### Inked on Skin

**Summary**

Around the same time the Straw Hats set sail on the East Blue, the Heart Pirates began their adventure on the other side of the Red Line.

It was then that a tattoo artist from a shady island in North Blue bumped into a polar bear on her doorstep, was introduced to his captain, and, in no uncertain terms, told him that the tattoos on his hands sucked. Faced with an opportunity and a common objective, that fateful meeting spiralled into an adventure across several seas.

[Follows the Heart Pirates on their trip through the Grand Line with slight canon divergences due to info coming out after the story started. First 24 chapters migrated in one sitting from FF.net.]
It was trouble at first sight

Chapter Notes

There's another note at the end for context, but I felt this was more necessary before we dive in:

When I started writing this fic, three years ago, I hadn't shared a story in years. It was also my first longfic in English, and while at first I just wanted to write something fun, soon enough this fic became something more. I've put a lot of work in it through the years, my style has evolved, and the first few chapters already evoke in me that cringey feeling authors get when looking at old work. I would have liked to go back and edit, but this story is still ongoing and that would be a surefire way to never finish it, so I'll bear it and trudge on. I've been assured by some lovely people that those chapters are good anyway, but you be the judge of that.

What I mean to say is, it gets better. So if you give me a little vote of confidence, I hope I can give you back something worthwhile and make your day a bit brighter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(On an island, in the blue bay)

On a small North Blue island of ill repute, a woman in her twenties stepped out of the shower and quickly dried her body with a towel. She wrapped it around herself, combed her wet hair back, disentangling it from the piercings on her ears, and brandished her liquid eyeliner. Today was going to be the day she didn't screw it up. It was now or never. One of her main goals in life was doing her eyeliner in one go before she died, and despite knowing that the clock was ticking against her, she had the feeling that the day had something good in store.

Her name was Saki, and she was good at drawing. Objectively, exceptionally good. This eyeliner business was getting ridiculous and it was a matter of pride to get the hang of it once and for all. She would not submit to the will of a flimsy brush.

Keeping the tip as still as possible, she painted the lines over both eyelids smoothly and in record time. The wings were even, too! She'd managed it. She could have cried, but she wasn't about to ruin her work of art. It needed to dry first.

She tried to ignore the tingling in her nose while she put the eyeliner tube away, but nature always found a way to screw with everybody. She sneezed, and the sudden movement of her head flung short, very wet strands of hair to her face.

Fifteen minutes and five cotton swabs after this miserable display, she was downing the last of her coffee, grabbing her sword, and ready to go. Hopefully she could find something interesting to do before her appointment in the afternoon, or keep an eye out for an oblivious traveler. Actually
helping one would have been nice, for a change.

Interesting was standing merely a few feet away from her doorstep, it had the shape of a polar bear, and was looking at a child in rags that was holding a note out to… it?

Denying that the sight of a bear standing on its rear legs and clad in an orange jumpsuit had surprised her was too big of a lie even for her standards, but the scene that was unfolding before her was so familiar that she didn't think twice her next move. She walked up to the, snatched the note the bear was now holding, read the address written on it, and raged at the kid. "How many times have I told you to stay away from this street? Scram!"

The child screeched and ran away. Her good action of the day was done.

Turning to the bear instead, Saki said, "Be careful." She held up the paper, an address written on it. "There are more like him that trick tourists into accompanying them to their hideouts to rob them blind. Don't trust anyone that asks something from you in this island, okay? Not even children."

"Yes, miss," the polar bear replied, bowing a little in thanks.

Her expression froze, and her brain along with it. "You... can speak?" After a bit, she recovered. "Oh. Oh. I was wondering if you'd even understand me."

For some reason she couldn't understand, the bear looked apologetic and bowed even further down. "I... I'm sorry…"

"Why!? It's amazing!"

Law strolled leisurely around the town market. There was a variety of products, both legal and illegal, scattered through the stands. He was slightly more interested in the latter, since Asteria had a reputation for being an important center of drug traffic, and that was what made him stop by instead of heading somewhere more important. There was something he needed to look into, because if his info was correct it was that man pulling the strings of the island's black market.

There were some other islands like that scattered through the North Blue, which were barely disguised criminal huts. The Navy seemed to think they were better off left on their own, because storming them would mean an investment of resources too high for the payout. When you cut a head, another would rise to fill its place. That was how crime syndicates worked. And with the news of the Germa 66 conquering more and more territory and taking over some of those islands, it wasn't surprising that the people at Marineford didn't think they were worth the effort. Trying to control the most dangerous of the four Blues when the other three weren't completely under their influence was absurd.

Asteria, though, was an anomaly in the sense that the regular population was still high for a place controlled by a crime syndicate, but the locals seemed to go about their lives as if they didn't mind. Trafficking attracted ships, and in turn also attracted pirates who knew they wouldn't be bothered by Marines during their stay. That meant money for the town.

He was surprised to find very few vendors that stocked any kind of medicine, and the ones who did sold it at disproportionate prices. When asked why, they all replied that getting a hold of it was complicated, so it was only fair. Even the most common antipyretics didn't come any cheaper than at a few hundred belis. He could only guess that more specialized drugs were exclusively limited to black market. Law noted that it wasn't a good idea to fall ill in this place. He found himself wondering how the local doctors could work in this situation.
He had agreed to meet back with Bepo near the Polar Tang in an hour. They usually stuck together wherever they went, but his friend had wanted to walk on his own for a while today, and Law was glad he was showing some initiative. He knew he did it to avoid attracting any undue attention, but he was far too shy for someone his size. Law was starting to feel kind of worried about him, because since he had entered the market zone he had caught three different pickpockets aiming for him.

A man from a junk stall waved him over and proceeded to try to sell him for an outrageous price some kind of seashell that purportedly could record sounds. He found a great excuse to ignore him when heard Bepo's voice from not too far away.

"Look, he's there!"

He left the vendor hanging to see Bepo walking alongside a redhead with a tattooed arm and a sword hanging from her hip. Even in the middle of the bustling marketplace, she was flashy. Both Bepo and her were carrying grocery bags, and his friend looked as happy as the last day they he had read there was salmon in the restaurant's menu. The girl stared at Law with interest. Law was used to stares, but not so overt and unashamed.

"Hi, Bepo. I see you met someone." He greeted them with a smile. He had no clue who the girl was and was curious as to why she was getting along with Bepo, who usually didn't talk much to people he didn't know.

"Hello, Captain!" Bepo approached him, smiling happily. "She's Saki. She helped me when I was about to get mugged and now she's showing me around."

"I somehow doubt any human could mug you, Bepo," Law replied, amused.

"Not one, but ten at once probably could. They probably targeted him for his fur or to sell as an exotic animal." She explained with a knowing smile, as if this wasn't the first time she replied to that reasoning. "Criminals in this town are well organized. It would have been a bunch of them jumping him as soon as they got him somewhere secluded."

Law took a good look at the newcomer before replying. Was that a deviated septum, or was it the angle? She didn't look like much when you got past the first impact. Red and green tattoo, red hair, red top, dark green pants, sandals that rose her several inches from the ground… She had the color palette of a holiday advert. She was… colorful.

She found her looking pointedly at him and realized he had been staring for too long, but she didn't call him out on it. He also noticed that she had stopped at a greater distance than Bepo, far enough that he wouldn't get her if he were to slash with Kikoku from where he stood. It may have been coincidence, or it may have been indicative that she wasn't a complete airhead that struck up conversation with random pirates.

"Thank you then, Saki-ya," he said, sounding too detached to be sincere. "Do you expect any sort of repayment?"

The woman raised her eyebrows at the question, and a small smile formed on her face. "Not at all. Mind you, I usually do, but your fluffy friend was too adorable to leave him to his own luck."

"That's generous of you." He said, still trying to find an ulterior motive. Pirates weren't used to people helping because, so he wondered what the girl could want from them in exchange. She had a sword. She could be a bounty hunter. That would explain the security distance. Maybe she had recognized the Jolly Roger on Bepo's suit and had used him to bring her to his captain.
"She's invited us for lunch and even bought fish. Do you think we could go?"

That only fueled Law's suspicions, but he hesitated with his reply when he saw Bepo's hopeful face. He didn't have time to get over it before the woman spoke.

"I know what you're thinking," she raised a hand to stop him from talking. "This must be some kind of trap. Maybe she is the one who wants to skin Bepo, or is a bounty hunter who wants my head..."

Nailed it.

"...or she's going to bring us to a Marine ambush because no one can possibly be so stupid as to invite two pirates home." She finished, still sporting a smile.

"...Let no one ever say you aren't a self-aware person, Saki-ya."

She let out a light laugh. "Well, do what you want. I can only say in my defense that there haven't been Marines on this island for a decade. But if you don't want to come, take at least some of the fish. There's no way I can finish it on my own before it spoils."

Maybe she really was that reckless. Just maybe. She didn't look particularly strong, but then again, one didn't see many women her age carrying swords around, so there had to be a story behind that. If worst came to worst, he guessed that his Devil Fruit powers would be enough to get them out of the spot.

Besides, it was almost lunch time and his crewmate seemed eager to go with her. Everybody, Law included, was a sucker for seeing Bepo happy. He'd have to work on that.

"If that's the case, we'll accept your offer," he relented.

"Great! And by the way, the guy standing on that side of the stall is eyeing your nodachi an awful lot."

Law whipped his head back to see a young man turn white as a sheet of paper and push his way through the multitude as fast as his legs allowed. He probably stole a few purses on his way, too.

The girl simply watched the scene with a calm smile. *Tourists.*

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Saki's house was a tiny two-story block encased between other buildings. It had a dining room that doubled as a kitchen and living room, and two rooms and a bathroom on the second floor. The only personal touch Law could see were a few drawings hanging on a wall. A huge bookshelf near the entrance door threatened to collapse under its own weight, and there were a few unstable book piles that didn't fit on the shelves stacked around the room. He hadn't expected her to be the bookworm type.

Law took a glance at the spines of the closest pile. *North Blue atlas;* an old novel; *Images of the Grand Line; First civilizations, volume III by Dr. Gram;* a sketchbook. There was no distinguishable pattern to them.

"You read a lot," Bepo said, secretly wanting to get his paws on the books.

"There isn't much else to do here. This town's pretty boring when you know how to avoid shady people."

Law, who thought the definition of shady fit him like a glove, didn't know if the girl was being
 naïve, what with inviting pirates home, or she was bored of reading and wanted to live dangerously.

"What do you do for a living?" He asked.

"I'm a tattoo artist," she explained while setting the plates on the table. When Bepo saw the grilled salmon in front of him he looked on the verge of crying of happiness, "but since the town's dangerous I take on odd jobs as bodyguard. Many pirates come here thinking they have nothing to fear, and I can't count how many of them I've seen dropping dead on a dark alley. Less confident visitors tend to hire someone for protection as soon as they set foot here. Lots of people make extra cash that way."

That explained the sword she was carrying before. There was a good chance that she was stronger than she looked, as he had suspected. "How does business fare?"

"I can't complain. There are always customers, no one's been killed on my watch so far, and I get to stab people inside and out of the studio." She smiled a bit at the last part and plopped down on her chair.

"I take it that you're good with a sword."

She shrugged. "I just know where the pointy end goes. But I've lived here all my life and I know which places and people to avoid, and how to. That's what's important. You don't last long if you go around picking fights."

Law wasn't sure if she was telling the truth or it was false modesty, but it intrigued him, and if her attitude so far was any indication, she could be useful during their stay. She may have known something about the issue he was investigating, though he didn't want to ask anything just in case she could tip him off to the wrong person. She had been suspiciously nice so far, and he still hadn't a clue if she was to be trusted, so he needed to stay on his toes.

The conversation continued along the lines of what sort of people docked on the island, what sort of business those people had, and how much of a thrill-seeker someone had to be to visit the island without a specific business in mind. Law decided not to answer that one.

After they were done with the food, Saki was quick to change the topic to something entirely different. Her face turned serious, and Law knew that, after much going around in circles, he was about to find out why he had brought them to her home. "I hope you don't mind me saying this. I couldn't help but notice the tattoos on your fingers."

Ah, right, the tattoos. She was a professional, after all. Law had a fair share of them, so it made sense that she'd say something. Those in particular were the most eye-catching ones he was showing. The ones who had earned him part of his epithet.

"What about them?"

"No personal offense meant, but they are a fucking mess. Who did them? And are they dead?"

As previously established, Trafalgar Law was a man used to others staring at him, and what most of them shared was a healthy dose of respect and fear towards him. Those who didn't usually ended up dead or worse. Someone being able to stare at his hands with open disdain, and telling him in no uncertain terms that his tattoos sucked, was so far outside his realm of experience that he didn't know how he was supposed to react.

"What?"
"Did you kill the fucker who did that? I mean, I would've– If you'll excuse me–" She didn't bother to wait for permission before taking his hand and inspecting the ink up close. "Holy shit, I knew it. It's scarred as hell. Not to mention the missing letter, though I suppose it's fine if it's what you wanted. But—damn, they're all raised. It's painful to look at; that had to hurt. How much pressure did they put on the needle? I'd be wearing gloves all the time if I were in your shoes. Well, after hacking the butcher's body to pieces and throwing them to the sea kings. Do you want me to fix it? It probably won't be as good as it could have been, but anything I do will be miles better than this. What do you say?"

To be honest, after that spiel—which, he noted, had contained more swearwords than everything else he had heard coming from the girl's mouth since they had met—Law could hardly think about anything to say. He didn't know whether to be offended, surprised, or, a small part of him admitted, grateful for the offer.

As a side note, he also registered that her fingers were overly rough for someone who mostly drew for a living and denied having much experience swinging a sword, and filed the info away.

"Oh, sorry," Saki let go of his him, and with a grin that would have put any seller to shame she asked again. "What do you think? The studio is right next door, and I'll give you a discount!"

Law felt tempted to look for the Visual Den Den Mushi that had to be recording somewhere. Maybe from the top of the bookshelf? No, there were only books there. Hidden behind the pictures on the wall? They looked normal enough.

"Saki-ya," he started, thoroughly weirded out, which, he had to give it to her, didn't happen often, "do you often take pirates home to pull a sales pitch on them?" He wasn't sure if he should feel annoyed or take the situation with humor. He tried to keep in mind that they had gotten a free meal and some information out of it.

"Sorry, sorry, I may have gone a bit overboard." She could have starred in a toothpaste advertisement. Christmas toothpaste. "But I could really fix it for you."

"I'll… consider the offer," Law replied, surprised that he was, well, actually considering it. He didn't mind his tattoos, but it wouldn't hurt to have them properly redone. Picking his nodachi, he stood up from his seat. "Thank you for your kindness, Saki-ya, but we should be going. We have business to attend."

"Of course," she said, amused. "See you around, I hope. Remember, I work next door."

Law made for the door sporting a smirk but still slightly out of his element, and Bepo quickly followed behind, biding goodbye to the girl.

It wasn't until a few hours later that Law realized the girl never asked for his name.

It was night in Asteria, and everybody who knew what was good for them was safely locked inside their homes.

There were two types of people that came out at night in that town, and neither were the kind you wanted to cross: those who hid in the shadows of the alleys to do their dealings, and those who walked the empty main streets exposing their presence to everybody. The latter were the most dangerous type, since it meant they were strong enough to do so, or had enough connections that they could roam around without fear that someone would lay a hand on them.

Saki used to be one of the latter, not long ago, but something had gone wrong and now she had to be
more careful during her night excursions. She had been stalking Rickhard's men for two weeks already, trying to find patterns in their movements and schedules. She felt she had a good grasp on them already, and the moment to strike was getting near. Time was running out. She quickly shoved her unease aside before it could take a hold of her. She had a purpose. Clear your mind. Hesitation meant failure, and she couldn't afford it.

Her night's routine found itself rudely interrupted by a nearby ruckus. She immediately moved closer to the source of the noise, and surely enough, in a crossing of three alleys secluded by tall buildings, there was a group of Rickhard's thugs attacking two unfortunate sods.

It didn't surprise her that much when, on closer inspection, the people being attacked were her guests from earlier. Pirates were drawn to trouble, in her experience, and these were proving to be no exception. She would have kept lurking in the shadows, but then she noticed movement from an alley the bear and his captain were not paying attention to.

She honestly did not care about a couple of dead pirates, but if it meant having an excuse to take down some of those thugs early and saving an adorable polar bear, she couldn't see many downsides to helping. As long as none remained to tell the tale of her being there, she'd be fine.

She slid her sword outside its scabbard as she ran towards the attackers, and her blade pierced from behind the heart of a man who was about to jump an oblivious Bepo. She doubted he could have killed the bear, but he would have still left a nasty gash. Bepo turned around just in time to see her hit another attacker on the forehead with the hilt of her sword and finishing him off with a slash to the neck.

"Saki?! What are you doing here?"

"That's my line, fluffy," she said, fastidiously rubbing a spot of her arm where blood had sprinkled. "You seem to be a magnet for danger."

"I—I'm sorry..."

She briefly wondered how the hell someone that huge could be so apologetic all the time, but soon she found Law's nodachi pointing at her, and she had more pressing things to worry about.

"Is that how you thank someone who just saved your subordinate's life?" She bluffed, though she was genuinely miffed. On top of the bad tattoos, dubious fashion sense, and an apparent weakness for animal prints, she could add rude to the pile. What a keeper.

"Answer his question."

Saki sheathed her sword, and held her hands up, never losing sight of Law and ready to book it like an F-Wani on speed if he made any sudden movements. There was no room for doubt that he'd kill her if she said something he didn't like. She swore this was the last time she tried to help a pirate, which, on second thought, would be an easy promise to keep no matter how badly the conversation went.

"I was patrolling. I've been following these guys' movements for a while now, and they happened to lead me to you." She felt she had said enough for the time being, so she pushed back, because by all rights this was her town and he was the suspicious one, going out at night and getting into fights. "What were you doing here this late at night? Newcomers to the city don't tend to get involved with these people unless they have something to do with them in the first place."

Law considered his options for a few seconds, until he finally decided to lower his sword. "You
don't sound very innocent yourself, Saki-ya. Why would you be stalking these people unless you too were involved with them?"

"Because I was until a few weeks ago."

'I can't count how many of them I've seen dropping dead on a dark alley.' Her earlier comment took on a new meaning.

"Killed any nosy pirates lately?"

She registered a bit of surprise before smiling grimly at the accusation. "Not for a while," she admitted, and she took a quick glance to the now deserted alleys. "This is no place to talk, Mr. Trafalgar. Care to follow me home again?"

It confirmed some of Law's suspicions. "You knew who I was from the start."

"Wasn't difficult to find out with that Jolly Roger on your clothes. Besides, memorizing wanted posters is a basic survival tactic in this line of work."

Law was still eyeing her with distrust, and Bepo was on edge, too. She had apparently saved them, but all this could still be a stupidly elaborate trap.

Keeping his distance, he said, "We'll come with you. But if you do anything odd--"

"I'm deader than the human garbage who inked your hands should be, I know."

Law was convinced that the woman in front of him was completely fearless, stupid, or both.

Taking the lead, she promptly tripped on a wobbly cobblestone and fell face first to the ground.

As Bepo rushed past him in a panic to help her get up, Law decided to settle for option two.

Chapter End Notes

Quick explanation of how this story came to be:

While in the anime they were done right from the start, Oda messed up Law's tattoos during the Sabaody arc constantly, where they kept disappearing and, most importantly, they spelled the word "DETH." It was a goof, obviously. And obviously, I have never let it go, because any excuse to poke fun at Trafalgar Law is a good one in my book.

Saki was born from a conversation with a friend in which we were talking about this. It went as such:

"Can you imagine being a tattoo artist and seeing that abomination for the first time?"

"I'd chase him all over the Grand Line just to fix it."

"He'd agree to it and then he'd keep putting it off just to be an ass."

"…I'm glad not to be that woman."

"Yeah..."
And so that poor soul came to be.
Mutual benefit

(You stole the heart from out my chest)

Bepo was happily leafing through an atlas while Saki poured coffee for the three of them. Both guests had settled in their earlier spots, and Law was questioning the woman, visibly more relaxed since he had seen that there wasn't a mortal trap waiting for them in the house and all the coffee was coming from the same pot, including the one she was about to drink.

"See, I'm not trying to poison you," she said as she took a sip from her mug.

Law shifted uncomfortably on his seat. "You said you were following those men because you want to kill their boss—Rickhard, was it?"

"Exactly. If I sneak into the base while they're out doing their business, he'll have less people to keep him safe. I can deal with a bit of resistance, but not his full squad. He has people working for him all over the city, and they are too much for a single person."

"Sounds risky, even if you wait until some are outside. There's bound to be security if he's that important. How are you going to escape?"

"I'm not supposed to."

Bepo lifted up his gaze from the book, his mouth slightly open from surprise. "You plan to die?"

"I'm being realistic. There's no way I can go there and come out unscathed, but as long as he's dead it'll be fine."

Law felt the smallest bit of something sink in his stomach. He tried not to sympathize at all and almost managed it. Wanting to die killing was something he could relate to better than he'd have preferred.

"Why?" He asked.

Saki sighed, and sounded somewhat defeated for someone that had been showing so much energy until then. "You don't want to hear the story of my life."

"I don't think we're getting any more work done tonight."

Saki had already told them her plan to get them off her back, all because she'd been a sucker for a fluffy animal when she could have let them to die in a dark alley. However, the plan was something thought over and over, painstakingly prepared during the past month. It was where she poured all her focus. It was calculated, and so she could talk about it in a detached way. What this pirate was asking for was something personal and completely outside of her control.

Then again, it wasn't like he could do much more damage with another info dump after everything she'd already said. She just wasn't sure where to start.

"Whatever I do, I'm already dead. It's not like it'll make a difference in the end," she shrugged.

"Are you being targeted?" With her already notorious tendency to flirt with danger it wouldn't have surprised Law at all.
She snorted. "No need to go to that trouble. I'm ill," she said, and her words reminded Law of things he didn't want to think about. "Let's see… I was born with a heart condition that would have killed me long ago had I not been receiving treatment. Once the smugglers settled here, about ten years ago, they began controlling all drug traffic in the island, legal or otherwise, and the prices skyrocketed. My father couldn't afford my treatment anymore, so he entered Rickhard's service in exchange for it. Long story short, he did something stupid and got killed, but Rickhard himself told me he'd keep supplying me if I worked for him in my father's stead."

"And you accepted."

"Of course. I like being alive, you know." She was lost in thought for a moment, and she unconsciously reached for the tattoo on her left arm. Bamboo shoots and red camellias. "He usually asked me to get rid of people that were bothering him, mostly nosy pirates or traitors. But I refused to follow the last orders I received, so he cut my medicine supply. That was almost a month ago. I'm running out of pills tomorrow, so I guess I have a week left, give or take."

She talked with little emotion, as if what she was saying had little to do with her. The words of someone who knew death was near and accepted it, Law thought, but what he said was, "And here I was wondering all day why you were being so reckless around pirates."

"That was Bepo's charm, no doubt." And the hope of landing another customer for the studio, but that was best left unsaid. A likely premature death was no excuse to neglect work.

"Why haven't you left the city?" The bear spoke. "I'm sure you could get your medicine elsewhere."

"I could, but the pills I was getting were laced. Trace amounts of the drug build up in the body with time and create a dependency."

"That's how he's kept you working for him?"

"You're quick on the uptake. I like you." There was a shadow of a smile. "The symptoms of withdrawal after so much time taking the drug are severe enough that I don't think I would survive them with my condition. I've seen it a few times: arrhythmia, panic attacks…"

So Law had only been right about the last half of the adrenaline junkie thing. Well, that explained things.

"I find it hard to believe that you're the only person in this situation. There are too many people in this island."

"There are others," she said, nodding. "No one can afford to pay market price for long treatments. They either end up working for Rickhard in exchange for the medicine or they flee the island as soon as they find out they need it. But as you can see, healthy people don't mind all that much, so the island's still bustling. Having a crime syndicate in town means there is always enough money flowing around to keep people content."

Bepo looked sad. "Does no one speak up against it? If everybody did…"

"Some do, and Rickhard makes sure they never last long. The hit I refused was one of them."

So in the end, Law had actually been lucky, in a sense. The smugglers, the illegal substance trafficking, it made Law think that he was closer to what he was looking for than he had expected.

"What's the name of that drug?"
"The locals call it aster dust. It's made from a local plant—that's where the name of the city comes from. It's Rickhard's main source of income."

"Damn," Law muttered, slumping back on the chair. Another cold trail. Not that he had thought it would be so easy, but he had hoped.

"Disappointed?" She was surprised by his reaction, but didn't want to miss the opportunity to question him about his own motives. "Was that what you were doing tonight? Looking for a drug?"

Law nodded. "I was… following a lead. Is Rickhard the only one directing the trafficking in this island?"

"No way. He's the visible head, that's all. I've heard a few things, and I know he answers to a man named Joker."

Law went so tense that he almost sent his coffee flying after hearing that name. Saki had hit the nail on the head somehow, and now she wanted to know why.

"Are you sure, Saki-ya?"

"As much as I can be. You know who he is? I've heard them speak through Den Den Mushi."

Law pondered the new information he had. There didn't seem to be S.A.D. in the city, but there was one of Doflamingo's subordinates, so he hadn't been that far off the mark. He could do something about it, true, but he wouldn't get anything out of it except some satisfaction for one upping the Shichibukai this time. It was time to leave town, and empty-handed to boot. Unless...

He looked at the woman appraisingly while he reviewed everything he knew about her. She frowned at his stare and sudden silence.

"Saki-ya, what kind of heart condition you have?" Law wasn't the sort of man to let opportunities go to waste.

She had been waiting for her answer to her question, and felt a bit annoyed at the sudden change of subject until she remembered who exactly she was talking to. "Right, you're a doctor." She went to the old bookshelf and took out a heavy medicine manual. "Page 362, section b," she indicated in an automatic tone, leaving the book next to Law as she sat again and took a sip of her drink.

Law browsed the book until he reached the page. As she had said, it was congenital heart condition, which affected the outer walls of the organ and weakened them. He had never seen an actual case before, since most patients never lived past childhood. There was a silence until Law talked again.

"I assume you haven't found anyone willing to operate."

"That's right. I'm always told it's too delicate of a surgery and no doctor would risk it."

Now that was a challenge.

"Is that so?" And he wasn't one to back away from an interesting one. "Room."

A blue dome surrounded all of them and Law moved towards her. She tensed and eyed him with suspicion, ready to strike back, as he lifted an arm towards her.

Echoing her words during their previous encounter, he said, "If you'll excuse me…” and didn't wait for permission, either.
It didn't matter that she had been right. He was still just a little sore about the tattoo thing.

"Mes."

There was no pain. Before Saki could realize what was happening, she felt an unfamiliar sensation inside her chest, like a void, and next thing she knew, Law was holding a cube in his hand and examining it with genuine interest and—was that amusement too!? It took her a second for the situation to sink in her mind, and when it did, it took a considerable effort not to scream bloody murder.

That pirate was holding her heart in his hands.

Her heart. Was. Out. OF HER RIBCAGE.

_Breathe_, she told herself. _This isn't the moment to panic._

In all fairness, if this wasn't the moment to panic, she was pretty sure no other would ever be.

"Can you fix it?" Bepo asked.

"With my eyes closed," Law declared bluntly.

"Did you just take my heart out?" Saki asked as calmly as she could, which all things considered was a big feat, because she was freaking out quite hard inside. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the beating organ.

"Don't worry, it won't hurt you," Bepo tried to reassure her.

She looked at the bear, and couldn't bring herself to say to his smiling face that she didn't give a damn and wanted all her internal organs where they were supposed to be. "That's not the—wait, you… said you can operate me? But—"

"Do you want to see it yourself?" Law offered with a smirk.

She was about to reply that no, she didn't and please put her vital organs inside her again, but even the horror of seeing her heart literally in the (sloppily, awfully tattooed) hands of that man wasn't enough to overpower the sheer fascination she felt. So instead of saying that, she approached Law, coffee cup still in tow, and leaned down a bit to look closer at her heart.

This was officially the weirdest shit she'd ever done.

"See the spot where the wall is strained?" He pointed to a mark that looked like scar tissue. "I can see why you haven't found anyone willing to fix this, but I could reinforce it with an artificial membrane without much trouble." He was being smug, irritatingly so. "As you can see, I have better tools at my disposal than most doctors."

Saki lifted her gaze from the hard to look at him intently. What was he trying to get at? "Forgive me if a guy whose epithet is 'Surgeon of Death' doesn't inspire me much confidence."

"I see you really did your homework," he teased her with a cocky smile.

"Hey, don't feel all that special. I told you I memorize every poster I get my hands on. I need to know which kind of people I work with." Then she added, as an afterthought. "Besides, I don't invite complete strangers home."

Law felt tempted to say that it was more worrying that despite his reputation she had looked for his
company, but he opted for a more businesslike approach. "Saki-ya, I'm offering you the surgery you need in exchange for joining my crew."

Silence. She stared him in with all the suspicion she was able to, and that was a lot for someone who regularly worked with criminals. After a month of little sleep and the threat of imminent death looming over her, she was pretty sure that she was a firm contender for first spot in the paranoia rank of the city.

"...Are you serious?"

"Do I look like I'm not?"

The staring contest kept going on.

"Come with us, Saki. It'll be more fun with you on board," Bepo added, trying to tip the scales in favor of his captain. Bepo was hoping she'd agree, because he really wanted to know how having a subordinate felt like. Also, she knew how to cook, and he and his captain couldn't say the same. The kitchen hadn't quite been the same since that day with the pressure cooker...

"Why would you do that?" She couldn't understand what was so interesting about her.

Why, indeed. Law could say it was a whim, that he needed more people on board and she could hold her own in a fight. He also knew it wouldn't fly, because he could find someone that fit the job description anywhere.

He could also say that, in a convoluted and very uncomfortable sense, she reminded him of himself fourteen years ago, but he'd rather be pushed into a nest of sea kings than admit it. Fortunately, that wasn't the whole truth either, because Law wasn't exactly known for being an endless pit of human empathy.

Law pushed the heart cube against her chest and it disappeared back into its place. Then he raised a hand and spoke. "I need someone to fix this."

Her eyes scanned again the tattoos on it, and she grimaced. "Yes, you really do."

He ignored her. "...And you seem to be capable in a fight. Right now it's just Bepo and I, and we need more people on our side."

"If it's a matter of manpower, I'm sure you can get some that isn't about to kick the bucket."

"I've never performed that sort of surgery before. It's a plus for me."

Saki didn't know what to make of the man that was standing before her. He was a pirate. He was a doctor. She'd met more of both than most people, and she didn't like either. In her experience, pirates were stupid and caused trouble, and doctors bled her dry just to say they couldn't help her. Useless. This man was the two things, and he was offering her a way out of a death sentence and the city, all wrapped in a neat package, everything she'd wished for since she was a child.

In exchange, he got a crewmate and the opportunity to work with an interesting heart condition. The deal made sense, and that was what set her alarms off. Where was the catch? There was always a catch. She remembered what she had told Bepo the morning before. 'Don't trust anyone that asks something from you in this island.'

Saki couldn't trust him, but if there was a chance, any chance to live, she'd take it. That was a determination she'd taken when she began to work with the smugglers.
Walking a few steps, she sat on a chair next to Bepo, still in thought, one hand on the back of her neck and the other holding the cup. The coffee was going cold. She looked up at last. "I can only do it under one condition."

"I'm listening."

"I need to kill Rickhard first, no matter what. I won't leave this town otherwise."

"Not even in exchange for living?"

"No."

Law let out a small sigh. He was going to tell her off and leave, she was sure of it. 'Too much trouble, I wasn't that interested, goodbye and have fun dying.' Yep, that sounded about right.

"Then you don't leave me many options. It's a deal, Saki-ya."

She stared in surprise as he extended his hand towards her. Nice hand, she thought as she shook it, Wonder how many people he's killed with it, and she was doing a big effort there keeping her face straight when she touched those letters. No amount of soap would make her feel clean after that.

"Very well. And please, don't tack that '-ya' onto my name. Just Saki is fine."

The hours passed as they exchanged information and planned the assault on the enemy's base for the upcoming night.

Suddenly, the door opened and a black-haired girl that couldn't be older than fifteen burst into the house.

"Saki, the customer arrived! Brought a tacky design of a dragon with a—" She stopped on her tracks when she saw Law and Bepo. "Oh. Weird, you have compa—WHOAA!" Her mouth hung open as she pointed and stared at the bear.

What!? What had he done? Bepo wanted to sink in the chair and die.

Saki burst out laughing. Even Law had to hold back a smile.

The older woman stood up and walked to the girl, messing her hair with more force than necessary. Saki was only taller because her sandals had heels.

"Ouch—ouch—ouch—"

Saki managed to contain the laughter long enough to speak. "Tsubaki. What did I say about being rude to strangers?"

Law thought she wasn't the most appropriate person to give lessons on politeness.

"But—A bear! There's A BEAR!"

"I'm sorry…"

"HE SPEAKS!"

"I'M SO SORRY." Bepo bowed so low that his head hit the table and made everything on top of it rattle.
"Why the hell are you apologizing!?!"

Law watched a grinning Saki throw an arm around the girl and introduce her to Bepo.

'Whatever I do, I'm already dead.'

She looked very much alive at that moment.

"Take, can you bring me more gauze?" Saki asked over the buzzing of the tattoo machine and the screeches of the customer.

Tsubaki's little brother was at her side in a flash with a sealed pack.

"Thanks."

A pause. She hated whiny customers. You complained when you got a tattoo in a back alley with a reused needle that poked so deep that you could feel the ink being pushed directly into your bloodstream. You didn't bitch and moan when you were sitting in a nice studio, getting the tattoo of your dreams done in a perfectly sanitary, professional way, by an astonishingly pretty girl who had fucking finally managed to get the wings of her eyeliner even, and hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours.

Maybe the last part was what was inspiring her to subtly torture the man, but she wasn't concerned enough to reflect on it. Professional, yes. Moral, hell no.

She trashed the stained pieces of gauze in a nearby bin and ripped the new envelope. The kid scurried back to the waiting room, impatient to keep showing Bepo his sketchbook.

The outline of the dragon was almost done. Tsubaki had been right. It was tacky, but she wasn't being paid to have good taste.

"Can... we stop for today...?" The pirate almost pleaded.

She wasn't being paid to put up with this, either.

"No way. The outline needs to be done in one sitting."

"What about painkillers?"

"That will be an extra hour and twenty thousand beli. Also, too late."

The man cringed when she turned the needle on again. Law would admit that he was amused by the sight.

If he had known the woman long enough, he'd have realized that she was wiping the excess blood away a bit too slowly, relishing on the sound of the needle almost brushing the arm and the customer getting tenser, only for the sadistic pleasure of it. But Law didn't know her nearly enough, and so he missed what could have been a beautiful bonding chance with a potential crewmate. Pity.

However, The Old Man, proud owner of the tattoo parlor and grandfather of the two kids that were currently entranced by Bepo, knew her since before she was born, and he wasn't having any of her shit. They needed the customers, dammit.

"Girl."
"You're such a wet blanket."

By the way the pirate started screaming, one would imagine that Saki was inking his balls instead of his arm.

Ah, music to her ears.

"I'm sorry, but I can't work if you don't stop twitching," she said in the most neutral tone she could manage.

"What the hell are you doing!? It's like you're tearing my arm off!"

"I'm sure the doctor over there can certify that your limb is in place and not going anywhere without you."

"It's not going anywhere without you." Law was getting a kick out of it, even if one couldn't tell from the outside.

"Thank you."

The owner of the shop was tall and built man, and a missing left arm and more ink than skin he had to show off. He lounged against the doorframe of the room where Saki was working, opposite of Law, and looked at them with disdain.

"I swear I've tattooed children that complained way less than you." He then turned his attention back to Law, ignoring the sounds coming from the customer's chair and her favorite not-granddaughter mumbling something like what kind of fucktard would ink a child in the first place. "Say, boy, are you interested in another tattoo? If you'll allow me to be so bold, those letters on your hands are a mess. The little girl or myself could fix them in a sec."

"I already offered. And don't call me little girl, old man," she said without moving her eyes away from her job.

"Stop butting in conversations and pay attention to your work!" He went back to Law. "Charming, ain't she? But she's really good at whatever she puts her mind to, even if she doesn't look it. Can you believe she memorized a fucking medical book on a dare?" He cracked up. "Can't say it was her brightest moment, but she made me lose five thousand beli and my best shirt."

A biting 'your fault for spitting wine all over yourself' could be heard over the increasingly louder yelps of the customer.

"I'll think about it if by the time she's finished that poor man does still have his arm. I need all my fingers to work."

The laughter of the old man filled the room in a way that made the walls vibrate.

"You are all so funny," Saki mumbled. Then, in a cheerier voice, she continued, "Hey, Bepo! Do you want a tattoo? You can shave your back, get a sweet design on it and let the fur grow back. It would be a secret tattoo. Free of charge for you."

"That sounds so cool!" Said Tsubaki, who was at the counter of the parlor in case any other customers came in. Not being in the same room wasn't going to prevent her from putting her two cents in the conversation.

"I want a pole star."
"I can draw stars! Wanna see them?" Take searched frantically for the page. Having one of his stars on a talking polar bear sounded like a life accomplishment at his age. Or any age, to be fair.

"You're pirates, but you don't have business with Rickhard's men, right?" The old man kept interrogating Law. "Are you looking for something in particular in this island?"

"Not really. We just planned to get some supplies and be on our way."

He almost expected to hear a woman's voice calling him a liar, but it never happened.

"That's a shame. Little girl senior and little girl junior seem to have taken a liking to you two. Or maybe just you, fluffball." He gestured at Bepo, who looked down and scratched his head sheepishly.

"You talk way too much," came the reply from Saki.

"Look and act as tough as you want, but you've always liked cute things."

An irritated groan was the only reply he received.

"I was actually thinking of taking Senior with us."

Saki did look up this time to throw Law the dirtiest look she could manage.

"I don't want her to go!" Take was flabbergasted at the suggestion. Her big-big-sister? Leaving?

"Ha! Good luck convincing her. Not to mention putting up with her."

"I think we already have an agreement in our hands." Law sounded pleased with himself.

"And I think you two should head out before I stab you with a needle."

Neither men moved.
Bepo strolled down the shady alleyway, making sure he was being seen by the man sitting on a crate. He took every step deliberately, slowly, with his head held high, as if he didn't even acknowledge the man's existence. But he did, oh yes, he did. That man was the only reason Bepo was walking alone in the middle of Asteria's silent night.

He walked past the man, drawing his gaze, feeling extremely accomplished. Then, as instructed, he turned around for a few seconds to meet the man's eyes with his own, and ran away without missing a beat.

The steps of the man running behind him made him feel proud of a job well done.

Sending Bepo to catch the guard's attention wasn't the most subtle approach they could have taken, but a polar bear in a jumpsuit was hardly missable in a narrow alley, and they were on a tight schedule.

From their vantage point on the rooftop of a nearby building, Saki was going to voice her concerns about using Bepo as bait. That bastard Arnold—who always insisted on frisking her for security reasons, hoping one day the excuse would work—chased after the bear at full speed. But then she saw them turn the corner, and a spinning orange kick on the face sent Arnold flying into a wall.

"I think I'm in love."

"You haven't seen anything yet."

Law thought she heard her snicker when they jumped to street level and ran up to Bepo.

"Good job."

"Did I do well?" The bear beamed at his captain's praise.

"Beautiful. I almost teared up." Saki had somehow managed to land next to a storm drain without getting a heel stuck in the grate. That would have been sad even for her standards.

"You don't seem very affected," Law commented, seeing her looking at her shoes. "Didn't you work with this guy before?"

She glared in the direction of the unconscious man. "Don't remind me."

"I can kick him harder if you don't like him," Bepo offered.

She had to resist the urge to hug the bear and settle for a, "Nah, not worth the effort."

The group made their way to the spot where the man had been sitting. There was a staircase behind that lead down.

"As you can see, we take the first part of 'underground business' quite literally here."
"Are you sure no one else has seen us?" Bepo was looking around, wary. "It doesn't make sense to have such a big hideout and only one guard."

