sophie!*"

Anko was wearing shorts, thank goodness. His chest was bare, a sand dollar necklace swinging over his collarbones. His face was unmarred, only his signature scar slashing through his left eyebrow. He was fine. The runaway pirate was fine and *alive* and sulking in a friggin' cave.

She rubbed her burning fist and spat, "They're all s-searching for you, you sour kiwi."

"I'm not going back," Anko snapped. "I'm tired of those fuckers."

A vein bulged in her forehead. "*Listen, you—*"

His eyes widened. Anko didn't say anything for several seconds, and it occurred to Sophie that he was staring at something behind her. She spun around.

Hai Xing stood against the light, his expression unreadable.

Then he motioned to her. "Strangways, let's go."
Wait, they were leaving now? Didn't Law want them to bring Anko back? She turned slightly, hesitated, and looked back at the helmsman.

Anko seemed equally at a loss. "...What about me?"

"Stay here for the rest of your fucking life," Hai Xing said, and Sophie's jaw dropped. "Lonely boy blue, everyone's forgotten you."

"Why..." Anko whispered.

*Pineapples, mangos, goddesses of the fruits, what do I do?*

"Why... why... why are you cooler than me!?" Anko exploded, pointing dynamically at Hai Xing. "It's not fair!"

Sophie stared. "...Eh?"

Anko clawed the air. "You're the cool, silent type who says cool things and you're a cool fishman and—and I mean, what do you need these awesome powers for!? All you do is cook! Just looking at your cool, dumb face pisses me off!"

She did not know how to approach this. Was Anko insulting Hai Xing or praising him?

"I cook," Hai Xing agreed. "I cook for hours every day. When I wake up, I cook. Before I go to sleep, I prep for tomorrow's cooking. Even Strangways cleans and helps out, and she's not even one of us. You can't even finish a load of laundry."

"I'm the helmsman!" Anko cried. "It's not my fault we've been stuck here for almost a whole fucking month!"

"You're only a helmsman because Shachi and Penguin were too busy to do it themselves," Hai Xing said blandly.

Silence.

It was as if a soundless bomb had detonated between them. Sophie nervously looked between Hai Xing and Anko, and opened her mouth, trying to think of something to diffuse this horrible tension —

Anko charged at him.

"Stop!" Sophie shrieked, diving between both pirates. "No! Bad! Ow, ow! Law-san would be very disappointed—ow!"

She tried to stop Anko from reaching Hai Xing, who stumbled back, losing his crutch in the scuffle. Anko accidentally elbowed her in the forehead, right in the big purple bruise she'd gotten from the chocolatiers. Sophie staggered to the side, clutching her head.

"Do it!" Anko was roaring at Hai Xing, shaking him by the shoulders. "Spike out! Gimme another scar!"

She grabbed the biggest, heaviest rock she could find and chucked it at Anko's back. He toppled to the ground, off-balanced. Hai Xing slithered away from being crushed underneath.

She strode forward. If Sophie had seen her reflection, G-13’s youngest chemical warfare director would’ve stared back at her, the Viran soldier, the Tenryuubito Slayer. She knew this feeling. It'd
been so long since she last touched it, breathed it, let it scream in tandem with her voice.

Anko grinned at her, wolfish. "You wanna fight, too?"

She spat on the dirt. "That's the G-13 Way."

Before he could get to his feet, Sophie kicked him across the face, her heel catching across sharp cheekbones. Her face was violently dark; she had not been this angry since Cat's Eye, since she was stuffed in a coffin to become sunflower feed. "At least I try to be liked. Do you want to run away from your friends? You want to be so lonely you feel like you're gonna go crazy?"

Anko scrambled away, kicking up sand everywhere. Sophie stalked after him, a hungry black shadow in the light, and seized him by his sand dollar necklace. "You want to be so alone that you start talking to yourself!? Because you're desperate to hear just one voice, even if it's your own!?"

She buried her fist in his cheek and felt the satisfying wham of his head snapping back. Her knuckles came away bloody, but so did he.

"If you really wanted to disappear, you should've done it thor-ou-ghly!" she screamed, because didn't she do the same thing? Didn't she leave before? Didn't she force herself to make peace with the fact that she was never going to see these pirates again? "No hesitation! No sitting in a cave feeling sorry for yourself! You should be halfway to Alabasta by now! You're spineless, pirate, you're spineless!"

Anko clawed at her hands, his eyes spitting murder. Grabbing him by the necklace, she straightened up and forced him to his feet, glaring down at him.

"Go ahead and leave," she hissed, practically strangling him. "Maybe I'll be their next helmsman."

Before she could blink, he jammed his knee her in the gut and kicked her backwards. Then he was standing before her, punching her in the solar plexus—once, twice—and across the face, knockout—Sophie fell onto the sand, her head ringing with pain. Her face was on fire.

Gasping for breath and coughing, he kicked her in the back. "Come on, babe, hit me one more —oomph!"

Hai Xing tackled him to the ground and started beating him over the head with his crutch. Sophie unsteadily got to her feet and chased after them. She shoved Anko when he tried to get up again, and he grabbed her hair and hurled her into Hai Xing. There they were: two pirates and a hitchhiking chemist, slipping on the sand, clawing and kicking each other like frantic, crazed animals. She punched him for everything stupid thing he'd done, and she punched him because he was leaving the Heart Pirates, and she punched him because he didn't know how good he had it.

They somehow scuffled their way onto the beach. Anko and Hai Xing were hitting and kicking each other, until finally they collapsed onto the sand. Sophie was a few feet away, on her hands and knees, wheezing and spitting blood. He punched her in the mouth and it cut her lip.

"Maybe she would," Hai Xing panted, "maybe she would make a better helmsman than you."

"You," Anko gritted his teeth, "fuck you—"

There was a thud, and Sophie looked up just as Anko kicked Hai Xing into the tide. The incoming wave rolled over them both.

"Sophie-chan," Anko said quietly, pinning Hai Xing down, "did you know that it's legal to kill a
The tide washed over Hai Xing. He turned his head away, coughing out water.

She raised her head, horrified. "Anko, no!"

Then it occurred to her that he sounded like... he was accusing her of something.

"Why haven't I ever heard about a single fishman in the World Government?" Anko asked.

It was an accusation. Sophie felt the threat of tears prickle at her eyes. *I don't know, I don't know—no, that was a lie, of course she knew, she just couldn't say it out loud because she was a big, stupid coward. She didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to think about how she had spent her whole life in the World Government, her entire existence complicit in this awful thing that had hurt Hai Xing. That had hurt so many people in its terrible atrocity, people who weren't soldiers who knew what they were signing up for, people who were never prepared to bleed and suffer and die.

"Why has it taken hundreds of years to accept the existence of fish and merfolk?" Anko's voice cracked. "Why do you still have to disguise yourself as human or risk murder?"

And then he said something quiet, and it sounded something like 'Why the fuck are you considered less than me?' only Sophie didn't hear it too well because she was too busy drop-kicking Anko while screaming, "LET GO OF HAI XING-SAAAAAN!"

Anko toppled over into the seafoam. "Ow, my eye!"

Sophie tugged Hai Xing away from the tide, onto the beach. She sat down, catching her breath and gingerly examining the bruises on her body. He groaned, wiping saltwater from his mouth.

"Are you o-okay?"

Hai Xing nodded. "He avoided my injuries."

Anko clumsily stumbled through the waves, trying to get back to shore. Watching him flounder like an idiot, all the will to fight left her. She was bone-tired. Sophie fell back on the sand, staring up at the lavender sky, stars pinwheeling all over heaven.

Hai Xing laid on the sand beside her.

She tongued the inside of her cheek, wondering and wondering and wondering until finally she said, "It's okay to h-h-hate me. Killing one World Noble doesn't make up for anything."

"Well," he said, in a tone that sounded like he'd once considered that, "I'm fine with not hating you."

She turned her head to look at him. Hai Xing's brown eyes reflected the constellations, and his hair was all matted against the birthmark on his forehead—and Sophie came to the quiet realization that maybe she was wrong. Maybe it was never going to be okay. Nobody could do anything that would magically make it okay. No matter how many people he forgave, no matter how much time had passed, no matter how many bajillion fireworks she exploded that wrote *HAI XING IS A BIG OL' SOFTIE WITH THE GRACE OF BOA HANCOCK AND THE SEDUCTIVE APPEAL OF WHITEBEARD* in the sky, he was going to live with it, forever and ever and ever.

Anko squished up to them and collapsed by their feet. "God, that fuckin' hurt," he complained, tilting his head forward so he didn't choke on all the blood dripping out of his nose.
"Serves you right," Sophie sneered tiredly.

After a lengthy silence, Anko pointed at the Big Dipper. "Look, it's the flying toilet."

"Ah," said Hai Xing. "There it is."

Sophie got the notion that she was listening to an inside joke, and then was quite surprised Anko and Hai Xing had an inside joke in the first place. She listened to them talk. Not talk like they were two disinterested crewmates, but like they were old friends, who knew a lot more about each other than they let on. She turned to look at Anko, at the pale scar running along his left eyebrow. *Give me another scar*, he had said. She wondered how exactly long they had known each other.

As though reading her mind, Hai Xing said, "This one saved me from a slave auction."

Sophie gaped. "Seriously?"

"I'm still angry that didn't land me a bounty."

"We stowed away on a pirate submarine, close to death."

"I was the one hurt!"

"We are all defective angels," said Hai Xing, quite poignantly. "…Worn down by the mortal coil of our tiny existence, shoulders burdened by the ever-grinding millstone of humanity—"

He had to shield himself from the pebbles thrown at him.

—

When Law found them, lying on the beach and trying not to get salt in their wounds, he smacked Anko over the head, then Hai Xing.

"Ouch!"

"…Ow."

He rounded on Sophie, who recoiled, covering her head. Her eyes were wet and shiny with the threat of tears. He paused.

Then he flicked her on the nose. *Hard.*

"Son of a plum!"

"Get up," Law ordered. "If you three give each other anymore injuries, I'll cut off your arms myself."

Anko and Hai Xing followed after him like kicked puppies. Sophie held her head high and made sure everyone knew she was only obeying his stupid order because she wanted to. The other pirates were waiting on top of the hill.

"Captain…" Anko took a deep breath. "I've been outshined by a cooler pirate for the last time. I can't take it anymore!" Law frowned at him. "I really am leaving the crew."

His captain scoffed. "Oh, like hell you are."

"Fuck you," Anko said indignantly and strode out into the desert.
Law threw his arm out, blocking anyone who was about to chase after him. He basically had to wrestle his entire crew, and was nearly bowled over by Bepo.

"Anko!" Sophie screamed, tugging on Law's shirt.

"Anko, get back here!" Shachi.

"Come back, jackass!" Penguin.

In a flash of blue, Anko stood before them. Law's palm was outstretched, glowing cerulean. They went quiet, with a collective, 'Ah, that's right…'

Anko blinked in surprise, threw Law an affronted glare, then turned his heel and marched back into the plains.

Law Roomed him back again. He was, clearly, not good with rejection.

Anko kicked a cactus. "God damn it!"

"You're not allowed to leave without my blessing."

"Dick," Anko said sullenly.

"Fuckhead," Law flatly replied.

"Unboiled spaghetti noodles," Sophie brightly contributed. They glared at her. And that was that.

Penguin marched up to Anko, surveying his bruises and bloody lip with a critical eye. "Looks like Hai Xing and Sophie set you straight," he said at last, and threw his arm over his shoulder. Anko blinked. "Alright, men, let's head home!"

"I make a better helmsman than you, anyway," Anko muttered to Sophie as he passed by her.

"For now," she dryly retorted.

He gave her the finger, and then yelped as Bepo tackled him to the ground.

On the train ride back, Shachi fell asleep against Bepo and Anko's drooped his head on Penguin's shoulder. They all looked so… close, like real family. Sitting across from them, it did not go unobserved by Sophie that no matter how long she knew these pirates, they had known each other for far longer. And that was alright. In a rare moment of unselfishness, she was genuinely glad for them. And then she had to think about explosions for five minutes to clean this horrible sappy feeling away from her brain.

Law rested his head against the window, gazing at the desert landscape as it flicked by, glowing rose-gold in the sunset. Their knees brushed gently every time the train swayed.

Now here was a pirate who'd been grinded up by the great pasta maker called Life and spat back out at the other end. She wondered if he would listen to her, genuinely, without wisecracks. Though Law probably wouldn't care… but maybe that was a good thing. She didn't even really want him to care that much. He didn't even need to say anything.

Sophie fidgeted with the hem of her dress and reached out to quickly tap his knee. He glanced over.

"Can I, um—" She cleared her throat, brushing her hair over her ear. "Can I talk to you… uh, for a bit?"
Law nodded, looking questioningly at her. Sophie exhaled.

"The Strangways," she said softy, "was a boat."

---

*The Strangways.* Her namesake.

Chipped paint varnished into a capsized hull. Barely anything left of it, until Hippo found her nestled between the collapsed mast and a chunk of flotsam. Perhaps it was unlucky to be named after a shipwreck, but they were already calling her 'that Strangways kid' before she could speak. There was something about only survivors that made people want to make stories out of them.

Hippo was the first to call her Sophie. He kept her surname, because old-fashioned marines had this custom of naming kids after their dead and he was big into tradition and remembrance and paying your respects, so Strangways stayed. She spent many nights huddled up under the covers, mouthing silently, over and over again. *Strange-wayees So-fee.* Her name had a certain whistle to it, like the snap-crackle of burning wood. She liked the harsh drag of the s's, the press of teeth against her lip and the way it almost sounded like 'free'. A boat became a girl. The girl found a home. That's how all the stories go.

Who was she, really, if she didn't dive under G-13's coral beds and pick oysters and clams during the dog days of summer? Who was she, if she didn't fall asleep to the drift of the lighthouse coming in from her bedroom window? Who was she, if she didn't watch the sun rise over the shipyard and listen to the footsteps walking down the barracks to breakfast?

Of course, Sophie knew that a home didn't define a person. It just couldn't, right? Losing a place didn't mean losing a central part of yourself… right?

Well. In any case. Law wasn't a marine, so he didn't know this, but her sensei and Vice Admiral Lettidore were kinda famous in their area of the Grand Line. Before their generation, G-13 was a hellhole. Illegal experiments run amok. Corrupt Vice Admirals holding criminals in tiny cells to torture them. Even to the point of taking the kids of pirates, the kids on their ships, to experiment with giantification. Lisbeth's Odin was one of them. Hippo was at the forefront of the reformation. The Vice Admiral always had his back. They were heroes, and she was just… a kid. A dumb kid who'd never be as good.

"So… so maybe he's done some lame stuff to me, but, but, like, he's Sensei… you know?" Sophie finished lamely.

She slumped in her seat, feeling like she was in no better place than when she first started talking.

Law spun his hat between his hands. "You're allowed to be disappointed in him."

"...Really? Can you... r-really do that? Just go up to your parent and say, 'Hey, you messed up, you weren't g-good to me, you didn't treat me right.'"

"Sure."

Sophie did that thing where she was thinking hard about something: her thick eyebrows furrowed together and she scrunched up her face like she was taking an enormous shit. She wasn't aware of Law glancing at his sleeping crew, or Hai Xing, who quickly closed his eyes in a demure impression of sleep.

Sophie could kick Hippo and call him names, but to actually say he was a disappointment? That
he… failed in her in some way? She could already see his broken expression, the pain and hurt in his eyes, feel her own self-disgust rise like bile in her throat. She shook her head. No, she wasn't ready to do that. She wasn't brave enough.

Law shrugged a little, setting his hat back over his eyes.

"He could die tomorrow. Are you ready to regret all the things you'll never get to say to your dad?"

Sophie inhaled softly, the 'were you?' dying in her throat like a heavy secret.

—

It wasn't too hard tracking Hippo down; some jerk was hustling old grandpas by beating them in Go, and she retraced his steps to a bar downtown. He was sat in the corner, greasy hair and bony wrists and still somehow channeling an 'I'll arrest you if you come near me' Marine Vibe.

Hippo looked up. "My god, were you run over by a brick building?"

Sophie sighed. "It's been one of those days." She slid into the empty stool next to him.

"It wasn't—Trafalgar didn't—"

She flashed back to her bedroom, his hand on her wrist, her knife gleaming at his throat. Sophie mentally blasted that thought away with a billion mental-grenades. "N-no. I was j-just caught in a stupid fight between friends." She nodded at the bartender. "Beer, please."

"I got it," Hippo said, before she could take out her money. He slid over two crumpled bills. "Late birthday gift."

Oh. So he did remember.

He looked at her guiltily. "I… can get you something better when I have the money."

"Doesn't matter. It's just a birthday." The bartender slid over a glass of beer and an ashtray for Sophie's cigarette.

"…When the hell did you start smoking?"

She exhaled, coughing lightly. "Vira. I was bored. There are only so many rats you can shoot before you find yourself wanting to die a slow, carcinogenic death." She watched him down another glass of scotch and waved for a refill. "You should… really slow down, sensei."

"Etiquette lecture twenty," he reminded.

*Never get in the way of old people and their simple pleasures.* "The Vice Admiral used to get angry at you when you drank."

"Don't remind me."

"Sometimes," Sophie said lightly, "I think, because he didn't… he didn't, maybe, want to show you the extent of that anger, he took it out on me. Sometimes."

Hippo paused. "Did he?"

She sipped her beer before continuing carefully. "I told you before. He'd yell, hit me—"
"Oh, my dear…” Hippo let out a long, slow sigh. "We all go through that. It's how things are done. You get hit, you stand up and move on. Nobody complained. I didn't, and look where I am. In a… a bar, kidnapped by my own student… on a hostile island… far away from home…” He considered this, and added, "To be fair, I am quite a successful doctor."

"Are you ashamed?” Sophie asked. "I've genuinely always wanted to ask."

"Let's talk about something else—"

"You only hit me three or four times in my life; it's not bad. You've had it worse. You were beat up a lot as a kid by adults you trusted, right?"

He didn't respond.

"Do you forget when you grow up?” she wondered aloud. "Do you learn to make excuses, and drinking makes it easier?"

He rested his forehead on his palm. Cigarette in one hand, beer in the other, Sophie somehow still felt like a child pointing out the flaws in an adult, flaws everybody told you you were supposed to pretend weren't there.

"You learn to live with it,” Hippo said finally. "And let it go, because it's in the past."

_Then why does it feel like it's still suffocating us?_ But trauma was a strange thing. Trauma had a habit of following down the generational line. The great pasta maker called Life had also grinded Hippo up, just like it did with Law and Teresa and everyone else who'd ever hurt her. Sophie got the sense that this was a never-ending cycle, and she'd been a part of it since the moment Hippo found a crying baby in the middle of a shipwreck.

"I wanna show you something," Sophie dug Odin's dog tags out from her dress. "Do you remember the giantification experiments?"

He peered over his glasses. "Yes,” he breathed. "How did you…?” Hippo's eyes widened. "On Cat's Eye?"

"Yeah. I recognized his tags from the files."

He shot her an almost frantic look. "How is the boy?"

"Dead. Well, he was in his thirties. But yeah, still dead."

Hippo slowly nodded, his eyes dimming. "It was so wrong, Sophie,” he said sadly. "The things they did… the things the Government allowed… who cares if they were children of pirates? They were still just children… god, it still makes me so mad just thinking about it…”

Sophie cupped her half-empty beer. She felt… oddly content with his reaction. It was so Sensei-like, so unabashedly heartfelt. She didn't notice that Hippo was glancing at her as she smiled to herself.

"Sensei, I want you to know something else. I didn't become a chemist because that was all I was good at. W—well, yeah, that was a part of it, but—I did it because I loved G-13, and I loved you, and… everybody was proud of me. Everyone loved me.” For a little while, at least. She stared intently at the condensation dripping down her glass. "I know you were raising me to potentially be a successor to Lettidore, and… I wanted that. I wanted… to show everyone that you didn't make a mistake."
And then she started laughing, smacking her palm on the bar counter. He stared at her. "S-sorry, I'm just—" She took a breath, struggling to regain her composure. "Why a-am I telling you this? It's too l-late, it's all too late. I'm the w-worst mistake you've e-ever made, oh my god, I'm sorry, but if you don't find this hilarious—" She broke out in a fit of high-pitched laughter, kicking the counter, beer splashing over her hand.

"You are not my worst mistake, Sophie," Hippo said softly.

Her laughter died down.

"My worst mistake was Greatcastle, ten shots of vodka, a leather thong, and two dozen assassins disguised as strippers."

Sophie and Hippo stared at each other. They burst out laughing, so loud that every eye in the bar swiveled to the raucous noise. She wiped her eyes and leaned back on the stool, trying to get enough air. Hippo chuckled, rubbing his head.

"You know, it's... not too late," he said slowly, glanced at her. "You talked about the little house on the hill, on some sleepy island in the middle of nowhere. We could... still go there."

She blinked. "You up for it?"

"Of course. You could be the local science schoolteacher, and I'd start a new life as the village doctor." Hippo leaned forward, his gaze almost dreamlike. 'We'd farm parsnips and blueberries and tomatoes, raise a couple of cows and chickadees. On Sundays, we'd rake the leaves, clean the house, and take in the laundry. You'd be known around town as the doctor's lovely daughter. Of course, I'll have to shoo away the suitors who come a-calling, but eventually someday you'll meet a nice fella and settle down and then, gasp, I'm a proud grandpa. What do you think about that?"

"Sensei..."

Sophie thought about the last thing she'd ever want to say to him, should he die tomorrow, and stood up. She flicked her cigarette into her glass.

"...I would rather blow my brains out."

It was quiet on the submarine as Law entered his cabin. He kicked a pile of books off his bed and fell over the mattress, face-down like he was ready to suffocate. Gripped in his fist, Kikoku was singing.

He closed his eyes, trying to erase the image of Sophie talking about her sensei. The soft, sad tilt of her mouth, her achingly wistful voice, the way she set her jaw in bitter self-loathing. It was too familiar and too strange all at once, and made his fucking skin crawl.

Being a pirate just happened to coincide with his plan. He enjoyed the lifestyle, the freedom, and on good days when he gazed at the horizon of untouchable ocean, he could imagine his younger self leaving Flevance as a ship's doctor, or journeying to Machinastein to study in the shade of the ceiba trees. Sometimes he pretended that the sea had always pulled at his bones. That as a boy he, too, heard the siren call of adventure.

Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit.

He had lost so much. He lost the entire world and had to build a new one from scratch—a broken world with twisting alleyways and knives springing out from spines like silver wings and an empty,
empty ocean, so vast it rippled across the universe with nothing and no one but him in a lone sailboat.

Lamie was the strong one. She was two years younger than him, but she could throw a better punch, swim faster, and always talked about exploring the world. The whole city seemed to be her friend, while Law squatted alone in the muddy garden, cutting up frogs. She would've been the better doctor, had she escaped instead of him. If she'd eaten the Ope Ope no Mi, she would've been a hero. Twenty-two, brilliant, courageous, never turning her back on someone who needed her. A better doctor, a better captain…

Law fought an absurd urge to laugh. Sophie and her sensei’s dysfunctional double act was dredging up some long-past-drowned memories.

He had not thought of this for a long, long time. He was a tiny boy when the amber poisoned his heart. He'd been sequestered into the last remaining bastion in the city, spinning tall tales out of fireburst-gunshots for sweet Lamie and the adults weeping softly behind the door. He remembered the earth splitting beneath his feet and the End of All Things; he remembered the air so thick with death he could've choked on it, he remembered his father spitting blood. He remembered his mother, growing stiff with rigor mortis. My brilliant son, be smart. Yes, he was. He was smart enough to crawl through stinking mountains of writhing white hands, as he sobbed for papa and his brain peeled away like layers of an onion. His mind had gently folded these memories into a secret treasure chest and buried it beneath the snow dunes in his head, so that he could wake up in the morning without screaming until his throat cracked.

What would they say, what would Cora-san say, if they could see him now?

…Well. It's not like he would ever find out.

"Who am I without them?" she had asked, rubbing the burn scars along her wrists.

He squeezed his eyes shut and curled up against the wall, willing his brain to shut up, shut up, shut up. Wondering about existential loss was for people like Sophie, people who still had souls to worry about. He wasn't the helpless little kid anymore. It was going to be different next time around.

The door creaked open and footsteps padded towards his bed, creaking as a weight settled against it. In the darkness, Law was thirteen-years-old again, hiding in the least smelliest alleyway he could find and shivering in the North Blue cold. He reached out and rested his palm against warm fur, rising and falling gently like a steady buoy over the waves, until his bones finally stopped shaking.

The next day, Sophie was too mentally exhausted to do any research and she didn't want to mope alone in her room, so she paid the submarine a visit. She had just climbed aboard the deck when a shout rang out: "Finally done!" Hacking coughs immediately followed.

With a black eye and a thin red line on his neck where she nearly strangled him, Anko sat in the middle of the deck. Piles of washed clothes, a washboard, and a large sudsy tub surrounded him. He victoriously pumped his hands in the air, spraying soapy water everywhere.

"Sophie-chan," he rasped. "You're witnessing my rebirth as the most badass washer in history."

Sophie scratched the itchy scab on her lip, where he'd slugged her. "Well done, you mango. It only took, what, a week?"

He held up three fingers and gave her a wide, shit-eating grin.
The deck door opened and Hai Xing walked out. He was carrying a cup of pudding. It was cute, actually, in a little glass cup with a sprig of watercress on top… and oh my god, was he passing it to her? Was this a dream? WAS THIS FINALLY HAPPENING?

"Eat up, Strangways—" He paused. "I guess I should call you Sophie now."

She gaped, in a mild state of shock, and accepted the offering from the Pudding Gods with trembling hands.


Sophie dug the spoon into the pudding, edged it towards Anko ("Aaaah…"), then cheerfully stuck it in her mouth. "Mmmm! Oh, it's spicy!"

"Machinastein special."

"What's your secret ingredient?"

"The lost dreams and hopes of everyone I've used as a stepping stone to get me where I am today."

Huh, she could taste it.

Anko glumly returned to gathering up the wet clothes.

Sophie tapped his shoulder and shoved a spoonful in his mouth. "That was for saving me at Vira," she said primly.

He blinked at her through a mouthful of pudding.

"You steered the ship, right? That day, when I was drowning, you were the one who found me. 'You saved Hai Xing, we're even'," she mimicked. "Remember? On Cat's Eye? I'm kinda pissed it took me this long." Anko was still staring at her. She ribbed him. "Give a genius some credit, you super cool helmsman, you."

Anko seemed to short-circuit. Hai Xing rapped on his head and pressed his ear to Anko's temple, searching for any signs of life. He shook his head. Welp. Alright, that was her fault. As penance, Sophie decided to help him finish his chores. Cleaning took her mind off of things, anyway. Sophie moved aside the tub and picked up a boiler suit. Now where the laundry lines…?

"Forgiving is a choice," Hai Xing said, quite out of the blue. "Not a requirement."

If she didn't know better, she'd say he sounded almost concerned. She grinned sneakily and voiced this accusation, which made Hai Xing dramatically look out into the ocean as though he wanted nothing more than to step off the plank, announcing, 'Today, you ungrateful fools, today is the day I die. After me, the deluge'.

Sophie thought of something and tilted her head. "Hai Xing-san, do you think it's easier to forgive the people we love, or harder?"

That seemed to be the limit of their rapport. Hai Xing sidled back inside the sub, sighing in one long exhale, "Don't we all die in the ennnnnnddd?"

Anko finally shook himself out of his daze. "Ahh! I'm alive!"

Sophie thought about her question as she helped Anko hang laundry lines across the second deck, tying it across the mast and stringing it down to the railing. Heart-patterned underwear flapped
proudly in the breeze. The Hearts seemed to suffer massive internal bleeding upon viewing Sophie pin up their unmentionables. They rushed out and insisted they take over. She ended up walking along the upper deck, watching them hang up their laundry and laugh with Anko as though he'd never been gone. No, the Hearts were not the type to court martial their crewmates and whisper traitor.

Sophie didn't see a familiar brooding presence behind her; Law had been walking inside the second deck, reading, when he caught a flash of curly black hair through a porthole. He paused and backed up three steps, his eyes sliding from the pages of his book to the porthole in question.

She heard a knock on the porthole behind her head.

Sophie glanced up and made a peace sign at Law, who merely raised his eyebrows at her over the book he was reading. He pointed and she obligingly stepped away from the porthole. He pushed it open and rested his arms on the sill.

"So," he said.

She toed the ground, suddenly shy. "I saw Hippo-sensei last night. I said everything I wanted to say." She nodded firmly. "No regrets."

Law snapped his book shut. "Damn straight."

Sophie beamed. He pressed his book to his chin with a hint of a smile and for a moment, just a moment, in the sunlight with the Hearts laughing below, the darkness between them was chased away. It would be back again, as it always would, but for now—this was enough.

"By the way, did you have to choke Anko that hard?"

"Maybe I thought he liked it."

He raised a dark eyebrow. "Villain."

"Worth fifty mil," Sophie reminded airily.

It was, she decided, relatively easy to forgive.

But the memory would never really go away. All it can do is scab over. Won't heal right, odd lumps of scar tissue, forever discolored. It will ache when it rains. And when someone brings it up again, it will be like squeezing out fresh blood. It builds up. Scab, heal, bleed, scab. Over and over again, until you can't feel your own skin anymore. Until, one day, it won't hurt at all. And you can't remember what you looked like without it.

_to be continued_
Chrysopoeia

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Kinjiru on FF for offering all of her wonderful insights as I spent the past year struggling to cobble this chapter together. It's been a long ride.

I drew a short comic on how Hai Xing and Anko met. If anyone's interested, it's on my tumblr @ohpineapples!

Another round of small edits has been made in the previous chapters of this arc. (Who lets me near a keyboard unsupervised.) Regarding an OC who is now named Kamasu: he was once known as Ikkaku, until the great canon reveal that Ikkaku was already a Heart Pirate, so then the last chapter he became Uni, until I decided I kind of want to write about the current canon Hearts joining, so now he is Kamasu, aka barracuda. What a long, stupid journey it's been for this minor OC.

I can't believe it's been a year. If anyone's still out there: hello! I hope you're somewhere safe and warm and you're ready to hallucinate vividly as you stare at a screen.

There was something majestic about a nine-man pirate crew's entire laundry fluttering over the deck.

It was an army of clean linen and unscented bar soap. It was a hypnotizing cha-cha-cha of cotton blends. It was an orchestra of wet cloth, harmonizing into a beautiful solo of tacky boxers and unmatched socks. The evening air was cool and Law was reading his medical book next to her. Bepo, Shachi, and Penguin were practicing some sort of slow, flowy kata on the deck. Sophie felt herself relaxing in this moment of perfect tranquility.

And then a seagull flew into the laundry lines and tangled itself to death.

Law flipped a page in his book. "I had a suspicion someone was going to die the day Anko did laundry."

"Prepare to be eaten, you dumb bird," Sophie heard Anko snarl from the rigging above her, as he untangled the gull from the rest of the clothes.

"You should get black boiler suits," she suggested. "It'll hide the blood better. The temperature of the deep ocean is near freezing, right?"

"I had that idea once."

"What happened?"

"We hit an underwater volcano and almost died from the heat. And as it turns out, seeing blood on a black suit is virtually impossible."

"Huh," she said, trying to imagine it. "So you guys were also novices once."
"We didn't know shit back then. Not a single shit."

The Hearts probably had stories that could fill books from here to the Reverse Mountain. _I wish I could've seen them_, Sophie thought wryly. Penguin, accidentally lighting himself on fire? Shachi, falling down multiple cliffs? Law, getting his butt kicked by an overpowered Marine captain? Slowly, her smile faded. Then: _god, I wish I could've seen them._

Valross burst through the deck door, crying happily, "I have room at the end of my hammock! I can stretch my legs again! It's a miracle!"

"Dude, don't hang your dirty clothes where you sleep," Penguin called.

"That's asking too much of me, and you know that."

Sophie giggled as she watched the pirates on the deck below. "So how come you're the only one who doesn't wear a boiler suit?" she asked Law.

"I'm the Captain."

"Hm," Sophie said doubtfully, and craned her neck to look around the laundry lines crisscrossing from the masts to the deck railings. "Well, I'm sure your fashion line extends to Heart Pirate-themed underwear. The question is, just where are they…?"

Law was resolutely tight-lipped.

"If I join, do I have to wear the boiler suit? Or can I get away with a shirt with paw prints everywhere and a big jolly roger on the back?"

"You wouldn't need to wear the suit."

Sophie looked at him in surprise. Now, hold on. That didn't make sense at all. Wouldn't everyone look better if they were all uniformed and _in uniform_? Now she _wanted_ to wear the suit out of spite and also _is this a woman thing? Does he think women should only wear pantsuits and steel-toed boots?_ She opened her mouth, prepared to begin her opening remarks with a scorching, _A lady can pull off that white sack as well as anybody, Trafeudal Manpenis, and I'm going to prove it to you right now—_

"Just the Heart Pirate underwear will do," he continued with zero emotion, still reading his book.

"There are, like, five stages of interacting with you," Sophie told him. "It's called the Five Stages of Interacting with Trafalgar Law. Like the five stages of grief? Only all five stages are you _giving me grief._"

Law looked at her over the top of his book, one despicable eyebrow arched.

Rolling her eyes, Sophie leapt down the stairs to the lower deck and then onto the pier. The horizon of Machinastein was dazzling at sundown, with all the lights beginning to glow along the darkening coast.

Flocks of Giant Quetzals flew in emerald-green formation against the setting sun. Movement creaked along all ships down the harbor as sailors opened portholes to watch. The sun was fading past the meadow of waving sails, and they watched the birds scatter over the horizon, heading back to the city to roost for the night. Sophie squinted into the sun, shielding her eyes as the birds flew overhead.

As Giant Quetzals were the main pack animals of Machinastein, they were the size of small horses. It
was... kind of unsettling, watching them all fly around in a horde—oh, mangos! Giant bird poop!
Sophie broke into a sprint, covering her head.

Anko did not seem to appreciate the poop falling from the sky and getting all over the clean laundry. From the deck behind her came a, "DOES ANYBODY KNOW A FOUR LETTER WORD FOR ARE YOU KIDDING ME?"

"FUCK!" the Heart Pirates roared back.

"IT'S 'HECK', YOU NASTY FUCKING PERVERTS."

It was morning, and the first floor of the Jaguar Temple was crowded with busy government staff. Sophie pressed up against the glass counter to avoid the commotion of people running around her and drummed her fingers.

"President Ursa is in a meeting," the secretary said, his quill scribbling a mile a minute.

"Yes, but I'd really like to talk to her." Sophie thought of how she'd brazenly smuggled a pirate into the College of Chemistry for the past month, and tried, "Please?"

"Like I said, my boss is in a meeting."

"Seems like sh-she's been in a meeting for the past three weeks. She's probably trapped in there. Been taken hostage."

"You know what, Sophie-san?" the secretary said, not looking up from writing his memo. "You could be onto something. I will start investigating immediately, because this is of the utmost importance to me."

Sophie leaned over the desk. "When the president is found dead, you're going to jail."

Before he could berate her, she scampered away and hurried to the train station. It was now close to a month since she had begun working on Red Sky, and summer's coda was fast arriving on the heels of a scorching heat wave. She squeezed inside the train and clung to a pole, feeling like a disgusting lump of perspiration.

Two teenage girls took pictures with their Cameko Mushis, and a poised woman next to them was engrossed in a book. How did they do it? How were they so energetic at melt-in-a-puddle-o'-clock? And how was their hair so straight in this humidity?

Sophie tried to pat down the mess of untamed curls on her head and stood a little straighter to mimic the posture of the Machs around her.

"Sirius is running about in the heavens above us," blared a Radio Mushi from somewhere on the train, "so I urge everyone to rest well, drink water frequently, and head over to the hospital if you feel unwell. You all voted for a president who wanted to implement free healthcare, so please use it or else I'm going to look really stupid." Scattered laughter around the train, as the deep, disembodied voice chuckled. "That's a full lid, everyone. Thank you."

A different voice took over. "And that concludes President Ursa's daily briefing...."

Sophie got off at the station by the University and went up the hill with the wave of students heading to class. Many of them were wearing their colorful robes as protection from the sun, but more were
dressed casually; colorful headscarfs, thin huipils, skirts patterned with flowers.

She self-consciously adjusted her green wrap-dress, Machina-styled all the way down to her sandaled feet. Here she was, ex-World Government scientist, walking along with everyone else. Nobody gave her a second glance. Everyone passed by her like she belonged, and it was almost disturbing how thrilled Sophie felt about it, which was immediately followed by a queasy feeling in her chest. Was this how foreign parasites felt, swimming around in an immune system that considered it one of its own?

She crossed paths with Law just as he was walking under the College of Chemistry's stone archway. He had his hood up and was wearing plain, unspotted jeans; a decent effort at blending in.

"Hey," Law greeted. "I barely recognized you."

"What?" Sophie asked immediately. "Like you couldn't pick me out of the crowd of students just now?"

His eyebrows raised. "I meant, your hair's down."

"Oh. Right, I was in a hurry today." She bent down, shook her hair out, and then whipped it behind her head so fast Law had to jerk back to avoid getting slapped in the face. She gathered her hair in a frizzy clump and wrestled it into her usual ponytail. "Mangos, it's hot, isn't it? And the humidity. Disgusting. I feel like a tumbleweed is growing on my head."

"The majority of my crew have locked themselves in the freezer."

"Well, that can't be good for the frozen meat."

"Or the other various body parts inside."

"Oh," Sophie sighed. "Can you at least, like, act stealthier?"

"I know stealth," Law replied evenly, and waved at the hood over his head. "Look at me. I'm not wearing my hat."

Why did she, against her better judgement, still engage in willing conversation with this man? "In a different universe, I'd be sipping coconuts on a beach, in a pair of too-expensive sunglasses and the frilliest bikini I own, having never met you."

"Wouldn't bet on it," he said, and strode past her.

Sophie ran after him and tugged him away from the path down to the basement. "Over here," she said, turning right and leading him towards the huge stone temples further up the hill. "I was thinking about what we should do today. The research phase is over. Now, to create a cure, we gotta look for ingredients."

"And how do you plan on accomplishing this?"

Sophie dramatically flung her arms wide. "This is Machinastein University! The pantry of knowledge!"

"So, stealing." Her flair was wasted on Law.

"Borrowing," Sophie assured. "And if that doesn't work, I'll start crying. I'm quite good at that. Been doing a lot of it lately. And if that doesn't work, I'm counting on that famous Trafalgar Death Stare."
Law frowned.
"Tone it down a little," she admonished. "You're not trying to seduce anybody."

"Right," he said, clearly having enough of this tomfoolery. "Onwards."

"To victory!" Sophie declared, never having enough of tomfoolery.

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The College of Ecology was a giant greenhouse, and it housed the most curious assortment of plants that Sophie had ever seen.

There were rows and rows of plants of every size and color, from islands all over the Grand Line. Alabastian shywhifflers that shrunk away when she touched them. Kunlun moon jasmines, blooming across the ceiling. Whisky Peak cacti. Pink hibiscus from Idyll Island. Drum's snowdrops. Even bog flowers from Crawfish Island.

Sophie smelled the purple swamp roses and the bone-white mushrooms until she looked up and saw that Law was already past a grove of bamboo trees, and hurried after him.

"We're looking for valerian and mandrake," he reminded. "Herbs with sedative properties."

It soon became clear that the greenhouse was far too large for Sophie and Law to cover in one day, much less one hour. She found an ecologist tending to a hedge of carnivorous pitcher plants. He had enormous glasses and a red ponytail that reminded her of a rafflesia corpse-flower.

She explained that she was one of President Ursa's guest researchers and told him she was looking for, and the young man's bespectacled eyes went agog with enthusiasm. "Plants as sedative? Fascinating. Follow me. A handful of valerian, a dash of mandrake, a pinch of skullcap…"

Next was the College of Medicine.

"We should break in," Law suggested, looking up at the stone temple.

"What is this, suddenly a heist genre?"

"It'll be faster if I just find their library of molecules."

"No, you should wait outside because the doctors on this island get really weird when they realize who you are. Do you see that student leaving the temple? With the cart? She looks like a student here. I'll ask her if she knows where they hide their disease research—oh, she's coming towards us—act normal, Law-san. Don't look suspicious. Oh my god, she's getting closer—casually lean on something, quickly—"

"There's nothing here to—"

"Just—just cover your serial killer face! Rip off your eyebrows!"

The medical student with the cart stopped before Sophie and Law. She tipped her cap up (it read, apples are my only weakness, and Sophie may have gasped at such a wonderful pun and clutched her heart like a fainting baroness), looking nervously between the two of them.

"Hey," Law said, sounding almost surprised. "We've met before, haven't we?"

Sophie subtly leaned back and checked to make sure the young woman still had her foot
Law tapped his thumb and index fingers together, and she replied quickly, her hands moving fluidly in the air. "She was heading to the College of Chemistry to look for you," he said to Sophie.

Sophie blinked. "Um, can you sign back—"

"She can hear fine," Law said, and the student opened the wooden chest in the cart as she continued to handspeak. "This… is a gift from President Ursa, who asked the doctors to prepare this for you, Sophie." He picked up a small note. "And there's a message."

That was… incredibly nice of President Ursa. Inside were at least a hundred glass bottles of small molecule samples, each labeled neatly.

"'Go get 'em, kid'," Law read from the note.

Now, all that was left was the coffee. Which was, as any good scientist could tell you, the most important part of the experiment.

Law went to set up the basement with their new supplies and Sophie ended up waiting in line at the University's café as she studied her notes. There was something off with her calculations for the specific molarity of sodium nitrite and valerian extract she'd need for a two-fifty milliliter solution, but she couldn't figure out what.

"That's point twenty moles," said someone behind her, and Sophie whirled around. The purple-robed woman pointed at Sophie's notes. "You missed the zero right there. Proportional reasoning as it applies to measuring rates of chemical reaction, right?"

The mathematician's name was Norma, and she had long black locs that glimmered with golden beads and a shirt that read 'Call Me Sin(3.14159)'. She told Sophie she was working on a way to disprove the concept of infinity. Sophie found her very odd and very excellent.

"Can you believe it's still this hot? Though, autumn here is basically still summer. I rather like the heat, reminds me of home." Norma pointed to herself. "Alabastian."

Sophie's curiosity was immediately piqued. "Really? How are things going over there?"

"Sorry, I didn't catch that." She pointed at her left ear. "This is my good ear."

Sophie quickly moved to Norma's other side. "How's it going in Alabasta?"

"According to my parents, it's still hard. Well, it's always hard after a war. But everyone has water, and I hear Yuba's been dug out of the sand. They say it's unheard of how fast Alabasta is rebuilding itself." Norma smiled, her beaded locs chiming. "We've never had a leader quite like Princess Vivi."

Sophie went up to the barista and ordered an overpriced latte for herself and a cup of black coffee for Law. "Thank mangos Captain Smoker was there to save her," she said, waiting for Norma to order.

"Yeah." Norma moved to underneath a shaded bench to wait, and Sophie followed. "Well, actually, my parents say it was pirates. The Straw Hat Pirates, but they couldn't print that in the newspapers, for obvious reasons."

Sophie's brow furrowed as she tried to think of a polite response. "…Are you sure your parents aren't compulsive liars?"
Norma squinted at her, like she was trying not to laugh. "You're from an Allied island, aren't you?"

"Not everything the World Government has done is bad—which, okay, I get that you never said, but, I mean, it was because of a World Government-commissioned sailor that Machinastein itself was discovered hundreds of years ago, so—"

"Yeah, so, the World Government didn't discover Machinastein. They were already here, and they've been here a whole lot longer than eight centuries."

Sophie frowned. "Oh. Right, I… guess."

"Listen, I once thought the same thing. My Machinastein girlfriend has gotten into plenty of fights in bars over that issue. There's a lot of pride here, considering how the World Government tried to repeatedly attack this island for their gold."

"That ended, like, two hundred years ago, right?" For once, her useless knowledge of history had remembered something!

"And?"

"And Machinastein is clearly doing great now."

"Sure, aside from the constant fear of the possibility that the World Government will bar them from trading with their islands."

"I don't think they'd do that."

"But they did," Norma said, blinking. "Two hundred years ago, they stopped physically attacking Machinastein and then tried to force them into the Alliance by starving them into it. And then President Ursa, before she was president, used her Dial inventions to negotiate with the Government to reopen the trade routes. So they've had to deal with famine, disease, the whole shebang, for centuries."

"…Oh." Was this common knowledge? Maybe it was, from the way this Alabastian was talking about it. Maybe everyone knew, except Sophie. Then again, she had never bothered to ask. Sophie could feel herself turning red from delayed embarrassment.

"That's you, isn't it?" Norma said, pointing to the barista calling her name; Sophie hadn't heard. "Anyway, it was nice meeting you. It's always fun to talk politics with a stranger."

"Ha," Sophie replied, cracking a small grin. "You think this is fun? What is it with young people and government nowadays?"

"Take it from the pirates. They're calling this the New Age." The mathematician got her coffee and left with a backwards wave.

—

The next morning, Sophie headed to the basement, balancing breakfast in her arms. She had fought in two wars, and this was probably the scariest thing she'd ever done.

She leaned against the door, haphazardly trying to balance a dozen coffees against her chest, when a hand reached out from behind her and opened the door. She caught her balance, blinking at Anko as he moved past her and kicked open the door wider so Sophie and her caffeinated cargo could fit through.
"The freezer was getting overcrowded," he said, before she could ask. Anko plopped on the chair Sophie normally sat at and unfurled a newspaper's crossword section. "Shachi said this was where you and Cap were holed up together all day."

Sophie wrinkled her nose. Did he have to phrase it so luridly?

"So this is where the science happens," he remarked, his voice quite unimpressed as he looked around the basement. Anko watched her totter in, barely able to see over the cups of coffee. "If you're planning on drowning yourself, the ocean's easier."

"This is fuel, you dumb mango. I pretty much bleed caffeine now, but I haven't had to sleep for three days and I only blink, like, once an hour." She stared at Anko with her enormous, red-rimmed eyes. "So it's definitely worth it. Can you move that petri dish for me?"

The pirate's shoulders jerked up, and he looked to where she was pointing. "Oh," he said, relaxing. "I thought you said f… never mind."

He cleared the petri dishes away to make room, and she set the coffees down on the table. Sophie frowned to herself, then asked tentatively, "You… haven't said anything, right?"

"No, I haven't fucking said any fucking thing," Anko snapped. "It's Hai Xing's own business that he's a fishman."

There was a loud creak at the other end of the room, and Sophie's gazed swiveled in the direction of the noise and landed on a polar bear who was sitting up among the storage crates. Bepo stared at Anko and Sophie. Anko and Sophie stared back.

Then Anko grabbed the chair and raised it over his head.

"Anko!" Sophie shrieked, the same time Bepo waved his paws and cried, "I already know about Hai Xing!"

"What the hell are you doing here?" Anko bellowed, a tendon in his neck actually jumping.

"The freezer was overcrowded! This basement is quite cooler than I expected…"

Sophie was still wrapping her head around Bepo's first announcement. "Wait—who e-else knows?"

"Just me and Captain! And it's obvious, with the way Hai Xing smells. I don't understand how you humans live with your terrible noses…"

"What the fuck?" Anko said, staring at Bepo. "What does he smell like?"

"Like a half-fishperson," Bepo replied, as though it was the most apparent thing in the world. "When did he tell you two?"

"It was a whole thing with chocolatiers. It doesn't matter," Sophie said. "I'm just surprised no one else noticed for this long."

"Yeah, well, he's good at secrets," Anko said roughly. "How the hell were we supposed to know?" And then he said, "Damn it," and laid his head on the table. "He's so much cooler than me. Fuck."

Sophie patted his mohawk. "To be fair, you set a low bar."

Bepo chortled.
She laughed as she sat down and reached for her research papers. Anko was still resting his head on the table.

"It's fucked up, you know," Anko muttered, his head turned away from Sophie. "What the World Government does. Spreading rumors that fishfolk are... diseased, or sick, or dirty, whatever. Killing them. Making them so afraid they can't even swim to the surface. It's some fucked up shit."

"Yeah," she sighed. "I know."

"You ever seen a people auction before?"

Sophie's mouth tightened. "No."

"I didn't know Hai Xing was a fishman when I saved him. I just wanted a fuckin' bounty. I should've figured it out. I should've..."

"Does it matter? You still would've called him names," Bepo pointed out.

"That's 'cause I'm also fucked up, Bepo, and that's what fuck-ups do," Anko snapped, and then looked down. "Anyway, you don't fucking know that."

Sophie and Bepo glanced at each other over Anko's head. Thankfully, Law arrived and that put an end to the conversation, if only because Sophie immediately grabbed him and showed him her new theories. Bepo came over to see what they were doing, and Anko was left to brood with his crosswords.

The Hearts appeared, one after another, gravitating towards their captain. It was becoming oddly familiar to step inside the basement and be greeted by loud laughter. In another lifetime the noise would've driven Old Sophie mad, but now she was comforted by it and how it seemed to fill up all the empty corners of the basement. New Sophie liked sound; sound was better than the absence of it.

She appreciated that Kamasu was here, though all he contributed were the snores coming from the corner and when she tried to introduce herself properly to him since they'd never actually formally met, he called her Strangesalt Snafu and rolled over.

Hai Xing and Bepo were dropping tiny chopped fruit into Goliath's cage. Bepo asked if the rat's poop was also contaminable, because it was definitely building up, so Sophie got Law to help her Room away all of Goliath's toxic poop into the hazardous waste bag. She made a mental note to throw it out later.

"Which island should we head to first after this?"

Sophie's quill stopped writing. She tried to keep focusing on the words in front of her (mandrake, 2-PAM chloride, likely combination), but she couldn't help but eavesdrop, a sinking feeling in her chest.

The pirates debated between Pucci, San Faldo, Water 7, and St. Poplar. They were all popular destinations, and the market sold plenty of Eternal Poses to let the average sailor take their pick.

"All five islands are connected by Sea Train," Sophie interjected, "so it doesn't really matter where you go first. You can get all the meat and see all the festivals your heart desires."
Penguin counted on his fingers. "And the fifth island is?"

"Enies Lobby, of course! The Final Courthouse, which sits upon the Precipice of the World, that leads to the Gates of Justice and beyond that, Marineford. They say that the glorious light of the sun never leaves it, and its rays burn the taint of evil from all criminals who walk across the Bridge of Hesitation. I've always wanted to see it. Though I guess I can't now, since I'm technically also a criminal…"

Penguin turned to his crew. "So, yeah, Water 7 has those famous shipyards, and if we visit before Aqua Laguna hits, maybe we could see the shipwrights in action."

A reaction she should've expected, if Sophie was being honest with herself.

"No. It's almost Aqua Laguna season, and Water 7's historically been dead center of the tsunami," Law said.

"What if—" Sophie cleared her throat. "What if you go after Aqua Laguna passes?"

"You have everything set up. There's no reason for my crew to stay longer."

"You'll be off on your own adventure, too," Shachi said cheerily. "You're taking this to Vira, aren't ya?"

"…Soon, yes." Law was right; she had everything set up. But she wanted to have at least some antidotes developed before she left Machinastein.

"We'll send you postcards from Raftel," Shachi assured.

"There better be a photo of One Piece attached," Sophie replied with a smile.

Their voices still echoed in her ears as she laid down on her blankets later that night, looking up at the painted stars on the ceiling and listening to the silence.

—

The Chocolate Dial scientists were all in a rush when Sophie arrived. She peeled open the door in a bit of a daze after another sleepless night, and nearly fell into the garbage bin where the chemists were dumping broken Dials.

A swan-necked chemist, Cygnus, said that it was take out the trash day, and they had to gather up all their unusable Dials. Dials that spat too much chocolate at once, Dials that only produced pepper without any of the mint, and Dials that did not provide any chocolate but instead released a discordant wail that sounded like a ghost shrieking from beyond the grave.

"I'll go with you," Sophie volunteered. "I have something I need to get rid of, too."

She ran down to the basement and grabbed Goliath's hazardous bag of poop, stuffed it in an empty wooden box she found lying with the other storage items, and hurried back upstairs.

The furnace for hazardous waste was in-between the chemistry and medicine colleges. Cygnus hitched her bike to a small cart filled with broken Dials and Sophie stuck her poop-filled box in the cart and walked alongside her as she biked slowly. The shady stone path was pleasantly quiet, except for a man walking behind them, whistling. After asking Cygnus if she was okay with it, Sophie took advantage of the open air by lighting a cigarette.
"I appreciate how strong Machinastein's pun game is," Sophie commented, looking at the chocolate chemist's shirt that read, *I Make Chocolate Periodically*.

"Thanks." Cygnus smiled. "I'm glad we're talking, Sophie-san. You rarely join in any of the conversations in the lab."

"Right. Um. I'm just—tired. Also, I'm not very good at talking, so you should count yourself blessed."

"You sound alright to me."

"Yeah, but you don't. Really know me. So."

The older woman shot her a funny look. "Ah, so you're that sort of scientist."

Sophie blinked. This conversation was heading into familiar territory, one that she used to hear all the time on G-13. "To be honest, I used to be that sort," she admitted, over the creak of the old wooden wheels. "I'm trying to get better. Um. Little by little, I guess. I'm still not very good. Then again, I don't really know if I'll ever be good."

"Change is essential to the fundamentals of chemistry. Everything undergoes change at some point or another. When applied an appropriate amount of energy, it's not a matter of *if*, but a matter of *when*."

"That sounds ominous," Sophie sighed, blowing out smoke.

"Doesn't it?"

Cygnus' bike rolled slowly over the path, and Sophie realized that the whistling behind them stopped.

"Um," Sophie said, "can you bend down a little bit?"

"What?"

The man behind them passed by the cart, his hand reaching for a Dial—

"Never mind," Sophie said, and leaped over Cygnus. She grabbed the man by the beard and slammed him into the ground, digging her palm into his throat before he could take a breath to yell. She loomed over him, digging her knee into his gut.

"Stay back, Cygnus-san!" she barked over her shoulder, patting the chocolatier down for guns or knives. "You know this is a school, right?"

"I wasn't gonna attack anyone!" the chocolatier snapped. "I'm not even carrying a weapon! What do you take us for? Marines?"

Glaring, Sophie dug her knee harder into his stomach.

"Aw, hell," the chocolatier wheezed gruffly, his eyes widening in recognition after getting a good look at Sophie's face. "You again, Eyebrows?"

"I wasn't gonna attack anyone!" the chocolatier snapped. "I'm not even carrying a weapon! What do you take us for? Marines?"

"Come on. Let me have a couple of those Dials. We have to fill our chocolate quota 'fore Sundae arrives."
Sunday? "I guess you have a long week ahead," Sophie snarled, and the chocolatier said some very unkind words to her, but she couldn't really hurt him in front of a civilian. It was sort of in bad taste. "Get out of here. When I get up, you," she prodded him in the chest with her cigarette and he hissed in pain, "start running."

She released him and watched him scramble to his feet.

Sophie turned back to Cygnus. "Let's get going—"

There was a clatter as the chocolatier bumped against the cart and was sprinting away with something clutched to his chest and jumped onto a Giant Quetzal that Sophie hadn't noticed was waiting behind a tree.

"Hey!" she shrieked, punching the air. "I was being nice, you pineapple! What did he steal? Was it something important, or just the one that screams like a demon, because, well, maybe we can let him have that—"

The cigarette dropped from her mouth. Sophie grabbed the cart. Her box with Goliath's radioactive poops was gone.

Muffinfudger.

—

She took off on Cygnus' bike, pedaling faster than she ever had in her life. From a far distance, one would've seen a cloud of dust making its way down the University hill.

If the chocolatier opened the box, if he looked inside the waste bag, if he threw it on the ground or, mango forbid, the river—Goliath's toxic poops would get into the water, and then the fish, and then she'd have to murder all the fish and set fire to everything and everyone nearby, and then—

Gritting her teeth, Sophie pedaled harder.

The intersection at the bottom of the hill was congested with afternoon traffic. The streets rumbled with the grind of wagon wheels and the air was heavy with heat. She saw a glimpse of the chocolatier in-between the wagons.

"Face me like a woman, you coward!" Sophie shrieked at the top of her lungs, but all she got were several stares and one approving 'yeah, girl!'

She ducked and weaved through the traffic. The chase went up another hill, through the meandering back streets, and Sophie briefly lost him in a wind-chiming alley filled with artisan shops, swearing at how distractingly beautiful Machinastein was, until she saw him and his Giant Quetzal beneath the bridge, riding east.

She biked on the street above, struggling to keep him within her sights—but up ahead, a big stir was occurring on the sidewalk. A familiar mohawk tumbled out of a patolli gambling parlor.

"I told ya, I don't have any more money!" he was shouting, as he was encircled by large men cracking their knuckles.

Sophie reached her hand out and as she zipped by, snatched him by the collar and plopped him in the seat behind her. Anko lurched forward to grab her before he could tumble off.

"What the—SOPHIE?"
"I need you to get your captain for me! I want him to kill that guy!" Sophie pointed at the chocolate gangster on the street below. "You see that box? That's mine!"

"Who needs Cap when you've got me?" Cackling, Anko jumped up lithely and his feet landed on the bicycle seat in a crouch. He held onto her shoulders for balance. "Throw me at the fucker!"

"I don't think that's a good—"

"THROW ME AT THE FUCKER!"

Sophie reached one hand behind her and grabbed his shirt. With a great heave, she lifted him up and launched him into the air.

Anko fell through the air, landed in a hay wagon, and disappeared into the wheat. "WRONG FUCKER!"

She heard his muffled scream as she passed the wagon. Sophie was plenty strong to lift a man one-handed, but she was not an expert people-thrower. Ah. Well. *Rest in pieces, Anko, you will be missed! Not really by me, but by somebody, probably.*

It was clear the chocolatier knew she was following him, because he rode into the twisting, curving roads up to the ballgames court, intent on losing her there. Sophie pedaled so hard it felt like her lungs were going to implode. She made it through the winding streets and out into the dusty exterior of the stadium.

"*Here they are, folks!* The ball games announcer echoed over the gates; a low, womanly tenor. "*The worst ball team on Machinastein, who's never won a game, the Palmettoooo Pantheeeers!*"

The roars from what seemed to be a massive crowd were so loud they shook the ground. Sophie biked past the golden pillars that surrounded the stadium. Massive carvings of Mach soldiers and ball players streamed by her, each taller than giants.

She narrowed her eyes as she drew closer to the chocolatier, huffing and puffing. Giant Quetzals were much bigger up close, and this one looked a head taller than Law so it was very intimidating to maneuver around, but Sophie didn't need maneuvering when she had the powerful alto that was her voice.

"HELLO AGAIN," she greeted, pedaling up to the chocolatier.

"What's this!? The Palmetto Panthers have gained the upper hand! What a once-in-a-lifetime experience!"

"Get away from me! We need this, Eyebrows! Our chocolate supply is nearly out!"

"There are no Chocolate Dials inside, you idiot!" Sophie roared, and punched the Giant Quetzal in the butt.

The bird squawked, and she grabbed the chocolatier's arm and struggled to yank his limb off or throw him off the bird, whichever came first. Holding onto the handlebars with one hand, she scratched and clawed at him, and they were both screaming as they hurtled through the crowd of tailgaters and spectators who were listening to the announcer on their picnic blankets.

"*They're fighting for the ball! The Panthers are rolling with the punches! History could be made today, folks!*"
The Giant Quetzal's leg came flashing out and kicked her bicycle. Sophie was barely able to grab hold of the handlebars before she fell over, and she went careening into a shaved ice vendor.

"A messy fumble from a sucker punch! The Panthers weren't expecting that at all!"

The crowd around her was roaring and the vendor was yelling at her. Sophie staggered to her feet, apologizing dizzily. There, in the middle of the chaos, the chocolatier's Giant Quetzal took off into the sky. She hobbled forward desperately, her knees stinging, dragging the bike behind her.

"The Panthers are on the ropes now! The ball seems down for the count, we're waiting on the referees for—"

Sophie nearly missed the flashes of movement on the rooftops—there was Bepo, and Shachi, and Penguin, searching the crowded street. And behind them was very disheveled Anko with hay sticking out of his hair meeting her eyes—he shouted something and pointed at her, and the pirates all leapt from the rooftops to where Sophie stood. With one glance at Anko, she had an idea and dropped the bike.

"HOLD ONTO YOUR HUIPILS, FOLKS! PANTHERS INTERCEPTION! THE BALL IS STILL IN PLAY!"

She pointed up at the chocolatier in the sky. "Bepo-san! Throw me up there!"

Bepo picked her up and flung her into the sky with the force of a speeding javelin.

"—BY THE GODS, THEY'VE HAVE LAUNCHED A HAIL MARY!"

Sophie hurtled through the sky like a small-range missile. Wind howled past her ears. Tears sprung in her eyes. Bepo's aim was true. As the chocolatier glanced back over his shoulder, she crashed into him in the clouds.

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?" he screamed, his elbow in her face.

"BOY, THAT IS A LOADED QUESTION," Sophie screamed back, and her legs flailed, trying to kick him as they tumbled round and round, plummeting upwards and everywhere.

The Giant Quetzal smacked her with its wing and clawed at her, and she considered, maybe, that this was how she was going to die: getting clawed alive by a stupid-looking bird as she yanked on a box filled with rat poop. The wood was coming apart, the metal clasps plucking off one by one—

"THE BALL GOES FLYING OUT OF BOUNDS!"

From the stadium below, a rubber ball whistled by Sophie's ear and smashed into the chocolatier's face.

His grip went slack, and with a mighty tug, she wrenched the box away.

Sophie glimpsed the chocolatier swearing and tumbling off into the wind, and then her world inverted. Everything was brilliant, blinding sky and sun, and she inhaled like she'd forgotten how to breathe—fields of clouds streamed for miles above her, fluffy-white meadows and snake-white ripples, and somewhere out there was a flying automaton cat named after a constellation in the sky, a cosmic object that was never coming back to earth.

Then the air underneath her feet became solid stone, and Sophie jerked forward at her sudden meeting of the ground again. The burst of wind from her fall caught up to her and she hastily
grabbed her dress and yanked it down.

Law caught her round the shoulders, and Sophie wrapped her arm around his neck, flushed with adrenaline and feeling more alive than she'd ever been.

"What," he said, "the hell."

"It's c-called tripping w-with style. No, not really. But look! I saved this from a chocolatier—"

The wooden box was open, and it was empty inside. Panic engulfed Sophie. Where was it? Where—

She looked up. The hazardous waste bag was falling from the sky, about to hit the plaza.

Then a shadow leapt overhead from the direction of the stadium, and a silver cane plucked the bag from gravity, as neatly as one plucked an apple off of a tree.

A tiny, snowy-haired woman somersaulted through the air and landed deftly on the street. Most of her four-foot stature consisted of a tall bun and an even taller hunchback, and beneath her plain old-lady tunic were two fuzzy pink bunny slippers.

Sophie gulped and smiled nervously. The old woman smiled back. She had very few teeth. Her small eyes glimmered like jade stones.

Then she cleared her throat.

"STRANGWAYS SOPHIE, HOW DARE YOU LET A CRIMINAL IN MY UNIVERSITY WITHOUT TELLING ME."

The voice of the ballgames announcer echoed down the street. Law threw his arm out in front of Sophie. His fist was glowing blue.

"YOU SHOULD'VE TOLD ME SOONER! I WOULD'VE SKIPPED MY MEETING WITH ALABASTA'S TRADE AMBASSADOR. YOU KNOW I CAN'T STAND OLD BORES."

"I-I'm sorry! I know you wanted me to stay out of trouble—"

"NONSENSE. I THOUGHT YOU'D BE CONSORTING AROUND WITH THOSE CHOCOLATE HOOLIGANS. BUT PIRATES ARE ENTIRELY DIFFERENT!"

Two elegant women swooped into view, armed with clipboards and formidable reading glasses, and they draped a glistening silver robe patterned with gold stars over the old woman.

One of them leaned down and bellowed, "MADAME PRESIDENT, YOU'VE FORGOTTEN TO ADJUST YOUR VOLUME LEVELS."

"I'M SORRY! I KNOW YOU WANTED ME TO STAY OUT OF TROUBLE—"

"OH, FORGIVE ME!" She touched her neck, and there was a metallic sound, like several gears clicking into place. "Ahem!" She gave her large wizened head a shake, and fastened her robes around her waist. "That's better, isn't it! I don't often announce at competitive events, but when I do, I get so wrapped up in the energy!"

The President of Machinastein stood before them, the woman of famed legend who harvested sunlight and grew seeds in the desert: Ixchel Ursa. Her pink bunny slippers were still sticking out from the bottom of her robes. She bore a startling resemblance to a wrinkled potato.
"Radioactive rat poop," Sophie explained timidly. "I was heading to the furnace, but—one of the chocolatiers stole it accidentally. Thought it was a Chocolate Dial."

Ursa handed her the poop bag and nodded, her aura filled with ancient wisdom and sagely advice. "Could one say it's radioactive?"

Sophie gasped. "One could."

"But should one?" Law asked from the background.

"I've been trying to see you," Sophie explained. "But it's very hard to get a meeting."

"That I can't deny. Though next time, let's not suggest to my secretary that I've been taken hostage, yes?" Ursa suggested, and Sophie rubbed her neck. "I've been wanting to check up on you, my dear. Make sure you're happy, nobody's dying, and you've haven't blown up my school."

"These are very responsible pirates," Sophie assured, "and they have my complete confidence."

"THAT WAS SICK, STRANGWAYS!" Anko slammed into her back and would've shoved her into President Ursa had Sophie not been built like the sturdy tree trunk that she was. Bepo, Penguin, and Shachi appeared behind him, hollering their agreements. "You got your box, right? Who's this dinosaur? You look older than the barnacles in my—"

Anko was pointing at President Ursa—and then he was flying backwards and slammed into the side of a building, two knives pinning his shirt to the stone wall. Ursa's secretaries lowered their arms and the rest of their weaponry disappeared under their silk sleeves.

"Did anyone else get a sense of déjà vu?" Penguin asked.

"Now, now, Dubhe, Benetnash, the child was just curious," Ursa rebuked mildly. "And I'm one hundred and ten."

"You look barely over ninety," Law said cordially, Rooming Anko back (who was looking utterly delighted by the new holes in his shirt).

"And I handle like I'm seventy-five." Ursa winked. "Now then, before I let you scamper off…"

Her voice barely changed in tone, but Law took a step back, taking Sophie, who was standing behind his shoulder, with him.

"Trafalgar Law, if you're taking advantage of being in my country and your intentions are wicked," President Ursa rested her hands on her cane, "I'll kill you where you stand. And don't think of lying to me, dear. Better men than you have tried."

Law was speechless, perhaps because he'd never been threatened by a hunchbacked fossil before. But the secretaries were reaching towards the insides of their sleeves again, so Sophie donned her Knight in Tinfoil Armor cap and gallantly rushed to his aid. "If Law-san tries to hurt your country, I'll be the first person to give him a good whack." Sophie mimed punching the air beside Law's head. "I'll be all, 'bang bang bang'!"

"Those are gun sound effects," he remarked.

"I'll be gentle."

"I'm not hiding the fact that I'm a pirate," Law said to Ursa. "But the point Sophie failed to make—"
"Hey…"

— is that I'm here to help her with Red Sky. I harbor no ill intentions towards your country.

"Not like Crawfish Island?" Ursa pondered.

"Um, yeah… the World Government sort of blamed that one on him." Sophie shrugged. "But he is still a moderately famous criminal."

"Moderately?" the Hearts repeated angrily.

"Well, there are plenty of those in my country," the president chuckled. "And speaking of criminals, I forgot to thank you for cleaning up some of those chocolate hoodlums last week. Several of them were treated in my hospital for some kind of starfish poison."

"Starfish poison?" Shachi smacked Sophie on the shoulder. "Where'd you find that?"

"Maybe on a beach, dumbass?" Anko muttered.

"Alas, the sign of a healthy economy is a manageable black market. Constrict too much, and the honorable thieves who keep the order die off—or worse, get recruited by that Yonkou, Big Mom."

The tiny woman motioned for Sophie. "Now that I have you here, come take a walk with me."

Sophie hesitated. "We should really get back to…"

"I humbly request that you humor an old lady," Ursa said, and though her voice was warm Sophie felt that there was something about it that was impossible to say no to. She gave the pirates a dismissive flick of her wrist. "Not you, dears. You're free to leave."

Law didn't move, but his gaze flicked from Ursa to Sophie, who gave a tiny jerk of her chin. She gingerly handed him the bag of poop and told him where the incinerator was, and then a Room spun out of Law's palm. Ursa's secretaries gasped, and President Ursa made a noise of admiration. The pirates vanished in a flash of blue.

"Well, then," Ursa said, "shall we?"

Without waiting for an answer, Ursa headed down the street. She waved at the citizens she passed by, hopping along in her pink slippers. How did someone so old have so much energy?

"And your teacher, he's doing alright?" Ursa asked.

It threw her for a loop; Sophie felt like she hadn't thought about Hippo in weeks, she had been so busy with other matters. "I d-don't actually know where he is or what he's doing—"

"He's currently residing in a quaint tavern called Aloe View, and he's spending his time hustling grannies in games of Go."

"How the pineapples—"

"He's a marine, my dear, and marines don't walk around Machinastein without me and a platoon of guards knowing their every location."

"…Wait, have you been tailing me?"

"Only for a little bit. We've deemed you as a non-threat, but the pirates you've been smuggling into my University…"
"Okay, that's fair. I'm. I'm very sorry about that." Maybe it was an invasion of privacy, but Sophie had grown up supporting a totalitarian government that used its force arbitrarily and laughed at due process.

The president eventually slowed down on a long, shaded pathway that was lined with golden willows. It was a quiet, secluded area overrun with colorful foliage, the lazy hum of bumblebees, and the sweet fragrance of overripe papaya. Her secretaries gave them privacy and followed from a short distance away.

"Though, might I add, out of all the pirates you could've bumped into, well done for picking that one."

"That's not—I didn't—" Sophie inhaled, then settled on the truth. "Yeah, I'm pretty lucky."

"You should say that a little louder. Trafalgar's keeping an eye on you from beyond these willows." Ursa looked around Sophie's waistline and called, "You might as well come out, dear!"

Sophie whirled around as Law stepped out from the shadow of a tree.

"How did you know?" he asked warily.

"How could I not have known?" the old woman shot back with a wry smile. "If you're so interested in my conversation with Sophie, then stay and listen."

Law crossed his arms, leaning against the tree.

Ursa rested her palms on her cane. "What does a former World Government scientist think about my city?"

That was hardly a difficult question. "It's a-amazing! Your food, your architecture—everything is so beautiful."

"I'm glad you think so. It took many years to rebuild after centuries of war."

"This is a huge city," she said positively. "Not as big as, say, Kunlun, but I'm sure it'll get there someday."

President Ursa smiled. "Have you been to the desert, my dear?"

Sophie nodded. The train ride there had been long. She and Hai Xing had walked for hours and hours, and then only made it halfway back to the city. There'd been wooden houses and ramshackle buildings and dusty wrinkled men shadowed by wide-brimmed hats. But mostly, there'd been nothing. Just cacti and coyotes and nothing.

"The ancient metropolis of Machinastein once stretched from this city," Ursa pointed a bony finger out, and Sophie followed it past the trees, past the street lights, and looked out into the distant desert nothingness, "all the way to the farthest outcrop at the other end of the island."

"…What happened?"

"Eight hundred years ago, the beast appeared."

"Oh my god, what beast?" she gasped, and received a flat look from both Ursa and Law. "…Oh, you meant—oh."

Ursa beckoned them to follow, and as she turned from the path and walked into the undergrowth,
asked, "Out of everything we teach, do you know why World History isn't included?"

Sophie shrugged. The thought never crossed her mind. Law was also silent.

"It was a part of a deal my ancestors reached with the World Government. They would allow us to trade with their islands, and we could only teach Machinastein history, nothing else. We would also bar any foreign archaeologist or historian inside our borders. You could say it was part of the tragedy that came after the Void Century."

Sophie passed that term before, in G-13's history books. They all had the same footnote: *The Void Century was an age wherein nothing of historic note happened."

"But bits and pieces of our past still remain."

Ursa's words echoed eerily in the shaded grove. In the middle of the grove was a massive ceiba tree, so big that Sophie and Law could both comfortably stand on one of its bare white branches. There was a majestic ancientness to it, how it twisted and spiraled everywhere. On its trunk were some sort of carvings that Sophie tried to make out as she got closer.

"Our history was once passed down through logkeepers, sage singers, and root women. Then the World Government came and killed them all, and killed their families to be safe. Generations, wiped out. And the reason? That is lost to us, as well."

The carvings were of people running through a city filled with temples, forests, and giant animals Sophie didn't know the name to. Chasing after the Machs were soldiers thrusting swords and World Government flags in the air. Marines.

The sound of Sophie's breathing was very loud in her head.

"After suffering internal wars and famine, we had to come crawling back to the World Government and their kings, begging to trade with their islands. Our civilization recovered, but it came at a cost."

Sophie traced her gaze over the smaller stone figures, clearly meant to be children, and squeezed her eyes shut. She did not want to see this. She could've spent her whole life without seeing this. All she'd wanted to do today was throw away a bag of rat poop—

What did Ursa want to accomplish by showing her this? Did she want Sophie to feel even more ashamed of her home? Did she do it just to rub it in her face? Did she think Sophie would naïvely believe her, like she had no pride in the World Government anymore? Like she would just listen to somebody who had never been a marine, who had no idea how the high the cost of loyalty was, *this ridiculous insurgent slander is what I expected from an idiot like Jacques Straw, but—*

Rage curdled between her teeth.

"Don't lie to me," Sophie snapped, and pointed at the gruesome carvings, looming over the tiny old woman. "This can't be real. And if it is, then Machinastein m-must have done s-something truly awful to deserve this."

"Sophie," Law said in cold warning.

"It's alright," Ursa said, with surprising calm. "We have done awful things. We were exactly the same as the World Government, achieving prosperity due a society rooted in classism and inequality —"

"I don't know what that means."
"Slavery. It means slavery."

Sophie turned her horrified gaze on Law, as Ursa continued, "Yes. The old empire was built on the backs of slaves. But we learned from our mistakes. We were capable of change—"

"I-I'm sorry, but how is this m-my problem?"

"I wanted to show you that even deeply-ingrained beliefs have the ability to change, to transmute; like how chemists say, from lead into gold—"

"I don't CARE about that! I don't—why would you think—I-I'm not a part of them anymore!" Her voice rose into a shriek and Sophie stabbed her finger into the old trunk, filled with carvings of the dead. "I would have never done something like this!"

A silver knife flashed under Sophie's chin, and she was being whirled around by Law before Ursa's secretaries could cut off her head. They stood between their president and Sophie, armed and ready.

"Stand down!" their president ordered. "My dear, I didn't mean to imply—"

"And chrysopoeia is a fool's tale," Sophie spat, and turned on her heel. But before she could get far, a hand grabbed her wrist.

She shoved Law away from her, really shoved, wanting it to hurt, and he actually stepped back. She covered her face, feeling like her tongue and her heart were going to jump straight out of her mouth. She couldn't speak. She felt like if Law tried to get her to speak, she'd start screaming.

But he didn't, and he let her go without saying a word, and Sophie stumbled all the way back to the ballgames stadium. Her brain was in a fog of anger and something like grief, but she didn't even know why it felt like grief, only that it did and it ached. She was only half paying attention to where she was going, so it was by some miracle that she managed to retrace her steps to Cygnus’ bike, lying on the dirt.

Her hands were trembling too hard for her to hold onto the bike, so she squatted next to it and buried her face in her knees, tapping her fingers against her feet and counting in even numbers over and over again. The anger subsided after she reached one thousand, and then Sophie felt sick to her stomach. She felt exhausted. And then she felt terrified, which was worse, because she didn't know of what.

And then—and then she felt nothing but numbness. Sophie listened to her breath rattling around her ribcage and wondered how it would feel to slip out of existence, without a breath or a sound, to vanish completely.

The crowd exiting the stadium milled past her, and a conciliatory hand patted her on the back. "Chin up, kid. The Panthers will win one of these days. It's just probability, you know."

—

Eventually, Sophie picked up the bike and made her way back to the University to return it to its owner (apologizing profusely for the burned rubber). Then she headed down to the empty basement, where the silence was deafening.

She inspected Goliath and his rat cage, and sighed. "More poop? Hai Xing-san is feeding you too well. You don't even look like you're dying."

Sophie finished up the last batch of cultured cells and carefully aligned the final petri dish with the
rest. She cast a scrutinizing eye over her work and nodded. There was nothing to do but wait and see how the Red Sky cells responded to the different molecular combinations.

She considered all the petri dishes and microscopes and papers, thinking of the logistics of her grabbing everything and running away on some nameless ship. It might work. She'd have to think about it.

…But first, coffee.

The sun was setting when Sophie headed to the café. The lights of the University were going out one by one as students and teachers headed home, and sky was a deep-blue velvet. She ordered her expensive cappuccino and sat on a nearby bench, waiting for her order. Sophie kept thinking about how, if it were possible, she could run away with all her Red Sky ingredients when a voice broke her daydream: "Long day?"

Sophie looked up. Norma was smiling at her, a cup of coffee in hand, her beaded locs clinking together.

"Long couple of months."

"Oof. You doing alright?"

She grinned tersely. "I'm great."

"Anyone who says that with that kind of tone is flat-out lying."

Norma broke off, her eyes brightening. A tall, willowy girl came running past Sophie and pressed a kiss to Norma's cheek, and the two of the women were briefly locked in a warm greeting. With a swish of her long hair, the medical student from that morning straightened up and smiled at Sophie.

"Oh, your girlfriend!" Sophie realized, then blushed. "Sorry. Hi."

"Celaeno! Norma!" came another voice.

Sophie turned around. "Really? All of you know each other?"

The rafflesia-haired ecologist with daisy earrings walked over to them, looking like he was heading home.

"Musca-kun!" Norma greeted, and said to Sophie, "This school is pretty small. Most of us know each other."

The ecologist blinked slowly Sophie, like he was trying to remember her face. "Oh, shit," he said in realization. "How's it going, chemist?"

"Fine. Can I please wait for my overpriced coffee in peace?"

"We were about to grab dinner," Norma said. "Why don't you come with us?"

"You've never experienced a real Machinastein night out until you're weeping for your mother after eating raw cayenne peppers," Musca said.

The barista called her name, and Sophie stood up and got her coffee. "Thank you, but that sounds terrible. Goodbye."

Celaeno stepped forward and smacked the coffee out of her hands. It went flying onto the grass
somewhere. She jabbed her finger at Sophie, who was standing there in stupefied shock, then pointed down the hill where the city glowed in the sunset, then rounded it all off with a cheerful thumbs-up.

"You still need to pay for that," the barista drawled.

"…Okay, let's go," Sophie said quickly, and the four of them bolted down the hill.

—

With Musca recommending what to eat at the night market, Sophie grabbed a dinner of hot tamales and lima soup. Norma suggested honeyed desserts to go with her papaya drink, and Celaeno’s eyes gleamed as she got Sophie to nibble on a raw cayenne pepper. Trying to disintegrate your tongue was a regular Machinastein pastime, and the three students started taking bets and passing around peppers.

"At leath ith great fuh thtuffeh notheth?" Norma sobbed, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"My tongue ith falleh awf," Sophie wailed, and then suction-cupped a glass of milk to her mouth.

Celaeno and Musca looked pityfully at the two non-Machs as they licked the pepper juice from their fingers.

Afterwards, they tried a less life-threatening activity and walked to a small plaza filled with restaurants and open-air seating. Two men were playing a trumpet and the drums in front of a tamale shop. The men had long red hair, fashioned quite like Musca's. Sophie's observation wasn't wrong: Musca told the others to watch, then took out an ocarina from his robes and ran towards them, sitting on the empty seat next to his father and grandfather.

The music was light and airy, a good song for dancing. People were leaving the seats where they were dining, and the women were pulling their skirts up and the men were tapping their feet. Sophie followed Celaeno and Norma, looking for a seat to watch the dancers. But then Celaeno whistled at someone in the crowd, waving her arms and pointed at Sophie.

Out of nowhere, a spry young man—one of their friends, maybe, or just a complete stranger—grasped Sophie's hands and spun her around. Her green dress twirled up around her knees and her breath flew out of her lungs.

Celaeno and Norma clapped enthusiastically, then clasped hands and went swaying into the growing crowd. Okay. Now here was a Machinastein activity Sophie could get behind.

She waved her arms and kicked her feet, and probably looked like a flailing idiot, but the music was beautiful, and she felt it from her toes to the tips of her fingers. It was pure noise: ocarina, trumpet, drums, and the sound of dancing feet and clapping hands, swishing skirts, laughter, feverish as a summer night. She spun to a woman, who caught her in her arms and twirled her around.

Sweaty and flushed and breathless, she barely noticed that some Hearts had come to see what the commotion was, until she came face-to-face with Penguin.

"Yo," the mechanic said coolly, and then immediately yelped as Sophie grabbed him.

Hand on each other's backs, they parted the crowd, twirling with a flourish that could in no way be described as proper dancing. Penguin threw his head back and laughed, and his eyes—forever shadowed by his hat—gleamed under the light. He whirled her to Shachi, and she mimicked his bopping movements. He looked quite snazzy in those sunglasses in the golden lamplight, his long
red hair flying all over his forehead, calloused mechanic fingers snapping to the beat.

"Remember that time in Lvneel?" Shachi called over the music.

"With the squirrel and the snowcones?" Penguin hollered. "Always!"

Sophie took light half-step back, then more as she watched them dance together, laughing about an island in North Blue that she'd never been to. Norma and Celaeno twirled by her, their hands clasped together, their silk dresses swishing about their legs.

Sophie closed her eyes, losing herself among the dancing bodies and the music. She felt the noise and the bodies and the atmosphere press up against her chest, pressing up so tight there was no room to feel anything else.

She used to dance with Hippo all the time when she was small, standing on his toes as he whirled around the room. He'd play old, scratchy records and hold her in one hand, the other carrying a glass of gin. She'd balance herself on his scarred knuckles and tell him she was gonna have big ugly hands like him someday, because her hands were gonna carry so many stories like his did, and Hippo laughed and laughed.

He could sing up a tune, her sensei. His voice was whiskey-sour-smooth, he could dazzle all the marines like it was nothing, and whenever she visited G-13's memorial with him, she'd watch him lay a wreath at the bottom of the black stone tablet and sing, *The ocean sees the beginning of the world, the ocean knows the end of the world*—

Her eyes flew open and her breath quickened. The music was deafening, and there were too many people, and her brain felt overheated.

She pushed through the crowd and managed to extract herself onto an empty sidewalk. There was a grassy hill nearby that was still close enough to hear the music, so Sophie stumbled up the hill and found a soft patch of grass to sit on. The night air was nice and cool. If she closed her eyes, she could be on G-13's battlements again, swinging her legs off the parapets—

*I miss G-13*, she thought, and squeezed her eyes shut. She missed the coral beds, and the ocean that seemed to have no ending, and the times when she used to look up at the stars and think they were all hers.

What was wrong with her? She was on a new island, surrounded by new people, trying to be a new person. Why couldn't she just... forget about it all? Sophie braced her head on her hands.

The grass rustled. Footsteps. "Feeling ill?"

When she made out the silhouette walking towards her, Sophie exhaled. Law sat on the grass with his legs spread out and handed his mostly-filled bottle of rum to her. She accepted, sniffed the edge of the bottle's mouth, and took a little sip. It tasted like dark, spiced honey.

She set the bottle down and muttered, "I shouldn't have blown up at President Ursa like that."

"Yeah, that was hysterical."

His voice was neutral, but she remembered how angry he'd looked. She made a face at Law. "Pineapplebutt."

"You took it too personally. The president wasn't talking about you."
"I know. I know! I just—I couldn't take another person reminding me how awful the World Government is. Even after everything Hippo-sensei did to me, if you tried to bad-mouth him, I would kick your apricot—"

He snorted.

"I would! I know that's stupid, but I would! He's my teacher, and G-13 was my home, and the World Government was—" Sophie took a deep breath, almost laughing because it sounded so dumb. "And I know that's stupid, I know. I know I don't have the right to say that. I set my home on fire. But—it was still a part of my identity. It still raised me. It was m-m-my—culture, my island."

Sophie wiped her mouth, her fingers tasting like sweet rum. The blissful horizon of palm trees and temples glowed in the dusk, slumbering with a million ghosts.

"I can't pretend like it never existed, because that's like pretending a big part of me doesn't exist. But then I get so ashamed that it is a part of me, that I think I could die."

"That's a piss-poor reason." Sophie's head whipped around to glare at him as he laid down on the grass. "All I'm saying is, at least make your death useful in some way."

"…Wow. I know your only interest is piracy and being a stupid mean pineapple, but—"

"I'm trying to be rational—"

"Oh, wait, you also like poisoning cute girls. And kidnapping them, and throwing them onto giant birds. Oh my god, if you ever get a girlfriend, I'm going to have to rescue her from your clutches."

"I can surgically shove your hand inside your eye socket."

"I'd also rescue your boyfriend," she replied, "that goes without saying. I'd be a very good hero."

"How's that heroism working out for you so far?"

"Quite well, as you can see by my current situation."

Law grinned. And then he said, "You're more than what you were raised to be."

Sophie tucked her chin on her knees. "Easy to say. Not so easy to believe."

"You've only been at this for, what, a month? Give it time. At least a decade. Then you'll probably be okay."

"Is that how long it took you?"

"Don't compare yourself to me. I was put in a situation that I had pretty much no control over. But for you, this is a choice. You changing is happening because you wanted it to happen. That's quite badass."

Sophie fidgeted. "…Even if the future makes me scared out of my mind? Even if I don't know how to… be this different person that I want to be?"

He thought about it. "No, you're right. I take it back. Your entire presence brings me immense embarrassment."

"Thanks, Law-san," Sophie said sarcastically.
"Anytime."

A pause, and then she said again, "Thanks, Law-san."

A slow song rose from the plaza, and fireflies drifted over the grass like little stars. The hill gave them a perfect vantage to see the winding streets and palm trees lit by golden lamps, and all the temples that shone silver under the moon. In the distance, a group of people could be heard faintly singing, "Someday the Panthers will reign agaaaaain! It won't be today nor tomorrow, but we won't abstaaain!"

"Why did the Twenty Kings even create a government for the entire world in the first place?" she wondered, reaching for Law's bottle of rum and taking a drink. "Why was it necessary? I've always been taught that it's for peacekeeping, but most countries already have a militia in place. And the Void Century."

Law exhaled, blowing dandelions into the sky. "One hundred years that no one in the world remembers."

"How is that possible? Why did the Government kill all those Machinastein historians to hide it? The world deserves answers, right? We deserve answers."

He shrugged. A firefly drifted over his hair.

"Aren't you even a little bit curious?"

"I don't care. It's all built on rot. I'd rather see it burn."

Sophie didn't feel the same. She needed the World Government intact if she wanted to learn its secrets. Somewhere in the West, somewhere beneath the constellation of the crown and the dragon, stood the Holy Land, Mariejois. Mariejois, which had spent eight hundred years complicit in slavery, genocide, and war. Because the World Nobles were gods? No. True gods couldn't die, and Sophie had slain one herself.

But what could she possibly do? She wasn't anyone. Her namesake was nothing but a shipwrecked boat. She had tried so hard to rise up in the ranks, to be somebody who mattered, but it had been pointless. She'd walked out on her faith, been excommunicated, eternally damned.

But how she had screamed at President Ursa, how she had raged—

G-13 was still there, beating inside of her.

The more she kept it a secret, the more she tried to cover it up with pretty silk dresses and straw-woven sandals, the more she became aware of it. She was an anomaly, a glitch. Nothing about her belonged on this island. Her blood was the blood of the World Government; it was the blood of legions of island-murderers and greedy warmongers. It was in her bones, down to the very last molecule of her being.

A thought, then, occurred to her. A terrifying thought that had been building up for weeks, and Sophie finally knew how to put it into words.

"Law-san." She shook his shoulder, and the fireflies glowing in his dark hair scattered. He rose up on his elbows and looked at her and the snot dripping out of her nose. The horizon of the golden city washed over Law's face, over his grey eyes and his earrings, and she was terrified all over again. Sophie wiped her nose and whispered, "What if… what if I n-never r-really leave G-13? What if it s-stays with me, f…forever?"
Law had been through this. He'd know.

He was quiet for a long moment, and said finally, "It stays. And you live."

Her cigarette was stub between her lips. She held her breath, waiting for something that wasn't so utterly depressing—

"That's all I got." He looked away, briefly, then back at her. For a moment, just for a moment, this seemed to take a herculean effort for Law to admit. "That's all I know."

Sophie thought about it again, and if she listened closely she might've heard the hum of their entropic bodies, releasing minute amounts of heat into the universe, tending towards chaos and randomness the constant dispersal of energy, and maybe, maybe there were no perfect answers. It stays, and you live.

She exhaled a river of smoke up to the stars, and said, "Okay."

—

Even when they had finished off the bottle of ale between them, Law felt no immediate desire to head back to his submarine. He was settled flat on his back and Sophie was lying next to him on the grass, relaxing on her side, her head resting on her palm. Her hair was coming out of its ponytail and it tickled his shoulder. Somehow, during their conversation, she had scooted closer to him. Or maybe he had to her.

"Where'd you get that?"

He raised his arm and looked to where she was pointing: a long, thin scar down his bicep. "I got sliced up with a broken bottle. When I was sixteen, by an asshole in a bar." Sophie pointed at another scar on his wrist. "That's from when I practiced knife-fighting as a kid."

"And then you discovered how bad you were?"

"Hilarious." He paused. "But, yes."

"How was it like, being sixteen?"

"How was it like when you were sixteen?"

"I was holed up in a laboratory all the time. I didn't go out, I didn't have friends… but you must've had some grand adventures."

He had. "I traveled all over North Blue. Spent a year living in a forest, studying and practicing my Devil Fruit… bummed around Lvneel for a while after that… stole a whole bunch of shit. Got chased out of three different islands. Such was the life of a burgeoning teenage pirate."

Sophie was quiet. He couldn't see her face unless he angled his head and looked up at her, so he did. Her face was close—closer than he thought, and he watched her gently bite down on her lip. When she exhaled, her breath smelled like honeyed rum.

"I would've liked to have met your crew back then."

"No, you wouldn't have. Trust me. This thing inside us, it's not something that—heals. It's… day by day, learning how to live with it. But you don't know what to do with that when you're sixteen."

"If you were sixteen, then I would've been twelve…" Sophie looked into the sky with a thousand-
yard stare. "God, I was an acne-covered, pubescent monster."

"So, nothing’s changed."

"Rude. Adult acne is normal, I’ll have you know." She flopped on the grass. "But yeah, the more I think about it… I would not have gotten along with you even if we’d met at the Beginning of the Beginning of All Stories. With any of you. Well, maybe Bepo-san." Sophie nodded firmly. "Better here and now instead of nowhere and never." Her brow wrinkled. "I guess that's… kind of obvious. But. Anyway, it feels good to say out loud."

The dance was winding down in the plaza and the last note of an ocarina faded away. Law glanced at Sophie to see if she was about to get up and leave, head back to her ivory temple. But she made no move to go. Her eyes were bright with stars.

"Chrysopoeia," she said, repeating the strange word from earlier. "You ever heard of it?"

Law shook his head. He hadn't.

"The Great Work, or so science-mystics say." Her voice was theatrically hushed. "According to legend, it's made with prima materia: the original matter. Aether, or chaos, or the world soul, the connection between all living things on the planet. It grants the alchemist the ability to change base metal into gold, and blesses them with eternal life."

"What a… convenient combination of powers."

"It's ridiculous," she said with a yawn. "But, well… in theory, if all the ingredients are right and enough energy is applied… transmuting lead into gold isn’t a matter of if, but when…"

She trailed off, and then a loud snore came from around Law's shoulder. He raised himself up on his elbows to look at the chemist, who was lying on the grass, her head lolling over her shoulder and drool puddling out of her mouth.

—

Listening to the quiet hum of the submarine, Sophie opened her eyes.

She didn't remember much of last night, but she knew she must've fallen asleep talking to Law. He brought her back to the sub? What a proper, murder-inclined gentleman. She sat up in the hammock and stretched out all the creaky bones in her body. Crawfish's bioluminescent mushrooms washed her room in aquamarine. The jar hung from the ceiling, and it looked well-kept. If Sophie didn't know any better, she would've thought a pirate had been taking care of it.

She stepped outside in the galley, blinking away blue sunlight. The walls rippled with underwater reflections of the ocean surface. It was morning again. How strange, that the world was still the same even as she felt so different. It felt suiting for the ocean to breathe rampant fire and the stars to drop out of the sky and fly away like fireflies.

But the world rotated just the same as it did when she was a proud World Government soldier, and it rotated just the same when she was a good, servile daughter, and it would rotate just the same now, when she was neither of those things.

Hai Xing was in the galley, preparing breakfast. He barely glanced at her as she came inside and leaned against the counter.

"Nice day," Sophie began.
"I made coffee," Hai Xing said.

"Oh, thank pineapples." She poured herself a cup with extra extra sugar, and watched him dice up vegetable. "I'm really glad you guys stayed for so long. I feel bad from holding your crew back from your next pillaging adventure."

"We didn't stay for you," the cook replied plainly. "Pirates don't exist in a vacuum of constant adventure. It's important to be content with your life in order to risk it in a battle." He raised his shamonji. "Today we live to the fullest, so that tomorrow we might die a satisfactory death."

"Huh. So, to you, piracy is basically the pursuit of a happy ending."

"I hear that's the best kind of ending," Hai Xing said, and she had to agree.

Sophie fingered a strand of her hair. Another good wash, and the black dye would finally be out and she'd be a blonde again. From lead into gold, she thought, and smiled.

"Are you ready for your next adventure?" she asked, and was quite proud of herself for sounding so poised about it. It's not like the Hearts were going to disappear from her life altogether. She could follow along in the newspapers, after all.

"Death has a way of finding those who want to be found," Hai Xing muttered, and passed her a butcher's knife. "Hold this."

"Wait, wha…?"

Then, Sophie heard it: beneath the low metallic hum of the submarine, there was the sound of the deck door creaking open.

Someone had boarded the submarine.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway, one by one. Hai Xing continued prepping breakfast, because he apparently followed all his grim forecasts with casual tomato-peeling. Sophie was now fully awake. Wait, Death? What? It's too early for this! I haven't even brushed my teeth!

The doors swung open and plump silhouette stepped into the light. The woman was—there was no other way to describe her: she had the appearance of a gentle, middle-aged mother, or an angelic cake baker, or the sweet lady who sold muffins down the corner. Her cotton-candy pink hair was softly permed, and her round cheeks were rosy with blush.

"So ye be the pirates who took out half my sweets operations on this island," she greeted.

"Uhhh…" Sophie stared, one hand on the knife. "Who… u-um, who a-are… you?"

The woman smiled beatifically and trilled, "Were ye dropped on the head, ya stammering, empty-headed, pig-nosed wretch? Charlotte Sundae, Minister of Gelato. I sail under the flag of Big Mom. And I do believe your gormless whoreson of a captain owes me some fuckin' chocolate!"

_to be continued_
Tastes Like Summer

Chapter Notes

Thank you klexenia for beta-ing my first draft. Your perspective is indispensable.

Well, folks. Summer’s almost over.

As the Heart Pirates continued to sleep, peacefully oblivious to the enemy onboard, Charlotte Sundae paced around the galley. She had to be at least in her late forties, even though she had the vocal range of a squeaky toy. For such a small, pink lady, she was channeling a fury worse than all of Sophie's G-13 drill sergeants combined.