"They are inside," Saki explained. "Everybody in town knows this place is off limits. One guard outside is enough to set off the alarm and have a swarm of thugs coming out. It's pretty straightforward from now on."

"Take out everyone we come across, right? Should be easy," Law said, walking down the stairs.

Bepo followed happily after his captain. "And then Saki will travel with us!"

The girl was starting accept she didn't have a say anymore in the matter, so instead of protesting she went for something more practical.

"Careful, this basement is built like a maze." She went down the stairs and got to the front of the group. "We should try not to get separated."

Law was getting really impatient with all the twisting and turning of corridors. Saki was guiding them, and the amount of dead and unconscious people they were leaving in their wake was proof that she had been right about one crucial point of her first plan: there was no way she could have gotten out of the hideout alive, if only because of the sheer number of smugglers that were coming out to greet them. He was relieved to see that, as expected, she wasn't lacking in skill, but no matter how good she was with a sword, a bullet was a bullet. Fortunately, that was when Law's Devil Fruit came in handy.

She didn't seem to have many qualms about attacking her former companions, but he noted that she made a point of hitting some of them hard enough to knock them out instead of killing. Maybe it was meant as a kindness, but he didn't dare make assumptions, and she didn't seem to mind what he and Bepo did. Which was a good thing, because he was cutting attackers indiscriminately, with or without an active Room. Maintaining it for long periods of time was too exhausting to be worth it, and the radius wouldn't move along with them, anyway. But it was fun to do when more than three people at once tried to attack.

"So this is what they meant about you cutting people up for a hobby." Saki's voice called Law's attention after he'd just finished returning two bullets and slicing the poor sods.

"You can even put the pieces back together!" Bepo exclaimed while he kicked another guy with so much strength he left an indentation on the floor.

"Shambles."

"Or scramble them!"

Limbs flew through the air and got reattached in places where no feet should ever be, to the utter horror of Law's victims.

Of all the things Saki had imagined that could happen while she stormed the enemy base, in all those sleepless nights following smugglers and deciding what to do with the few days she had left to live, laughing her ass off wasn't a possibility she had contemplated, but she was about to reach that point.

She was having so much fun, and she wasn't supposed to.

"Still not as gruesome as the news would lead me to believe."
"You know how Marines are. Everything’s so catastrophic to them."

"Always so dramatic," she agreed, and gestured them towards a set of stairs that, for a change, went up. "We're getting close to where Rickhard should be."

"Have you considered the possibility that he might not be here at all?" Law questioned, and he expected a better answer than what he received.

"Yeah, I have."

He tried to put all his indignation in the glare he shot her. She sighed and explained herself.

"His only option would be leaving the island, and he wasn't expecting us. Maybe me alone, but he'd have banked on his guards having me dead by now, and there wasn't anyone to sound the alarm at the entrance. Besides, we're underground, and there is only one access to this place. And, on top of it, he wouldn't run away from me because of stupid pride. He is here."

The door at the end of the corridor opened as soon as they reached the top of the stairs. Alerted by the ruckus in the hallways, Rickhard had been waiting for them.

"Saki, my little flower! I was sure you'd pay me one last visit before you withered. But I didn't take you for the kind to associate with strangers."

Rickhard was a small man, slightly shorter than her, with black balding hair, a moustache that stuck in all directions, and a penchant for sounding like he was a book villain. He received the girl and the pirates with open arms, and Saki's eyes flew to the familiar sword he held in his right hand. How many years had it been since she had last seen it? The bastard was showing off that blade just to rub it on her face.

If she had been a character in one of the many adventure stories she had read, she'd have said now something solemn and cool like, 'It's you who dies now, Rickhard' or 'And I'm taking you with me to the grave', but she was in a hurry, doing her best to avoid a gruesome death, and most definitely wasn't a fictional character. She knew what she had to do, so she lunged forward without a word, but when she thought she had him, something strong enough to leave her breathless hit her and made her fly back.

Bepo caught her midair, before she could fall on her ass. That had been so undignified. She held her bruised stomach as she looked up to see Rickhard's body covered in scales and a reptilian tale sprouting from behind him. What the hell?

"You didn't tell us he had eaten a Devil Fruit." Law's demeanor had changed, and there was none of the previous levity in his stance or expression.

"Because he hadn't," she spat. She shouldn't have, because after all Law had volunteered to help her, but damn if he was going to accuse her of withholding information. "He must have gotten it very recently."

"Bingo! I got it this week! A present from the top, for my excellent service these past years. It's a shame, Saki. You could have had one, but since you turned your back on us, I had to give it to Sasu."

Law eyed the girl, who had walked to his side. "Sasu?"

"A bodyguard. Silent, stocky, lots of brute force, nothing of note. We haven't seen him yet, so he must be around."
"We took out everybody we found."

"Wouldn't it be fun if he was right behind you?" Rickhard laughed, showing his new set of fangs.

Something tugged at Law from behind, and he landed on his side and on the edge of the staircase. But whatever had done it, they couldn't see anyone.

"A mosquito! There's a mosquito!" Bepo cried out, running to help his captain up.

Law and Saki searched frantically around to no avail.

"Seriously?" She said in disbelief. How were they supposed to find a fucking mosquito in the middle of a fight with a crocodile?

"Truth be told, I've been thinking that maybe it was for the best that you betrayed us. I always imagined you having something more visible. A mosquito's too stealthy for you. You're nothing if not flashy. For Sasu, though? He goes unnoticed all the time. It fits him perfectly."

Law stared at the mosquito, trying to train his ear to hear him all the time, when he noticed other sounds coming from downstairs. It was either reinforcements or unconscious people waking up too early.

"Bepo, block the stairs. Don't let anyone up here."

"Aye, Captain!"

Bepo ran to the bottom of the stairs while Law enveloped the hallway with a Room.

"Let's take care of the big one first."

In the split second that followed Law's declaration of badassery, a few previously stray thoughts connected in Saki's mind. The train of thought was more or less this one:

Law was trying to kill Rickhard.

Rickhard's super special sword contained a small amount seastone.

Law was a Devil Fruit user.

Devil Fruit users had universal weaknesses she'd never given any thought before, because most fruit users were crammed in the Grand Line trying to kill each other.

Rickhard was now aware that Law had a Devil Fruit and would target him.

Law was going to drop like a sack of potatoes if he sword did as much as graze him.

Before Law had time to swing his nodachi – **Why's that thing so long, is he trying to compensate?** — and Saki could protest, Rickhard ran to him with an unseen speed, and the only thing that prevented him from being cut was Saki's own sword parrying Rickhard's at the last second. That couldn't have been good for her heart.

"Leave this one to me!"

"Why would I—"

"There's seastone in his sword!"
"Why didn't you tell me before!?"

"W-well, I just did!" That reply hadn't been childish at all.

In the middle of the confusion, Sasu took the chance to untransform at their side and sweep them away with an arm.

The blow sent them against a wall—a recurring scene when you were fighting in hallways, Law mused—as he lost his grip on Kikoku. Rickhard was on what should have been full crocodile form a second later, but somehow he had kept his hands and feet during the transformation, and he looked so horrifying that Saki almost wished this had been an actual reptile trying to bite her head off. His bodyguard was right behind him, in half-shifted form, which left him with a lovely set of translucent wings, antennae, and bulging eyes.

There was no escape. Great.

Saki used her sword to block Rickhard's jaws from closing on her arm, despite knowing full well that it was a matter of seconds before he overpowered her with sheer strength. Right when she thought her arms were about to give in, her hands were empty, and she was staring at a wall instead of sharp teeth. There was a chilling scream behind her, and she realized Law had switched them for Sasu and his nodachi at the last second.

"Now!" Law said, running to recover his sword, and she didn't need to be told what to do.

She took the sword Rickhard had discarded when he morphed to full Zoan at the same time Law cut both men into several pieces, and stuck it in the underside of his midsection. A quick look at Sasu made clear that he had been done in by his own boss.

"H—how dare you! After everything I did for you! You owe me your life!"

Rickhard's head was back to human, but the rest of his body wasn't. Was that normal for a Zoan user? His dismembered body parts thrashed, desperate for a chance to defend himself, but it was clear by the erratic movement that that alone was taking a huge effort.

"Will you stop talking like a cheap villain?" With a huff, she reached down to pick up her sword from the pool of blood Sasu had left behind. "You had this coming."

Law observed the scene from a distance. Rickhard was going to die from blood loss soon unless he got someone to help him fast, and with seastone stuck in his abdomen, it wasn't likely. He thought Saki was going to give him the killing blow, but she just stared at her sword and sighed in disappointment.

"I can't even sheathe this until I clean it." She turned to Law, who was watching her expectantly. "I think we're done here."

"You aren't going to finish him?" After all the men she had seen her kill in the past hour, he was curious as to why she would hesitate to kill the person she hated the most.

She looked one last time at the sword that kept Rickhard's now human belly stuck to the floor.

"I'm not that nice," she said, and she sounded bitter and very tired. *He left me to die on my own, too. He didn't even send a customary goon to try.*

There it was; the emotion she'd been lacking throughout the whole ordeal. Law had been wondering about her apparent detachment on the issue, but now she had let some of the resentment slip, and it
was reassuring, in a sense. She had laid out the plan to them and went about its execution as if it hadn't been personal, but there was a functioning human beneath the mask, and for a brief moment it looked exhausted.

It disappeared as fast as it had come, and there was a tiny smile on her face when she looked back at Law. He couldn't tell if it was sincere.

"You think you can find the way back outside following the trail of corpses? There's something I still need to do." She turned to the dying man again.

Law had no option but to talk to her back. "You aren't thinking of breaking our deal, are you?" People did stupid things under stress, and no matter how calmly she seemed to be taking the situation, she'd been perfectly willing to die to get the job done. That was a dangerous mindset to have.

"What can you do if I am, hm?"

"You'd be a prime subject for open heart surgery without anesthesia. You internal organs will end up bottled in formaldehyde for further study. Also, I'll make sure to add your eyeballs to the collection on my top shelf. I'm still missing that particular shade of green."

"That's kind of cool. It'd be like donating my body to science."

"Does nothing ever faze you?"

She turned to face Law, lips slightly parted, because was that the impression she'd been making all that time, when in reality he'd been throwing her off for all the short time they'd known each other? It was him who appeared to be on top of everything all the time, with his freaky powers and seemingly infinite self-confidence.

She changed the subject. "You haven't told me why you started your own crew." If she was going to follow him, she wanted to know. She was sick of working for someone she despised. What was Law after? Money, followers, a position of power? She needed to know if there was a meaning to keep on going, if the opportunity this man represented was worth taking.

"Because I'm going to find One Piece." Words spoken earnestly, bluntly and without a hint of embarrassment.

The last time Saki had heard someone seriously say that, she'd been 6 and her neighbor 7. And maybe she still couldn't find it in herself to trust Law, but she believed him. She wanted to believe. There was something in the conviction with which he'd said it that made her think that he was the kind of man who could do it.

Deep down, she'd always wanted to believe on the legendary treasure, too, even when everybody laughed at it as a children's story. She'd dreamed of sailing and meeting new people with new ideals on new places. She longed for the world out there.

"Pirate King, I see." The corners of her lips curled up, not in amusement, but hope. "It's a fine dream."

"Do you have one, too?"

She did. And she'd always thought it'd remain like that, but now there it was, there that man was, taunting her to step out of her shell and make a grab for it and make it real if she had the guts.
"I never intended to go back on my word. I'll set sail with you."

She decided she had a new purpose. The first long-term one she could afford.

"Besides, no one's going to take seriously a Pirate King with that thing on his hands."

Law stared at her for a few long seconds, wondering how many days of this his ego could take before he decided to throw her overboard. For now, he was content with rolling his eyes and flipping her off.

"We'll pick you up in the morning." He headed to the stairs, and then added as an afterthought, "Preferably alive, but it's not mandatory."

"Make that early afternoon. I have an appointment with yesterday's customer."

"Can I watch?"

"No."

"I'll be there."

As soon as he turned around, Law heard her snicker. Satisfied with a job well done, he reunited with Bepo downstairs and left.
There was a stop Saki had to make before going home. She rapped on the door next to her own, and it opened so fast she almost shoved a fist on the old man's abs. That would have hurt in the knuckles.

"You were awake," and after blurting it out she thought she should change her name to Obvious and form her own pirate crew.

"You've been leaving alone every night for weeks and tonight you storm off with two pirates you just met. Did you think I wouldn't notice?" He moved from the doorway to let her pass to the dimly lit reception and closed the door after her. He noticed something in her hand. "What's with the Den Den Mushi?"

"Don't mind it."

All of a sudden, she lifted a sword in its scabbard in front of the man's face.

His eyes widened in recognition, and he took it from her hands almost with reverence. The dancing light of the waiting room's oil lamp was reflected on the blade when he unsheathed it, the metallic gleam broken by the thin vein of seastone that crossed it from the hilt to the tip.

"Didn't know it was my birthday," he said, trying to contain the emotion that had become a knot in his throat.

"It's a return, not a present," the seriousness on her face was broken by a lopsided smile. "I could've brought you an arm too, but I thought you wouldn't want it."

"You..." The words died in the man's lips, and with a deep breath, he put the sword behind the counter and took out a bottle and two glasses. "You and I are going to drink," he declared solemnly.

Saki chuckled. "Thank you. I was thinking I needed one."

"Those two helped you?"

"Yeah." She placed the Den Den Mushi on the table. It breathed with difficulty in its sleep, as if it had a cold. Man, she wished she could sleep like that.

The man grunted in a way that Saki interpreted as approval and uncorked the liquor. "That Trafalgar boy is a doctor, right?"

He passed her a glass full of a greenish amber liquid. She guessed it was one of the old man's brews and the best idea would be not to ask what was in it. It looked undrinkable. It probably was.

"Yeah. He says he can cure me. How convenient, huh?" She spun the glass on the wood a few times, trying not to think too hard about anything. Too many things in too little time. She hadn't planned so far ahead, because she wasn't even been supposed to be alive at this point. Killing and dying would have been enough. Facing her surrogate father to tell him that she was leaving for good with the Surgeon of Death, godly savior of dying dames, and his amazing fluffy companion had never been part of the equation.
"Do you trust him?"

She lifted the glass to her lips and meditated the reply while tasting the alcohol. Brandy and rum and something reminiscing of camel piss. She ignored the nausea and swallowed. It lit her throat on fire.

Somehow she managed to reply. "I'll take my chances." It was not like she had any other way out.

"That isn't an answer."

"You know I don't like doctors." Though he had helped…

"Girl…"

"…But I really like being alive." And a famous rookie pirate wanted to tinker with her heart because she was an interesting case. If she gave it with some perspective, things weren't exactly looking up for her.

"Girl," he insisted.

"I trust that he trusts in his ability," she said. That would also be her final thought on the matter, for now.

There was a heavy pause, and the man sighed. "A leap of faith."

"Yeah."

"Well, better than running off with the lad because he's good-looking."

Her mouth opened in indignation and she glared at the old man. How dare he! "He looks like a leopard-printed noodle!"

"And with those colors you look like Christmas puked all over you. Cut back on the dye."

She smacked him so hard on the arm that she left a mark, but the bastard only laughed.

"And he's a pirate," and pirates were smelly and scurvy and Mother Nature's way of saying 'BAD CHOICE FLEE NOW'. Nevermind that he had perfect teeth and he seemed to smell of antiseptic when he wasn't getting a beating in a narrow hallway. Antiseptic was good. It was what the studio smelled of, and she was going to blame on the lack of sleep the fact that her mind was trailing off.

The old man emptied half of his drink with a single swig. Saki had the theory that his taste buds met an untimely end many years ago by one of his alcohol mixes, and he had become immune to taste.

"There is one thing I learned after many years in a Marine ship, little girl."

She waited for him to continue, for once not minding the nickname. That thoughtful expression wasn't something that graced the man's face frequently, and the nostalgic smile was even rarer.

She had been his one and only little girl until Tsubaki was born, and she'd been secretly jealous of her at the beginning. In time, she'd learned that love wasn't something you ran out of if you gave it to many people. Tsubaki was now her little girl, too. They were her family, blood ties be damned, and she had thought dying would be the hardest thing she'd do, but now it felt like the coward's way out when faced with the opportunity to leave them behind to keep on living.

"Marines, pirates, civilians… There's scum everywhere. But there are good people everywhere, too. Individual lives can't be summed up with a single word." The man grinned, and he looked thirty
years younger. "That's why I don't mind you becoming a pirate."

Saki felt something tug at her heart and forced herself to mirror the man's grin. "Don't get all sentimental on me. I'm still dying, remember? I could drop dead this second." She brought a hand to her forehead and leaned on the counter with the other one. "I think I'm fainting. Please get me a nice coffin and take care of mom's books."

He hit her on the back of the head and she faceplanted on the floor. The man stared at the newly acquired smear of blood on his hand.

"I hope this isn't yours."

"You know how I bathe in the blood of my enemies?"

"Stop screwing around and stand up."

She did as told, holding her achy nose. "What matters is that no one's after your head anymore, and I'll be out of town before anyone outside the island can put two and two together."

"And now this city has a chance to rebuild, and you can choose what to do with your life," he reminded her, refilling the glasses to the top. "A toast?"

"For justice being served," she said sarcastically.

"To hell with justice. For freedom," he corrected, and the sound of the clinking glasses was clear and sharp in the otherwise silent room. "And down it all in one gulp."

Saki had to rest her head against the counter until the disgusting liquid stopped setting fire to her insides, but somehow she managed not to cough.

"Just so you know, your parents would be proud of you."

She stayed in silence, pressing her cheek against the smooth wooden surface, and feigned she didn't care.

It was good that the customer still didn't know she'd been running for over forty-eight hours without any sleep. Not that she wasn't able to do a perfect job despite it, of course, but she was sure he'd have been dramatic about it.

He was lucky. With the old man and her new-but-not-quite-yet-captain making small chat in the waiting room (surely cracking jokes at her expense that she couldn't hear from the second Bepo asked 'When did you get that scratch on your nose?') and her two almost-but-not-quite-siblings making sad faces from the door, she didn't feel like wasting time on pointless torture.

Fast forward an hour and a half, and the customer left with a bandaged arm and the biggest smile of relief she'd seen since Rotten Feet Joe had announced to the whole tavern that he was leaving to stink up another island.

It was time for goodbye, and as it was universally known from that sad little corner of the North Blue to Mariejois, goodbyes sucked. Also, Saki didn't know how to goodbye. People just up and disappeared, and sometimes turned up dead when their corpses clogged up a sewage pipe. It happened about twice a year. Right then and there, with a child attached like a barnacle to her leg and getting snot on her pants, she was deeply regretting not taking off unannounced in the middle of the night.
"Don't goooo!" Take was holding onto her leg with all the strength a ten year old could muster.

"Stop. Stop. It." She'd need a crowbar to pry him off, at this rate. "Besides, it'll be better for you if I'm not here when Rickhard's boss finds out what happened."

The boy reluctantly let go, but couldn't stop sniffling. Looking at him, Saki felt like the worst person on the planet. Come on, she was a tough girl. She could do this!

"Then... Then take me with you! I'll be a pirate!" Tsubaki suddenly exclaimed.

"Nice try. No." Her thoughts were more along the lines of, Why are you doing this to me don't cry let me go letmegoletmego.

"Little girl, you're still a tad too little for that."

"He's right. And stop acting as if we'll never see each other again, you're giving me the creeps. I promised you a tattoo when you were older, didn't I?"

Tsubaki perked up a little at that. "When you are out there I'll get one just like the one you have on your arm!"

"Save the other one for me, that's prime inking state."

"Naah… You'll have to do with a foot or a wrist. For leaving."

Saki grabbed Tsubaki by the upper arm she was getting denied and proceeded to tickle the teenager until she cried.

Law was patiently waiting from a distance with his navigator when his gaze wandered to Saki's tattoo. Bamboo shoots and camellias. Take and Tsubaki. Of course. Suddenly feeling like an intruder, he looked away from the scene.

Law didn't have much time to linger on tattoo meanings and his own memories after the realization, because the old man walked up to him. He was slightly taller than Law and way more built, and for a second the pirate thought that without his Devil Fruit powers the man could snap him like twig if he wanted. If he had been looking at any ordinary person with that expression on his face they'd have been intimidated for sure, but Law was not an ordinary man by any parameters.

Was he about to experience the typical moment with the concerned father figure telling the guy he'd better watch his back if anything happened to his daughter? That would be a new one.

"You better take care of her," he crossed his arms and glared.

Yep, he was. On reflex, he found himself checking out Bepo's position in case he needed support. He wouldn't, but still.

"As much as she allows me to. But I believe she can manage herself quite well, Old Man-ya."

"Damn straight she can. She better get a pretty bounty poster in no time."

The threatening tone rolled off Law's back, and he smirked. "Oh, I'm sure she will."

"Good. And..." His aggressive demeanor disappeared in a wink, "Thank you for offering to operate her."

"My pleasure. It's a condition one rarely gets to work with."
The old man nodded in approval. "And you." He was stern again when he talked to Bepo. "Look after her too, will you? She's smart, but she doesn't always act like it. I don't want her getting into unnecessary trouble."

"Unnecessary trouble is a pirate's everyday," Bepo replied, because he wasn't fond of making promises he couldn't keep and the man had no right to demand anything of them. If he didn't like it, he could suck it up and deal.

The man blinked a couple times and burst into laughter. "Well said!"

When the farewells were done and over, they left the family behind and headed to the pirate ship.

As it turned out, Law and Bepo were not travelling in a ship. The bear went first and disappeared behind a metallic door on the deck.

"A yellow submarine?" Saki had the nagging feeling that there was a joke hidden somewhere in there, but she wasn't able to find it.

"I hope you aren't claustrophobic," Law said walking up the gangplank.

She followed him, inspecting her surroundings. The harbor she'd always known looked like a completely different thing from that height. "Is Bepo a mechanic? Because sailing in a ship without a shipwright is one thing, but a sub…"

"We were on our way to pick up one when we docked here, as a matter of fact. Someone offered to join us two weeks ago and he's waiting for us at Indent Bay."

That was a two days' sail from Asteria, if Saki recalled right. It wasn't as if she'd ever paid much attention to the specifics of what travelers said about other places. She hadn't wanted to think about what she couldn't have.

"The waters in this area are calm, so Bepo will be able to manage alone for most of the day. I'll conduct your operation as soon as we're underwater. Filtering your blood will take roughly an hour, and the heart surgery about three. The sooner we get it over, the sooner you'll be able to move around."

"Okay." God, how she hated being at the mercy of doctors.

Law gave her a tour of the sub while Bepo prepared to set sail. Saki thought the vessel was too big for only three people. It seemed empty and cold. It didn't make much of a difference from her house, all things considered. She'd feel right at home.

Her quarters were a small room with a lock and a tiny bathroom, not far from Law's. The only furniture was a bed, screwed to the floor, an old desk and an empty trunk. It looked very much like a never used guest room. Bepo had, for now, the men's quarters all for himself, though there were several bunk beds lining the walls, prepared for the arrival of new crew members.

She dropped a bag on her bed and sat next to it. There was a porthole on the wall a little wider than she was. The harbor of Asteria was less of a flurry than usual, and she wondered if it had anything to do with the events of the night.

Looking through the reinforced glass, feeling the constant movement of the waves, it finally sank in that she was leaving or possibly dying in a matter of hours, and suddenly she didn't feel so confident about her decision. But that was hesitation speaking, and she knew there was no point in going back.
She was leaving for good, and the number of things she'd miss was only three. There was so much more out there, waiting for her to discover it.

The sub started to rumble and move.

"Setting course for Indent Bay! Estimated travel time: two days!" Bepo announced over the speakers.

She stared as the sub got farther and farther away from land, until Asteria became a dot and finally disappeared in the horizon. The world was so big. How could she have lived so long in such a small place?

She swallowed the knot in her throat and tried to reassure herself. It was going to be all right.

Three hours and medical file later ("Broke it in a bar fight; 'Pfft, of course I am not pregnant'; 'Yes, I only have two tattoos, why are you judging me'") she had already changed into a hospital gown and was lying on the operating table, listening to Law talk while gloved hands—she thanked everything that was holy that there was a barrier between that ink and her—inserted a needle in her left arm. Ugh, the squick.

"...it's a high-risk operation, as you already know, but there is no other way of solving the problem. The anesthesia will work for about four hours, which should be enough time to finish the surgery. I'll administer you sedatives afterwards so you can rest and we don't risk any strain on your body. Of course, there is always the possibility that you wouldn't wake up at all, be it from an adverse reaction or because your heart simply stopped during the intervention. Death by excessive hemorrhage is an option too, but we are well stocked on your blood type, so to be honest, if you are able to lose that much blood in so little time, you're best left to die."

That sounded significantly better than the 'Sorry, can't do this' she'd been getting from doctors all her life.

"See, that's your main charm point. You're a practical man."

A dark smirk appeared on his face. "I assume that you have no objections to the surgery?"

What a creepy man. "None at all. And even if I did, I doubt I could change my mind at this point."

"And that's your selling point. You are always aware of your situation."

"Eh, what can I say. Being on a death clock kind of gives you perspective."

A part of Law could sympathize, but he'd rather work than get lost in memories. He injected the anesthesia into the IV drop bag.

"You'll be asleep in a minute approximately. Anything else before we start?"

"Actually…"

"...Hm?"

"Just in case I die, there's something you should know. I got you something."

Law waited for her to continue, and for a moment he had the feeling that she was making fun of him. But no, that couldn't be right. He was holding a very sharp scalpel. No one laughed at Law when he had a scalpel.
"There's a Den Den Mushi on top of my desk that I took from Rickhard's office. It's wired to Joker's. Thought you'd want it, since you were so interested in him."

Law mentally congratulated himself for not dropping the deadly surgical tool on his patient. In the few seconds that it took him to recover from the shock, Saki appeared to have fallen peacefully asleep.

Law stared with a deadpan expression. He stared at her face and at the inked clovers running up her left calf and at the spot he was supposed to cut with the Very Sharp Scalpel. The anesthesia clock was ticking and he didn't know what was more tempting, to let it run out and then operate or to get her a drink when she woke up.

This woman. This fucking woman. With a sigh, he began the surgery.

When Saki came to her senses, she spent a few minutes listening to the beeping sounds of the machines connected to her, before she was able to shake off the effects of the anesthesia and open her eyes. The ceiling of the sickbay and a familiar voice greeted her.

"Congratulations, miss. You're alive," was the playful comment of the man beside her bed.

Law was sitting on a chair, holding a medical textbook he had been reading to kill time. Saki idly registered it was the same book she had home, and filed the information where all the things she didn't care about went.

"I think I know who to thank for that."

"Oh? Then whenever you see him you can tell him he did an outstanding job. The operation was quick and presented no complications, and the patient seems to be recovering at the expected rate. I'm almost impressed."

"I'm lucky to count with such a skilled doctor."

"Yes, you are."

Looking at Law's face was more than enough to see that he was satisfied with the results of his job. Smug bastard. She guessed he could afford to be one.

Saki managed a half smile. "I'd also like to ask Mr. Doctor how long I was out and how much I'll need to be stuck here."

"He'd probably say something along the lines of a full day and until tomorrow morning, respectively. Full recovery will take only two weeks, since he didn't need to cut through the breastbone."

That first part explained why she was feeling sore even in body parts she didn't have. It also was a bummer to hear she'd have to be careful for half a month, but when she remembered that she wasn't even supposed to be alive she felt silly at the notion of complaining.

"I suppose I can't go get a book from my room…?"

"I'll have Bepo bring it to you. The bleeding heart has been worried sick since the operation."

"Aw, I need to apologize to him. I can't stand seeing a cutie depressed."

Law's smile was dark and not something that many people wanted to see, but she found it oddly comforting. It was probably an after effect of the sedatives.
"We'll be hitting land in the morning. Bepo and I will be out for a while to recruit our mechanic. You are to stay in the sub and rest. Don't even try to move alone if you're feeling dizzy. I don't want to find you in a pool of blood after all this effort."

"Yes, Captain."

Law's expression went from mild surprise to a smirk. "Welcome to the Heart Pirates," he said as he left the sickbay.

Saki watched him disappear into the hallway and wondered what the hell she had gotten herself into.
Indent Bay, as its redundant name suggested, was a coastal town that lay along said landform, and nested between steep cliffs. A canyon in the distance and the small stream coursed through it were the only way the otherwise isolated town connected to the rest of the island. It was in this otherwise unremarkable place of the North Blue that some of the finest engineers this sea had to offer worked, at a place called Payne Factory. Mr. Payne, a middle aged man with a permanent sour mood and high blood pressure, had inherited the family business twenty years prior, shortly after his father had struck a contract with a cruise liner and subsequently choked on an apricot stone, much to his relatives' sorrow and his employees' relief, because apparently the unpleasant character ran in the family.

At any rate, what mattered was that, currently, Payne Factory built top notch naval equipment in their warehouse that was later distributed throughout the seas. It just so happened that, when Law was acquiring his vessel, he had met one of the guys that built the engine. It also happened that said guy fell in love with the overall craftsmanship of the submarine and decided that he wanted to work on it. Law had been happy to oblige, because nobody liked being stranded underwater inside a giant piece of metal.

This man was called Penguin, and they were supposed to meet him at his workplace, but when they got to the warehouse, what they found was an irate red headed man blocking the door and yelling at whoever was inside.

"—your whore of a mother! And don't try to sound offended, we all know where she works!"

Law thought it was no wonder Penguin had been so eager to switch jobs.

Caught in the whirlwind of obscenities coming both from him and the warehouse, the angry man turned around so suddenly that he almost ran headfirst into Bepo.

"HOLY SHIT A BEAR!" An appropriate reaction for the situation.

Bepo took a step back, morose. "Sorry."

Law patted his friend on the arm for some reassurance while the stranger shit bricks because 'HOLY FUCKING SHIT, IT CAN SPEAK.' "Excuse us, are you one of the workers here?" It was merely a polite question. He was wearing a grey boiler suit with the company's logo on it. "We're looking for a man called Penguin."

The man's full attention, unceremoniously grabbed by Bepo up to that point, switched to his less aesthetically unobtrusive companion.

"That makes two, uh, three of us." The redhead snuck one last glance at Bepo, who looked like he wanted to disappear behind his captain, before going back to Law. "You are? Wait, I know who you are—you're the pirate he's been talking about nonstop," he groaned. He didn't look very pleased at the realization.

Law nodded, wondering what was his problem. "This is Bepo. I'm——"
"That Trafalguy, yeah, I know. Look, it's all fine and dandy if he wants to go with you, but this is not the time. Penguin's disappeared and I'm gonna go look for him."

"What do you mean he's disappeared?" It didn't take Law a full second to notice he had given the most clichéd reply in the history of vanishing people, so he added something to not feel as stupid. "When?"

"Yesterday. He was called over to the nearest town to fix a crane. Got there fine, rang me up two nights ago saying he was coming back and he hasn't yet showed up. I called the inn where he was staying and they said he left as soon as the sun went up."

"Has anyone checked his house?"

"We're roommates."

"Ah."

Bepo waited for the two men to say something else, which in turn stared at one another in tense silence. He could understand Law's frustration. They never seemed to get anything done without running into trouble. Having a quiet stop at the island would have been a nice change of pace.

He could see were this was going, clear as the sky that day. "Should we start searching?"

The sub was silent when Saki woke up. First thing of note was that she was still breathing. Unexpected, but nice.

She blinked a few times until she was able to focus her sight. There didn't seem to be anyone else in the sickbay. There weren't tubes hooked to her any longer. She stretched her arms above her head and inspected her hands. Still five fingers on each. She removed the sheet covering her, revealing her bare legs, and wiggled her feet. They were in place and fully functional, too. Counted the clovers inked on her left calf. Still five of them. Hard to believe as it was, it appeared that her new boss had kept his end of the bargain.

_Huh. Maybe he isn't such a bad guy._ And maybe she would take up hula dancing as soon as she got the okay from the doctor and make a living showing her moves around the world. Both things were about as likely to be true.

According to what Law had said before, she should have been able to walk without lethal risk, so she sat up slowly, making all her joints crack in the process, and just to be a contrarian ass she hopped down the bed with more energy than Law would have approved. Cue dizzy spell, staggering, and having to lean against the mattress when she almost bumped her head against a metal cart. She took a quick glance at her surroundings to ensure that no one had witnessed her moment of shame. Okay, she'd follow the doctor's instructions. As soon as she felt better she stood straight and made her way to her room at a reasonable pace. She only took the wrong turn two times, a double feat, since the sub wasn't so big on the inside.

The sun shone bright inside her quarters that morning. Unfortunately, she couldn't see the island from there, since the porthole was on the starboard side. She rummaged a bit through her bag until she picked the clothes for the day, some toiletries, and headed for the bathroom, not without stubbing a toe against a bed leg and curling up in pain for a few undignified seconds. While she was closer to the floor, she noticed some sawdust around the spots were the bed had been screwed. It looked recent. It also looked like the floorboards needed a good sweeping.

The bathroom was small enough that she was grateful not to suffer from claustrophobia. She turned
on the shower and waited expectantly. Nothing. She turned it off, waited a few seconds, and turned it on again, in the vain hope that it would magically work.

It did.

It also spat cold greenish mud on her arm.

The more time she spent in her quarters, the more obvious it became that no one had expected to have any use for them. Come to think of it, why would a pirate ship even need a guest room? Had the sub not been mostly empty, this would have probably become a storage room. Law and Bepo must have put a few essentials in there on short notice and be done with it. There had been more pressing things to do in the short while she'd known them, and she could have crashed on one of the bunk beds until they had more time to sort out her sleeping arrangements, but nonetheless they had taken the time to outfit the room for her. It had been awfully considerate of them.

She really hoped that wasn't a slug crawling up her forearm.

Actual, clear water began running a few seconds after the shower gave her its special greeting. It seemed safe for use.

She contemplated the slug that was now near her elbow, wondering if she should flush it or introduce it to the Den Den Mushi. In the end, she said goodbye to her little friend as it disappeared down the drain, because looking for the Den Den Mushi that was under Law's custody right now wasn't worth the hassle and she'd already spent too much time without murdering anyone innocent. Two birds with one stone.

*What's the deal with Joker anyway?*

He had never told her, but it must have been important if it had made Law consider helping her. She still wasn't sure why she had decided to take the snail from her former boss' office —she could tell herself that it had been so no one could directly contact their superior, but that would have been as easy as smashing the receiver. No, as much as she wanted to tell herself that she didn't owe Law anything because she'd already agreed to work for him, she had felt indebted, and she had wanted to give him that Den Den Mushi as a thank you of sorts for helping her keep her family safe. Some would say that was twisted of her, but she had been almost convinced that she'd end up as a test subject for the Surgeon of Death, and how awkward would it have been to thank someone who was about to chop you to pieces? Besides, he looked like the kind of guy who'd appreciate something more substantial than words.

She took her gown off when the water was warm enough and had to stop again before stepping in the shower because when she looked at her chest, there was nothing. No bandages, no scar, no signal that she had undergone a surgery anywhere. For a moment she panicked, thinking she'd been tricked and he hadn't operated her, but then she put a hand over her chest and felt the beating inside. Rhythmic, if a little accelerated at the moment, but steady, unlike it had ever been. This was how a proper heart sounded.

She brushed aside the oncoming pang of sentimentality and finally got under the stream of water. It seemed that Law had been honest with her. It meant, then, that his purpose for her was actually helping him by joining his crew. She could do that. A tool was a tool, even if it changed hands. She just hoped this time she'd actually be used by someone more deserving.

By the time she was done drying her hair, she heard noise coming from the floor above. The initial excitement about being not dead had worn off considerably and she felt drained enough to drop on the bed and not move for another whole day, but when had tiredness ever stopped her from doing
what she wanted?

She tried to memorize everything on her way. Broom closet, mysterious locked room, captain's cabin, showers, crew's quarters, supply closet, come to think of it, she never saw where those downward stairs went... Was she seriously going to live in this place from now on? It wasn't sinking in yet. She headed in the general direction the galley should have been in hopes of finding something to eat, but what she found were two men and a bear on the mess hall, sitting around the table and donning dark expressions. One of them was a red-haired guy she didn't recognize. He was wearing a pair of sunglasses indoors, which in her mind automatically marked him as a pretentious idiot.

The atmosphere was so uninviting she almost made a 180 and went back to bed. Whatever those three were thinking about, they were so concentrated that they didn't notice her until she spoke.

"Did someone die?"

The new face almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of her voice.

Law mouthed a 'maybe', but Bepo's enthusiastic reply drowned the sound of his voice. "Saki! How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," she gave him a thumbs up and a grin. "Just a bit tired." Understatement of the century.

"You'll likely feel fatigued for a few weeks," Law explained.

She tried to sound unconcerned. "Can't complain."

Apparently satisfied with the answer, he motioned to a chair. "Sit with us. We've run into a problem with our mechanic."

Saki took the seat next to Bepo and looked pointedly at the stranger in front of her.

"No, it's not me!" He raised his hands in a defensive gesture. "Name's Shachi. It's my friend Penguin who was supposed to set sail with you."

"Was?"

"He left three days ago for the nearest town and hasn't come back yet," Law filled her in.

"He was supposed to be back yesterday, but he hasn't even called. Though seeing the boss's mood, when he does he'll be fired anyway."

"Not a problem if he's coming with us," Saki said.

"Something's happened to him; I know it! He's not the type to vanish without warning. 'Sides, he'd been talking about you guys. He really wanted to work in this sub." Shachi eyed his surroundings appreciatively. "Not that I blame him."

"Is there a reason we need that guy specifically?" She had recognized the glint in Shachi's eyes as he checked the vessel out. It was the same the old man got when that guy came in the shop and asked for a design done 'in the traditional way, no machines, I'm not a pussy.' The customer was crying ten minutes later, but that didn't matter. The point was that ginger boy seemed eager to get intimate with the submarine's inner workings.

"He's good at his job and he offered. And I know what you're thinking." Law huffed. "Shachi-ya here says he isn't going anywhere if Penguin-ya doesn't turn up."
"We were thinking about searching for him. Then maybe both could join," Bepo looked from Saki to Shachi. "And you'll all be my underlings!"

She held back a snort and lolled back on the chair. "Captain, if you keep helping people someone's going to think you aren't a proper pirate." She was staring at the newcomer while she spoke.

"What do you propose we do, then? Kidnap Shachi-ya and leave town?"

The mechanic tensed up on his seat and started to look for escape routes.

"I just have to wonder if launching a search party is worth the trouble."

Law's face said that he had been considering it for some time. "We can't keep on going without a mechanic."

"This sort of ship requires constant maintenance," Shachi agreed.

"We don't have much of a choice, unless we want to have an unwilling crewmate waiting for a chance to flee or backstab us."

"Then we're going to look for the man?"

"We are. You are sitting this one out."

She opened her mouth to protest, but nothing intelligent came to mind. "Oh, come on." Yeah, that would make an amazing case in her favor.

"This is not debatable. You are recovering from open-heart surgery."

"What?"

Shachi's confusion was ignored.

"I've been holed up in this tin can for days! I need sunlight!"

That rustled Shachi's jimmies worse than the kidnapping threat. "This sub is not a tin can!"

"Who wasn't going to complain?" Law pointed out.

"That's a completely different thing."

"You can sit on the deck," Bepo suggested.

"Here, have some reading material," Law threw a thin newspaper in front of Saki. Nevermind the neutral expression, he was enjoying her suffering. She knew it. He knew it. The Marines had always been right about the sadistic streak.

Saki's mumble sounded remarkably similar to, 'I'll tell you where you can shove your local news,' but Law didn't pay it any mind.

"You will stay here and not do anything that could endanger you in your current condition. Understood?"

She huffed in frustration, fully aware that she was acting like a child and Captain's orders were, well, Captain's orders, and she'd rather not begin a streak of disobedience that could land her in the bottom of the sea. But he didn't get it! She had never been outside her home island. Now she was
somewhere new, and she wasn't allowed to go out. What was the point of travelling like this?

"Yes, Captain." *This sucks.*

"Good. And by the way, don't make coffee. You can't drink it."

Being alive was losing its charm astoundingly quick.

_________________________________________________________

An hour later, the sun shone bright, the birds chirped, and everything was greenery and rocks save a tiny stream of water at their feet as two men and a bear ventured inside the canyon.

"We'll find him if we go this way," Shachi said, though it seemed that he was reassuring himself rather than the other two. "The pathway doesn't branch at any point. He can't be anywhere else."

"How do you know he wasn't abducted on his way from the city?" Law suggested. "If he's as skilled as he told us, maybe someone else had business with him."

Shachi stopped on his tracks and stared at Law, a little weirded out. "What sort of crazy place do you come from that a kidnapping would be more likely than a mountain accident?"

"…You have a point," he conceded. From the corner of his eye, he saw Bepo trying to pick a scent.

They resumed the trek quietly, but Shachi kept making nervous comments every now and then, inspecting their surroundings frantically, and Law thought he'd have a better chance of spotting what he was looking for if he took off those sunglasses, but kept the comment to himself.

Bepo was getting restless, too. Every time Law snuck a glance at the bear, his face was more scrunched up. Something was wrong.

Bepo tapped Law on the shoulder. "This smell is getting stronger. I don't like it."

Humans may have a certain inclination for unjustified paranoia when thrown into unfamiliar situations, but as a rule of thumb, when you had the polar bear of the team saying he didn't like something, you listened. Law sniffed the air and this time he, too, picked up something faint. It was reminiscent of when Bepo went weeks without a proper shower.

Law tried to describe it in a less insulting way. "Something's… musty." For the lack of a better word.

"That's right!" Bepo felt some pride at the smelling sense of his captain. It surely had rubbed off of him.

"Are you guys sure that—"

An earth-shaking roar reverberated across the canon and put everybody on guard. A few small rocks fell from the top of the cliffs at each side.

"…Are you sure this place is safe?" Bepo was looking around, trying to find the source of the noise to no avail. Whatever the creature was, it must have been hidden by the foliage.

"It should be. I mean, we usually go from town to town by boat, but this path has always—"

Another roar. More rocks. A pebble fell on Law's hat.

_________________________________________________________

If Saki had to choose a single word to describe the state of the sub's food reserves, she'd be torn
between "deplorable" and "dramatic".

She had been rummaging through the kitchen for fifteen minutes, in hopes of finding something edible, and so far, the search had only turned up a few sad-looking leaks, half an onion, and a potato that was trying to develop a new life form on its surface.

*Not even stale bread*, she thought to herself, *not that I'd have anything to put on a toast. How have they survived so far?*

As she opened cabinet after cabinet and became more justified in all her beliefs regarding young single men, human or otherwise, she settled on making soup and having a few choice words with the captain about pantry maintenance.

The most aggravating thing, however, was the stash of coffee she had found right next to the potato. It was the one thing the ship was well stocked on, and suddenly the captain's dark eye circles made perfect sense.

The coffee pot sat on the counter, taunting her. She stuck her tongue out and turned her back on it.

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Something heavier than a pebble fell from the top of the cliffs and got stuck between a tree's branches. They'd have assumed it to be yet another rock had the leaves not cried out in pain.

"Who's there!" Law yelled.

"Help!" The tree cried.

"Wait, I know that voice!" Shachi ran up to the tree's trunk and looked up. "Penguin! Is that you?"

The leaves shook and something peeked between them. A yellow visor came into view. "Shachi?"

The voice wheezed.

Shachi was visibly relieved. "Dude! What happened to you? You almost worried me!"

The man on the tree tried to laugh and ended up coughing. "The—cough—hippos!"

"What? I thought they culled them!"

"Not enough."

"…Oh shit."

"What does he mean?" Law asked, a bit lost at the turn the conversation had taken.

"They are an invasio—imbatib—uuuh, they're a foreign species someone let loose a few years ago. We have to cull them once a year, 'cause they turn really aggressive when they don't have enough space."

Bepo frowned. "That's cruel."

"It's either them or us."

"But this is their home."

"It's ours too!"
"They're nesting and chased me to—owowowOW."

"...Penguin?" Shachi called. He tried to shake the tree when Penguin was didn't reply right away, but it didn't budge.

"I'm okay." He didn't sound like it. "It's just a flesh wound."

"Can you drop down?" Law asked. "Bepo can catch you." Ideally he would have brought him down with Shambles, but Penguin was stuck high up and he had close to no visibility thanks to the foliage. If he missed he'd be switching leaves with a rock and it sounded like the last thing the man needed was more weight falling on him.

Bepo positioned himself right under the yellow visor and waved so Penguin could see him. "Jump! You'll be fine!"

"HOLY SHIT, IS THAT A TALKING BEAR?"

"I-I'm sorry..."

"SO WEAK!" The mechanics said in unison.

Law considered himself a patient man, but he hadn't come to a rock slide-happy canyon to watch a humor show. "Are you going to jump or not?"

Cue another monstrous growl, the sound of more pebbles falling and the entire group freaking out at the sound of stomps approaching from behind.

"JUMP, JUMP, JUMP!" Shachi screeched, and his friend obeyed.

"WAAAAAAAAAAaaaaahhh!"

Bepo caught the man effortlessly in midair and ran for the hills with his two companions following suit.

This was boring. Saki wished she could have accompanied them.

She had cooked, eaten, read the entire newspaper --she really shouldn't have-, tried to take a nap and failed to, considered to pick the lock of the mysterious door, reread the newspaper, memorized the wanted posters that came with it out of habit, and paced up and down the hallways until her legs ached.

It was late when she finally went to the deck, found a comfortable spot against a wall and sat down with a sketchbook, watching the evening sky as it dyed the bay in orange hues. The breeze of the North Blue in summer was a welcome change after staying cooped up in the sub for so long.

Indent Bay was small, houses upon houses packed together between the shoreline and the cliffs that surrounded it. The exploration team had headed to the canyon she could make out on the far end of town. Now that she was seeing the size of it, she was starting to think that she was going to be alone until the morning. She hoped they didn't die, because she wouldn't know what to do with a submarine.

She put pencil to paper and began to sketch the town she should do this everywhere she visited and send the drawings to the kids in Asteria. She remembered the letter she had to write to tell them she was fine, though she'd need Law's permission to go post it. *Augh, since when have I needed to ask*
permission for anything?

She still didn't know what to think of the two pirates. Law appeared to be a surprisingly decent guy for a famous killer, and she had trouble seeing Bepo as anything but the sweetest deadliest fluffball on the planet, but she had only known them for a few days, so she could be mistaken. Time would tell, and in an extreme case, she'd jump ship—figuratively, she wasn't a bad swimmer but didn't have superpowers, either—and try to make it back home.

The dock was quiet, and she only saw sailors passing by every now and then. It had been a while since she had been able to draw at her leisure. She worked in silence, lost in thought and unsure of where her life was heading, but not entirely displeased by it.

They managed to duck behind a majestic bush to catch their breath as the hippopotamus that had chased them sprinted past their hiding spot. It ran and ran until its footsteps became faint and it was nowhere in sight.

Shachi spat out a couple of sea buckthorn leaves. "I thought we were gonna die."

Bepo wasn't sharing his human companions' relief. "...It smells really bad."

Law mentally cursed his luck and regretted his latest life choices. "Where?"

"Here."

"Are you sure it isn't a fart of Shachi's?" Penguin's physical state may have been pitiful, but his mind was still sharp.

"You better get well soon because I'm going to kick your ass."

"It's the same smell from before."

Law was looking discreetly from behind the bush. No trace of hippos in sight. "Do you think it could be a lingering smell? I can't—" Law stopped mid-sentence as he thought of the worst, turned around to look at the top of the canyon, and found Worst standing on four legs and doing the best impression of a glare a three thousand pound ungulate was capable of.

The last thing they saw before running for their lives again was the hippo curling up in a ball, becoming undistinguishable from a huge boulder, and rolling down the cliff.

Despite the exhaustion from the surgery and the meds she was taking, her mind wouldn't shut down, and she spent the next hours turning on her bed until she got tired of it and decided to go the upper floor. It was early morning. She needed to do something about her sleep patterns.

She was about to hit the galley for the coffee Law had forbidden her from taking the day before when the door to the deck was flung open and in came Bepo carrying an unconscious stranger, making a dash for the sickbay, and the captain and Shachi, who looked a much worse for wear than the last time she'd seen them. She rushed to their side, wondering what the hell had been able to leave Law looking so haggard.

"Fucking rock hippopotamuses!" Shachi yelled.

Well, one mystery solved, not matter if she took the 'fucking' as an intensifier or literally, though she strongly hoped it was the former. She was torn between feeling pity for the men in front of her, relief
for having been left behind, or asking if they were okay and why there were hippos in a North Blue island. But the faces of those two were daring her to make a comment, any comment about their current state, and she wasn't willing to put her luck to test so soon after a successful life-or-death operation.

So she said the only other thing that came to mind. "Hippopotami."

"For fuck’s sake—"

If he had been an outside observer, Law might have smiled the slightest bit. As it turned out, he wasn't, and there wasn't any amusement to be found in being caught in the middle of a surprise stampede of rock *hippopotami* when they were trying to get his new mechanic out of their nest.

Besides, what sort of hippos made fucking nests?

"Can I help?" Saki asked almost timidly, fidgeting.

Maybe she hadn't meant to make fun of them, Law thought. Maybe she had a hidden awkward side he hadn't discovered yet. Or maybe she'd suddenly become shy because she wanted to keep all her limbs in place, which would fall more in line with everything he had seen until then. Whatever it was, it was irrelevant.

"Let's go to the sickbay. Can you dress Shachi-ya's wounds while I fix Penguin-ya?"

"Sure."

She offered an arm to Shachi and he leaned on her with a pained face, holding his left side with his free hand. Dried blood had trickled down his nose and a temple. His steps had become unsteady now that he had relaxed, and Saki wasn't sure she would be able to put up with his weight long enough in her weakened state.

In the short way to their destination, Law looked over his shoulder three times to make sure no one toppled over, but he didn't feel altruistic enough to lend a hand. Bepo could pick them up from the floor in the worst case.

Penguin looked like a truck had run over him. Bepo was dutifully sitting on a stool, awaiting orders, while Saki gave Shachi cotton rolls for his nose and Law examined the other guy.

"You present symptoms of dehydration and a first degree sunburn. Four broken ribs, large abdominal contusions but no apparent internal damage—"

Penguin cried out in agony as Law's hands pressed on a certain spot.

"—make that five ribs. The dislocated shoulder is back in place, and the pain in your right leg is most likely a hairline fracture, but I'll examine you with X-rays to make sure. You were lucky. It looks worse than it is."

"It's a way to see it," Penguin commented, not very convinced, but relieved that he wasn't going to die anytime soon.

"Being alive isn't such a bad silver lining," Saki said happily. It was clear to the surgeon a bed away that she wasn't talking only about Penguin.

"Bepo, help me move the gurney to the operating room." Upon seeing Penguin's terrified face, he clarified, "The X-ray machine's there."
"Aye, aye!"

"Do you need any help over there?" Law asked before leaving.

Saki took some gauze and a bottle of rubbing alcohol. "Nah, we're fine."

Law nodded and left.

Shachi was growing exponentially nervous the longer those three were gone, and there were two distinct reasons for that.

The first was that, no matter how nice she was trying to be, she was the same psycho who had subtly suggested kidnapping him if they couldn't get a hold of Penguin.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, was that the privileged scenery her low cut top was offering him as she disinfected his wound was making him uncomfortable in places. It wasn't even that good of a rack, because to be completely honest, Shachi was a boobs kind of man, and if he had to grade hers, those were at most a six, six-dot-five if he felt very generous. There was too much space in between, they were objectively lacking a couple sizes and-

"You've been lucky, too. A bit more to the right and you may not have told the tale," she said, and her breath tickled his ear.

Think of ponies, man, think of ponies.

"Your captain mentioned he wanted to get the crew's Jolly Roger painted on the sub," he said, trying to steer the conversation towards something he could concentrate in.

"Good idea. It will give your friend some time to recover before we leave."

"Oh, yeah." Shachi said, a little down. "He's going with you guys..."

Saki wiped the dry blood away and began to cut some medical tape. "Going to miss him?"

"Hell yeah. We've always been together."

"Childhood friends?"

"For as long as I can remember."

"I'm a bit jealous." She commented, but she perked up at once. "I can't speak for the captain, but I don't think he'd mind having two mechanics on board instead of one."

"You think so?"

"Talk to him. He's not as bad as the wanted posters make him out to be. Usually." She placed more clean gauze on Shachi's temple and secured it with some tape. "See, we're pirates playing nurse."

That smirk alone could bump her up a full point in the scale, rack aside, and he had to make a superhuman effort to not think of her fingers brushing against his hair. He was a hero, a damn hero, and no one was ever going to know.

Inappropriate thoughts aside, Shachi was also a curious guy by nature, and she hardly knew anything about these pirates. He wanted to know what sort of people Penguin would be leaving with.

"It's just the three of you in the crew, right?"
"Yep. The sub's pretty much empty. I assure you there's space for one more. Can't say the same for food, though…" She added with a mumble.

"So aside from you it's going to be a doctor, a mechanic, and a polar bear."

"Bepo isn't just a polar bear. He's our navigator."

The door to the operating room opened at that moment, with Bepo pushing the gurney and Law holding the door open from them.

"Are you shitting me?" Shachi stared at the bear that was carting Penguin to his earlier spot without a care in the world, as if it were something perfectly normal.

"Bepo's the finest navigator you'll find," Law said matter-of-factly.

The bear beamed with pride next to his captain.

"If you say so. And you?" Shachi asked Saki. "What are you?"

She replied, "A tattoo artist" at the same time Law said, "A former hitwoman." Saki shot him the dirtiest glance she was capable of. Law may or may not have been hiding a smirk behind Penguin's medical file.

Shachi not so subtly scurried away from who he was again convinced was a murderous psychopath until he hit the edge of the bed. He let out a very uncomfortable "Umm…" when she turned to look at him, eyebrows raised, and he said the first thing that crossed his mind to fill the awkward silence. To be honest, he'd been curious since he'd seen her talk to Law in the galley.

"Are you two...?"

"What." Saki almost dropped the supplies she was holding.

"No," Law said, and notably, there was some surprise in his face.

"Oh, sorry. I thought..."

"No," she repeated. "Also, we've known each other for less than a week."

"Less than six days, to be exact," he added quickly. "Two of which she's spent unconscious."

"What he said."

"Sorry, sorry, I meant no offense!" Shachi put up his hands defensively. "You sorta give off that vibe, that's all."

Well, at least now he wasn't the only one feeling this uncomfortable, Shachi thought as he turned the shade of his hair.

"You've always sucked at telling this kind of thing," Penguin said.

"Shut up."
Worldly attachments

(Leaving home ain't easy on the one you're leaving home)

Shachi had left for the warehouse to bring his boss and coworkers the news about Penguin. Bepo was napping on the deck and making every local that passed by the sub do a double take. Law had disappeared in his room as soon as Penguin was okay, and Saki had volunteered to keep an eye on the patient until he fell asleep.

Now that he was, there was nothing separating her from the coffee pot she had so cruelly been denied the day before. Silent like a cat, she turned on the stove, opened a cabinet, and almost jumped out of her skin when someone spoke.

"I hope you weren't going to make coffee."

Damn the guy that had appeared behind her and damn that irritating smirk.

"I was going to make something to eat," she said with an A grade poker face.

Law didn't buy it, but it didn't matter. "Why don't we eat out? You still haven't seen the city."

"I… can?"

He almost chuckled at the way her eyes lit up. "I wouldn't be offering if you couldn't."

"And Penguin?"

"The sedatives should have him out of commission until night, and there's Bepo. Why are you asking so much? You don't want to go out?" Law shrugged as if he didn't care and turned to leave.

"Wait!" She shut the cabinet in a flash, ran after the captain and stopped him by the arm. Law tensed for a split second and she unhanded him right away. "Sorry." Jumpy guy. Way more muscled than he looked, too.

He didn't look bothered at all when he spoke. "You shouldn't be running."

"I'm fine." Except she felt really tired if she paid any attention to her body, but she wouldn't let something so insignificant keep her away from the outside world. And it wasn't only for her sake. The pantry was desperately screaming for help, and for all appearances she was the only occupant of the sub willing to show mercy.

Law still didn't believe her, but any distraction was better than leaving her with alone with a month's worth stash of caffeine. Just one more thing...

"Get a jacket."

She stopped on her tracks with a heavy sigh.

"Yes, mother."

Law felt like a babysitter.
Before they found a place to eat, he'd had to grab Saki at least three times when she tried to jog-slash-sprint to check out something that had caught her eye. After getting out of the restaurant and having to do the same four more times ("Wow did you see that rainbow bird? It's amazing!" "Don't mention the local fauna."), he settled for having a permanent hand on her shoulder so he could tug back at the slightest sign of insubordination. She complained about the tattoos on his fingers every now and then, but other than that the strategy was working well so far. If this was the natural state of the woman without coffee, he didn't want to see her on a caffeine kick. Or maybe it was the withdrawal. Maybe he had messed up her medication. So many possibilities.

To be completely fair, she was short enough to make a decent armrest, and the last two times she'd been about to run off somewhere had been to get something on the shopping list she'd put together when they were waiting for their food.

"I can't believe you kept the pantry so empty. How were you planning on surviving the next week?" Saki stopped in front of a market stall to inspect a batch of oranges.

"We were going to restock." Law sounded a little like a kid who'd been caught doing something wrong. "We've been doing fine so far."

"I take it that you used to do the cooking?"

"Bepo and I took turns."

Saki turned her attention to Law. "…He doesn't have opposable thumbs."

"It didn't make much of a difference."

That could either mean that Bepo was an awesome cook or that Law couldn't fry an egg to save his life, and Saki had a hunch that it wasn't the latter case. She went back to picking oranges with a half-smile at the thought.

"How long have you two been travelling together?"

"Almost ten years. Why do you ask?"

"You've been eating poorly for ten years!?" Saki was horrified.

"There are restaurants everywhere, you know."

"Children need to eat properly to grow up!"

Of all the things she could have said. "…I've been done growing for a few years."

"No wonder, caffeine stunts—" She suddenly shut up. Her head barely reached past his shoulders, and that was with heels included. "You know what, forget it. It's a good thing for doorframes all over the world that you didn't get any taller." She handed the oranges to the shopkeeper for weighing and sighed. "But I'm a bit jealous of you too. Looks like everybody has longtime friends around these parts."

"You didn't have any home?" That piqued Law's interest. She had never mentioned friends, but seeing how easily she'd got on Bepo's good side, he had assumed she had to have some.

"Does it come as a surprise?" Saki took the fruit back from the shopkeeper and turned to Law grinning. "You're paying, Captain."
Law had to remind himself that being opportunistic was a good quality in a pirate as he handed the man the money. "No, it doesn't."

"We got strawberries fresh from South Blue, first of the season," the shopkeeper informed Law. "Here, take some for your girlfriend; come back if she likes them."

Law's face of surprise would have been much more amusing to watch if it hadn't caught Saki of guard.

"She isn't—"

"Thank you, mister," Saki cut him off, discreetly jabbing an elbow on Law's side and taking the strawberries with a smile. "I'll be back for sure."

Law nodded politely at the man and tugged at Saki's shoulder to drag her away from the vendor. "This hasn't happened again," Law said when they were far enough.

"It's the hand. Let me go and they won't think we're together," Saki popped a strawberry in her mouth. "Hmm, they really are good. Want one?"

He took one from the bag. "I'll let you go when I can trust you to stay by my side."

"Aww, that's so sweet of you," she said while munching.

Law stuffed the strawberry in her mouth to shut her up. She was giggling with her cheeks puffed like a hamster when she held the fruit bag in front of Law's face.

"I can't carry weight, honey."

"I wonder how long this luck of yours will last." Despite the complaint, he took the bag, but he made a point to unhand Saki and push her away. She almost made a point, too, of falling on her butt at the sudden shove, but she laughed anyway.

When they got to the warehouse, they found Shachi sitting on a pile of wood planks.

"Hey," he greeted them without any enthusiasm.

"The chat with the boss didn't go well?" Saki asked.

Shachi's reply was a sneer.

"That bad, huh..."

"He said, and I quote, 'I don't care a rat's ass what that bastard's been doing these days, I don't wanna see his mug again, and you better get to work if—'"

"'If?'" Law prompted when Shachi didn't continue.

"Nothing else. A mouse snuck in his pants and ran up his leg. We have pest control problems."

Law decided to break the silence after a few awkward seconds. "I assume then that no one will complain if Penguin-ya leaves with us?"

"I—"
"Shachi, move your ass!" A companion fiddling with some sort of machine yelled. "That weirdo's not worth moping over!"

"What he said, man," another passed by and patted Shachi's back so hard that he almost fell face-first from his seat. "He has a life and a job and wants to fuck everything to become a pirate? Let him. He's an idiot."

"Do you have something against pirates?" Law butted in the conversation, and only then did the workers pay any attention to him and Saki.

The man didn't seem too happy to see them. "You pay the bills. And you're better off shitting up the sea than a town of decent people."

"That tends to be the general consensus," the girl agreed, ignoring the side eye his captain was giving her.

"Do you often have trouble with pirates?"

"Nah," Shachi shook his head. "They sometimes try to haggle over prices, but it's not like the town's been raided before. They're just cranky because Penguin's better at his work than they'll ever be."

"Your boss didn't seem very conflicted over firing him."

"That's 'cause they have me," Shachi grumbled, getting up and kicking some dirt. "Asshole will make me work double to do Pen's part. The guys never liked him much, so they won't cry when he goes."

"And what if you couldn't work here, either?" Saki asked.

Shachi snorted. "They'd have to close shop until they found someone else."

"Perfect opportunity to ask for a raise!"

He looked up a bit surprised. "Huh, hadn't considered that. Anyway, I'm gonna go home to pick up Penguin's stuff and take it to the sub. Boss can bitch all he wants, but he can't fire me now."

"Don't you need help?"

Law took rested the bag of fruit on Saki's head to illustrate his point. "You can't carry weight."

"…You forgot the honey," she muttered. Damn, that was heavy.

"I'll be fine. He already packed and he's not bringing much with him. Later."

They saw him go, stuffing his hands in his pockets and dragging each step.

"Is he coming with us, too?" Saki asked.

"Shouldn't he be answering that question?"

"Did you see his face? He doesn't want to stay in this place."

"I can't deny he'd be useful, but I can't do anything if he doesn't come up and say it."

Saki sighed. "Isn't the entire point of being a pirate to do what you want, unbound by society's rules and all that?"
"I thought it was the pillaging."

"Ah, true. My bad."

"Beginner's mistake. Don't worry, you'll learn."

"So, if he asked…"

"Who's unnecessarily helping people now?"

Law caught Saki's tiny smile when she sped past him to catch Shachi, who was about to disappear out of sight.

"Hey! Don't run!"

Bepo knocked on the door of the operating room and peeked inside.

"Captain, are you busy? Saki says dinner's ready."

"No, it's all right. I'll be there in a moment."

Instead of leaving, Bepo fully opened the door to see what Law was working on. There was a scaly leg on the table, cut open so the bones were visible. He approached his captain as Law set the scalpel he was holding aside and stared at the limb in front of him, thinking something through.

"Did you find out anything?" Bepo asked. The smell in the air was strong, but it didn't bother him. He'd smelled worse.

"Not so far. It's like I told you earlier—the bone structure is not right. There are reptilian parts mixed with human bones, but he wasn't caught mid transformation, so it should have been one or the other. Zoan fruits don't work this way."

"Do you think something went wrong during the transformation?"

"Possibly. The question is what. I've heard about Devil Fruit users being able to maintain a half-shifted form after years of training, but this man had eaten it only a few days prior. It doesn't match." He held the cut to open wider so Bepo could see. "Besides, these bones shouldn't even be fused. The limb isn't functional. No one would do this intentionally."

"But a Zoan transformation can't go wrong. It's something you do or don't. You can't get stuck in the middle of it."

"I know."

"I don't get it." Bepo was lost.

"Me neither," Law admitted. He removed the latex gloves he was wearing, tossed them into a trashcan and made his way to the sink. "We aren't getting any closer to the truth by staring at this. Let's go. Autopsies make me hungry."

"Why do corpses smell like cold cuts?"


"That makes sense."
Shachi was on a swing stage that hung from the side of the sub, working on the new paint, when a bunch of orange peels were dumped on his head. For a moment he had traumatic flashbacks of rocks falling from the top of cliffs.

He immediately looked up to yell at the psycho woman who surely was throwing stuff at him from above. Her crewmates seemed far too decent for that. "I SWEAR TO GOD, IF YOU—" Some of the stuff got in his mouth. "FEMGUIM?" He spat the peels over the edge of the platform. Disgusting. "Penguin, you asshole! Can you walk already?"

"Keep working, lazy ass," Penguin was resting his weight on a crutch and there was a nasty bruise on the part of his face that wasn't obscured by his hat, but he was grinning like he'd been pulled out of a toothpaste ad. He looked around, trying to find someone else hanging from the side of the sub. "Are you alone?"

"Yeah. The other guys don't want to be around here."

"Their loss."

"They are idiots." Shachi dropped his brush into the bucket of paint and hugged, careful to avoid the still fresh motifs. "I'd marry this beauty if I could ask her parents for permission."

"We are her parents. I call dibs on Dad."

"Gross. Do you have any whole oranges?"

The flying fruit Shachi on the sunglasses and he fumbled to catch it before it could rebound into the sea.

"You'll have to excuse me. It's too tempting to throw you things from here."

"You're taking advantage that you don't have any bones left for me to crack."


"Wanna try me? Wait until you can walk straight again and…" Shachi lost steam when he realized what he was saying, and the sentence died unfinished. Silence stretched for a good minute. "When are you leaving?"

"As soon as you're done with the paint."

"And if don't finish it?"

"I'll pelt you with oranges until you cry for mercy."

Shachi dropped the subject, sat on the platform and started peeling the orange. He put the first slice in his mouth and said, "Are these Tony's?"

"Yeah. I asked Saki to get them when she went shopping."

"I thought you didn't like them much."

"But you do."

"If you're trying to punch me in the gut you can do it the easy way."
"I want you to join this crew, idiot."

Shachi lost the will to finish the orange. "It sounds so easy when you say it."

"Because it is. Ask Captain, pack your things and come on board."

"How do you know that will work?"

"It's what I did. With a hippopotamus intermission, but the point stands."

Shachi turned to look at the town. Penguin had told him many times over the years that this place was too small for the two of them. They had bitched and moaned together about underpaid jobs and cranky bosses, but Shachi had never seriously thought that it would come a time when Penguin would decide to up and leave.

"…These pirates don't seem too bad," he said. An old lady was sitting on a bench at the harbor, throwing breadcrumbs for the birds. She waved at Shachi when she saw him staring.

Penguin watched his friend wave back at Mrs. Hortense. Shachi liked people too much. He made friends fast, got attached to them and didn't like to let go. Despite how much he grumbled about coworkers and boring townspeople, he liked the familiarity. Penguin thought he'd be much happier on the sea, the two of them travelling together in a testament to today's technology and their contribution to it, but he couldn't do much about it short of knocking him out and dragging him onboard while he was unconscious. He wasn't going to dismiss the idea, though.

"And Law's strong. I think he'll go far. Well, we will," Penguin amended. And you could be part of that we, dumbass.

"You have a lot of respect for that guy."

"I think he's proven himself more than enough, don't you?"

"I'll admit that he was pretty cool when he swapped us for those trees at the last moment and got the hippo stuck in them."

"Cutting off its legs wasn't going to sit well with Bepo."

"What a weirdo."

"When are you going to be done with the paint?"

The sudden change of subject back to the deadline hit Shachi harder than the orange. "Tomorrow, I think. It should be dry in a day."

Penguin took one last glance at his friend and let out a long, measured breath. "Two more days, then. I'll be inside if you need me."

Shachi watched Penguin hobble away from the railing and disappear.

Two days.

He wallowed in misery as he ate his orange.

Shachi went home after a long work day and almost greeted Penguin on reflex before realizing he was waving at the coat hanger.
He seriously considered drowning himself in the shower.

That night, when he managed to catch some sleep, Shachi dreamed of long gone snowball fights in the courtyard of the orphanage.

The next day came sooner than Shachi would have liked. When he got to the top of the gangplank, he found Bepo and Saki sitting on the deck and sharing a newspaper. The girl made a gesture of acknowledgement with her head and returned to the news.

"Good morning!" Bepo greeted.

"Morning," Shachi replied with no enthusiasm. "Penguin's inside?"

Saki glanced up at him, but the guy didn't seem to be all that keen on her, so she kept her mouth shut.

"He's resting. Do you want to talk to him? I'll call him up!"

"No, that's fine, I—" Shachi watched the bear ignore him and disappear from the deck. "…don't need to."

He stood there, surrounded by painting materials, as he heard the sound of turning pages in the background.

"…Nice hair," he said, uncomfortable.

"Thanks. It's dyed."

"You—you traitor!"

Saki finally looked up from the newspaper, confused. "What?"

"You're not a real red head!"

"So?"

"Kids at school never said you had no soul!"

"I never went to school."

"Eh… neighborhood kids, then!"

Saki folded the newspaper and dropped it on the floor. She was frowning. "What the hell's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem."

"Really? Then what's keeping you from telling Law you want to join the crew?"

Was it really that obvious? Shachi wasn't sure how to reply to that. "I… Don't…"

"I don't give a shit what you do, but Penguin's sulking. He doesn't think you'll be happy here, but it's not like he can drag you with him."

"…He told you that?"

Maybe she had talked too much. She shrugged and looked away.
"You don't get it. I have a life here," Shachi said, but he didn't sound convincing. He wasn't even trying to.

"So does Penguin."

"We're not the same."

Saki made a face. "I can see as much."

"What the hell does that mean?" He didn't know if she was trying to be helpful or get a rise out of him.

"He knows what he wants. You're being stupid."

"Easy for you to say," he grumbled.

The look she was giving him now was a little softer than before. "I suppose so. I didn't have many options."

"…Why did you join this crew?"

She considered briefly how much she wanted to tell him. "I'd be dead if I hadn't."

"You don't want to be here?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then?"

"What does it matter?" She said, apathetically. "Our circumstances are different. If you're looking for advice here's mine: make up your damn mind and stop leading Penguin on."

"You're a bitch."

"And you're a fucking idiot."

The sound of steps and the tap-tap-tap of Penguin's crutch interrupted the argument, and Saki went back to the newspaper as if nothing had happened.

Shachi dropped by Tony's fruit stall on the way home. The seller side-eyed him, asked him what was going on with the pirates with the flashy submarine, and told him they were out of oranges.

He almost greeted the coat hanger again when he got home, and he kicked the offending object down only to trip when he tried to walk over it. The fact that there was no one to make fun of him made him feel worse.

At seventeen minutes short of four in the morning, someone banged on Law's door at the same time the Den Den Mushi on the shelf let out a monumental snore. Law's eyes opened to darkness. For far longer than he'd care to admit, he wondered what was wrong with his sight and what was trying to suffocate him, until he sat up and the book he'd been reading fell from his face to his lap, narrowly missing a vital part of his anatomy.

He stumbled out of bed and dragged himself to open the door. He blinked his bleary eyes several times at a red-headed man wearing sunglasses indoors and carrying a backpack, waiting for an
The Den Den Mushi snored again.

Shachi stepped inside the warehouse with renewed conviction.

He was going to do it. He was going to quit and tell his boss to suck it up and deal with it. He was going to leave town with his best friend and the prettiest vehicle he'd set his eyes on to see the world.

It was noon and Mr. Payne was going to be furious oh god I don't wanna do this. The thought of telling his boss he was going to be mechanic-less from that day, goodbye and thank you for the laughable salary, bastard, gave him the runs, but fuck if he was going to sneak out of his home island like a vulgar criminal. Never mind that he was actually going to become a criminal, he didn't want to be the vulgar sort.

"I can do it. I can do it," he repeated over and over to himself.

He looked over his shoulder and saw Law, who had come to pay for the rest of the paint job, resting against the wall next to the entrance. Bepo was with him, both observing the scene clear interest.

A bald man came out from an office on the far back and stormed up to Shachi.

"SHACHI! WHERE THE FUCK'VE YOU BEEN?"

I can do it.

"I… Eh… I'm going to, eh…"

"YOU KNOW WHAT HOUR IT IS? YOU AREN'T LEAVING 'TILL THE YOU'RE DONE WITH THE VAPOR—"

"No! I'm, uh, I am leaving… with…"

Mr. Payne stared down at him. Shachi had to resist the urge to take a step back.

"You're leaving? What the hell d'you mean you're leaving?"

Shachi hesitated, breathed in, and raised his voice. "I mean exactly that! I'm leaving, and I just came to say that I quit and you better start looking for someone else to do my part!"

Mr. Payne's was head was turning red and the sunlight that filtered through the warehouse windows made it shine like a halo. "LIKE HELL YOU'RE—"

"I AM!"

"YOU—!"

Law ran out of patience as soon as he saw that the exchange was going to be pointless.

"It's already decided," he intervened, approaching the pair with Bepo close in tow.

A few workers were watching from a distance, curious to see how their boss would react.

Mr. Payne clenched his jaw, but he had the good sense not to yell at Law. It was up for dispute whether it was because he was a customer, a famous pirate, or because there was a bear glaring in his
general direction. "Mr. Trafalgar, you got Penguin. This idiot isn't going anywhere. Now if you can wait until I—"

"You don't seem to understand. We aren't asking for permission. As he said, he's leaving with us—"

"And as I said, like hell he's—"

"—because we're kidnapping him." Law unsheathed Kikoku and held it against Shachi's throat.

"Room."

The entire warehouse went still as a blue dome encased a good part of it.

Shachi's previous anger evaporated and he turned paper white. "WaitwaitWAIT—!

"Shambles."

In the blink of an eye, everybody was staring at three of the wooden crates stacked outside instead of a bear and two men. It took them a good half minute to process what had just happened.

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR!? GO AFTER THEM!" The boss bellowed, and he made a beeline for the Den Den Mushi in his office.

Saki heard stomping outside the sickbay. She was still slightly offended that Law had left her behind while he and Bepo went to give moral support to Shachi (the captain had threatened to tie her to a bed if she didn't stop moving so much, to which she had replied 'Wouldn't you like that', and he had unceremoniously dragged her to her current seat to 'Stay here and make sure he doesn't break anything again', or else), so she didn't bother to peek outside to find out what was going on.

Comfortably huddled on a chair, she went back to the book she was reading while Penguin snored on the nearest bed. He was making an effort to get out of bed and walk, but he still couldn't do much, and spent more time napping than anything else. She couldn't blame him. He probably hurt in places that didn't even exist. She hoped he'd feel better when —if— Shachi officially joined them.

She heard the sub's engine start up, and when she was resenting that she'd have to move to make sure the vessel wasn't being hijacked, the door was thrown open and a bundle of grey jumped on the patient she was supposed to watch over.

The scream that came out of Penguin echoed for a few seconds up to the navigation room.

"Fuck! Sorry, Peng! But I'm leaving with you guys!"

"So… happy…" Penguin managed to breathe out.

Deciding it was best to leave them alone, Saki set the book aside and walked outside the sickbay. She took the stairs to the navigation room with an energy she didn't really have, wondering if Bepo would want some help.

The sub began to move, and from the back of the room she watched their navigator man the sub with expertise. She still could hear the voices coming from the sickbay.

When Saki approached Bepo, he commented, "The sub's getting lively." He looked happy. Satisfied, even.

From that spot, they could see Law standing on the deck, staring at the town with a smug expression on his face. Saki hummed in agreement and smiled up at Bepo.
That month had not been a good one for the Marines stationed on the North Blue. Truth be told, months were never good for North Blue Marines, but most counted themselves lucky not to have been assigned to the Grand Line, because they'd heard the stories from transferred colleagues and oh, man, those guys had bad weeks packed in single days.

Still, peace was not a word these Marines had been very well acquainted with those past few weeks. On top of the usual criminal activity their sea was already known for, and a bunch of rookie pirates causing trouble so efficiently that some were beginning to wonder if they were coordinating their attacks, something had happened that had dismantled the usually clockwork behavior of the region's organized criminals. Two stray ships had already been captured by the Marines since the internal confusion had begun, and many more had been deviating from their usual schedules. Helpful, because this newfound chaos had made it much easier to catch them in the middle of their dirty deeds, but the Marine bases soon had found out they didn't have enough cells to hold that many people, nor enough staff to round up every ship they found conducting illegal business.

Captain Marina was fuming as she read the last report that had been brought to her—the pile on her desk kept growing before she could clear it up—and when she got to the part that said 'lost in a storm' and 'missing cargo', threw the stack of papers against the wall with murderous intent.

The explosion of paper missed an incoming sailor only by inches, but the man took it with admirable stoicism.

"Ma'am, we've received a communication from base! The target has been spotted thirty miles west of our location. Our other ships are already giving chase."

As if her problems weren't bad enough, she also had to deal with the incompetence of her colleagues in other Blues.

"Are we heading there?"

"That's, ah… Lieutenant Mako up in the bridge says there's a suspicious boat trying to hide behind the… crag to…" The sailor's explanation lost steam as he saw the face his superior was making.

"TELL THAT IMBECILE TO CHANGE THE COURSE AND GIVE CHASE TO THOSE DAMNED SMUGGLERS, NOW!"

The soldier was saying 'Yes, ma'am!' and running out the room even before the woman could finish the order.

With a groan, Captain Marina flopped into her chair and massaged her forehead. She'd had her subordinates on watch ever since receiving a warning about a stolen Marine ship that had crossed the Calm Belt to the North Blue, and it seemed like her persistence had paid out. Trying to intercept a stolen Marine ship in the middle of a downpour wasn't how she had planned to spend the last twenty-four hours, but failure wasn't an option. Many eyes had been on her since she had begun
rising through the ranks in her twenties, and more than a few were waiting for her to slip up and claim her position.

Feeling only slightly better, she rose from her seat and made her way to the bridge with long strides.

North Blue was her territory, and she was going to serve justice.

For the fourth time that week, Saki woke up with a start too early in the morning and couldn't fall asleep again. She'd hoped to be able to sleep like a normal person after a month away from home, but old habits died hard. And apparently, so did recurring nightmares.

She crawled out of bed, put on a pair of slippers and walked as quietly as she could up to the galley. Her original target had been a glass of water, but she saw that there was leftover coffee from the day before, so obviously she did the stupid thing and warmed it up. She was taking the first sip of caffeinated goodness, feeling it wash away the hope to catch some more z's, when she heard a distant sound.

Still not very awake, she followed the noise to its source and soon found herself standing in front of the operating room. The door wasn't completely closed. She heard a small clink of metal against metal, and when she pushed the door open the smell turned her stomach. Saki wasn't a particularly squeamish person—she couldn't have been, considering her track record—, but something deader than what she was used to was there.

"Captain? What are you—" She walked up to his side. "That is not what I think it is."

"Hm?" Law turned around nonchalantly. "Ah, you're awake. What hour is it?"

"Way too late for this shit. Or too early. I don't care. I'm not even going to ask."

A gloved hand stole her coffee and she stared with disgust at the place where Law had brushed her hand. "Please tell me you haven't been poking inside that with those gloves."

"If that's what you'd prefer."

"...Now tell me why I shouldn't wipe my hands on your clothes."

"Because I'm your Captain and that won't get rid of the bacteria." He held the mug in front of her. "Thanks."

"Keep it."

Law's smirk was partially hidden by the rim of the mug as he took another gulp. She hoped he choked on it.

"Why?" Saki asked at last, looking at the scaly... something... that was dissected on the table. She wasn't able to make out what body part that had been.

"I thought you weren't going to ask."

Saki blinked her bleary eyes a couple times and turned around. She should have stayed in bed.

"I retrieved some of Rickhard's pieces to investigate," Law had the courtesy to explain, stopping her on the way to the door. "By the way, you did me a favor bleeding him to death. It made the preservation process easier." On second thought, he asked, "What did you do with his sword? I didn't see it anywhere when I went back."
"It wasn't his," she said, slightly annoyed, even though she was aware that Law had no way to know. "I gave it back to its owner. What is it about this piece of garbage that interests you so much?"