"If I want to be the Minister of Gelato and Chocolate, I'll have to convince Mama, and I'm not able to do that if I don't have any chocolate!" Charlotte Sundae threw herself onto the table bench with an affected sigh, as though exhausted from turning Sophie's face into a spittle target. "I shall be tragically ruined as a dripsy chocolate-less fopdoodle forever until the end of time."

Sophie palmed Hai Xing's large, pointy knife, fingers sweaty.

"Fetch yer captain," Sundae instructed, fanning herself. She looked curiously sweaty in proper lighting, as though small globs of her were melting right down her neck. "I'd go lookin' fer him meself, but this blasted heat—"

Sophie threw her arm back and hurled the knife straight into the galley door, missing her target by several feet.

"Ye half-baked crumpet!" Charlotte Sundae seemed deeply affronted that she was almost impaled through the head.

Hai Xing was giving her his disappointed face. "I tried!" Sophie wailed.

He stepped in front of her, reaching in his apron pocket to demonstrate.

The single chopstick he threw across the galley sliced into Charlotte Sundae's widening left eye with a horrifying *shlurp*—and her entire head exploded. Pieces of her flew into Hai Xing's face and hit Sophie before she could throw her hands up. She shrieked, pulling the ice-cold chunks from her hair. It warmed in her hand, melting and turning sticky and *whaaaaaat the—*

"Euuughhllfhghghh!" Sophie shrieked, spitting out the glorp that landed between her lips. It tasted…

Hai Xing wiped his mouth. "Sweet," he muttered, finishing Sophie's horrified thought.

The headless Big Mom pirate was still sitting neatly, legs crossed. The amorphous gelatinous, gloops melting from her neck reformed into a round face and bubblegum-pink hair.

"Alright," Charlotte Sundae sighed, and clasped her soft, doughy hands together. "Let's do it the bloody way."
In all respects, bashing your head against a very solid metal wall was not an enjoyable experience. It was painful, and overall quite lackluster, but despite the drawbacks Sophie's heart was racing as she gasped for breath. How did the glucose and fat molecules of Charlotte Sundae's ice cream combine into her own body? She wondered how the bonding worked, and would Sundae be upset if Sophie asked for a sample—

She pulled herself upright just as the cabin door next to her opened.

"Can you keep it quiet out here?" Bepo yawned, rubbing his eyes.

Charlotte Sundae hurled Hai Xing into his stomach.

Bepo tumbled backwards and fell into the cabin and over other Heart Pirates, judging by the yelps of pain. Overhead, Anko's voice from the speaking tubes was hollering, "Hold onto your nipples, boys! We got a mother of a problem anchored next to us!"

"What does that mean, boy!?" Sophie heard Manta shout back.

"It's A BIG MOM SHIP!"

The shock seemed to awaken the half-asleep pirates, as Hai Xing leaped back into the fray and sliced apart Charlotte Sundae's ice cream claw with a bread knife. The ice cream splattered across the floor, and then another, even bigger hand gurgled from her elbow and punched Hai Xing aside. Shachi and Penguin charged at her, but they were pushed back with a wave of ice cream that engulfed the cabin. And then, bedlam.

"What is that?" Shachi screamed, wiping his face.

"Nobody panic!" Manta shouted, giving his upper lip a firm lick. "It's… ice cream."

"Oh my god, move!" Valross immediately shoved aside his crewmates as he attempted to hide under a hammock.

Penguin grabbed the collar of his boiler suit. "Where the hell are you going!"

"I'm lactose intolerant, bitch! Safety first!" Valross was now crawling, dragging Penguin behind him.

Charlotte Sundae's pink curls elongated into a long, semi-frozen hammer, and then quite rudely slammed into Sophie's gut. She proceeded to hack last night's undigested bits all over the floor, and almost missed the burst of blue that exploded through the hallway.

Law stood in the doorway of his cabin at the other end of the hall, clearly having just woken up, with his shirt half-untucked in his jeans.

And Charlotte Sundae stood unharmed, no severed limbs or eyeballs floating where they shouldn't be. A look of malicious amusement crossed her face, though her malice was slightly undercut by her waffle-cone hairclips.

Sophie stared. The pirates stared. Law looked just as bewildered, nodachi gripped in his hands, eyes wide like the pamphlet boy for One in Five Men Suffer from Performance Issues, It's More Common than You Think!

There was a puddle collecting at Charlotte Sundae's feet as she perspired. Melted ice cream.
Sophie waved her hand in the air for attention. "Get her outside!"

A split-second where an inaudible conversation passed between the Hearts, and Manta came charging out of the cabin. He hoisted Charlotte Sundae in the air, bits of goopy ice cream and all, and chucked her towards the deck door, which Bepo kicked open.

The Hearts all went racing towards the deck, and Sophie stumbled after them.

The second she passed through the door, she heard Law say, "Oh, fuck. Fuck it."

Sweating about a third of her body mass away in the sun, a slowly-liquefying Charlotte Sundae stood on the railing, pink apron whirling in the breeze, and lifted one fist in the air. Behind her was her warship: a frigate with square-rigged sails, Big Mom's red-lipped, pink-haired Jolly Roger flapping in the breeze… and three dozen cannons raised.

"Ready!" Sundae trilled. "Aim!"

Pirates scrimmages were not usually the epic things that Sophie read in the history books, like the battles between Gold Roger and Golden Lion Shiki. They were more commonly short bursts of extreme violence, and could occur over perceived rudeness, or endangered goods. While marines all over the world were united by duty and loyalty, pirates did not share a sense of familial love over bloodlust and criminal activity.

A shimmering blue Room rippled over Sophie's head, covering the Heart Pirates' deck. The pirates were all yelling as Law was about to warp them all to safety, but the submarine, the poor submarine —

"Now hold on a minute!"

A tall, white bun appeared over the railing.

"Excuse me—oopsy daisy—"

The President of Machinastein flopped onto the deck with zero grace. Her two elegant secretaries swooshed in from behind like hummingbird assassins as Ursa picked herself up and dusted off her robes. Law stopped, mid-shout. Sophie twisted her neck to look at Charlotte Sundae, who had not yet uttered fire and was looking at the new arrival with a pinched sort of expression.

"Sundae," Ursa sighed, tottering over with her cane, "what have I told you about causing trouble in my port?"

The pink pirate oozed down from the railing. "I'm owed five tons o' chocolate from a shop destroyed by these rapscallions," she purred silkily, which was sort of impressive considering she was trying to keep her nose from melting down her face.

Sophie opened her mouth, and a couple pirates made a move to step forward, but President Ursa raised her hand. "On behalf of Machinstein, I'll sell you the chocolate myself."

"Listen, sweet thing, I ain't payin' yer country's ridiculous export taxes. I could get decent black market chocolate at a fifth o' the price yer legal businesses sell 'em at!"

"Ho! Miserliness does not befit a daughter of one of the richest pirates in the world."

Charlotte Sundae giggled, scooping up her left eye ("I feel sick," Sophie heard Shachi mutter) and shoving it back in her dissolving head. "And can ya imagine the money we could've made if ye
removed tha' stick up yer ass?" 

"I was never going to be one of your mother's pawns," Ursa said tersely.

"Good for me! I woulda melted here."

Ursa scoffed. "You think it's because of the location change that I didn't marry you?"

*Um,* Sophie thought. Law cleared his throat loudly, looking vaguely uncomfortable this was happening on his ship. He was ignored.

"I loved you!" Sundae cried.

"You wanted to milk me for the all the chocolate I had," Ursa snapped.

"Tha' chocolate dried up years ago," Sundae hissed. Law looked desperately at Charlotte Sundae's warship cannons, as though he wanted them to fire.

Anko opened his mouth.

"Don't," Sophie warned. He closed it.

"Did you come all the way to Paradise just to harass a group of chicklets?" Ursa asked sternly.

"To disrespect an Emperor is a death sentence," the blob of ice-cream snarled, and her steely gaze met Sophie. "All pirates know this. Ye be no pirate; only a fool."

With great style and poise, Sophie hid behind Bepo.

"You're dripping all over my deck," Law said through gritted teeth.

"Sundae, let's discuss a potential trade deal of selling Machinastein chocolate to your mother." Ursa reached into her robes and drew out a small, silver bracelet. "Can you do something about your state?"

Grumbling, a drippy hand snatched the bracelet and clamped it around her other wrist. With several joint-cracking pops, Charlotte Sundae's body reformed—though she looked exhausted all of a sudden. Her makeup was running down her cheeks and crow's feet lined her eyes. Seastone.

Sundae nodded at her crew, who were watching from her warship. A handful of them, in waffle-cone hats and checkered shirts, came swooping down with ropes and landed on the pier, waiting for their captain.

"Let's talk somewhere *away* from this godforsaken sun," Sundae said, and with one last look of nasty amusement at the Hearts—whom, in all respects, she could've decimated with a snap of her fingers—picked up her skirts and hopped over the railing.

The pirates let out a big exhale.

"Well," Ursa said, looking at the Hearts, "nice meeting you kids. Old girlfriends. You know."

"Yep," Shachi said loudly, puffing out his chest. "We sure do know about women."

"Excuse my friend," Penguin said. "He's always wanted to say that."

Ignoring the immediate uproar that followed, Sophie stepped forward before Ursa
could *woosh* away. "Um," she said abruptly. "Um, the other day, I—"

"We can talk later, dear," the old lady interrupted with a wave of her hand. "I'm quite busy right now."

"Oh—okay."

Sophie reluctantly turned back to the pirates. Law reminded everyone that as soon as they were cleaned up, they'd set off. The pirates trooped down below to gather mops, passing by Kamasu who stuck his bedhead out of the engine room, yawning and asking if something happened.

It took several tries for Penguin to wrench out the knife that Sophie had thrown into the galley door. There was a small, mysterious hole in the door that Bepo peered out of, and they discovered that the chopstick that Hai Xing had thrown had embedded itself into the glass porthole at the other end of the hallway.

The summer sun was bright and Sophie held her hand up, squinting against the sweat glistening off the dozen bare chests. She could roll up her sleeves and put them to shame with her own biceps, but today in the heat, Sophie was content with watching them work, in the shade, with a decent view and a cigarette.

"I'm heading to the University," Sophie said as Law passed by, scrubbing the deck. If this morning was something out of her most bizarre nightmares, this was straight out of a daydream. "Offering an invitation."

"I'll see you later," he said distractedly, looking around the deck. "I need to take care of something first."

Cleaning up the submarine *did* seem to be pretty annoying work, for their last day on a beautiful paradise island. She would've offered to help, but. Shade. Nice view. The foreboding feeling that getting any closer to these pirates would lead to immense emotional damage further down the road.

"Hey," Sophie said, watching Law. "About Charlotte Sundae, I think she—"

"Has Haki, right?"

She twirled a strand of curly hair. "You're going to meet a lot of pirates like her in the future."

"Worried?" He was now looking at her fully.

Sophie smiled with maximum angelic benevolence. "How will you get by without me?"

"For starters, I'll start charging rent for freeloaders."

And that was her cue to leave.

---

Sophie felt bad for her little grey lab rat. Not because she poisoned him with a chemical agent, and also not because they used to eat rats during Vira when Times Got Tough and so now her stomach always felt a little queasy when she looked at Goliath. She felt bad because he was looking *bored*.

She cut up little cardboard boxes and put them around his cage, like a maze. "Dying slowly from a chemical agent can be very traumatizing, and the best thing to do is to keep your mind occupied," Sophie told him, taking off her heavy-duty gloves. "When I was sixteen and I threw myself down the
stairs to see what would happen—and also because life had no color and food had no flavor and I hadn't slept in four days—I made my best bombs afterwards. It was like, *muah.*" She kissed her fingertips. "Fantastic work."

Goliath flopped over on his belly.

"Though Hippo-sensei did put me on lots of medication," Sophie remembered slowly, "so I'd say that helped the most." She brightened. "But I'm working on medication for you, so don't die on me yet! I'm getting emotionally invested in you, Goliath-san—sort of a bad sign considering the people I get emotionally invested in…"

She paused from scribbling down more data and glanced up. She half-expected to see Law sitting there, twisting a quill between his fingers, his tattooed brown elbows taking up the entire side of the table, sour concentration furrowing his brow. Even when she was buried over a microscope, she'd hear his scuffles and quiet mutters in the background.

And when it got late and they were both tired, he'd tilt his chair back and put his feet on the table, and then she'd snap at him about hygiene and he'd dryly protest that he had a bad back and then some way or another the conversation would move to his horrible penmanship and—

And it was, actually, going to be very difficult doing this alone. Without someone by her side. She'd gotten too used to this, the predictability of friendship…

Well. It would not do to wallow without a cup of coffee. She went outside to the café, and grinned when she saw a woman with neat black locs waving at her with her own coffee in hand.

"Last night was a riot, huh?" Norma greeted as Sophie joined her.

"It was superlative," she agreed, scooting over to Norma's good ear. "Top-notch. Thanks for inviting me."

"No worries. Are you feeling better?"

"No worries. Are you feeling better?"

It was a remarkably considerate question from someone who didn't know her very well, and Sophie blinked. Then she grinned. "Well, I'll be fine."

—

Law sloshed through the muddy puddles of the harbor streets, kicking up dirt in his wake. He walked through alleys, passing by old men in loincloths and long braided hair, smoking like chimneys, and brown barefoot kids running past him with their dogs.

He stopped before a small, shithole-ish tavern by the docks, studying the crusty painted sign. *Aloe View,* with a small heart over the i. Here was the tavern he overheard in President Ursa and Sophie's conversation. Law went inside, but his mark was nowhere to be found. The manager at the desk pointed him to a gambling house nearby.

He stepped into the dimly-lit, cramped parlor. The air was thick and humid, cloying with the smoke of burning candelilla flowers, lit like incense.

"No weapons inside," the large, tattooed bouncer rumbled.

He set his nodachi against the wall with the other assemblage of weaponry. Beers clattered, cards shuffled, money exchanged hands. Lightly tugging on his shirt that was already feeling uncomfortably warm, Law scanned the room and found his target.
At one of the small board game tables in the back sat Sophie's teacher, counting his recent winnings and surrounded by several empty beer glasses.

Law waited until a glum-looking old man stuffed his remaining stella in his pocket and left the table, and then swung his legs into the just-vacated chair. He watched as Hippo jerked up and then rearranged his dirt-smudged glasses.

"Is Sophie okay?" was the first thing out of his mouth.

"I come out all this way to see you, and you just ask about your student?" Law sarcastically extended his hands. "What are we, doc?"

Hippo looked at him for a long moment, then sighed into his fifth mug of beer. "If you're here to lecture me, I'd rather not hear it. Sophie already did a fine job."

Law leaned back on the chair, one arm thrown over the back. "And if I'm here to kill you?"

"Don't be a cliché, pirate."

"Says the father estranged from his kid. Now there's a tired trope."

"If you're trying to pester me to death, it's working." He could've been a handsome young man, once. He had a soldier's face; a stern mouth, a tense, grizzled jaw, and quick dark eyes that marked Law's actions, despite the generous amounts of alcohol he had gulped down.

Law looked over the board game, at the little black and white stones in wooden cups. He knew this game.

He slapped down a wad of yellow stella bills and then set a black stone on the board.

"Well?" Law prompted, eyebrows raised.

The older doctor seemed surprised, which then melted into a reluctant exhale. He reached for the white pieces, and for a few minutes there was nothing but the quiet clack-clack of stones being set down.

Then Hippo said, "You're not in trouble with the Big Mom Pirates, are you? If it's trouble for you, it's probably trouble for Sophie."

"You don't have to worry; we're leaving."

"Ah. Well, about time."

Law ignored that. "The Big Mom ship in the harbor must be a painful sight for you."

"My blood pressure has shot through the roof. Civilian life is a fucking nightmare."

"You sound incredibly well-adjusted," Law replied, changing tactics to keep the white pieces from advancing further into his black. "I can see why Sophie nearly gave up freedom for you."

Hippo went quiet, scanning the board. Then he spoke, sanctimonious in his sureness, "I know why you're here, pirate. You're here to ask me for my blessing so she can join your crew."

Law stared at him. "She's going back to Vira. She—told you she's cleaning up your mess. Does it go in one ear and out the other?"
A glimmer of triumph. "So she's not a pirate."

Law's scowl dropped, and he looked at him flatly.


Law could see why Sophie would have a difficult time letting go of him. He also once had a father who studied medicine. Hippo wasn't anything like him, but the fact that this similarity existed in the first place was slightly unnerving.

"Trying to get a foothold in my corner?" Hippo rubbed his chin. "You're harder to read than I thought. Still, Sophie's better than you. You're trying to keep all your soldiers from being surrounded by my pieces. You're protecting them. She knows when to sacrifice."

"Learned it from the best, I'm sure," Law murmured.

Hippo rubbed a white stone between his fingers, searching the board. "Growing up in the Marines," he said pensively, quietly, "is a—a little bit like hell. Our mantra is to beat discipline and respect into our kids early. We take any violent young we can get our hands on and teach them anger. So they learn how to use that anger on our enemies. We must not be timid, because our comrades wait for us."

"We must advance towards the blue horizon," Law muttered, examining the remaining spaces.

"Oh? You know that song?"

In another life, another marine could've been sitting on the chair opposite, a cigarette between his lips, smiling.

"Sophie," he said, shrugging. Hippo took it as an explanation.

"Hm." He looked deep in thought. "She's really doing it? Going back to Vira? That kid, who's never loved anything but chemistry?"

Law considered leaving. And then he thought, fuck it to hell, and said, "You're a shit teacher."

Hippo blinked. "Well," he said, and took a breath like he was about to go on a forty-five-minute diatribe on all the ways he was forced to be a shit dad, on tragedies he had suffered, and how much worse he'd had it as a kid and how grateful everyone else should be for it. He concluded, "Yes."

"Is that it? That's all you have to say, fully aware that you're sitting on your ass, stewing in your own self-pity, and being a waste of a trained doctor?" Law thought about how brightly she once talked about him, how important this father figure was to her, the magnificent marine hero. How he ended up just being another man in a dirty gambling parlor, just another deadbeat dad.

"I never wanted this, Trafalgar."

For a split-second Law wondered what Cora-san would say to Hippo, marine to marine. But then, he supposed it didn't matter. There were fairytales about always getting what you wanted, without ever suffering consequences. And then there was life, this life, and the choices you make in it; the choices you die for.

And what was he doing here? This wasn't his problem. He had meddled enough with Sophie's
personal life, anyway. Yeah, she was going to be fine without Hippo. One hundred percent.

"I've had enough." Law slid over his pile of crumpled bills. "It's your win. If you're not a fool, you'll buy some real food and lay off the alcohol."

He stood up, the chair scratching across the floor.

"And for the record, Sophie loved you so much that she refused a seat on my crew because she wanted to live a normal life with you. You were her last opportunity to live far away from the ocean. If there was anyone who could've convinced her to settle for mediocrity, it would've been you."

The marine looked up, finally. "What exactly did you come here for?"

"I came here," Law said, "to thank you."

It was lucky for Hippo, he thought later, stepping out into sunlight with Kikoku on his shoulder, that he never had the chance to meet Miss Manette Nellie. If she was in Law's place, there was no chance Hippo would've survived her wrath.

—

Sophie waited on a bench and tapped her feet together. Sometimes she'd wave a hand at the staffers passing by, but they always brushed her aside with the President is still busy, wait a while. So Sophie waited on a bench and leaned back on her wrists and entertained herself by imagining what sort of mischief the Heart Pirates could find themselves in, if they were waiting here with her.

The President's golden atrium was teeming with lush plants, and an enormous bronze clock hung between the greenery. Every so often tiny automaton birds would come out of the clock and sing, powered by the pond and the waterwheel beneath. That would be Bepo's first stop—and the rest would follow suit. Law would find a comfortable spot in the shade to make snarky comments from. There would be immense water damage. Sophie would undoubtedly be forced to be the voice of haughty disdain at their lack of propriety, and she bit her lip to keep from grinning.

Somewhere, a door banged open and she jolted up. She scrambled to her feet as President Ursa's hunchback tottered out into the atrium with her army of staffers… and the distinct pink flounce of Charlotte Sundae.

Ursa and the Big Mom pirate were arguing loudly about tariffs and taxes and other things of an infernal nature that surely only hobgoblins knew about, when Sophie scuttled up to them.

"Ah!" Ursa said loudly upon spotting the chemist. "Excuse me, Sundae, this seems to be an urgent matter—"

"Sweet jams and jellies, this word-wobbler again?" Sundae huffed, as Sophie shoved past her.

"H-hello to you, too, you b-bloodthirsty dessert abomination—President-san, I have to talk to you—"

"Come in, dear." Ursa hooked her cane around Sophie's arm and pulled her inside.

"This isn't over, my sweet!" Sundae shouted crossly. "I'm gettin' Mama's chocolate one way or another!"

The guards posted outside the office closed the door, muffling Charlotte Sundae's voice.

Sophie sidestepped the staffers who were all crowding around President Ursa. After a pause, she
turned her attention to the wall, examining the framed photographs. There was nothing else to do to keep herself occupied, other than standing in the corner and pretending she was an agave plant.

A faded, wrinkled monochrome photograph with a statuesque figure caught her eye. A woman, with loosely-braided black hair tumbling all over her wide shoulders and a smooth, clean brown face, but for a bit of a shadow of a stubble on her jaw. The woman had Ursa's hooked nose and Ursa's strong chin, and Ursa's wide way of smiling, though she still had all her teeth intact. She could've been her daughter, or granddaughter—

_Oh, Sophie thought, hey. Now, she understood Charlotte Sundae. Young Ursa was a total knockout, wolf-whistles and everything._

"Sophie," Ursa said, and she jumped a little. "I'm quite busy today. Did you have something to say to me?"

"Right. Yes." Sophie cleared her throat. "Um. I, um, apologize for losing my temper. Uh, about yesterday, that is."

"Apology accepted, my dear," Ursa said briskly, then waved her cane at her staff. "Let it be known that I am a good—nay, _superb_—judge of character, Benetnash."

It was one of the secretaries who had seen her implosion yesterday. Sophie shuffled her feet.

"You were in a relationship with a Big Mom pirate, ma'am." Her reply was drier than the desert. "Let's also be clear about that."

"Oh, that was long before I entered office. Back then, I was young and impassioned and filled with vigor."

"You were eighty-years-old, Madam President," said the other, Dubhe.

"Some prefer a riper fruit," Ursa said delicately, and Sophie hastily turned a stifled snort into a loud, hacking cough. "In any case, has absolutely no bearing on our trade talks. Sophie, tell my overdramatic staff that a dalliance with a pirate is nothing to be concerned about."

"...I wouldn't know anything about that."

"Oh? Not even a little?"

Ursa's sweet old lady eyes blinked innocently. Which made it very difficult to glare with vile, murderous intent.

Sophie did her best anyway, and then spoke again, "There's one other thing—"

"Just a moment, dear." Ursa directed her secretaries to various governmental tasks and sent them off to work, and then it was only her and Sophie in the office. "Go on."

"I actually—um, I wanted to let you know that I'm ready to sail to Vira. If you know of any ships in your port going east, I'd be really thankful if you could get me in touch with their captains."

Ursa searched her face. "No one here is asking you to leave. You do know that?"

It's not like she wanted anyone to _have_ to ask. Machinastein had not been built for her. Not for marines, ex or otherwise. Sophie respected that, and she wanted it to stay that way—untouched by the madness of the World Government. She nodded.
"If you're sure, I can spare a small crew and a ship, and I'll lend you our colors—so when the Revolutionary Army sees you, they'll know you sail under Machinastein's flag."

Sophie stood up straight. "Thank you. That's—that's incredibly nice of—President Ursa, you've done so much for me, without asking anything in return."

"I could say the same to you, my dear. There are very few people who would sacrifice their own time and happiness to do something better for the world."

Indeed, that was the reality of her situation. "Right," she laughed quietly, more to herself. "I'm not a pirate at all, am I?"

"It is a good thing you're doing. Remember that."

*I'm tired,* Sophie thought, remembering all of it.

A flutter of wings came swooping in from the sky. A bird landed on the open windowsill, sticking its leg out where a letter was tied to. It wasn't a toucan or a macaw, the birds used on Machinastein used to deliver letters, but a seagull. A Bad Feeling prickled on the back of Sophie's neck.

The Bad Feeling made evident when Ursa peeled open the letter and announced, "The World Government envoy is requesting access to our waters. They want a meeting tomorrow, first thing in the morning." She chuckled, then started outright laughing. "They heard about Sundae fast, didn't they? Must've tapped the Den Den Mushi waves."

Sophie understood slowly. "If you cut a deal with Big Mom, an Emperor, the World Government will want to make a new deal with your country…?"

"That's right. And they always send their bookkeepers with a Marine Vice Admiral and a fully armed battalion, as though I'd declare war over taxes on papaya."

"Vice Admiral Lettidore once mentioned you were much more difficult to deal with than your predecessors."

"I've eaten raw lemons sweeter than that man," Ursa declared. "I must admit, I did laugh after hearing about his demotion…"

"Ha. Same here." And then Sophie spent the rest of the night clutching a knife and thinking about how Lettidore would kill her if he ever saw her again.

Ursa shuffled to her desk and reached for a piece of parchment to begin writing her reply. "I don't know who they'll be sending this time, but that can be dealt with tomorrow. When the ship is ready, I'll send a toucan to find you."

Sophie nodded and left. But as she stepped out of the office, she turned around.

"What you said before, about turning from lead into gold. What alchemists call chrysopoeia. I want to believe that."

It was, at best, a modest declaration. It lacked all bravado and the raging passion necessary when one proclaims one's resolve, and in the end, it's not like Sophie actually knew how to transmute gold. But it was worth it, to see the small smile spreading across President Ursa's face as the guards closed the door.
Done! Sophie patted her hands, looking at her work.

The fact that the laboratory that was originally a basement that was originally a place to shove cardboard boxes filled with fireworks for Machinastein's summer festivals, ended up being incredibly convenient. The microscopes, petri dishes, and cultured cells were all labeled neatly and packed up. (As for the leftover fireworks that had been sitting in those boxes, Sophie had other plans for them.)

She fell onto a chair with a loud sigh. It was done. Everything was ready to be shipped off with her to Vira.

"Look at that, Goliath-kun," Sophie remarked, waving at the spotless emptiness. "The cleaning witch strikes again!"

It felt so long ago when she had kicked Bepo and Law out of the dirty, overcrowded basement to clean it. Now, quills and inkwells stored away, blank parchment rolled up and boxed.

This neatness was how a laboratory should operate, anyway; not at all like when the Hearts were crowding around the table, their voices loud and laughing, their feet catching against the table legs and their hurried apologies, arms brushing against her shoulders, calling her name to get her attention for a stupid joke…

Two knocks came from the door. She sat upright as Law entered. He started a little, looking around the room.

"I'm all packed up for Vira," Sophie said, waving her hand around. "I figured it was about time to go."

He nodded with a brisk jerk of his head. "Right. Good."

"Also, I have something for you."

Law walked over as Sophie hoisted the backpack that was lying at her feet.

"This," she threw down a thud of thick, heavy folders on the table, her children that she worked on for years and years, "is a pretty diverse selection of what I made for G-13. There are some island-cratering bombs in there. A couple of poisons. A few rejected ideas, like rainbow glitter grenades. I thought you'd be interested in the," she wiggled her fingers, channeling imaginary sparkles, "diverse ways G-13 killed people."

Law weighed the stack. "Fifty million beli."

"Around ten million, actually." Her other babies were stashed away, for obvious reasons. "I figured that's a decent price for your help."

He skimmed through a couple pages, before nodding. "Cool."

"These are yours. You may do as you like with them. I don't know what price they'd fetch on the black market, but I think selling them to some evil dictators might net you the largest sum—aah, not to say I'd support that, but they're yours now, so—"

Law held them back out to her. "As much as chemistry is an underappreciated art form, it's still far easier just cutting someone's head off. These belong to you."

"…Wait. Really?"
"But," he added, "you can buy me a drink."

Law traced the condensation dripping down his ice-cold glass of honeyed liquor. Across the tiny table, Sophie was nibbling on a popsicle, her knees drawn up to her chin, sitting like a kid on her chair. They were at a small outdoor bar in the city plaza, and the hum of cicadas buzzed around them.

"So," he said, "what do you know about Haki?"

Sophie caught a piece of popsicle that was about to fall from the stick with her mouth and swallowed. "Super Psychic Fighty Armor. Um. Sometimes, you can use it to withstand Devil Fruit powers. Sometimes, you hear a certain… voice. That's what they all say, anyway."

Right, he'd heard rumors of that before. But they had always just been rumors.

"The voice of… people," she continued, "but… when they're not talking. When they're quiet."

A distant memory in the back of his mind, locked for years, banged against the door.

"But you still hear them," she said thoughtfully. "I think that's how it goes."

In Flevance, he had crawled through a mountain of corpses to escape. He could've sworn the bodies had all been silent, been properly dead when he approached it, but inside—when he crawled through those bodies, feeling stiff fingers brush over his skin, strands of hair tangled under his nails—either there had been people who had not yet suffocated from the crushing weight, or—

Law ripped himself away from the memory and slammed the door shut.

"I see," he forced out. A small crack had formed in his glass of liquor, where he had gripped it. He turned it to the side, so Sophie wouldn't notice.

"It's not very common, this side of the Grand Line." She lowered her voice, glancing at the bar-goers around them. "The marines who do have Haki tend to flock to the New World. Wait… do you think you might have it?"

He wondered if he did. He then wondered how it would be remotely useful. Then came a third thought, like a ghost breathing against his neck: fuck, he didn't want to touch that door again. Law shrugged and took another drink to have a good excuse to not respond.

A great gust of wind blew down the street, sending the tree leaves over their heads shivering. The breeze lifted Sophie's curls away from her face. She closed her eyes. "Feel that?"

"The wind?" Law asked dryly.

She opened her mouth wide, then inhaled with gusto. It reminded him of a frog. "Tastes like summer."

He leaned back to get a feel for the summer-taste in the air. He could smell the sweet scent of plumeria lingering in the late afternoon, and the bitter musk of hot, humid dirt.

"Oi! There you are!"

Penguin and Shachi edged through the crowded tables until they reached Law's. They were panting,
hats askew, as though they'd been running all over.

"We've been tasked with getting the nerds," Shachi announced.

"That can't possibly include me," came Sophie's interjection.

"Of course it does," Shachi said cheerily, dragging her chair until she was forced to stumble to her feet. Penguin cleared his throat at Law, who shot him a Look, but got up and followed anyway.

Grumbling—though perhaps not as loudly as she would've if it was someone other than Shachi holding her wrist—Sophie allowed herself to be dragged with the pirates off to some escapade…

…Which turned out to be a small ballgames court down the road. The other Hearts were already there, tossing a ball between them.

"Alright, lads!" Valross called, bouncing the ball on his wrists like a volleyball. "Now we can start!"

"Cap's on our team!" Penguin called immediately. Anko and Valross cheered, but they were shouted down with protests from Shachi and Manta.

Apparently, Penguin and Shachi had been searching for Law so he could join in on the game. Machinastein's ballgame court was one ten-feet-tall wall, with a bronze ring welded sideways at the top. It was a pretty simple game—so simple that pirates could learn it by watching, and then coerce their crewmates to try it out.

Sophie set down her backpack next to the bench where Hai Xing was reading his latest erotic romance. Next to him, Kamasu was dozing off.

"Not playing?" she asked.

Hai Xing waved his book at her, and Kamasu snored. Which she supposed function as answers.

"Sophie, please, shade," Bepo voiced, sweating on the grass. Sophie obligingly stood over him, shielding his face from the sun as the pirates argued.

"You could go back to the submarine," she pointed out.

"But I don't wanna be alone when everyone's having fun," he wailed.

Ah, Sophie thought. How relatable.

"If you get Cap, we get Hai Xing," Shachi was saying.

"I'm busy." Hai Xing turned a page.

"Come on," he wheedled. "I'll wash all the dishes tonight."

The chef remained unmovable.

Shachi exhaled. "I won't drag you off *anywhere* to do *anything* fun for one whole week, if you play on my team."

Hai Xing closed his book with a snap and tossed it on Bepo's stomach. "Let's do this."

"Hell yeah!" Shachi cheered, and then added as an afterthought, "Sophie-chan, you too."
"Gee, I'm feeling the love," she retorted, but made her way over, secretly delighted. She covered Bepo's face with a big tropical palm leaf before she left.

"Keep a close guard on Hai Xing," Anko muttered to Penguin and Valross. "He's stronger than you think."

"And no superpowers allowed," Manta said, crossing his arms.

"Fine with me," Law retorted. "Penguin, you call the shots; I'll go where you point me." He slapped his mechanic's hand in a low-five.

"Wait. We also need a cheerleader," Valross said, looking expectantly at Sophie.

"Great." Sophie grabbed the ball from his hands. "Get off the court and cheer for us."

Valross' face went slack under his bandana, and a chorus of low 'ooooooooo's came from the pirates. Anko, Penguin, Shachi, and even Bepo from the shade, started shouting together, "You fool! That's how she gets you! You fool!"

Biting her lip to keep from grinning, Sophie passed the ball to Shachi, and he threw it in the air, starting the game.

In the ensuing scramble, Law's long legs got there first. His foot connected to the ball with a sharp crack.

And then it was a blur, shooting through the ring with such power that it ricocheted against the wall behind it and flew off into the air. Sophie squinted against the sunset, watching as the ball sailed over the rooftops of the houses down the street. The other pirates were also following the ball's path. A couple of them whistled. There was a distant crash.

They all turned to look at the captain.

Law shrugged. "I wasn't using any powers."

"I'll get it," Valross volunteered, and took off running.


"Okay, look." Penguin was trying hard to stifle his laughter. "How about he doesn't use his legs?"

"You can only use your right hand—no, pinky!" Shachi declared. "Anything else is a penalty!"

"If that makes you feel more secure."

Valross tossed the ball back. Sophie bounced it a couple times on her wrists, testing the weight. She used to watch marines kick around balls on the training field from the window of her lab, but never joined in. It was the sort of thing that seemed fun, but she always figured you had to be a certain amount of good to play with others and, well, Sophie wasn't.

"It's heavy," Law cautioned, a mocking glint in his eye. "Don't hurt yourself."

"Heckle heckle heckle!" Anko cackled, heckling.

Penguin sighed. "Guys, please, can we not aggravate the rage-prone arsonist?"
"Thank you, Penguin."

"She'll lose her focus and break a nail," he finished with a grin.

Sophie glanced over her shoulder. Hai Xing, Shachi, and Manta nodded grimly, giving her their approval to demolish their crewmates.

Penguin was still laughing with his team. Sophie strode forward and chucked the ball at his head so hard he dropped to the ground and the ball immediately ricocheted back into her face. It slammed against her forehead and bounced into the air, directly to Hai Xing—as Penguin’s team tried to bum-rush him, but were held off by Manta—who bumped it to Shachi, who jumped into the air and headbutted the ball, launching it through the ring.

"Shit!" Penguin rubbed his head.

"I planned that!" Sophie shrieked, her forehead bright red.

"I swear, I think your aim's getting better," Hai Xing said, as Manta helped Sophie to her feet.

"Sorry," she began, but Shachi high-fived her before she could finish.

"That's teamwork, motherfuckers!" he shouted in glee. "We're just getting started!"

—

The sun was setting when they decided to call it quits. The tiebreaker shot devolved into a wrestling match over the ball, which Manta accidentally sat on so hard it abruptly deflated. So in a show of great maturity, both teams decided that they won and the other team was a sore loser.

His crew ambled off the court, talking to one another and taking off their shirts to mop up their sweat. Manta went to drag Bepo up, and when the bear began moaning of the heat, the big man simply slung Bepo across his back and dragged him over to the others.

A few civilians passed by on the road; some that Law recognized from the University. Sophie ran over, talking animatedly to them. The med student motioned to Bepo, signing, Is that really a bear? He's nice, Law replied. Hardly eats humans at all.

She and the girl she holding hands with both blinked at each other, then laughed. They went off with one last wave at Sophie.

She came back, slinging her backpack over her shoulders. "I never did ask, Law-san, where'd you learn how to sign?"

"Long time ago. Once knew a guy who didn't talk much."

Sophie squinted doubtfully, then decided that it was of no interest to her. "I brought presents for everyone," she announced, and opened her backpack. The pirates crowded around, peeking at the objects Law remembered had been collecting dust in the corner of her lab. "You need a safe place to set them off. Somewhere away from people, maybe high up."

"Then let's find the tallest building!" Valross cheered, and the others agreed.

Sophie looked elated at their enthusiasm, and she snapped her fingers. "Law-san, remember that place, with the train…? It should be nearby, actually…"
Law knew what she was talking about. He scanned the horizon of gleaming rooftops, and then found it. With a quick Room, the Hearts and Sophie stood on the rooftop garden in the middle of the city. It wasn’t a large garden, but it was big enough for them all to fit comfortably on it without the fear of falling off. They hollered, their voices echoing distantly over the busy nighttime streets far below.

Sophie passed around her matchbox. "Be careful, they set off fast—"

The small fireworks went off in their hands and roared into the sky, exploding into sparkles. The pirates yelped and hopped around, waved their hands in the air and blowing on them. Anko held a firework like a bazooka as Penguin lit it from beneath.

"PUBLIC MENACE!" he bellowed, as it shot off into the stars. The other pirates hollered their approval.

"POTASSIUM NITRATE, SULFUR, CARBON!" Sophie screamed. The pirates' hollers were more confused, but still enthusiastic.

Penguin reached around Sophie to grab more fireworks. She punched him in the shoulder. "That's for heckling me." Then she patted him on the head. "And that's so the next time you see me, you can't run away and say I never said goodbye."

"Yeesh, alright." He rubbed his arm, looking faintly embarrassed. "Anyway, look, I'm sorry about the heckling."

"It's okay. I don't mind it that much."

"I keep getting carried away," Penguin admitted, scratching his head with an unlit sparkler. "I mean, I would've said the stupid nail thing to any of the guys. I, uh, I guess I've been treating you like you were one of us."

"I don't mind," Sophie said again. "I never minded, really."

He nudged her shoulder. She nudged back. Then he nudged so hard she stumbled into Shachi. They locked eyes, nodded, and tackled Penguin until he shouted for mercy.

There were shouts on the streets below; people were stopping on the road to look up and coming out of their houses to see the fireworks. The sun was setting, burning red over the distant flat desert and saguaro cacti, and the evening smelled faintly of gunpowder and marigolds. His crew was silhouetted against flaming horizon, talking loudly and jostling each other. They raised their hands to the sky, as though trying to catch the lights in their palms.

Law thought back to Haki, and the voices Sophie had told him about. He knew he’d have to dig deeper to pull that power out of him, if he had it.

But for now, he decided, he was pretty fucking content with sitting back and listening to the clear voices of those around him.

As dusk settled in, they sat in the circle and lit the last of the slow-burning sparklers. Sophie stared into the fizzing glow at the end of her stick and came to the quiet realization that she didn't want this to end.

But Saint Kasimir warned her that she’d be on the run forever. Tenryuubito Slayers were given to
Impel Down. Then execution, or slavery. It was logical—it was just logical to not be a pirate. She still had G-13’s Red Sky problem to take care of anyway, because nobody else was going to. She had to make peace with the fact that she'd be perpetually living in the shadow of the World Government, no matter how much she tried to leave it.

The world was crazy, but there was always sitting around on a warm summer night with people who wanted you to sit next to them. And that was enough for her.

"Hey," Law said, tilting the sparkler in her hand away. "Don't look at the flame for too long, or your eyes will get like Shachi's."

"Oh." Sophie blinked. "Okay."

He turned away and went back to talking to Bepo, and Sophie opened her mouth again. But she couldn't speak; something had lodged in her throat.

She looked up at the stars, abruptly on the verge of tears.

The velvet night was beautiful, and maybe, due to some improbable unforeseen disaster, time on the Grand Line would stop and the night would stretch on forever and ever, and maybe, just maybe… tomorrow would never come.

Sophie closed her eyes and leaned her head on Hai Xing's thin shoulder.

He sighed, and she thought he was going to shake her off, but he just adjusted her slightly and let her be.

—

It was early morning when the messenger toucan found Sophie, delivering her a small note that read simply, *The ship to Vira is ready.*

Sophie traced President Ursa's neat handwriting with her fingers, then crumpled up the note and threw it over the rooftop. She was sitting on the edge, legs dangling in the air. The harbor sparkled in the distance, and the sound of the train rumbled past, and her insides were as cold as ice.

The pirates were passed out around her, snoring. Law was leaning against Bepo, his hat tilted over his face. She scooted closer and carefully moved his hat away. He looked weirdly stern in his sleep, like he was disciplining his dreams.

"You keep waking me up when you leave," he murmured, eyes still closed. "First on Idyll Island. Now here. Pick someone else this time."

"I'd be too sad if it was someone else."

He looked at her, his eyes like pale gold in the light. "You only ever think of yourself," was his response, and she didn't know what to say to that.

Sophie got up, brushing off her dress, and looked around the sleeping pirates. They all looked so peaceful. She didn't want to wake them. It would take forever and a day to leave, if she did.

Law left his hat and nodachi lying next to Bepo, and motioned at Sophie. "I'll take you home."

"It's not home," Sophie replied, but put on her backpack and took his hand anyway.

His powers were all too convenient, and in a half-second they appeared in the middle of Sophie's
bedroom in the Jaguar Temple.

His brown callused hand released hers. "I'll see you off here."

Before he could say another word, before he could turn around and leave, before Sophie really knew what she was doing, she grabbed his shirt. He looked down at her fist. He looked back to her face.

*Excuse me what is this*, half of her brain was screaming at the other half, which was, at this point, possibly comatose.

It was around ten seconds of Utter Death Silence later when Law spoke. "I don't know what you want if you don't say it out loud."

She felt like she was floating out of her body, and some other Sophie opened her mouth and said, "Don't go."

*Well*, the remaining cognizant part of her brain said, businesslike, and proceeded to throw itself off a cliff.

"I'm going," Law replied, with barely a pause. (But there was a pause, there *was*—)

"Then d-don't let me go."

Sophie had lost her mind. She had lost all of it, and it was breaking into a million different sparkles, launched into the air and exploding into fire-bright flowers. Boom, boom, boom.

There was a long pause, until he spoke again.

"Is this the part where I say 'fuck Vira'? 'Fuck all the work we did'? 'Fuck the people who are dying from Red Sky'? 'You didn't cause it. It's never been your responsibility, so fuck everyone'? Is what you want to hear? Am I supposed to steal you away?"

He suggested that before—he wanted her to join his crew before—

"I can't do that anymore." Law gripped her wrist, making her let go of his shirt.

She did slowly, unclenching her fist. Sophie stared at her feet, wanting to disappear.

"Look at me," he said. She couldn't; she jerked her head away, but he tilted her chin and she found herself staring at him, "Could you really say you won't ever regret it, if you come with me? Can you really be certain this won't haunt you?"

But it could be—*home*, she thought perilously. No—she couldn't think that. She had to smile at Law's not-unkind advice. *Smile*, Sophie willed herself, *smile and agree. Just agree and let them go. *

"You'll..." he paused, and his voice grew—clunky, awkward, "find a home for yourself. It's out there, somewhere."

A little knife dug into her heart.

"Screw you," Sophie snapped, slapping his hand away from her.

His face was blank, hand still raised in the air. "...What—"

"I said—" She threw her backpack to the ground and tore through it, searching for her carton of cigarette. She found it, but her matchbox was empty. Pineapples. The fireworks. "—*Screw you.*"
"I know I'm selfish," Sophie said heatedly, cigarette between her lips, repeatedly flicking her lighter. But only tiny sparks appeared; right, it was dead, and she knew it was dead, but the anger still rose. "I'm selfish in all the ways that don't matter. And I can't do anything about it." She hurled her useless lighter on the bed, where it landed with a soft *fwump*. The cigarette in her mouth followed it. "I'm so tired of saying goodbye to all the important things I want."

A flash of emotion crossed Law's face, but then it was gone.

His voice was bitingly sensible: "You'll find more."

"I don't want to find more!" Sophie burst out. Her voice was hot and trembling and shameless, escalating to a shout. "I don't want to do this all over again with another group of people, because then they leave, they leave like how everyone leaves, and I'm just—standing here, pretending to be happy about everything, like an idiot!"

Law stared at her, his chest rising up and down. For an insane moment, she thought he was going to grab her, and shake her, and hold her so tight she wouldn't have to feel anything anymore.

And then he sat down at the edge of her bed. "Fuck, Sophie."

An awful pressure built up behind her eyes. But she couldn't stop. It was all spilling out; the happiness, the awful happiness, the cutting rage she felt towards G-13 because it had never allowed her to be that happy. It had never allowed her to be a kid and learn what she really, really wanted, and then she felt furious at herself because it took her such a stupidly long time to figure out that the ridiculous notion of being happy was important. It felt important, at least. It felt real. Teeth-numbingly, gut-achingly real.

Law's head was bent, elbows on his knees. She wished she could see his face. But that'd make it so much worse.

"I'm sorry," Sophie whispered, and squeezed her eyes tight.

She wanted to rip out her heart and replace it with something that actually functioned well. She wanted a time machine to go back in time and smack the idiot who deployed Red Sky over Vira's battlefield. She wanted to say *to hell with all this*, and get up and leave, just like a real pirate—walk into that ocean and never look back, raise her gun in the air and fill the sky with bullets that would never come down.

He didn't say a word. She shouldn't have said anything after all. She should've kept it inside; repress and then die, like a real soldier.

"Go," she urged then, because she had to. "Just go. Please. Please, will you go?"

Law was still quiet as he reached over and picked up the cigarette on her bed. He rolled it around his fingers, and then seemed to come to a decision.

He stood up. "I will. But let's get you a smoke, first."

Sophie stared after him. Law glanced over his shoulder.

"Or are you going to let a pirate like me wander all over this temple unchaperoned?"

She followed him blankly, her head spinning. The corridors outside were empty. Law found the
stairs, then strolled down them two at a time and she had to quicken her pace to keep up. They reached the interior balcony area of a grand concourse that was usually crowded government employees during the busiest time of the day.

It was empty below, being so early in the morning, but there were a few staffers walking around on the balcony—some of whom recognized her as Ursa's rather peculiar guest.

Law raised her cigarette. "Does anyone have a match or a lighter?" He jerked his thumb behind him, at Sophie. "For the young miss."

Two of them said they'd go back to their offices and check. Sophie leaned against the balcony, bewildered and slightly winded from running after him.

Law held the cigarette out towards her. When she didn't move, he took her hand and set it in her palm, curling her fingers over it.

They stood together, in silence. Sophie realized she felt a little calmer now, and breathing was easier. Maybe that had something to do with the thought of nicotine, but… she looked at Law, at his self-control, his composure.

"I don't know what to say," she said eventually.

"Goodbye seems a reasonable place to start," he quietly returned.


He looked at her. But the expression on his face now was not one of self-control, or composure. She didn't know what it was, but she thought, fleetingly, that it might've been mirrored on her face as well.

On the hall below, the heavy stone doors creaked open.

A long ray of light fell across the floor and a group of people walked in. Ursa's voice reverberated over the walls.

"I'll remind you that we are one of the few countries prosperous enough to refuse to pay the tribute to your Dragon Perverts."

"I suggest you speak carefully, President Ursa," came another distant voice. The footsteps came closer, and the voice grew louder. "Being an island unaffiliated with the World Government, with pirates all over your harbor, not to mention holding trade talks with a Yonkou."

The woman in the sharp black suit below turned around, her long black ponytail swinging, her black eyes hard as bullets. She stood at the forefront of a small group of men and women, and the only thing that identified themselves as Cipher Pol were their crow-colored suits and hats. And the only thing that differentiated Teresa from the rest of her agents was the long, black-and-grey pinstriped coat she wore over her shoulders.

Sophie's knees buckled; Law had grabbed her and yanked her down to the floor, swearing quietly into her ear. It reminded her of monasteries, of peaches and altars.

"I should call them the Holy Slavers instead," came Ursa's old, wry voice. "You work for the richest rapists in the world. But I imagine it helps not to think about that."