"Didn't you notice that something was off when he transformed?"

"I was more focused on not dying, to be honest."

"You had to see it. He got stuck mid transformation."

She remembered, now that he'd said it. "I thought he didn't have full control over his ability. I don't know how Devil Fruits work. Is that not supposed to happen?" She looked at the piece of her ex-boss with curiosity.

"Indeed it isn't."

"Then why did it happen?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. I've been meaning to ask you, did you get Devil Fruit shipments often?"

"Not at all. There was drug trade, a fair amount of weapon shipments, but never fruits. I'd have known, Rickhard would have been ecstatic to get his hands on one. Couldn't keep quiet about something like that even if he tried."

"I see." Law didn't look disappointed, just in thought. He doubted he was going to find out anything else, so he changed the subject. "Why are you up at this hour?"

"I woke up and couldn't fall back asleep."

Law looked at her with a clinical interest and Saki found out that she didn't like it. It was disquieting, to say the least, to be stared at by a known murderer in an otherwise empty surgery room (where, in her own opinion, she had already spent more than enough time from day one). As many pirates as she had met in her life, she had never spent more than a few hours around the same ones. She couldn't tell at which point it was safe to share a room with one of them and she wasn't sure that she wanted to find out, either.

"Does this happen often?" He walked up to her and she took a step back. "I have sleeping pills. Maybe you should—"

She cut him fast and backed away while she spoke. "Nah, I'm fine, have fun with your dead junk, bye!"

Law didn't bother go after her. It wasn't like she had anywhere to run to.

He took another gulp of coffee, trying to decide if it was time to trash the piece of meat on the table. The smell was starting to get to him.

Early in the morning, a small ship docked on Asteria's port. It was a regular trading ship with regular people on board. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Nobody bat an eye when its crew set foot in town. Some went to talk to other merchants, some thought they deserved to get some proper sleep at the nearest inn. Two of them went off somewhere else, in the direction of that no local dared to set foot on, but they were fast and nobody noticed, or else didn't care enough to warn them. Asteria's citizens weren't strangers to finding a traveler in a
ditch every other week. As long as they didn't clog the sewage pipes, no one minded much.

Like ghosts, the two figures disappeared into an alleyway as the sun began to rise over the city's buildings.

If you had asked Saki a month ago, she'd have said that living in a sub with a bunch of guys and a bear had to be horribly claustrophobic. But there was a certain charm about being hundreds of feet underwater, being able to watch the sea creatures swim by and see the seabed when the waters were clear and shallow, and above all, knowing that there was an ungodly thunderstorm above and you weren't one of the poor souls that were caught in it on open sea.

There was just one small, but admittedly critical detail that bothered her, if you didn't count the (possibly likely unstable) man who seemed to enjoy cutting up human remains in the wee hours of the morning. The tip of the eyeliner brushed against her eyelids, leaving a smooth, controlled line.

*Just a little more, just a—*

The sub's steady rhythm shifted and the floor under Saki's feet moved.

**GODDAMMIT!**

It was strangely comforting that no matter where you went and how unexpectedly life changed, some things always stayed the same. It just could have been something else, she mused while she redid that line for the third time. Then, the door to her room burst open, and it was a testament to the steadiness of her hand that she didn't draw all over her face.

"You there, Saki?" Penguin's voice called.

She left the bathroom to find the man along with Shachi inside her room, carrying bundles of white fabric.

"You'll never learn to knock, will you?" She had been annoyed the first five times, because *privacy, do you even know what that is?* to which they had replied *nope, we've always shared rooms*. Then she had locked the door, only to discover that Penguin would unintentionally headbutt it when he was going fast and the door didn't budge. At that point she had decided that having them barge in unannounced was better than stumbling onto a concussed man on her doorstep.

"Sorry, we're not used to—wow, you look like ass." Shachi blurted out, and quickly added, "No offense. Bad night?"

"None taken," she avoided the question and gestured to them. "What's that?"

Shachi raised the cloth in his arms. "New boiler suits!"

"Can we use your desk? Bepo has his covered in maps and he kicked us out of the bridge."

Saki shrugged. "Sure. But are you planning to work in those? Doesn't seem like a good color for dealing with machinery."

"We're making uniforms," Penguin held up a piece of black fabric and a pair of scissors. "We're going to sew our Jolly Roger on."

"Nice."

"Do you want one? We got spares." Shachi offered.
It was generous of him, truly, particularly if she took into account that they started off on the wrong foot right from the moment they met. Still…

"Nope."

"Told you, buddy."

"Why!?"

There was a pause in which Saki tried to find the words to avoid sticking the previously mentioned wrong foot in her mouth, but it was difficult to describe the embarrassment that would mean being caught in one of those without being offensive, so she settled for saying, "Not my style."

"But it's a sign of companionship, trust… that sort of thing," Shachi insisted.

"Yeah… You'll have to find another way to trust me, then."

"No team spirit," Shachi grumbled. "Your eyeliner's uneven."

"Screw you too."

Suddenly, the sub made a strange movement and they had to grab onto the closest furniture to not fall.

"The hell is Bepo—?"

But Shachi didn't have time to finish the question before an alarm began to wail inside the sub, and immediately, Bepo's voice boomed through the speakers.

"A projectile almost hit us and I can't see what's going on with all the rain! We need to surface, Captain!"

The three occupants of the room shared a moment of understanding when they realized they were in deep shit and ran upstairs to find out what was happening. Law was already standing by the door, waiting for the water to be at a reasonable level before opening it.

"Be ready for anything," he said.

A thick curtain of water hit them as soon as they went outside. Visibility was bad, but it wasn't all that difficult to make out the shapes and colors of three Marine ships at a distance. No one was surprised to find out that the shooting was being done by them. The strange thing was that they weren't aiming at the sub, but rather at each other.

There was a moment of collective inactivity as the crew watched one of the ships burst aflame right after an enemy projectile made contact with it. Not a minute had passed when they saw panicked people jumping over the railing and trying to swim away from the ship as fast as possible.

Penguin said out loud what everybody was thinking. "Cannonballs don't work like that."

Shachi took a few steps towards the edge of the deck to see better. "What the hell could they be—Wait! Those people don't look like Marines."

"Civilians?" Penguin said.

"Why would there be so many?"
"A stolen ship?" Law suggested.

"AH!" Saki startled everybody with the sudden yelp. Something had clicked in her brain. "Of course, smugglers sometimes use Marine ships to—oh shit. We need to leave."

One didn't need to be a master at subtlety to notice the sudden urgency in her words, but if there was any doubt, the frantic gestures she was making at Shachi to step back didn't leave any room for misinterpretation.

"What's wrong? It doesn't look like they've seen us."

Law thought questions would be better asked when they weren't in imminent danger, and at any rate, it was in their best interest not to intervene. "Shachi, step away! We're getting out of here!"

They didn't fully make it inside the sub before the huge explosion and the ensuing shockwave knocked them downstairs along with a fair amount of debris. The metal door closed on its own, a wave put the sub in nearly vertical position for a moment, and the pirates slid down the hallway until they slammed against a wall in a miserable pile of limbs.

"Are you okay!?" Bepo said through the speakers. When he realized no response would come because his companions had no way to talk with the navigation room, Bepo rushed downstairs only to find a heap of humans on the floor. "Captain!" He ran to their side to help them get up. The sub was still rocking heavily.

"We're alive," he said, taking a hand to his forehead and grimacing. "I think."

"And sort of deaf." Saki covered her ears to make a vacuum, but she frowned when she removed them and her hearing was still dull. She decided that she wasn't still ready to stand on swaying ground and sat on the floor.

"Don't do that," Law said, dropping to the floor as well. "Your eardrums could be damaged."

"This ringing sucks," Shachi commented. "How long does it last?"

"From seconds to up to a lifetime."

"WHAT?" He said, scandalized.

"From seconds to up to a lifetime," Law repeated, louder.

"No, I heard you right the first—"

"So, what do we do now?" Penguin commented from a lying position. He put his hands over his stomach and decided to keep still until his sense of balance came back or he barfed, whatever came first.

"Bepo, what's the situation out there?"

"A Marine ship blew up and another was caught in the explosion. The third one looked fine."

"And the sub?"

"No damage taken!"

"Good. Let's submerge and continue to Lymes. Fast."
"Yes, Captain!"

As they heard Bepo clank up the metal stairs, Saki explained, listless. "Standard protocol for the guys handling cargo. You're about to get caught, you burn or blow up any proof."

"How the fuck did they get a Marine ship? Did they just attack one in the sea and took off with it?"

"No idea. I've heard about them being used to sneak through the Calm Belts, though."

Penguin would have been eyeing her with suspicion if he hadn't been comfortably staring at the ceiling, so he had to verbalize his feelings of mistrust. "Why do you know all this?"

"I'm a psychic."

"We should be hitting land at dusk," Law said, morosely, seeing as he already had the info he wanted. Spirits were low, but they had work to do regardless of the circumstances. He got up, significantly more steady than a few minutes prior. "Go get ready."

The automatic reply was a chorus of grunts that ranged from 'I don't wanna deal with this shit right now' to 'I'm sure if I stayed in bed Bepo would be able to buy the exact measure of screw we need for the humidifier.'

"Move."

Captain Marina got to the scene of the crime to be greeted by the remains of two ships, a third one rescuing the survivors and no trace of the criminals or the documents and cargo they were carrying. She stared at the dark mass of water, hoping that with enough intensity she'd be able to rise with pure frustration whatever had sunk to into its depths, to no avail.

She felt water trickling down inside her raincoat and anger rising again. This was those idiots' fault; you don't simply let a bunch of smugglers steal one of your ships and cross the Calm Belt so the Marines on the other side deal with it.

"Ma'am," the Marine from before spoke over the ruckus, "some of the survivors said they saw a yellow submarine with the Heart Pirate's Jolly Roger."

"So they were involved." A lead, and a good one, at that. "They won't go far in this weather. Tell Lieutenant Mako to head to Lymes."

She could imagine what the vultures would say if she didn't put a lid on this issue fast.

There were fallen things everywhere. When they had finally managed to stand up without holding onto the walls, Penguin and Shachi had begun a checkup for structural damage and then disappeared somewhere. Saki had been left to tidy up the galley and the suspicious appearance of broken plates and glasses near the table made her think that the guys had asked to use her desk just because they didn't put away their stuff after having breakfast.

Miserably, she wiped the last of her favorite apricot marmalade from the floor, thinking she should have eaten it sooner, and coming up with ways to sabotage the oafs' meals discreetly.

A shadow fell over her.

"Did you bite a lemon?" Said Bepo.
"Nah. I lost my breakfast."

She almost fell inside the trash can along with the ruined food when Bepo amiably patted her on the back.

"I know how it is. Captain and I lost a lot of breakfasts when we tried to cook ourselves."

She didn't know what to say. She didn't want to be condescending, because this bear was a professional, a person whose work kept the crew alive daily, but he sounded so freaking adorable when he said that.

"It's good to have you here. You haven't lit anything on fire yet."

Oh, screw it.

"Bepo, can I hug you?"

He was startled for a second. "Uh… okay?"

So she did, and then she realized she hadn't even hugged a pillow since she said goodbye to the kids back home. Human contact, pah, who needed that when your navigator was a fluffy teddy bear of death and destruction.

The storm was still raging when they reached an island. The one town in it, Lymes, was one of the nearest to Reverse Mountain, and as such, a very frequent stop to travelers and pirates alike. Marine activity was high on the zone, with a base a mere hour away.

Law had one clear objective to accomplish there: get a Log Pose and leave before they could attract any undesirable attention. It was a stealth operation, not helped by the bee-colored hoodie and white boiler suits with huge Jolly Rogers on them.

No one had said that subtlety was the Heart Pirates' forte.

Bepo volunteered to stay in the sub, away from the city's main docks and ready to pick them up should any emergency arise. In the spirit of honesty, he admitted to himself that he wanted to see the city, but there was a downpour going on and wet fur was a bitch to deal with. Humans were smoother and better equipped for rain, in his humble opinion, and he was sure he could trust his captain and subordinates to acquire a quality Log Pose.

When everybody else left, he sat on his chair on the navigation room, put his feet on the table and made himself comfortable with a beer and a book called *North Blue Water Currents*.

Night had fallen, stores were closing and no one dared say a thing.

The four pirates weren't sure at which point one could be said to have stopped walking and began swimming (although having Law around and breathing was a nice indicator), but they'd wager they were at least wading by then. The curtain of rain was so heavy it barely let them see what was in front of their noses, and Shachi had already tripped twice and brought Saki down with him. When Law slipped after they were unceremoniously thrown out of the fourth shop, everybody did as if they hadn't seen it. The general mood was sour enough with all their body parts in place.

"What's the problem with these people!?” Penguin immediately regretted opening his mouth when he choked on some rainwater.
"Dude, don't spit this way!

"You take off those sunglasses and stop tripping‼

"You know they're pre—OOOFF‼

A nearby door opened and hit both mechanics square in the face. Penguin and Shachi picked themselves up from the floor in time to see a middle aged man yelling at them.

"What are you doing out there‼? Come inside! It's raining cats‼

"Don't you say‼ Penguin retorted.

"No, it's actually raining cats, Margaret is——

A glacial screech resounded over the storm. The pirates turned to its general direction and something wet and furry hit Saki on the head. She screamed in a very undignified manner and the animal ran away after leaving a nice scratch on her neck.

"Will you come inside or not?"

The four ran into the building and the man closed the door behind them. It was a small inn with only a few patrons around a table, playing cards. They weren't paying the pirates, nor the screaming outside, any mind.

"Margaret—that's the neighbor next door—she gets really nervous when it rains, you see, she was once caught in a flood——

"Florence! What was that noise? Did you go outside‼ A woman peeked from behind a bead curtain and got startled when she saw the newcomer's state. "Oh dear, oh dear, hold on a second, I'll get you towels‼ She disappeared, still talking to herself.

Florence herded them to a table near the fireplace. "What were you thinking, walking outside in that weather? Storms around here are something fierce." He took a long, nice look at Law.

The woman from earlier came out, carrying so many towels that she couldn't be seen behind the pile. "Here! Hurry, dry yourselves, you don't want to catch a cold in summer. Oh dear, you are drenched."

"We were trying to buy a Log Pose and be on our way," Law said from under a towel. His hat was on the table and halfway through making a puddle on it.

"Heading to the Grand Line, are you? Tough luck. You aren't going to find anyone willing to sell."

Every pirate paid extra attention to him after that.

"Why is that?"

"Everybody's talking about the Marine ships you sunk this morning. With the base so near, no one's going to risk getting on their bad side."

"What are you on about, Florence? Don't tell me these are those pirates‼ The woman took a step back.

"Either they are, or the Surgeon of Death has a twin brother."

"Don't you say‼ Penguin retorted.
"We didn't sink any ships." Saki said, annoyed. The cat's scratch was itching. "A Marine ship blew up and sunk another with the explosion."

"What she said," Penguin added. "We almost got caught up in it, too."

"Someone must have told the base that we were nearby and they made up the rest of the story."

Shachi thought it made a lot of sense. "Guess it saves more face saying they were attacked by pirates than they fucked up themselves."

Law clicked his tongue. "This is going to complicate things."

Florence let out a sigh and shrugged. "Ah, well, not that I care. I wasn't going to kick you out with what's going on out there. Are you staying? We've got empty rooms."

"That might be for the best," Law glanced out the window. "It doesn't seem like it's going to let up anytime soon."

"Margaret's worse than the storm!" One of the patrons said. Apparently, they were too busy with their game to look, but not to listen in. "By the looks of it, she's still on the fourth, and she has eleven."

"Seventeen," another corrected. "Remember Peaches had kittens last week."

"God damn. The day she dies those cats will eat her."

The other patrons chorused in agreement.

Florence ignored the lot of them and went back to the pirates. "That'll be fifteen hundred beli each, dinner and breakfast included."

Shachi was wiping his sunglasses with the towel. "And how do we know you aren't gonna sell us out while we sleep, huh?"

Florence slammed a hand on the table and everybody jumped a little. "Are you not going to pay?"

"We are," Law replied quickly.

The man's friendly demeanor returned. "Then that's it. I'll go get the keys."

The woman stayed with them. "So young and heading to that horrible place..." She shook her head. "Oh, forgive my rudeness. I'm Angie, and Florence is my husband. I'll see if I can find you some clothes to wear while yours dry off." She then gestured to Saki, who was wringing out her hair. "Sweetie, come with me."

"Me?" She was confused. No one had called her 'sweetie' since she was a kid. She had made sure of it.

"Yes, you. I'm sure I have some old clothes that will fit. Come here already."

She hesitated at first, but none of her companions tried to stop her.

"Hey," Shachi said when she was leaving. "Your eyeliner's running."

Startled, Saki brought her hands to her face and examined her fingers in a hurry.
"Wait." All clean. "It's waterproof, asshole."

Shachi laughed, and Saki could've sworn someone else was hiding a smile behind his hand.

Saki went back to the main hall significantly drier. Angie had lent her a long sleeved dress with printed daisies and dandelions that was only mildly ego-puncturing (the pale blue one with hot pink hearts, though, had been met with a polite refusal). But Saki wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth for long, and on the bright side, the dress gave her a chance to parade the clovers along her calf. She'd inked those on herself when she was sixteen, and the old man hadn't let her near a tattoo machine for a month after that. What an overreaction.

She threw a quick glance at the room. The patrons were still on their spot, the only difference from before a few more glasses on the table. No new customers, which made sense. No sight of danger, either. She sat next to the fireplace and waited for the guys.

The door opened again as Angie was setting a warm drink in front of Saki. A tall woman flanked by two Marines who seemed to be feeling pretty crummy stepped into the room. Their raincoats dripped water all over the entrance.

"We're looking for Trafalgar Law," she said as a greeting, giving the room a cursory glance.

Saki made herself small behind Angie.

"C-Captain Marina, can we get in?"

She turned around to face her subordinates, and the word 'Justice' on the back of her red raincoat billowed in the wind. "No way! Stand guard outside! Those pirates might be trying to sneak away in the storm!"

The men cringed, but nevertheless obeyed.

"Anyway!" she centered her attention again on the current occupants on the in. "Have you seen Trafalgar or any of his henchmen today?"

"Why are you going after such a small fry, Mari-chan?" One of the patrons said, grinning. "You're better than that!"

"I'll talk to your bosses for you," another offered. "You should be fighting crime in the Grand Line!"

"The Yonkou will tremble in fear the day she sets foot there!"

The table exploded in laughter.

The Marine's face became an interesting shade of burgundy. "S-shut up, Ron!" She pointed at the man, trying to hide her embarrassment with indignation and failing. "Have some respect! I'm on official business here."

"You work far too much, sweetie," Angie said, concerned. "When will you take a vacation? Dad's worried, too."

"Mom, this is not the time."

"There's always the time to take a breather, and all the more with this awful weather! Tell your boys to come inside, too!"
"Justice never sleeps!" She cringed inside at how hammy she had sounded. She still wasn't pulling the dignified act. She never could. She should have requested that transfer to East Blue when she had the chance. "A-anyway! Have any of you seen those criminals?"

"How should we know? Can't pay attention to all the pirates in town."

"We put up wanted posters everywhere!"

"Yeah, and last week it was that Ten Dragoon guy and the week before that blonde weirdo. Give up, Mari-chan."

"Take a seat and have an orange juice with us like you used to!"

"We promise we won't tell anyone at the base."

"T-t-that was many years ago! Anyway, mom! You haven't seen him either?"

"No, dear."

"And you. The clover girl. I haven't seen you around before. Are you a visitor?" She paused as she stared at Saki's clothes. "W-why are you wearing that dress?"

Saki was forced to stop staring into the depths of her incredibly interesting drink and look at the Marine captain. She'd have felt more threatened if Anyway's Mom wasn't acting as a physical barrier between the two of them.

"She was caught in the rain, and you haven't worn it in such a long time. I thought you wouldn't mind."

"I-I don't! She can keep it! Anyway, no sight of those wretched pirates on the way here?"

Saki plastered on a smile. "I wouldn't know. I don't pay attention to wanted posters."

Marina groaned. "I'll be going, then. All of you, be careful. That man kidnapped a civilian at Indent Bay and sank two of our ships."

"We heard three!"

"Shove it, Ron! A-anyway, goodbye!"

"Take care, dear."

"Bye, Mari-chan!"

"Come play with us soon!"

"Get a promotion!"

"And a husband!"

The door closed after her. Not two seconds later, they heard blood-curling screams and frightened meows.

"Oh, dear," Angie shook her head. "I hope it didn't go for the face."

"What was that about?" Penguin, newly arrived, asked.
The other pirates came from upstairs along with Florence and took seats near Saki.

"I kept them upstairs," Florence said, appearing from behind.

"Thank goodness you did," Angie said to her husband.

"Not the first time, probably not the last." He went behind the bar and began cleaning glasses as if nothing had happened.

"Captain's got an admirer. Curly brown hair, deep dark eyes, tall and pretty…"

"Dreamy."

"Some guys are lucky," Shachi muttered.

"A Marine captain admirer."

Shachi made a face. Law didn't comment on it, but it was clear that he was growing annoyed by the second.

"We need a Log Pose," Law said, "and you three will have to take care of it, if I can't walk around freely. Tomorrow at—"

A fist slammed on the table, interrupting Law. The room went quiet. Every pirate glared at its owner, ready for a fight, and every other head turned to watch the scene.

"What's your problem?" Penguin said.

There was no trace of the cheerful man that had been making fun of the Marine woman. "Is it true that you kidnapped someone?"

The tension in the air could have been cut with a gomu gomu no butter knife.

"Sort of," Shachi said, completely unimpressed by the unspoken threat. There wasn't much left to fear in life after watching a rock hippo jump from a cliff to make mechanic mush. "I like to think about it as quitting my job in an unconventional way."

Ron wasn't sure what to say to that. "And you don't mind?"

"Are you kidding? You couldn't pay me enough to go back to that place."

"Not even with one of those electric generators on the latest issue of *Mechanical Systems Monthly*?" Penguin butted in.

"Nope."

"What about a mermaid on an electric generator?"

"Ah, that's harder to say…"

"Two mermaids on a generator?" Saki tried.

"Okay, maybe! Are you happy?"

"Is that so…" Ron said, feeling a bit lost but much relieved. He patted Law on the back so loudly that his subordinates winced a little. "Well, as long as you aren't that sort of people! Angie, the drinks
are on me! As thanks for making Mari-chan drop by."

"What was that about?" Penguin said, watching Ron go back with his friends. The atmosphere in the room went back to normal.

"You're repeating yourself."

"Marina's our daughter, but we barely see her," Florence answered, aligning the bottles on the shelves with millimetric precision.

Angie continued in her perpetually concerned state. "She spends every day either in the base or running after pirates. It seems like she only ever comes home to ask for wanted people."

"She's doing fine, Angie. Don't worry about her."

"I know, but after Mack…"

"He's doing fine, too."

The conversation died down after that, and it seemed as if the patrons had gotten quieter, too. When they left, the only talk in the room was the pirates planning what to do the next day, and soon they headed to their rooms.

Law woke up early. He was not a morning person, and by the second coffee he was debating between going back to the sub with Bepo or staying the day cooped up inside the inn until the others returned—and seeing how they weren't up yet, who knew when that would be. Seeing how the sky was still overcast and drizzle was falling on and off, he was leaning towards waiting in the unrivalled company of Kikoku. Besides, there were the Marines looking for him. His crewmates could roam the town freely, but didn't have that sort of luxury.

He recognized the light steps approaching him from behind, so he didn't bother looking away from the window.

The newcomer unceremoniously sank on the chair next to him. Law turned around to find a red haired zombie instead of a person.

"Coffee?" Angie asked.

Saki made a guttural noise that could be interpreted as 'please'.

They stayed in silence while Angie brought her the drink and retreated to the bar.

"Why are you staring?" Saki asked.

Law honestly didn't know, but it may have had something to do with the fact that he was smelling something citrusy and couldn't pinpoint the exact source. He figured he was still somewhat asleep too.

"You got it right today." Whatever the case, he couldn't let the opportunity to be an ass slide. A reputation like his had to be earned with constant work.

Bleary eyes looked up at him and blinked a couple times before the comment sank in. When it did, she felt tempted to tell her captain to go fuck himself, but she knew that was the drowsiness talking.

"It's easier when the floor doesn't move," she admitted. "I hope my clothes dried overnight."
Law had to admit that even if the print wasn't doing the dress any favors, the clothes suited her. Judging by what she usually wore and how she moved, he'd thought she'd feel like a fish out of water in them.

A waving hand in front of his nose snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Earth to Captain."

Ah, crap. He'd been staring again, hadn't he? Maybe a bucket of cold water would help wake him up.

"Nice shirt, by the way."

If anyone had the gall to question Florence about the contents of his closet, for which his wife was one hundred percent responsible, as she had been for her daughter's, he'd say electric blue shirts with bright yellow durians were the latest fashion in Lvneel Kingdom and everybody was jealous of his magnificent taste.

Law hadn't questioned. He'd just wanted something dry to wear. "You're one to talk."

She actually cracked a small smile at his comeback. It was fun to see the human behind the bounty. "You're cranky about the Log Pose."

Yeah, he was. "You pay more attention than you let on."

"...Dumb luck. I'm still asleep. Don't mind me." She didn't know why she felt like a kid caught red-handed, but she didn't like when people noticed things about her. People who noticed things were family, not random people she met on the street. She was fine with being an idiot in the eyes of the world.

Law's gaze went from the coffee she appeared to be trying to drown herself in, to her neck and the scratch that ran down it. *Superficial and clean; doesn't look like it'll get infected*, he noted on autopilot. Law wasn't usually a man of impulse, but for a fleeting moment, he had wanted to reach out and touch the skin.

"Why clovers?" He asked instead. He wasn't sure if it was to distract himself from the earlier thought or out of genuine curiosity.

Saki hesitated, but a grin spread on her face right away. "So handsome men come ask me what they mean."

Law deadpanned. "Nice evasive. Has it ever worked?"

"Only if I mean to."

"You're not telling me. I get it."

"Not everything needs to have a deep meaning. Why hearts?"

Law stiffened so imperceptibly that she wouldn't have caught it if their eyes hadn't met for a split second.

Angie approached the table again. "I hate to interrupt, but Florence is making toast. Do you want some?"

The replies, "I'll pass," and "Yes, thank you," came at once.
Saki snorted in a very unladylike way. A lesser woman might have been frightened by Law's ensuing glare, but when one had seen the same one directed at a loaf of bread it lost much of its effectiveness.

"Such a cute couple," Angie sighed as she made for the kitchen. "You remind me of my husband and I when we were younger."

Silently, they watched her disappear behind the curtain.

"This is starting to become an unsettling pattern," Saki said.

"It's the clothes' fault." It better be the clothes' fault.

"I agree." That was a half lie. She really wanted to, though, and that had to count for something.

Penguin and Shachi couldn't wake up soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

Originally, I posted an extra chapter between the last one and this, a short snippet about Saki and her family when she was a child. Since I'd rather keep the numbering of the regular chapters correct, I'll likely be posting it aside with another bunch of drabbles (both in-universe and AU) as a companion story.
The awkward let's-pretend-we-haven't-made-highly-uncomfortable-remarks-about-each-other silence that hung between Law and Saki was mercifully broken by Shachi and Penguin not long after Angie's intervention. They were wearing their shiny new boiler suits, and the girl's eyes filled with hope.

"Our clothes dried overnight?"

"Nope," Penguin said, shoving a piece of toast in his mouth that barley fit. "Just the suits."

"You're kidding me." There was no way that something so thick would dry faster than her pants.

"The outside is waterproof," Shachi said with unconcealed smugness. Sweet, sweet payback.

She didn't deign to reply and instead walked up to the counter to grab the newspaper and immerse herself in the new wanted posters.

"Sore loser," Shachi said loud enough for everyone to hear.

Law thought it was better not to ask what that was about and waited for everybody to be done with breakfast before he gave instructions. Ideally, they would have stocked up in Lymes and made for Reverse Mountain, but circumstances required a different course of action. Law would contact Bepo to be ready to pick them up, quietly wait for his crewmates at the inn, and they would return together to the sub as soon as the strike team got the Log Pose, no time for dallying. It shouldn't have been hard, and so, as everything that shouldn't pose any sort of complication does, it managed to grow into a considerable mess with unexpected consequences for the future.

The Den Den Mushi on top of the table rang, and despite almost falling from his chair when he woke up with a start, Bepo picked up the Den Den Mushi with the swiftness of a veteran secretary, and his voice didn't betray he had been asleep seconds prior.

"Captain!"

"Bepo, I need you to get ready. We'll be at the port in two hours at most."

"Roger! Have you run into any trouble?"

"So far we've avoided the Marines, but the less time we stay in the city, the better. We'll need to stop somewhere else for supplies."

"No problem! I'll be waiting for you."

"See you later."

Law hung up. With a monumental yawn, Bepo stretched and got to work.

The sun timidly shone from the corner of a fat, grey cloud. Despite the appearance of the sky and the
unholy deluge of water the day before, the morning was reasonably warm and humid. It was a blessing in disguise, since both mechanics had to wear the top of the boiler suits down to avoid having four Jolly Rogers smiling at every passerby.

"This weather is crazy," Shachi commented, raising his arms to let the breeze pass through the short sleeves.

Saki batted an arm away from her. "Don't put your armpit on my face!"

"Not my fault you're a half pint," Shachi grinned and shoved his arm closer to her.

"I'll shove this pint up—" Shachi grinned and shoved his underarm closer to her. "AAAHH, PENGUIN, HELP!"

Said man got between them and replied to Shachi's earlier comment as if nothing was happening.

"Bepo said the magnetic field of Reverse Mountain does that to the weather."

"Oh, yeah. How far are we from it?"

Penguin stared at his friend with incredulity.

"Look, my ears were still ringing when he was explaining—"

"Only half a day's sail."

"Damn, that's close."

"Aren't you a genius."

"Who's talking now? I can't see from up here…"

Saki's arm shot up to snatch Shachi's sunglasses, but Penguin caught it in the middle of the trajectory. He ended up having to forcibly separate them, because Shachi had retaliated by tugging on Saki's hair while Penguin was busy stopping her.

"Be quiet, kids, we have a job to do."

It was a sight, watching a man in a cap that spelled 'PENGUIN' drag two redheads in the middle of a catfight to the town's shopping district, but all in all not terribly odd as far as the locals were concerned.

Again, subtlety was not the crew's forte, and thank Roger they had left home the polar bear.

They made their way through the island's citizens with Penguin pulling his companions by their ears, and the same deserted avenue their collective butts had become well acquainted with the night before was now dry and bustling with people. The city had a remarkable drainage system, Penguin thought.

He let go of his crewmates when they stopped trying to whack each other with the sheathes of their respective swords. That same moment, Shachi spotted a shop that sold nautical instruments, which incidentally was the last one they had been thrown out of, while Saki was distracted by the urban scenery. She was looking at the birch trees and white benches that lined the street with almost childlike awe. It was a pretty place, sure, but nothing to write home about. Penguin had seen better when he travelled for work.

There was something stuck on the window shop, which happened to be wanted posters on closer
"Hey," Shachi lowered his sunglasses a bit to peer from above. "Captain's bounty has gone up."

Saki turned around at once. "Huh? His poster wasn't in today's newspaper."

"They've been pretty quick with this one. It's been a day since the sunken ships – maybe they made emergency ones just for this area?"

"They do that?"

"Only if they really want to catch someone fast," Penguin said. "Remember the time it happened back home?"

Shachi shivered. "How the hell could I forget, that guy was disgusting."

"What did he do?"

"It was what he didn't do, by the smell of it." Shachi explained. "Heard Mrs. Hortense fainted on top of a petunia bush and her grandkids puked on the sidewalk half an hour after the guy had gone through their street. What was his name…?"

"Stinky Feet Bob or something like that." Penguin grimaced. "Ugh, just remembering it makes me want to throw up."

"…Rotten Feet Joe?"

Two heads turned to look at Saki.

"Yeah, that's—!" Penguin stopped mid-sentence and frowned. "No, seriously, how the fuck do you know these things?"

"…I'll tell you one of these days over drinks."

"Deal."

Shachi ignored his fistbumping companions and looked inside the shop through the space between the posters. "Guy behind the counter is the same as yesterday. He's gonna recognize us."

"Yeah, I don't think he'll sell to us if he knows who we're with." Saki glanced discreetly at the man inside the shop. "We need a plan."

"If only we had a disguise…"

There are moments in life where two people will share a thought without needing to express it at all. Those who've had longtime friends will understand that synchronicity that sometimes happens, like a spark, between people who've known each other for several years, maybe due to one rubbing off on the other, maybe because of divine inspiration. As Shachi let the last word trail off, realization dawned upon him and Penguin, and with timing that only two dudes who had been sharing a roof for 20 years could have, they stared at as Saki as if they had suddenly realized something miraculous.

Sensing the sudden change in the atmosphere, she took a step back from them. "What, what is it you're thinking now?" She asked nervously.

"You're a woman," Shachi said, as if no more explanations were needed.
She was so weirded out that she bit back a sarcastic, 'you're on a roll today.' She turned to Penguin for help, but he was looking at her in the same way as his friend.

"And you are wearing a dress. You weren't wearing a dress last night," Penguin stressed.

"Uh…"

"If I didn't know you and I'd seen you in that state then and now, I don't think I would recognize you."

"And even if you did…"

"You're a woman."

"Yeah."

At this point, Saki was unconsciously holding her sword to her chest, as if it could work as a barrier against idiots. "…So?"

"Go use your womanly wiles on him, come on, go!"

"Did you hit your head while you slept!?"

"He's right. You need to take one for the team."

"Oh for the love of—" Of all the times Penguin had to back up one of Shachi's ideas, why now?

Shachi did his best to sound encouraging, and it wasn't difficult because he believed in his plan. "Go, Saki! You've got a power dudes can only dream of!"

"He means a pair of tits."

She looked at them for a long moment and, unable to find a flaw in their strangely sound logic other than 'this won't work', she thrust her sword towards Shachi. "Hold this for me." And she stomped off to the entrance of the store muttering something so obscene that a passing woman almost dropped her baby in horror.

Bepo had once told his captain that perhaps he should be more careful with his coffee intake. The notion was forgotten as soon as said man also suggested that he, too, was having health concerns about the two of them, and from then on they should go only to vegetarian restaurants. Bepo was a bear, but not dumb, and he was quick to catch the drift and decide that a decaffeinated Law was not worth all the seal meat in the world.

Trafalgar Law did not have a problem with coffee. In fact, coffee was so unproblematic for him that he was on the fourth cup of the morning when the inn's door opened and he caught sight of Ron from the corner of his eye. The man walked towards the bar, and Law angled closer to Kikoku as the newcomer approached him from behind.

His shoulder was subsequently patted in a friendly gesture that reverberated through the entire room.

"Your friends left you alone?" The man asked, and he took the barstool next to Law.

The pirate hesitated for moment, but he thought he might as well take advantage of the interruption to gather information.
"They'll be back soon," he said. He didn't know if they would, but he sure hoped so, and telling a stranger that he might be without his crew for an extended period of time wouldn't do any good.

Ron laughed. "Course they will! What crew would leave their captain ashore? And heading to the Grand Line, no less."

Alerted by the new voice, Angie's head poked from behind the kitchen curtain. "Morning, Ron. The usual?"

"You know it."

The usual happened to be a whiskey on the rocks at nine in the morning. As Angie poured the drink, Law caught a whiff of fruit again. It was coming from the woman.

The woman looked over her shoulder very fast, leaned over the bar towards Law and said in a hushed voice, "May I ask a favor of you, dear?"

That was a new one for Law. Most people didn't think he had the good Samaritan aura about him, but he couldn't deny he was curious, so he leaned closer to the woman and waited for her to continue.

Angie rummaged in the pockets of her apron until she pulled out a slightly crumpled letter. "Mack—that is, my son—went to the Grand Line a few years ago with a pirate crew, but they didn't make it far. He's been stuck there all this time, and he writes sometimes, but—"

"You're doing this behind Flo's back, ain't you?" Ron asked, approaching the other two with a furtive expression. They looked far more suspicious than if they had been talking normally, and Law thought this was an excellent moment for Florence to pop out from the kitchen.

"Men! Always telling me not to worry, but I'm his mother, I can't just sit still while he's in such a dangerous place!"

"How's a letter going to—"

"Please," Angie shoved the letter on Law's hand as she wrapped her own around it, "Please, give this to my Mack if you see him."

Contrary to popular opinion, Law did have a functioning heart, but it was without a doubt the muscle in his body that got the least exercise of all, and today was not training day. "Mrs. Angie, I don't know which island your son is at, not to mention that it may not even be on our route."

But there was no one in the world able to shoot down a mother's conviction when it came to the safety of her children, and she was not letting go of Law until she got an answer she deemed appropriate. "He said he's on the second island they got to when they entered the Grand Line. He's a cook at the local tavern. If you don't stop on his island, it's fine, but take the letter just in case." Her voice was pleading, but her eyes were burning.

Law had little doubt that the woman's fingers would lose all circulation if he delayed his reply much longer. As long as they didn't need to go out of their way, just this once, he didn't mind playing postman for someone who had helped his crew hide from the Marines. "I make no promises."

"This is how you tell a trustworthy guy from a liar, Angie." Ron said, nodding; then he belched and filled the air with the smell of alcohol. "Another man would nod and agree just to shut you up."

Apparently satisfied, Angie released Law and left to put the whiskey bottle in its place. There were
white little finger marks all over Law's 'DETH' tattoos. Was he ever going to fix those, he wondered, or were they worth keeping just to see how all feelings of hope and joy drained from Saki's eyes every time she laid them on his hands? A man of the sea had to take his pleasures where he could.

He pocketed the letter as the inn's door opened again.

Bepo couldn't dock.

He had been spying through the periscope, not without difficulty because the water around the island was just shallow enough to allow for immersion and run the sub aground if he wasn't careful, and he had seen a Marine squad stationed along the docks.

Bepo was certain that he could take on them. He also thought that Law wouldn't like it if he did it without consulting first.

He called, and the Den Den Mushi rang, but no one answered on the other side. That usually meant trouble or bathroom break. He waited five minutes and called again.

Definitely trouble.

He drove the sub away from the port and began to circle the island while mulling over his options. Just then, he saw an artificial opening underwater. It was akin to an enormous pipe, probably some sort of waste disposal system, and no wonder it was below water level, because it was big enough for a ship to fit in there.

He tried the Den Den Mushi one last time, and once more, there was no reply.

The pipe seemed worth a shot. He drove the sub in, determined to find his crewmates.

The shopkeeper listened intently to the girl's story, how the poor thing had been kidnapped by pirates, brought to the Grand Line and sold to a human trafficking ring, and after a terrible shipwreck involving ten sea kings while trying to cross the Calm Belt, she had been washed up on the shore of a North Blue island, miraculously alive and with the only objective of going back home.

"—since those horrible, horrible pirates took me away from my family and I need to go back to the South Blue, please, sir—"

The shopkeeper was a good man, but he had slept through a lot of geography lessons. At no point of the sob story he realized that to go from South Blue to North Blue one needed to either cross the Red Line and two Calm Belts or, alternatively, go through all of Paradise and leave through the Calm Belt after reaching the New World.

To be fair, he couldn't be completely blamed. Everybody knew the Grand Line was made of baloney, so you simply didn't question someone who had been there. He could have been told there was a sea in the sky and he would have believed it.

"—they are the only ones who have agreed to take me there, and the things they make me do—"

Like cooking for the few of them, doing the laundry and mopping the floor, but the shopkeeper didn't know that, and what was more important, he didn't want to know.

"—but I'll do whatever it takes to get me back home! Please, sir, if you'd be so kind—"
"Anything to help you, girlie—here, this is our best model!"

Saki sobbed harder as she profusely thanked the man and promised to name her firstborn in his honor.

That month had not been a good one for the Marines stationed on the North Blue. Truth be told, months were never good for North Blue Marines, but most counted themselves lucky not to have been assigned to the Grand Line, because they'd heard the stories from transferred colleagues and oh, man, those guys had bad weeks packed in single days.

Those were more or less the thoughts of the two men that opened the door to Angie's and Florence's that morning during the short, most definitely unofficial break from duty they were taking, unaware that they were about to have their very own Grand Line Marine Quality Day.

Howe and Philip had met at naval school at the tender age of fifteen, when they were still fresh recruits.

Howe was the third son of a wealthy family, and he was shipped to the Marines as soon as his mandatory schooling was completed, because there was nothing for him to inherit when his parents kicked the bucket and the family didn't want to see him destitute or—horror of horrors!—knocking on their doors every week to ask for financial support that he was surely going to squander playing cards with pirates at a seedy tavern downtown.

Phil was the first son of a farmer called Philocrates, who still remembered how mean the kids of the village had been about his name and decided that, despite wanting to keep the family's naming tradition, he would not repeat his own father's (good old Philandros, whose grapes gave the best wine in the region) mistakes on his son. Philip had walked out the door one day telling his parents that he was going to become a Marine and rise through the ranks so he could support them and his little sister when harvests were bad. Philocrates gave him a teary goodbye while Phile (actually first cousin of Philocrates, but nobody had minded their marriage because they were utterly charming people and everyone was everybody's cousin at the village, anyway) gave him a pat on the shoulder and shoved a basketful of food at her son in case the school didn't feed him well.

On the second day of training Philip jumped down from his bunk bed and landed on Howe's head, which resulted in two broken teeth and a bloody nose. Conversation flowed between them while they were at the infirmary, a feat if one took into account the plugged nose and newly acquired dental orifices. They became best friends when Howe's unintentional hissing made Philip inhale his cotton plugs in a bout of laughter.

All in all, they were good people, and believed in the good cause of ridding the world of pirates to make it a safer place. Captain Marina believed in erasing pirates off the face of the planet, too, and though she was quite scary when she was angry and the slightest bit terrifying in battle, they shared her sentiment and found her a woman worth following. Also, the entire base knew she was a geek who spent her free time building little machines with children's construction toys and carving wood figurines, and they found that adorable.

So, though they may have been slacking a little, they absolutely did not deserve to find the Surgeon of Death sitting on a barstool, turning his head in their direction and flashing them a bloodcurdling smile that promised pain, humiliation, and, if they were especially unlucky, subject testing.

Law tried to feel annoyed at the inconvenience of having two Marines barge into his mostly uneventful morning while he tried to finish his fourth coffee. After the first interruption, it had
become bitter and cold like his soul.

On the other hand, a voice in his head that couldn't be his conscience, because he liked to believe he didn't have one, told him that had he really, truly wanted to be inconspicuous, he would have hid in his room until the others returned. He justified himself thinking that he wasn't feeling like paying extra to keep the room longer, but if he was completely honest with himself, he almost welcomed the action. Law wasn't the kind of guy who sat pretty and waited for his subordinates to do the dirty work. He'd rather sit menacing and grin sadistically at the pair of Marines who had so opportunistically stumbled onto him.

The Voice That Was Not His Conscience also said he felt a little sad at the prospect of wrecking Angie's and Florence's place.

"Mr. Ron, I think it would be well-advised to leave." Civilians shouldn't bear the consequences of Marines' bad timing.

"And I think you're quite right!"

With a final pat on Law's back, the man left the inn with an admirable aplomb, smiling cordially at the Marines and wishing them a good day.

As Captain’s mom quickly retreated to the kitchen, Trafalgar Law, Surgeon of Death, Creeper Extraordinaire, rose from his seat with a predatory flair and grabbed his sword. The young Marines' gazes were set on him, apparently transfixed, but actually watching their lives flash before their eyes so fast that they lost all awareness of their situation.

Law extended his Room.

Years ago, during that chat in the infirmary, they discovered that blue had always been their favorite color.

Shachi and Penguin waited on an alley around the corner of the shop, lounging against a wall. The wind was starting to pick up, and they had zipped their boiler suits back up. The smell of rain was in the air, bringing memories from the night before. They didn't need a repeat of that.

"How long has it been already?" Shachi asked, idly drumming his fingers against the swords' scabbards.

"About fifteen minutes." Penguin replied.

"Do you think she's in trouble?"

Penguin peeked around the corner and grimaced when he felt a dull pain on his side. His wounds were doing much better than a few weeks ago, but his ribs liked to remind him every now and then that he wasn't still fully healed.

"Doesn't look like it." He felt Shachi tug on his suit, brusquely, and so hard that he tripped and almost fell backwards. Ouch, his ribs. "Dude, what—!?"

"Look!"

A group of Marines ran right past the alley. Frozen on the spot, they waited, but no more appeared.
Shachi decided to say what both were thinking. "The inn's that way."

"Yeah."

"You think we should go?"

"…Yeah."

The approaching sound of heels made them look back again.

"Success! And with a discount!" Saki announced with a grin, still a ways from them, showing them a small box. No reaction. "Wow, so much enthusiasm."

"We just saw Marines heading on the inn's direction," Penguin explained.

"Well—"

More heels. Swift, rhythmic, trained steps that would have gone right past them without notice, had it not been for fabric printed with freaking daisies and dandelions. Captain Marina stopped a ways from them, this time wearing a red denim jacket instead of the raincoat. She'd have left them alone, too, had it not been for the Jolly Roger that grinned at her from the guy's uniforms.

"Heart Pirates," Marina spat.

Though they hadn't seen her the night before, the mechanics put two and two together soon enough.

"—shit," Shachi aptly completed the sentence.

It happened in a matter of seconds. Marina pulled out a bunch of sharp things, all business and fixated on the two men. She hadn't yet realized that Saki was with them, and as of then, the girl was the only thing that stood between Marina and the guys. Penguin was in no shape to fight, Law was probably about to be swarmed by Marines, and for all the talk that she really liked to be alive, Saki had a surprisingly bad instinct of self-preservation.

"Switch, switch!" Saki yelled as Marina passed her, and threw the Log Pose at Shachi.

"Catch!"

In a move so impressively coordinated that made Saki want to puke ‒because ugh, why him of all people—, sword and Log Pose drew a beautiful parabola over Marina's head and were swiftly caught by their intended recipients. No later than the box had touched Shachi's fingertips, Penguin tugged at him and both started running into the alley like their pants were on fire.

"WE'LLBRINGHELPTRYNOTTODIE!"

Marina whipped her entire body around to face Saki, who was slowly coming to the realization that choosing career paths didn't appear to be her forte and giving up adventure to set up a radish farm looked like an increasingly good idea.

"You," Marina said, and wow, that was some unique kind of ability to make a pronoun sound like the worst of insults, "You are a pirate!"

If there was something that Marina hated more than pirates, it was liars.

Saki unsheathed her sword and pointed it to Marina in a gesture that was less meant as a threat and more like a desperate attempt to keep a reasonable distance between the two.
"Um… Thanks for the dress?" She said with a tentative smile.

Marina drove forward and tried to plunge into Saki something that her brain registered as **WHAT THE BLOODY INK IS THIS MADWOMAN TRYING TO STAB ME WITH A CHISEL!?**

Had Saki not stepped back in time, there would have been a hole in her foot instead of the cobblestones. She could have hardly put up a fight against that sort of brute strength, and definitely not in a busy place, so she booked it down the main street, keeping an eye for alleys, sidestepping curious townspeople and cursing her genetic makeup –*Mom, dad, why couldn't you make a healthy child with long legs and proper organs*— as she heard the woman catching up to her and sharp tools cutting the air dangerously close to her head.

As if things weren't bad enough, thunder rumbled in the distance and a raindrop fell on Saki's forehead and slid into her eye. *I hate my life, dodge passerby, oh well it's waterproof—ooh an alley!*  

*(She remembers running for her life the first time; it was raining, too, but it had been night back then, and she'd been many years younger and a hundred times more scared than now, because she was alone and it was kill or be killed—)*

It was hard to breathe while she ran at that pace, something she hoped was more indicative of the weeks she had stayed indoors than her cardiac function. Praying that she wouldn't find a dead end, she turned the corner left as fast as she could. Saki had to admit she was fond of alleys. She had spent the better part of her youth sneaking through them, and they were both useful to get rid of pursuers and to trap people. Unfortunately for her, it was usually locals who took advantage of them, and as her magnificent book collection at home never included a travel guide to the back alleys of North Blue, no matter how much she blindly twisted around corners Marina was always behind her. The water droplets became full-blown rain during the chase.

She cursed her luck when she saw the back street had no exit, and even if she jumped on one of the old crates there she wouldn't have been able to reach the top of the wall and climb up—

*(—and a dead end forced her to turn around and face a man she could barely see, and it was crystal clear that he hadn't expected her to put up a fight when she drove the sword into his chest. The sound made her sick; she couldn't tell apart the blood from the rain from her own tears, but there was warmth flowing down her hands, and how could someone who had tried to kill her be warm inside—)*

"Up here!" A voice called, and Saki looked up to see an arm reaching out to her from the top of the wall.

She threw her sword over the wall, and the crate creaked and broke under her feet as she jumped on it, but it was enough to get the needed momentum to grab onto the extended hand, grasp the top of the wall with her other hand and climb it.

*(—the body collapsed on top of her when she pulled out the sword, and she pushed it aside as if the mere contact burned her skin and ran, ran as far as her legs allowed her, and she fell to the ground three blocks away from home and tried to hold back the nausea, alone and terrified—)*

Grazing one of her legs against the edge of the wall, she landed in a terrace about three meters above street level, and she heard her pursuer curse and turn back in a hurry.

"Shachi," she said between heavy breaths just to be certain that he was there, as if saying his name would somehow make him more real and not a hallucination she was having because Marina had managed to embed a chisel in her skull.
"Yo!" He was out of breath, too, and his sunglasses were hanging dangerously low on his nose. "Let's be honest, Captain is the last of us who needs reinforcements."

It was then when Saki realized something that maybe should have been obvious for some time now, but hadn't quite registered until she saw Shachi sitting in front of her and grinning with obvious satisfaction.

*I'm not alone.*

And in such an uncharacteristically intimate gesture that she surprised herself, she straightened Shachi's lopsided sunglasses and laughed.

Bepo concluded that he had gotten into a sewer of titanic proportions. From where he stood, holding an oil lamp high, the path branched in several directions, and they merged in the big one he had driven the sub into. Smaller canalizations funneled muddy water into the river-like structure. It didn't smell as bad as he would have thought, but maybe it had to do something with the massive downpour the day before. The stone at both sides of the water stream was covered in a viscous mixture of dirt and garbage, but he could walk on it without difficulty.

These sorts of structures needed maintenance, so it stood to reason that there would be accesses to the town above. He just needed to find one and hope that it would be close enough to his crewmates to be of help.

Yeah, Bepo could see the small flaw in the plan.

He stood still near a pipe that was getting his boots in a deplorable state, eyes closed in concentration, trying to pick up any sounds from above that might lead him to an interesting place. Five minutes wandering around and some ruined leather later, he heard stomping above him.

Putting a paw on the slimy wall to his left, he followed the sounds and tried not to get lost.

It took him a few minutes jogging until Bepo heard something familiar: the unmistakable screams that his captain provoked when he was in action.

He found the nearest ladder and climbed up to a manhole that he opened quite easily. Being made of a thousand pounds of muscle had a lot of perks.

Shachi had been right. Penguin didn't think Law needed any help. Which was perfect, because he wasn't in any hurry to get his injuries back and didn't want to risk the Log Pose getting smashed in a brawl. They had done well sending Saki to the shop. If years of experience with tavern girls had taught him something, it was that women *always* found a way, whether it was to get a drink or to talk a guy out of his pants and money only to wake up the morning after, still without pants or a miserable belly in his shirt pockets.

Not that anything of the sort had ever happened to him. He'd just heard stories in the warehouse.

The important thing was that Law was safe and sound in front of the inn, had at some point swapped the durians for his dry hoodie, and he was getting the last pieces of Marine chopped down. The street was otherwise empty, except for the middle aged patron who had given the most shit to Captain Marina the day before, according to Saki, and he looked positively impressed.

Penguin waved at Law from his hiding place, hoping to catch his attention to no avail.
His conundrum was promptly solved when the ground beneath his feet rose.

"What the—!?

A sudden movement-slash-high pitched yelp at Law's right caught his attention. He saw Bepo poking out of a sewer, raising a manhole cover with one hand, and Penguin pulling a balancing act on top of it.

...Are they having fun?

Seeing as the street was basically empty, he sheathed Kikoku and, with a nod to Ron, calmly walked up to his crewmates.

Bepo was having a hard time getting out of the hole with just one paw. "Captain, can you hold him for me for a second?"

Law had been opening his mouth to ask why he had left the sub and why he was doing acrobatics with Penguin, but he had to close it to keep himself from laughing in his face.

Penguin had another idea. "Go back inside and let me get down, you idiot!"

"So-sorry…"

With Penguin back on solid ground and Bepo outside of the hole, it was time to decide what to do. They couldn't dally much as long the dismembered Marines kept screaming.

"We should move." Law saw the box in Penguin's hands and looked around. "Where are the others?"

"Uh, yes, about that… We ran into some trouble."

The sound of hurried footsteps put Law on alert again.

"Bepo, how are the sewers?"

"All clear."

"Perfect, we can catch up there."

"Do you realize how incredibly stupid heading back to the inn is? She'll be there!" Saki complained, but she made no effort to run in another direction.

"And where else do you want to meet up with the others?"

"I don't know, I'm just saying that this is dumb!"

"As long as Captain's there we'll be fine!"

After jumping on several rooftops, slipping on a few broken roof tiles and maybe knocking down a clothes line or two during their descent ('I SWEAR I DIDN'T LOOK UNDER YOUR SKIRT'), Shachi and Saki managed to get to the inn. Captain was not there, though a bunch of chopped up Marines hinted that he had.

"Good morning, youngsters," Ron said. He was standing under a balcony, waiting for the rain to
slow down. "Your friends went through the manhole on the other side just now."

"Thanks, mister."

"No, thank you for showing up. We like having Mari around."

The pirates, on the other hand, weren't particularly eager to cross paths with her again.

Shachi looked at both sides of the street. "Do you think we can cross the street without being seen?"

"There doesn't seem to be anyone around, so if we're fast…"

"We sprint to the alley on the count of three."

"Who died and made you boss?"

"Do you always have to be so—"

"THERE YOU ARE!"

The Marine captain had appeared, as expected, and there was no point in running towards the other alley if she would see them going into the sewers.

Still, there was something they could do. Wondering at which point exactly her life had taken this bizarre turn, Saki unsheathed her sword and used Ron as a shield, putting the blade against his neck.

"I'm so sorry mister I just want to get her off my back," she mumbled so fast only Ron could understand.

The man seemed to take the situation spectacularly well. He also reeked of whiskey when he spoke. It probably had something to do it. "Oh don't worry, it's not every day one gets taken hostage by a young lady—Hey, Mari-chan! Doing your best, I see!" He wave at the other woman.

Marina stopped in her tracks at a healthy distance from the pirates. "Ron, don't move! I'll take care of them!"

Shachi seemed as alarmed by the turn of events as Marina. "What do you think you're doing!? Have you gone crazy!?" He said, trying to keep his voice down.

"Take this chance and run!" She hissed back.

"I'm the one who came to save your ass, not the other way around!"

"Who the hell cares!?"

"I do!"

"Don't you understand we need a bait to—"

"Well, bait gets eaten! Is that what you want!?"

"Let him go, you, you—clover—something—pirate!" Marina pointed a chisel menacingly in their direction.

"Fuck, Shachi, stop being a bleeding heart and leave!"

"You stop trying to go on suicide runs! We're a team!"
And Saki watched with incredulity how Shachi unsheathed his own sword and held it against the hostage as well.

Still, Ron seemed unfazed by all this. "Mari-chan, why can't we all be friends? You're so young, she's so young too—tell me, cutie, how old are you?"

"...I just turned twenty-three."

"See, Mari-chan? She's almost your age! Let her leave, go home and have a quiet dinner with your parents—"

"Mom and dad have nothing to do with this!"

"Why not? They're always worrying about you, you know how much they miss Mack and still—"

"Don't mention my brother!"

"Are you still mad about that? I know you miss him too, you were always so close—!"

"I AM HERE TO ARREST THOSE CRIMINALS!" Marina tried her hardest to assert her authority in the last way she had left: yelling louder than everybody else.

"And we have a hostage if I may remind you!" Saki said, who was feeling somewhat left out of the situation.

"You'll be punished for harming civilians!"

"They're not harming me, it's actually pretty comfortable."

"We'll let him go if you let us go!" Shachi shouted.

"Not a chance in hell!"

"Mari-chan, it's raining—!"

"Shut up—AAAAAAAH!"

The pirates saw in slow motion how two furry balls, grey tabby and calico, respectively, flew from a balcony and latched onto Marina's curls with panicked meows. Saki felt a brief pang of sympathy.

"Raining cats, I was about to say," Ron finished. "Mister Pirate, Miss Clover, the inn's right around the corner."

They partly ran, partly slid on the wet ground to the alley where their friends had gone, foregoing the ladder and simply jumping down the hole before Marina could notice what had happened.

"Shit, we need to close that thing!"

"No time for that, keep running!"

"Are you nuts, we don't have a light and we don't know where—"

"Guys," a voice cut their bickering short and they turned to see Penguin waving at them, "we're right here."

"...That's one less problem."
Bepo told them how he had docked the sub inside of the sewer while Shachi climbed the ladder to close the manhole, grumbling all the way.

"I'll show you back to the sub," Bepo said, happy that his rescue plan was working. "It's this way."

They walked for what seemed like hours as the water level went up and down, at one point nearly reaching up to Saki's knees. To say that she was missing the pants she had been wearing the night before would be the understatement of the century.

There was a slight problem with the group's guide. Bepo had had the right idea when he decided to follow the wall at first, but he had stopped paying attention to all the twists of the sewer when he had to skip a few turns to follow the sound of the footsteps.

He still had that animal instinct he could rely on that told him exactly where home was, but they came across a small difficulty when instinct pointed directly into a solid wall. He was sure the sub was that way. He just didn't know how to get around the stone. He, obviously, didn't inform his companions right away of their situation, because Bepo was nothing if not optimistic, and also because he didn't want to look bad in front of his new subordinates.

It took another good half hour for someone to voice everybody's concerns out loud.

"Are we lost?" Law asked cautiously, though he knew there was no way to point that out and not hurt Bepo's feelings in the process.

Bepo went stiff, let a few seconds pass in silence, which he employed on trying to find a good excuse with no success, and suddenly bowed low. "I'M SO SORRY!"
The lantern Bepo was holding came dangerously close to the murky water when he bowed, but Law caught it before it was too late.

"Too close for comfort," Penguin commented.

"Can't we get to the sub from outside the sewer?" Saki asked.

"We'd have to swim to the sewer's exit and dive against the current." Bepo took a glance at Law. "So it's out of the question."

Shachi had his arms crossed and was scanning their surroundings nonstop, maybe hoping for a staircase to materialize out of thin, foul air. He said, defeated, "This is what happens when you put the bear in charge."

"I-I'm so—"

Feeling a budding headache, surely because he hadn't been able to finish his fourth coffee cup of the morning, Law cut the apology short. "Now's not the time. Bepo, do you know in which direction the sub is?"

He signaled towards the stone wall with a paw.

"Are you sure?" Shachi insisted.

"Completely. I just don't know why this… wall… appeared here instead of the stairs…"

"We'll find another way," Law said, playing the reassuring captain role even if he didn't have an inkling of where they should be heading. "As long as we know in which direction we need to head, we should find it."

And so they walked to explore the turns they had left behind, and after a while the sharpest members of the team started to worry about the remaining oil in the lantern Bepo was holding on again, but they didn't dare voice their concerns out loud.

"That's my left foot!"

"I told you it's mine!"

"No fucking way, look at these scratches, my boot has identical ones."

"I have a birthmark on my pinky toe, check it out—"

"I'm not touching that, you take off the sock."

"I don't have hands!"

"Guys, has anyone seen my right arm!?"
Marina was fuming as she watched her men trying to piece their body parts back together. Her mother had insisted she sit on a bench so she could take care of the scratches that adorned the captain's face. Buttercup and Waffles had done a thorough job before she managed to shake them off.

"I can't believe you did it again."

"What did I do, dear?" Angie asked, with the air of a patient parent enduring a child's tantrum.

"Harboring pirates! You outright lied to me in front of my men!"

Angie brought a hand to her chest, looking hurt. "But I didn't think you'd find out!"

"T-t-that isn't the point! It's the second time this month!"

The older woman's expression changed to something more serious, and she pointed an accusatory finger at her daughter. "They were caught in the middle of the downpour. Don't tell me you'd have let them stay outside to brave the weather by themselves. Is that how we raised you, missy? What sort of behavior is that?"

"N-no, mom, but you have to understand, we're talking about dangerous criminals—"

"Nonsense, they were very polite guests. They even paid up front! Like the gentleman who gave me a card reading two weeks ago. Such nice hair he had, too—"

"B-but—"

"Don't talk back to me! You're always blowing things out of proportion, since you were a kid. You need to be more accepting of different folks."

Marina couldn't reply that her job specifically entailed not being accepting of criminals, because a projectile flew towards the bench and slapped her across the face. She stared dumbfounded as it hit the ground. A hand wiggled its fingers up at her.

One of the men roared, "Will you watch what you're doing, you piece of—"

"I'm very sorry Captain, my hand slipped!"

She needed a raise and a vacation somewhere far, far away.

When she was, at long last, able to escape her mother and her men looked reasonably whole, she hastened to the alley where she had lost sight of the Heart Pirates. Some other Marines followed her, alert to any hints of an attack, but Marina knew they wouldn't be so lucky. The pirates had taken the chance and fled. It made no sense to stay around.

"Ma'am, we've contacted the unit at the port. No trace of the pirates or their submarine anywhere 'round the island."

"It must have surfaced somewhere to pick up the pirates. Are we sure we didn't miss it?"

"I asked the same, ma'am. Lieutenant Mako says that even if he is in urgent need to renew the prescription of his glasses, he can still, and I quote, 'tell a yellow submarine apart from a goddamned fishing boat, who do you think you are to question my eyesight, recruit?'"

"...I see." That had to mean that the pirates were still somewhere in the island. As long as the coast was being patrolled they wouldn't be able to board their vessel. Now it was a matter of finding out
where they were hiding.

Philip and Howe, bodies already recomposed, were inspecting the alley along with Marina. Philip bumped his foot against something and would have fallen if the captain hadn’t caught him by the scruff of the neck.

"Careful, Marine."

"Yes, Ma'am, sorry, Ma'am. I tripped with a cover. I don't think it's well secured."

"We should notify the town hall to fix it," Howe suggested.

"Leave it for later, we have more pressing things to do," Marina said, and she tested the metal covering the manhole with a boot to make sure that it would stay in place if someone stepped on it. Upon closer inspection, the cover was loose, but not deformed. It looked like somebody had lifted it and didn't put it back in place correctly.

Under usual circumstances, Marina would have assumed it had been moved by a maintenance worker, but deep in a case featuring vanishing pirates and submarines, all of her alarms went off.

The sewage system of Lymes was so extensive that the entire island was basically hollow, a necessity because of the usual rough weather. The pirates could have hidden in it, but they would have to come out, because it had no exits other than the manholes sprinkled throughout the island.

Those were a lot. Fortunately, Marina also had a lot of people at her disposal.

"Howe, take ten entire men and come with me. Make sure they have enough limbs and have them carry lanterns. I want everybody else to keep watch of every single manhole in the city. We're going underground."

She crouched down as her subordinate hurried to relay her orders and pulled the cover up.

"Captain, you don't need to, let me—"

She didn't pay any mind to Philip, lifted the cover and pulled it aside. It didn't smell too bad. The flood had probably washed away most of the residues, but they'd need to be mindful of toxic fumes nonetheless. Staying inside for long wouldn't be wise. She tugged on the ladder stuck to the hole to make sure it was well fixed. The last thing she needed was more broken soldiers.

She stood up and waited for the men to come to the alley, one hand resting on her hip and the other twirling a chisel in a circular motion. Marina gave a satisfied smile. "We've got them trapped."

Meanwhile, the pirates were having a jolly walk under the streets. Bepo had told them to watch out for stairs, but so far the closest things they had found were a series of slopes that broke off from the main canal and sent water further into down the sewer. Not exactly the way they'd take, given a choice.

The water level went up and down as time passed; it was probably raining on and off outside.

When nearly an hour had passed with no satisfactory result, they had to accept that they needed to go out or they'd end up contracting some unknown and deadly disease.

"If we come alive out of this," Saki said laconically, looking at the flowing water now lapping at her ankles, "remind me to never wear a skirt again."
She got a sympathetic shoulder pat from Penguin as they separated a few meters to search for the nearest manhole. "At least it doesn't seem like this can get any worse."

Shachi groaned near him. "Now you've gone and jinxed it." He walked as far as the light allowed him, inspecting the ceiling. Not that he could see much with the sunglasses, but he was so used to them that the thought of removing them never crossed his mind.

"Stop being so superstitious."

Being the tallest one, Bepo held the lamp over his head as they searched the area, but the light could only get so far, which made the exploration more tedious.

The following scene unfolded in a matter of seconds and would be used in conversations between the crew for years to prove that cosmic irony existed and it was not to be fucked with lest it fucketh with you.

Just as Law was about to tell the others to be careful after stepping on a slippery spot, Penguin slipped on something nasty, put a foot in the canal and balanced precariously on it for the fraction of a second it took Shachi to react and grab him by the leg he had in the air. Naturally, this also left Shachi in a rather bad spot, and Penguin had enough momentum to pull his friend into the canal with him. Still, further disaster could have been avoided if Bepo, who was hurrying along Law and Saki to help them out, hadn't slipped in the same spot Penguin had, crashing into the two men and sending the three of them down a slope with a flurry of screams and disgusted noises.

Stunned, Law watched his companions disappear down the tunnel, and their only source of light with them.

"We are so fucked," he heard Saki say after an uncomfortable silence.

"I'll never feel clean again." Penguin emptied the dirty water inside his hat on the floor.

"My glasses are disgusting," Shachi said as he inspected them under the light of the lamp. Bepo had somehow managed to keep it over his head all the way down. "Where are we?"

"This is the lower level of the sewer," Bepo explained. His fur was covered by a grimy brown layer that he did not want to think about. He'd need someone to help brush it off. "I passed by here when I went up. The sub shouldn't be too far."

"Shame we left half the crew behind." Penguin approached the slope as much as he could without getting in the water and yelled. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

Nothing. Cue collective sigh. They could already could themselves lucky that Bepo had managed to keep the lantern out of the water during the fall.

The bear closed his eyes and concentrated on the sound around. Penguin and Shachi stared until he signaled to a nearby corridor. "I hear something over there."

Shachi kept pulling his glasses up and down in a futile attempt to see. "You sure it's not the water?"

"It is. But the current's different," Bepo said. His ears twitched as he listened again to make sure. "There's more water volume. The place where I stopped the sub is where all the water leaves the sewer."

"It's not like we lose anything by trying," Penguin said, leading the way with a pained face. "And I
want to drop off this Log Pose before we somehow manage to break it."

"We also need to find a way upstairs," Bepo reminded him.

"Hey, they know where we are. They only need to want to follow."

Shachi looked at his friend, surprised at the outburst. "Pen, you okay?"

"Sure. My ribs feel like someone mistook them for a xylophone and I've been useless luggage while everybody else went on rescue missions and kicked Marine ass."

"Dude, don't be like that. You've been holding up like a champion."

"And you're the guardian of the Log Pose," Bepo chimed in. "We couldn't have done this without you."

"Yeah, yeah, thank you," Penguin grumbled, but he had gone a slightly red and was trying to hold back a smile.

Shachi threw an arm around his friend and grinned. "Now let's go find our daughter and rescue those two useless lumps we left upstairs."

"I'm sure she's lonely," Penguin said.

Bepo followed after them to point the way. "Who's your daughter?"

"The sub, who else?" Shachi said.

"Cool!" The bear grinned. "Does driving her make me the husband?"

"What?" He sounded horrified at the suggestion. "No!"

"We aren't marrying our daughter off to the first guy who asks!" Penguin exclaimed.

"He's steering her rudder and fingering her buttons every day!" Shachi lamented. "How have we been so blind?"

"I'm sure that's illegal somewhere. Bepo, you're gross."

"I'M SORRY I ASKED."

"Marco!" Saki closed her eyes, not that she needed to, and waited for a reply that never came. She insisted. "Marco!"

"No," Law replied with the air of a petulant child. She was sure he had his arms crossed and was making a sour face.

Saki huffed. "Can't you make a small effort? How do you want to get out of here if we can't even find each other in the dark?"

"We weren't that far away. Just walk."

"I'm on the edge of the canal. You were closer to the wall when the light went out." The slimy thing that had been her cremates' downfall was under her right foot and any error in movement was a potential dive into murky waters. And she was wearing a skirt! Did he understand how dire her
situation was? Getting water up there would be the worst, and it had been a close call when the water level had risen.

Defeated in the face of Law's silence, she said, "Say something else then. Whatever crosses your mind, just keep talking."

Law let out a sigh that offended Saki a lot, because as far as she was concerned the one making a display of infinite patience was her, but he complied. "Campylobacteriosis, cryptosporidiosis, escherichia coli, encephalitis, gastroenteritis, giardiasis, hepatitis A, leptospirosis, methaemoglobia —"

He listened to the splashes her unsteady steps made get progressively closer, and he stopped when Saki's hand touched his arm, and then the fingers held onto the fabric of the sleeve as if to make sure he wouldn't go off on his own and leave her to her luck, which she'd say was pretty rotten if anyone asked her opinion.

"Captain Nerd found!" She got an elbow to the ribs she didn't complain about, just to deny him the satisfaction and because it had been worth it, anyway. "What were you listing?"

"A few illnesses you can catch in a waste disposal facility."

"Charming. The alphabetical order gave it a nice touch," she commented, looking around them despite knowing perfectly well that she wasn't going to see a thing. "You know, there may be a bright side to this," she said in a hopeful voice.

"...Was that a fucking pun?"

"Wha—Oh. It was, wasn't it? A bright side. A ray of sunshine. A light at the end of the tunnel. A break in the clouds."

"Do you have a point?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry. Manholes have those little holes on the cover to lift them. We'll see the light filtering so much easier." She was silent for a bit, and then said with a grin that could be heard in her voice, "Or maybe it's just a pipe dream."

"Stop that."

"Aw, don't be such a wet blank—"

"It's an order from your captain."

"Sheesh, fine. I should have called you Captain Grumpypants. You know, wet skinny jeans are very uncomfortable, are you sure you aren't cha—"

"If you finish that sentence I promise I'll push you down a slope."

She huffed, and Law felt her grip on his hoodie slacken. "You should enjoy the little pleasures in life, Captain. Even if they are stupid. Sometimes it's all you have at the end of the day."

"Is that why you are so chipper despite the situation?"

"I guess." The hand on his arm trembled, and he wasn't sure if something was wrong until she spoke, barely containing her laughter. "It was so ridiculous. Did you see their faces when they fell?"

Law found himself smiling against his will. "I did." He cleared his throat in an effort to remind
himself that he was supposed to be a serious person. "Do you have any other life lessons or brilliant ideas before we try to stumble our way out?"

"Did you just make a fucking p—"

He elbowed her again.

"Right. I don't know, you're the one with superpowers. Can you glow in the dark?"

He didn't answer right away.

"Actually…"

"Are you fucking kidding me."

Law's hand illuminated for a few seconds. Saki saw thin arches of electricity enveloping it, and she felt the electricity coursing through him, passing to her and tingling unpleasantly through her body. The effect, and the light, were gone as soon as they had appeared, and she was thankful when all her hairs returned to normal.

"It isn't going to work," Law said with apparent annoyance.

"What did you do, exactly?"

"I've been trying to make a defibrillator with my Devil Fruit power, but as you can see I'm still working on it."

"You realize that we are standing on water."

"That's why I regulated the voltage."

"You… Please don't do that again when I'm holding onto you."

Law shrugged off her petition. "Let's try to hug the wall to advance. We need a source of light before we can find the others."

"Before we move, just to make this entirely clear, if you fall into any kind of water you become as useful as a potato, correct?"

"Not quite. A potato can float in salt water."

"Great," she said, and right away she slipped on something slimy and barely managed to keep her balance. "Just making sure."

"Watch where you step."

"Might want to change your verb of choice—"

No sooner than Saki had started replying, they heard voices around the corner and coordinated steps moving fast. There was no question that the Marines had caught up to them. Saki immediately let go of Law to grip her sword properly, and she could feel Law moving to do the same.

"So… we steal the lanterns from them?" She asked in whisper.

"We steal the lanterns from them," he confirmed.
"Finally we're getting somewhere."

But Law pushed her behind him as she got ready to receive their pursuers. "Watch the back for reinforcements. I'll handle these."

"What are you on about? I don't need you to protect me." She paused. "Well, maybe from Captain Carpenter."

"I know, but I'm the one with superpowers," he threw back her words at her. "Unless you have the means to turn projectiles around, in which case, be my guest."

"Good luck, Captain, you're my hero."

Law smirked to himself. "I thought so." He extended his Room, invisible in the dark, and waited for the Marines to approach.

The first group to appear around the corner became a rain of limbs, weapons and, conveniently, a couple lanterns on the floor.

"Oh, by the way," Saki chimed in, "watch out for flying chisels."

"Sure—Wait, what?"

When she saw the five men in the vanguard fall in pieces to the floor, Marina knew that she had found what she was looking for. She ran up ahead of the other soldiers, closing the distance between her and the man with the face she'd been seeing in every bounty poster for days; when she captured him she'd be able to go back to the base and get some peace and quiet away from this city that was a constant reminder of everything undesirable in her life—

The first chisel she threw barely missed the pirates' heads (Law ducked when he was still processing the Saki's warning; the girl just stood there and let it fly over her head, because being short had its pros sometimes), and then lunged forward and she stabbed the air instead of that damned man; she was inexplicably standing ten paces away from him and somehow he was passing a lamp to his crony, that shameless woman who had stolen her dress and got two cats on her face. When had Buttercup gotten so plump, anyway?

"Captain, get back, we'll—"

"Stay behind me!" She bellowed at her men, quickly looking around, and only then she noticed the blue hue the tunnel had taken, even under the warm light of the flames. Deducing it must have been part of his Devil Fruit ability, she moved right outside the limit of the dome and shot a murderous glare at Law.

"Smart move," he said tauntingly. "I thought you'd rush in again."

Marina wanted to stab him in the eye with a chisel and see if he'd still be smirking afterwards. "You have nowhere to run, pirate," Marina said, refusing to dignify the man by using his name. All pirates were the same. "The only way out is up, and I have all the exits watched. Reinforcements are on the way. Surrender now."

"Are you sure you're in a position to make demands? You know what will happen if you take one more step. We can be here all day."

"Do you expect me to believe that you can take on an entire unit?"
"Try me."

Marina toed the line that marked safety apart from Law's territory and sent him a chilly smile. "That's exactly what I'm going to do."

The yellow submarine floated in the middle of an enormous canal and grinned at them in all its Jolly Roger-painted glory.

They tried to ignore the appropriately foreboding "DEATH" on the hull and just be happy at the discovery.

"I told you it was here!" Bepo beamed.

Shachi patted him on the back, grinning. "Good job, mate."

"Now to find the other two, I assume?" Penguin asked.

In absence of Law, Bepo was the oldest crew member of the bunch and the leader by default. It was time for him to take charge and show the newbies who was boss. "Penguin, you go inside and start the engine. Shachi and I will take the closest stairs and get Captain and Saki back."

"Won't we get lost again?"

Bepo put his paws on his hips and smirked, or came as close to smirking as a bear could. "I can hear the sub's noise from all the way upstairs."

"Stop trying to look cool," Shachi said, and Bepo was starting to apologize when he added. "You're a talking bear already, you don't need to posture. Lead the way."

Penguin shook his head with a smile and walked up the gangplank.

Marina was proving to a much bigger complication than Law had expected. The woman moved at the speed of light and threw her weapons faster, not to mention the freakish strength with which she aimed. There was a collection of broken stone tiles around them, making quick movements more risky than they already had been with the slimy floor and body pieces.

With a gesture of his left hand, he lifted the chisels stuck on the floor and made them fly towards the Marine, granting him some distance between the two when she dodged, and at last he managed to get a cut in with his nodachi.

Marina's right arm fell to the ground with a splat and she retreated out of Law's sphere to catch her breath. She didn't look anywhere close to giving up, there were more men behind her, still waiting on her order to attack, and there was no telling when more would come.

He had told her they could be there all day, but it was a big fat lie. They had wasted enough time as it was, and he didn't know how much longer he'd be able to hold up his Room.

"Captain," he heard Saki whisper with urgency behind him. "I hear footsteps. They are coming from behind us."

He didn't take his eyes from Marina while he spoke in an equally low tone.

"How's the lantern?"
Saki turned it around in her hands, inspecting it quickly. "Sturdy, cold blast model. These guys don't hold back with equipment. Why do you ask?"

"How much do you trust your captain?"

Her face told him that she didn't like the question even before she replied. Narrowing her eyes at him with suspicion, she asked, "Is that a trick question?"

The corner of Law's mouth turned up. "Good answer. Run towards where we lost the others when I tell you to."

Her only answer was a nervous laugh, which he took as a good signal.

"Now!"

Saki ran immediately ran the same way they had come, even though she didn't know why and she wasn't sure she wanted to know, but orders were orders and Law seemed to have a plan.

In the blink of an eye, Law retracted his Room and ran behind Saki. The Marines' rushed footsteps echoed behind him right away, but he wouldn't let them catch up. Soon, they were in the same spot from before and Saki had made a slippery stop to avoid a crash against a wall. Law didn't waste a moment to put an arm around her, and he leapt into the canal and onto the slope where the others disappeared. Thankfully, there wasn't enough water going through it to render him without strength, so the trip down the sewer resembled a ride in a dirty and potentially mortal aquatic park. He didn't think the final part was going to be as pleasant, but this sort of thing was why he had a crew in the first place.

The string of expletives (likely and most deservedly directed at him) leaving Saki's mouth was muffled against his shoulder, but despite that she was holding fast to the lantern, protecting it with her arms (and hopefully the glass was thick; otherwise she was going to get a set of burns), and at some point through this he caught the smell of fruit again, like at the inn, and he realized her hair smelled like tangerines—

They fell into a waterway with a splash, and Law wasn't aware of anything else until he was dragged onto solid ground.

As he came back to his senses (hat to his right, check; sword next to it, check; respiratory system working, check), the first thing he heard was, "You. Are. An. Asshole."

Saki was soaked, and under the flickering light of the lantern she looked like a dandelion-clad devil come from the depths of hell to devour the souls of sinners.

"Are you suicidal?"

"It got us out of there, didn't it?"

"T-that's it? You—That's—You—!

She spluttered, and Law noted with increasing amusement that it was the first time she had seen her lost for words, but it didn't last. "That's it!? What if the fire of the lantern had gone out!? How would I get to you!? You could have died!"

He thought it was supremely funny that she had worried for his life instead of being thrown into a waste disposal system, so he laughed in her face, she called him more names—'fucking smartass, jerkface, eye-searing blowout fingers'—, which prompted him to laugh harder, and she tried to slap him with his own soggy hat, but he caught it with ease and stood up.
"Let's go before someone tries to follow."

She picked up the lantern and got up, red-faced and still glaring at him. "You are the worst."

"It's in the job description," he said with a smile that reeked of self-satisfaction. Probably of other, less pleasant things that one could usually find in a sewer as well, but it was better not to think about that when the promise of a shower seemed so far away.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, the part that wasn't busy feeling indignation, Saki wondered how many times had this man narrowly escaped death to be taking it so well, and why had he relied on her getting him out of the water without as much as a warning of what he was planning to do. She'd blame it on the adrenaline and her flustered state, but upon glancing at his face as they walked, Saki fleetingly thought her captain looked far too handsome for his own good when he smiled like that. She looked away and tried to forget said thought had ever existed, mentally chanting 'leopard-printed noodle' over and over, so when a voice called out from not too far away she welcomed the distraction with open arms.