She could feel his heart thudding against her shoulder. "You have to go," Sophie hissed at Law.
"What if she's already seen your ship on the harbor?"

"Hold on," he said abruptly, listening intently to the conversation.

There was a brief silence, then Teresa spoke again. "This dialogue has come off the rails. Perhaps we can continue it tomorrow."

Wait, Sophie thought, calming herself down. If she stayed hidden, she was (relatively) safe. After all, Teresa didn't know she blew up G-13; she thought she was dead. She thought she killed Sophie personally.

"Sophie-san, there you are!" one of the staffers called, running up to them. "Here, a new matchbox!"

The unlit cigarette fell from Sophie's hand. Law's fist glowed blue; she grabbed his wrist. "She'll see your Room."

"...What was that?" came a stiff voice from below.

"Just my staff," Ursa said loudly. "Don't mind it."

"Oh, Sophie-san!" called the other staffer, coming into view. "I found a lighter!"

"Are you fucking kidding me," Law said, and then grabbed Sophie and shoved her to her feet.

"I see," said the chief of CP5, echoing across the stone hall. "Then, please excuse this subsequent rudeness."

Like a lightning bolt from the sky, Sophie's personal personification of the Goddess of Bloodthirsty Violence leaped from the hall below and landed before her and Law. The balcony shook, and the ground cratered slightly beneath her feet.

The dark agent rose to her full height, her coat whipping around her like a huge sleek raven unfurling its wings to block the pale grey light, swallowing up Machinastein's summer warmth into a void. There was a new scar or two on her inscrutable face, but otherwise she looked the same as she did on Kunlun, back when Sophie and Law had escaped by a hair's breadth.

"You," Teresa began, stepping forward. "Do you know how much paperwork I had to do because of you?"

_to be continued_
Teresa was going to die from all this bureaucratic bullshit.

Stacks of paper filled her ship's cabin; compensation reports for the damages incurred at her fists. She had to file documents to hassle HQ for more money after repaying the shops and houses on Kunlun that she had single-handedly wrecked.

It was, of course, all Strangways Sophie's fault. And Trafalgar Law's. Teresa couldn't do much to a dead girl, but she eagerly waited for the day she bumped into the Heart Pirates again to repay the mountain-of-fucking-paperwork debt.

Trapped inside with this boring bullshit was not good for her. It was not good for her impatience or her dry skin. Where were the pirate attacks when she needed them? Where were the meteors that coincidentally hit CP5 battleships? Where was literally anything else?

As Teresa seriously contemplated steering her ship into the Calm Belt and crashing into a Sea King, the Den Den Mushi rang.

"Teresa," Lettidore began.

She sighed, kicking her feet up on the desk. "Is it Hippo again? God, he's being so unnecessarily upset; he can adopt another kid if he wants—"

"G-13's on fire. They got Hippo."

Funerals were always the most troublesome part of the work. You make friends, and they die. Sometimes you don't make friends, and you still see them die. It never works out.

They carved the names of Hippo and a younger marine who was killed in the attack onto G-13's obsidian memorial wall (they were calling it a death, because that's how it worked with marines who went missing; ninety-nine percent of the time, they were right). Following the debacle, the higher-ups
demoted Lettidore a rank and reassigned him to Marineford. She found his pale hair and inflexible, furrowed brow at the memorial, likely hiding from the interim Vice Admiral HQ sent. Faintly she could hear Garp the Hero *bwahaha!* from an open window somewhere.

Teresa slung her arm around Lettidore's stiff shoulders. "You can use this time to take up a hobby, Rear Admiral. Try baking or something."

"Even with a demoted rank, I can still kick your ass."

"No, Lettuce, you couldn't. But I'll let you get away with saying that. Just for today."

"Stop *calling* me that," he grunted, ribbing her in a way that might've been painful. They could've been two kids at the Marine Academy again, always butting heads without Hippo there to intervene. Whether they were fourteen or forty, some things never changed.

"I sent you after the kid because that was my Absolute Justice."

She glanced at Lettidore.

"I gave you my permission to kill her," he continued. "Hippo was never… right after that."

There was no handbook to cope for when your best friends kill your daughter. Family was just another euphemism for goodbye. Teresa would have to remember to speak in past tense about Hippo now. What a pain. What a fucking pain.

"Do you regret it?" Teresa asked, scrutinizing him for fragility.

He gave a merciless, scornful laugh, and the familiarity of it almost made her smile. A man of blood and iron, even as a disgraced ex-Vice Admiral.

Then he said, "Do you?"

*If I regret, I am lost,* she thought. But that was the shittiest of shit answers, so she just grinned back and told him that she was stealing some of his neckties before he packed everything away.

—

"Long story short, we intercepted a call from a Big Mom ship to Machinastein. It's about time for that yearly 'threaten islands with trade wards until they give us money'. We need someone to escort the bookkeeper."

In other words, babysitting duty. Teresa could feel the onset of a migraine. "The Vice Admiral of G-13 usually does this. Garp is G-13's interim Vice Admiral, send him there."

A scoff. "*I'm not asking Garp the Hero to meet with an okama lost from the Kamabakka Queendom.*"

Scratch migraine, Teresa was about to pop a blood vessel. "This errand sounds beneath me, boss."

*"Boo fucking hoo. You have your orders."*

Okay; multiple blood vessels. "I'm actually long overdue for a promotion. I've killed every pirate I come across—"

"You couldn't even kill one rookie. The Surgeon of Death is still out there! I'll tell you what. Squeeze more money out of Machinastein and I'll promote you myself. Until then, you have your orders."
"But—"

"If you're too soft for it, then Laskey, perhaps. Or my own son, Spandam. Men of unwavering strength. Men courageous enough to pull a trigger or summon a Buster Call."

The Den Den Mushi smiled perversely. Spandine always loved hinting at the fall of Ohara, as though he was afraid his subordinates would forget if he didn't mention it in every conversation.


"She gripped the edge of her desk—a Cipher Pol agent is above emotion—and snarled through her teeth, 'I am no gentler than those Oharan demons you murdered."

There was a sound at the other end, like a cup of tea clattering, and then a loud yelp.

"You—what sort of tone is that? Be grateful that I bother to give you missions at all, Teresa! Now get going!" Spandine shouted, then added with a verbal lecturing finger, "Also, I don't appreciate it when a woman talks with that sort of language."

He hung up. Teresa closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

Then she grabbed the entire desk and flung it into the wall, shattering it into pieces.

—Ixchel Ursa, the President of Machinastein, had the dignified air of a shriveled potato. She was wearing fluffy pink slippers.

Teresa barely paid attention as her agents made the standard polite introductions. It was too fucking hot and they were told to leave their weapons on their ship. She felt unsettlingly exposed. To add insult to her situation: there was a Big Mom warship sitting in the harbor and the Heart Pirates' yellow eyesore right next to it. All Teresa could do was grind her teeth. Diplomacy was a bitch.

"You don't look like average marines," Ursa observed, scratching her ear with the hook of her cane. "Why'd the Government send you?"

Teresa scrutinized her wrinkled face for signs of masculinity. It was harder to tell, when they were older.

"I was the only Marine ship in the area when my boss called." Better for this country to think she was a simple Government agent than Cipher Pol. "The seas have been rough as of late, and our bookkeeper needs to be escorted back to Mariejois when we're done here."

The bookkeeper was a man who carried around a heavy, black ledger. His eyes were empty and sort of bulging; Teresa thought he looked like an evil, dead fish when he smiled. And he was always smiling. When he bowed to President Ursa and introduced himself, his breath smelled like beli.

"We're here to renegotiate the trade deal between Machinastein and the World Government," Teresa continued, as they walked through the airy hallway. She could feel the hushed stares of her agents as they took in the luminous gold carvings on the walls. She felt the bookkeeper's stare most of all.

"Here's what will happen. I'll give you a tour of my temple, then you'll report back that we've treated you with hospitality and there was nothing you could change about our current trade arrangements."

Ursa said it with such casual authority, and Teresa briefly contemplated how rare negotiating with a
female leader was. Certainly uncommon among World Government islands. Especially in the
Marines. But it was different for independent countries; Machinastein had Ixchel Ursa, Amazon Lily
had the Pirate Empress, Totto Land had Big Mom, Momoiro Island had the gender-nonconforming
Emporio Ivankov, and before her death, the Ryugyu Kingdom had Otohime. As for Teresa, she had
Spandine.

…But not for long, hopefully. If she could just get that promotion and join the handful of women in
the upper echelon of the World Government, she'd never have to hear Spandine's sniveling voice
again. A higher rank, more power, and above all, respect…

"You're entertaining a Yonkou's crew, but you won't even consider talking with the World
Government?" Teresa asked, carefully neutral.

"Eight hundred years ago, your people destroyed half our civilization and killed all our historians."

"We also brought the outside world to you, gave you trade routes, cleared Sea Kings, and allowed
you access to other islands."

President Ursa laughed. "Why, we already had those things."

"How would you know?" Teresa said, before she could stop herself. "Your historians are dead."

President Ursa's smile vanished. *Fuck*. Fleetingly, Teresa wondered if Spandine threw her this
mission because he thought women had some inner feminine talent for subtlety.

They reached the end of the hallway and Teresa could already hear Spandine's disdain that she
couldn't get a frail old woman to break. Two guards opened the doors that led to an inner concourse
area. She caught a brief flash of movement from the shadowed balcony above—a trick of the light?
Ursa spoke again, reminding her that Machinastein was an independent, wealthy nation and would
never pay tribute to the *Dragon Perverts*, as she called them, speaking directly to the bookkeeper
(who was smiling so forcefully Teresa thought his cheeks would fall off).

Their conversation veered a hard left; Teresa didn't come here to discuss morals, or slavery, or
history. She needed to regroup, return with another plan.

"This dialogue has come off the rails," she said stonily. "Perhaps we can continue it tomorrow."

The president scoffed and shook her head, and Teresa could see her hopes for a promotion
crumbling into pieces—footsteps thumped across the balcony above, and there was a cheerful,
*Sophie-san, there you are! Here, a new matchbox!*

She flinched, turning in the direction of the voice. A coincidence, surely…

Once more: *Oh, Sophie-san! I found a lighter!*

The yellow submarine in the harbor. The Heart Pirates were on this island, too.

It couldn't be. It was impossible. It was *impossible*…

Teresa braced her feet against the floor.

She leaped up and landed on the balcony, staring straight at the chemist she had once killed, her head
attached to her neck, poised to flee with the Surgeon of Death beside her. Strangways Sophie
was *alive*, rudely alive as she had been on Kunlun, and then the thought of Kunlun made a vein
spasm in Teresa's forehead—
"You," she raged, pointing at both of them. "Do you know how much paperwork I had to do because of you?"

A blue sphere flickered and Teresa reached for a weapon on her back that wasn't there.

"P-President U-Ursa!" the girl shrieked. "She's a Cipher Pol chief—"

In the blink of an eye, they vanished. Teresa swore under her breath. What was Strangways Sophie doing here? What was Trafalgar Law doing here? If she was alive, then the incident at G-13—she must've been the one who—

"Cipher Pol," a secretary voiced. "Isn't that—"

"Get out of my country," President Ursa said darkly. "Right now."

Teresa was still staring at the empty spot in front of her. All at once, she saw a path to a promotion.

She hopped back down to the ground floor, her mind churning with the logistics of a declaration she was to pull straight out of her ass like a shameless magician, and proceeded, "How sly, Ixchel Ursa. Having pirates lying in wait. Ready to assassinate an emissary from the World Government."

"Hah!" Ursa barked. "Those two are under my protection! Don't you dare try to twist this into—"

"You've taken advantage of us," Teresa snapped indignantly, with as much false outrage as she could muster. "You've made a circus of this meeting and brought disgrace to all international diplomacy, everywhere. This is your fault. (How to Victim-Blame in Righteous Anger So Nobody Can Doubt Your Less-than-Honorable Intentions, written by Chief Teresa and a plurality of men whom she had taken notes from.)"

The old woman looked shaken. "That's absolutely not—"

"If I brought this back to my boss, he'd rain hellfire and brimstone here like the Government did eight hundred years ago. He would say that no matter how many times you make flowers bloom in the desert, we'll stomp them back into the sand. He would say this—Remember Ohara."

Pause for effect. Aaaand now.

"Though, I suppose I can look the other way if you agree to a new trade deal." Teresa snapped her fingers. "Bookkeeper, draw one up for the president to sign. Agents, don't let anyone leave or enter this room. I have unfinished business to take care of."

Twenty years ago, Spandine had slammed a button that blew an island into the stratosphere and erased it from all maps forever. The World Government rewarded him, called that strength. Well, she could be strong, too. She could capture two wanted criminals and deliver a ship filled with gold to the World Government. If this was how she had to prove herself, then so be it.

"You have the audacity to call yourselves the World Government," Ursa said, her voice rising, "as though the world is something that can be owned!"

"Anything and anyone can be owned, given the right price." The bookkeeper cracked open his ledger. "Shall we begin?"

Law was not having a good day.
Which was saying something, because the day had barely begun when Sophie woke him up, and it had barely begun when she confessed that she didn't want to leave the Hearts, and it had still barely begun when he discovered he had zero fucking energy to say 'you have this chance to do something for Vira that I couldn't do for my country, and you're wasting it away like a goddamned pirate' and it was just. Exhausting.

There were things that he knew what he was in for when he became a full-fledged pirate and not a teenage criminal hustling on the streets of North Blue. This was not one of those things. This was so far from what he signed up for it had reached the opposite edge of the fucking universe.

It was all he could think of to just drag her over to light a cigarette. To help her think, recognize the importance of her situation. Honor was a great and terrible thing, and she had enough of it for Law to know she'd be haunted by her choice for every fucking night that she was a Heart, and he'd had too much of waking up half-whispering names of all his dead to want that for her.

Sophie was strong. Fuck, she was made of gunmetal and cigarettes and unadulterated stubbornness. She had killed a Dragon. She would survive the loneliness and all the demons that came with it. She was a half-step away from being a proper fucking hero. He'd be damned—far more than he was already—if he let her waste herself on a pirate with a death wish.

She had to leave. That was a fact.

It didn't matter what she said. It didn't matter how honestly she said it, even though he respected her for that. Even though he could understand down to his marrow. Down to every starry night in the wide expanse of the ocean, every footprint in white sand, every dinner in the mess—with his crew, his friends. She couldn't be a part of that. She had to leave. It didn't matter that she was staring down the long barrel of loneliness, and it didn't matter that she had fought so hard and long to get to the point where she could say, I want to be happy.

None of that mattered. Not the fact that he didn't know what the fuck to say except goodbye. Not the fact that it was taking an abnormal amount of effort to look her in the eye and say it. Certainly not the fact that it wouldn't come out of his fucking mouth, because you would think that a man of his trauma caliber wouldn't flinch at watching dizzyingly brilliant chemists leave. (Leave again—how many times had he watched her back disappear before?). It didn't matter at all.

And then CP5 appeared.

So, no. Law was not having a good day.

"Wait!" Sophie wailed. "My unlit cigarette!"

Law grabbed onto the back of her dress and hurled her into her bedroom. She grabbed her dead lighter from the bed, and then screamed, "Law-san!"

He barely dodged the knife she hurled at his face. It slammed in the wall behind him. He stared at it, then at her. "What the fuck."

"I-I thought you'd catch it!"

"What the fuck," Law repeated with a growl, Rooming the knife into his hand. He'd left his nodachi with his crew; this would have to do.

He followed her into the fancy, tiled bathroom. Sophie reached behind the bathtub and took out a wooden box with a hefty lock on it, then stuffed that inside her backpack.
"G-13's research," she said sheepishly, after catching Law's expression. Fifty million beli, shoved behind a bathtub. "I had very few options."

"You said the research wasn't hidden in your room!"

"TECHNICALLY, THE BATHROOM DOESN'T COUNT."

The aggravated snarl Law found himself responding with was cut short by the bedroom door flying off its hinges and skidding across the floor. The seven-foot-tall agent barged in, her pinstriped coat fluttering behind her.

Law flipped the handle of the knife around his wrist. He wielded the knife as Kikoku, bisecting her body from head to toe.

Teresa stopped in her tracks and patted her un-bisected chest. "Ooh, that tickles."

Haki, the bane of Law's existence.

"Are mature women your default weakness!?" Sophie yelled, which, well. Law decided to just *fuck it*, hurling the knife at the agent. Smirking, Teresa caught it in mid-air ("See, like that!" Sophie said, unnecessarily) and hurled it back, and it would've sliced through his nose had Sophie not jerked him backwards right as they vanished—

The road outside was beginning to bustle with morning pedestrians. He hauled Sophie to her feet as she hastily tugged down her dress to her knees. "I'm taking you to the harbor, your ship to Vira—"

"I have to go back to the lab! The Red Sky research!"

"You left it back there?"

"I-I didn't think I'd be in a rush!"

"Sophie, you picked the worst day to be a dumbass!"

"I'M SORRY I DID NOT FORESEE THIS IN MY THIRD EYE AND ALSO IMAGINE HOW MUCH FASTER WE COULD BE RUNNING IF YOU STOPPED YELLING AT ME."

Another Room spun out of Law's palm as he reached toward the University across the city, pushing his Devil Fruit further and further. If he had looked up, he would've seen Teresa watching them from the balcony of Sophie's room. He would've seen her gaze flicking to the temples where the hazy blue glow stretched towards.

They appeared in the basement lab. Sophie began shoving everything within eyesight into her backpack. Law braced himself against the table, taking a moment to catch his breath. He knew where his limit was, and hadn't reached it yet. But at the same time… if he always knew how far he could be pressed, then that meant he was still the same kid. The same useless kid hiding inside of a treasure chest.

"Hey, you pineapple! Let's go!" Sophie was yelling.

He followed her up the stairs and into the courtyard. The grass rustled in the breeze. Alarm, or fear, or foreboding crawled up his spine. Distantly, he felt Sophie tugging on his arm and shouting, *Sweet mangos, what are you waiting for?* He felt her right next to him, but he also felt a much stronger presence, breathing ice right down his neck.
Far away in the back of his mind, there was a sound like someone pounding against a door.

He saw it: a raven blur flying over the golden spires of Machinastein, jet-black eyes, and a grin.

There was the briefest instance of déja vu—incense, altars covered in peaches—before he whirled around and grabbed Sophie. "Move!"

Law crashed like a badass through a window, his arms raised in an X over his face. Sophie crashed through far less spectacularly, and landed on her belly on top of Law with the elegance of a walrus. She might've thrown up a little bit in her mouth.

Cygnus and a few other scientists looked up from their microscopes at the surprise intrusion.


The lab did not evacuate in fleeing, screaming droves. The lab mostly just stared at her and said blandly, "Wait, what…?"

Teresa soared through the broken window and landed with a thud, sending test tubes rattling and beakers crashing to the floor.

"GET OUTTA HERE!" Sophie grabbed the closest beaker and threw it to the ground. "RUN, YOU STUPID SHEEP. OR I'LL COOK YOU ALIVE AND TEAR YOU LIMB FROM LIMB WITH MY TEETH."

Now the screaming started.

Of course Teresa would be the emissary the Government sent to Machinastein. Of course Sophie would be fighting for her life while wearing a short dress and sandals, because screw proper, civilized society where people wore boots for this sort of thing! This was just how the universe worked!

Of course her and Law's conversation would be interrupted by a vengeful Cipher Pol agent. It was only the most excruciating, soul-baring thing that had ever come out of her mouth, so no big deal! Genre-shifting from 'passionate eye contact with a snarky pirate' to 'RUN FOR YOUR LIFE OR DIE' was the most predictable plot twist ever. The only thing that could make this more predictable was if someone buried her alive in a coffin.

"So you were alive after all." Teresa yanked her up by the backpack and ripped open the flap. "What the fuck—is that a rat—"

"That's n-not yours—get your h-hands off—"

"Ah, I see now," she said, scanning the Red Sky notes. "This is the property of the World Government. And the Revolutionaries will pay us a hefty price for your research."

There was a slight tug on Sophie's body that was the telltale sign of a Room, and her backpack fell into her arms as she fell into Law's arms. Because Law was carrying her. Carrying her with his hands under her knees and around her back and, and—

"P-put me d-down, y-you g-godless charlatan!"

With a flat look, Law dropped her unceremoniously on the ground. Right as Teresa charged.
"Pick me up, Law-sama!" Sophie hopped on Law's back, wrapping her limbs around him like a jellyfish with separation anxiety.

He staggered slightly before balancing himself, stuffing his hands—rather angrily—under her knees, as though he, too, realized there was very little time to do anything else. Then having a bright idea, Law spun her around in his arms and tried to use her legs to hit Teresa.

"I AM NOT A SWORD, TRAFALGAR," Sophie wheezed beneath his sweaty armpit.

"I'm improvising."

"This is revenge for carrying you like a blushing bride on Kunlun!"

Law did not deign to reply, but he did throw her a furious That Never Happened glare.

"I know you attacked G-13. You killed Hippo," Teresa snarled, the closest thing Sophie had to an aunt in her life. With lightning speed, she shattered a table of bubbling chocolate as Law backpedaled as fast as he could.

Sophie grabbed two fistfuls of Chocolate Dials from a workbench Law passed by, and she pointed them over his shoulders. A spray of chocolate jalapeño blasted into Teresa's face. She clawed at her eyes, screaming.

Law glanced around the lab. "Make a bomb, chemist!"

"You fool, I cannot just make a bomb on command—oh, sugar! And a butane torch!"

Teresa lunged at them, jalapeño tears streaming down her face.

A flock of green quetzals fluttered by the window. In a quick Room, Sophie and Law appeared outside in the air. Teresa broke through the wall and leaped after them. Law twisted to see the encroaching vortex of doom and swore.

A gloved hand whipped by his face. Three bags of powdered sugar burst apart in Teresa's burning red eyes, followed by the butane torch.

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut and slapped her hands over Law's to shield him from the light.

In midair, they exploded.

—

Bepo held Kikoku in his paws and remarked, "That doesn't look good."

Penguin was sitting on Shachi's shoulders, who was sitting on Bepo's shoulders. "Yep," Penguin said, squinting, "definitely looks like Cap's in a fight."

Small clouds of dust were rising from the direction of the University. Distant rumbles accompanied the sight. The Heart Pirates were gathered at the edge of the very tall rooftop garden, essentially stranded with no way down.

Another distant explosion came from the Jaguar Temple. Bepo raised his paw to block the glare from the sun. It looked like something was flying over to the University, but what, he couldn't tell…

"So," Shachi said, looking at the long drop. "How do we get down from here?"
"I found our ride," Anko called, as from a distance, the train whistled. The elevated railway would pass right beneath them.

"Wait a minute," the other pirates said immediately.

Anko grabbed the closest pirate to him—which happened to be Hai Xing, who said, "Ah."—and saluted. "Stay sexy, fellas."

The others shouted, but he disappeared off the ledge. Bepo jumped after him, Manta was kicking a snoring Kamasu off the ledge, and then altogether the pirates were leaping through the air, screaming at the top of their lungs.

They landed on the speeding train and gave a great sigh of relief.

"…WAIT, WE'RE GOING THE WRONG WAY," Penguin realized.

"How could a bunch of pirates be so clueless about directions!??" Shachi wailed.

(Somewhere on Grand Line, a moss-haired swordsman sneezed.)

The force of the explosion thrust Law backwards and he landed on the College of Medicine, brushing off his singed t-shirt. He smelled like burning sugar. Like caramel. Sophie was surreptitiously sniffing the back of his neck when he said to her, "You're batshit, you know that?"

"Shucks."

Teresa bulleted out of the sky and hurtled towards Law. He leaped back as the force of her landing broke through the temple walls.

Law moved at a breakneck speed, almost flying through the corridors with the wind pressure behind Teresa stripping doors off their hinges. Tears from the wind pricked at the edge of Sophie's vision. Students blurred underneath them, Celaeno gaping at Law and Sophie, who was clinging to his back like a terrified baby koala—

The white ceiba tree flashed in Sophie's mind. Void Century. The murder of historians, of an empire, of a people. A legacy of violence in her blood—and also in Teresa's. She sucked in a huge breath and, with enough volume to rip her vocal chords, yelled, "WORLD GOVERNMENT!"

Her voice barely echoed over the uproar of alarmed students, but Celaeno had heard her, and she was singing to her friends. A wave of hatred roiled across the hallway, all the way up to the students watching the bedlam from the higher floors. Voices resounded from everywhere, fingers pointing at Teresa, shouting, "World Government!"

Teresa dodged the influx of chairs, desks, coffee cups—and a plastic skeleton, courtesy of Celaeno and her anatomy classroom—thrown her way. Of course, this did nothing to deter her.

With one fist in Law's chest, she launched him straight across the College of Medicine—

("Hold tight," Law ordered, and Sophie nodded quickly. He released his grip under her knees.

Teresa's military-precise strikes were quick, but Law blocked her just as fast—his right arm flashed in and struck Teresa in the jawneckfacejaw, like rapid-fire bullets—she grabbed his arm, rearing back her fist—a chunk of stone was swapped in his place and broke apart under her knuckles—
"Oh my god, I'm flashing everyone!" Sophie wailed, feeling the wind brush way too close to edge of her buttocks.

"Nobody said you had to wear a dress," he said tersely.

"But I am trying to convey a sense of carefree summer-lovin' happy fun time—" Sophie shrieked as Law did a supremely sick butterfly kick, spinning sideways in a flying cartwheel and catching Teresa across the chin. For a moment, she felt airborne.

His fighting style looked almost like Bepo's style, but it had the relentless brutality of the marine's. It was amazing how Law moved, how he used his body as a finely-honed weapon, tensing and easing and shifting easily from one stance to another.

Sophie, for her part, contributed by yelling fruit names.)

Through the College of Mathematics—

("Sacred geometry, give me strength!" Norma shouted as she attempted to spear the agent with calipers.

"YOU ALL WEIGH NOTHING," Teresa roared, flinging the students aside as she smashed through wall after wall like an unstoppable javelin.

Sophie gave a tiny, muffled shriek and her legs tightened around his waist. It reminded Law of a different night, a dark bedroom, and her hand on the crook of his elbow, smelling of ash and alcohol. His fingers ran across the hem of her short silk dress, and he knew if he looked down it would be riding up along her thigh.

He looked up instead, blocking Teresa's hits, getting accustomed to the speed that she was fighting at—he flashed out on instinct, reflexively grabbing her ankle as she kicked. Law grinned, and the agent's black eyes flashed at him before she whipped her other leg around and kicked him so hard he crashed through the wall.)

Through the College of Ecology—

(Flowers from all over the Grand Line were crushed beneath running feet. Musca hiked up his skirt for Maximum Lunge and chucked coconuts and potted cacti. Ecologists threw coconuts at Teresa's head, and she was distracted long enough for Law got in a solid kick. She flew into a row of Kunlun bamboo trees, decimating it.

"There!" Sophie pointed at a broken window; an escape. "We have to get her away from the University—"

It was like he had forgotten Sophie was on his back. It was like he couldn't even hear her. Law lunged at Teresa with his arm outstretched to bash her face in—she ducked, grabbed him by the ankle, and flung him through the greenhouse.)

And into the College of Astronomy—

Glass shattered around them and students jumped aside, screaming. A quiet groan into his ear—Sophie's cheek drooped on his shoulder, her hands slipping from around his neck. He didn't have time for this. Law forcefully tightened his grip on the backs of her knees, and she shot up from semi-consciousness, yelping and grabbing on tighter.

Brass telescopes and scrolls of parchment flew everywhere as the students scrambled away. Behind a
massive sundial, the med student—Celaeno—was jumping up and down, trying to catch his attention. We'll throw her off, lead her that way, she signed, pointing to the other end of the university grounds. Once she's distracted, you attack!

Not a bad plan. Law nodded and looked for Teresa's pursuing figure—

And was shocked to see her not searching for him in the bedlam, but watching the med student. She focused on her intently. Her narrowed eyes had been following Celaeno's hand movements the whole time, and—

"Sophie-san! Trafalgar! There you are!" Norma and Musca shouted, running in a different direction.

—a little smirk tugged on Teresa's mouth.

She can sign. He furiously motioned for Celaeno to STOP!

Too late. Teresa followed Celaeno's gaze to Law. Leaping over, she dropkicked him so hard he blew backwards. Law blinked away stars—no, the stars were still there, and they were flying past the sundial—

They collided on the stone floor. Sophie was flung from his back and she rolled to a stop several feet away.

They had fallen into a large, open lecture hall. Constellations around the world were carved onto the walls, everything from the sun lion in South Blue to the crown and the dragon above Mariejois. It was by pure chance that when Law raised his head, he looked squarely at the constellations in North Blue.

His eyes found the stars his mother had so often pointed out to him, and it was strange, suddenly, to think there was something about Flevance that still endured. He had always figured everything about it was wiped from existence. His chest twisted in pain—fuck, no, that was real pain, he was really hurt there, shit—

"Are w-we d-dead?" Sophie whimpered painfully.

Law opened his mouth to shoot back a wry response—then clutched his side with a stifled groan.

"You're h-hurt."

"Yeah," he sighed. "Know any good doctors?"

"No, but I'll tell you when I find one." Sophie cracked a tired grin, her sweaty bangs sticking to her forehead.

She wobbled as she stood, and he could still feel the impression of those soft, sturdy legs twined around his waist. Law didn't know why his brain decided to focus on that. (But between her legs or the stars over his dead homeland, he supposed she was the safer concept—though the margin was slim.)

"Get to the harbor."

"Okay," she agreed. "We're escaping now, th-that's a good plan—"

"You're escaping. This is my fight."

"Wha—you want to keep fighting?"
"I have to," he snarled. "I have to win. If I can't win here, there's no fucking point."

An involuntary shiver raced up her spine. His face was contorted in anger, teeth grinding, blood dripping down his jaw. What was he looking at? What was he thinking about? Why was he trying so hard to win on his own, like his life depended on it? She was close enough to grab Law if he started to fall, but for a moment, Sophie felt that she couldn't be further apart from him.

"What are you gonna do, fight until you die?" she tried to joke. This couldn't be the same pirate who called her an idiot for attacking G-13 on her own.

"Until one of us dies," Law uttered with grim determination, and she was this close to taking off her sandal and slapping him across the face with it.

"Dra-ma-tic slow clap," Teresa narrated as she emerged from the shadows, clapping. She shrugged at the stares her theatrical malice had elicited. "Might as well play the part, right? Now, I finally have you in my nefarious clutches…"

"Can you just!" Sophie burst out, and pointed at the smoking ruins. "Just for a second—I-look at the destruction you've c-caused!"

"I'll pay for it. With my pay raise after I get promoted, I think I can afford it." Teresa tapped her chin. "Do you know if this country gives out loans?"

"What is wrong with you," Sophie breathed, and she didn't mean for Teresa to hear it, not really, but she did.

"Okay, look. I'm trying to enjoy myself because I can't look at your face without wanting to rip it apart. You grew up with a home, a father—everything. And you gave it all away to be a goddamn pirate."

"Yes, because a roof over your head and a guy who calls himself your dad constitutes 'everything'," Law said.

Teresa held a finger up, warning him to keep his mouth shut. "Do you know what other women have had to do to get this far?" she shot at Sophie. "Do you know what women who grew up with nothing have had to do? You were given a wonderful life. I—" She broke off, shaking her head. "…I just want to know one thing. How did you kill him?"

Sophie wanted to say she shoved Hippo in shark-infested waters and watched them rip him apart, she wanted to say she slit his throat and stabbed his dying body so many times she lost count. But Teresa looked so desperate for an answer, and Sophie wanted to cause her as much pain as possible. "I didn't."

"Tell me the truth, you fucking little—!" A telescope hit her in the head.

Teresa spun around. Celaeno, Norma, and Musca were bruised and bleeding, but they looked plenty enraged as they clutched makeshift weapons.

"Really?" Teresa said flatly. "I've never seen a cavalry look more pathetic."

Celaeno spoke with her hands in a way that even Sophie knew what she was saying. She flipped Teresa off.

A wizened old laugh burst out from behind them. "Splendid! Just what I expected from a citizen of mine."
Teresa seemed startled, then quickly relaxed. "Have you signed the new trade deal?"

Whatever this trade deal was, President Ursa walked in empty-handed.

"Maybe she'll pull a baking pan out of those robes and smack Teresa with them," Sophie whispered hopefully. Law did not look convinced. Great, now they'd be forced to watch Teresa beat up a senior citizen.

"I didn't want it to come to this, but you can't be reasoned with," Ursa murmured. "You've committed a great crime against Machinastein today."

Teresa examined her fingernails. "I'm not leaving without the money. I mean, look. There's no one in this country who can match my strength. So unless you want Machinastein to be obliterated again as it was eight hundred years ago, move aside."

Sophie prepared herself to run between them and carry Ursa away. Whilst crying uncontrollably out of fear, but nonetheless.

"No," the president said.

The whirrrrr of a machine resounded within her. With a metallic kching, like the sound of several guns cocking, her back vertebrae aligned and straightened up. She grew, and grew, and grew until she was as tall as Law. Her hunchback was gone. The old woman cast off her outer robe; her body was corded with large, thick muscle, like a young warrior at her prime.

Ursa exhaled steam from her mouth and nose, and behind her on the wall of constellations, the stars of the great bear shone above her head. She clenched what few teeth she had left, the sun-beaten wrinkles on her face contorting in a scowl of rage.

Sophie gasped. Law's jaw dropped.

Her body was covered in glowing, solar-powered Lamp Dials. She was a—

"Cyborg," Teresa hissed in shock.

"You move," Ursa snarled.

Kicking off the ground, she slammed into Teresa and they burst through the stone walls into the sky.

There were stories about Ixchel Ursa that stretched a century back. There were stories of her fighting giants and inventing wonders and romancing the most brazen pirates of the sea. Stories that conflated her into a myth and a legend with every whispered retelling.

Out of all the stories, there was only one that was the most agreed upon. The story of Ixchel Ursa in her greener years. In search of new resources to help her ailing country, she arrived on a sky island, gathered all sorts of marvelous Dials in her arms, and plummeted back to the Blue Sea in a terrible fall that broke nearly every bone in her body.

Then, out of bolts and metal parts and solar-powered Dials of her own invention, Ursa built herself anew.

Sophie had heard of the story in passing. It was one of those rumors she wasn't sure whether to believe—like, Gold Roger and Silvers Rayleigh were lovers, or all of Whitebeard's commanders
were actually his illegitimate children. She had disregarded it, back then.

Sophie ran after the white contrail in the sky, made by the force of Ursa's flight. She was trying to catch up to Law, who was limping with impressive speed and shouting, "Ursa-ya! She's mine!" at the sky like the village madman.

"Sophie-san! What the hell!" Norma cried. Oh, pineapples—she hadn't noticed them running up from behind.

"This can't be a war," Musca was rambling, "I mean, there hasn't been a war here in over a century so this isn't a war, right?"

"I—this isn't the time to—stay back, foolish blueberries!"


"Fine. If they really wanted to—fine. I'm an ex-World Government scientist. I'm from G-13. You know that one? It's the Marine b-base nearby. Now stay here; stay away from the city!" she shouted over her shoulder, outpacing them in a sprint.

"What—Sophie-san, Trafalgar! Wait, you assholes!"

She left them behind, catching up to Law. "You didn't have to tell them the truth," he said.

The brief glimpse of Celaeno's expression—the shift in her eye, of flat horror— "No," Sophie muttered, feeling her tics doing the cha-cha-slide across her face, "I did, actually."

Law didn't respond to that, but he gave her a challenging smirk. "Tired?"

Her back straightened. Sure, she hadn't been doing any intentional physical training on Machinastein, but Sophie had done a bike marathon through the whole city, fought the Heart Pirates' own helmsman, fought a bunch of chocolate gangsters, and fought a Big Mom pirate. Her muscles were in fine shape. She snarked back, "Not even close. You're talking to a war vet, Trafalgar!"

When they reached the main street, it was filled with confused turmoil. Pedestrians and Giant Quetzal carts and bicycles weren't moving; traffic had come to a full stop. Heads poked out of windows. Café-goers stopped sipping their iced chocolate drinks and looked up. Everyone was watching the explosions in the sky. Machinastein had a small standing army, mostly soldiers that patrolled the city. They were banging their spears against their shields and ordering civilians to get inside the nearest buildings.

"EVERYONE!" Ursa was a speck in the clouds, but her amplified voice boomed clear over the city. "TAKE SHELTER! THIS IS AN EMERGENCY!"

"What now?" Sophie asked, moving to follow Law.

He grabbed her elbow. "Now you get your ass to Vira."

"Y-you still want to fight Teresa, don't you? I'm trying to help, you ungrateful mango!"

"I never asked for that!"

"Yeah, well, I can't sit back and watch a suicidal friend run off to his death," she muttered sourly, then beamed. "Not without popcorn, at least!"

He didn't laugh. "You have to see this through to the end. Even if it takes ten, or twenty, or fifty
years, this should be the only thing that matters—"

"You want me to go this much?"

Law's hand fell away from her arm. "I wanted you on my ship after Kunlun. You chose different. You left. You've always made the choice to leave, not me."

Sophie opened her mouth to retort, but his words sank in. Her backpack felt like it weighed ten thousand pounds. "I…"

A Mach soldier went flying between them and crashed into a tamale store. The remaining pedestrians on the road screamed and shoved past Sophie.

"Hey, kid," said the Cipher Pol sniper, rounding the corner with a dozen other agents behind her. A gold tooth winked between her mouth. "How ya been?" She punctuated the word by yanking a bloody spear from the hand of an unconscious soldier.

Sophie shrieked. She whirled around and almost hit her nose on another agent and shrieked again.

She stumbled back until her spine hit Law's. No Rooms appeared; he must still be recuperating his stamina. The train rumbled on the overhead railway. The wind whipped Sophie's dress around her knees and blew several black hats into the air.

"B-before we get started, does a-anyone have a cigarette lighter?" Sophie ventured. She heard Law sigh. "I'm just s-saying, I'd like to have a smoke b-before I get shot."

The agents took a collective step forward, shadows from the passing train flickering over their faces.

Or not! Sophie squeezed her fists tight, wild-eyed. "Come and get some!"

A pair of boots, sunglasses, and red hair swung past her head.

Leaping from the train, Shachi tackled an agent to the ground with a loud whoop. More feet landed around them. Anko laughed maniacally as he socked an agent across the face. Bepo grabbed another by his jacket and threw him into a fountain. Law ducked as Penguin leaped over his back and sent an agent flying backwards with an uppercut. Manta charged at two and bounced them off his belly with a loud laugh.

"You're late!" Law called; he was grinning.

They answered with a collective, raucous, "Sorry, Cap!"

Sobbing in relief, Sophie hugged the closest pirate. Who happened to be Penguin, and he shouted kind of exasperatingly, "Okay, okay! God!" as he wiggled free. "Hey, is it just a coincidence these guys look like the CP5 fools we met on Kunlun?"

"I'll explain later," Law replied, roundhouse kicking an agent across the jaw.

"Ha-ha! I didn't get a chance to fight on Kunlun, but now's my chance!" Valross said. "I will show you all!"

"Nobody's asking you to prove anything!" several pirates yelled back.

"I said I will show you all!"

"Captain! Got your sword!" Shachi shouted, raising Kikoku over his head. He was immediately
shoved in the back.

Before the agent could punch Shachi again, Valross rammed a dagger into their eye. Whistling cheerily, he pulled it free and flicked the blood off. Kamasu was drinking from a bottle and slurring unhelpful advice from the sidelines, like an alcoholic cheerleader.

"I still got it!" Shachi said, picking up Kikoku. Manta accidentally rear-ended him with his butt and they went sprawling on the ground.

Someone hit Sophie in the head, which was rude. "Ahhh my brain cells! THAT'S MY LIVELIHOOD, PUNK." She flailed her fists at the agent. "PUNCH ME AGAIN AND I'LL SUE."

"Yeah! Fuck 'em up, bitch!" Anko cackled, catching the sword that had fallen out of Shachi's hands.

"What d-did you call me?"

"I meant bitch in a good way!"

Sophie glanced at a spark in the sky, opened her mouth in warning, thought better of it, then tapped Bepo and pointed at the two women who were hurtling towards them. Wailing in panic, Bepo tackled Anko to the ground.

Moving at a hundred miles per hour, Teresa slammed Ursa into the hospital with the force of a meteorite. The force of it launched debris into the plaza; pirates and agents alike dove aside to evade. Huge smoking blocks of white limestone shattered the road. Palm trees smashed into the fountain and beheaded decorative jaguar statues. All was silent for a few seconds…

"Bepo, get your tits out of my face," Anko wheezed.

The ground lurched tortuously as Sophie struggled to her feet. She heard Shachi shout, "The scary marine lady from Kunlun!" as there was another deafening burst of noise from the ex-hospital; a golden streak was Ursa flinging Teresa back into the sky with an enraged yell.

Cries echoed down the road. Civilians pointed out their windows. She followed their line of sight to the harbor, where a stretch of merchant vessels and humble fishing boats were floating. Just beyond them was a massive warship sailing closer to the harbor. A world-class ship of the line, loaded with three hundred broadside cannons, bearing the blue-and-white flag of the World Government.

Under Machinastein law, it was illegal for a World Government vessel to sail within a mile of their waters. The three Machinastein ships that had been guarding it were now flotsam, smoking in the ocean, as the Government battleship plowed forward.

"So, Law-san?" Sophie said faintly. "You still think getting a ship to Vira is an option?"

"It's nothing we can't handle," Law retorted.

There were little pop-pop-pops, like fireworks, and then the first house along the harbor exploded under artillery fire—then the second—and third, and fourth. The ground quaked. Clouds of smoke ripped apart the sky. There was a split second where the general populace just stared, aghast and motionless… and then the screaming began.

"Ah," Law said. "Yeah, never mind. Anko, move the sub!"

Only two brown legs were visible under Bepo, who appeared to be drooling and mumbling about
tuna mayo onigiri. "I'm trying!"

"We'll take care of it!" Manta grabbed the nearest two pirates and taking off. ("Nooooo I want to fiiiiight!" Valross cried, being carried on Manta's shoulder next to Kamasu.) Penguin and Shachi dragged Bepo off Anko and slapped the bear awake.

Sophie was frozen. *Wasn't Hippo-sensei living in a tavern by the docks?*

The colorful houses of Machinastein blurred into the cobblestoned street of Anatole, sunflower petals caught in her hair, a heavy crown weighing down her hand, Dragon's blood sprayed across her face—the desert heat stifled, pineapples, she needed a cigarette—

Someone shouted her name, and two hands roughly jerked her around. Hippo was gasping for breath, his face shifting in the dust like a fever dream. "Finally! I was looking all over for you! We have to go, the World Government has declared war!"

Before Sophie could coherently understand that this wasn't another strange delirium, Hippo really was standing there, the two mechanics were manhandling him away from her with a loud, "Back off, dingus!"

"I knew you'd get my kid into trouble, you over-tattooed, over-pierced, annoyingly tall punk!" Penguin and Shachi were struggling to keep the fuming doctor away from Law, who looked deeply indifferent. As Hippo continued ranting, Sophie heard a shout from a rooftop.

"Delivery!" A marine flung down flintlocks and ammunition to the agents.

They were standard-issue marine pistols; .22 caliber, solid grip, minimal recoil. Sophie narrowed her eyes. She wanted one.

Hippo flinched as blood sprayed across his face; Sophie was shooting at the agents with two shiny new flintlocks. The agent she'd tackled and stolen the guns from was on the ground, groaning. "For *fuck*'s sake, Sophie—"

The downed agent grabbed her ankle. Sophie sank more bullets into him, and then frowned at the resulting blood stains on the hem of her dress. She shot the dead man again, as his rudeness necessitated.

President Ursa crashed down into the middle of the road. A black streak landed before the crater, loosening her tie.

Hippo peeked out from behind the rubble. His eyes widened. "My god… Teresa?"

Cipher Pol agents, their arms laden with weapons they must've picked up from the warship, tossed over something shining—Teresa rolled up her sleeves and caught the axe. She hadn't noticed Hippo; she was trained purely on the Hearts. Her muscular arms flexed as she gave the axe a few lazy swings.

Sophie fired until one gun ran out of ammo; she threw that over her shoulder and held the other gun in both hands, squeezing her right eye shut.

Sophie emptied the pistol at her, *BANG BANG BANG*—Teresa charged, blocking the bullets with her axe with expert precision—

"It's revenge time, asshole!" Anko yelled, and then Teresa punched him in the face. "Ow, my eye!"
"And War rode in on a red horse," Hai Xing muttered, "bearing an upright sword—" He, too, was flattened into a pirate pancake.

Teresa smashed through the pirates, her long black ponytail shivering behind her. She ripped the backpack off of Sophie's shoulders and kicked her in the gut, she hit the ground, heaving acid—("Get that backpack!" Law yelled, clutching his bloody nose)—Bepo charged in and managed to rip it out of her grasp, just barely—it flew into the air.

Hippo leaped from the rubble and caught it.

Teresa stopped mid-swing and swore. She stared at Hippo some more and swore again. "God." Her voice was equal parts stilted, confused, and full of wonder. "God, you're alive." She laughed, a quick exhale of a sound, still staring at Hippo. "You look like shit."

"Yeah. Hi. It's been a weird couple of weeks." Hippo glanced down to the backpack. He knew what those notes were, what that rat was for. He knew it was Red Sky. Now he was going to give it to the World Government, and at this point Sophie was seriously considering eating a cigarette and getting her nicotine fix that way.

Teresa stepped forward, raising her arms. He stepped back.

Her tiny smile vanished. "…Hippo?"

"Please, my friend. Just once in your life, look away. You don't need to kill every pirate you come across."

Teresa glanced at Sophie. "So you just want me to take Trafalgar's head—"

"No. Not him. None of the Hearts. Can't you just… leave Machinastein?" He said it so quietly Sophie was sure she heard wrong. Though even if he shouted it from the rooftops, she'd still be sure she heard wrong.

Teresa chuckled in a bemused sort of way. "Don't do this," she said, half-grinning. "Don't do this," she said again, and when Hippo didn't move, her eyes dimmed. "Please. Don't do this."

Nausea bubbled up in Sophie's chest. This wasn't happening. She made eye contact with Law. Blue light spluttered from his fingers and faded; he pounded his fist on the road, as though breaking his bones might somehow help. This wasn't happening.

Don't make me defend you, Sophie thought furiously. "Run—please, just run! Don't a-act like a hero!"

"But that's what marines are." It was a declaration. It was a choice; with bony shoulders and glasses all cracked to shit, Hippo stood with two feet planted on the ground, facing the black-clad herald of death. "We're supposed to be heroes. Justice applies to all, not just to the enemies of the World Government. We were supposed to be a generation better than the ones that came before us. How did we end up becoming exactly like them?"

"Stop this," Teresa said. "You're embarrassing yourself."

"What have we done to each other?" Hippo said, his voice cracking.

"Good q-question, sensei, but godawful timing—"

"Don't talk to me like that!" Teresa's voice rose to a crescendo. "Would you say that to Lettidore?"
Would you try to appeal to his sentimentality, like he's weak? Like he's susceptible to emotion?" She pointed her axe at Hippo, at her oldest friend in the world, probably. "Give me the fucking bag."

"You don't have to do this—"

"I can't turn back." Teresa trembled, and for a moment she looked almost like Law, beads of sweat dripping down her forehead, her faraway gaze, if I can't win there's no fucking point. "There's nowhere I can walk now but forward!"

She braced her feet against the ground, ready to hurtle forward. Hippo seemed frozen, his chest rising rapidly, his eyes focused on her, only her, in disbelief, in fear, in grief—but then the dramatic tension was broken as an ice cream hand wrapped around Teresa's ankle and flung her into the air.

A very pink, very loud distraction arrived in the middle of the plaza-turned-battlefield. Sophie took this opportunity to shove her teacher into a half-collapsed habanero kiosk for shelter.

The Hearts started booing Charlotte Sundae, who responded, "SILENCE, WHELPs."

"Do you know how much ice cream we had to clean off our ship because of you!" they shouted back, shaking their fists.