"Who's there?" It was Shachi, and they moved in the direction of his voice. "Anyone?"

"It's us," Law called, and before he could react something huge appeared from a dark path and crushed him in a literal bear hug.

"Captain! You're safe!"

Shachi appeared from behind Bepo. "Yo," he greeted Saki, "I'd hug you too, but you look like ass. Again."

"Haven't checked any mirrors lately, have you?" She grinned back at him, and then she went serious as her ears picked up something. "Is that the rumbling of the sub I hear?"

"Yeah, it's right around the corner; Penguin's gone ahead to start it. We were about to go upstairs to look for you when we heard you frolicking in the water."

Law managed to get out of the bear's arms to talk. "Perfect, let's go the—"

Several splashing noises from behind interrupted him, and the pirates went on their guards at once.

"Captain Marina, there's another path down the slope! The pirates—"

They didn't wait to hear the end of the report and ran after Bepo and towards the sub.

Shortly after, Marina received a report by Den Den Mushi from the Marines on the harbor saying they had detected a submarine near the island. Ship had been dispatched to deal with it, as everything pointed to the Heart Pirates being there.

Still, she had her men search the lower level of the sewer for any clues, but while her unit was still spread over the infinity of tunnels under Lymes, she happened upon a huge hall with a canal wide enough to house a ship, and she knew what had happened.

She'd need to have a few choice words with the mayor. Maybe before she took a shower, if she was still this angry.

Gripping one of her chisels harder than she had to, Marina kicked the stone wall, leaving a nice indent on it. Fucking pirates.
The sub sailed out of the sewer, keeping underwater. Everybody was up in the bridge, hoping for a stealthy getaway, but when they were beginning to think they were safe, Bepo took a look at the radar and announced, "They detected us. We're being followed."

"How many ships?" Law asked.

"Two. We can lose them as soon as we get to stronger currents."

Law hesitated before giving an order. The best course of action was, without a doubt, to get away as fast as possible and forget about the Marines.

The incident that had sparked their miserable day had been the explosion of the two ships that had been pinned on them. The sub had torpedoes, obviously, but they were difficult to replace, and not something he'd use without an exceedingly good reason. He wouldn't have attacked Marine ships in a thunderstorm for no reason.

His crew was tired, soaked, smelly, and, personally, he didn't think he had caused the Marines nearly enough grief today for what they had put them through.

Still, torpedoes were expensive. Very, very expensive. They couldn't be wasted sinking ships for sport.

"I don't care," he told Bepo, staring at the beeping points on the radar screen. "Sink them."

This wasn't sport. This was petty revenge and it was a thing pirates were perfectly justified to do anytime, no matter how stupid it was.

There were cheers behind him and the navigator.

"Aye, Captain!"

Besides, it was good for morale.

"Bepo," Penguin intervened with urgency, making them wonder if something was wrong. "Can I fire the torpedo?"

The bear grinned at his crewmate, flashing his teeth. It would have been unsettling had he not been on his side. "Sure! Be ready for my signal."

Penguin stepped up to the control panel and the rest watched Bepo slow down the sub and maneuver it until the torpedoes were aiming at the enemy vessels.

"Three, two, one… Fire!"

Penguin smacked the button with glee and the projectiles flew to the approaching shapes of the ships, impacted on the hulls and exploded.

There were a few sighs of contentment in the room, like the balance of the universe had been restored and now they could rest easy.

The aftershock rattled the sub slightly, but as the ships began to sink, Law deemed the action satisfactory enough to make their exit.

Saki was feeling much better after a shower. She put on a t-shirt and shorts and left her room to go to
the bridge and see if Bepo needed help. He had volunteered to drive the sub while the rest of them cleaned up, possibly because they were offending his nose, but judging by the way he had been scratching behind his ears, he was aching to get the grime cleaned, too. She also needed to get started on lunch, though at this rate it was going to become dinner.

She was stopped by a chorus of ghostly laments that echoed on the metal walls of the submarine and appeared to rise straight from the underworld.

As she approached the stairs, the wailing from the next life got louder and more defined. She stood on the first step and looked down.

"Foooooood. Fooooooooooood."

"Are you serious?"

Shachi was the one to reply. "Of course we're serious, we've been walking for hours and we're still working."

"Fooooooood."

"Do I need to remind you that I'm not your mother?"

"What's going on?"

Law came out from his room in all his recently showered glory, wearing a t-shirt with his Jolly Roger in the middle. One day she'd hate to ask where he got all his personalized clothing.

"The chicks are in their nest cawing for food."

He looked at the staircase and said blandly, "As long as nobody regurgitates on the floor…"

"Not funny! We're starving in here!"

Law directed his attention at Saki. Might as well check up on everybody now that things had calmed. "How are your arms?"

She furrowed her brow, confused, and looked at them. "Fine? Should they be not?"

He took her by a wrist, and turned it gently to look at the inside of her forearm. "You were hugging the lantern on the way down. It didn't burn?"

"Oh, you mean that! Not at all, I told you it was well made." She gave him a reassuring smile. "I'm fine, no worries."

Law almost believed her, but then he took a cursory glance out of professional habit and saw something that made him arch his eyebrows. "What's that?"

Saki followed his gaze and found herself staring at the scrape on her leg. It was red and angry. "It's nothing." She waved in dismissal. "I got it when that Marine captain chased me. I scrubbed it raw with soap and water, that's why it looks like that."

"You realize that you've been treading through a sewer for hours with bare legs?"

"It's okay—"

"I'll decide that. Go to the sickbay."
"Don't be like that, I cleaned it first thing, I'll be fi—"

"You. Sickbay. Now."

She threw her arms up in surrender as she walked upstairs. The pained cries of the mechanics resounded in the distance.

"Fooooooood!"

"You know where the kitchen is," she heard Law say as he followed her.

When they got to the sickbay, he made her sit on a cot while he searched for something.

"Are you sure you cleaned it well?" Law asked as he inspected the inside of a small refrigerator.

Saki wondered what he could be looking for in there. "Believe it or not, I've got hurt a few times in my life and I'm still breathing."

"That's relieving to know. When did you have your last tetanus shot?"

"I don't think I've ever—" She retreated until the back of her knees hit the mattress when she saw Law approach, needle in hand. "What do you think you're doing?"

"This," Law said, slowly, as if talking to someone particularly slow, "is called a vaccine. It's used to—"

"Don't patronize me, and don't get that thing any closer to me!" She considered if backflipping from her sitting spot would catch him off guard enough to book it out of the room.

"Stay still and it'll be over soon."

"And you just had to make it sound creepier—" He grabbed Saki's right arm. "Aren't you supposed to disinfect the—Ouch!"

"And give you the chance of running away while I get the alcohol? I won't risk it."

"I hate doctors," she mumbled.

"Me too," he said, and just this once it didn't sound like he was mocking her.

Saki made an effort to not look at her arm during the process and instead concentrated on what he just said. Why would he hate doctors when he was one? Saki realized she didn't know anything about his life. He had never offered the information, and she had never pried because she understood too well not wanting to talk about private things. But she was curious by nature, and there were so many questions to be asked. What island was he from? Why did he become a pirate? Did he have any family?

Oh my god, what if he has a wife and children?

Well, maybe not so many questions.

Still, she hadn't forgotten that he had known about Joker when she mentioned him. All excuses aside, she was sure that he wouldn't have helped her if she hadn't provided that bit of information. He had wanted to get inside the smugglers' hideout as much as her, and he had come back after she was gone to do who knew what.
He had earlier asked her how much she trusted him. A man didn't ask his hammer if it trusted him, he just hammered away. That's what tools were for. Saki wasn't sure she knew how not to be a tool, but she found herself wanting to extend that bit of trust, and she didn't know if she liked that.

And she found herself thinking again that in the sewer he seemed to have taken for granted that she'd pull him out of the water.

**What an idiot.**

Saki wasn't entirely sure to whom that thought was directed.

She didn't look at him until she felt him press a piece of wet gauze on her upper arm, and she felt herself go a bit light-headed; exactly what she had been trying to avoid. She gripped the sheet under her between her fingers, trying to pour all her attention on the texture of the fabric and the softness on the mattress underneath and goddammit it wasn't working and she kept feeling worse and worse.

"There you go, drama queen" Law said, and when he noticed her blank expression he stopped and stared at her face. "Are you okay?"

"Perfectly fine." She was getting dizzier by the second, he sounded so far away and this was going to be so embarrassing.

"You are pale as death."

"Haha, says the Surgeon of—"

"Are you afraid of needles?"

She pressed her lips together, made a colossal effort to look at an extremely interesting row of pill bottles Law had aligned inside of a cabinet and said an entirely unconvincing, "No."

"You can't be serious. You work with—"

"It's not the same. I-I've had bad experiences, okay?"

"With needles."

"Yes."

With some exasperation and no previous notice, Law pushed her down on the cot. "Get your legs up and don't move until your feel well."

She did as told, since her dignity had already fled off the window and far, far away, somewhere in the farthest recesses of the sea. Knowing her luck, a seagull had probably pooped on it, too.

"You should have told me."

She made a face at the ceiling of the sickbay. "Yes, because I love to share my irrational fears with people."

"I took blood samples before and after your operation. You were hooked to an IV drip for days."

"Honestly, I didn't think you'd care. I know it's a stupid fear; I didn't want to be made fun of."

"A vasovagal syncope is a completely normal reaction to needle punctures. I wouldn't have."
"Didn't know that back then, did I?"

Law seemed to accept that explanation, but still pressed the issue. "Regardless, don't you think I'd need to know if you're going to faint if I get a needle near you?"

"I didn't—you—don't exaggerate, I don't mind having them nearby and I've never fainted before."

"You were well on your way now."

Saki breathed a tired sigh and closed her eyes, pressing on the bridge of her nose as if it would help to get the pressure in her head out. He was right, she hadn't fainted, but might as well. She felt ridiculous for the umpteenth time that day.

She tried to keep her mind blank, just taking deep breaths, and with the smell of disinfectant in the air she almost could imagine she was at the studio, working on a new piece; the only missing piece was the familiar rumble of the tattoo machine... How many years had it been since the last time an entire month had passed without her doing a tattoo? She had been working with the Old Man since before her father died, so... eight years?

She jumped a little when she felt something cold pressing against the scrape on her leg, and she opened her eyes to see Law disinfecting it with a gauze. It stung like a bitch.

When he was done, he stood up to trash the used supplies. "Is this related to not liking doctors?" He said conversationally, like he was asking about the weather instead of potential childhood traumas.

"Yes," and she didn't know why she volunteered the information other than wanting an excuse for her self-perceived stupidity. "When I was a kid I got prodded with needles a lot. For nothing."

Law hummed in acknowledgement, and then she saw him approach her again, this time with a stethoscope.

"Why—"

"Be quiet," and he placed the chestpiece under her shirt.

"You know isn't courteous to grope a young lady without her permission, right?"

"Shhh." He listened attentively, searching for any strange sounds, and when he was satisfied he said, "I don't see any of those here."

"Now I don't know if you called me old, put my gender in doubt or questioned my manners."

"I'll leave that mystery unsolved," Law replied, unhooking the stethoscope from his ears. "I didn't hear anything out of the ordinary. Have you noticed any strange symptoms lately? Arrhythmia, chest pain, fatigue, shortness of breath..."

"That last one, actually. Only today," she clarified when Law's eyes began to narrow and she worried that he was really going to tie her to a bed for the reminder of her life. "While I was running to the inn."

"And you aren't sleeping much."

"I never sleep much. Bad habit."

"We can't rule the possibility of those being symptoms of withdrawal. Your brain is used to the medication you've been taking for years. It figures that it wouldn't take kindly to the sudden change.
It should fade away on its own, but if you need sleeping pills—"

"I don't want to take more than what's strictly necessary, and I'm used to not sleeping. I've had enough medication for a lifetime, thanks."

Law seemed to think a bit before letting it go. "Have it your way, but I reserve the right to spike your food if you can't wake up in the morning."

"Joke's on you, I'm the one doing the cooking. Can I get up now?"

"Sure, but—" Law finished the sentence too late. "—slowly."

"Oops."

Law turned around, shaking his head, to replace the stethoscope where it belonged. Saki watched him, pensive, sure that he was well aware that her eyes were trained on him, and she felt like she had to say something before leaving.

"Law," she called, and only when she had done it, she realized that it was the first time she called him by name. If his curious expression was any indication, he had noticed as well. "I know I must seem very ungrateful, but—I'm not—I mean—I appreciate everything you're doing for me." She looked away and cringed inside. She wasn't used to thanking people, not really, and it had come out lamentably.

"No problem," he said, quietly, and maybe because it had sounded a little too personal for his taste, he added, "You aren't ungrateful; you have a surprising bad habit of not giving a damn about your health. Taking care of my crew is my responsibility, and that includes you."

He had said the last sentence like it was the simplest thing in the world. But it was a difficult thing to take for granted, despite all the evidence so far. She supposed she'd have to get used to it.

And again, it brought Saki to the question of why he had helped her before she had joined him. She wanted to know, most of all, what his relationship with Joker was, but the way he had avoided the topic the first time she asked made clear that he didn't want to talk about it. She wouldn't ask.

'Why hearts?' she almost asked on a whim, again, her eyes following the trails of ink that peeked under his clothes. It didn't seem a fair question. She put the thought aside as quickly as it had come.

"Do all pirates get undeserved bad press or are you just a special snowflake?"

Law showed her a small smirk. "You can find the answer on your own. You are a pirate, too."

The thought was strangely comforting. "True."

"Food!"

"Not quite." Saki stopped the descent and squinted to see the mechanics sitting at the bottom of the stairs. "Why are you here in the dark and do I want to know?"

"The lightbulb just died. Everything else is running fine, though." Some of the light from upstairs shone on Penguin's cap as he looked up, enough to make out how far she could go without stepping on the guys.

Saki went a few more steps and she plopped down on one of them with a mix of a sigh and a groan.
"Did you just lay down on a step?"

"Maybe. I'm tired. Fuck, it's cold. I brought you beer."

She had barely raised the hand with the bottles when they were snatched by the featherless chicks of hell.

Minutes passed in pleasant silence, only interrupted by gulps, with the three of them just trying to get over the day's events. It was Penguin who spoke first.

"You said that you used to do tattoos for a living."

"Yeah."

"I heard you killed guys for a living," Shachi interjected.

"I wasn't getting paid for that."

"...Oh."

"I want a tattoo," Penguin said, ignoring his friend. "Can you do it?"

He immediately grabbed Saki's interest. "Of course. Just need to know what and where."

Penguin rolled back a sleeve to show his forearm and pointed a finger near the elbow. "I'd like it around here, a—"

"Are you crazy, dude, who knows what she'll do to—" He was promptly cut by a kick to the head.

"Say what you want about me, but no one talks shit about my tattoos."

Shachi rubbed the back of his head, not pleased at having found out how much a heel hurt there. "'Kay, madwoman, don't get violent. Just saying it would be good to see a sample beforehand."

Saki merely raised her right leg and pointed to the clovers. "I did those. I have other drawings on paper if you want to look at them, but I didn't exactly bring my portfolio with me."

Penguin got closer to examine the ink. "Nice."

"See, Shachi, this is why he's my favorite mechanic."

"Aw shucks, you're my favorite redhead."

Shachi muttered something that sounded like 'tr treacherous bastards'. Then he looked up, as if he was wary of somebody walking in on them, and said in a conspiratory tone, "Just to be sure, you didn't do the tattoos on Captain's fingers, right?"

"I don't think I can put into words how much that question offends me. I've wanted to fix that shit since I laid my eyes on him."

Shachi sounded extremely relieved. "Thank god, I thought I was the only one who thought... you know."

"I know. They plague my nightmares. Is it mutiny to say it out loud?"

"Possibly," Penguin said with a grin.
"Hm."

"So," Shachi rested an elbow on the step behind him. "Did you come down here for anything?"

"I put a cooking pot on the stove and it has to boil for a while. We're having soup, by the way."

"Haven't we had enough liquid for a day? Or a week?" Penguin complained, and Saki shot him a sympathetic smile.

"We're short on supplies."

"I thought you would go check up on Bepo when you were done," Shachi said. "You spend a lot of time with him."

"I wanted to, but I found him on the way to the shower. Besides, I'm tired and I can't hide in the bridge while Captain's there."

"Is that so." Shachi didn't sound entirely convinced.

Absentmindedly, Saki kept her hands busy by turning her bottle around. "Hey, what you said about the uniforms being waterproof—"

She could hear Shachi's grin even if he wasn't looking at him. "I fucking knew it."

"Oh, shut it."

The sub was quiet. There was a simmering pot alone in the kitchen, Bepo had kicked him out of the bridge after he was clean and chewed him out for jumping into water and not getting any rest on top of it, and the others were nowhere in sight. Not that he could blame them if they had fallen unconscious after the day they had had, but as the captain he couldn't allow his crew to be slacking off in the middle of the day.

He went downstairs to check up on Shachi and Penguin, and he was only three steps down the stairs when he ascertained that he was heading in the right direction.

"—never been able to do it on purpose."

"Really? Pen and I used to have contests way back when. Show her, man."

"Wait a sec, here it comes..."

The sound of a gargantuan burp rose from the depths of the vessel and shook the walls around Law. He felt extremely tempted to turn around.

Instead, he followed the chorus of laughter into the dark until a voice stopped him.

"If you go down two more steps you'll put your foot on my face."

He frowned and blinked to adjust his eyes to the dark. Penguin and Shachi were sitting at the bottom of the stairs, and Saki was lying down two steps above them.

"May I know why you are in the dark, and do I want to?"

There were a few seconds of silence until Penguin said, "Eerie." Law didn't get it.
Shachi cleared his throat and summarized, "Engine, turbines and boilers are in perfect condition, lightbulb blew out, food's cooking itself."

"Are you drinking?"

Shachi shrugged. "Why aren't you?"

He had to admit he made a very solid point.

Law took one step down. He saw Saki wince, as if expecting the impact, but instead he put his feet on the step below her and sat directly on the one above.

"You just love getting into my personal bubble, don't you?"

He took the bottle from her, to which she only sighed in resignation.

"You ratted me out to Bepo."

Saki didn't seem get what he meant at first, but when she put two and two, she let out a satisfied laugh. "Oh, yeah, before I forget again," she pulled out something from the pocket of her shorts and handed it to Law. It was a stack of beli bills. "The change from the Log Pose."

Law counted the belis. Twice. "Did you steal the Log Pose and pocket half of the money?"

"Yes, and I plan to blow it all on hookers," Saki deadpanned, and Penguin snorted the beer he'd been trying to swallow. "Was that a serious question? I got a discount."

In Law's eyes, that seemed more of a present than a discount. "How do you always get people to give you free shit?"

She grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. "I'm charming that way."

"A power dudes can only dream of," Shachi said wistfully.

Saki threw him a disgusted look.

"What?" Law asked, lost.

"He means a pair of tits," Penguin explained helpfully.

Law contemplated this new information and reached a decision. "You're in charge of all the shopping from now on," he said to Saki.

"Can these two carry the bags?"

"Fair enough."

"HEY!"

That afternoon, a small passenger ship docked in Asteria. The travelers booked rooms at one of the less run-down inns of the port, and spent the rest of the day exploring the local market and getting acquainted with the town.

Nothing out of the ordinary.
Marina did not have the good night's rest she deserved.

They did not find pirates in Lymes' sewer, but they found something else. It was mid-afternoon when one of her officers reported that they had found a stash of sealed boxes filled with firearms, gunpowder, and strange-looking fruits. In one of them was an invoice that pointed to Asteria, a seedy town under the jurisdiction of another base. It was widely known that crime ran rampant in that place, but the usual policy was not to interfere as long as it remained contained there.

Marina didn't agree, because crime was a cancer that took every opportunity it had to spread. Her protests hadn't earned her many friends between her colleagues in the area. It was all well, since she didn't have any sympathy for them.

When she had surfaced with her men and the cargo, they had been told that two of their ships had shipwrecked in battle against the Heart Pirates. The irony wasn't lost on her.

She decided to be the bigger person, to not pay a visit to the mayor in that moment, and let her men go back to the base. It wasn't easy, but today's battle had been lost and there was no point in denying the truth.

She spent the rest of the day filling in paperwork and staring at the note they had found in the sewer, unable to get it out of her mind.

Somebody had been using her own city to smuggle weapons under her nose. All these weeks spent chasing smuggling ships, wondering where they were heading and what had made them so uncoordinated, and the leads had been hiding below her feet.

Cross the Calm Belt with stolen ships. Transfer the cargo to another ship and hide it in the sewer. Recover it when the coast is clear and ship it to Asteria.

At full speed and with good conditions, Asteria was less than a day's sail from her location, maybe less if they only loaded the barest essentials on the ship. The only problem was that going there would be overstepping her bounds and onto somebody else's toes.

The Den Den Mushi on her desk rang, and she took a deep breath before picking it up.

"Marina speaking."

"We got the preliminary reports, Captain Marina. Headquarters is not happy."

"Commodore—"

"You've lost two high bounties in two weeks and four ships in two days."

Marina gritted her teeth. "Make that five, according to your propaganda. What was the meaning of that?"

"You are fully aware that we can't admit to the public that we lost a ship to smugglers. A pirate attack is a more adequate explanation for a shipwreck. And this was still the result of your inability to
control the waters under your supervision."

"Commodore, we're undermanned, if you'd let me—"

"No, shut up and listen for once, woman. It was ability that made you rise to your rank, and your continuous ineptitude will sink you just as fast. You know that your appointment to the Lymes Branch was not without controversy. If you cannot take the responsibility of guarding the entrance to the Grand Line, we will remove you from your post. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"We expect a full report in the morning."

The Den Den Mushi went back to sleep, and Marina smashed the receiver against her desk, getting tiny fragments stuck in the palm of her hand.

"HOWE!"

The hallway outside Marina's office went deadly silent and Howe appeared tentatively from behind the doorway.

"C-Captain?"

"We're going to Asteria. Make sure our fastest ship is ready to set sail at dawn."

Upon seeing that he was not going to be on the receiving end of her anger, he squared his shoulders. "Yes, Ma'am!" And with a salute, he left.

Saki woke up with the first morning light, and decided that five hours straight of sleep were a success that warranted celebration crepes. She was getting better at this resting business.

Last evening Bepo had docked the sub on an island that reminded her of aunt Fern's descriptions of her homeland. She had once mentioned living near the Red Line before moving to Asteria. Why would anyone in their right mind move to that dump, Saki had never understood, but apparently it had something to do with the island being full of ferns and her parents lacking a healthy dose of imagination when choosing names for their kids. In any case, Saki had always suspected that the woman was slightly off her rocker.

In her sleep-dazed state, she didn't know how much time had passed between her getting out of bed and ready for a new day and the growing pile of crepes to her right. It reached her shoulder, but she knew they'd be gone in a blink when the resident mechanics woke up. Not to mention she had a bear to feed, too.

She started brewing coffee the moment she heard Law's tired footsteps coming from the mess hall. He took a look inside the kitchen, and when he saw coffee wasn't yet ready, went out to the deck.

The pile soon got taller than her, but there was still batter to go, so she kept going.

A wanted poster rudely interrupted her eye contact with the pan, and she had to blink a few times to bring the letters to focus.

"Congratulations," said Law, passing the poster to her.

She dropped the spatula when she saw her picture staring back at her and the words below.
"What the hell?" She blurted out, thoroughly weirded out. "Where did they get this?"

"What do you mean?"

"This?" She pointed to the epithet.

"You were wearing that dress, remember?"

She blinked a few times as the information tried to permeate her early morning brain. "…Ah. Of course." Memories of being called 'clover girl' and other variants during that day came to mind. "Are the clovers really so conspicuous?"

"They just latch onto the first thing they can think of and stick it to the poster."

She handed the poster back to Law to pick up the spatula from the floor. She recovered from the silly moment with a sarcastic comment, "Good thing 'Red Hair' was taken, or Marine HQ would have been in trouble when my roots started showing."

Law chuckled as he snatched the coffee maker from the range. "There are worse things to be called. Penguin and Shachi got theirs, too."

"And Bepo?"

"I don't think any Marine saw him."

She made a disappointed sound and silently eyed him for a moment. The heart tattoos on his shoulders were yet again poking out of the sleeves of his shirt. She had never seen them entirely, but they looked so well done that she really wanted to. It had absolutely nothing to do with the well-defined deltoids they were inked on.

*Heart tattoos. Heart Pirates. It has to mean something.*

She really knew so, so little about him. Or, better said, she knew a lot of things about him, but none that were relevant. He didn't like pickled plums and bread, he like his coffee black, although she suspected his coffee habit was more a need to stay awake than a taste for it, he had abysmal sleep patterns, he liked to take naps leaning against Bepo when it was sunny outside. She knew many whats but no whys.

Running the spatula under the faucet, she said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Do I get one, too?"

"What?" He wanted to ask her something? "Sure, go ahead."

"Why did you smell like a walking tangerine yesterday?"

She was pleasantly surprised by the question. "You noticed?"

Law shrugged. "Hard not to when you're in a sewer."

But guys never noticed these things. Maybe he really was a special snowflake. "Mrs. Angie lent me her shampoo. I was thinking about getting it for me, too. What do you think?"

Law looked at her as if she had asked his opinion on the mating rituals of sea cows. "Why do you
"If we're going to be stuck in the same ship for the foreseeable future, I might as well ask. What if you hate tangerines, or are allergic to them or something like that? I don't want my captain to be allergic to me."

He gave her a sideways smile. "I'm not allergic to tangerines."

"Good. I'm getting it, then," grabbing another dish to pile more crepes with noticeably more enthusiasm.

"And your question was?"

She thought about the question she meant to ask. She tried to make it sound casual, because it was definitely not on the level of the one he had asked, and now she felt really awkward springing it on him. "Why are you a doctor?"

Law didn't answer right away. In fact, he stayed quiet and still for so long that she thought he had been mortally offended by the question and she began to try to smooth it over, "I mean, you don't have to answer if you don't want to, I was just thinking I don't know much about you and—"

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Don't backpedal. You didn't say anything wrong," What felt wrong was her trying to take it back. Just like her thanks in the sickbay, it made her look smaller, somehow less than she was, and she was small enough already. It was unnerving. "...I was thinking."

"...Oh. Sorry."

"My parents were doctors," he said at last. "I've been studying medicine as far back as my memory goes."

The past tense was the first thing that jumped out at her. Of course someone like him wouldn't have a happy family waiting for him somewhere in this sea. Shachi and Penguin didn't have parents, either. She didn't know if Bepo had, but if he did, they were surely far away. Piracy didn't attract people from nice households.

It surprised her, though, for an entirely different reason. "Yesterday you said you didn't like doctors," she probed. She wanted to know more, but she didn't know how far was too far. Family was always a sticky matter.

"My parents weren't included in that statement, if that's what you're thinking."

She cracked a small smile. "That's good to hear."

Law's own mouth curved up imperceptibly at her reply, but disappeared when he volunteered more information. "I had bad experiences, as you would call them, with doctors as a kid."

That caught her attention. "Why? Were you sick?"

"Very," he said, pensive, staring idly at some point of the kitchen's wall. "Until I was thirteen."

"But you're okay now?"
He turned to her when he heard the alarmed tone, and he found a set of green eyes staring with concern. He searched for traces of pity underneath it, but he couldn't find them.

(He hadn't lied when he said he didn't have that shade in his collection. He'd have to look harder amongst his future victims.)

It was better to think about that than about having someone other than Bepo worry for him. But it was reassuring, particularly after the vote of confidence she had given her yesterday in their downwards slide. She hadn't disappointed, but that had been expected. Law was too good at gauging people to make that sort of slip up. And now he, too, was unintentionally making mental puns about the whole situation. He wondered if they were spending too much time together or it was that he just hadn't had his first morning coffee.

He smirked at her. "I'm here, am I not?"

She stared a bit longer and let out a long breath. "Thankfully."

He wasn't sure how to reply to that, having expected a joking remark back, but she spared him the effort by turning back to her cooking.

The scratch on her neck was still there, less red than the day before, and this time he did lean in and reach for it, fingers lightly brushing the skin when he moved her hair to take a better look at it. The moment he touched her, her face changed and she dropped the spatula again with a jolt.

She snapped her head around to face him, her hand reflexively covering the spot where his had been. "Look, surprisingly, I don't mind all that much that you intrude my personal space, but there's a line and you just crossed it. Don't touch my neck without warning."

Law watched her take a deep breath after the outburst and pick up the cooking utensil, again, while she tried to appear relaxed again without avail. Her shoulders were tense and she was avoiding looking at him. He should have apologized, but he was far more interested in her outburst than sorry.

"What's with that reaction?"

"What reaction," she said indifferently.

"You looked afraid for a moment."

"I was not afraid. I was startled because I don't want those things you have on your fingers going near me."

Law chuckled at the save. He'd let it slide this time. "They aren't contagious."

"I wouldn't be so sure. You caught them on both hands."

And just like that, she poured more batter into the pan and proceeded to use the dirty spatula on the new crepe, which she placed on the empty plate.

Law's brain didn't register right away what had just happened and stared at the crepe with narrowed eyes.

"You…"

"Those two sleep too much. You and Bepo get yours from the other plate."

Deeming it too early to argue, and perhaps because a spiteful part of him wanted to see the world
burn for all the inconveniences his insomnia caused him, he dragged himself to a table with a steaming cup of coffee and an empty crepe from the safe pile, leaving her to deal with her bad mood alone.

He wondered if uncomfortable morning talks were going to become a thing between them.

Tsubaki always ran late to school, very literally and on purpose. It was an excuse to get some exercise and cut through some of her less explored (read: rather unsavory, unsafe, and many other adjectives that started with a negative prefix) streets. They were okay for the most part during the day, even if she sometimes had to dodge blackout drunks and they were so unkempt that her trips through them resembled an obstacle course.

Again, it was healthy exercise.

There was, however, *that* part of town that she never set foot on, and if the things she heard around town were true, there had been more movement than usual around that zone since her sister left. Not even Tsubaki was reckless enough to get near that place. Bad things happened to nosy people in Asteria, and she wasn't going to volunteer to find out the specifics of that.

She remembered with a pang of guilt the time Saki had to get her out of a nasty situation. Her sister's nose never was quite the same after that, but she waved it off saying it gave her character. And when people asked about it, she always said she broke it in a bar brawl. Come to think of it, it was her go-to explanation for every other injury she had gotten. Tsubaki was pretty sure her sister had never been in a bar brawl before, but everybody else had no trouble believing it. Must be the tattoos and piercings.

All of the above was the reason that, as soon as she saw an unknown girl heading *there*, she stopped her sprint to shout. "Hey! Don't go there! It's dangerous!"

When the stranger turned around to look at her, several things ran through her mind at this point:

*She doesn't look much older than me.*

*She's so beautiful.*

And,

*I wonder where she bought that skirt?*

The girl rubbed the back of her neck and grinned at her. "Sorry! I got lost in the alleys. You say it's dangerous over there?"

"Yep." It was obvious now that the girl wasn't a local, or she wouldn't be asking that sort of thing. "That part of town is really dangerous for everybody. But *this* part," she gestured to their surroundings, "is dangerous for travelers too. I'd leave if I were you."

"Oh, wow! I had no idea! It was so quiet I thought it was safe."

"The market is down that alley and to the right," Tsubaki offered. "That's better. There's only pickpockets there."

"Better be on my way, then. Thank you for the info! You take care too!"

Tsubaki waved her goodbye and watched until she disappeared around the corner just to make sure
nobody jumped her. What was she thinking, walking alone wearing such expensive-looking clothes? And she had such a pretty smile, and it had been all for her. Tsubaki giggled as she resumed her race to school.

_Tourists._

Law only noticed he had fallen asleep next to his third coffee cup when the lively voices in the mess deck woke him up. From his undignified position on the table he could see his three furless crewmates chatting at the farthest end of the table, and as the conversation advanced he wasn't sure he wanted to know what the topic at hand was.

"Why is yours bigger than mine?" Shachi lamented.

Saki gave him a smirk and a knowing smile. "What, are you jealous?"

"Wha—no! But this is how I measure up against other guys now!"

She waved him off. "You wouldn't know what to do with a bigger one anyway."

"Oh, I do. I'm gonna work on it until it gets huge, and first thing I'll do when it goes up will be wave it in your face!"

"Why are you so competitive? Penguin's is smaller than yours and he's fine with it."

"It doesn't matter how big it is, but what you do with it," Penguin said sagely.

"This guy knows what he's talking about."


Penguin bonked his friend on the back of the head. "Not cool, man. Besides, if we're talking about impressive ones you just have to look Captain's."

Law blinked lazily when he heard himself being mentioned.

"I know, he showed it to me this morning!" Saki said.

Law blinked again, startled. He did what?

"He did? I didn't think he was the type to brag."

"Oh, you know, he put it casually on the table, like he didn't know what he was doing, but who pulls it out like that if he doesn't want others to look?"

"There's one thing that bothers me about it, though," Penguin said, and his companions eyed him curiously. "It's so long I don't know how it fits!"

"Yeah, it's a mouthful," Shachi agreed. "Whoever has to make that fit has one hell of a workload."

"I knew a girl back home who did that sort of thing. Said customers always wanted everything crammed in without any regards for her."

"Some people are dicks."

At the mention of the magic word, Law realized that maybe the conversation wasn't about what he
had thought it was. "What are you talking about?"

"Morning, Captain! We were talking about the bounties!"

"Your name and epithet barely fit on the poster," Penguin said.

Eyeing said paper, Saki added, "How does it feel to have a surname?"

"Now that you mention it, he's the only one of us who has one, is he?"

"That's why I'm the captain," Law said, amused.

"Well!" Shachi said, stretching on his seat. "Now that everyone's awake, what's the plan for the day?"

Stowhaven was a small but busy town close to the Red Line. It wasn't as close to Reverse Mountain as Lymes, but at the same time, it was much farther away from the Marine base. Law would have preferred not to waste time there, but arriving to Lymes under such bad weather conditions, not to mention the situation with the Marines, had made it impossible to stock up properly. Even if the crew was small, he didn't want to set foot on the Grand Line without provisions for months. Who knew what they would encounter there and where they could replenish supplies? He wasn't going to leave something so vital up to chance.

Alone with Bepo in the bridge, he watched from a window the rest of his crew as they left with a shopping list the size of the New World. He needed to review their route with Bepo and prepare for any kind of emergency.

The navigator was on his desk, books and papers all over, concentrated on a map of currents. He'd been at it since dawn, and when he hadn't appeared for breakfast Saki had brought him a plate of salmon filled crepes. She had a soft spot for Bepo and tried to cook things he knew he liked. Law never questioned this logic, because Bepo did deserve the best and it was nice to see someone else valuing his job for what it was. He handled an enormous responsibility, and anybody who questioned his navigator's abilities just because he wasn't human could go fuck themselves.

"If you keep furrowing your brow like that, it's going to get stuck that way," Law said to his friend.

"Huh? Like yours?" Bepo commented absentmindedly. Law was struck speechless for the second it took Bepo to realize what he had said and cover his mouth with his paws. "I'm sorry!"

He brushed it off. "I guess I brought it on myself. Any luck with the route?"

"Ah, yes," Bepo was glad to get an excuse to change the subject. "The way to Reverse Mountain is clear, but as I said before, we need to be very careful with the currents. I'll need help with the helm. We also need to watch out for the weather. It changes fast, so I won't be able to tell how it is what we'll find until I can see the clouds above it, but the book says that blizzards aren't unheard of. We may have to turn around if it's too bad…" He said, avoiding Law's gaze during the last part in a silent apology. "There's one good thing, though!"

"Which is?"

"The curve of the path isn't too sharp from North Blue, since the Grand Line goes in the same direction we'll be sailing towards. Sailors from East and South Blue have it worse. They have to pull a swerve in a forty-two degree angle," Bepo shuddered. "That's suicidal."
"Do you think there will be wreckage on the way?"

"It's likely, but it shouldn't be a problem unless we find it a lot of it at the top. Once we've made the turn and are on our way down, we just need to keep straight."

"Easier said than done, if the currents are that strong."

"Don't worry," Bepo said, determined. "As long as I'm here, we'll be safe."

Law smiled. "I don't doubt it one bit."

"Kay, guys, brace yourselves for the next one." Saki turned the pages of the shopping list, looking for the few things that were left. She was carrying three bags on each arm, which was nothing compared to what Penguin and Shachi were lugging around. "Huh… I think we're done!"

Shachi mouthed a 'THANK FUCK' to the sky above and let the bags fall to the ground with a thud.

Penguin grimaced. "I hope you weren't carrying the eggs."

"…Shit."

"ANYWAY!" Saki exclaimed right away, deciding she had not heard what had just happened, "I need to find the post office. I won't make you cart this around," she added as soon as she saw their faces. "You can head to the sub and I'll be back in no time."

"You sure you'll be fine on your own?" Shachi asked.

Saki put a hand against her hip and eyed her companion with suspicion. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You have a bounty now."

Saki's mouth formed a perfect circle. "You're worried about me?"

"What—no!" He spluttered, flushing slightly.

"Aw, Shachi, you do care!"

"Remind me to never be nice to you again."

"I'd hug you if I weren't carrying bags!"

"I'll pass, thanks!"

"Who are you sending letters to, by the way?" Penguin interrupted.

"They're for the kids back home."

Shachi's jaw fell and he said, alarmed. "You have kids?!"

"Wha——" Saki stared at him, at a loss for words, and started laughing as if she'd heard an amazing joke. "They're my siblings, dumbass!"

That didn't seem to calm Shachi. "You mean there are more of you?!"

"No, we're not related by blood," she said when the laughter subsided.
"Good, you had me worried."

"Yeah, it's for the best," she agreed, earning her a pair of raised eyebrows. "Well, see you in a bit. I'm sure you want to drop off those as fast as you can."

"Don't take long," Penguin said. "We need to rescue Captain and Bepo for lunch."

"Yeah, don't know how they can spend so much time indoors."

With a nod from her, the guys began to make their way to the sub, and she watched until they disappeared in the middle of the crowd.

It dawned on her how strange it felt to be alone on the street again. She hadn't had a chance to walk outside on her own since she had left Asteria, and as used as she was to go here and there on her own, now there was a nagging sensation at the back of her mind. Maybe the bounty was making her uneasy.

Yes, it was definitely the bounty. It wasn't that she missed the company.

Unlike the occupants of Lymes, the people of this town didn't seem to mind pirates. They had docked safely in the port, where their Jolly Roger had not been the only one proudly displayed, and she'd only seen passing glances at the emblem on the guy's boiler suits. He wasn't so sure that having the Jolly Roger emblazoned on the back was such a good idea, though. It was like asking to get stabbed from behind.

The comparison brought her back to the incident in the kitchen, and instead of dwelling on that she decided to ask somebody for directions and get her solitary trip over with.

She didn't know what made her angrier, the (unintentional, a little voice in her head reminded her) scare he had given her or the fact that she had gotten scared in the first place.

It was his fault. You didn't touch from behind a woman who had been working with shady guys for years. Particularly not on the neck.

The same annoying voice from before told her it was her own damn fault for letting her guard down, and this was why getting comfortable with others was a mistake.

She had already felt like an idiot for getting startled the day before when they had fallen in the canal. It was one thing to help him because that was what was expected of her, and she would have done regardless it of circumstance because she owed him, but her heart skipping a few beats when she had realized he wasn't rising from the water because he was physically incapable to had been completely unnecessary. She had took the scare out on him and it was well-deserved.

She held back a frustrated groan when she realized he had scared her two days in a row. This wasn't good, and the things he told her weren't helping. He could have been an asshole—to be fair, he was an asshole, but in a different way, and Saki wasn't a glowing example of human decency either—and she would have had a good excuse to dislike him and not build any kind of attachment to him, like when she worked for Rickhard. But then he had gone and unceremoniously lifted her impending death sentence from her, showed concern for her health, and he had decided to divulge that he had been sick as a child, too.