Ursa pushed aside the heavy rubble. Her metal joints sparked as she exhaled steam through her nostrils. Sundae clasped her hands together and sighed. "A sight for sore eyes, my sweet nougat. Now, how's about you turn Machinastein into Big Mom territory?"

Teresa clambered out of the Teresa-shaped pothole in the road. "This island belongs to the World Government!"

"Pull your heads out your asses!" the President of Machinastein thundered. "In all our history, we've never been someone else's territory!"

"Sweets, that's what Fishman Island said before they became Whitebeard's."

"This is why I never married you," Ursa snapped and Sundae gave an offended huff. "Soldiers! Clear the streets! Protect our people!"

"Yonkou!" a CP5 agent cried. "Boss, we gotta alert HQ that we're fighting a Big Mom pirate!"

"Not yet!" Teresa barked. "Not until we've won." She tongued a small, bloody cut on her lip. "I'll make this quick."

Law barely evaded a swinging axe. He twisted through the air, glimpsing flashes of cannon fire exploding along the harbor. Teresa shot after him and kicked him down onto a rooftop, where he landed in a bush of achiote flowers.

"This ain't yer weight class, boy!" Sundae crowed. "Best sit this one out!"

Ursa glanced at Law and Teresa smirked. He glared, feeling absurdly like a little kid surrounded by aunts. Or, aunt-like women. Aunties who wanted to kill him, in Teresa's case and possibly Sundae's.

It didn't matter anyway; the two women continued bickering about the politics of sovereignty as they went after Teresa. Law angrily yanked red flowers from his shoulders and wiped his still bleeding nose, scanning the horizon.
Machinastein sloops-of-war and Charlotte Sundae's frigate fired back at the Government warship, but they were overpowered and, one by one, began sinking in the harbor as their crews dived overboard. Ursa gave a terrible cry of rage and charged toward the harbor; she was blocked by Teresa, who punched her backwards into Sundae—

Marines marched through the streets, flintlocks blazing, mowing down Machinastein soldiers. The Hearts were fighting in the chaos, surrounded by Cipher Pol agents. The air tasted like smoke and burning grass. Houses toppled to the ground. People were running onto the street and away from the battle epicenter, carrying precious belongings in their hands, clutching children.

Lamie cupped her hands around his ear and whispered, *Flevance, Flevance, burning bright.*

"Captain, *watch out!*" Bepo shouted.

Law realized he was standing completely still. He didn't see Teresa until her axe was slicing through the side of his ribcage. He tumbled from the rooftop and hit the road, pain lashing through his body.

He cursed himself for his carelessness. How was that agent so strong? Cipher Pol was nothing to scoff at, but it was an intelligence agency, not a branch of warfare. Her strength was like a marine captain's—no, it had to be higher than that, if she was going toe-to-toe with both a Big Mom pirate and President Ursa. Law reached for Kikoku—and remembered it was somewhere in the rubble.

The desert earth was blistering and unyielding under his fingers. The ground crunched against him, resisting, and his entire body protested. He lifted his hand in the air, then touched his chin with his thumb, middle finger to the sky. *Up, motherfucker*, he signed.

The earth cracked—broke open—a wall of rock jutted upwards, catching Teresa on the side with a groaning *thud*. It felt like lifting a boulder, and Law fell onto his palms, struggling for breath.

Teresa caught her balance, a look of disdain quickly masking her surprise. "*Motherfucker*, really?"

Using his powers beyond his limit was like an elastic band getting stretched longer and longer. He was bound to snap.

*Once more*, Law thought, because he was also pissed as hell.

Another block of earth slammed into her leg, and Teresa stumbled back, swearing. Law's nerves crackled with mind-numbing pain, and he doubled over on the ground, his vision blaring white. Ursa swooped in and rammed into Teresa, shouting, "I'm tagging in, Trafalgar!"

He wanted so badly to lie down and sleep, but then a bullet grazed his cheek, red slicing along its path. Before the CP5 sniper could shoot again, Sophie whacked her with Kikoku a lá baseball bat.

"Oi, don't *hold* it like that."

"Sorry, Law-san!" she chirped, bouncing to his side. "Those some new moves? I think you leveled up!"

She still wasn't running? Shit. "Sophie, I suspect you have a bad habit of always picking the wrong choices."

"Objection, I think the choices I've made have worked out for me so far. After all, I believe in you! Just do your Room! Shambles! Bam! Cool! Fabulous! Strike a sexy pose and win!" Sophie held out Kikoku out. "It's time for the counterattack!"
A laugh escaped his mouth. He was losing this argument—though, he'd been losing a lot of arguments with the chemist ever since they met—but he felt strangely alright with it. Law grinned.

Then she inhaled, her entire body stiffening. Her face went slack in confusion. Kikoku rolled out of her hands.

A motion behind her drew his attention. The rifle the Cipher Pol sniper was holding up was still smoking. She mouthed a soundless swear, adjusting it back to Law. A big white paw kicked the sniper across the face. Bepo spun around, and something was wrong, he was crying out…

Simultaneously, Law and Sophie looked down to the hole in her stomach.

Her brow furrowed in a semblance of annoyance as she complained, "I wanted a smoke…"

Law grabbed her before she could fall over. His breathing was grotesquely loud in his ears. He had to stem the bleeding, he had to quickly, quickly… Sophie's eyes fluttered, her curls spilling from her ponytail and down her grimy neck… quickly… do something… move… move your stupid fucking hands—

Across the city, Teresa grabbed Ursa's right arm and ripped it out of the socket. Wires snapped apart. Steam hissed from her body as the president fell amongst the ruined statues of her gods.

move your fucking hands move your fucking—

Teresa leaped up to the top of the Jaguar Temple, to where a green flag emblazoned with a yellow sun flapped proudly. The fighting paused for a split-second as heads turned to watch. On another street, Musca roared President Ursa, get up! and Norma wrapped her arms around Celaeno and fought to keep her from running into the chaos.

As the city watched in horror, Teresa ripped their flag down.

If the only thing about Flevance that remained were its stars, then so it would be for Machinastein. Law was ten-years-old again in the ruins of his country. Soldiers of a foreign land sprayed bullets and washed the streets with red. Churches exploding in blazes of unglory, bells tolling to angels who had long turned their backs. Flevance, Flevance, burning bright.

you useless piece of shit, you're letting her die like you let them all die, you let them all die—

How many times was he going to let someone else take a bullet meant for him? You'd think a decade's worth of suffering was enough; the cycle would've stopped. The wheel would've broken. He was still the worthless kid Cora-san sacrificed himself for.

She should have gone to Vira. She shouldn't have believed in him.

(Somewhere in the back of his mind, a door creaked open.)

Nothing changed, he thought.

Nothing would ever change, he thought.

Pain, someone else thought, someone who felt like gunmetal and cigarettes and unadulterated—Sophie? Pain pain PAIN—

He gasped, clutching his stomach as though he himself was shot, Sophie's agony coursing through
him—he could feel her, not just her physical body but her, every scorching excruciating molecule of her—what the fuck IS THIS—

Sophie's pain disappeared beneath a swell of other emotions—his crew's, the man down the street being crushed by rubble, the children hiding under their beds, the soldiers and the marines, down every street, through every alley, in every house, in every room, it was like he could feel every single terrified soul on this damned island.

Fuck, was the last cognizant thought Law had of his own, before he, too, drowned under the tidal wave of screams.

The Heart Pirates froze at the sound of Bepo's cry. Hai Xing followed his crewmates' gazes until it landed on the man crumpled in the center of the plaza, the chemist bleeding out next to him, and the panicking polar bear.

Hai Xing sighed. Then he said, "Alright, fine."

Starfish spikes ripped out of his forehead.

_to be continued_

Chapter End Notes

So. I was originally going to have an addendum here about how "in the manga Law is only shown with Armament Haki, but I'm inserting my own headcanon that his Observation Haki woke in Flevance, but the resulting trauma was so great his mind unconsciously sealed that part off. Authorial leeway? You betcha!"

But as it turns out, according to the new Vivre Card data book, Law actually does have Kenbunshoku Haki! Some might be surprised that I'm introducing Haki so early, but it takes a long time to train and seeing as how Luffy took two years to get his Haki up to snuff (which is a ridiculously short amount of time, according to Rayleigh), I'd say it's realistic for other pirates to have developed theirs sooner.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! See you next time /waves

more oc and writing shenanigans: tumblr | twitter | ff
This was fine.

(it hurts it hurts it hurts—)

This was totally, completely fine.

(SOME PINEAPPLE ACTUALLY SHOT ME—)

How ironic: for all of her neuroses with counting the exits whenever she entered a room, standing with her back to a wall whenever she could, flinching when someone brushed past her—they did nothing to keep her from getting shot in the gut. So much compulsive paranoia, wasted.

And the pain. God, the pain.

Law wasn't even helping her. No, the smarmy pirate doctor was muttering shutupshutupshutup like an unhinged lunatic. Well, even more of an unhinged lunatic. Law was not a naturally Hinged sort of person. (Sophie understood. She also wanted to scream into the ground, but perhaps he could do something productive and help her before she bled out?)

Her head lifted with a sharp tug. A pale hand gripped her jaw, turning her face left and right.

"You're G-13's traitor?" The thin, clean-shaven man peered down at her with a creepy smile—the same man who stood behind Teresa that morning, in the Jaguar Temple. "Wouldn't make business sense to waste that brain on Impel Down. I suppose we're taking you home. Mariejois, I think. We'll put you back to work, where you belong."

Sophie knew of the World Government's bookkeepers. She'd seen them when they met with Vice Admiral Lettidore to discuss the selling of G-13's chemical weapons. They were always different men, but they looked the same—plain black suit with a red quill tucked into their breast pocket, carrying a heavy black ledger—and they all smelled like beli.

She willed herself to move, spit in his face, do something. STOP IT YOU STUPID FRENCH FRY, the hole in her gut protested.

Sophie supposed she was going to get harassed by a skinny accountant and then die. Whatever.
"Now, the Surgeon of Death." Still smiling, the bookkeeper released her and grabbed the front of Law's shirt. He was totally out of it, muttering absolute gibberish under his breath. "Devil Fruit powers, strong body… seems to be concussed, but no matter. A Dragon will pay handsomely for a toy of this quality."

"…H-hey, you nasty man," her palms hit the dirt, forcing her body to move, blood be damned, "get your c-crusty hands off him."


Instead of sobbing, she stood up. "Don't test me, you piece of garbage. I'll bite your head off."

He sounded amused. "You can barely stand—"

She stomped her foot with a war-scream, and the bookkeeper screamed, too. Only, his scream was because he was simultaneously punched and whacked in the head.

Hai Xing emerged from the dust and unclenched his fist, shaking it out.

Hippo was right next to him, clutching a broken plank of wood. "Get away from my kid, you —woah!" He almost tripped over the twitching bookkeeper, staring at Hai Xing.

Sophie's knees buckled. The luminescent black spines vanished and Hai Xing caught her before she could fall over.

Hippo registered that all the red splattered across Sophie's green dress was not, actually, a tacky fashion statement. "Shit," he said, running forward.

Hai Xing ripped off the bookkeeper's black suit jacket and pressed it to Sophie's stomach. "Marine, help me take these two to safety."

Hippo made a face at the order, but turned to Law—who had stopped muttering nonsensically and graduated to twitching like a frog mid-dissection—and slung one of his arms around his shoulders, lifting him up. The younger man was taller than Hippo, and the tips of his shoes dragged along the dirt.

"First I talk back to Teresa, and then I save my kid's dumb backpack, now I'm helping pirates and, damn it, I should've retired early…"

The summer heat abruptly felt ten degrees colder. A shadow dropped down from the spire of the Jaguar Temple, Machinastein's flag falling around her in green tatters.

The seven-foot-tall, musclebound woman dusted off her suit and raised her axe. "Hippo, Sophie, and… I know you. Kunlun, was it? I thought I killed you back then. You must know there's no point in fighting me, unless you've somehow become stronger since I last—"

"Get ready to move," Hai Xing said, and slammed his fist against the vacated, noticeably unstable house right next to them, sending an avalanche of stone and debris cascading into the street between them and Teresa. Wind burst in Sophie's face, whipping her hair all over, and she realized that the wind was Hai Xing moving at an incredible speed as he carried her.

He stopped on the rooftop of a still-intact house. Following behind them, Bepo burst out of the dust cloud with Hippo and Law on his back.
"Ahhhhh!" Bepo waved Law's nodachi around like a signal, as though Hai Xing and Sophie couldn't see the giant polar bear bounding towards them. "That was so close, I thought I wasn't going to make it!"

"I really should've retired early," Hippo gasped, his glasses sliding down his sweaty nose.

Hai Xing looked down at her. "Sophie, are you in pain?"

"Yes?"

"Okay, so you're used to it." He threw her out of his arms. Bepo caught her, muffling Sophie's earsplitting curses in his chest. "The others are close. Go. I'll keep the marines busy."

"Be careful!" Bepo cried. "That's an order from your senior crewmate, you hear me?"

Hai Xing gave a two-fingered salute and fell backwards over the edge.

The Civic Hospital was teeming with people evacuating. There was a large, smoking crater in the middle of what had once been a beautiful atrium. Bepo had grabbed Shachi and Penguin with one paw; Anko heard Hai Xing went off to fight Teresa alone and booked it in his direction, and there was nothing they could do to stop him. Their attention was distracted, anyway.

The chaos around them was making their captain worse. He was yelling like a madman now, fingernails scratching at his forehead like he wanted to claw his own brain out. Though Sophie had already seen him stab her with a needle full of parathion, this display of derangement was somehow more terrifying. Whatever was happening to Law, he was losing.

Sundae dropped next to them—all the pirates shrieked, and then tried to cough in a manly fashion—carrying President Ursa around her shoulders as she hollered, "The lad can't control it! Put him to sleep!"

"A tr-tranquilizer," Sophie whispered. "Fentanyl, e-eto-etomidate, and a pa-paralytic—su-succinylcho-choline, if they h-have it."

Penguin sounded alarmed, "Can you, uh, spell that out—"

"No! It'll be too late!" Bepo howled with the certainty of one descending into a void of irrational panic. "Captain, go to sleep!"

He punched his captain so hard Law did, indeed, pass out.

Law's eyes shot open and a hiss twisted out of his throat. Terror, grief, stabbing pain, movement churning and spinning around him, and voices, all these wretched voices that wouldn't stop—

"Concentrate on your own presence, Trafalgar." It was a distant echo, as though he was standing in the bottom of a well. "Focus. Let yourself sink into it."

Law didn't know what the hell Ursa was saying, but he was too far gone to question it. The people—or rather, the impression of people around him faded away, and he was left alone with himself, and he felt like snow. He felt like a barren snowfield where there was not a single living soul but him. The bitter wind slashed his cheeks. His breath came out painfully, like the air itself was trying to pull the life out of him.
"Now let it go."

There was a door in the back of his mind. He reached out, his hand settling on top of the handle of—no, it wasn't a door anymore, but a treasure chest covered in snow. Icicles formed on the rusted lock. But the top of the chest was cracked open. Law knew, with unerring certainty, that whatever was inside had to be quiet. It couldn't make a sound. It couldn't even move.

A hand shoved through the crack and it whispered, "Cora-san."

Law slammed the chest shut.

He jackknifed into a sitting position and grabbed the two shadows leaning over him, hard enough to throttle.

"Ow! Cap, it's us!"

He let go of Shachi and Penguin, disoriented as he apologized. His chest hurt. His cheek really hurt. Law assessed the damage. There was a shallow axe-cut along his ribcage that someone had bandaged up. Other than that, aside from a few bruised bones here and there, he felt… okay. The pressure in his head was gone.

The air in the Civic Hospital was heavy with smoke. Ursa was helping her citizens who had been hit by the rubble, Sundae was sitting away from them, speaking into a Den Den Mushi, and there, propped up against Bepo, was Sophie.

"We'll talk about this later, Trafalgar," Ursa said. "Right now, she needs your—"

He was at her side in an instant. Sophie's eyes were closed, and there was a transfusion tube next to her, a red line from a blood bag to a needle in her elbow.

She was mumbling something to herself. Law leaned closer. She was counting backwards in sevens. Her eyes peeled open; they were eerily blue in her dirt-streaked face. Law's vision spun again. What was wrong with him. She was shot in front of him and he straight-up dissociated into a motherfucking hellscape—

"You're alive." Sophie shot him a faint, lopsided smile. "Well d-done."

"That's my line," Law retorted. He rubbed his aching cheek, remembering the impact of a white paw. "Thanks for punching me, Bepo."

"Just doing my duty, Captain."

He lifted some poor bastard's jacket off her wound as tenderly as possible. What a bloody fucking mess.

"Found the needle, thread, and rubbing alcohol." Hippo set the items down with a clatter. "Finally awake, Trafalgar? Move aside, I can handle this—"

Power flared from Law's fingertips. Being knocked out recovered a bit of his stamina, enough to Room her organs out of her body to check for shrapnel and damage. Hippo's jaw dropped. Sophie lit up like a kid at the candy store.

"A clean hit," Law said. "The bullet didn't fragment in your body. Your large intestine was nicked by the shot, but that's fixable. I'll do this fast."
"On the upside, I do like things clean." Sophie was grinning. She was probably going to stop grinning when Law told her she needed at least half a dozen stitches on her stomach and back.

"Leave it to you to be optimistic about something dumb," Shachi snorted, even as he twisted his hat in his hands.

"Or what, be pessimistic about dying? Boring." Her eyes were glassy and her brow was shiny with sweat. She was resilient enough to be cracking jokes, but he’d wager that stubborn humor would one day be the end of her.

"Cap, weren't you also hurt?" Penguin asked. "I mean, what was up with the…"

The screaming and the fainting, yeah, he had no idea how to explain it to his crew. Law did a double take, momentarily distracted as he counted heads. He sent Manta, Valross, and Kamasu to the sub, so — "Where the hell are Hai Xing and Anko?"

Hai Xing, having spent a large part of his life hiding his fishman genes, was very good at being sly. He emerged with his spines behind Shachi and Penguin, and promptly ditched them as a mortar flew through the street and dust covered their vision. He was good at being alone. He preferred it, usually.

That begged the question: why was this happening.

"…I was going to distract the marines," Hai Xing muttered.

Anko issued him a fed-up glare as he held the cook by his side, hiding around a corner of a demolished alley. "I know, dumbass, that's why I dragged you in here. Look, I ain't interested in cleaning fishman guts from the street."

"…No one would ask you to clean—"

"Shut up. You know what I mean."

"…You'd probably take forever, if the laundry was any indication."

"I am this close to shoving you out the—"

"The western end is clear," came a CP5 agent's voice. "No sign of the pirates or President Ursa."

Rather than shoving Hai Xing out into the open, Anko’s grip tightened as though he thought the cook might dive into the street and rip open his shirt while shouting _here I am, take me now_!

"This is the most hectic day at work we've had in a long time," another agent remarked.

"Hey, Chief, is this... really something you have to do?"

Teresa's voice rang out. "The men I answer to only value one thing as currency. Violence."

"You never used to care about making them happy."

"And where has that got me? Ten years of being stuck in the same damn place while other agents get promoted before me. If I want Spandine's job, I have to show I can be strong like him. Him, Fleet Commander Kong, Akainu... they've wiped out entire islands. So can I."

The rubble beneath Hai Xing's foot slipped out. Anko yanked him back before he could tumble—but
since Hai Xing was already deftly moving back, Anko only succeeded in creating more noise as they bumped into each other. Stones spilled out of the alley.

The street outside was abruptly quiet. A shadow drew closer, raising an axe.

Hai Xing and Anko met eyes, expressions mirrored: *Run.*

The fresh stitches seared, but Sophie was getting used to the pain. She gripped the fur on Bepo's back as he carried her. Her backpack was heavy, but she didn't trust Hippo to carry it, even if he did tell Teresa to go eat a blueberry earlier. Figuratively.

Sophie wasn't given a role in the plan, but Law did toss her an objective: "Stay the hell alive."

He was asking a lot out of her, wasn't he…

(The plan was this: The pirates' submarine had disappeared from the harbor, but no one called to let Law know where they fled to. It quickly became apparent why. The marines were scrambling all the Den Den Mushi waves in the city. Unable to communicate, they had to grab Anko and Hai Xing, hightail it to a working train, and decide what to do from there.

Or as Sophie summarized, "Let's blow this popsicle stand." Law wasn't impressed by her wise, ancient proverb. He said it lacked gravitas. And that she was a black hole where gravitas went to die. She couldn't argue with that.)

After Ursa herded the last few patients to the part of the hospital barricaded by beds and nurses gripping IV stands like baseball bats, she caught up to the pirates and was running beside them. "Listen up, Trafalgar. What happened to you is something only few people ever experience. Observation Haki is the ability to sense spiritual energy, but it's a dangerous power. Some people, when they awaken it, go mad."

A marine shot Ursa in the chest. The bullet glanced off her metal body. With one look at the humorless old cyborg, the marine aptly chose to flee.

"As I was saying," Ursa continued, flinging a piece of rubble that knocked the marine unconscious, "to control it, peace of mind is necessary. Inner chaos can cloud it, can poison it and turn it into madness."

"So I have to stop feeling," Law said seriously, which was just. The most Law thing Sophie had ever heard.

"The opposite of uncontrollable emotion is not the death of all emotion."

"Is there any way you could say that more vaguely?"

"Mastering the observation of others will not happen until you first learn to observe yourself."

Law scowled and Sophie cut in, "There's another Haki. The armor one."

"Ye get hit," Sundae said, intently focused on her Den Den Mushi. "Nigh a-plenty, to shake it from sleep. Armament is the easier one to awaken, I'd say, and you can go toe-to-toe with the strongest Devil Fruit users out there."

She leaped away from them and onto a higher rooftop, raising the Den Den Mushi as though
searching for a signal.

"I might've felt Observation Haki before," Law muttered. "A long time ago, as a kid."

"It typically awakens through high levels of emotional stress," said Ursa. "If something happened to you as a child... the brain has ways of repressing memories. You may have forgotten."

"How do you know if you got it?" Penguin wondered.

"Sometimes it's immediate, sometimes it takes longer for one to be aware. Haki manifests itself uniquely in every person. It lies dormant within every living being on this world, though most don't notice it. Controlling it, however, is a different story." Ursa blinked, attention shifting. "Ah, I see several of my citizens trapped in a burning wreckage! Excuse me!"

A line of marines blocked the street ahead.

"Up we go." Penguin and Shachi grabbed Hippo and, ignoring his protests, jumped onto the rooftops. "We'll meet you on the train, Cap!"

Law didn't stop his pace. In one fluid motion, he slashed the marines apart, flicked the blood off, and re-sheathed his sword. Show-off.

Sophie squinted through the hazy film of dust. "Do you see them? Should I try shouting?"

"I'm sure that'll do it," Law said sarcastically.

"Hai Xing-saaaan! Ankoooo!"

Distant screaming answered her, growing louder and louder until the two pirates were flying over Sophie's head and collided smack-dab into their captain. They rolled to a stop on the ground, sprawled over each other, groaning and rubbing their bruised limbs. Law, the non-believer, leveled Sophie a flat, Do Not Say a Word glare.

Bepo didn't get the memo. "A cleaning witch sure is powerful," he observed.

"Indeed, Bepo-san, indeed."

"I think I cracked my ass," Anko spluttered, clutching his butt. "Oh, hey, Cap!"

"Captain, your foot is on my windpipe, but it's okay, I'll just die..."

With a sigh of relief, Law propped himself up on his elbows. "Idiots."

The three of them were on their feet in an instant as Teresa landed before them. A blue Room appeared.

"Running away again?" Teresa mocked. "I expected more from you."

A chill ran up Sophie's spine. "You stupid pineapple, don't—"

The Room vanished. The stupid pineapple drew Kikoku, snarling.

"I hate men who don't listen to good advice," Teresa tsked, and they ascended over the buildings in a series of bright, flashing metal blows, sword against axe, until they crashed into a pyramid-temple in an explosion of dust and straight out the other side.
A giant hammer made of melting, gloppy ice cream slammed into Teresa. Ursa whirled into view, smashing an uppercut into Teresa's chin. Flying through the air, Ursa grabbed Law's hand and spun, using the weight shift to catapult him back at Teresa, sword raised, blinding—

Sophie watched the mind-blowing fight shatter the clouds. It wasn't too noticeable, but the pink dot that was Charlotte Sundae seemed to be struggling to keep up with Law and Ursa. Of course, the desert wasn't exactly optimal for an ice cream woman. She was dripping ice cream all over the city. Sophie inspected the puddles of leftover dairy on the ground; it was steaming, curdling in the heat. Hm…

A marine lunged at Anko, sword raised. Before anyone could react, a rolling pin slammed against the marine's head.

It was the chocolatier who had stolen Sophie's backpack. They locked eyes for a split second, and he clobbered another marine.

"Come and get some!" he yelled, waving his rolling pin. More chocolatiers came out of the woodwork, raising whisks and baking pans to defend the streets. They weren't doing it alone; Ursa's secretaries were fighting right beside them, two green whirlwinds with silver daggers, and Charlotte Sundae's crew were taking particular delight in shooting down marines.

Law was still locked in combat with Teresa, because he was a Man with Something to Prove, with the ol' chip-on-the-shoulder and other dumb phrases that basically meant he had a deep-seated, masochistic yearning to get his butt kicked. Sophie looked around, wondering if there was a way to help, and grinnned; they were in the market district! Ingredients galore!

"You three," she said to the pirates, raising a handful of slimy milk curdles, "let's do some science."

Using broken metal pipes, Hai Xing, Anko, and Bepo furiously stirred Sophie's concoction of white vinegar, baking soda, and Charlotte Sundae's milk curdles in a barrel that previously held a bunch of live crabs that Sophie set free into the street. Run into the wild! she mentally called to them. Roam to your heart's content!

"Will this work?" Bepo asked, worried.

"Ho-ho, my sweet polar bear." Sophie shook her finger with a knowing smirk. "I have no idea. Now throw!"

"Captain, duck!" Bepo wailed, and Hai Xing hefted the barrel and launched it at Teresa with the precise aim of a half-fishman with ridiculously good hand-eye coordination. A bit of smoke hissed from the friction of his follow-through.

Law's eyes widened and he Roomed Ursa, Sundae, and himself out of the way.

The barrel hit Teresa full on, the homemade bomb of glue encasing her limbs, and she was flung across the other side of the city, her screams echoing behind her. Sophie was hit with a flash of déjà vu: a peach-tree monastery, mercuric thiocyanate, and the same scream of fury. Teresa had quite the vibrato.

"You're one strong fucker," Anko commented, shielding his eyes from the sun.

Hai Xing shrugged. "It's all in the wrist."

Hippo, Penguin, and Shachi had made it to the train; they were in the conductor's compartment, shouting loudly over the controls. They leaned out the shattered window and waved, yelling for them
"Nicely done," came a murmur in Sophie's ear. She closed her eyes in the flash of blue.

They appeared inside the train compartment, suspended in midair, and hit the floor with a crash. Sophie landed daintily on Hai Xing's lap, who fell on Anko, who bounced on Bepo's belly. Law sprawled over a seat, out-of-breath, blood dripping down his forehead.

Sophie rolled onto the solid floor, thankful to have something stable under her hands. She heard footsteps run in from the conductor's compartment, and then Penguin and Shachi were helping her and their crewmates up. Hippo wasn't far behind.

Blobs of ice cream whipped inside the speeding train. Ursa, her secretaries, and injured chocolatiers who were about to be made into marine target practice were dropped inside. Sundae followed right after them. There was a moment of silence as everyone took a breath. And then started speaking at once.

"What the hell do the marines want with Machinastein?" several people shouted over the cacophony.

"Heavenly Tribute," Ursa said. "The more prosperous a country, the more riches will go to the Celestial Dragons."

"CP5 wants to make their bosses richer?" Penguin scoffed.

"Oh, not at all," Hippo said. "Teresa wants the promotion for being the one to bring Machinastein into the World Government Alliance. Like how whoever kills the biggest pheasant gets a trophy."

"I can also imagine there's benefits to capturing Ursa-ya alive," Law said mildly from his prone position on the seat. "To torture her to sign an agreement. And if she knows any information or history the World Government doesn't want Machinastein knowing, that can also be tortured out." He raised a brow, noticing the stares. "What."

Sophie could practically hear the chocolatiers mentally ask themselves how many bodies has this man hidden.

"You lot protected President Ursa," said the chocolatier who had stolen Sophie's backpack, clutching a beat-up rolling pin. "Thanks."

"We're not the most upstanding citizens, but nobody messes with our country," said another.

There was a tiny pricking at the back of Sophie's mind—why did she feel so off about the chocolatiers being in the same space as the pirates?

"And the fishman was badass," a chocolatier remarked. "Good thing you have him in your crew."


"That one." The chocolatier pointed at Hai Xing, standing in a dark corner like a horrifying statue. "The pirate we fought before."

Shachi burst out laughing. "What? No. He's just a little weird, is all." He yanked Hai Xing over to the group. The cook flopped around like a boneless jellyfish; to everyone watching, he was merely a short, thin man with funny scars on his head. "Look at him. He's never even beaten me in arm-wrestling."
Charlotte Sundae made an irritated noise. "First of all, yer both thicker than rocks," she told Shachi and Penguin. "Second, I'm gettin' word from Mama. This here snail is incapable of being intercepted, but the marines were jammin' Den Den Mushi waves. Seems like reception is a little better out of the city."

"You're calling Big Mom?" The Hearts gathered around the white Den Den Mushi to gaze reverently/breathe loudly at it. Ah, the distraction power an Emperor's name had on young, upstart rookies…

"I've made my decision, Sundae," Ursa said. "If you help get them off of our land, Machinastein will produce chocolate only for Big Mom."

Every Machinastein citizen in the compartment stopped talking and stared at their president.

"Yer askin' for territory protection. That changes things. You'll deliver us chocolate for free, every month. Big Mom's tribute, instead of the Dragons'."

After a tense silence, Benetnash said, "This is a catastrophic emergency. What other choice do we have?" The other secretary, Dubhe, nodded.

"Have faith," said Backpack-Thief Chocolatier. "We're a scrappy bunch, our people. We've taken worse licks and have gotten back up."

This seemed to bolster Ursa. "I accept the terms. I'll also have to convince my ministers and the representatives, but I don't believe they'll fight me on this. Mostly because I don't know how many of them are still alive." She closed her eyes and sighed, looking very old. "Well, then. You'll be my liaisons," Ursa said to the chocolatiers. "You've all been dealing chocolate to Sundae for some time now, yes? If we're becoming a land of criminals, then we best be number one."

The chocolatiers vigorously raised their fists. Ursa's secretaries looked tired but pleased by the display of fighting spirit.

Charlotte Sundae was the only one who was conflicted. "You know how Mama likes to sign her pacts, sugarplum."

"Ha. You finally have me in your claws, dear."

"I didn't want it t' happen this way."

"It might not happen at all unless we get out of this alive. I need your help for that."

"I look forward to doin' business with ya," Sundae held out her hand. She hesitated, then said in an undertone, "I woulda married ya even if Mama never asked me to. I woulda married ya even if there was nothin' to gain, even if ye were the president of a pile of dirt."

Ursa's smile was dark-chocolate-bittersweet. "No, you wouldn't have." She gripped Sundae's hand. "But thank you for saying it."

Sophie watched them, something twisting in her chest. There were a million and one words in the gaze they shared. They loved each other. She knew awfully little about romantic love, but it seemed to her that Sundae and Ursa, despite their combative relationship, had loved each other very much. But it was something that never lined up the right way. Something that… never had the right timing…

She didn't notice that Law had sat up, and jumped slightly when he muttered, "This is pirate country
now. I assume you're disappointed?"

Idyll Island had done the same thing. It had once been nearly decimated by the plentiful qava root that grew on the island; the black market loved a powerful sedative drug. Whitebeard's flag gave them protection from those wanted to harvest the root for themselves. It was no different from Machinastein and many other islands across the sea.

"Not at all," Sophie said honestly. "It's the best option they have at this time. If anything, it's admirable." She turned her head toward him. "And I'm no stranger to forging alliances with pirates."

He grinned a little at that.

"Ah, a desert storm," Ursa said, calling Sophie's attention back from places that may or may not have been the crook of Law's mouth. "This will be a sight to see."

The Machinastein desert stretched out around them, far and wide, an unbroken mass of hot, parched earth. Massive clouds loomed over the sparse plains, anvil-grey, so low to the ground that they could see its huge shadow moving over cacti and desert marigolds. The train fell quiet; they all watched the rolling clouds blanket the sky. There were days like this in the trenches, silent spells where she gazed at the red sunset wavering over the horizon, cigarette dangling from her mouth, wondering if it was the last beautiful thing she would ever see. She glanced at the Heart Pirates. She didn't have to worry about that anymore.

Just then, a heavy thud came from the top of the train.

"The beldam," Sundae uttered.

As they were looking up at the ceiling, Teresa exploded through the side of the train, ripping the metal apart with her axe.

Ursa was the first to rise, one-armed, shining. "May the gods smile upon Machinastein."

"The only gods in this world live in Mariejois!" Her axe-blade swung. Ursa dodged; the blade caught the train wall and cracked it apart like an egg.

This was not a fight Sophie wanted to be in close-quarters with. More marines burst in from the other compartment. She ducked a swing of a sword, and Shachi and Anko leapfrogged over her, kicking the marines back. The chocolatiers sprang into action.

"Trafalgar, watch out!" Hippo punched a marine that ran at Law with a sword, and then screamed as the marine collapsed. "Oh my god! I'm sorry!"

"Hippo, you traitorous slut!" Teresa roared, blocking Law's nodachi with her axe.

"Eat my shorts! You almost killed my student again!"

Sophie snorted into her fist. If she closed her eyes, she was back in G-13's mess hall, listening to Hippo, Teresa, and Lettidore bicker about nothing and laugh uproariously in their own bubble that was impervious to everyone else.

Teresa set her jaw, glaring. The mess hall was a memory; nobody was laughing now.

Penguin jerked. "Sophie, watch ou—"

When she wasn't paying attention, hands reached around her and yanked her through the window.
"This belongs to the Government," said a gruff voice behind her.

She was thrown to the top of the train. Her teeth scraped against hot metal, she felt hands tugging the backpack away from her. She heard Penguin swearing, and she kicked up in a rising handspring, ramming her feet into his face and leaping upright.

Sophie grabbed her backpack as Penguin shoved the agent off the edge, his screams fast disappearing as the train sped on. More ravens were climbing on top, their sharp black coats whipping in the wind.

"There's no end to them," Penguin muttered. She supported herself on his arm. She could stand, thankfully, but just the one kick made pain flare through her body.

"I have complete faith in you, Penguin."

"Thanks, but you are in no way helping." He scanned the ripped, bloody scrap of a dress she was wearing. "Unless you have a bazooka hidden under there."

Sophie pinched his ear. "Eyes up or I'll make you eat your own kidneys."

"Can I watch?" Shachi clambered on top of the train, wiping blood off his face that was definitely not his, if the wide grin was any indication.

"Disgusting bastard." Penguin shook his head. "Now, tell me the exact details of how you'd make me eat my own kidneys."

"You two are as bad as your captain," Sophie complained, as Shachi twirled her out of the path of the bullets.

"Did you just figure that out?" Shachi quipped.

"Uh, no. But I can't march up to two strangers at a bar in Crawfish Island and tell them they're both ne'er-do-wells, can I?"

Penguin disarmed an agent with two strikes of his fist and threw the pistol to Sophie. "It would've made the whole search for Cap's missing scalpel a lot easier."

Sophie checked the safety and groaned, recalling the harassment she endured from Law in the swamp. "You two did perfectly well without my help."

Shachi swept an agent's legs out from underneath them. "Aw, she called us perfect!"

"I knew she liked us on the inside."

"Come on, it's so obvious."

"Can you two pick a better time to mock me?"

"Sure," Shachi agreed, and the three of them stood back-to-back, fists and gun raised, as the agents surrounded them. "Hey, we look pretty cool."

Penguin flexed his fists as the train sped beneath roiling desert-storm clouds. "Hell yeah, let's—"

"Down!" Sophie threw herself on top of the two pirates as Anko and Hai Xing leapt onto the scene, cutting through the agents with several of the chocolatiers' baking weapons, which both ruined the moment and saved their butts.
Penguin rolled over on his back. "At least buy us dinner first."

Shachi raised his hand. "I want primo seating at the kidney feast."

"Less talk more fight, please," Sophie requested.

"Who says we can't multitask?"

As they ran to catch up with their crewmates, Sophie wobbled to her feet. Three compartments down, Law burst through the train top, thrown into the air by Teresa. Ursa grabbed Teresa's ankle before she could slice Law apart and hurled her back into the compartment; the entire train shook. Sundae was holding marines at bay with a wall of melting ice cream as she shouted into her Den Den Mushi.

Sophie took one look at this fight and knew that she didn't belong.

For any sane person who had a hole ripped through their gut, their bodies would naturally relinquish the pain and throw themselves into the river of blissful unconsciousness. But all Sophie could think about was how she wasn't indestructible like the other godforsaken, unfairly overpowered scumbags on the Grand Line. What an embarrassment that one dang bullet put her out of commission.

Her own weakness pissed her off. Cutting through the pain, sweat, and blood was a stubborn, knife-blade of a thought: *Hell has to work a lot harder than this if it wants to drag me down.*

Instead of lowering herself into the safety of the compartment, Sophie backed up toward Charlotte Sundae, firing off her recently-acquired gun. Sundae was still yelling into the Den Den Mushi, her makeup melted off in dripping blobs, leaving her face white and wrinkled. The closest marine eeped when he saw her. Sundae did not take that noise kindly.

"Jackanapes!" Sundae walloped him with a giant, gloopy spoon.

Sophie could've sworn she heard Ursa mutter, "my future wife, everyone," as she broke a fistful of rifles on her knee. They snapped like sticks.

Bepo was dealing with his own group of marines, swinging his arms with the velocity of an inebriated koala. Sophie eyed him, worried at the copious amount of sweat that was forming a puddle at his feet.

"It's a guy in a bear suit," a marine said to his comrades. "I think he's supposed to be the Heart Pirates' mascot. Or some kind of pervert?"

Hearing this rude talk, Bepo decided to chase the marines at the pace of a very determined banana slug. Sophie should've expected this. They had an ice-cream woman, a fishman, and a polar bear fighting in the desert. Hai Xing was slowing down, the others covering most of his hits, and Sundae was already just a talking blob of dairy. They were getting overpowered.

Sophie shot at the marines surrounding Bepo until someone pulled the backpack from where it was hanging off one shoulder. Pain flashed. She thought she heard Goliath's squeaks and staggered after it. Her fist met jawline, her backpack flew through the air, and she must be going crazy because there were green birds in the corner of her vision—

She reached for her backpack and slipped off of the train.

"Shit—" Law turned, and Teresa used the distraction to kick him across the mouth.
"Sophie-chan!"

"Do you see her!?"

"No, I—holy shit."

A flock of Giant Quetzals rose up, flying alongside the train in an emerald wave.

\textit{Don't fall}, was Sophie's first thought as she clutched her backpack to her chest, astride a giant bird. She felt every beat of its wings underneath her and adjusted her balance on the feathers. She looked behind her at the young woman she was riding with and shouted over the wind, "That was awesome!"

Celaeno gave a quick thumbs-up, then narrowed her eyes as she steered the bird into a nosedive right into the marines. Sophie gripped the bird as tight as she could and braced herself, wind roaring in her ears. The marines scattered, some leaping over the train to avoid collision, as they rocketed like a green bullet over the battle.

Celaeno pulled out of the dive and rose up into the air again, laughing silently.

"Scratch what I said earlier," Sophie gasped. "\textit{That} was awesome."

"That was so hot! My girlfriend is amazing!" Norma crowed from her Giant Quetzal, chucking a basket of avocados at the marines. "Also, we should've grabbed real weapons, why did we think throwing snacks at these guys was a good idea?"

Musca disagreed. "You destroyed my house and killed my succulents, asshat!" he yelled, pelting Teresa with corn.

Giant Quetzals surrounded the train, Charlotte Sundae's crewmates among them as they rode beside the Machinastein soldiers. They flung spears at the agents and shouted as they spotted President Ursa.

The battle slowed as all sides of the fight assessed their numbers. Law still looked grim, aware that a cavalry meant nothing to Teresa.

Sundae threw down the receiver of her Den Den Mushi, a pleased grin on her face. "We're finished here, marines!" No one paid her any attention. "OI, YA BLEEDIN' BILGE RATS! I SAID, IT'S OVER!"

"You think these count as reinforcements?" Teresa retorted coolly, loosening her tie.

Celaeno maneuvered her bird right next to the train, close enough for Sophie to hear Sundae shout, "Three man-o'-wars near Applenine Island, commanded by a Vice Admiral Momonga."

It was a warning. A threat. And it worked, judging by how Teresa froze.

"My siblings' warships have already been deployed." Sundae tapped her Den Den Mushi. "They say they can reach Applenine in half a day. Won't be enough time for the Vice Admiral to run. If you stand down, so will they. This is Big Mom country now."

"President Ursa—" it was amazing that Teresa still had the gall to address Ursa civilly, Sophie thought, "—you're not even going to fight your own fights?"

"I did what you forced me to do," Ursa said, as Sundae cackled. "I chose a side."
"You chose the wrong side."

"KISS MY WRINKLED ASS," the supercentenarian bellowed. "Will you put a Vice Admiral at risk? Be a marine killer?"

Teresa went unnaturally still. She lowered her axe, her gaze firmly on Hippo, waiting for him to say something, do something for her. Sophie knew that look. She was overly familiar with it when it came to her teacher; betrayal.

"Let's move," Hippo said to the pirates, jumping back to the other compartment. Sophie released a breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

Law swung Kikoku, cutting the link between the conductor's compartment and the rest of the train. Celaeno waved her arm to Norma and Musca, and they followed after the lone compartment.

Between each wing-beat, Sophie watched the figures on the train grow smaller, and then they were gone.

"I can't let ya murder her," Sundae warned, as the Heart Pirates vanished from sight. "The balance between Big Mom and the World Government is thin enough."

"My city has seen enough bloodshed. I'll let you leave Machinastein." Ursa patted her armless shoulder, where Teresa had ripped it straight out of its metal socket. "But not without dislocating an arm."

Whatever was jamming the Den Den Mushi waves didn't reach this far outside of the city. The Hearts finally got through to Manta, and he reported that the submarine was fine and they'd meet them at the north end of the island. In the meantime, as the train chugged on, Law bandaged any wounds on his crewmates that needed immediate attention. He did a quick check on Sophie's stitches and was satisfied when he saw she hadn't ripped any of them. He also spared her a glare when she moaned if anyone had a working cigarette lighter and said icily that he'd Room her cigarettes into the ocean if she kept asking that.

Cigarette-less and moody, Sophie half-listened to the conversation around her as she rummaged through her backpack. The contents of her backpack had become disorganized during the fight. She arranged her notes neatly on her lap and stretched out her hand distractedly. "Sensei, hand me the cage."

Hippo and Law reached for the rat cage at the same time. A vein bulged in Hippo's forehead. Law pointed at himself. "I'm a doctor, too."

"Only an idiot with an atom-sized brain would ever call you sensei."

"Sophie, did you hear what he called you?"

"Never mind, I'll get it myself." She pushed past the doctors and peered at Goliath. "Still alive?"

The rat, undoubtedly used to being tossed around at this point, gave her a look like, you muffinfudger. Yeah, she could tell. Celaeno, Norma, and Musca immediately came over to coo at the adorable test subject. The Hearts also drifted closer, though they seemed more interested in talking with the nice-looking students who sort of helped save them from marines.

"I know what this is."
Sophie lifted her head. Hippo was staring at the—where did the notes in her lap go? _Oh, you gotta be…_

"You never had access to those documents," Hippo said slowly, flipping through her Red Sky research. "We'd gotten rid of them after… you wouldn't have known about how they…"

"Hi." Sophie snapped her fingers. "Science, please."

"The gigantification scientists had difficulty moderating how fast the kids’ lungs grew. There was compound used to stabilize their breathing, an anticholinergic drug that blocked the acetylcholine in their nervous systems, keeping the neurotransmitters calm instead of erratic. In the seventh generation, the one Odin was born in, the subjects were able to reproduce the molecules themselves."

"He evolved new molecules to stabilize the breathing process?" Law joined in on the conversation, brow furrowed.

"It _does_ sound like a way to treat Red Sky’s symptoms, how the lungs can't stop contracting because of the acetylcholinesterase overload," Sophie murmured.

"It makes sense, there were signs of immense stress on his lungs."

"…Why do you sound like you've have seen his organs?"

"I have them back on my ship," Law said blithely. Hippo was undergoing immense stress himself. "You experimented on—"

"Not just experimented. I killed him."

"You—"

"Hey, we're all bad scientists who've made poor life decisions," Sophie said firmly. This was a good reminder that if she ever mentioned she killed a World Noble in front of Hippo, he would combust and that would not be an exaggeration.

"Some more than others," Hippo added.

"Don't talk to Law-san like that. Of all the scientists and doctors in the World Government, the only people who bothered to work on a cure for Red Sky were a traitor and a pirate."

Hippo looked down, chastened. Looking amused at her sudden defense of him, Law agreed with her suggestion to try it out when they got to the submarine.

Hai Xing and Bepo were the first to spot the ocean. The rest joined the navigator and the cook at the window and watched the coastline surge into view. The Hearts cheered when they spotted the yellow submarine on the horizon, and Law asked the students if they knew how to operate the train back into the city. The three of them glanced at each other, unsure, and Norma proclaimed that they'd never been on a pirate ship before.

Sophie replied that the Heart Pirates were a hospitable bunch of pirates—but they had to watch out for random beheadings.

Hippo found himself tentatively grinning as he watched his kid. But she moved away from him, leaning out the open door with her arms around Idiots A and B—no, Penguin and Shachi, those were their names—and Hippo's hand fell back to his side, his smile disappearing as an uneasy
realization came over him.

"What the absolute fruitcake blueberry muffins."

"Said scientists everywhere as they discover a cure to a debilitating nerve agent," Law remarked.

"What scientists say everywhere is 'I don't know how this happened.' Which also applies, in this case."

There was a fully healthy rat sniffing in front of them. Combination dosage of 2-PAM chloride, mandrake, and whatever was in Odin's molecules. The secret ingredient from an atrocity G-13 committed... was the cure to another atrocity they committed.

The universe was a giant joke.

"Naturally, there has to be a more detailed investigation." Law looked up from observing Goliath's tiny organs underneath a microscope and Roomed them back into the rat. "But the lungs are working fine again, and the Red Sky molecules have been killed off."

Sophie didn't even have time to celebrate this surprising turn of events as she jotted down her notes. Though if she had time for anything, she really wanted to lie down and take a nap. Law went off to supervise his crew as they made last-minute adjustments and preparations for the oncoming storm.

"It's brilliant work," Hippo said. "I can't begin to describe how surprised I am that you and Trafalgar managed to... maybe I shouldn't be so surprised. You're excellent at chemistry and he's..." Hippo's expression strained. "...a doctor, technically."

"Hm," Sophie said, her thoughts drifting. She left Celaeno, Norma, and Musca in the galley with Hai Xing, the only pirate she trusted to cause the least amount of trouble with an audience. (Valross and Shachi already ran by, stripping off the top half of their boiler suits, shouting if there was anything heavy in the galley that needed lifting. They also stuck their heads in the operation room to check if Sophie was okay with her teacher, and that was far more of a surprise.)

"I actually met him once," Hippo pointed at the embalmed lungs that once belonged to Saint Kasimir's right-hand man. "As a kid, I mean."

Sophie stopped writing and fiddled with Odin's dogs tags on her neck. "He was sold to a—"

"A World Noble, I remember. Twenty years ago. I couldn't stop it."

That was something Hippo hadn't mentioned before. "You were there?"

"I couldn't stop it," he said again, quieter. "I was a junior doctor, and—no, maybe that's what I just kept telling myself. When I found you, I thought it was a sign. I started loving G-13 because I loved you so much. I wanted to raise it well for future generations. Somewhere along the way, I forgot that I loved you more."