In the month they had known each other, he had treated her better than most people she had known her whole life. She couldn't dislike him if she tried, and the worst part was that she didn't think she wanted to.
She could see why Bepo liked him so much. She could even understand why Penguin and Shachi had decided to join him. There was something alluring about him when you got over his ridiculous fashion sense and godawful tattoos, that much she could easily admit.

Funny how the idea of leaving the crew had vanished from her mind.

Deciding that lone errands were not worth it if they were going to make her think so hard, she made her way distractedly through the busy street, idly apologizing when she bumped into someone with her shopping bags.

It was her last day on North Blue and she didn't want to waste it with heavy thoughts. She'd think about her new tangerine shampoo. Fruit always made everything better.

Bepo was organizing all the maps strewn over his desk in a neat stack. Law was gave one last look at them, and he saw different type of document under one of the papers.

It was a drawing of Indent Bay. Law instantly recognized the landscape that they could see from the deck of the sub for the week they had been there.

"What's this?"

Bepo looked up from his papers. "Ah! Saki's doing these landscapes to mail them home. I saw her one day while she was drawing and asked her if she could get them done for the logbook too. I thought you'd like them."

"So this is a copy?"

"No, she mailed the first one when we were still on Indent Bay. She made this one last week or so. I must have gotten it mixed with the other papers." Bepo cast his head down. "Sorry, I meant to tell you before, but I forgot."

"You've been working hard," Law said, and Bepo looked relieved. "We'll need to find someone who can take turns with you when we're sailing. You need to rest, and I know I'm not much use up here."

"That's not true! You help a lot at night while I'm sleeping."

"Wouldn't you prefer not to have all the navigation duties fall on your shoulders?"

"Well… yes, but I can manage. Don't worry about it."

Law smiled. "We'll find you some help."

Bepo smiled back. "Speaking of finding, Penguin was complaining yesterday that he and Shachi could do with a few more hands in the boiler and engine rooms. And Saki's been saying for some time that she's no cook and she doesn't think she'll be capable to keep up when the crew gets bigger."

Law stood silent for a moment, perplexed. "Why haven't they told me?"

Bepo shrugged. "I don't know. I guess they don't want to bother you. You haven't been looking too good lately."

"You say that because you know me. It isn't that evident, is it?"

"I think…” Bepo mulled over his thoughts before replying carefully, "…they notice many things.
We spend a lot of time together and we get along. No matter how much you fake it, they'll end up knowing if something's wrong."

Sheepishly, Law brought a hand to the back of his neck and looked away from his best friend. "I have a lot on my mind."

"I know. But remember we're here to help." Bepo said with a smile, and as an afterthought he added, "Yesterday was fun, wasn't it? And everybody worked together. I think you're putting together a good crew."

Law chuckled. "It's reassuring to hear it from you."

As soon as he went on deck, Law recognized the view. He knew he'd have to go outside sooner or later, but he still had made a point of staying with Bepo for as long as he could. The last time he had sailed to this town, it had been on a small boat, and when he left, he had left behind the local hospital in flames, thanks to Cora-san, who had somehow managed to catch his own coat on fire as well.

Law was tired of North Blue. Tired of happening time after time upon islands he'd already been to, and it was a testament to Cora-san's thoroughness that it had happened so often in the past ten years, travelling with Bepo wherever the currents took them.

He hadn't looked forward to making his last stop here. Lymes should have been the last one, if not for bad weather and timing, and he could have left this sea behind without having to remember, again, that despite having lived in it for twenty-four years there would be nothing left behind for him to show. Not even four tombstones that, by all rights, should have existed. Law didn't believe in an afterlife and didn't put much stock in honoring the dead, but this, not even being able to give them a grave where each of them could rest, made him bitter to the core.

He had been a kid, powerless and pitifully weak. But he wasn't one anymore, and he was going to set things right. He would make Doflamingo pay and raise hell for the World Government for as long as he lived. It was the least they deserved.

Shachi and Penguin were chatting against the railing of the sub, facing the town and the people coming and going on the port. Law noticed he was missing a red-head on board.

"Yo, Captain! Finally coming out?" Shachi greeted.

"Yeah," he said, lifting his hat to ruffle his hair and putting it down again. It was a hot day, as if summer was trying to make its presence known in its last days. He smiled at the men, trying not to dwell on thoughts that were doing nothing good for him. "Did you find everything on the list?"

"Yeah, already brought everything inside too. Oddly enough, there weren't many eggs for sale."

"We heard chickenpox is doing a number on the island," Shachi said.

Law rose an eyebrow. "That's not how chickenpox w—"

"Aaaand now we're just waiting for Saki to come back," Penguin interrupted and sent a nervous glance at Shachi that meant 'shut up you pea-brained oaf' before Law could send them shopping again.

"She didn't come back with you?"
"She said she had to mail a letter—"

"—I told her it was a bad idea to go alone," Shachi said upon seeing Law's frown.

"We were carrying a ton of bags each."

"We could have carried them longer."

"She was trying to be nice, dude."

"Well she isn't, she doesn't need to try."

"It's all right," Law interrupted, releasing a small sigh. Figures she'd go off on her own despite the bounty on her head. He didn't think she'd get in trouble in such a short time span, but he'd have preferred that someone was there to watch her back. "This town isn't dangerous. But," he warned, changing the tone for a more authoritative one, "from the moment we get to the Grand Line, I want everybody in pairs at least, no matter what. Understood?"

Saki chose that moment to walk up the gangplank in a hurry. "Sorry! Am I late?"

"Don't go off on your own again. Understood?" He repeated.

The other three replied in a chorus.

"Told you so," Shachi said under his breath.

Mimicked a mock 'told you so' in silence and walked briskly to the door to leave her shopping bags inside.

When Bepo was done with his preparations, the pirates got off the sub and followed Penguin and Shachi to a decent tavern they had seen on their way back from shopping.

It wasn't far from the port, and it appeared to be filled by travelers and locals alike, bustling with conversation and laughter. That was, until the Heart Pirates went inside.

Saki had spent enough time luring unsuspecting victims in busy taverns that she had developed a sixth sense to know when something was fishy. Conversation became stilted when they went inside, and a few patrons glanced at them nervously before going back to their meals.

She decided she didn't care much for bounties if this was the effect they had on people. The stares were different than the ones she had noticed Law getting so far, though. In the brief time she'd been around him, she had noticed two main types of reactions from people who recognized him: they stared in awe or they tried their best not to look at him in case Law felt insulted and took away a few eyes for his collection.

(He hadn't been lying about it. Saki had found it during one cleaning day, behind the mysterious door between her room and the captain's quarters, and she had decided that she would leave the dusting of that particular storage room to Law. It wasn't that she was squicked by the eyeballs suspended in jars, but the smell was strong and she had been feeling a little seasick since their departure from Asteria. Best not to test her questionable luck.

She did take a moment to make sure that, indeed, he did not have eyes in her shade. From then she made sure to lock her door every night just in case, until Penguin's head became intimate with the wooden surface. She figured in the worst of cases she could live without eyes, but not with an
impaired mechanic on whom the crew's life depended.)

But these people seemed curious, nervous, maybe, not afraid.

The bartender sized them up and asked, "Table for five?"

Law nodded.

"There's one over there," the man motioned to a free one, and looking nervously at Law, he said, "You may want to leave quickly."

"We aren't here to cause any trouble."

The bartender shook his head. "It's not you. Another pirate crew has been frequenting the tavern. You don't want to cross paths with them."

"Why wouldn't we?"

"They're the Splinter Pirates. Their captain's Splinter Leg Gonzalo."

"He's thirty-six million," Saki informed automatically. "Likes to break his peg legs on enemies' heads."

"That's laughable," Penguin said.

Shachi nodded. "And expensive."

"Let them come," Law said, completely calm. "We aren't going to hide."

The bartender didn't insist, but the eyes under his bushy eyebrows looked at them with pity, like someone who's seen many young people think they are at the summit of the world just to be stomped on by the next guy. The pirates sat, a young boy took their order, and nobody paid them any mind anymore.

Lunch went by without incident. The food was good. Law said to an uneasy bartender that they'd come back at night.

When they did, the bartender shot them the same you-don't-know-what-you're-doing glance as before, the boy took their orders, and they waited.

They were finishing their meals, not without some lingering disappointment at the boring normalcy of the day, when the door of the tavern burst open and in came a group of men laughing loudly. The leader, who walked in front of the group, was the noisiest of all, and moved like he owned the place. His beard had bald patches and he also looked like him and his clothes hadn't seen water for a month.

The conversation in the venue quieted down as the pirates walked to a big table that was occupied by a group of young locals, who immediately stood up and went to the bar to pay, leaving their meals half eaten and their seats vacant. Some of the newcomers laughed, and they occupied the table.

The other conversations kept quiet, perhaps making the pirate crew sound more obnoxious than they already were.

"I didn't think these things actually happened outside stories," Penguin said, impressed.
"You said you didn't have trouble with pirates on Indent Bay, right?" Law asked.

"Yeah. I suppose it's because we supplied the Marines as well. You can imagine what would happen to somebody who screwed with our company."

"And we kicked out of the warehouse anyone who didn't want to pay up front. Saved us problems and relieved stress. Didn't happen often, though…"

"Figures. You part on bad terms with the guys who built your boilers, and what do you do when one breaks?"

"Cry and shower with cold water."

"Or not shower at all," said Bepo with clear distaste, casting a sideways glance at the other pirate crew.

"This kind of thing wouldn't fly in my town either," Saki commented.

"Really? Wasn't it a free-for-all kind of place?" Penguin asked.

"That's why. I saw some pirates try to pull this in one of the port's taverns," she smiled fondly at the memory. "It was pretty funny."

"What happened?"

"When the owner saw they were trying to intimidate his customers, he pulled a shotgun from under the counter and pointed it to the captain."

"And the full crew was in the room? That takes guts."

"Well, the thing is that when the pirates tried to attack him, the sailors around them took out pistols and knives to stop them, so then they grabbed a waitress hostage."

"That's low."

"It's routine," Saki shrugged it off. "She pulled a tiny gun from her sleeve—"

"What."

"—and shot the man in the arm, and when the others tried to grab her, her friend pulled a flintlock she carried under her apron,"

"What the—"

"—and a working girl threw a beer bottle at a pirate's head and yelled that if they wanted to grab some booty they could fuck off and look for hidden treasure or pay her five thousand beli each, and well, you can imagine how the rest went."

"They went for that girl?"

"Of course not," Saki said as if it had been a crazy assumption. "The sailors beat those guys to a pulp, the waitresses took their wallets as tips, and they turned up in a ditch a week later. I think their ship was sold to smugglers to pay for the damage to the building. The owner bought nicer chairs, too, so everybody won."

Shachi started laughing.
"…I didn't think these things actually happened outside stories."

The laughter caught the attention of the Splinter Pirates. They turned to see what the fuss was about, because how dare somebody raise their voice in the tavern when they were inside, and then one of them said, "Hey, you're the bitch that bumped into me earlier!"

Four heads turned to Saki, and in their faces was written 'what did you do when we weren't looking?'

She glared at the guys. "Some confidence you have in me. I have no clue who that guy is."

Law relaxed on his chair, at least apparently, but his eyes didn't leave the other pirates and rested his sword against his shoulder. He was ready to jump at any given second.

The staredown continued as Splinter Leg Gonzalo walked to their table with a knock-thump-knock sound and the tavern went quiet to watch the scene.

The Heart Pirates didn't look impressed. Bepo, in particular, was contorting his face as the man's stench assaulted his senses from closer up. This wasn't being a great week for his nose. Law sent him a sympathetic look.

"I've smelled worse," Penguin said.

Saki nodded without enthusiasm. "Definitely."

"Is this an intimidation tactic?" Shachi said in a fake whisper.


"So much swag."

"When do you think he will start waving at the crowd?"

"How pretentious for a guy who can't grow a full beard."

"He doesn't even have a surname."

"HAH," Splinter Leg's voice boomed through the room, and it was painfully clear that he was talking loud so everybody could hear, "aren't you the new kid with the big bounty?"

"I have a name, Splinter Leg-ya. It would be in your best interest to remember it."

There was shuffling of chairs around the other pirates' table, but their captain put a hand up to stop them and laughed heartily. "I have better things to do than learn the names of every brat that flies a black flag and fashions himself a pirate."

Law was opening his mouth to reply, but Shachi blurted out, "Yeah, like taking a shower," and Penguin and Saki couldn't hold their laughter any longer. Law hid a very convenient cough behind a hand.

Disconcerted at the lack of fear he was instilling, Splinter Leg Gonzalo changed tactics and faced Saki, very serious.

"One of my men says you bothered him."

"This is what I get for being polite and saying sorry—"
"How are you going to compensate him?"

Penguin turned to her. "No, really, is this happening?"

The bartender interrupted them in an effort to save his furniture from destruction, "Sir, please, don't mind them, they were leaving already—"

"We weren't," Law said loud and clear.

"You'll be," and when Splinter Leg tried to step closer to Law, everybody in the table stood up. The presence of a grown bear in an orange jumpsuit became noticeable at once.

"Is… that a bear?"

"I am," Bepo replied.

There were a few screams around them.

"What in the—!"

"It's a monster!"

"It speaks!"

Bepo frowned and looked at the pirates defiantly. "I'm not sorry."

"Mister," Saki called the bartender, who was frozen with a vacant stare, probably wondering if the insurance would cover the damages that were about to happen, "if we get rid of them can we have our food for free?"

It wasn't probably the sort of question the man was expecting, but he nodded weakly, still.

At this point, the other pirates had left the table to come to their captain's support.

"Who do you think you—"

Saki ducked behind Penguin even before the man extended an arm towards her, and suddenly Law was up from his seat and the other captain was knocked out on the floor after getting a sword sheath to the windpipe.

For a few surreal seconds, the room sat in complete, stunned silence.

Penguin gently patted the bartender on the shoulder, prompting him to move before he got caught in the fight.

"Who's next?" Called Law.

Some were stupid enough to try, and the rest followed behind because they had to.

A blue sphere swallowed the room, and when the first few to shoot fell to the ground by their own bullets, Saki thought that this really was a useful power.

Saki knew, like she knew every night, that she needed to sleep, but instead she was folding clothes in her room. It wasn't even that late, but Law wanted to leave early in the morning to get as much daylight as possible when they got to the Grand Line.
It felt so strange to think about it. Her parents had worked in the Grand Line, before she was born, and she had hoped to see it someday, but never expected to be able to.

Usually, she wasn't one to be unnerved before a situation went awry, but she found herself nervously taking out the few clothes she had brought with her and rearranging them inside the chest in her room. There was a new item she didn't know what to do with. She looked at the folded square on top of her bedsheets, and a pattern of daisies and dandelions danced tauntingly in her vision.

She had planned to trash the dress, because she was absolutely, 100% completely sure that she was never wearing it again. But she hadn't, because when she had slipped out of it in the bathroom, she had noticed it had a saving grace that made up for every con.

It had pockets. Pockets! Two of them, nice and wide! So she washed it, put it in the drier, and sneaked it out of the laundry room before any of the guys could see it. They wouldn't understand. They had pockets everywhere.

She hid it under the rest of her clothes, closed the chest's lid and sat on it. She had a headache, but that wasn't anything new. She'd had them for years, never incapacitating but always pulsing in the background, though in the past two weeks they had been subsiding. She'd always attributed them to stress, but after what Law said the day before, it made her think that it could have been the aster powder's fault. Insomnia, headaches, nausea that maybe wasn't seasickness at all. She had been on heavy painkillers for a few days after the operation, so she had probably, unknowingly, skipped the worst of the withdrawal headaches. Wasn't she fortunate.

She was restless and she didn't feel like sleeping at all, so she took her sketchbook and made her way to the upper deck to get some drawing done while she had the time. It was always better to draw in front of the model than try to remember later.

She was barefoot, not a great idea considering the temperature outside, but she wanted to avoid bothering the others with the sound of her heels against the wood. Besides, she liked the cold.

She found the door to the higher deck open, and her first though was that Splinter Leg Gonzalo had come for revenge, as unlikely as it was given that they had left him no legs to splinter anymore, and she walked up the last steps in absolute silence. As soon as she went outside, it became clear that it wasn't the case, and she relaxed.

Law was leaning on the railing, staring absently at the scattered lights that were still lit in the town. It wasn't as if the view was very interesting, either. A fairly new building that housed the town's hospital was the major landmark in the view he had from that spot. She would have felt more inclined to be on the starboard side, in his place.

She approached him, quietly, because the floorboards of the deck weren't yet old enough to creak, and he didn't seem to notice her.

But he did. He always noticed everything, the bastard. She wondered why was she going in his direction at all, if she should say anything or sit far from him or turn around and resign herself to do the drawing from memory. And she needed one for Bepo, too.

Law lifted the weight of making a decision from her by speaking. "You should go to bed."

He didn't say it with much conviction, either because he was getting used to her irregular sleep patterns or because he was worse than her. At least she just fell asleep late and woke up early. He woke up constantly in the middle of the night, to the point that he didn't try to keep sleeping anymore. He took naps when he could, and coffee the rest of the time. It worked for him.
Saki thought there was no point on staying back anymore, so she went up to him, "Shouldn't you too?"

Law turned around with a smart retort ready, but he stopped himself to look up and down at her.

Saki automatically took a small step back. "What?"

He smirked. "You really are short." Without heels, the top of Saki's head barely reached Law's shoulders.

Stunned in surprise at the sudden offense, and out of any other semi-dignified course of action since bonking him on the top of the head with the sketchbook was not an option (not because it may have annoyed him, but because it was way too high up), she yelled, "You are too tall!" and left the way she had come, fuming.

She'd leave the drawing for another day.

"Go to the market! Run! Run!"

The air was thick with smoke and an unbearable heat, ashes raining down on the entire street. Take's cries brought Tsubaki back to earth, and without missing a beat she took his hand and ran as fast as her brother's legs and the uncomfortable weight on her back allowed them to, taking every shortcut she had learned in her life. There was flaming debris falling from the buildings, and she didn't register half of the people they crossed were running in their opposite direction. Getting to the market, where the street wasn't narrow and there was a quick path to the sea, was the only objective in mind. There would be neighbors there, and the grown-ups would know what was happening and what to do, and they'd only have to wait until grandpa came to pick them up and they were safe again.

But the closer they got to the market, the louder the yelling got, and they didn't sound as panicked as they should have been in the middle of a massive fire. As soon as the main street came to view, a deafening burst of gunfire hit the wall of a nearby building and stray bullets ricocheted inches shy of them. Tsubaki immediately pulled her brother between two buildings that hadn't been engulfed by the fire, not yet, and they caught their breath as they listened.

There was a battle going on behind them, on the market street, where they should have been safest. It wasn't like the shootings that happened every now and then, it sounded much bigger and more professional. Tsubaki poked her head just enough to look in the direction of their home, and she was horrified at the sight. From there, it looked like the entirety of the island had been swallowed by fire. Tsubaki had seen her fair share of fires in the town, because wooden structures were the norm, but neighbors rallied together when they happened and never let them get out of hand. This fire had spread too wide, too fast, and they barely had had any time to get out of their beds before it was upon them.

Take was hugging her waist and weeping quietly, swallowing his sobs as they came. She put an arm around him in a vague attempt at comfort, but she didn't know what to do. They couldn't stay there. They couldn't go back the way they had come, and they sure as hell couldn't find refuge in the marketplace. Who was fighting there? What was going on?

Water. It was the only thing that her mind could come up with. Fire couldn't get to them in the water.

"Take," she said with urgency, and the knot in her throat made it hard, "we need to move. Hold on a little longer, 'kay?"
She took his whimper as a yes, lifted the neckline of his shirt to cover his mouth and nose, and began to lead him through the alley, in the direction of the waterfront. The stone-built docks should be safe if they found a place to hide and none of the strangers fighting shot them, and they didn't swallow too much smoke… too many ifs.

There were more ships than she had expected, and she would have known because one of them was big. No big merchant ships or cruises stopped in the island, so she would have heard from somebody if one had. People rushed in and out of it, carrying firearms, and she did her best to stay in the shadows cast by the buildings against the flames in the near distance.

They ran to the quietest part of the waterfront, an old dock where only a few abandoned and dingy boats floated, took Take in her arms and walked down the steps that ended somewhere under water level. She sat down as low as she could and leaned against the stone at her right, her boots half-submerged in the sea as she ran her fingers through her brother's hair in a soothing motion, like their mother did when a nightmare woke them in the middle of the night.

The screams and the gunshots didn't cease, and they became a background sound that accompanied her as she drifted in and out of sleep, wondering what would their parents do in her place, what would her sister do, and the weight of her own thoughts became too heavy to bear.

Tsubaki dreamed of mom and dad, alive and well, and Saki being back home and quiet and silent, like she was when they were little girls, and aunt Du that she had only seen in photographs but everybody talked so fondly of, and both of their families were together and happy like they had once been.

She woke up at dawn with a rifle pointed straight to her face. Somebody out of her line of sight saved her from an early demise.

"What are you doing? Get that thing away from them! They're kids!"

"The girl has a sword," a man said.

"For the love of—she's a schoolgirl, I met her yesterday when we were combing the hideout area."

The man lifted the weapon at once, and Tsubaki blinked a few times. Her eyes stung and she couldn't focus. She barely recognized the girl she had met the day before on her way to class, who kneeled next to her and reached out to touch her face.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Tsubaki nodded weakly, but the gesture was far from convincing.

"We need to get out of here. Let's take them to the ship."

Tsubaki heard approaching steps and somebody tried to take her brother away from her. She tightened her grip on him, but she was too weak to resist —'Don't worry, you'll be together' said the girl, and Tsubaki had no choice but to let go—, and she felt her own body being picked up and lifted a moment later.

"Holy shit, what is this wind!?"

"Do you listen to anything Bepo says?"

"Course I do! But I don't understand half of it when he starts talking weather!"
"Will you stop bickering and help me!??" Saki yelled.

Penguin and Shachi got back to the ropes that secured the ship’s main sail and pulled. The canvas, aided by the wild winds that blew near Reverse Mountain, resisted their efforts to move it. Any other weather would have been better—rain, hail, even a thunderstorm—, but it didn’t matter how sunny it was when this sort of wind blew. Fishermen knew better than to venture when the winds blew so strong, and you knew you were doing something stupid when men who made their living in the sea decided to stay at home for the day. Bepo had looked at the cloudless sky over the mountain with furrowed brows, then at his expectant captain, and he seemed to decide something in the moment he declared he would sail the sub all the way up the mountain by relying on the engine. Law had shared a heavy look with him that none of the others understood, but the navigator didn’t back down, and then he ordered to take in the sails.

They went as fast as they could, because even Bepo was having trouble keeping the rudder straight, and it was plain why as soon as they hit the deck.

After one or two minutes that seemed much longer, with the sub rocking wildly around them and getting splashed by high waves, the huge black sail complied and slowly retracted until it couldn’t oppose any more resistance to the wind or change their intended course.

Law must have been watching from one of the bridge’s windows, because the engine blared to life while they were still trying to regain their breath, and the sub began to make its way through the waves in a smoother way.

Saki held onto the railing that oversaw the lower deck to avoid being swept away by the wind. The Red Line stood, imposing, before the sub, and from her point of view it looked like they were heading straight towards a wall, but there had to be an opening there that she couldn’t see. If Bepo said it was there, it was there, and there was no discussion about it. The guys soon joined her attempts to not get blown away, and their thoughts couldn’t have been very far from her own. They had stopped talking and were watching with anticipation as the rocky wall grew closer and the crashing waves sent salt water spray everywhere, until they were so close they really began to think that they were about to become pirate pancakes on sharp rocks—

But they didn’t, and then the sub shifted and its speed picked up, sending their backs against the metal bars. Saki turned around to see that it wasn’t the wind or the speed what was sending them back, it was the inclination of the ship because they were sailing up a mountain.

If Shachi’s face was anything to go by, he wasn’t the only one in need to some time to let it sink. It was one thing to hear it, like with Devil Fruits, and a very different one to experience it first hand. Normal people never saw those sorts of things in their life.

Penguin, on the other hand, was looking at the foamy trail of the sub with a grin from ear to ear.

Then, like a theme park ride, the sub’s speed decreased as they got to the top, and they had only a few precious seconds to see the traces of flotsam around them and take in what they meant when they began going down, and gravity and water currents worked together to put to shame the speed of the upwards trip.

Shachi almost lost his sunglasses with the momentum and wow he had pretty eyes, and with the distraction Saki lost her footing and would have met the floorboards headfirst had Penguin not hooked an arm around her in time. She straightened herself quickly, a hand never leaving the railing, and looked forward.

The submarine got to the bottom of the mountain and a giant wave splashed water over the deck.
This was it.

*The Grand Line.*

They ran forward like sugar deprived kids after an ice-cream cart and only stopped to take in the view when they slammed against the front railing. The wind was gentler this side of the Red Line and the waters weren't as wild, but sunlight had trouble permeating the mist at the foot of the mountain. They could make out the shape of two lighthouses flanking the stream that led into the Grand Line.

The door behind them opened and out came Law and Bepo, both looking extremely pleased.

"Twin Cape," Law announced, and the rest of the crew broke out in cheer.

Marina's ship got to Asteria at noon, and she saw a phantom city. Her men grouped around her in high alert, but there was no movement, no sound, no life in sight. Smoke still drifted from some buildings, and the smell of burnt wood and paint and fabric and flesh permeated the air in a revolting stench. There were corpses. There always were corpses when something like this happened.

*If I had come one day sooner,* she thought. *Just one day.*

She walked up the main street, leaving imprints on the ashes and the soot in the ground, staring at the ruins with so much intensity that she could have willed survivors to come forth. But none did.

She took off her jacket, pulled a bandanna from a pocket, and tied it around her head with a firm knot to keep the long curls from falling on her face.

"Search the entire island and look for survivors." She ordered. "They are our priority. Anything else that comes up can wait."

The soldiers began organizing themselves and she walked to the nearest building to push aside a fallen wooden beam. She would find.
Between the mountain and the deep blue sea

(Four o'clock, four o'clock...)

Hours went by, and after the initial adrenaline rush wore off, Saki was forced to face the cold, ruthlessly unforgiving reality: nothing was happening.

The sub was docked next to one of the lighthouses, and with nothing better to do, Saki paced up and down the small portion of flat land, testing the boundaries of human balance until she was certain she'd fall down the cliff if she tried to walk just a little bit closer to the edge. She proceeded to sit right there, at the foot of one of the lighthouses, legs dangling over a promise of death, and tapped the heels of her sandals against the rock with no discernible pattern. She intended to continue until she got tired or somebody yelled at her to stop, whichever came first. The second scenario wasn't even guaranteed to work. That's how bored she was.

The truth was that the Grand Line looked more normal than she had imagined. Which was fine, good, even, from a purely practical aspect, but the fact that it wasn't raining fire and brimstone and no hellish monster from the depths had come to greet them yet was mildly disappointing. Plain mist was ordinary and uncomfortable. She couldn't even make out the line of the horizon.

Bepo and Law were somewhere behind her, going over a map and occasionally walking around the area while the Log Pose set. She had no clue how they could have so much to talk about despite all the planning they had already done, but better safe than sorry, she supposed. In the meantime, Penguin and Shachi were keeping themselves busy with the lock of the lighthouse's door, which was quite content in its unbudging state, and the grunts and muttered curses in the background mixed with the sound of the tall waves breaking against the Red Line and splashing Saki's feet every now and then.

All in all, it was a quiet morning. At some point she had gone inside the sub to whip up something to eat, then went back to being bored and having nothing to do. She considered drawing, but she'd just ruin the paper with the humidity.

"Saki, can you give us a hand?" Penguin called.

She looked over her shoulder to see Shachi pulling at the doorknob with a red face and Penguin looking at her expectantly.

"Ask Captain, he should have spare ones." Then again, maybe not, considering he hadn't swapped his fingers for new ones yet. From the pitiful look Penguin flashed at her, he appeared to be thinking something along the same lines. "Alright, what do you want me to do?"

"Can you pick the lock of the lighthouse before we bust a gut."

"What makes you think I know how to do that?"

"...You don't?"

She couldn't see his eyes under the brim of his hat, but she was pretty sure that his expression was of disbelief.

"Do you honestly think all Asterians are criminals?"
"But you are."

"Good point, but I didn't open things. I stabbed them when they weren't looking."

"Well, had to give it a try," he shrugged, and no sooner than he started turning around, a wail froze them all in place.

There was a huge thud then, and small bits of rock rolled down the Red Line. A feeling of déjà vu washed over they guys, and Saki didn't understand why they had become so pale at the sight of a few pebbles.

"Bepo," Shachi asked nervously, forgetting momentarily about the door, "how much longer do we have to wait?"

"I'm not completely sure." He said, trying to make out the source of the noise through the mist. "The Log Pose's set already, but we can't take the first route. We need to wait until it pick up another magnetic field."

"Why?"

"Rumors say that there's an island on that route with a year-long wait," Law said.

Penguin's mouth fell. "That can happen? What if the route we take has another island like that?"

"We didn't find any similar warnings about the other routes. Not that there was much information to begin with, but one would assume it would be something worth pointing out to other sailors."

"There's also that volcanic island somewhere that is supposed to be unapproachable," Bepo chimed in. "There are warnings when places are too dangerous."

"That was on the northernmost route, right?"

"That or the second northernmost," Bepo shrugged. "Who knows?"

Penguin wasn't feeling more reassured as the conversation went on. "How unapproachable are we talking about?"

"Sailors who get too close die from smoke inhalation, but if they don't, they can't record the magnetic field. It's a death trap."

"Obviously, we won't be taking that route either."

"But how do we know we won't mess up with the route we pick?"

"We don't," Law said. "It's difficult to find detailed accounts of the different routes because most people never reach the other side of the Red Line, and the only ones who do that sort of long distance travel are related to the World Government."

"Cool," Shachi said in a tone that suggested that he was anything but. "That's very reassuring, Captain."

"Don't worry, we've got this under control."

"Just so you know, if it weren't you saying it, we'd already be looking for a ship back," Saki said from her spot.
Law took a long look at his crew and smiled a little. "Good luck on finding that ship if you ever change your mind. The only way from now on is forward."

"Isn't it always?"

Another cry made them all stare at the sea, and from the depths they saw a colossal shadow emerge. It made no attempt to go towards them, instead, it moved towards the Red Line and rammed it.

"I guess this is the monster the rumors mentioned," Bepo said.

Shachi rubbed the spot of his nose where his sunglasses rested. "You knew this was here? And we stayed in this place anyway?"

"We need to wait no matter what." Law answered. "Monster or not, it wouldn't make a difference."

"I wish I could be this calm about this as you."

Whatever the shadow was, it wailed again in a sort of mock agreement.

"How much longer, Bepo?" Penguin insisted.

"I'm doing what I can, okay!?"

"Right. We'll be at the door."

Not long after, the cries of the monster ceased, and slowly, its shape sunk underwater.

The mechanics gave up on the door and Shachi went to sit next to Saki with crossed legs. He took a few pebbles and began flinging them at the water. "Do you think it died?"

"Maybe it got bored."

It was midafternoon when the Log Pose finally set on their intended course. Soon they left the mist behind, and the rest of the day went on with an exciting mix of hail and thunder at the same time. The main sail got a few new holes, but nothing that couldn't be fixed with a bit of patience. Saki volunteered to do the first watch that night, and while the others slept, she drew the lighthouses of Twin Cape, hoping that there was a way to safely send mail from the Grand Line that she didn't know about.

Way before morning light came, she was relieved from duty by Penguin, and for once in a long time, she was able to fall asleep almost as soon as she hit the bed. Funny that it should happen as soon as she had entered uncharted territory.

Marina's usually pristine clothes were covered in dust and soot by the time reinforcements came. The man that by all rights should have prevented this disaster walked up to her, glancing around nervously and nose stuck in the air, as if he was afraid to catch something from the debris.

"Marina, what are you doing here?"

Her scowl deepened. One of her soldiers passed by the scene as he helped an elderly man walk to the makeshift hospital they had set up nearby. A queue of dozens of people of all ages waited outside the tent as Marines ran up and down with first aid kits and more fortunate townspeople helped give out water and food to those who had been left homeless.

"Your job, apparently."
"And why, exactly, you had to notify headquarters? Aren't you content to stick your nose in affairs that don't concern you?"

"I have every right to be here. I followed a lead on a smuggling ring that led to this island."

"For the love of..." The fellow captain ran a hand through his hair and said, incredulous, "Of course smugglers operate here; we all know that. You should have contacted me and kept yourself busy with your designated area, girl. Do you realize what this is doing for my image? For your image?"

Marina felt pure rage boiling inside her. "You're worrying about image when most of this town has been burnt to the ground?"

He glanced at the line of people and said, with a shook of his head, "Accidents happen."

"Bullshit!" She exploded at last, startling nearby townspeople. "This was no accident! There was a battle, we have dozens of eyewitnesses, and they all say the fires were intentional!"

The man groaned under his breath and spoke slowly, as if Marina had trouble understanding, "Listen quietly; I'll spell this out for you so it gets through your thick skull: nobody cares about this dumpster. Nobody cares about your witnesses. Asteria's been nothing but a headache for years, for everybody involved, and if the fire got rid some of the scum hiding in here, we're all better off for it. But if you find whoever's responsible for this, by all means, tell me so I can shake their hand."

There was a smack accompanied by a crack so loud that most soldiers halted to look at its source just in time to see Marina's fellow captain fall backwards with his nose bent ninety degrees. A bunch of his men rushed to his aid, but none of Marina's made any effort to move.

"If you haven't come to help, you can get the fuck out," and she spat back, "And by all means, tell our superiors about this. Maybe they will listen to your witnesses."

Shachi opened his mouth and before any sound could come out of it, Bepo growled faintly and said, "Yes, I'm sure this is the place, and if you ask again I'm using your towel when I shower."

Shachi's mouth closed promptly.

"You know you're a twit when you manage to get even on Bepo's nerves," commented Penguin.

"Then why do you keep looking back and forth from the window to him?"

In front of them, filling all the view from the front window of the bridge, a mountain stood before them. There was no sight of dirt or plant life, and it was so tall that the Heart Pirates could have believed that they were staring at the Red Line again, had it not been for the grey of the stone.

Saki listened to her crewmates as she tried to read the map that Bepo and Law had been revising at Twin Cape and tried to make out the shape of the island. Whoever drew it hadn't been concerned about landmass, leaving the island as a mere outline colored in black with the name Qaryn next to it, and instead depicted with precision all variations that the currents that lead to it could take depending on the weather.

The map's legend was over a foot long, plus the annotations, and the lines that marked the currents were a jumbled mess that try as she might, she couldn't decipher. Her appreciation for Bepo went up several notches, as did the curiosity of why their captain was not only a doctor but also capable of making sense of that paper. He must have led an interesting life.
"I wonder how people live here," Penguin said, making her look up.

"Maybe at the top?"

"There's supposed to be an entrance somewhere," Law said. "Bepo, let's circle the island."

"Aye, aye."

As they moved around the huge rock, its height began to diminish until it was barely twice the sub's height and they saw an opening wide enough for passage. A wood structure had been built on each side, fashioned like castle battlements, and there appeared to movement behind. When they sailed into the gap, they were stopped by three heavy chains that hung from side to side, barring access to any ships.

Some of the people on the wall pointed weapons at them, but after a moment it became obvious that no one intended to shoot at the sub, not yet. It was risky, but it looked like they needed to go out to talk to them.

Law gave them instructions fast. "Bepo, stay here and get us away if we are in danger. The rest of you, take your weapons and go on deck. Be cautious. Let's meet these people."

He went first, and the rest followed in silence and high alert, ready to lose all dignity and bolt inside the ship if necessary, but they weren't attacked.

From the deck, they could see a group of men and women alike, all armed, but only some pointing bows and guns at them.

"Who goes?" A man holding a rifle yelled. He was in his thirties, had long black hair tied in a low ponytail, and could have looked more epic if the wind hadn't been uncomfortably blowing it on his face. Seeing his expression, Saki could have believed that he had just eaten a whole lemon, but she could tell if it was because they weren't well received or because his hair was really getting in the way.

"Heart Pirates!" Law shouted back. "This island is the next stop in our route! We aren't looking for trouble!"

The man turned around to talk to somebody that wasn't visible from the submarine, then rose his voice again. "How many of you are there?"

By the way Law suddenly squared his shoulders, Saki could tell he hadn't liked the question at all.

"Why do you want to know?"

"It's me who asks the questions here, pir—mhhfff!" A hand from the person to his side had appeared from the battlement to cover his mouth and push him back.

The hand's owner appeared right away, a woman with a raised scar that ran from her right eyebrow to the middle of her cheek. Her tightly braided hair was put up in a ponytail that looked more functional than his companion's, and the smile she displayed made it look as if she was staring at a joke instead of a group of wanted criminals.

"What Charming here wanted to say is that before you can come into the island, we'll do a quick search of your ship, and if you don't like the idea you can turn back the way you came."

Obviously the last option wasn't feasible, because the Log Pose was unmistakably pointing to that
place, and no amounts of navigating genius from Bepo could save them if they tried to sail away without a working compass.

Saki kept glancing from Law to the woman on the wall. Cornered and tense, she wasn't sure if he was about to unsheathe Kikoku by the way he was thumbing its hilt, but at last he relented. "There's us and our navigator."

The woman's eyebrows flew up, and the man from before appeared back on scene, this time not bothering to keep his voice low so the pirates didn't hear.

"They're lying. You read the newspapers."

"But these are all the people on the wanted posters, aren't they?" She said, staring with suspicion at the vessel below.

"Do you honestly think they'd pay so much for this guy's head if he didn't have more men with him?"

She cocked her head left and right, pondering their options. "No way to know but see it with our own eyes."

The man made a grunt of disapproval, but didn't speak further.

Law didn't like to be put in such a vulnerable situation, but there was not much else he could do short of starting a battle they couldn't win, not even if they took down all the security. They wouldn't be able to stay in the island once the locals learned of what had happened. "You can board the ship," he said grudgingly, "but we're keeping an eye on you."

"As do we," The man shot back. "Do something funny and we'll use your sub for target practice."

The Heart Pirates had no choice but to watch as a plank was lowered to their sub with some difficulty—and no way they were going to help—and greeted the five people who came down the wall with the dirtiest glares they were capable of. Leading the group was the woman from before. Saki noted how she had woven white threads in her braids, and as pretty as it looked, she hoped it also blew on her face.

"So? Are you going to show us the way?" Her voice had a teasing quality, like this was routine. It probably was. It was certainly condescending.

"Banu!" The man, still on the wall, shouted. "If you aren't out in ten minutes—"

"We know!" She shouted back. "You don't need to say it every time!" And she turned to the pirates with a self-sufficient smile. "Lead the way, gentlemen. And lady."

The guards made their way into the sub, checking the biggest rooms along the way in search of something Saki couldn't pinpoint, but they never stayed in one after a cursory glance. There was a tense moment when they got to the bedrooms and they asked Law to open the door to his quarters (Whatever you're looking for it isn't there. 'Open the door if you don't have anything to hide.' 'No.'), though not as much as when they took a look inside the sickbay (Saki, Shachi and Penguin discreetly stepped out when they noticed Law was frowning, really frowning, not the usual relaxed frown they had grown used to see. They were sure somebody was about to die when they set foot in the surgery room with dirty boots).

(On the upside for the pirates, the faces of the guards when they checked the locked storage room
with the preserved organs spoke of divine retribution at the unwanted intrusion.)

After the lower levels were checked, they went up at once to the bridge, and all the murderous intent blew out in a split second there.

Bepo had his arms crossed over the helm, patiently waiting for whatever the strangers were doing in the ship. He hadn't heard anything alarming so far save for a few retching noises, but turned his head to the stairs when he heard people coming up. A lot of awkward staring followed.

"Is… Is that a bear?" A very confused man dared to ask.

Bepo didn't take it kindly. "Who are you?"