Sophie squeezed the quill until it hurt. "What do you want me to say to that?"

He looked at her for a long moment. "Nothing. I... nothing."

The pirates' shouts were audible down the hall, breaking the tense silence.

"What a rowdy bunch," Hippo said, and Sophie blinked at the lack of disapproval in his voice. "But
they look out for each other. Reminds me of my old platoons."

She had an urge to tell him about Anko. How he threw a tantrum and left the crew for a few days. Just up and left, of his own free will. How pissed she was; how she much of a coward she thought he was. How fools like him would get killed by their squad before they ever managed to die in battle. How when he came back, and they smacked him around a little and went on with their lives, and it was one of the strangest things she'd ever felt envy for.

She realized Hippo was watching her as she gazed at the hallway, where the pirates' voices were.

"You don't have to sabotage your own future, kid. You could be free. I wouldn't blame you."

Even someone as selfish as her sometimes had eye-opening epiphanies. Sometimes those epiphanies come in the form of pirates with wry smirks and one hell of a traumatic backstory. She had chosen to walk down this path of brambles, and now it was time to see it through. It was like Ursa accepting Sundae's help and Big Mom's protection. This was the best thing, the only thing, that Sophie could do now. And she had to do it without the Hearts. As she thought it, Sophie wasn't afraid. She had gained a greater perspective after her many adventures on Machinastein, and it felt like armor.

It would not be like this morning, when she almost burst into tears at the thought of voluntarily choosing to leave the—no, it would not be like that anymore. She could handle this alone. G-13, Saint Kasimir, even Law, when she had first met him—Sophie had overcome them all by herself. She could do it again. What else had the World Government taught her, but that her life was a worthy sacrifice for a greater cause? "I made my decision to fix G-13's mistakes."

"They aren't your—"

"The gigantification experiments weren't your mistakes, either. But you stepped up because nobody else did."

"It wasn't an act of altruism. I had someone I wanted to do it for."

"So do I," said Sophie automatically, and wasn't sure if she was talking about herself or… well, didn't matter. She tapped her hands on the steel operation table, then nodded. "Anyway, I won't ask you to come to Vira with me, but I won't say no, either. You could help a lot as a doctor. Go back to G-13, stay on Machinastein, stick with me—do whatever you want, sensei."

She gathered her notes and bumped into Law outside of the operation room, who was on his way back.

"You good?" Law asked as she neared and started walking with him.

"Better now. It's weird being in that room without being tied down by leather belts."

"I meant your wound. But it seems I may have awoken something immoral in you."

"Yeah, yeah. It hurts, but not as much if I ignore it and push it into the back of my mind." She was rather good at that. "Hey, did you talk to sensei at some point?"

Law investigated the handle of his nodachi. "Did he say something?"

A small smile crept over her face. "Thanks, I think."

He didn't reply.
"You did something nice for me," she added.

"I'm a nice, decent person."

"That sounds worse than a swear coming from you," Sophie said, not even joking a little bit. "Hey, we cured Red Sky today. This deserves a victory dance."

"Yeah, rather not."

"A hi-five, then. That won't damage your reputation as a ruthless pirate, right? I know you have to be careful about that."

Shaking his head, he took his hand out of his pocket and lifted it. The satisfying _smack!_ of a hi-five rang out in the hallway, and Sophie beamed as she looked at their hands. It was kind of funny how much larger his was compared to hers. If she moved her fingers, she could slip them between his and lace them together.

She let go. "When you leave, don't say goodbye to me," Sophie told him. "I've had enough of that. Actually, don't say anything. Just go."

"Why so dramatic?"

"I'm not kidding. If you call my name, I'll come running."

There was probably a better way to phrase that. But she was too tired to think of syntax. Sophie gave him a friendly pat on the arm and hoped that conveyed the depths of her appreciation for the strange ways their lives intersected. He didn't move at all, looking at her with a furrowed brow that was so very much Law. She wondered how she could already miss him if he was standing right next to her.

"Well, anyway," Sophie said cheerfully, and puncturing the awkward end to the conversation was a dark shadow that passed over the porthole. A Machinastein ship pulled up beside them and dropped anchor.

---

"We lost the city, but perhaps it's not all gone to waste."

Teresa ground her teeth, careful not to move her shoulder as she rested her weight against the railing of her ship. Her arm was on fire, but the pain of resetting it would fade. Eventually.

"Your reputation precedes you," the bookkeeper continued, smiling that creepy fucking smile. "And yet you've been stuck at the same job for over a decade, while those weaker and less experienced than you have risen higher."

Teresa ground her teeth harder and glanced at her crew. They hadn't lost many numbers, which was fortunate. But losing numbers at all was never good. Not to a neutral island, not to a Yonkou, and definitely not to a Yonkou that claimed said neutral island as its protectorate.

"It's simple. Show your superiors that you're not another weak-willed woman." The bookkeeper steepled his pale hands. "Win, please. Trafalgar Law's head, Strangways Sophie, G-13's research. Win and expand our coffers. Win and earn the respect you deserve."

---

"It's as they say," Ursa rasped weakly, like she was on the verge of death, and burst out laughing,
"AIN'T NO SCHOOL LIKE THE OLD SCHOOL!"

The crowd of soldiers and chocolatiers parted for the Hearts as they came aboard. Their president was back to wearing fuzzy pink slippers, in her miniature, hunchbacked form that deceptively hobbled around with a cane. Sophie was the first to ask if Machinastein was going to be okay after exporting all their chocolate to Big Mom.

"Only our chocolate exports," Ursa corrected. "Machinastein doesn't just cultivate cacao, though that's what we're most known for. Do you know what this is?"

They leaned forward. She held a long, thin, stick-like bean between her fingers.

"Vanilla," Ursa said cheekily.

The President of Machinastein had an ace up her sleeve the whole time.

The chocolatiers intermingled with his crew in some post-battle conversation, laughing as they recounted the battle against CP5 like it had been some epic, one hundred-day war. Celaeno pulled Sophie over, and Law was about to follow when Ursa said, "I forgot to mention the last Haki. The disposition of the Conqueror."

He turned.

"It cannot be learned. Only one in a million people have it, this strange power can wipe out armies with a single glance. The ones who are born with it are said to be touched by the gods, chosen as kings."

"Does that have to do with the will of D?" Law inquired, and her eyes glimmered.

"Indeed, Conqueror's Haki appears to be a common trait of those who bear the name of D. Great things have followed them throughout history. Great and terrible things. The Pirate King, Gol D. Roger, was one of them. There's been a boy in the newspaper recently…"

"Monkey D. Luffy. A one hundred thousand bounty for some exploit in Alabasta."

"Yes, and what a familiar straw hat he wears," Ursa hummed. "You've awakened one Haki, Trafalgar. What you're able to do with it is up to you. Your crew will always be welcomed back to Machinastein."

He tipped his hat. "You have my thanks."

Law caught bumblebee hair in the corner of his eye; Sophie was blinking as Penguin and Manta pulled her aside to ask if she was okay after talking with her teacher, and when she nodded quizzically they gave the other pirates a thumbs-up.

If you call my name, I'll come running. There were so many more important things to think about, especially concerning Haki, yet he couldn't get a few damn words out of his head. The simple way she said it was the furthest thing from Kunlun, when she implored him to consider her as a Heart Pirate. She was different now; she knew what sort of bastard he was. She knew, and yet… I'll come running.

He drifted closer to Sophie, thinking that he had to leave as fast as possible. Or else this was going to hurt, in a way he really fucking hated things hurting.

He barely made it a couple more steps when Hippo accosted him in the shade of the mast.
"Do you have a minute?"

Law raised a brow. Hippo sighed.

"Waterboarding, screwing needles in your feet, pulling your nails out, starvation, psychological torture... I was a medic out in the field, but I was also the guy who kept prisoners right on the brink of death. Break their spirit and they start asking you to put them out of their misery. There's a whole twelve-step method for it. Anyway, if we happen to benevolently toss them out with the rest of the garbage, they'll never recover. They'll spend the rest of their days half-dead, unable to function, and wither away."

"...You're into some kinky shit, huh."

The weathered marine sighed again. "I understand pirates get hurt. She loses an eye or a leg, you know—awful, but understandable. Can still live a fulfilled life. But so help me, if Sophie dies?"

His entire countenance changed and he stepped forward into the light, and Law actually took a step back.

"I will hunt you down and put the fear of God in you. Don't fuck this up."

Charlotte Sundae's frigate appeared around the cliff, searching for their captain. Following after them at a safe distance mortar shells couldn't reach was CP5's battleship. The moment the Hearts sailed past Machinastein's waters, they would undoubtedly try to arrest them. 'Try' being the key word. Sophie was sure the pirates wouldn't go down easily.

"You seriously held out on us, Sophie-san," Musca hissed. Sophie blinked. She was surrounded in an instant.

"I'm... sorry?"

"He's talking about the pirates," Norma said. "Specifically, Trafalgar Law. I don't see it, buuut..."

Celaeno emphatically raised her eyebrows and nodded at the tattooed, broody figure who was minding his own business and probably didn't appreciate being ogled at. Which Sophie wasn't doing at all, ever, in the history of her life.

"Catch ya later, asswipes!" Anko shouted as he passed by them, throwing up a peace sign.

"That guy is the worst, though," Musca commented.

"It's how he shows affection. Also, here. He should go home with you guys." She passed Goliath's cage to Celaeno. "Um... so, about me being from the World Government, it's a long, boring story..."

Celaeno smiled and shook her head. Sophie didn't need a translation. It's okay, she'd said.

"Yeah?"

Yeah.

Sophie hugged them so tight they all wheezed. After that, Ursa urged her citizens onto Sundae's warship; it was safer there, with CP5 close by. Sundae's ship would sail back to the city port, while the clipper—the medium-sized vessel they stood on, built for speed over capacity—would head to
Vira with Sophie and a small group of sailors. It was starting to drizzle lightly. The storm was reaching the shore.

She searched for the pirates and her stomach dropped. They were leaving the way she asked them to. Silently, without a glance in her direction—even Law, who didn't turn his head as he hopped the railing. They boarded their submarine, leaving her on the Machinastein clipper. This was fine.

(it hurts it hurts it hurts)

This was totally, completely fine. The last thing she would ever hear from them was "Catch ya later, asswipes." Cool. Thanks, Anko.

Sophie picked up her backpack… and found it suspiciously lighter. Her G-13 projects were all inside, but— "Sensei, where are the Red Sky notes? And the test tubes?"

"I put them in the cabin," he said breezily.

She slung on the backpack with a sigh. "So you're coming with me?"

"Nope."

"If you want to stay on Machinastein and play Go and drink until you die of alcohol poisoning, that's your prerogative." She rolled her eyes at his silence. "You can say something, you know."

"I'm going to Vira on my own."

Sophie stopped.

"I missed out on your birthday. I owe you something big."

When she finally remembered how to speak, she stuttered, "What are y-you saying? G-13 is your home. You…" She frowned, confusion and suspicion gnawing inside. "This is a joke. You're trying to p-pull a fast one on me again, I won't fall for—"

"You have every right to leave and never speak to me again," Hippo said calmly. "I'd just like for you to listen to my last etiquette lecture."

"I—hold on—"

"Live for yourself. When you sail with those pirates, remember that you're also strong without them. This is your life. Not Trafalgar Law's. Not G-13's, not mine, or anyone else's. Don't ever again live on the fumes of someone else's dream. You'll fight a lot of marines. Win against them. Survive. Live. Keep living."

A shaky breath left her. The bitterness ebbed away, like a low tide out to sea. It left behind uncertainty. There was a lot she had seen on the Grand Line over the past few months. But this? This was the one thing she couldn't believe.

"You don't know how hard it is to leave your home," Sophie protested.

"I know—"

"No, you don't. You can't go home again." He didn't understand. He wouldn't be offering if he did. "You can't ever go home again! You can't be around your friends again, you're leaving everyone behind—"
"Sophie," he said in that same calm tone. "I need you to keep listening. Back when Teresa was stationed in North Blue—she never told me the details, but a marine died because of her. Her reputation for killing all the pirates she finds is to compensate for that one mistake."

When Ursa called Teresa a marine killer, she froze up completely. Sophie didn't think there was an unluckier sea than North Blue.

"When you fight Teresa, you need to know her strength masks vulnerability. She isn't unbeatable, and..." Hippo bowed his head and exhaled. When he looked up, he was smiling even as his eyes were overbright. "Ah, maybe this is a mistake. Should you come with me after all?"

"Isn't it too late for that?" Sophie said viciously, and broke apart, covering her face in her hands. "You're never on time for anything, sensei."

He hugged her and years dissolved in Sophie; she was six-years-old again. He still smelled like whiskey and rubbing alcohol.

"I understand," Hippo said into her hair, "what you meant by being alone on the Grand Line."

How long ago was it when she shouted at Hippo in the hospital, that night she met Law and Bepo again? An eternity, probably.

"You must have been lonely without a home."

"It wasn't that bad," she choked out. "I found these really weird pirates."

Her hands shook as she wrapped them around him, and remembered what it was like to be young. There was a part of her that never wanted to pull away. The part of her that was a child, that waited so long to hear this from him. For a moment, Sophie prepared herself to feel like she was back on the fortress' white battlements, and the ensuing wave of nostalgia and sadness.

…but that didn't happen. They were still standing on the deck of the clipper, the salt-wind around them. With her cheek resting on Hippo's shoulder, Sophie wasn't reminded of the past. She only thought of the present, and how people could change. Like a chemical reaction, undergoing synthesis. From one matter to another. From lead into gold. Chrysopoeia.

Hippo struggled with something much greater than goodbye, and said, "Crazy kid. Why'd you have to grow up without me?"

"I'm still shorter than you."

"That's not what I meant."

Six-year-old Sophie stayed in his arms, would always stay in his arms.

Twenty-year-old Sophie let go with a wry smile. "Yeah, old man, I know."

She caught Ursa's gaze, who was standing a mindful distance away. Ursa, who had expected good things of her, who had done so much for her, and here she was, running off to be a pirate.

"I'm sorry," Sophie said softly. It felt like she was apologizing to Nellie, too.

Ursa chuckled, gap-toothed. "I'm sure I'll get over it. Now, as us old-timers say," she slammed her cane, "get off my ship, rookie!"

"Sophie!"
There it was: a piercing, strident voice louder than the rain, calling her name, reminding her of her word. Law wasn't alone. All the Hearts joined in, shouting, Sophie and Sophie-chan and Strangways, get your ass over here between the two ships.

Live, Hippo told her. Keep living. Yes. She was going to live until she burned into a shooting star, until every bit of her matchstick-self was chewed up into ash. She was going to live like drinking clear clean water out of the palm of her dusty hand. Until she wrangled everything out of herself, everything. She would not forget. "There's so much more I—"

"Me, too." Hippo nodded. "One day."

"One good day," Sophie promised, and ran towards the ocean.

—

"Hurry up, Sophie!"

"Hold on, I'm trying to button this dang—okay, coming!"

Gone were the Machinastein silks and the sandals; Sophie stepped onto the deck, clad in a Heart Pirate's boiler suit. Well, in one of Anko's boiler suits, since they were the same height (five feet eight inches; a small woman she was not). It was loose in the chest and snug around the waist, softer than she expected but still durable. Her feet were stuffed in a pair of Hai Xing's old boots, and she tied her hair up with one of Manta's ribbons he used for his braids.

She had wrapped fresh bandages around her gunshot wound extra tight. She felt some of the pirates' worry, but no one insulted her by suggesting she stay inside. They had seen her fight and knew she could handle herself, or else why was she there? If she was with the Hearts, then she was with them 'till the end of the line.

Teresa's battleship was waiting for them, and the dark woman was standing at the bow. The waves churned, splashing onto the sub's deck. It was the perfect backdrop for her first fight as a pirate. Gale force winds whipped the Heart Pirates' flag; not a skull, but a weird smiley face. Sophie's weird smiley face.

Everyone was at the ready, stretching their limbs and waiting for their captain's orders. She stepped in place beside them. Her crew, her captain.

"Never in my life could I have imagined this," Sophie said aloud. She couldn't be dreaming; the cold spray of the sea would've woken her up.

Law laughed and leaned in. "You just got to the good part."

His smirk was dark and dangerous and full of things she wanted to know.

"It all begins now."

—

Hippo recalled that final, horrific day in Vira: crammed onto a ship of screaming refugees and limbless marines, realizing he forgot his own student, and watching her shove through the pier, hand outstretched as the ship left her behind. But it was different this time; he was watching her walk fearlessly into the storm.

"The thing about homes…" Ursa looked up at the rain. "There will always be another. And, one
hopes, better than the one before it.”

Hippo nodded, taking off his glasses to wipe his eyes.

The storm was quickly moving out to sea. On Machinastein, it was merely gently falling rain.

When they got back to the city, Celaeno, Norma, and Musca sought shelter underneath a café canopy and opened the cage Sophie had given them.

The rat known as Goliath ran through the rain-soaked streets of Machinastein. He ran past the crowds forming to help lift rubble, large, strong-armed women carrying baskets of tamales and steaming rice to share with their neighbors, children shouting as they located their favorite toy in the debris. He ran past the Jaguar Temple, where a new Machinastein flag was being raised—and beneath it, the infamous Jolly Roger of Big Mom, Queen of Totto Land and an Emperor of the New World.

He ran and ran and ran until he arrived home, where he recounted to all his friends the most peculiar adventure he had with a horrid girl who poked needles in him and a wicked man who studied him and their much nicer friends who fed him lots of fruit. He recounted it all until he got tired, and curled up and took a very well-deserved nap.

*to be continued*

Chapter End Notes

About damn time.
Home Is Where the Heart Is

Chapter Notes

Apparently, the ending last chapter was wrapped up without my signature ‘what sort of shrooms is this author inhaling’ cliffhangers and I received some comments from people thinking MNP is over! Not yet, folks! We still got lotsa mysteries to solve!

I want to apologize for the slow pacing of this arc. I went in with a chainsaw to edit, and I hope it reads better now. Unfortunately, my anxiety keeps telling me that I’ve tricked you guys into reading something you didn’t sign up for. (I am told this is not true by very kind people! My anxiety, however, goes ‘la la la I can’t hear you’ whenever this happens.)

The expectation an adventure/humor fic has is—well, lighter fare! I owe an explanation for why MNP kept getting weirdly heavy and long. The roots of dark comedy, cringe humor, and self-deprecation (all things I think encompasses MNP) are a lot to unpack, so I felt this arc should serve as a lengthy examination of why we use them and our own demons they protect us from. It was difficult for me to write and I cried a lot. This confirmed my theory that all writers are slightly masochistic.

Anyway, this is still a morally-grey story about murdery pirates, so let’s get on with the bad puns and adventure!

"I'll take care of the main boss and the marines on the deck," Law instructed, gathering his crew in a huddle. "Find out where they keep the provisions below."

"We saw some marines helping themselves to the golden bricks on Machinastein's temples," Shachi told Sophie, grinning wickedly. "It's only fair we get to have it, since we defended the city and all."

Ah… this was truly her first step into a pirate's life… yo-ho, yo-ho…

Tumultuous waves battered both ships as they neared each other and, according to Manta, made aiming the torpedoes too difficult. In the control room, Anko steered the submarine. Kamasu stayed below in the engine room to keep an eye on the machinery as they weathered the storm. Though it was midday, the sky was a storming, roiling grey, flashes of hot sun peeking out through the clouds like light filtering through silk.

"Hai Xing, take care of the lockpicking. Manta, Valross, bring back any treasure you find. Penguin, Shachi, create havoc. Bepo, watch my back. This won't be a war of attrition. Both sides have been damaged by the earlier fight, so the ensuing battle will be quick and brutal." Law rubbed his chin. "We'll also have to properly destroy the ship so it can't follow us."

"Ah, um." Sophie raised her hand. "Please let me handle that. I've been on these types of Government warships before, so I know where the gunpowder magazine is located."

"Good. You need to take the backpack with you?"
Sophie adjusted the straps on her shoulders. It was much lighter now that she only kept her G-13 research inside. "It won't be a bother, promise."

"ARE WE READY TO PARTY, ASSFUCKS?" Anko's voice shouted from the speaking tubes.

It had been a long day. There was no asking if they could or couldn't get past CP5 and Teresa. They would. There was no other option. The Hearts were hopping on their feet, grinning, sure of their victory or at least doing a bang-up job convincing Sophie they were.

She took out the gas mask. It was a fifty million bounty, and her gut twisted at the thought of wearing it in front of the marines. Now she understood why the Hearts wore their Jolly Rogers on all their clothes. They were telling the world, here I am.

As Law brought forth a Room, Sophie pulled the gas mask over her face. She had burned all her bridges, and now they were lighting the way for her.

In a flash of blue, her boots hit the deck of CP5's warship.

This was not the same CP5 chief who arrived to Machinastein that morning in an ironed suit, a clean pinstripe coat, and shined leather shoes. This CP5 chief looked awful. Her jacket was ripped on the sleeves, a black eye, and her movements were noticeably slower than earlier. A parting gift from President Ursa.

Now, to get rid of the crowd…

Flash grenade! Law signed at Sophie, who looked back at him, befuddled. Teresa, on the other hand, knew exactly what he said.

"Cover your eyes!" She threw her own hands over her face and the marines on the deck followed suit.

Law sent a brief thank you to Cora-san for teaching him all those years ago. "Shambles."

Bodies snapped apart, rearranged themselves, stuck together again in a writhing, macabre nightmare. A torso with six arms scuttled around in a panic. Marines screamed as their heads were transmogrified together by their necks. Hands conjoined to faces, eyes attached to feet.

"Thanks for the help, Teresa-ya," Law called. "Now that that's out of the way…"

Surrounded by the disassembled bodies of her crew, Teresa gripped her axe and fixed her gaze on Law. If looks could kill, he'd be a pile of bloody, censored, X-rated mush.

"Go!" he ordered his crew, who made for the stairs that led below deck. Teresa lunged.

The metal of their blades clashed together and he realized that this wasn't going to be that easy. The huge, broad-shouldered woman was right in his face, strands of black hair coming undone from her high ponytail, her black eyes narrowed in hate. "Your bounty poster says you're from North Blue. Is that right?"

"It is." With a flick of his wrist, Kikoku tore the axe from her grasp. Teresa hissed, clutching her arms. Law's attention snapped to it—she had been injured there, he could exploit that—

"Chief!"
Two swords came flying from the marines on the quarterdeck. Without blinking she caught them out of the air and attacked Law again with vicious strength. *Fuck*, did this woman not feel pain?

Her next swing felt like colliding headfirst with a boulder. Law stumbled, and the raindrops hitting his face slowed.

He could feel every speck of water. *One drop, two drops*… Time itself was unwinding before him, like he was watching reality slow from another plane of existence. The wood beneath his feet creaked slowly, drawn-out. The crest of a wave that was about to batter the ship was almost frozen in place.

*Three… four…*

He became hyper-aware of Teresa's breathing. The slightest tremor in her hands where she held her swords. The shift of her weight onto her left foot as she braced herself to charge.

*Five… six…*

He saw her tilting her swords in just the right angle to neatly cut Law from shoulder to hip. He could feel her triumph rushing through his veins.

*Now.*

He sprung off his feet, ducking beneath the swing, and sliced Kikoku across her left thigh. The force was strong enough to slash her leg off, but all she did was stagger back, her Armament Haki shielding her from his blade and leaving her unharmed.

Law, however, was back to feeling like his head was about to explode. The awareness of everyone on the ship blazed through his mind. Everyone. It was like sinking into a well of pure, overwhelming emotion and suffocating in it, unable to move or breathe or even think. His nerves were stretched into a million different directions.

He took a deep, excruciating breath, and remembered what Ursa told him—*focus on your own presence*. His adrenaline, his resolve. Let everything else go. Close the treasure chest and keep the boy inside.

…*Come on, focus!*

Teresa kicked him into the mast, grabbing her axe along the way. His bones seared, yet Law barely felt it underneath the echoes of immense *pain* that didn't belong to him. The world was turning to ash. He gasped, his hand scrabbling in front of him, sure that he was going to see it disintegrate into white lead as he crawled through the mountain of twitching bodies, the quiet whispers, the smell of rot, the eyes watching him, the fingernails dragging along his flesh, their agony and despair he felt like saltwater rushing into his lungs as he sank to the very bottom of the ocean—

"Captain!" Bepo yelled, and the clarity of it sliced through everything.

Time returned to normal, a thousand raindrops hitting him at once, and Law barely rolled out of the way as the blade whistled by his ear.

---

*Marines on the Grand Line fought in grueling conditions every day, and their mantra was win fast and safely. Subdue, restrain, onto the next pirate. There was no flash, no style, only aggression and practicality. They weren't machines born just to die on the front lines; they had to fight for themselves*
Sophie had the highest respect for the style of fighting they taught her. She also knew the best ways to repel them.

The boiler suit was comfortable and easy to move in, and the cloth was made out of durable material. Which she had the perfect opportunity to test as she found herself face-to-face with a marine. He reached for her to grab her arms and break them quickly. Sophie sidestepped and grabbed his chin before he could stop his momentum forward, and used his own weight to flip him to the ground head-first.

It wasn't as hard as she expected to fight marines. Granted, they were out to maim her, and her survival outweighed the very deep part of her that shuddered whenever she saw someone in a white shirt and seagull-embellished hat go down. It helped, also, to think about how they were out to kill the Heart Pirates, and it's not like marines had a monopoly on ethical violence no matter what they said about Absolute Justice.

Penguin and Shachi charged into the agents on standby. Hai Xing was twirling a ring of keys around his finger, and the marine he'd pilfered it from was asking himself, "Wait, what happened to my—" before Manta cracked a shotgun over his head.

"Where's the booty!?” Valross hollered, sticking his knives into anything that moved. "Gimme the booty!"

"We'll clear the path, little lady!” Manta shouted, whacking away marines with his shotgun. His laughter boomed across the inner hallways.

As the other pirates drew the marines' attention, Sophie snuck fast-walked behind them. *Don't look suspicious, don't look suspicious, I'm just whistling casually and blending into the wall, nothing to see here…*

The gunpowder magazine had to be in the deepest part of the ship. But first, she needed to get to the artillery room to find some linstock and flint. Wouldn't do to light all the gunpowder without some safety precautions!

A bullet nicked the corner of her gas mask. Sophie flinched.

The pale, skeletal bookkeeper strode out of whatever spot he'd been hiding in.

"Go! Every pirate we don't catch costs us money!” he shouted, urging more marines toward the deck where Law and Teresa were fighting. He focused in on Sophie. "I'll take care of this one."

…Mangos.

She crashed through a door in the hull to evade the bullets flying past her. They were in the deepest part of the ship, and there was very little light. She caught a whiff of something underneath the briny sea-smell. Sulfur. The gunpowder magazine was near.

Sophie flicked open her lighter. Nope, still dead. And she wasn't carrying any matches on her, either. There was no way of lighting all the gunpowder. She needed to get to the artillery room, but the bookkeeper was blocking her way.

She ducked behind a block of crates and cleared her throat, deepening her voice. "Uh, have we met before? If you're looking for Strangways Sophie, she ran the other way.”
"Oh?" the bookkeeper said, sounding surprised. "Guess I'll leave then."

She peeked around the corner and bullets fired at her face.

"That's d-dirty!" she shrieked, sprinting in the opposite direction behind another line of crates.

*Think, Sophie, think!* She'd gotten herself out of messes before, all in situations with the odds weighed heavily against her. Footsteps echoed behind her. Making sure not to be seen, Sophie crept to a heavy door that reeked of sulfur and nudged it open. There it was, gleaming in the darkness. Barrels and barrels of unlit gunpowder.

"Don't you ever get ashamed?" she asked loudly, sneaking away from the door.

"I serve justice. It's not my fault that the World Government is the one that gets to define what justice means."

"Yeah, we've really corrupted that word. Nowadays, justice means forcing an island into an alliance so you could squeeze money out of them. It means letting countries die rather than research a cure. People auctions. Selling weapons to war zones to make a profit off of death."

"I believe you are also guilty of that, Strangways Sophie. You'll never be able to run away from that. You were born into this life. You will always be a part of the World Government."

Fury boiled in her chest as she systematically ran through a dozen different scenarios of killing the bookkeeper. But before she could attempt any of them, she took a breath to control herself. Even if the World Government was within her, would always be within her, she could live with it.

It stays, and you live.

A suitable distance away, Sophie walked into the open, raising her hands to show she was unarmed and had given up.

He spun towards her, flintlock raised. "Surrendering? It's about time you realized you can't win."

Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that everyone who ever met her so easily believed that she was an idiot. Of course, it helped that she had the honest sort of face that screamed *punch me, I'm deeply insecure!*

"How about w-we make a deal?" With a quick swing of her arm, Sophie took off her backpack and showed it to the bookkeeper. "Here. All the p-projects I've made for G-13."

She threw it past the open door, into the dark room that was the gunpowder magazine. The bookkeeper edged into it, pointing his gun at her, and when Sophie shrugged, still with her hands up to show that she wasn't going to move, he jumped in. With his free hand, he rummaged through her backpack. She could practically see beli signs pop up over the man's head as he calculated how much he could sell it for. It was exactly how he looked at Law as he had called the pirate a *toy*.

"Worth fifty million. Will you take it a-and leave me and the Heart Pirates alone?"

"I don't think so. Not when you've so kindly allowed yourself to be caught. If I keep you alive, sell you at a good price to a Dragon, pass you around for a few years, sell you again, then…" the bookkeeper muttered, counting on his fingers.

Ah, such pleasant talk. "Here's something else, for the record. World Nobles aren't gods. Gods can't die."
"...How dare you speak such profanity—"

"Your masters are humans who've swindled the whole world into worshipping them. They're con artists and they're worse than pirates, because at least pirates are honest about who they are."

The pale eyes in the dark spasmed. "Don't make me—"

"Did you know that when World Nobles die, they bleed red and piss themselves like any common —"

He pulled the trigger. A spark.

The gunpowder magazine exploded, blowing Sophie into a wall of crates. Oh, she'd feel that tomorrow. Now, all she had to do was get to tomorrow and unenthusiastically receive the sore, aching complaints of her still-alive body.

The bookkeeper was a melting husk, and her science was burning up into ash. Well, she still kept pristine copies of them in her head. But her notes, the physical reminders of the years she dedicated to G-13... She hoped her babies appreciated this Viking send-off. Now they could return to carbon and rejoin the eternal cycle of nature's molecules.

Sophie limped out of the fire's immediate reach. She paused for a moment and fumbled inside her pocket for something, then lit a cigarette on one of the burning crates. When she got into the hallway, she yanked off the gas mask, sagged against the wall, and exhaled cigarette smoke with her eyes closed.

The perfect image of relaxation, as though the backdrop of a roaring fire behind her was a peacefully crackling fireplace. Nice.

—

A great boom exploded across the ship. From the portholes below, marines jumped overboard. The cheerfully smoldering chemist bumped into Hai Xing, Manta, and Valross, all carrying chests and winking gold jaguar statues. The treasure chests were stolen from pirate ships and they, as Valross put it, were just stealing it back. For the good of all piracy, of course.

They met Penguin and Shachi on the way back, who were fending off the CP5 agents. They staggered onto the deck with a massive crash, pirate and agent alike falling over each other. There was a loud, chaotic scrambling as waves knocked the ship back and forth. Flames licked up the wooden sides.

"Back to the sub, Captain's orders!" Bepo shouted from across the deck. The submarine was positioned unsteadily next to the battleship.

Valross and Manta grabbed onto the rope rigging of CP5's ship, cut through it, and used it to fly across the perilous gap between the two ships. Penguin and Shachi yelled for them to hurry as they dodged the agent's bullets by swinging away.

Law was catching his breath, clutching a rather nasty-looking cut across his chest as he braced himself against Kikoku. Teresa stared at the fire, general bedlam, and pirates scurrying away with CP5's loot—and her gaze landed on Sophie. Her eye twitched.

Sophie backed up, trying to hide behind Hai Xing or another conveniently-placed object of some sort. "W-would now be too late to start calling you Auntie?" She slipped backwards on the wet deck and hit the ground at the very moment the axe passed bare centimeters over her head. "Ow! I
Bih mah tungh…"

Hai Xing sprung between them and clapped his hands together, catching the blade between his palms. Sophie gasped. *What a badass!*

The cook, however, did not seem to relish this situation as the axe neared the tip of his nose. His newsboy hat slipped off and his arms visibly shook as Teresa towered over him. Her strength forced him—him! A half-fishman!—to step back.

"I know you," she muttered. "From Kunlun. You were a poor fighter then, too."

A dark green spine ripped through the bottom of Hai Xing's boot and he slammed it into her leg.

Teresa inhaled, but otherwise didn't even flinch. Blood oozed down her leg. She glanced at Hai Xing's birthmark across his forehead. "…Fishman?"

"Starfish toxin is strong enough to slow her down, right?" Sophie squeaked.

"For ten seconds, maybe," Hai Xing gritted out. "I'm not a blue-ringed octopus." He paused. "A blue-ringed octopus is—"

"*I know what it is! Please focus on saving our lives!*"

"Aye-aye-aye!" Bepo leaped into the fray with a well-placed kick at Teresa's side, sending her hurtling into the quarterdeck. "Have a taste of my mighty and powerful—"

"HAARGH," Teresa roared, bursting from the wreckage.

"UUWAHHH," Bepo cried, backpedaling.

Kikoku crashed against Teresa's axe. "Your fight's with me," Law snarled, and shouted over his shoulder, "Go! I'll catch up!"

"Let's go," Hai Xing crammed his hat back over his head and held onto three pieces of rope, "the sub is almost out of reach—" Bepo's butt clapped Hai Xing in the back, and he went off swinging with a rather anticlimactic, "Ahhhhhhh…"

A massive wave surged between the two ships, knocking them further apart.

"Noo! We're too far away!" Bepo's eyes became two dizzying whirls of panic. "What do we do now!?"

"C-calm down!" Sophie shrieked, ripping bits of hair from her scalp. "Do you know what this part is!? This is when where we discover our inner powers! Our backs are pressed to the wall! We're c-cornered! We have no choice! Haki, appear!"

She squeezed her eyes shut and focused so hard her face turned red and she gained the appearance of a constipated lobster. She could feel something burning within her! Unbridled power! Her butcheeks were clenched! Several blood vessels were being popped! Bepo was edging away from her! She was vibrating so intensely she was now a demonic blur! Yes! This… this feeling… *must be Haki!*

Ah… a light flatulence upon the breeze… a gentle passing of gas… a small *toot*, if you will…

"WHERE ARE YOU? MY HAKI!?" Sophie wailed to the heavens above. *O, ye cruel gods of the Grand Line!*
"Go! I can handle this!" Law yelled at them, and was cut off as a bullet arced past his face. He stopped, looking up.

Sophie followed his gaze to an agent reloading her rifle from the crow's nest. It was the sniper with the gold tooth—the one that shot her. With a twist of his hand, the sniper appeared before him on the deck, blinking at her changed surroundings. There was a witch light in Law's eyes.

It was Teresa's turn to block Kikoku. "Don't touch my crew," she snarled, defending the agent.

"I'm just getting even," Law retorted icily.

Before the sniper could aim again, Bepo kicked her in the head.

"Sophie!" Bepo tossed the rifle to her before going after his captain. She checked the ammo and lifted it to her shoulder.

Teresa, Law, and Bepo were moving too quickly for her to follow. Any shot she tried to make could very well hit the pirates. There was also no guarantee Teresa's Haki wouldn't just stop the bullets. They were running out of time. If Law depleted his stamina, he couldn't use his Devil Fruit powers to Room them away. They'd be stuck on a flaming, sinking ship with a bunch of marines.

What could someone like her, with no Haki, no superhuman strength, and no particularly cool weapon (like a grenade launcher, mangos, she really needed a grenade launcher) do? Think, Sophie, think!

…Haki wasn't an automatic reflex. That's right, Hai Xing had broken through Teresa's Armament while she was distracted. It wasn't like breathing, an act that usually required no concentration—Haki needed focus. That was it. What had Hippo told her about Teresa? What could she use…?

Bepo and Law flew into the ship's wheel and it shattered beneath them. Teresa blinked after she threw them into her ship's steering device and snapped, "Do you know how much warships cost nowadays!?"

Sophie shot the CP5 chief twice in the back to get her attention. The bullets pinged harmlessly onto the ground.

"Stay back," Law rasped, glaring at Sophie while struggling to raise himself onto his elbows. Bepo panted, lying flat on his belly.

The gunshot wound on her stomach ached. Sophie was in no condition to put up a fight, yes, but it'd be a mark on her pride as a traitor soldier if she couldn't take a few more punches. She pulled off her gas mask, letting it hang around her neck.

"Sensei told me everything about when you were stationed in North Blue," she shouted over the wind, and Teresa went alarmingly rigid. "A marine died because of a mistake you made."

"…What?"

"That's w-why you kill all those pirates," Sophie accused, and without looking at Law, stomped her foot three times on the ground. "It's to compensate for the f-fact that you're a fraud—"

She slammed against the wet deck and Teresa lowered her fist. Agony. She dry-heaved, something dribbling out of her mouth. So this was what Armament Haki felt like: a broken rib or two. Or three. She banged her palm against the ground twice as she staggered to her feet. Please remember, she willed. Remember what you noticed on Kunlun. G-13's tap code. It was fine if Law didn't
understand it, but all she had to do was let him know there was a plan… to hold on and wait a few more seconds.

"All the power you have, and you use it to raid islands like a common pirate." It was agonizing to talk, even breathe. "You f-failed again. Your crew is in pieces and Machinastein survives—"

Another punch. To the face, this time.

"Pineapples!" Sophie screeched, holding her bloody nose. "Ow! Mother of—god, that hurts!"

" Shut up. Shut the fuck up." Teresa's long, narrow brown face was contorted in anger. "I stayed with the World Government for decades. Decades. You're just some selfish, spoiled brat who can't tough it out. You get beat a few times and you run away? No. You're supposed to stay and keep taking the punches. That's what it means to be a woman in the Marines."

An old memory tugged at the threads of Sophie's mind. She had met Teresa a few times when she was very young; five or six. There used to be an affectionate lightness to the intelligence officer—she hadn't been in CP5 yet, back then—that she used to tease Hippo and ruffle Sophie's hair with. But then Teresa went off for a mission in North Blue and came back to the Grand Line three years later. Sophie vaguely remembered that day; she had stopped on the stairs outside Hippo's office, hearing voices inside. She peered through a crack in the door as a tall shadow sank on the floor beside Hippo and Lettidore's feet, her black hair cut short to her scalp back then, and Teresa had said something like, Been court-martialed. Blaming me for his death. All because of some stupid kid he was trying to save. Sophie wasn't sure if her memory was exactly right, but ever since then, the great pasta maker called Life had grinded Teresa into the workaholic juggernaut she was now. The next time they met, Teresa had shoved a far-too-heavy gun into Sophie's hands and ordered her to get stronger, or else she'd be an embarrassment to the World Government.

"You dishonor every woman who fought beside you in Vira. You were raised to be a leader in G-13 and now you're a lackey for a pirate," Teresa waved her hand in disgust at Law, "for some man."

Suddenly, gender politics!?! Well, Sophie could play that game, too! "Don't talk like the World Government isn't completely run by men," she retorted in a nasally voice, pinching her nose. "Like all your superiors aren't also men, who have never chosen a woman Admiral or Fleet Admiral in e-eight hundred years. Who work for Dragons who snatch up people like objects, b-because slavery is illegal except when it's not, right?"

Teresa's face was ashen. "That's—you don't know anyth—"

"Do you a-actually think you'll get promoted? Think about it. Would they ever choose you, who couldn't even k-keep one marine safe?"

"Stop it—"

"Go ahead, u-use Haki," Sophie goaded, cackling, her eyes electric-bright and teeth bared. "After all, you need it to kill someone as weak as me."

"Like hell!"

"You couldn't even kill me right on Kunlun, you failure."

Teresa raised her axe in both hands, her scream loud enough to ripple the ocean.

Law shot to his feet, plunging his fist through her chest—
"Mes."

It was too late for her to throw up Armament Haki, and too late to stop what had happened. Teresa doubled over, her hands reaching to stem the blood on her—but there was no blood, only an empty square in her chest where her heart should've been. Sophie could peer out the clean, unbleeding hole in her torso straight to the other side.

Law drew back his hand, holding something stark-red within a transparent cube. A beating heart.

His first movement was towards Sophie, holding her upright as she swayed on her feet. "Can you stand? Hey, look at me." Law gripped her chin, tilting her badly-wounded face as rain pelted them both. "That was reckless. I didn't even know what the message was."

"But you knew there was a message," she said with a weary, lopsided smile. He wrapped an arm around her waist, telling himself this was only to make sure she didn't fall over. "What did you call that? Mes?"

"Like a scalpel."

"I would've called it *Heart Attack*."

"Is it too late to change the name?" Bepo brought Kikoku over to Law.

"It's definitely too late." Law let Sophie rest against Bepo as he picked up his nodachi. Kikoku was singing again, and he knew he was only one on the ship who could hear it. The cursed blade was excited, sensing he was about to soak it in fresh blood. Had this always been a part of his Haki as well?

Teresa clutched the empty hole in her chest, stunned. Sophie pulled her gas mask on and raised the rifle. Bepo took a martial arts stance. It was over.

Law gripped Kikoku in one hand, her heart in another. "Are you prepared?"

She didn't look up. Her mouth moved, and her whisper distorted through the air, shaking him down to his thirteen-year-old self's amber bones.

Sign language. North Blue. A marine she couldn't save.

"Dying at the hands of a North Blue pirate…

Rocinante,

your ocean haunts me until the end."

Sophie could barely make out Teresa's voice beneath the wind and crashing waves, but Law went motionless. Wind whipped his blood-stained shirt across his chest, his disheveled hair across his forehead.

…Who the mangos was *Rosie Nonty*?
"Let me die on my feet, Trafalgar," Teresa commanded. There was no trace of regret on her face, even as she struggled to stay standing.

He didn't move.

"Law-san?" Sophie murmured, breathing shallowly to not cause more pain to her ribs. She tapped her rifle.

"Captain, hurry!" Bepo glanced at the formerly dismembered marines who had almost finished puzzling out whose legs belonged to who. The warship was sinking and water was flooding the deck from below and from the sides.

The hand that gripped Teresa's heart was trembling. She had never seen that look on Law's face before.

"Captain—"

"Trafalgar!"

No hesitation. Sophie pointed the rifle at Teresa's heart and pulled the trigger.

When another wave crashed into the ship, she realized three things. One, a gunshot rang out, but the bullet landed nowhere near Teresa's heart. Two, Sophie's arm that was holding the gun was lifted to the sky. And three, this happened because Law had thrown Kikoku to the ground and grabbed the rifle in his bare fist, which was now steaming, and forced it upwards.

He had stopped her. He was… letting the enemy live.

Law tossed the heart back to its speechless owner. "Remember this," he said, picking up his nodachi and sheathing it. He called forth a Room from his palm.

…What just happened? Had she made some sort of a mistake? What did—

Light flashed in the corner of Sophie's eye from a Cameko Mushi, but before she was able to discern who had taken her photo, a great creaking sound echoed. Sophie, Law, and Bepo looked down blankly. The deck beneath their feet dropped, and the ocean rose up to enfold them.

Overwhelmed by damage, the warship snapped apart. And then all she felt was cold.

And pain.

And she couldn't breathe.

Sophie was yanked through the ferocious current, unable to tell up from down. Something brushed her hand—Law? Bepo? Her fingers tightened around it, felt like fabric, a shirt, a body, maybe—and then it was gone, torn from her grasp, and she couldn't even scream—Sophie kicked hard, but it was useless, she was spinning out of control, the ocean flinging her deeper and deeper underwater—her body was so heavy, and her eyes were closing, and—

On the submarine, the pirates watched the deafening shudder as the warship collapsed on itself. For a split-second, nobody moved.

Nobody except Hai Xing, who sprung over the railing and leaped overboard.
"Hey!" Penguin lunged after him and was prepared to jump into the storming waves when he was grabbed around the stomach. "Anko, what the hell—"

As soon as he had seen the explosion, Anko had slammed out of the control room. He jumped onto the deck for the express purpose of keeping all his crewmates from following after their cook.

"We have to go after them!" Shachi, too, was snatched away from an untimely drowning by the helmsman. "Damn it, get off! What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you want Hai Xing to die!?"

Anko tried to wrestle the two mechanics to the ground. "Wait a goddamn second!"

"Someone tie the end of this around the mast!" Manta shouted, binding a rope around his middle and ripping off his boots. "Valross, get into the control room and turn the sub around!"

Valross nodded and sprung off his feet. Before he took two steps, he was wallop ed in the chest by the helmsman.


Deep below the surface, something took hold of Sophie.

Water rushed past her face, roaring in her ears. Before she knew it, she broke the surface and ripped off her gas mask, inhaling frantically, teeth chattering. A hand was grabbing her boiler suit, and that hand was attached to the most majestic, beautiful sight in the world: the Heart Pirates' chef, who was grimacing as his captain hacked up water all over his shoulder.

Hai Xing's powerful kicks in the water allowed him stay afloat in the storming waves. He had Sophie in one hand, Law on his shoulder, and Bepo in his other hand. Polar bears, it seemed, weren't great swimmers in storms.

"The sub!" Bepo burbled as another wave crashed over them.

Pain shot through Sophie's chest as she was jostled by the roiling ocean. She squinted through the fog; the entire world was grey and rain and wind. Wait—was that a painfully yellow paint job not meant for human eyes? "There! Do you see that?"

Hai Xing adjusted his grip on his three crewmates. "It's too far. I'm calling for help."

An unearthly noise reverberated from Hai Xing's throat, so eerie and loud that she had to cover her ears. It was the same noise Sophie had heard from him at the chocolatier café—something primordial, from the deep ocean.

A large, colorful fish flicked by. And then another. And another. They swam in a tornado-like circle around Hai Xing, tighter and tighter, until she felt herself being lifted up. They rose on a massive school of Dorado fish that carried them over the ocean. Marlins and bull sharks leaped alongside them. It was like riding on a smooth, wet carpet. The fish glittered, their eyes comically large and shining, and they seemed to be… smiling?

"They're laughing at my accent," Hai Xing mumbled. "I'm not great at talking fish."

"N-no, well," Sophie said, staring, "to know how to speak f-fish at all is an achievement by any standard…"
They passed CP5's smoking wreck of a battleship and Sophie thought she saw Teresa watching them from the bow of her ship. She knew, somehow, that Teresa wasn't going to give chase anymore, and the battleship disappeared into the cloudy haze.

A sharp groan alerted them to the man sitting up with a wince.

"Hai Xing…?" Law's eyes widened at the fish they were hitching a ride on. Something passed between them—a quiet, understanding look that held many stories that Sophie didn't know—and he grasped the other man's hand. "I'm proud of you."

Bepo gave a little *huhuhu* behind his paw, grinning.

"Your praise won't stop the world's eventual, inevitable demise," Hai Xing's dark brown eyes softened minutely, "...but it's still appreciated."

Well, gosh, that was adorable.

A touch alighted on her dripping curls. Sophie jumped slightly.

"Your hair," Law rasped.

Her ponytail had fallen out, and she realized the ends of her hair were yellow again. The rain had washed away the last of the black dye that she had gotten so long ago on Crawfish Island.

Though she wouldn't know this, the flash of light earlier had been from a Cameko Mushi by a CP5 agent with an astute eye. The resulting blurry photograph of her in the gas mask had little color except for the bright hue of her hair, and in the coming days, it would be shown to the marines who had been searching for Strangways Sophie. Or, 'a loud arsonist with curly black hair, who could turn water into ice in an instant and make sugardust explode', as they knew her by. They would murmur that she could even turn her hair gold, like a sorcerer from an old wives' tale, and from that point onwards, the World Government would assign her the epithet of *Alchemist*.

But presently, all Sophie was concerned about was tumbling over the submarine railing in her soggy boiler suit and trying to not look like a total idiot. Mission failed.

They had cleared the storm. Rays of sunlight gleamed from the clouds as it parted above them. Hai Xing helped her to her feet and Bepo shook off his wet fur. The enormous array of fish leaped in the air a few more times before swimming away, and the Heart Pirates, dripping wet thanks to Bepo, watched in stunned silence.

They all faced the cook, who gave his shoulders a little roll as the crown-of-thorns spines vanished under his skin.

Hai Xing pointed at the ocean, remarking monotonously, "Wow, did you guys see that. Where did all those fish come from… I have no idea…"

Law lowered his cook's arm. "It's been long enough, don't you think."

Hai Xing sighed. He rubbed the back of his neck. "What, a guy grows starfish spines once and you don't even recognize his flesh prison anymore?"

The Hearts' mouths dropped in perfect coordination. Manta's curled mustachio went straight as a plank out of shock.

There was a collective, deafening *yell*. 
"Hold on," Penguin said, gaping. "The chocolatiers on the train—they said—that was real?"

Shachi looked equally stunned. "How—what—you're a—where did—I mean, how did—"

"Captain, I will cook for these men, but I refuse to explain the process of how babies are made."

"How long have we known each other, huh?" Valross shouted. "How can you keep something like this from us?"

"Is it really that important?" Hai Xing retorted.

The Hearts stared at their cook, then at each other. "Isn't it? It seems like something that might be very important!?"

"Look, boys, I've been through this," Anko drawled, throwing his arm around Hai Xing's shoulders, who tried to go limp and ooze away. "You're emotionally conflicted, this shorty shouldn't be allowed to be so cool, your pride is a little bit wounded, you're thinkin' about things, things ya never thought of before, and you can't believe this shrimp is actually part shrimp."

Hai Xing jabbed Anko in the stomach. "Half-starfish."

All the Hearts rounded on Hai Xing. "ANKO KNEW?" Sophie cleared her throat, raising her hand. "...AND THE HITCHHIKER?"

"Cap, you, too?" Penguin demanded. Law grinned and gave a vague sort of shrug that obviously meant 'obviously'.

"Clearly, we must work on our friendship from sun up 'till sun down!" Shachi announced. This was punctuated by fervent nods by the rest of the crew.

"I'm not different," Hai Xing said, and he stepped forward with such a sour look his crewmates all stepped back and listened. "I haven't changed. Don't look at me like I'm someone new. I'm still the same person I've always been."

"We aren't treating you differently, though," Shachi said, tilting his head. "Haven't we always tried to know you more?"

"There are many things we don't know about each other, it's true," Manta voiced. "And we're not entitled to any of our past histories. But I still can't help wishing you found us close enough to share something special with."

"It's not..." Hai Xing muttered under his breath, "not like..."

It was Law's turn to throw his arm around Hai Xing's unprepared shoulders. "We can save the rest for tomorrow," he declared. "And look, isn't this about right for a pirate crew on the Grand Line? A half-fishman and a mink?"

"A mink?" Sophie gasped. "Who—"

Everyone pointed at Bepo, who waved.

"Was that," Law said, "not obvious."

"A m-m-mink!?" Sophie winced. She yelled so hard it felt like she busted another rib. "You're a part of the great, mythical Mink Tribe?" she hissed. "Whose powers are legendary and shrouded in mystery? You're n-not just a talking polar bear?"
"…This whole time, did you think I was a polar bear that one day magically learned how to speak words?"

"I—I couldn't have b-been the only one, right? Right?"

"Oi!" A wrench banged against the deck's door. Kamasu had trudged out of the engine room, and the perpetually irate-looking man was now watching the spectacle from under his dark, messy hair. "Didn't we fucking win, or something?"

The pirates looked at each other. That was right. They had survived CP5—they'd won. Their roars and cheers were so loud that it shook the deck.

…Ah, wait, perhaps that was Sophie's knees doing the shaking. She stumbled against Law and opened her mouth to apologize, but then her vision spun. Floor, be gentle with me. In the split-second between wake and unconsciousness, she halfheartedly made peace with the nasty bumps her head was going to sustain.

Instead, there were arms to catch her.

—

"Is there anything we can bring back to HQ?" her sniper, Delia, asked.

A fish flopped over Teresa's rain-drenched shoes. The universe was a dead-eyed, stone-cold bitch.

(Much like her, in fact.)

"Bring all the injured here!" Teresa directed. "Disregard all the inventory we lost in the battle! Only saving lives are important now!"

The warship was bits and pieces of flotsam. The marines who had jumped overboard had found the bookkeeper's burned corpse and dragged him to the part of the deck that was still floating. Teresa examined the stinking pile of wet, blackened flesh, tapped it experimentally with the tip of her shoe, and gave it a firm kick. The head broke off with a snap and rolled into the ocean. The Government had a thousand bookkeepers. He would simply be replaced.

Spandine, of course, wanted to update her with his thoughts on her current situation.

"YOU ABSOLUTE DUMBASS! WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO? YOU FAILED TO CAPTURE ONE ROOKIE PIRATE? AND NOW BIG MOM IS ALLIED WITH—"

"Spandine," Teresa said calmly, "blow me." She hung up.

Delia rested her hand on Teresa's shoulder. "Not gunning for that promotion anymore, chief?"

"I was never going to get it. I finally realized that. The good news is that it only took me eleven years," Teresa joked, and neither smiled.

Making up her mind, she dialed another number. Across the Grand Line, a Den Den Mushi in Marineford was answered.

"I thought you wouldn't call, child," came an aged voice. "Having fun out there?"

She had the whole thing planned out. It's been a while, Tsuru-san. Thought I'd catch you up. Things are going superbly, as expected of your star pupil.
What she said was, "It should get easier at some point, right? I thought it would all work out if I just became as strong as these men who lead the World Government."

"Hm," Tsuru said, considering. "You can't be as strong as men. You must be stronger, because this is the world you were born into."

Teresa had pointed her axe at Hippo. Hippo, her best friend, her brother. Him and Lettidore, the only sense of family she ever had. She tried to bring an entire country to heel. She murdered. She fought. She bled. She survived. She bled some more. She gave everything, and when her own life and future weren't enough, she sacrificed others.

"I've done something I will never be forgiven for." Teresa's gaze lifted to the sky. If there was some true form of justice, she willed it to judge her and strike her down now if she had wronged the world. She waited for a bolt of thunder, a crash of lightning. Across the horizon, the ruins of Machinastein steamed under the desert sun.

"What you've done, you've done in the name of the Government, and the Government is never wrong."

The sky was blue and vastly empty. "How long can I keep telling myself that?"

Tsuru's reply was both gentle and terrible: "Longer than you think. Now, pick yourself up and come home. Did you remember to bring me some of that famous Machinastein cacao?"

"I barely have a working rudder, Tsuru-san."

"Pity."

—

An IV drip blurred into view as Sophie's eyes peeled open, adjusting to the light in the sickbay.

She took a deep, pained breath, inhaling the recycled submarine air that wasn't quite fresh but wasn't exactly stale, either. What time was it? The submarine was quiet and dim cerulean light shone in from the portholes—which likely meant it was early in the morning. She had slept almost a full day, yet she still felt like moldy pineapples blended into a moldy fruit smoothie. What even was a decent night's sleep anymore?

She worked her limbs, testing out the soreness. Her face felt swollen and her mouth felt full of cotton balls. A stiff bandage was wrapped on her nose and she touched the tender flesh, wincing. Someone had changed her into a fresh boiler suit. Her ribs protested angrily when she reached for a cup of water on the empty chair next to her and downed it in one gulp.

When she lowered the cup, she froze.

Hai Xing was sleeping on the cot next to her, and Anko dozed on the floor between them on a puddle of blankets that also held Shachi and Penguin. Valross, Manta, and Kamasu each took a bed as well. It was a sickbay filled with relatively uninjured, snoring pirates, like they were only there to keep watch on her.

Well, that was just…

Sophie would've been perfectly inclined to flop back on the bed and bask in this strange, foreign feeling that bloomed across her aching ribs like a flower. But she was so hungry her head was swimming. She carefully removed the IV needle and found a band-aid in one of the cabinets to slap
over the crook of her elbow. She tied the sleeves of her suit around her waist like she had seen the other pirates do, leaving her top half in Shachi's old shirt that he had let her borrow yesterday and clean bandages on her torso, from chest to stomach.

She tugged the blanket over her shoulders and padded outside. Sophie almost bonked into a furry white mass coming back from the bathroom.

"You're up!" Bepo greeted, catching her before she dropped butt-first on the floor (Wow, a mink! A real mink was holding her! No, Sophie, be cool, be cool. Bepo's just Bepo. Nothing's changed.) "Food's in the mess. And Captain." He patted the top of her head, lightly pawing at her messy curls. "You should let him know you're okay."

"Ah—th-thanks. How are his injuries?"

"He says it's nothing major, but I've heard that a thousand times," Bepo said with an aura not unlike a Disappointed Dad. "Hey, he was cool in that fight, huh? There were so many times I just wanted to shout, 'That's our Captain!'"

Bepo's eyes glittered. Sophie squinted, feeling like a wrinkled old worm staring into the dazzling sun. Such... purity... "That's our—uh, yep. Right. Geez. I guess I should, um, try to get used to saying that."

"Heh heh heh," Bepo laughed.

"Heh heh heh," Sophie laughed back, blushing.

"There were things said in that fight that might be better if you forgot them."

"...Eh?"

Bepo's expression was curiously blank as he studied her. "It'd be alright if you didn't think about it much." Then he stretched and yawned, as though what he just said wasn't entirely befuddling. "It's too early," he lamented. "I'll sneak in a few more hours of sleep... Penguin and Shachi made me promise I'd be their pillow..."

Bepo moseyed back into the sickbay, leaving Sophie wondering how many more secrets were hidden in the walls of this submarine.

In the mess, Law was looking deep in thought as he considered a pot of simmering coffee. She hobbled in, blinking at the ocean light that covered the room in a soft morning glow. The blanket trailed on the floor behind her.

He looked startled as she entered. "You shouldn't be up yet."

"I live to astound. Also would like to fed, please."

"I'll heat up some leftovers, but you're going back to bed right after you finish."

"Thanks," Sophie groaned, sitting down at the table and bundled up in the blanket. She noticed Law glancing at her. "What."

He cranked on the stove. "You look like shit."

Glaring, she raked her fingers through her wild bedhead curls. "Pot, meet kettle."

Covered in bandages and cuts himself, the lanky pirate sat across from her. He was watching her
with that intense, laser-eyed doctor vision, like he was scanning her injuries.

"Is the rest of the crew okay?" she asked.

"Their wounds were mostly superficial. You must've seen them. They insisted on sleeping in the sickbay after you were out of surgery."

"Surgery?" Sophie's hand went to her chest, touching the bandages.

"Four of your ribs were broken in the fight, you broke your nose, and suffered a concussion. Not to mention your gunshot wound reopened. My powers are able to fix you up better than a normal doctor, but..." Law's gaze wandered over to the side, "it was still pretty bad."

The shadows under his eyes were darker than normal. "You must've stayed up late to fix me," she said in a tiny voice. "I made you overwork yourself."

"You're in no condition to be worrying about other people," he said, sounding appalled. "Do you recognize how serious your situation was? Is?"

"Getting hurt is an occupational hazard. And the other guys have suffered injuries as severe as mine before. I'm alive. I'll get over it." Maybe.

"Don't talk like that after what you did."

"What did I do?"

He glared at her.

A burst of angry anxiety twisted up her spine. "Hey. I'd feel pretty weird if you're showing me concern that's different from the concern you show the others. The other men. We're all treated the same, right? You don't secretly see me as weak?"

He did a double take. "That's not what I—"

"Then why are you so upset?"

"Because you took one hell of a beating to secure our victory," Law said harshly, "and I should've been in your place."

His eyes were wide, golden flecks flashing-bright before he remembered himself. He leaned back, his expression neutral.

"But you were—also hurt pretty bad." They listened to the pot on the stove bubble. "...You know, I needed your help with Red Sky. It's... okay to need me, too. No one ever said captains have to carry everything on their own. After all, Gold Roger arrived on Raftel with his crew."

Law contemplated her. It looked like he was about to say something, reconsidered it, and simply said, "Making pirate references already. I knew this life would suit you."

Sophie's ears reddened, but luckily, she avoided having to come up with an intelligent response as he got up to fetch her a bowl of soup.

She arrived at another conundrum once she received her sustenance. Her arms shook with the effort to raise the spoon, pain lacing through her chest every time they moved. It was the third time that she dropped the utensil that Law exhaled, unable to stand the sight of her sorry existence anymore.
He moved from the other side of the table to sit next to her. Sophie recoiled.

"Give it," Law said.

"I r-refuse! Do you know how much dignity I've already lost around you?"

"Do you want to eat or not?"

She glanced furtively over her shoulder and checked to make sure no one was hiding in the corners. Like they were in a drug transaction and she was waiting for a signal this was a trap, she nodded a tiny fraction. Law raised the spoon to her mouth. The soup was warm and wonderful. Something chicken-y. A Hai Xing special. He lightly pushed aside the mess of curls on her shoulder and adjusted the blanket, pulling it tighter around her. The great machinery of the submarine hummed in the background. She was in no rush, there was no grand objective she needed to accomplish or die trying. She had woken up surrounded by people who were now her crew.

For perhaps the first time in Sophie's life, the world felt gentle.

His fingers brushed away an escaped tear. "You hate Hai Xing's food that much, huh?"

She kicked him. At least her feet were still working. His calloused hands came up to her face, wiping away the saltwater.

"Ow," Sophie winced, laughing weakly. "Why is this making my nose hurt?"

"You're trying to sniff." He used the blanket to dab at her runny nose, careful to avoid the bandage.

Geez, how embarrassing. But if she had to be around anyone looking this pathetic, she was glad it was this person in front of her.

"Thank you for pushing me to Vira," Sophie murmured, her eyes closed. His thumb ran along her wet lashes. "If Hippo-sensei hadn't offered to go in my place, I would've gone. You were right. It would've haunted me if I didn't. I don't… make the best decisions, when I'm afraid. You believed I could go to Vira despite that fear. I had to hear that. That I'd still be alright on my own."

He lowered his head, stirring the soup. It seemed more like a way to avoid meeting her eyes. "Yeah, look. Don't get all—you know."

"But now I'm here," she said quickly, feeling quite self-conscious herself. "For the long haul."

He didn't reply as he helped her sip another spoonful of soup, but Sophie got the tiniest sense that he appreciated her saying that.

"I watched you in the fight," she said, fidgeting. "You didn't seem to use Haki. Is it still hard to control?"

"It's… hard to switch off. I only tried it on Teresa-ya once. It was too dangerous to keep testing, especially when I can't… use it well yet." Law exhaled. "Just when I thought I got my hands on a great skill…"

"Haki manifests differently for everyone, right? That's what President Ursa said. You'll have to find your own way, I guess."

"Right. It's just—when I use it, I go back to…" He paused like he was trying to figure out how to word his thoughts. "My Observation Haki can't seem to stop reliving the past."
"Flevance?" Sophie asked softly.

Law smiled wryly. "If Haki is a reflection of ourselves, is it saying that I'm living on my memories?"

She didn't know how to respond to that.

A shadow crossed his face. He smirked a little bit, shrugging. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

But of course it did. All she could think about, abruptly, was Bepo. *It'd be alright if you didn't think about it much. *"...Can I ask you something?" She bit the inside of her cheek when he nodded."...Who is Rosie Nonty?"

For a long moment, she was sure Law wasn't going to respond.

When he did, it wasn't anything close to an answer. "If you can do this one thing for me... just this one thing, please pretend like you never heard that name. Please. It's not time yet."

Sophie considered for a moment. Whatever his secret was, she trusted that Law had a good reason for guarding it, with the best intentions for his crew. But. But if he didn't, if his end goal was something awful and selfish and harmful, then... they would cross that bridge when they came to it.

"Okay." She nodded. "I can wait. Time is something I have a lot of now."

The tense line of his shoulders relaxed. "Do you know what happened in Teresa-ya's past? In North Blue?"

"No, just the little bit that Sensei told me. And all the awful things I said to her—I made that up, too. I was winging it, really," she admitted, and he snorted. "I never thought she'd... I don't know, have a vulnerable side. Like a normal person." Sophie was quiet for a moment, then blinked. "And um, I'm sorry for—when I tried to shoot Teresa's heart, I should've waited for you to..."

"You made a split-second judgement call," Law refuted. "I froze, and you didn't hesitate to kill our enemy."

"I didn't do it because... I didn't want to be the one to kill her. I'm not..."

"You were decisive," he said, looking at her fully. "I may have struck the final blow, but you won that fight. Keep pushing me forward. I need someone like you, who doesn't falter."

Heat radiated off her cheeks, but Sophie also felt something uneasy. Something troubling.

"What if," she said slowly, "I push you to a place where no one else can follow?"

He merely raised a brow.

"You fought like you already had one foot in the grave. You said it yourself, you had to win or there was no point." Something clicked. "It's like you have a death wish."

"That sounds impractical, don't you think?" he replied calmly.

Sophie bit back a sigh at the vague, not-really-an-answer answer. *Don't ever again live on the fumes of someone else's dream.* She could live by her own principles without any more guilt. She could make choices and argue and voice her own opinions. And if, somewhere down the line, the pirate life stopped suiting her, she could find another path and continue walking on the winding, detour-filled road that was her life. She could be free.
And then, she understood her place.

"I won't follow your orders blindly. Not like how I did with G-13. I'm sure whatever goal you have is important to you, but you staying alive is important to me. If you're okay with my hand at your back, you better get comfortable with the idea that it won't be pushing you forward as much as it'll be dragging you away from the edge." She took a breath, steeled herself, and finished, "Captain."

There were a great many embarrassing things that had come out of her mouth during her lifetime; without a doubt, this was number one. She was ready for the mocking smirk and an obnoxious drawl, and prepared herself to throw hot soup at his shoes and shriek *I SAID NOTHING! NOTHING! I'LL DROWN MYSELF IN APPLESAUCE BEFORE YOU MAKE ME ADMIT IT! YOU'LL NEVER TAKE ME ALIVE!*

But when she forced herself to look up, he was smiling. It was small and hesitant, and for a moment she forgot about her debilitating mortification.

Footsteps came down the hall. Voices, greeting each other. Hai Xing in his room in the pantry, drawers opening and closing.

"Sophie," Law said, right before the doors opened.

"Yeah?"

"Welcome home."

*to be continued*
Somehow this chapter became 15k? How? Could it be that being so close to graduating from college has made me write with the feverish intensity of a worm overdosing on caffeine? Oh, sweet Life Panic, how I long to escape thee!

Well. Anyway. Onwards, fair readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"The Baron captured his plump lips, and their tongues battled for dominance—"

"Can you imagine the saliva?" Sophie critiqued as she laid prone on the sickbay bed. "That sounds repulsive."

The storyteller glared the demonic energy channeled by a thousand trashy romance novels.

"Forgive my impudence, Lord Hai Xing. Continue."

It was safe to say that though Sophie was consigned to the bed and told to keep as still as she could without moving her torso, she didn't experience a dull moment.

"Sophie, help." Bepo showed her his hand. "I've forgotten the rules already."

"Check," she said grimly, and Bepo pushed square pieces of Machinastein dark chocolate into the pile.

"Check. Don't you think it's a bit mean to pair the bear with the bed-ridden?" Penguin asked.

Shachi was stone-faced. "I want my desserts, Penguin. Check."

They laid out their hands.

Puzzled, Bepo turned his cards over. Royal flush. Grinning evilly, Sophie used her feet to scoop over the packaged chocolates.

"What!" Valross cried.

"Where are you keeping your extra cards?" Shachi demanded.

Sophie gaped. "Extra—are y-you cheating?"

"We're pirates, Sophie," said Penguin, fishing out cards inside his sleeve. "We're all cheating."

Law took off his hat and three cards fell out. He shrugged and pushed his pile of chocolate to Bepo, but Sophie thought she had seen him deal several face cards into the mink's hand.

"What game are we playing again?" Bepo inquired.

Kamasu and Anko arm-wrestled for the last bit of chocolate—unaware it was already being eaten by
an oblivious mink—and Law gave up telling his crew to let her rest when he saw how she was laughing. Penguin was overly polite to Hai Xing and Anko, which meant things were still weird, but Sophie was half-addled on painkillers to devote any brain cells to the matter.

As the evening wore on and grew quieter, Manta took Hai Xing’s place by her bedside and strummed his mandolin, light and sweet. Her eyes closed, drifting away to the music.

When she slept, she dreamed of fire raining down like falling stars.

Marching across the Viran wastes in her wartime uniform, the sun red and bloated like a ripe persimmon. The gnarled, bone-white ceiba tree. Carvings of marines as they trampled Machinastein’s ancient empire beneath their wooden feet. Swords plunging through those attempting to flee, wood chips bursting out like blood.

An enormous man in a feathery pink coat clapping in the flames, morphing a crack of light in a door that Sophie peered through, a long silver memory from eleven years ago, Teresa shaking as she sobbed furiously, blaming me for his death, all because of some stupid kid he was trying save—

Sophie twisted in her sleep.

She woke up screaming.

A hand on her shoulder. A bucket in front of her. Hai Xing’s fantastic dinner came out in hunks of acidic fire. It burned up her throat and brought tears to her eyes.

"Breathe," Law said in what might’ve been an attempt at soothing. She wanted to claw his mouth off.

"D-don't need to breathe," she gasped, "need drugs."

"You've had far enough painkillers." He raised a cup of water. "Here, drink."

She knocked it aside, expecting to hear a satisfyingly loud shatter. But no—Law had snatched from the cup in the air, and was setting it calmly back on the desk. He wasn't even letting her throw a tantrum in peace.

"Drugs," she snarled, glaring with the full force of her agony, hoping he could sense that she was throttling him in her mind and peeing on his future gravestone.

"Shut up," he recommended.

"Die."

Law responded to this vicious threat upon his life by holding her hair back as she heaved into the bucket again.

Two fingers found her wrist as he timed the rate of her heartbeat and his other hand went to her stomach, lifting up the cotton pad. The bloody gash strained against the stitches, pulling itself into a scar.

He was a nebulous shadow against the lone, half-melted candle on the desk. A good night’s sleep and he was already walking around without a wince. She fell back against her pillow, fingers digging into her palm to keep herself from swearing incessantly from the pain. Why does being normal have to hurt this much?
"How long have you been there? Watching me in my sleep…"

Law settled back on the chair next to the bed. He picked up a medical book that had fallen out of his hands and set it back in his lap, like he had been there, reading. "I knew this was going to happen. Broken ribs 101. You looked like you were having a nightmare."

"W-was I?" Falling stars and burning arrows. Civilizations destroyed. Flamingos. "Don't r-remember."

"You're a shit liar."

"How dare you. I think I'm pretty good."

The corner of his mouth lifted wryly. He leaned forward, resting his perfectly-working arms on his knees. The staggering difference of recovery between them was ridiculous.

"Did it come with your Devil Fruit powers? This whole superhuman healing business."

"Not exactly," Law said after a considering pause. "I got hurt a lot as a kid. A good portion of which was my own fault." He tapped the center of his chest. "The scars build up. You make new skin, develop calluses. Wounds stop bleeding as much as they used to."

She scoffed at the ceiling. "Wow. Sounds nice."

He studied her for a moment.

"Can you sit up again?" Law held out his hand, ignoring the look she shot him. "Just try it."

Teeth gritted, Sophie braced her hands palm-down on the bed and, without reaching for his offered help, sat upright. The simple movement seared, but it wasn't intolerable. Not like earlier, how twisting around felt like getting stabbed by a white-hot poker.

"I don't think it'll take too much time." He regarded her with slight curiosity. "Getting shot in the stomach didn't seem to hinder you in the fight."

Sophie had an inkling where this was heading. "That's because I barely fought."

"You were able to stand and walk around from the moment you woke up the other day."

_I'm not like you_, she wanted to say.

"So," Sophie said, "what."

"So," he replied, "your scars have been building up."

She thought about it. Coincidental data, baseless conclusion.

"I'd prefer drugs."

---

As flattering as it was that Law thought she was healing faster than the average marine-turned-traitor-chemist, Sophie spent the next three days lying in bed until she couldn't take the stink any longer. She wished she could tell herself this was the fragrant scent of classy garbage—gârbâgé, if you will—but no. Just garbage.
With the acrid smell of sweat floating behind her, she hobbled to the communal bathroom and flung open the door. She heard voices inside, but it didn't matter—marines enjoyed limited privacy, after all. This was nothing.

The chatting voices abruptly stopped. A group of naked men turned in the direction of the jarring noise, and shrieked.

"Hi," Sophie said, entering fearlessly.

"S-S-Sophie-chan? D-do you need something?" Shachi blubbered, holding up a wooden washbowl to cover himself.

"I want to shower."

"NO," the Hearts collectively roared.

"W-we haven't cleaned it yet!" Penguin said in a panic, wrapping a towel around his waist. "Avert your eyes!"

"I'm sure it's not that bad—oh, oh my god, that's a lot of hair. And a-are those b-baby mushrooms growing in the corner?"

"DON'T LET HER ENTER," Valross bellowed. "ONE GLANCE AND SHE'LL LEAVE THE CREW."

Manta's glistening muscles took up a good portion of her vision. "Forgive me, little lady, for I must block you with this beautiful body of mine!"

"WE CANNOT LET YOU BATHE IN OUR FILTH, SOPHIE-CHAN," Shachi sobbed. "IT'S FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY."

"Hey! Where the pineapples am I going to shower!?" Sophie shrieked, getting shoved back outside the hallway by four pairs of hands.

—

"Yeah, go ahead," Law said, and tossed her a towel.

She inspected it. "This… is clean, right?"

The man who was so graciously lending her the bathroom in his cabin didn't seem to appreciate her questioning his hygiene and/or laundry habits. She quickly scampered inside and locked the door, letting Law continue to read undisturbed at his desk.

The tiled floor was cold against her feet. His bathroom was small, but clean. Bare would be a more accurate term. A toothbrush and a cup sat on the sink, a razorblade and shaving cream and a handful of pill bottles were kept in the medicine cabinet. Mostly pain-relievers and sleeping aids, seemed to be well-used. Pipes that pumped clean water covered the ceiling and made their way down to the bathtub.

A lovely porthole sat over the tub, filling the bathroom with golden lamplight from the submarine's outside lights. Silhouettes of passing fish swam over the walls. Ah, this would be the perfect place to take advantage of Law's generosity, draw a steaming bath, comb coconut oil through her hair, and unwind…
Her gaze wandered down, and Sophie gasped like she witnessed a murder scene. No, actually, this was worse.

There was only a bar of soap in his tub.

Repeat, one bar of soap. No loofah, no shampoo, no conditioner, no oils for frizzy, curly hair.

She had been too pampered by the Jaguar Temple, with all their nice amenities. This! This was the true face of the ocean! It was cruel and unforgiving, and decimated those who lacked preparation!

Grumbling in defeat, she wriggled out of her clothes and set them on a hanger bar. She traced the dark violet bruises smeared like oil paint across her chest. The largest one was almost as big as her hand, with all her fingers splayed out. A greenish-yellow bruise on her forehead, another on her jaw.

She studied herself in the mirror with a faint, detached smile, and blinked. Her eyes widened. 

*I'm naked in Trafalgar Law's bathroom.*

She inhaled wrong and flopped over the sink, hacking out a lung.

"You okay?" he called through the door.

"Yep!" Sophie trilled casually, covering her face in mind-numbing horror.

She wrenched open the shower faucet, determined to get this over with as quickly as possible. She jumped in when it became scalding hot and stuck her head underneath the showerhead, inhaling a steamy sigh of relief.

Then she peered at the used bar of soap sitting on the edge. Was she just supposed to scrub the thing he scrubbed all over his body on her body? How unhygienic!

Gingerly and very reluctantly, Sophie rubbed the bar over her hands to get it sudsy. She ran her soapy hands over her the curve of her stomach, her breath quickening—she was standing in the bathtub that Law used, who was just behind the door and knew she was using his soap. Her hands slid up, over her arms, then pressed lightly into the undersides of her breasts—

"Ow, ow, ow!"

There was a knock on the door. "Okay in there?"

"Fine—ow!"

"That doesn't sound fine. Need help?"

Sophie banged her knee against the wall. "Absolutely—OW—not!"

She could hear him rolling his eyes. "Suit yourself."

Need help? Need help!? What did that even mean!? What sort of help was he talking about!? Was he going to pull a loofah out of nowhere and show her how shameless he could be!? It then occurred to her that doors and locks wouldn't stop him from entering, not if he really wanted to—

Sophie yanked the shower from blistering hot to freezing cold.

Then she discovered another problem she should've expected.
She wrapped a towel tight around herself and exited the bathroom with her head held high.

"I don't have any clean clothes," she announced primly.

After she finished desecrating various items in his closet, Law recommended that she stretch her legs. Sophie adjusted the seat of her pants as she roamed the hallways, letting her hair dry and looking for something to do.

She wore a pair of grey sweatpants that she had to roll several times over her ankles. One of his big, yellow sweaters—for he had a few—with a ubiquitous Heart Pirates jolly roger on the front was sawed off at Sophie's middle, the long sleeves cut off to resemble a t-shirt hoodie. She also swiped one of his cotton shirts and wrapped her hair in it, tying it around her head to let it dry faster and curl better.

Law, for his part, made it clear that he was only allowing this to stop her from looking so pathetic.

In front of the broom closet that she was considering her room once she graduated from the sickbay, Manta sat cross-legged, cleaning his shotgun.

"Shachi's inside, and he says you're not allowed in."

There was muffled banging coming from in there, and the sound of a power drill. Now she was really curious…

"Manta-san, your moustache looks splendidferous today," she simpered, blinking her eyes.

"I know." The large man winked at her, all chiseled jaw and braided hair with a pretty pink ribbon at the end.

Her smile dropped into a flat glare. She was beat.

Bepo was dozing off in the men's quarters, surrounded by the glittering haul they had stolen from CP5. Anko was in the control room, his tattooed brown ankles resting on the console as he scribbled on a crossword puzzle. Hai Xing was in the galley, as usual.

The air was quiet; the deep dark ocean was peaceful.

With nothing better to do, she was about to head back to the sickbay when she bumped into Penguin.

"I don't smell like a feral raccoon digging through trash anymore," Sophie greeted, twirling around to show him.

"Sorry about earlier," he said with a sheepish grin. "We really should've considered this when you joined the crew. It's our only bathroom, aside from the one in Cap's cabin."

"It's okay. There are curtains around the showerheads, right? I'll use that when I'm in there."

"I guess that'll do for the time being." He rubbed his forehead, looking faintly distressed. "We'll have to get used to you walking around in there. With us."

"I'm fine with it," she said honestly.

Penguin gripped Sophie by the shoulders. "I'm glad you have no shame when it comes to viewing
our chiseled, manly bodies—"

"I really don't. Do you know how many naked corpses I've seen? I could give Law-san a run for his beli."

"—but please have mercy upon us."

She patted his hand. "I'll cover my eyes and do my best."

"That's all I can ask of you—hey! Done already?"

"For today." Shachi pulled down the kerchief he wore around his mouth and used it to mop his sweaty forehead.

"What sin are you committing in my broom closet?" Sophie inquired.

"You'll be grateful when it's finished. You'll be calling me Shachi-sama."

"I look forward to it," she said dryly.

He grinned. "So do I."

A toolbelt jangled heavily on Shachi's waist, catching her eye. Out of curiosity, Sophie asked if they all had different jobs as mechanics. It was something she wondered before, but assumed everyone shared the same tasks.

It turned out that Shachi handled all the auxiliary mechanics. Hydraulics, plumbing, ventilation, anything that involved the cabins. Penguin worked with the main engine and the propulsion system. Kamasu operated the boilers that provided power to the main engine, turbo generators, and various auxiliary systems, and Valross looked after the freshwater generating equipment.

Despite their specializations, each of them were well-versed in each other's craft that they could step in if one needed help. She had to admit that was quite impressive.

She leaned against a porthole, nodding as they spoke and absently tracing a finger down the metal rim. It came back dusty. Definitely needed a good wipe…

"Have you spoken with Hai Xing?"

She rubbed the dust off, looking up at Shachi. "A bit. Why?"

"He hasn't really talked to us about anything, and…" Penguin took his hat off to rake his hands through his short brown hair. "Never mind, it's dumb."

"Hold on. You're the type to ignore whatever's bothering you until it kills you. And you, Shachi, are going to mope until you die. If you have something to say, you should say it, right?"

Their expressions made it clear that ignoring, moping, and death would be so much simpler.

That night, Sophie thought about the roles on this ship.

The four mechanics. Bepo the navigator. Hai Xing the chef.

Then there were the positions that were a bit more flexible.
Anko was the main helmsman, but he and Manta, who was the gunner of the ship and also frequented the control room, switched whenever Anko needed a break. On rare occasions, it could also be handed off to the mechanics, Bepo, or Law if need be. Law himself was the captain and doctor, and because of his extensive knowledge of the daily workings of the sub, he also kept the logbook.

They had been a crew of nine men, maintaining a large, complex submarine on their own. Chemist wasn't exactly a role on a ship. She wanted to properly help.

Sophie tapped her fingers on her stomach, her eyes closed but unable to sleep, thinking. Her specific job had to be something practical. Something useful. Something she was good at. Which severely limited the field of options, but…

With a jolt, her eyes flew open and she lifted her arm to smack herself before remembering—

"Ow!"

In the middle of lunch, Sophie stood up and banged a broom in the middle of the galley. She found it awkwardly stuffed in the men's quarters, where it was used to bat away any seagulls that flew inside when the portholes were open. (She had to wipe the feathers and blood off before trooping into the galley.)

"I AM," Sophie declared, "THE JANITOR."

The crew chuckled. Clearly amazed by her genius.

"Ah…" Shachi reached forward, sunglasses glittering, "our bathroom…"

"Absolutely not," Sophie returned swiftly. "You're grown men and you'll clean that up yourselves."

As he wept on Manta's shoulder, Law remarked, "Aren't you our resident arsonist?"


Penguin snorted, then covered that up with a cough.

"Everyone here has a role," Sophie said cheerily. "I want to do my part, too."

"Nice thinking, little lady."

"Definitely appreciated." Valross grinned over his cup.

"Then, because I'm still recovering, I was thinking today we could all clean the ship from top to bottom! Doesn't that sound marvelous?"

"What? Come on!"

"We got things to do, Sophie-chan!"

"That," Law said, "is a good idea. It's been a long while since we've done any real cleaning."

The silence was filled with the empty gazes of pirates betrayed by their captain.
He nodded at them all, smirking. "I'll let you get started on that."

He turned to leave and jerked back, standing chest-to-nose with Sophie.

"Where do you think you're going?" she inquired, smiling. "Aren't group activities a wonderful way to build morale? Aren't you going to lead your crew and show us how it's done? Cleanliness is next to godliness and therefore Pirate Kingliness, isn't it?"

Law's smirk strained.

They stared at each other.

*Fight*, his men willed.

Floofy curls bounced around her cheeks as she giggled daintily. "A captain should lead by example, yes?"

*FIGHT!* his men cried in their souls.

Despite all evidence supporting the contrary, it *was* possible for the Surgeon of Death to blink first.

"Going by your potentially flawed perception… one could… *possibly* conclude that is a reasonable suggestion."

"I wholeheartedly agree with your deduction and look forward to parsing the results!"

The Hearts all looked at each other.

"Monster," Anko said.

---

Carrying a mop and bucket, Sophie strode by the battle noises, muffled screams, and flashes of Law's blue Room coming from the bathroom.

It was noticeably warmer in the belly of the submarine. Water condensed on the steam pipes and humming turbines. Artificial lights were fitted on the ground, casting an underlit glow to everything and reminding Sophie of a subterranean cavern. She had been inside the engine room before, and she sort of liked that the homey sort of clutter was still there; empty plates, dog-eared books, and tools. Signs of life among all the metal parts.

"Yo. Welcome to the pit."

She looked up.

Valross stuck his head out between pipes on the ceiling, his green bandana catching the white hair threatening to fall over his face. Sophie hadn't even noticed there was space up there for someone to wiggle through.

He jumped down and held a rag completely blackened with greasy gunk. "Ta-da!"

"I don't know whether to be impressed or disgusted," she said, and thought about it. "Yeah, I'm disgusted."

"This place needed a good scrub." Penguin emerged with his own broom and a dustpan. "The Polar Tang is our home." He lightly knocked the tip of the broom against the wall, all fondness. "We gotta
treat her well."

Wait. "Polar Tang?"

"Yeah. The sub."

"It's called the Polar Tang?"

Penguin looked at her like she was dumb. "We literally say it all the time around you, Sophie."

She wracked her memory and came up with, "No. Anyway, aren't tang…"

"They're tropical fish," Shachi helpfully supplied, poking his head out between two engines and wielding a dirty sponge.

"There are no tangs that live in polar regions?"

"This one does," Penguin said.

"…You couldn't have picked a fish that does live in the polar regions?"

"She doesn't understand, Shachi."

"Of course she wouldn't, Penguin. Tangs are also known as surgeonfish."

"Doctorfish, as it were."

Sophie stared at them. She stared at the ceiling. She stared out the porthole. "I am living in a giant, yellow, metal pun of a ship."

"And you love it, right?"

"…I l-l-love it! I love it so much!" Sophie cried, covering her face in sheer delight as the other pirates whooped.

"Loud ass monkeywrenchers…” Kamasu passed by them. Long, dark hair that tinged purple in the light, heavy-lidded eyes, scars cutting across his face. How old was he, twenty-eight, twenty-nine? Definitely the oldest of the mechanics.

The other three tugged at Sophie's arm, beckoning her over past the turbines, following Kamasu. Now this was something she hadn't seen.

"There she is," Shachi sighed like a yearning lover.

The main engine, loud yet sweet-sounding, the constant fwish of the cylinders chugging away. The generator flickered with lights. Numerous dials dotted the engine, measuring the pressure, adorned with wheel-shaped turning gears. The beating heart of the submarine.

What a feat of engineering.

She knew from her own experience that it must've been hell. Beneath this collection of machinery was a mountain of sleepless nights, countless hours, and failures. The blood, sweat, and tears they put into mastering their craft, to build a home…

"Cool, huh?" Penguin grinned. They stood in the engine room as though it was so easy, perfectly ordinary.
"Yeah." You guys are.

Sophie settled a hand against the wall. It was breathing. Every little puff of steam, creak of the metal veins, little gears of the arteries turning in perpetual motion—

_Polar Tang_.

The submarine hummed gently in response.

—

Bepo sat at the very edge of the bow, a fishing pole in his paws, looking out into the horizon. It was a warm, lazy afternoon, gulls flying low and skimming the surface of the ocean.

St. Poplar was another week's sail away. Their black market was notorious across the Grand Line, and Law wanted to poke around before sailing onward to the Sabaody Archipelago.

She sat on the deck, doing stretching exercises to loosen up. Her fingertips grasped the toe of her boot and she tucked her forehead into her knee. Beside her, Law had Kikoku out of its black sheathe and was polishing the blade with choji oil, light and fragrant.

"Ever heard stories of the Kitetsu swordsmiths?" he asked, studying the nodachi for any greasy finger marks.

"Didn't they make cursed swords? Their owners all died throughout history, or something." She turned her neck and rested her cheek flat on her knee, squinting. "Is that one of them?"

Law shook his head. "Though, I'm starting to think this one is cursed."

"Spooky," Sophie laughed, and her bullet wound gave a twinge of pain. She'd been carrying Kikoku at that moment, her blood watering its blade… "Why aren't you affected?"

"My curse is definitely stronger," he said with no trace of irony.

"Poor thing, to have you as its master."

"Hm." Law sounded like he didn't particularly disagree. "There are Graded swords made with such craft that they'll never need sharpening." His strong, callused fingers lightly touched the handle. When he rubbed the blade with choji oil, it was more like a caress. "Kikoku isn't one of them."

Now there was a thought. Trafalgar Law, traipsing all over North Blue and picking up a hugeass, randomly cursed sword along the way, one with no particularly great status.

Sophie felt a strange, new sort of kinship with the sword. _Even if your dumb curse did get me shot._

The blade winked at her, light flashing.

"Can it win against a Graded sword?"

With practiced ease, Law lifted his nodachi straight in the air. The sun caught on the polished silver edge. "It'd be a fight," he said, evaluating it with pride, "but a good one."

She switched legs and stretched, imagining the earth and ocean waves splitting apart. A sight to see, someday.

From the deck above, Anko opened the control room door to air it out and wrung his rags in a
bucket.
"I'm impressed," Penguin remarked, walking by Sophie and Law. "You made Anko wash something and he didn't even run away."

Flecks of dirty water scattered in the air over Penguin. Splash.

He yelped, drenched all over.

A brown mohawk appeared over the top deck's railing, holding the empty bucket. "My bad."

Penguin's mouth parted, but he caught himself and gritted his teeth.

"Oi, oi," Law began, sheathing Kikoku and standing up—

Sophie stared at the tiny drops of water that speckled her shirt. Her eyes spasmed.

"I AM SO TIRED OF THIS," she bellowed, cutting off Law. "You and you!" She pointed at a sullen Penguin and Shachi, who clutched his mop and froze like he was caught in the crosshairs. "And you!" She pointed at Anko. "If you have something to say, clench your buttholes and say it!"

The helmsman jumped down to the lower deck, big boots clomping. The other pirates stopped in the middle of the last chores of the day, turning to the sudden shouts. Bepo set his fishing pole down, his ears flat on his head in apprehension.

Law crossed his arms over his chest, glancing between his crewmates. "Clench and speak."

"I get it now, why you ran away," Penguin said fast, like he didn't want the taste of it to linger in his mouth. "That was when you learned the big secret. You weren't actually leaving; you were just throwing a tantrum."

A big secret, Sophie thought, gaze flashing to the captain.

"If you're pissed—" Anko began.

"I'm not," Penguin shot back. "Not at you."

Hai Xing paused as he threw out a bucket of dirty water overboard, then set it down.

"Okay, look," Shachi said, fidgeting with his hat. "We've been sailing together for so long. You know about our lives. But you tell us jack about yours when we ask, or you pretend you don't hear and go back to reading your stupid novels. We've always wanted to know more about you."

Teresa's terrible expression. Rosie Nonty. Bepo in the hallway. Law in the kitchen, yet somehow very far away.

Sophie bit down on her lip. His voice echoed. Please pretend like you never heard that name.

Hai Xing was quiet for a few seconds, then muttered, "My novels aren't stupid."

"For shit's sake—"

"I don't have stories so I can tell them to people. They're mine. Only mine." His gaze was flat. "I won't apologize."

It could've been a knife. Sophie felt it right in her gut, and she wasn't even the one Hai Xing was
looking at.

Anko stepped in front of Penguin and Shachi. "That's it, yeah? No more of this."

Shachi's eyebrows rose over his sunglasses. "Are you serious?"

"You tried to leave the crew, in case you forgot," Penguin said flatly. "So maybe you shouldn't order us around."

"You are pissed," Anko sneered. "I'll stop if you stop throwing a fuckin' fit."

"How is that different from what you did?"

"It is different!"

"How!?"

"'Cause I haven't been here since the beginning! This whole damn crew started with you four! You don't know one thing about someone that has nothin' to do with you and you—"

"Yeah!?"

"You're being a selfish little bitch about it!"

"Fuck you—" Penguin reached for Anko and found his sand dollar necklace instead, gripped it, and the twined chords snapped.

"HEY!" Anko roared.

Sophie lurched awkwardly, stopped by the weight of Shachi's hand before she could leap forward—Law was between them, grabbing their shoulders and wrenching them away. "That's enough."

The waves lapped softly up against the Polar Tang.

Penguin exhaled up into the wide blue sky. "Aren't we," he tossed the necklace back, "supposed to give a shit about each other? Or should I just stop caring?"

Anko caught it, breathing hard.

"…Can I, uh, just say something?" Shachi voiced, scratching his head underneath his hat. "Hai Xing, it's okay that you didn't tell us. We're just… angry at ourselves. If we were different, if we were… better, we could've looked after you. That's all we ever wanted." He sighed into his hand. "Okay, let's just go back to normal."

"Ah?" Bepo turned to Hai Xing, who spun on his heel and went below deck. "Ah?" He turned to Shachi and Penguin, who went off to resume cleaning. "…Ahhhh!"

The alarmed bear ended up racing across the deck to follow Law, his pole with an enormous fish caught on the end flopping after him.

It was an excellent visual metaphor for Sophie, whose stomach was in knots. She rubbed her hair over her face and wondering why the pineapples this was so difficult.

"It's hard to say anything when they get like that," Valross said quietly. She peeked out from her curls.
"The Heart Pirates started with those four," Manta added. "Law, Bepo, Penguin, Shachi. They're the family the rest of us joined. They opened their home to us."

"Bets on one of them leaving before the day's over—oof." Kamasu's chin hit his chest from Manta's terse smack, chuckling lazily.

Nothing was perfect. No matter how tightly a tapestry was woven, there were always going to be loose ends.

—

It seemed Anko had the same idea as her.

Sophie made it to the pantry first and grabbed the doorknob, shooting the helmsman a pointed look. He flipped her off and gestured for her to open.

Inside, Hai Xing was laying on his cot like a corpse, hands flat by his side and a book flat over his face. His shoes were only half-off, like he'd given up unlacing them.

It was cramped enough for two people, let alone three. Sophie lightly sat on the edge of his cot, next to his shelves of knitting supplies and floral-scented candles. Hai Xing's chest rose and fell erratically, which meant he wasn't asleep.

"You know… everyone… loves you so much," she told him, because it was true even if it was corny as anything. "Shachi and Penguin could never hate you."

She carefully removed the book over his face. Hai Xing's dark brown eyes were already open, looking up at the ceiling.

"It'd be easier if they did. I know how to deal with hate."

She knew, more than she'd care to admit, what that felt like…

"Like drinking fire," Anko said. His eyes were shining, but not in his usual glee. "Makes you fucking feel something."

Her scarred hand touched Hai Xing's arm. He didn't shake her off, which meant he was at least tolerating her presence, but she didn't know what to say.

A knock came from the door, and the three of them looked up.

"Just checking in." Law closed the door behind him.

Hai Xing sat up, scrubbing wearily at his face. "Dinner."

"It's fine, there are leftovers."

"I should cook something. I want to. I have to."

"You don't have to do anything." He sat next to Hai Xing and clasped him on the spot between his neck and shoulder. "That's what makes you a free man. Right?"

Anko sat on the floor with his back against the wall, playing with his necklace between his fingers. Sophie picked some scabs on her knees.

Hai Xing's hands twitched. "Right," he said, gripping them.
Law exhaled through his nose, the slope of his neck curving as he bowed it. "If you keep people at a
distance," he said carefully, "then nothing can ever hurt you. That's your choice. But everyone else
holds you close, so when something bad happens to you, that hurts them. And they don't know what
to do about it, either."

Was he speaking from experience? Or…

For the briefest moment, Hai Xing's voice wavered. "Did I make a mistake?"

"You did what's right for yourself. That's not a mistake."

He rested his forehead on Law's shoulder. He did it tentatively, until their captain wrapped his arm
over him and pressed him closer, their heads leaning against each other.

It wasn't really that Law had the charisma of a natural-born leader—he didn't. He had so much more
than that. He was deliberate in his words and looked after them in ways that weren't superficial. This
man, who once glared when she called them his subordinates and retorted, crewmates.

She wondered if his shoulders had always seemed so broad, with all the weight he was carrying.

Sophie cleared her throat, cupping her cheeks in her hands as she glanced at the two men beside her.
"Shall I light a candle and put on some music?"

"Yes," Hai Xing said immediately.

"Hai Xing," said Law.

"Tch." Anko's face scrunched up.

"Anyway, how are we getting out of here?" Sophie stood up, trying to hop around Law and Anko.
"It's too cramped!"

The door flung open again, smacking Anko in the face.

"Ow, my eye!"

"Are you feeling better, Hai Xing?" Bepo cried, shoving himself through the door.

"BEPO, NO!"

—

"Be careful," Sophie urged nervously.

"I haven't done anything yet."

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"I haven't done anything yet."

She squeezed her eyes shut to prepare herself as Law lifted the bandage off and held up a mirror.

There was a small, definite scar across the upper bridge of her nose. It wasn't very noticeable unless
she stood in the right light. A nice addition to her ever-growing collection of scars.

"You set the bone well." Eyes wide in appreciation, she turned her head left and right. "It's not
crooked or anything."

"Did you expect anything else?"

She bit back a smile, amused by his nonchalant tone, swinging her feet off the edge of the bed.

The check-up was standard procedure. He took her blood pressure, took a vial of her blood, gave a wicked smirk when he wrote down X-, *universal donor*, listened to her heartbeat through her shirt, and various other tests.

Then it was time.

"I'll remind you," he slowly began lifting her shirt up from the bottom, "if you move to attack me, you'll probably tear something important."

"Better hope I won't attack you, then," she said, pointblank.

He stopped and elucidated, "I've been looking at bodies since I was a kid. These sacks of flesh we wear all look the same to me."

Sophie was reminded how she spoke to Penguin and gritted her teeth. *This is karmic retribution.*

Her shirt went up her stomach. He stopped again. "If you're too embarrassed, we don't have t—"

"*Just do it.*" Freaking pineapples. She was an ex-soldier, and bodies were just bodies.

Her chest was out, bare and small and slightly paler than the rest of her.

His cold palm on her ribcage, pressing gently. "Inhale."

She did, staring at the space over Law's head. Sophie was five-foot-eight—above average and a sturdy woman—but if he spread his long, tattooed hands across her sternum, fingertips touching, he could cover it fully. *Subtle observations that are entirely unnecessary.*

"How are you feeling?"

"Wishing I had a bottle of octogen to explode both of us." It was definitely the only bodily urge she was comfortable processing at the moment.

"Make it chlorine and ammonia. That way it can dissolve the remains so clean-up will be easier."

"Oh my pineapples! You're so right." Sophie was briefly lost in the annoyance of not thinking of that first.

"Inhale again. Any pain?"

"A… little. Nothing too bad." At least she could lift her hands over her head, finally.

"Your body's healing unusually fast," Law muttered. "Not by much, granted, but it's something."

Sophie raised her eyebrows. "Sure," she said. "Okay." In the Grand Line, surrounded by people who could talk to fish or attach heads to butts, what did that matter?

"You cauterized this wound, didn't you?"

Without touching, he traced the scar on her stomach. It was on the opposite side of the bullet wound,
about two inches long. A plane of glass breaking from G-13's wall, hitting her right in the gut. It healed almost well, leaving behind charred pink skin. She thought it looked lovely in a strange way, but she knew, objectively, any sane person would call her body a horrifying patchwork of scars.

But whatever, screw it.

"Cute, huh?" Sophie said dreamily.

His lips tilted, concurring. "Exquisite," he said, lowering her shirt back down.

Something within her… sighed.

—

It's nothing, she told herself over dinner.

It's nothing, she told herself, watching the ocean shadows ripple on the sickbay's wall and scratching her old burns.

It's nothing, she told herself as the sun rose.

It's nothing, she told herself as she brushed her teeth, ignoring the 'kyaaa's from the guys as they passed by her in towels.

It's nothing, she told herself over breakfast.

The spoon clattered from her fingers as Anko's shout crackled over the speaking tubes: "IT'S TOA SANG BAY!"

—

Lush karst formations, the peak of mountains that had long ago fallen undersea, cast shadows over the Polar Tang as they cut the engine and prepared to drop anchor.

The towering rocks were the last remnants of the mountainous island that once covered Toa Sang Bay, eroded by the ocean's currents centuries ago. What stood in the sunken island's place was a massive, colorful floating village; an assortment of shanty boats and wooden bridges nailed together. Trader ships were scattered across the bay, fisherwomen hauled in their catch, flat-bottomed sampans plied the waters.

It was a good place to sell off the pirate's treasure and Machinastein gold they stole (or stole back, from the Hearts' view) from CP5. The kitchen also needed restocking, and the rest of the crew agreed they wanted to stretch their legs.

Sophie tied the white sleeves of her boiler suit around her waist, newly adjusted thanks to Hai Xing. It fit much better now, but was still loose and comfortable to move in. She fixed her hair, tightening her curls into a ponytail, as she walked along the deck.

The weather was warm, sunlight glittering across the water, mesmerizing. As they drew closer, they passed fishermen hoisting up dried salt fish in their junks and a tiny wooden house standing over the bay on precarious stilts. An old man dozed off on the shaky ledge, fishing pole clutched loosely in his hands.

It was so beautiful that Sophie didn't want to even blink, or she'd miss something.

But the yawn was impossible to force away, and she rubbed her eyes, unable to hide a long, loud
exhale as footsteps came up behind her.

"Bad sleep?"

"It's nothing," she said firmly. "Hey—look!"

The Hearts ran over. Hands clenched the railing, peering overboard. She jumped off her feet and leaned out as far as she could, shouting in delight, and almost tipped over before Law grabbed her by the back of her shirt.

The aquamarine water was so clear they could see enormous fish swimming by. Iridescent sharks, basa fish, and arowana with vibrant orange scales glistening like little dragons.

When they arrived at the docks, she was the first one off the Polar Tang.

She missed the sound of a hundred people around her, walking, clothes rustling, pockets jingling, shouting and singing and the pier creaking underneath the swell of movement, the waves lapping against the wooden pillars. Carts rattled, shaking the wooden bridge. Bright, vivacious, beautiful.

Sophie spun around in the middle of the bridge, drinking in the new sights and sounds and smells, and only paused when the crowd began pointing at the smiling black jolly roger on a yellow flag.

Heads turned to watch Law walk onto the bridge. He was given a wide berth from the moment his foot touched down.

"Almost killed Machinastein," someone muttered.

"Left those marines in bloody pieces."

"There should be limits to cruelty."

"Murderous fiend."

Penguin and Shachi snatched up a copy of the day's World Economy Newspaper from a newsstand, and she hurried to their side.

In the span of one terrible day, Sophie read over their shoulders, her expression souring, Surgeon of Death Trafalgar Law destroyed vital areas of the city of Machinastein, attacked marines who came to rescue President Ursa, and temporarily allied himself with Charlotte Sundae, a Big Mom pirate and daughter, who proceeded to take over Machinastein.

President Ixchel Ursa, who was once notorious for declaring her country would never pay the Heavenly Tribute, will now undoubtedly be forced to pay collateral to Big Mom.

With another victory for the Emperors of the New World, the Marines have announced their newest recruits will graduate early from the Academy and join increased patrols across the Grand Line. It's fair to assume other independent nations who believe they can survive without the backing of the World Government are reevaluating their decision.

Her stomach lurched violently, like she'd eaten spikes. It was a familiar feeling, but now one that she could put a name to.

Hatred.

Sophie stuffed her hands into her pockets to keep them from tearing the newspaper in half. Bounty posters slipped out between the pages. Shachi and Penguin's jaws dropped.

"No way…"

"Captain…"

They turned together, staring. "You broke one hundred million!"

—

WANTED
DEAD OR ALIVE

Surgeon of Death
TRAFALGAR LAW

150,000,000 beli

Captain and Doctor of the Heart Pirates. Extremely dangerous.

—

"Not bad." Law's teeth flashed as he grinned.

"CAPTAAAAHH! SO COOL!"

"An outrageous number of zeroes," Sophie remarked, and felt an odd shiver the moment she said it out loud. An abstract sense of, this won't even be the half of it.

"Not done yet," Penguin said, and dropped two more bounty posters into their hands.

—

WANTED
DEAD OR ALIVE

Alchemist
STRANGWAYS SOPHIE

51,000,000 beli


—

WANTED
DEAD OR ALIVE

BEPO

500 beli

No, Sophie didn't mind her new epithet at all. Her face was covered entirely by her gas mask, the glass planes of the eyes reflecting the camera's flash. There was nothing about this photo that gave her away, except for the wild golden curls whipping past her ears. The gas mask made her look like someone who lived in a secluded hut, huffed lead paint for fun, and was the poster girl for mothers to warn their children about.

…Alright, yeah. Kinda sick.

Only her mask was notorious, not her actual face. And only a million beli increase? That was great. Solidly middle-of-the-ladder, absolutely no need for more attention. She could still walk around freely without worrying about being recognized.

"Pet…"

"I wish I could share with you, Bepo-san."

"Pet…"

"Or rewrite the description on your bounty. Marines aren't all that great when it comes to identifying minks. Take me, for example."

"Pet…"

"Is that all?" Shachi shook the newspaper, Penguin looking over his shoulder. "Where's the rest of it? Where's our bounties?"

—

Across the ocean in the Marine Headquarters, Commodore Brannew slammed his palm against a wall of bounty posters.

"Why are these three the only Heart Pirates listed?" he shouted, pointing at a bear, a sleep-deprived doctor, and a mask-wearing creep. "They have a crew of nearly a dozen men!"

"They were all wearing the same uniform and wore hats, sir!" stammered a saluting marine. "It was impossible to tell them apart in the rain, sir! We couldn't catch their names, either! We were only able to find the pet because of the orange suit he was wearing and the Alchemist because of her hair."

He shook the poster of the Alchemist's face, or lack thereof. "Does this photograph look remotely useful!?"

"Apologies, sir!"

Brandnew sighed and rubbed his shiny forehead. Another day, then.

—

"Bounty…"

"Pet…"
"Bounty…"

"Pet…"

"Bounty…"

"It'll come one of these days!" Manta called as he began to unload chests filled with gold and beli. "For now, get your asses here and help!"

Sophie adjusted a large, patched-up canvas bag over her shoulder. The pirates had lent it to her, along with a generous allowance. Joining a ship with no clothes or items of her own meant she was in desperate need of shopping.

Hopping eagerly on her feet, she waved at Law and pointed at the market.

With a short nod and a two-fingered salute exchanged, she scampered off to explore.

—

Treating her poor, neglected hair was the first priority. She found coconut oil and hibiscus shampoo from an Idyll Island merchant, and underwear, socks, and other essential necessities from the shops. After some consideration, a new lighter. Two new pistols and a knife. Soap and other cleaning ingredients that the Hearts sorely needed. Potassium nitrate from a Kano Country trader who called his wares 'the best salt from Kano's marshes'.

Sophie stopped at the first bookseller she saw, a nice stand with paper carp streamers attached to a weather vane rustling in the wind.

She rapped the counter. "Hello! I'm looking for books about the islands I'm heading to."

"Sure, sure," the trader said with an easy smile. "Where you heading?"

"St. Poplar, after this. Then to the Red Line."


They all sounded promising. "Oh, one more thing," Sophie said, sliding the beli over. "Do you have any books on Ohara?"

His smile fell. She blinked.

"What are you asking me for?" the trader roared. "I don't sell that sorta thing! Who'd you hear that from? Doesn't matter, they were lying! Never been to West Blue in my life! And don't you go on saying I got anything from that island in my shop! I don't want trouble, you hear?"

He slammed his palm down, making Sophie jump.

"Wouldn't touch that with a ten-league pole, miss," called a merchant from the stall next door. "Any trader who does have relics from Ohara knows better than to say it. Or else, you know…" She stuck her tongue out and mimed cutting it off.

It was the same with every bookseller Sophie met. Any mention of that island made them clam up and turn icy. After Machinastein, Ohara had dug into her mind and settled in there, eating into her curiosity. Another island the World Government said they had to wipe out for the greater good. There was a painfully limited amount of information about the incident, and who knew what
was even true?

"Here's some info about Ohara for ya," one merchant said helpfully, when she asked.

"Really? Thank you so m—"

A crumpled paper ball bonked Sophie in the head and fell into her hand.

"...I think you've mistaken me for a recycling bin."

The gesticulation she received from the merchant was much more frank.

She decided not to find the nearest food stall vendor, grab a pot of boiling oil, and dump it over the rude mango. Out of the goodness of her saint-like heart, of course—also it would take too much effort and she was getting tired of all the dirty looks shot her way. So she simply walked along, inattentively smoothing the paper on a whim—and froze.

A bounty poster of a dark-haired, eight-year-old little girl. Her face was striking even in her youth, with dagger-like eyes and a sharp nose.

An absolute enemy of the World Government, who sank six Government warships thanks to her Devil Fruit. A ruthless weapon in the shape of a tiny child, all the newspaper declared.

Sophie's head pounded something fierce.

A bone-white ceiba tree. Marines and their warships. Centuries of ruin echoing in the present.

This little girl, hunted for twenty years, stared pitilessly back at her.

Instead of tossing it, she folded Nico Robin's bounty poster in even quarters and tucked it carefully in her bag, then sat down shakily on a wooden crate in an alcove and pressed her head into her knees for several long minutes, quiet.

—

"They weren't satisfied with their lot in life," Hippo once said, when she had asked. "They aimed for more. They wanted to learn, but they chose the wrong way. They tried to change the world."

Her soft, pudgy hands flipped through another book. All of ten, her fingernails still intact, the burns that turned her skin shiny and raw still accidents.

"Kill, sensei," Sophie reminded absently. "They tried to kill the world, and for some dumb, deluded dream. That's what we learned in class."

"That's... right." He knelt by her side, his eyes like iron. "Yes, that's right. And why were we forced to wipe out Ohara?"

"Because there's only one virtuous way to kill," she recited obediently, "and that belongs to the World Government."

—

She was heading back to the Polar Tang when she saw him on the bridge.

A difficult man to miss. Heads taller than everyone else.
A long black-and-gold captain's coat whirled around his ankles. A black hat perched atop thick, wiry black hair. Glass beads winked on his neck.

_Son of a plum._

The enormous, black-haired pirate stopped in the middle of the bridge, catching her blue eyes with his almost foolishly round ones. The same wide grin with missing teeth, deeply tanned skin, and huge, hairy chest with pistols and a bottle of ale sticking out of his pants. But there was something different about him, compared to the laughing pillowsack of a human she met on Kunlun. Something slightly darker.

He squinted. "Eh? Where have I…"

Her mouth moved automatically. "Cherry Pie-san…?"

"…AH! The strange lass from Kunlun! Zehahahaha!" He easily pushed aside the crowd until he was clasping her shoulder, grinning. "Fancy meetin' you here! But don't call me Cherry Pie-san, ya hear?" He jerked a huge thumb at himself. "The name's Blackbeard!"

_(You hear anything about Teach passing through these waters? He's calling himself Blackbeard now, stupidest fucking name if I've ever heard one…)_

"Blackbeard…" Sophie muttered, and her ponytail stood on end like a cat's bristling tail. For pirate and marine alike, disloyalty meant a short walk off a plank. She smacked his hand aside, eyes ablaze. "Don't you m-mean Teach?"

Surprise flashed across his face, his hand lingering in the air.

"C-crewmate killer," she said.

The black coat shifted, whispering. Dark eyebrows rose up.

This was the second time Sophie would encounter Marshall D. Teach, though the rest of his name she wouldn't know yet.

Her head barely reached the middle of his stomach. "I," Sophie said, pointing up, "met Fire Fist Ace."

She couldn't begin to describe the emotions that shifted across the other pirate's face… until a smile stretched over his mouth, long and simpering.

"Now, lass, you ain't know the full story." His lashes fluttered. "Do I look like the disreputable sort to murder recklessly?"

"Yes," she huffed.

"Wha—hey, now, hold on!" he spluttered.

"First Fist is _actively_ looking for you. How long do you think you can ru—"

Sophie shivered.

From his massive height, Teach slowly leaned down and peered at her, squinting one eye. "How close are you to Ace, hm?"

Perhaps there was strength in obliviousness, because she retorted without blinking, "We only met the
one time. What's it to you?"

"Ahhhh. Well, well, well." Teach nodded solemnly. "I see what happened. He tricked ya with that
damnable face of his!" He thumped his meaty chest with a large palm, looking disgruntled. "A real
man doesn't need good looks, only the strength of his character!"

"What if he has both?"

"Don't interrupt me while I'm makin' a point!"

"Uhh Beardblack, sir," a vendor interrupted, "your pudding is ready!"

He grabbed it with an offended huff and the tapioca, grass jelly cubes, and fruit disappeared into his
mouth with a nice long sluuuuurp.

Sophie peeked over Teach's elbow. Her stomach rumbled. "…Is it delicious?"

"…Aye, lass, mighty delicious."

—

"Thank you," she said reluctantly, swirling her spoon around the warm, Toa Sang Bay-style
pudding, "for treating me, I… guess."

It was fine for killers to be nice to each other, right? It was a bit hypocritical of her to be angry at him
for murdering someone, right?

…And if she didn't have any beli left, well, it was fine being treated, right?

"It's my repayment for you telling me my old commander is hot on my tail," Teach chortled,
finishing the dessert off with an entire flask of ale. He belched in satisfaction. "See, I'm a much more
generous man than I look!"

"You're a much worse man than you look, too."

Teach's grin widened, his eyes glistening like a night sky.

The wooden bridge creaked under her companion's feet. The cloying sunset was hot, the perfume of
savory, greasy food blooming from trails of smoke along the houseboats, and Sophie sweated lightly
underneath her thin cotton shirt.

"Can I lay out how bad this is for you?" she continued, chewing on bits of longan and lychee.
"Being chased by Ace-san, of all people? I feel like you don't quite understand."

"Oh?"

"Here's what you do. You escape to East Blue. Peaceful sea, right? All things considered. You find a
nice island. You grow a pineapple groove. Settle down. Live a quiet life. If you've avoided him for so
long, you can still get away!"

"Sure as the sun sets in the west, it's too late," Teach said, grinning up at the sky. "I've seen things
you couldn't dream of, lass. A castle under the sea. Armada fleets, glittering in the rain. The edge of
the world. Once you've tasted that, there's no going back."

A bit of lychee dribbled out of Sophie's mouth as she stared.
Something lifted in her chest, an urge to sink her teeth into his words and taste for herself. She knew exactly what he...

The breeze was strong, sweeping her curls across her forehead. She combed her hair back, glancing around the marking and trying to come up with a retort, when her eye caught on something.

They were walking by another bookseller. *Chance!* Sophie leaned over the counter, smiling toothily, twirling a loose strand of yellow around her finger. "Any books on Ohara, miss?"

The cute merchant raised her fly swatter. "Please keep moving along."

*Turned down in an instant…*

Teach seemed terribly amused by her lack of charm, snickering, "Only fools shout Ohara in a crowded place."

She stuck her tongue out. "Yeah, but at least we got spunk."

"*Zehahahaha!* You'll get 'em next time, ducky." He strode forward with a flick of his coat, not caring to see if she'd follow.

Sophie tilted her head back and watched the flight of kingfishers over the market. If she closed her eyes, the busyness of Toa Sang Bay could've almost been the golden streets of Machinastein, desert palms and garden rooftops. Could've almost been the candlelit Tournesol on Cat's Eye Island, filled with young insurgents with nothing but ideas of liberty in their heads. Almost, but not quite.

"The truth is meant to be learned and shared," she said idly. "Is the Oharan Incident not a learning experience? Why do people do what they do? How can we prevent it from happening again? History affects all of us—all the islands, all the world. No matter who becomes Pirate King at the end of the day, aren't there greater things we should be yearning to discover? Things that should change how ignorant children are taught to see the world?"

She looked at Teach and almost jumped. The huge, hairy pirate was a lot closer than she thought. A *lot* closer.

Sophie leaned back, disconcerted.

"What," he glanced around her face, like he was inspecting her curly hair and blue eyes and bronze skin, "is your blood?"

"…X neg," she said dumbly.

"Your island, daft lass. Your people."

Her throat closed up. World Government child. Destroyer of civilizations.

"I'm from the ocean," was the first thing she uttered, because it was the truest lie she could think of.

"We're the same, then," Teach said, his dark eyes shining. "Even orphans like us might find their history in the history of the world."

*Oh,* she thought, startled, *maybe that's why—*

Her face scrunched up, oddly conflicted with this enormous, soft-bellied pirate with the stupid laugh.

"Did you have a good reason?" Sophie burst out recklessly. "For killing your crewmate and running
"I," he gave a relishing lick of his lips, "had the most *delectable* reason."

He didn't regret it, Sophie observed, and for a split-second—at least *that's something I might be able to respect*. "If you believe that so much, then you need to make contingency plans! You need to *think*! What if Ace-san finds you right now? What would you do? What if—"

Her crewmate-killing companion threw back his head, shaking with deep laughter.

"Ah, lass," he chuckled, "I bet you spent half your life imaginin' all the ways living could go wrong."

Sophie stopped, grey eyes with hints of gold flashing through her mind.

She took a breath. *Stop that, you pineapple.* "We're still talking about how you're running from an Emperor, right? Someone with *sixteen* divisions? Each with a commander and full crews?"

"You don't have to remind me! But I already have a fine idea about who I'd recruit!"

"Eustass Kid is huge in the papers now," she mentioned, remembering the bounty posters slapped around the market.

"No damn rookies. They gotta be the biggest, baddest pirates in town! The finest scoundrels of the seas!"

"Then you're wasting your time."

Teach scowled. "How's that now?"

"Infamous pirates? Notorious for their villainy and years of terror?" Sophie planted her hands on her hips, voice sharp and brassy. "The World Government already *caught* them all. They're rotting in Impel Down."

Her response was a short chuckle, almost restrained.

"I'm not saying you have any chance of breaking into the most protected prison in the world, but if you did—hypothetically, if you *did*—there are all sorts of mass murderers and detestable criminals in there. You could take your pick of them. There's even a level strictly for the criminals who've become major, impossible to ignore threats to the World Government. …Is that common knowledge out here? Well, whatever, it's not like it's actually possible."

A peculiar expression melted across his face. "You're sayin' some mighty interesting things."

"To even get into Impel Down, you'd have to work for the World Government. And you're a pirate."

"That I am, lass."

"The only pirates who work for the World Government are Warlords. And there's always seven of them, exactly." She paused. "Ah, but…"

"But," he repeated, humming.

"There's… six now. After Straw Hat Luffy took down Sir Crocodile, a spot opened."

Teach bit into his pie, smiling.
"Say you do become a Warlord," Sophie said, tapping her chin as she strategized, "and say you make it into Impel Down. Then you'd run into another problem. There are thousands of prisoners who you'd have to sort through." She snapped her fingers. "Oh, but you know what you could do? If you were really mean about it? You could…"

He waited, eyes rounder than ever.

She hesitated. "No, I can't say it…"

"Come now!"

"No, no, it's really too much…"

"Can dear old Teach treat you to somethin' else?" he offered in a saccharine tone. "Somethin' sweet for a sweet lass?"

"If you really wanted to find the worst of the worst…" she rubbed her toe in the ground, cheeks pink with embarrassment, "you could… tell them to fight, and let the ones standing join your crew. Kill probably a hundred birds with one stone. And that's how you might, might stand a chance against Ace-san and Whitebeard."

He stared at her.

Then burst out laughing. Sophie followed suit nervously.

"Knock off me britches and clean my clock!" he roared, wiping his eyes. "Absolutely appalling!"

"It's so awful, right?" she laughed, her nervousness washing away into genuine hilarity. "What am I thinking? That's such a horrible suggestion!"

"Most excellently vile." Teach beamed at her with his gap-toothed smile.

"Well, at least you're thinking of recruiting," she acknowledged. "You definitely need a crew. Unless you're actually planning to fight Whitebeard alone?"

"Alone?" he chuckled. "When did I ever say that?"

A low whinny came up behind her.

A pale, sickly-looking horse clopped up to Sophie. Its rider stretched out a trembling hand. "Apple, dear?"

She took one whiff of it. Her gaze flicked from the apple basket filled with shining, scrumptious red fruit, to the long-faced man with a deathly pallor.

"Thanks!" She plucked one out and rolled it around a bit. "But on second thought, you should have it."

"Ah?"

"You look hungry." She flipped the apple in the air and caught it. "And terminally diseased."

"No, no, it's a gift," he wheezed, coughing out a light spray of blood.

*One,* she thought, and eyed the rest of the crowd. Where were the rest?
"Teach! Want a bite?" Sophie tossed it over. "Catch."

"Huh!? Wait, wait, wait—"

In midair, the apple was simultaneously whacked away by a cane and shot through by a bullet, landing in the ocean.

A flash of light, and the explosion sent waves rocking against the bridge. Shouts cascaded down the bridge. A lithe figure landed with a light *tap-tap* of his feet, holding his crimson cane at his side.

The smiling man tipped his hat in front of his face, blocking the spray of ocean water. Droplets splashed across Sophie's skin, dancing down her cheek.

Sulfur had little nutritional value. It also smelled like rotten eggs.

"*ZEHAHAHAHAAA*! You've been found out, doc! A clever lass, she is!" Teach roared, clutching his stomach.

"Lucky to live?" coughed the sick man. "Or unlucky to be alive?"

"Your breath stinks," Sophie politely informed, unflinching.

The pale man spun his cane, burgundy lips pulled into a mocking smile.

"Not her, Lafitte," Teach said, looking at Sophie with odd, renewed interest. "She's a funny one."

He set the cane down, balancing it in both hands as he kept smiling. Creepy. Though, Sophie knew creepier.

Her feet lifted from the ground. *Wah!* She yelped in alarm, kicking her legs, coming face to face with a hugely tall marksman who had stuck his blunderbuss-type rifle beneath her bag strap and raised her up with it.

Behind his glasses and odd-looking monocle, his eyes were hard as flint. "Just a rookie. Nothing special."

Ignoring him, Sophie latched onto that spectacular rifle and rubbed her grubby fingers all over it. *Shiny.* "W-w-what's the caliber on this thing?"

His eyebrow lifted. "…Inch and three quarters."

"Custom-made scopes?" she gasped enviously, and scowled into the marksman's face. "It's too cool for a smarmy banana like you."

"*Brat.*" He shook her off roughly like a bug. Her boots clunked back down onto the bridge, almost falling over.

"She met my dear former commander, Van Auger!" Teach crowed. "The old man sent him! Ain't that somethin'? Addled geezer sendin' the youngest of his brats after little old me?"

"Then this is also a meeting of destiny," the smiling one, Lafitte, said, tipping his hat at her.

A shadow fell over Sophie. She scrambled back; an enormous man in a wrestling mask passed her, a golden champion's belt on his waist. "Captain Teach! All the supplies have been gathered on the raft! Let's sail!"
Her jaw dropped. "You've been running from the Whitebeard Pirates," she said in complete, sheer disbelief, "on a raft?"

"Aye, and we'll rattle the world!" Teach thundered, fists raised. "Just you watch!"

"Yes, yes, you'll rattle and make a mess of things, ruin islands, burn seas." Sophie flapped her hands. "But someone always has to clean it up, and life will keep going on after you're dead, and in a thousand years will anyone even remember you?"

"Then," the marksman intoned, "we'll simply burn the sea until there's nothing left."

"One thousand years under the heavens," the doctor coughed, "is but a blink of an eye."

"I'll challenge them all! Wiiihaaaaa!" the wrestler bellowed. "Next stop, Banaro Island!"

"Pineapples, that's not what I meant." Sophie pinched the bridge of her nose. "Though, I guess your commitment to devastation is—"

A whisper against her cheek. She barely turned, and found empty eyes and an emptier smile.

Lafitte's red lips pressed against her ear. "This, too, is fate."

What—

She slapped him aside, but her hand met air.

He tapped back to his crew, the Blackbeard Pirates rumbling with deep laughter. Banaro Island, Sophie thought, furiously scrubbing her ear and already making plans to find Fire Fist Ace and chuck him in their direction. I'll remember that.

"If the winds are fair, ducky, let's meet again!" Teach shouted, his grin enormous.

The five pirates were about to board a raft of all things as they spoke about upending the world. Sophie was certain that the next time she'd see them would be on the front of a newspaper, having been executed by the Whitebeard Pirates for their crimes.

"Ha," she sneered. "I'll pour one out for you when Ace-san chars you to death."

Laughing, he fanned himself with his hat, and for a moment the crashing waves beneath the bridge seemed to still. "Tell that boy made of flames to come light up the darkness…"

Teach's wide grin was outlined by the fading sun, the beginning of night.

"…if he can."

—

The unsettled, heavy feeling churned in Sophie's gut as she walked through the market. She tapped out a cigarette and used her new lighter to light it.

She was passing through the pier when she saw the lanky visage of her captain over the crowd. He was facing away from her, looking at the shops, his posture relaxed—almost slouching, like the twenty-four-year-old that he was. She forgot that, sometimes. How young he could appear in odd moments.

She found herself quickly walking forward.
"Machinastein vanilla beans!" a trader called, his green skirt reminding Sophie of aloe vera plants and hot sacbe roads. "Two hundred beli a pound, best vanilla you'll ever taste! Quetzal eggs, three hundred a box! Commemorative coins! New Machinastein coins to celebrate the alliance with Big Mom!"

She's never seen anyone whip out beli so fast.

"Commemorative… coins?" Sophie inquired.

Law barely glanced at her as he inspected the large bronze coin, stamped with a Big Mom jolly roger on one side and an image of towering temples on the other. "Everyone has hobbies."

"Surgeon of Death," the trader said, blinking at him. "Awful what the newspapers are saying. You saved my house from being destroyed."

"Don't worry about it," Law replied easily. "I'm sure I didn't mean to."

A burst of laughter. "Oh." Sophie covered her mouth. "Sorry, that was just really funny."

The trader shot her an odd look, then shook his head and flipped the coin over to Law. "Take it, pirate. I won't accept your money. Go on."

Law grinned appreciatively, nodding his thanks.

"So?" he said as they made their way through the bridge. "Have you burned through all my money yet?"

"I've invested excellently in my future," she said seriously, giving him a thumbs-up. "Though… there was something weird that happened…"

Dusk settled over the floating market as Sophie recounted meeting Blackbeard and his weird crew, though leaving out all that bizarre talk about fate and destiny. Lanterns across the market were lit, vibrantly red against the blue evening.


She rubbed her ear again. "I'm always careful."

His look could've withered flowers.

"I always try to be careful," Sophie articulated. I'm not like you.

"Unlike me?"

"Woah. Psychic!?" He flicked her on the nose. "Ouch." It didn't actually hurt and before she knew it, the heaviness in her stomach vanished.

Someone passing by bumped her arm. Sophie stumbled a bit more out of surprise, her bag knocking against her hip—and looked down at the tattooed hand on her shoulder.

"You'll get lost," Law told her. "You're short."

She gasped in outrage. "You take that back, punk! I'm above average height for a human lady!"

"Sure." He looked down at her. "I still get to say you're short."
"You're infuriating and vile and wicked and—"

"Stop, I'm blushing."

Unspeakably delighted, Sophie slapped him away and made clear, "That's disgusting. I'm disgusted. You're infringing upon my delicate sensibilities, you know?"

"What part of you is delicate again?"

"I'll push you off the bridge."

"That's mutiny."

"I'll save you, too, so you'll fear and respect me."

That made him chuckle, the corners of his eyes crinkling. In the blue dusk, Law was half a shadow, broad shoulders, black hair cut unevenly, earrings clinking gently in the breeze.

*I feel this way, Sophie reflected, because I don't have any experience.*

Her whole, sheltered life was staring her in the face. She hadn't lived enough yet. She hadn't done enough. Even after all of it—killing an ex-World Noble, falling from the sky, setting a Marine fortress on fire, Red Sky—this was something she didn't understand at all.

*What would anyone even like about me, anyway?*

There it was. Sure, they had bonded over being Science Adventure Buddies, but… she was awkward and weird, twitchy and stuttery, and her brain ran too fast all the time, and she was too cunning and too nervous and took up too much space and not enough. She was too much of everything; scars and hair and emotion. She was just… strange. A little bit unlovable, in the way all strange girls were.

Sophie didn't understand why anyone would look at her and think, *ah, yes, ideal.*

Most of all, she didn't understand why she was thinking about something *as stupid and pointless as this in the first place! Stop thinking about it, brain cells! I forbid you from thinking about it ever again!*

*…And I wouldn't even know how to do anything.*

Wow. She was one more badly repressed thought from throwing herself off the bridge with an anchor tied to her feet.

The Hearts were across the bridge, eating on small chairs in front of a vermicelli noodle shop and drinking rice liquor, the air smelling wonderfully of fish sauce.

"'Ey, you guys made it!" Valross waved at them, mouth full of egg roll. "We sold off or traded all the gold! Let's celebrate!"

Sophie quickly dashed over and crammed herself between Anko and Hai Xing, who grabbed their bowls to keep them from splashing over. Law took a seat beside Bepo, waving at the noodle maker and shouting for two more bowls.

In the slow, languid wind, her crew laughed and clanked glasses, glowing in the bright lantern lights, the cool roll of the waves beneath their feet. It surely must've been the heat from the boiling pots and the steaming noodle bowls, because her chest felt as hot as ever.
"Shit! That was a good throw. But also, *fuck, ow.*"

Sophie leaned against the training room door, watching Penguin help Shachi up from the mat. They had left Toa Sang Bay right after dinner, and were now back on the ocean. She'd been walking to the sickbay, tired from the day's adventure and ready to collapse in a bed, when she heard the voices.

She set her hefty bag down. "Can you show me how to do that? The hip throw?"

They looked up and grinned.

Penguin brushed off his hands. "Sure."

"It looks useful in close-quarters." Sophie removed her boots and stepping onto the mat. She tightened the boiler suit sleeves around her waist. The fact that she barely escaped not one but *two* fights against Teresa and the bookkeeper by relying solely on her smarts was not lost on her. She needed to resume training.

Penguin beckoned her closer. "If you were Shachi's height, I'd say hold the back of head. But since you're a little shorter, you're gonna hold my stomach—yeah, like that—"

"And don't worry about getting hurt," Shachi said with an amicable grin. "Cap can fix us up."

Not very reassuring, considering Law had the power to reattach limbs. She'd rather her limbs stay firmly in place.

"Grab my other arm here," Penguin directed and Sophie did, "step inward, spin your body, bend down, lift me on your hip—"

"HAAAA!" Sophie roared, lifting the man several inches taller than her and many pounds heavier right off his feet.

"*Holy shit,*" Penguin gasped—

"Careful with your feet," Anko said gruffly, watching from the door. "Or you're gonna—"

Her foot slipped.

They collapsed in a limbless pile with a loud, "*Oof!*"

"Think you can teach better?" Shachi called cheerfully, lacing his hands behind his head.

Anko passed a flat glare at him, kicking off his boots and striding on the mat. "Stand up, Sophie."

"Keep your center of gravity low," Penguin said.

"When you grab his arm, hold it with your armpit—"

"Make sure to lock it so I can't get free—"

"And widen your stance," Hai Xing said.

"*HAI XING!*?"

"I've been standing in the corner for the past five minutes. Ah, could it be? A ghost clinging to your
"Spooky!" Shachi shrieked, hiding behind Sophie's shoulders. She flexed her biceps at the invisible ghost, daring it to try.

"Okay, you ding-dongs." Penguin pointed at Sophie. "The four of us are going to run at you one at a time, and you're going to hip throw all of us."

"Huh!? No, no, no, wait—"

Half an hour later, Sophie was lying on the floor and inhaling as much air as she could. Shachi had opened the porthole to let in fresh air, and she was grateful for the breeze.

"You," Penguin said, breathing harshly, "fight like a marine."

"Not just any marine," Shachi added. "Marines who've fought a lot by pirates. It's not like they're physically stronger than normal, but they're way more aggressive. Their style of self-defense is really obvious."

"Attacking only vulnerable points," Hai Xing noted, the shortest out of all of them and the only one looking perfectly put-together, "putting distance between you and your opponent, focusing on getting out alive."

"The style changes a bit depending on which base you're at. Bases that don't see a lot of war don't fight like I do." Like there were no rules and every battle was life-or-death. Which it was.

"Yours did?" Shachi asked. "G-13?"

"Too much," she replied tiredly.

"You got the muscle for fighting," Anko said, leaning back on his palms. "Now's just a matter of muscle memory." He burped. "Oh, fuck, dinner's coming up."

"Yeah, right?" Penguin laughed, wiping the sweat from his face. Shachi pressed his hand against Anko's head and pushed lightly, like a pup roughhousing with his brother.

"All that half-fishman strength and you still ain't a great fighter, Hai Xing," Shachi said over his shoulder.

"I know." He was aimlessly spinning a wooden practice staff around his hands.

"But you could be, if you tried," Penguin remarked. "The best out of all of us, even."

"I'd rather be a decent thief." The staff stopped abruptly. "And a great cook."

The other four Hearts grinned at him. To have all that strength and yet be decisive enough to say *to mangoes with it* and do what he wanted... that was just plain rad.

"You've definitely put in a lot of work to hone your body," Anko said, investigating her strong shoulders. Then he leered. "You know what else could help with that *honing*?"

"So anyway," Sophie said, after pummeling Anko with her boots.

"I WAS GOING TO SAY WEIGHTLIFTING."
"Oh. Yeah, that's a pretty good idea! I should start up again," she agreed, and tipped her head at the muttering man. He had always seemed particularly confident in his fighting skills, and he clearly was good at it. "Anko, how'd you get to be the helmsman?"

He flinched.

"...If it was really up to me, I would've been a fighter. Ya know, someone whose only job is to defend the ship and drink rum. But then Cap was all 'we need a helmsman yada yada yada' and…" He scowled fiercely. "But it ain't like I didn't have experience, okay? I had my own boat before joining. And I learned sailing the hard way in the Grand Line, not from some fancy book or whatever."

"Where's your ocean?"

His hand went up to his sand dollar necklace. "South Blue."

"And you sailed into the Grand Line on your own?"

He shrugged. "Reverse Mountain was smaller than I thought it'd be."

"That's amazing," Sophie said, her eyes wide. Anko shot her a surprised look. She tapped her fingertips together in crafty apprehension. "I b-bet those three also agree."

He whipped his head in their direction, glaring with suspicion.

"'Course we do," Penguin said roughly.

"We always did, man," Shachi voiced.

"And Hai Xing-san."

"If I ever said otherwise," Hai Xing said, "I was wrong."

An ineffable expression flitted over Anko's face. He smiled. "Damn fucking straight! I'm cool as shit, and don't you bastards forget it! Motherfuckers! Shitbags!" Anko threw his head back and laughed, "WAHAHAHA!"

As he continued to cackle like an idiot in the background, Penguin said, "Next time, we should have Bepo in here. Screw that five hundred bounty, the bear can fight."

Sophie grinned as they all stood up. "You guys aren't bad teachers."

"You did good, too." Penguin ruffled her hair.

"Hm? Wha?"

"Yeah, nice job, Sophie-chan." Shachi elbowed her.

"Hm? Ah? Eh?"

Anko stood next to her, his face neutral. She blinked at him. He smacked her hard in the back, between her shoulders.

"Ow!"

"Ah, the Anko smack of approval," Penguin said.
Shachi rubbed his butt. "I remember it being lower."

"I have to prep breakfast," Hai Xing said. "It could be possible there might be Toa Sang pudding in the fridge tomorrow."

Sophie looked up from putting Anko into a headlock, her mouth watering.

"Oh, and don't go to the sickbay tonight," Shachi called after her as they left the training room and went separate directions. "Cap says you're free to sleep elsewhere. Maybe like an old broom closet."

Bemused, she found her way back to the broom closet. Despite whatever Shachi had done to it, the wooden door looked the same as ever.

She opened it.

Immediately after she did, footsteps sprinted through the submarine, an engine room door burst open, and she leaped onto the redhead mechanic, wrapping her arms around his neck to the point of choking. "Shachi-sama!"

—

"Told you they'd be okay," Bepo said, beaming. Their crewmates' voices below floated up to the deck, rowdy and loud and laughing.

Law adjusted his hat. "Yeah, yeah."

—

The cloth hammock mimicked the swaying of ocean waves, and that was a lovely thing to wake up to, even in the very early morning.

She could tell it was morning because of the new porthole that Shachi had built. He also installed new lamps in the walls; small, glass bauble-like things that she could flick on and off with a switch. A trunk beneath the hammock stored her clothes, and the jar filled with bioluminescent Crawfish mushrooms was still hanging from the ceiling. Sophie got a pretty good clue who was taking care of it when Manta slipped her a book on horticulture with a wink. She arranged her new books on the desk, and flattened out Nico Robin's bounty poster and set that in a drawer.

It felt really like a room now. Her room. Small and admittedly cramped, but there was space enough and it was all hers.

Sometime in the night, the submarine had risen up from beneath the sea.

Standing high up on the control room deck, Sophie set her knife back in its leather sheath and raised her new lighter. A smiling jolly roger carved on the metal, with six lines extending out of it that made it look like a gear, or a virus.

Peach-colored clouds spread across the sky. She blew a river of smoke up at them.

She rubbed her shoulders, still sore from last night's impromptu sparring match. It also made something crystal-clear: when it came down it, she was weaker than she'd like. Made of fragile bones and soft organs. She used to be proud of the fact that she had the same strength of an average marine, but now... I'm only average. Terribly average.

She couldn't fight with such clean technique as the others, but...
Haki was the great equalizer. If she had Haki, she could handle her own even against Devil Fruit users. Maybe, just maybe…

Sophie took her cigarette out from her mouth, examining the burning end. All it needed was pain, right? She had lived through enough pain for a lifetime—several lifetimes, considering all her near-death experiences. If she had survived for so long, maybe there was a reason for it that wasn't just smarts or serendipity.

She kissed the tip of the cigarette against the skin of her palm.

"Come on," Sophie whispered. *Do it, you ugly things. I'm a Tenryuubito Slayer. I killed a Dragon. I should have Haki, too.*

Her skin began to smoke. Her eyes teared up.

*Help me,* she willed. *I have to fight better, harder. I have to. I WILL—*

Her mouth tasted abhorrent, like hate.

*You muffinfudger!*

It remained the same disfigured hand, attached to the same scarred wrist, now smelling like burnt flesh.

She hurled the cigarette into the ocean, her fists coming down with a violent slam on the railing.

(A quiet *creak*—)

Her hands throbbed. She didn't lift them yet, letting the anger cool, breathing hard.

Maybe if she, too, was secretly descended from some sort of special bloodline… maybe if her birth family was special… maybe if the island they had come from—Sophie's original island, because she *had to* have one—was a Special Island, filled with Special People with wild curls and blue eyes just like her…

…As though that would ever happen.

The great, neutral logic of universe told her there were just some things people like her could never achieve. No matter how much she wanted it.

Her mouth twitched. *Yeah, okay.*

She laughed into the wind—a small, light thing, then louder until it was bright and ringing. *Bring it on.*

Everything she didn't know, everything she didn't understand, everything she wasn't capable of yet—well, that was just another experiment for her, wasn't it?

"I'll f-figure out your secrets!" Sophie shouted up at the half-moon in the sky, luminous and unfathomable. "Do your best a-against this insignificant, island-less orphan, universe!"

A flock of gulls passed by, cawing at her and clacking their beaks like they were amused.

The submarine began to slowly shift direction, following the southern stars.

Her attention catching on their new course, Sophie moved along the deck. She didn't notice the
small, knuckle-shaped dents her hands had left behind in the metal.

"Yeah, universe, fuck off," Anko yawned from inside the control room, rubbing his eyes. "We're making a quick detour."

"We're reaching an uninhabited island," came Law's metallic voice from the speaking tube, because of course he was also up this early. "I'm taking a day here to train."

Tired of his butt getting handed to him by middle-aged or older women, no doubt.

The island came in closer view. A winter island in the middle of a gentle spring, covered in great pines, fresh meltwater coming in to supply the rivers. The weather changed, the cool breeze turning into a high, cold wind that made her toes curl.

Somewhere out there was a former marine stepping into a camp of the Revolutionary Army. Somewhere out there was a flying automaton in the shape of a cat and a lost princess. Hippo-sensei, are you doing well? Nellie-san, Lisbeth? I'm still here. Breathing. Living.

Let's meet again.

—

Far away on Sabaody Archipelago's Grove One, the daily human auction was beginning.

The owner of the Human Auction House sauntered out of his office, inspecting the line-up of today's goods. He adjusted his tall yellow hat and star-shaped glasses. It was an important day. Two agents from a certain family were sent to check up on the house, and he couldn't afford any missteps.

They were waiting in the dimly lit corridor and listening to the distant roar of the crowd. The wolves were out in full-force today. Some were crying, some shivered, others were dead-eyed and resigned. So long as the herd was quiet and minded their place, Disco was happy.

Whispers erupted in the back of the line.

"You dare treat me this way—"

"It's the crazy one again."

"I am a princess—"

"Lady, please, just shut up or you'll get us all killed."

Disco whirled around and glared. They quieted down.

He glanced at the young woman in the back, her eyes caked with kohl, stuffed in some dancer silks that might've been someone else's that died before they had the chance to make it on the stage. Her red hair was cut tight to her ears and that was a shame; but she had come to him that way, a month's long sail on a slaver ship.

"Alright, boys!" Disco crowed. "Let's give 'em a show!"

The stage lights were blinding. He grabbed the chains of the slave-to-be, dragging her to the front of the line—past it—and up onto the stage.

"A beautiful dancer from the exotic desert of Alabasta!" he yelled into the mic, as the thrilled audience applauded. "Barely sixteen, young and nubile!"
They said she was twenty-two when they brought her in, but what did he care?

"A fresh, unplucked flower!" Disco hollered, and the crowd wet their lips, searching for an ounce of weakness, for a tear, even a wish for death. "Let's start the bid at one million! Do we have one million! Yes, from the gentleman in the back! Two million! Three mil—"

"I am a princess of the blood!"

Her yell resounded across the entire auction house, sweeping over the two shadows standing at the back. They glanced at each other, then back at the wide screen that was also being broadcasted to all areas of the underworld, including a particular palace of a particular island in the New World.

"I am a dynast, descended from my mother of the royal line of Cat's Eye Island, I am the rightful heir to the Sunflower Throne—"

The faceless crowd started booing.

"I will kill all you worms, I swear on the ashes of my mother!" the woman standing displayed on the stage, cuffed in chains, shouted. Her callused hands refused to plead, and instead itched to grip bows and arrows. "I will not rest until your putrescence is washed into the soil! Pathetic worms who grovel at the feet of slavers! Filth! Scum!"

The lights dimmed and the curtains fell in a quick swoop.

Disco grabbed her by the chains. "Are you crazy, wench!? There were Dragons in the audience today, too! Do you even know what a Dragon is, you shit-for-brains little—"

"I curse you to rot."

For a heartbeat, staring into her eyes, he nearly hesitated. The moment passed, and he raised a hand to strike—

"She's spoken for, Disco. Take that collar off."

A woman emerged from the backstage with a click of her heels. She was dressed like a maid, a cigarette dangling from her lips. Her companion was a man with a windmill-shaped hairstyle and a furry coat.

Disco's teeth gritted, and he adopted a sweet tone. "Ah, but—but, see, this slave needs to be disciplined—"

The maid flicked her cigarette at his feet. "Orders from the big man."

He went pale. Fumbling for the keys, he immediately unlocked her collar and handcuffs with shaking fingers.

The one in the furry coat was grinning. Painted black on his teeth was a jolly roger with its smile crossed out. "Our boss wants to talk to you, princess."

Her eyes were wide. Breathing heavily, she pointed at the people-seller. "...This means I am free from him?"

"Yep."

Lisbeth nodded.
Then she threw her arm back and socked Disco right on the nose.

_to be continued_

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR SUPPORT. REALLY, YOU GUYS MAKE MY HEART SOB. Thank you all for reading, and especially those who favorited, followed, and reviewed so far! Hopefully I can keep up the pace for the next chapter as well! To those of you who commented about going back to the beginning and reading how Sophie different was now, I sure as mangos agree. I went back and reread a bit and it's wild how much she's changed and how different my writing process for her was compared to now.

Of course I had to include the Donquixote Pirates, given that Doflamingo's past was revealed to be uncannily similar to how I wrote Lisbeth's. (Heck, there was also no way I could've imagined Doflamingo to be involved in Law's past when I wrote him in chapter four. But… LET'S JUST ROLL WITH IT, YEAH?

That's gonna be MNP's motto from now on.)

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