And then the guards began to talk all at once, pushing each other aside to get a better view, caution forgotten, flung through a porthole and left to fend off the sea monsters on its own.

"It can speak!"

"Holy Mother of—"

"What the fuck."

"Is… is it really a bear?"

"Is it dangerous?"

"He's a he, not an 'it,'" Law noted, annoyed at the fact that he wasn't as annoyed at he should have.

"But is it a bear or a furry?"

"I'M SORRY!"

"YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHO THEY ARE, DON'T APOLOGIZE!"

"So weak…"

"So it isn't a bear?"

"Volkan, the navigator is a bear! A real bear!" The woman said between fits of hysterical laughter when they were out in the open again. "You should have seen everyone's faces!"

The man glared from her to the pirates, back to her, back to Law. "Did you do something to—is that a fucking bear!?"

Law released a sigh of exasperation. "Can we go in or not?"

"They're fine!" The woman gave a thumbs up. "Never thought I'd see the day… a bear navigating a ship…"

Volkan shook his head and yelled at the other guards, "You heard her! Lower the chains!"

"You aren't going up the wall again?" Penguin asked when the strangers on board didn't make any effort to move.

"No. We'll show you around when you dock. Standard security protocol," the woman explained away with a shrug. "Name's Banu, by the way."
Nobody replied. She chuckled under her breath.

Bepo steered the sub into the bay that opened before them. Now that they could see from inside, it became clear that the island was the top of an ancient volcano. The sea had filled most of it through the gap, leaving only a thin strip of flat land at the foot of the wall, which doubled as a natural means of protection. As expected of one of the first stops in the Grand Line, and despite how inhospitable the environment would have initially seemed, the town was full of activity.

What made the place unique, however, was its buildings, or rather, lack of thereof. There were a few constructions and what appeared to be market stalls along the waterfront, but the rock of the wall behind was full of man-made holes; horizontal rows of artificial caves where the townspeople lived. Paths carved on the stone allowed them to navigate their way around the town, and slopes and hundreds upon hundreds of worn steps connected all the different levels. It was a maze of streets, reminiscent of an anthill, complete with the incessant activity.

Saki observed as the colorful fabrics that hung from many windows danced with the wind of the higher tiers of the island; a group of kids running down a flight of stairs, playing tag, and when the sub got closer, she noticed how the inhabitants of the island hadn't been content with only painting the outside of their homes. There were intricate details carved around the windows and doorframes of the houses, and the low barriers that lined many of the paths had reliefs of vines and leaves. These people were sculptors, not builders, and they had turned their mountain into a work of art.

It was a beautiful island, one of those where mankind had grown old along with the place and left its mark on it, the same way the stone had marked the lives of its dwellers. Where others would have left for better lands, these people stayed and learned to make the best of what they had. She had never imagined that bare rock could have been so welcoming and full of life. In that moment, Saki understood why her mother used to speak with such longing of the Grand Line. She would have never seen this if she had stayed in North Blue, and she smiled a little at the thought.

Docked safely at the port, they were escorted by the guards to a place where they could spend the night, but it seemed more out of formality than mistrust, if the relaxed demeanor of the group and the people they passed was anything to go by. The kids Saki had seen running before stopped to wave at them with grins, and a middle aged man selling trinkets tried his best to catch their attention until Banu told him, smiling, "Leave it for later!"

Speaking of whom, she kept trying to make small talk with the pirates, but despite their interest in the island, they were trying to stay annoyed at the invasion of their living space. Banu seemed to take it in stride, continuing the conversation alone if nobody replied.

"This first level of caves is for travelers," she explained. "There are shops here and on the streets above if you need anything, but," she signaled to a wider path that ran several rows above them, "from that street upwards passage is forbidden to foreigners."

"Why?" Law asked, interest officially piqued.

The woman's smirk widened, apparently satisfied that he had got him to talk. "All those caves are residential. You have no business there."

"Is that so," he replied and kept looking up, unconvinced.

Banu's perpetual half-smile turned sharper. "I wouldn't be getting any ideas in your place. You'll be spending the next four days here before you can leave."

"We told you before that we aren't looking for trouble."
"One never knows with you newcomers," she said, leading them to a cave that had its door open. The doorframe was made of solid wood, directly mounted on the mountain's opening and painted the same color as the stone. Carved to the right of the entrance was a simple circle with a dot in the middle.

"Do you have trouble with pirates often? Given your location you must get a fair amount them."

"Some try to, but that's why we have a security control at the entrance. They aren't a major concern nowadays."

"Then who is?"

"And we've arrived," Banu said, crossing the door and leaving the question unanswered. Unexpectedly, the venue looked like a normal building from the inside. Somebody had even taken the time to carve lines on the walls so it looked like they were made of masonry.

"Odd to see you down the wall at this hour, young lady." An old man so tiny that Saki hadn't noticed him sat on a cattail rush chair, resting all his weight on a well-used cane. He had long white mustache and kept his head covered with a brightly-colored woven hat. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Good day, Onur. I've brought you visitors."

The other guards greeted him as if they were family. Possibly one of them was.

"Kind as always," the man chuckled. "Will you introduce us?"

"Of course. These are the Heart Pirates," and she turned to the aforementioned people. "And this is Onur, one of our elders."

"Just by virtue of being old. I'm the owner of this place," he tapped the floor with his cane with more strength than his body would indicate, "and in my youth I carved every window and every block on this wall with my own hands. Well, and chisels!" The man laughed at his own joke, but Saki shifted a bit at the mention of the instruments of certain death. "That is something to be proud of."

"He's bragging," Banu explained for the pirates' benefit. "He tells the same to very traveler he meets."

"That does not make it any less true."

"Of course it doesn't. I trust that you'll be fine on your own?"

"Carry on," the man waved her away. "It does not do for you to be down here."

The group was about to step out when one of the guards asked all of a sudden, "Did we tell them about the curfew?"

"Good going, I almost forgot!" Banu said, and turned to the pirates. "You can't go out after nine."

"More security?" Law asked, evidently fed up.

"For everyone's benefit. It's easy to take a bad step on these streets when there isn't much light. Nobody can go out unless there's an emergency." With that said, she waved at the others in the exit's direction. "See you around."
The guards left, and as soon as they were out, Onur knocked on the floor with his cane to get the pirates' attention.

"Now then," he started, stern but still amused. "I don't make a habit of housing complete strangers. May I have your names?"

"Mr. Onur wasn't startled at all when you first spoke to him," Saki told Bepo, who had just spooked a woman he had bumped into. "I think that's a first."

"He could tell I am a mink. I wonder if he's met many in this island? There aren't that many of us out there."

"You're a what?"

"A mink."

"But aren't you a bear?"

"I'm... I'm both. A bear mink."

"But minks are this small?" Saki gestured with her hands. "And brown? And... different...?"

"We aren't all the same. Are all humans tiny with messy red hair?"

"No, but that's..." She lost track of her own thought. "Did you just call me tiny? Why is everybody getting cheeky with me?"

"If you're tired I can give you a piggyback ride."

"No wonder you and Captain get along," she mumbled, and after a pause she added. "Maybe when no one's watching."

Bepo patted her head. Saki wasn't sure how much more condescension she could take on a single day, but she decided to let it slide. Bepo's day had been rough enough already.

"Girl! Miss! And tall mister! Come take a look at my wares!"

"I think that's us," he said. The man that had tried to catch their attention before was going at it again.

"Might as well see what he has."

They approached the man's stall, which was a long table with several trinkets that contrasted with the dark cloth underneath. Aside from the typical jewelry Saki was used to seeing, there were bracelets, necklaces and diadems woven in the same style as the innkeeper's hat. Some had the same symbol that was carved beside the inn's door.

"That's a beautiful tattoo on your arm, miss. Do you like flowers? Can I interest you in this?" He showed her a pair of silver earrings shaped like lilies.

"I was wondering about these, actually." She pointed to the diadems. "I've seen these colors and patterns a few times since we got here."

"Ah, yes, these are popular souvenirs. The colors are typical from our island, and the circle with the dot is how it was represented in maps long ago."
"So it's like a local symbol?"

"You'll see it everywhere. Ah, but enough boring stories, you look like a lady who appreciates color. Here, touch it, it's made from the softest threads." He grabbed Saki's hand to put a diadem in it, and she had to make an effort not to flinch away. "Want one?"

"How much?"

"Five hundred beli."

"Not interested, thank you." She smiled and turned around, knowing what was coming.

"Wait, four hundred!"

She faced the man again, "I don't think our Captain would approve this kind of spending…"

"If that's the case, just because it's you… Three fifty?"

"I don't know, I saw the same in a stall down there and they were selling at two hundred…"

"But we didn't—" Bepo started, but he got nudged on the shin and took the hint.

"That scammer wouldn't know quality if it hit him on the face! His dye runs as soon as it gets wet, trust me, miss, you won't find better for a lower price."

"Two hundred."

"You're ruining me!"

"Take it or leave it, I can't pay any more."

There was a momentary stare down, after which the man shook his head and smiled as he put the diadem in a paper bag. "You're used to this, aren't you?"

Saki grinned as she dug for the belis in her pocket and Bepo took the bag and looked inside.

"It's pretty," he commented.

"Does it get the Bepo stamp of approval?"

"Sure. It matches…” He looked at Saki up and down, unsure. "…You?"

She didn't know how to take that.

As soon as night began to fall, activity near the port dwindled. The market stalls began to close, the sailors hurried to carry their merchandise to the ships and warehouses, and the townspeople trickled into their homes until there was nearly no one in sight on the streets.

Saki waited with Bepo and Law at the docks while Shachi and Penguin were busy dropping in the sub a 'fundamental piece for the ship' that should really had been acquired in Lymes, not from a sketchy pile of 'used' scraps, but circumstances being what they were, it had slipped out of their minds. Neither had wanted to explain what exactly it was or what they needed it for, since the sub was not old enough to be in need of repairs, but Penguin had said that everybody would be grateful for it when the time came.
Meanwhile, Saki watched three boats that approached the docks from across the bay, where the entrance to the island was. A group of around twenty people waited for them, and when they reached solid land, the boats' passengers exchanged a few words with them and traded places. The boats sailed again towards the wall, and the guards who had just ended their shift stretched and made small talk with each other. Some went off, but among the ones who remained, Saki distinguished Banu and the man who had so unceremoniously received them a few hours ago.

He wore one of those woven hair ties she had seen earlier at the street vendor. He wasn't very tall, and his face while he talked to his colleagues was remarkably friendlier than any they had seen so far from him. It didn't last, though, because soon enough one of the guards noticed the Heart Pirates standing a ways away and pointed to them. His expression soured instantly, and with confident steps and a firm grip around the strap of his rifle, he walked towards them, apparently ready to point their weapon at them if he so deemed necessary. He seemed to be the short-fused sort.

"What are you doing here?" He asked, and it sounded more like an order than a question, so of course, none of the pirates was impressed.

"Why do you care?" Law said. "It isn't nine yet. Aren't we allowed outside, either?"

The group of guards was now paying attention to the conversation, and Banu kept moving her feet, as if she were unsure to intervene or not.

"Don't get smart with me and give me an answer."

"Ponytail-ya, I suggest you cut back with the demands if you want me to be civil."

"His bar for smart must be set pretty low if that qualifies," Saki said in a prime demonstration of what not to say to a guy with a weapon.

The man frowned with an intensity that could put a smiley Law on a good day to shame, and took a pair of steps in Saki's direction in an intimidation attempt that didn't really work. Attacking them for that sort of insult would have been stupid, to put it mildly, and his companions didn't seem to think that intervening was worth it.

"You think you can get away with saying whatever you want because you're a woman?"

"Why do you assume I wouldn't—" Saki cut short her retort when she heard two pairs of steps walking down the gangplank, and at the same time, Banu must have decided that enough was enough, because she approached the group before things got ugly.

"Can't you play nice every now and then, Volkan?"

"Pirates don't play nice. You know that better than anybody else."

Banu's ever present smirk dropped, and Volkan's own face changed the moment he saw her reaction.

"Sorry, I-I shouldn't have…"

"Don't worry about it," she shrugged it off, and the smile came back, though noticeably smaller. "But more importantly, they aren't breaking the curfew. And what's the worst that can happen at this hour? That they trip down a staircase and break their necks?" Their eyes met for a moment too long, and Saki had the distinct impression that they were missing something in this conversation.

"I think you meant the best," Volkan said with a sigh, but despite his words he relaxed a little, and Law took the chance.
"As entertaining as it is to hear your banter, we've got better things to do," he said apathetically, in a way that left no doubt that 'entertaining' was the furthest thing from his mind.

"Don't mind Volkan, please," Banu said. "He's just a little rough around the edges, but he means well."

Said man cursed under his breath in a language the pirates didn't understand, but apparently Banu found it worthy of a chuckle before adding. "You should really go back to the inn before the sun sets. The stone is treacherous in the dark, and it gets slippery with the night dew."

"Sounds great. We've had enough slips for a lifetime," Shachi said.

"We were about to head back, actually," Law admitted.

"Then why didn't you say so from the start?" Volkan said, irritation rising again.

Instead of replying, Law stared him down, which wasn't a difficult feat from his height, but Banu put it in words anyway for the benefit of everybody.

"Because you're being an ass. Come on, Volkan," she tapped his arm a few times, "it's been a long day. Mr. Law, everybody, have a good night's rest."

Quietly, everybody in the group parted ways, and the Heart Pirates headed straight to the inn. Saki kept looking around her, more out of habit than anything, because something about the town was nagging at her mind. It felt as if tiny inconsistencies had been piling up until they weighed too much to pass unnoticed any longer.

That Volkan being unpleasant with them wouldn't surprise her on its own, because he had known who they were when they showed up at his gate and the newspapers hadn't been kind (or too kind, depending on how one viewed it) to the crew lately. But Banu had told them that they didn't think the pirates they allowed in were particularly dangerous, their escorts to the inn had been friendly and relaxed, and the townspeople didn't seem to be afraid of them at all.

Then there was the matter of the curfew. If it was truly only enforced to avoid falls down the mountain, why had Volkan made a beeline for them when they were on the flattest part of the island and wasn't even night yet? To add to the strange behavior, there was also the search they had conducted on the sub and the mystery of what they could have been looking for. The pirates had been allowed to keep their weapons and carry them everywhere, and besides, the ship was full of medical instrumental and potentially dangerous machinery. The inspection had been fairly quick, too, so they must have been looking for something visible at first glance.

Nothing added up.

Night came, and with it, the island fell into absolute, almost uncanny silence. At dinnertime it had become evident that there weren't any other travelers staying in the inn aside from the Heart Pirates.

Saki's reprieve from insomnia didn't continue, though, too awake by the little things that she didn't understand about the place. Seeing that she wouldn't be able to fall into sleep's clutches anytime soon, she began to sketch the last town they had visited in North Blue. She could remember the details with a vivid quality that used to amaze uncle Arthur when he was teaching her how to draw. If she closed her eyes, she could still see the disposition of the streets, the contrast of the new, orange bricks of the hospital compared to the old of the other buildings, and if she concentrated a lot, she could place each different graffiti that had been written on its walls. Having a stupidly good memory for detail wasn't as practical as one would imagine once out of school, and Saki had never attended
one to begin with, so she had been happy to find a good use for that ability. It was one of the reasons she had taken to drawing with so much dedication. It was also part of the reason that she went over the newly issue wanted posters every morning.

Still, remembering wasn't imagining or drawing. She recalled how much she had struggled at first and how frustrated she used to get when her work didn't resemble at all the picture she had in her mind. It still happened, sometimes, enough to get at her ego and make her work harder.

After a while, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a light outside. She approached the only window in her room and watched as a pair of people patrolled the street right outside the inn. She wondered if they would justify it saying it was for their benefit as well, but soon the guards moved and disappeared from her sight, up some steps that went way above their level.

It was definitely strange, this level of security, and organized by townspeople themselves. It hit her then that she hadn't seen a single Marine that day, despite Qaryn being a mandatory stop for many pirates. She would have thought they'd be circling the island like sharks, waiting for any newbie with black flag to show up and get them a no return trip to Impel Down.

*Is this how people on the Grand Line live? Don't they have Marines to protect them?*

When her vision got too blurry to work, she blew out the candle on her desk and lay on her bed, drifting in and out of shallow sleep.

---

Law was already sitting on a low sofa and sipping coffee when Saki went to the inn's main room. She was wearing the diadem she had bought the day before.

She looked around for more people and yawned openly. "Do you ever sleep? Other than on the sub's deck, I mean."

"Not in hostile places."

"...You've noticed it too, huh."

"Bepo as well. There's something these people are keeping from us. We should watch out while we're here, maybe talk to them and try to find out so we don't get involved in whatever it is."

"You're way too goddamn awake," she sentenced, and dropped her butt on the nearest ottoman. It was soft and it swallowed her.

"You'll fall asleep again."

"Shhhhh."

The bell on the door rang, and with it Saki was forced to come back to reality. Banu came in wearing ample cotton pants, a strapless crop top and a long vest that reached her knees. The scars on her face weren't the only ones, she had a few cuts running through the side of her abs. Saki wanted those abs for herself.

"Wow, you're early birds," the woman said with a smile.

Law saluted her with a nod; Saki just let out a weak grunt.

"Not a morning person?"

"Not before her morning coffee."
"She's in luck, then, because Onur's is the best. Where is he?"

"Somewhere in the back, I think."

Banu sat on the opposite end of the sofa from Law. "Nice diadem," she told Saki, extending an arm forward. "Look, my bangles are the same!"

Indeed, the colors were similar and it had the same pattern of white circles. "So it isn't just a tourist thing."

Banu laughed at the suggestion. "No, but you'd think so with all the things they sell at the market. The people of this island are very set in their ways. A good thing if you ask me, they haven't lost their identity among so many travelers. They put symbols of the Mother everywhere, even those who don't believe in her. It's traditional and looks neat. Even Onur has one next to the door.

"The Mother?"

"That's what I said. You don't know what the symbol means?"

"The vendor said it was the old way of representing this island on maps."

"That is true, but it isn't the whole story. Onur should be able to tell you if you want to know… Ah, there he is!"

The man came out from a door behind the counter and walked to them with labored steps. "Oho, I'm away five minutes and two beautiful women appear in my house. Maybe I should leave it unattended more often."

"No, you've come just at the right moment," Banu grinned. "Could you tell these guys about the Mother?"

Onur blinked a few times, surprised. "Surely you've learnt the stories by heart by now? You can tell them yourself."

"I know you'll do a better job. Oversharing is your thing."

"Well, if you insist…" The man said sheepishly, though he seemed eager to start talking. "There are ancient stories about—"

Saki raised her hand suddenly. "May… may I have a coffee first?"

Saki would happily admit that it was easily the best coffee she had ever had, and could just as easily get depressed if she thought that she'd likely never taste it again after leaving the island. Such was the ephemeral nature of life on seas, her mom used to say. Her mother also loved complicated words and, according to dad, made coffee undrinkable to anyone but her.

The rest of the crew had appeared while Onur was in the kitchen, and they were all now waiting for the man to start telling them about this Mother business.

"There isn't much to explain, to be honest. Our legends say that it was the Mother who gave birth to our people. Devotion for her used to be strong, and we prayed and brought her offerings to the shrine in the mountain's lowest cave. The circle," he drew one in the air with a finger, "represents our island and her body. The dot in the middle is this town, or her belly, qaryn in our old tongue. That's where the name of the island comes from."
"Of course, people didn't magically pop into existence on a volcano's crater," said Banu with a
dismissive wave. "Thousands of years ago, people must have come through Reverse Mountain and
settled here because it was a convenient stop for sailors."

"And it still is."

"Speaking of convenient locations, it's a wonder that this place has managed to stay independent for
so long," Law said, having reserved the question for a good enough moment to drop it, "Don't
outsiders try to take over the island to use it for their own purposes? The Navy, pirate crews?"

Banu raised an eyebrow at him. "Why do you think we keep security so tight at the entrance?"

"I doubt such flimsy fortifications and a handful of soldiers could hold up against a well-organized
attack."

They were startled by the sudden knock of a cane against the floor. "The Mother granted us the wall
to protect us from intruders. For as long as our people exist, she'll keep us safe," Onur said
brusquely, leaving no doubt that he was cutting the conversation on his end, and disappeared from
the room.

"Touchy," Shachi muttered.

"You don't beat around the bush, do you?" Banu sighed. "Foreigners are a delicate subject with
some people, nowadays. You should be more careful with what you say."

"It didn't look like anybody in town minded us yesterday," Penguin said.

"And certainly nobody seems to mind you, either." Law pointed out. "Have you lived here for
long?"

"You shouldn't make assumptions based on looks. People of many skin colors are born here. You've
seen them."

"I don't think he meant it that way," Saki intervened, and Banu looked at her with interest. "You talk
about the people of this island as if you weren't one of them. You keep saying 'they,' not 'us.'"

Law stayed silent and simply smiled at the ceiling.

"Weren't you asleep?" Penguin asked, and Saki just shot him a lazy look and took another gulp of
coffee.

Banu took a moment to reply. "I came to this island before the Golden Age of Piracy took off.
Things were different back then. Safer. And for all intents and purposes I am one of them, even if I
don't remember it all the time."

"Excuse me, do you have today's newspaper?" Saki asked Onur over the counter.

"If it isn't on a table, a customer must have taken it," he said curtly.

"Oh… thanks."

The newspaper was nowhere to be seen, so Saki decided to go outside, wondering if she should be
worried about the man spitting in their food. She was stopped just as soon as she put a foot across the
door.
"Where do you think you're going on your own? Didn't you listen to what Captain said?" Shachi was approaching and shooting her a dirty look.

She opened her mouth a couple of times to reply before she said, "I… don't believe I was thinking at all."

"No shit."

"I'm not used to having a nanny, okay?"

"Just admit you were about to screw up."

Saki put her hands in her pockets and looked at her sandals as she kicked nonexistent dust. "Do you want to see how far we can climb up the mountain before somebody tries to throw us out?"

"Count me in."

The town was as busy as it had been the day before. It seemed odd that some townspeople had problems with foreigners when nobody seemed to bat an eye at them. Then again, she supposed that having a constant influx of new people could be challenging. Was the constant presence of travelers the reason for the security? Was she reading too much into it?

A loud whistle interrupted her thoughts. "Saki, take a look at this!"

Shachi was some steps ahead of her, facing the bay from the first street they weren't allowed onto. That tier was wider than most others, but not many people were using it at that hour. As they had been told, it seemed to be mainly a residential area.

Saki walked up to him and looked in the direction he pointed to. The water of the bay glistened under the sunlight as if it had been sprinkled with diamond dust. From that point of view, the same as from the gap directly opposite to them, the people moving at the foot of the mountain and going on their business up and down it were like ants hurrying to get their job done.

"Not a bad view for one of your drawings. What do you think?"

Saki turned to him, not expecting that comment in the least. "Is that why you wanted me to look?"

"Don't you spend most of your free time like that? Always drawing or reading or whatever you come up with to not have to be with all of us at once."

For the second time that day, Shachi left him out of smart replies. "Have I really been doing that?"

"Good to know that you don't do it on purpose, I guess."

She wasn't what to say, and during the heavy silence that followed, they heard two people talking from one of the windows above.

"—telling you, something was out last night! Old Arslan says he saw a shadow through the curtains."

"Must have been a patrol."

"So up high? That's nonsense. You heard about the pirate crew that came to town yesterday, right? The made the news last week, apparently their captain is getting famous fast..."
"We'd be better off if we just allowed a few Marines to set up camp on the harbor, I tell you. Don't know when the elders will see sense... The guards at the entrance can't keep up. The trouble's inside, not outside."

"I suppose you're right..."

The conversation faded, and the two redheads kept quiet for a good minute afterwards.

"What the hell was that about?" Shachi said quietly.

"I don't know, but I'm pretty sure we weren't supposed to hear it."

"We'd better go down and tell the others."

Saki spared one last moment to glance up at the open window, but the only thing she saw was a cloth of red and yellow and green fluttering in the wind.

The Heart Pirates spent the remainder of the day looking over their shoulders, but other than that, nothing of note took place.

People were nice. Onur's mood got better. Saki finished her drawing and Penguin and Shachi helped her find a post office. She reminded Penguin that he still hadn't told her what design he wanted for his tattoo.

She went to sleep thinking that maybe they were being paranoid, after all. It had been only a conversation.

A shot and a scream rang through the stillness of the night.

Saki woke up with a jolt, sat upright and backed on reflex until she hit the bed's headboard. Her heart pounded in her throat furiously, as if it was trying to come out, and she whipped her head left and right frantically, trying to find the source, 'where's the danger, where?'

It didn't take her long to realize that nobody else was in her room.

The scream had sounded very close, and it had been a woman's, so it couldn't have come from inside the inn. She pushed herself out of bed and stumbled to the window, trying her best to see the street and carelessly ignoring that there was a high chance that someone with a gun was around.

Straining her eyes, she managed to see the shape of a collapsed person on the ground below her. At once, she opened the window, lifted her legs over the windowsill, and leaped down. Her room wasn't too high up from street level, but a bad fall would hurt, regardless.

She lost her balance when her feet hit the ground, so used to jump in heels that, ironically, she had trouble doing it barefooted, but she picked up herself from the floor as fast as she could.

The figure lay a scarce five feet away, and when Saki approached it she stepped on something wet and sticky. She wanted to run, but she couldn't leave this person be. She knelt next to her and turned the woman on her back to see where the wound was while in her head she just repeated like a mantra, 'not again, not again, not again—'

"Banu?" She croaked.

The answer she received was in the form of ragged breaths, and she felt her blood run cold when she
touched the area of the wound and the woman whimpered.

"Don't fall unconscious, okay?" Saki said faintly, pressing on the wound with the palm of her hand. It didn't look good, there was so much blood already on the ground and it was happening again, what could she do, she needed help—

"Move," said somebody to her right, and she had been so lost in her panic that she hadn't heard Law approach with their crewmates in tow.

"What happened?" She heard Onur say, and a second later she saw him running towards the wounded woman at a speed he hadn't though he was capable of. "Banu? Banu! Who did this to you?" He let go of his cane and dropped to her side.

"Saki, move or she'll die," Law insisted in a calm voice, and that got her out of her daze long enough to back away from the woman. Her eyes, though, didn't leave her.

Penguin pulled on her arm gently. "Come on, get up," and when he didn't get any response, he asked, "Saki? You okay?"

Shachi rushed to her other side. "Man, that's a lot of blood."

"You aren't injured, right?" Bepo said, sniffing the air near her.

Law's head snapped in their direction for a brief moment.

"I'm fine," Saki said, even if she was evidently not. She looked down at her hands, and she found that she couldn't keep them still.

Shachi insisted, "Your hands are shak—"

"There's a goddamn woman dying next to you, I'm fine!"

She felt everyone's stares burning through her and flinched. She hadn't meant to take her nerves out on Shachi.

"C'mon, let's go," Penguin said, as if her outburst hadn't just happened. "You need to wash up." Saki stood up with his help, still trembling and trying with all her strength not to, wishing that her crewmates hadn't seen her like that.
There was a sort of magnetism, Saki pondered, that kept landing her butt on the sickbay. An inexplicable force of nature come to take revenge for all the time that she should've been scheduling doctor appointments but didn't.

That inexplicable force of nature went by the name Trafalgar Law and was doing some clean up in the surgery room with Penguin, very much Not Angry at her, and appeared to be aware that keeping her on a cot with her right foot propped up on a pillow was as much of a torture as she made it out to be. She didn't attempt to put her infiltration abilities to use and try to pull a stealthy retreat from the sickbay, because she didn't want him more Not Angry at her.

After an awkward apology on her part for yelling at Shachi, the mechanic had taken pity on her and offered to bring her a book to pass time. But he was going to choose it, it'd be the most boring looking he could find, and he'd rummage through her things while he was at it. She said thanks anyway, and he took off with a satisfied grin.

He delivered. Shachi returned with First civilizations, volume III, in one hand and a photo in the other. He threw the book at her, aiming for the stomach, and approached while waving the picture.

"It fell from out of the book. Who are they?"

Saki snatched the picture where a group of people were smiling at the camera. She pointed at a very pale, blonde woman covered in freckles. "This is my mom. Wasn't she pretty?"

"'Was'?"

Saki kept smiling and waved it off. "Happened a long time ago. It isn't important."

"I feel ya." Shachi studied the photo closely, then looked at Saki and let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Come on, say it."

"What a waste of genes."

She smacked him with the book. "Shut up, spotty face."

"Like you can talk!" He said with a grin.

Penguin looked outside the operating room and said, "Shachi, are you gonna keep flirting with her or are you gonna help us clean?"

"Are you jealous?" Shachi spread out his arms and started walking towards his friend menacingly.

"Do you want a smooch, Pen?"

Penguin pointed a spray bottle at Shachi. "I have cleaning product and I know how to use it."

"Don't be shy!"

"Don't make do this, my friend. Please, reconsider—"
"To my arms!"

Penguin fired, Shachi's sunglasses and mouth took the worst of the hit, and Saki tuned them out and cracked her book open.

After a while, the beeps of the machine Banu was hooked to kept throwing her off, and when she had gone through four pages without actually reading them, she went back to the picture she had stashed behind the book’s cover.

Sixteen years was a long time to miss someone, but she was able think about her with a smile, now. Her mother, her father, the kids’ parents, everybody who had fallen victim to the insidious disease that ran deep in Asteria, she hoped they were together and happy if they were anywhere. Saki didn't believe in the afterlife, but sometimes she wanted to, if only for them.

But life, the real kind, went on, and took you to strange places, and she was strangely content with a sprained ankle and a boring book she had read too many times and the regular company of a talking bear (scratch that, mink, even if she still didn't understand how he was supposed to be one) and three men she didn't know two months prior. If she felt homesick, she could even close her eyes, lie back, and smell the disinfectant in the air like she was in the studio. Life had gone from being a thing that she was supposed to trudge through to something she actually looked forward to. It was a pleasant sensation. Foreign, but welcome.

Unlike the noise that followed her morning reflections. A fast stomping sound coming from the hallway soon revealed Volkan, very angry-looking, who barged into the room so forcefully that the door slammed against the cabinet right next to it, rattling its contents.

"You're going to die," Saki informed him. "It isn't a threat, it's a fact," she warned, but he ignored her.

"Where's Banu?!!" Volkan looked left and right, ponytail swinging and slapping his own face. It had to be a talent. "Banu? Banu!" His eyes set on the woman, way too late for such a small sickbay, in Saki's personal opinion, and launched himself towards her bed.

He halted mid step when a very sharp, very accurate scalpel was came out flying from the operating theater's door and embedded itself less than an inch away from his big toe. Saki wondered when did Law get such a strong knife-throwing game and filed it in the same place where all the questions related to his past went to die.

There was more stomping, Bepo came running into the sickbay and caught Volkan from behind, wrapping an arm around his neck and nearly lifting him from the floor.

"I have never seen firsthand what happens when you inject ethylene glycol directly into a human's bloodstream," Law said, like a normal person would say that they felt like lying down on a hammock with a piña colada in one hand and a beautiful sunset on the horizon.

Saki made a face at the two guys that appeared right behind the captain, and Penguin mouthed, 'ANTIFREEZE'. She 'ooh'ed silently and gave him a thumbs up.

Volkan went pale, but to his credit, he didn't wet his pants. "How is she?" He asked more calmly, and Bepo set him down.

"Stable," he politely replied, as if he hadn't just threatened the man. "I extracted the bullet. It hit the liver and grazed the aorta, and she needed a blood transfusion. She'll be sedated for the next few hours, but she should wake up sometime today."
Volkan suddenly dropped to his knees and bowed so low his head almost touched the ground. "I cannot express how grateful we are for your help!"

The pirates glanced at each other uncomfortably at the unexpected turn of events.

"Grovel in her direction; she's the one who slowed down the hemorrhage until I got there."

"I hate you so——"

"In the name of Onur, myself, and all the people of Qaryn, you have our deepest thanks. We'll repay you, no matter the cost!"

She pointed to Law. "All expenses were paid from his pocket!"

Law immediately flipped her off as Volkan went back to his first target, but this time he looked up at the pirate captain with fierce resolution. "Say what you want and you'll have it."

Law pinched the bridge of his nose with the gesture of a man who needed a drink stronger than the aforementioned piña colada, and said, "You could start by telling us what's going on. Do you know why she was outside the inn last night, and who did this?"

"R-right. Of course. I didn't mean to hide it from you any longer. We didn't want to cause you any trouble."

"Nice job," Penguin said.

The other man looked ashamed. "I know, but… The elders don't want word of what is happening in the island to get outside. We have to respect that."

"And what is happening?" Law said, losing his patience.

"A series of murders," Volkan blurted out. "For a year, visitors have been appearing dead in the Mother's shrine. Drowned. Most of them notorious pirates. You've made the news recently; we thought you might be targeted. Banu was staking out the inn last night," he frowned, "and she shouldn't have been alone, I told her so many times…"

Law moved to dislodge the scalpel from the floorboard, "How many people know what happened last night?" he asked.

"The entire town is talking about it." He hesitated before continuing, "Some are blaming you for it, actually."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Shachi was. "Wait, why? We saved her!"

"They don't know better!" Volkan said, trying not to stare at the scalpel Law was twirling between his fingers. "Some people are jumping to conclusions, but Onur's doing his best to tell everybody what happened. The militia knows as well. You won't be in danger while you stay with us."

"Last night's incident tells me otherwise."

"Yeah, and how does that make any sense? You have a killer running freely for months and suddenly the new guys are the culprits?"

Volkan was clearly uncomfortable, but he put up with the pressure like a champion. "That's… that's
because there has never been a victim among our townspeople. It's always travelers."

"Well, obviously somebody has stopped being picky."

"I know!" He exclaimed, gesturing emphatically with his hands. "I don't believe it was any of you! Banu must have gotten in the way of the killer and that's why… why she was shot."

Shachi huffed. "How difficult can it be to catch a guy that has to have been living here all this time? Don't you have any suspects?"

"It's complicated," Volkan said, and his eyes shifted from Shachi, to Banu, to the floor. It looked like he was struggling with himself when he lifted his eyes again. "There is infighting between our elders, and some people are taking sides. Some… don't agree that we should let strangers inside the island. They say we are losing our culture. But that's insane – you've seen this place, we can't live from the land. Commerce with travelers is what keeps us alive."

"And the others, I assume, think that the island should be open to everybody?" Law asked.

Volkan nodded and added, "There's another faction. They are calling for a Navy unit in the island. I don't doubt we'd be safer, but… in my opinion, they'd just end up turning this island into a conveniently located base."

"You sound like you agree with letting people through," Bepo said.

"Of course I do! Travelers are our lifeblood, our—"

"But you didn't want to let us through."

Volkan avoided their eyes again. "I… I thought you might be trouble. People are using the murders as an excuse to push their agendas. We don't want more incidents that make people feel unsafe. I also thought you might have a larger crew. Those are in more danger because we can't keep an eye on everybody. Then pirates go missing…” He trailed off and grimaced.

"Okay, let's get this straight," Penguin said, and he began recounting, "You threatened us with guns when we wanted to dock here, searched our ship against our will, told us where we should sleep with no explanation, made up some shitty excuse to make us stay inside at night, never thought it was a good idea to tell us that some crazy mofo may be after our heads, and someone got shot on our behalf. Is that all?"

"We're also being blamed for it," Law reminded him.

"Right. Thanks, Captain."

Volkan had turned progressively redder during the tirade and at this point he could have easily passed for a ripe tomato. "I sincerely apologize for my previous behavior. I'm told often that I sound angrier than I am." Saki snorted in the background. He cleared his throat and continued. "As I said, we aren't allowed to speak about this to strangers. We formed the militia to try to keep all this under wraps, and to find compromise with those who want Marines stationed in town… and it isn't working."

"Too many suspects," Law concluded tiredly. "Everybody has something to win by letting a murderer run loose."

"…You're right. We don't have nearly enough guards to keep our island safe as things are now. But we know we can't let this be known outside. If ships stop docking here, we'll die out. No matter what
the people in favor of closing our doors say, we can't let that happen."

Silence stretched for some time while the pirates took in everything they had heard. The steady beeping of the machine was the only sound while Volkan stared at Banu, lost in his own thoughts.

Bepo was the first one to speak. "So what does this mean for us? We'll be on our way as soon as the Log Pose sets."

"That's right," Law said. "The infighting in this island doesn't concern us. If someone attacks us, we'll retaliate. If not, it isn't our problem."

"Of course," Volkan said in resignation, mouth dry. "You've already done much for us. Had it been any other crew inside the inn when Banu was attacked, she'd be dead." He thought over his next words. "Before I said that you were in no danger from us, but the truth is that I can't be sure of that. Our people are on edge, and they don't know what to think anymore. Isolationists are even saying the killings are divine retribution from the Mother. Be careful."

"We will," and determining the conversation as finished, Law said, "Penguin, Shachi, you have a sail to fix."

The later asked, "What about the operating theater?"

"I'll finish cleaning myself. Go."

"Aye, aye!"

"I'll be in the bridge," Bepo announced, and he left with the other two.

Volkan's eyes lingered on Banu. "May I stay with her for now?" He requested, and between the tone of his voice and his face, it sounded like a plea.

"No," Law said without missing a beat.

"But—!"

"We've wasted enough time as it is and I'm not going to let you be here unsupervised. Especially after what we know now. We can't be sure of your intentions."

Volkan got incensed instantly. "Are you suggesting that I will harm her?!"

"I think he's suggesting that you get out or the next scalpel won't miss the mark," said Saki with a deadpan.

Law frowned at her. "It didn't miss."

Volkan glared at the pirates present, took a deep breath and seemed to calm down a little. "Tell Onur right away if she wakes up, please."

"No need. If you bring someone else, we'll lend you a stretcher to carry her home. She isn't in danger anymore."

Volkan's face lit up, and for a moment Saki and Law feared he may grovel again. "Thank you! I'll be back right away!"

"Don't—" The man was out of the room before Law could finish. "—take long. Well," he turned to Saki, who didn't think much of him still wielding the scalpel, "what's on your mind?"
Saki looked up from the book she wasn't reading. He didn't seem to be Not Angry at her anymore. "Why the interest?"

"Because you haven't said a thing in the entire conversation."

"I'm timid."

Law tried another approach. "This woman was shot right under your window."

"I noticed."

"...Which was past Penguin's from one side of the street and Bepo's from the other."

"I noticed."

"Which—"

"Yes, Captain, I noticed I might have been targeted."

He kept insisting. "Did you see anyone suspicious yesterday?"

"Everybody seems suspicious now," she sighed. "But no, aside from that conversation Shachi and I heard, there wasn't anything of note. I only talked to a few vendors, same as the day before." She thumbed idly the pages of the book and lowered her voice. "That aside, some of the things Jerkface said make me wonder."

"Surprise me."

She glanced up from the book at Law and smiled for a split second. "He says people appear drowned in the shrine. How does the killer move the victims? If they are truly drowned, not killed beforehand—"

"He needs to get them in the shrine, where outsiders wouldn't be allowed in the first place, and in a way that can't be seen."

"Which shouldn't be possible in the morning, if the port and the market are full of people, and if they did it at night, the militia would spot them right away. I don't like this."

"You think there are accomplices."

She ran her finger against a corner of the book, flicking the pages back and forth. "This place is a mess. The militia could be in on the killings, for all we know. Easiest way to get past security is to have them on your side."

"Speaking from experience?"

She dismissed the question with a shrug.

Law stared at the machines in the sickbay and his patient as he mulled over the situation. "We leave the island as soon as we can," he said. "I'm not going to let these people involve us further in their power squabbles."

Saki smiled a bit at him. "You know, you almost seem a decent Captain when you talk like that."

"Just decent?"
"The hands kill the effect."

He smirked. "Do they really bother you that much?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want to hear the answers to."

"I'm serious."

Saki blinked a couple times, looked at her hands and furrowed her brow. "They do. They reflect poorly on me." Law raised his eyebrows at that. "Don't make that face, the guys asked me if I inked those abominations on your fingers."

Law's expression changed for a moment, and he turned around to head to the operating theater.

"Are you laughing at me?"

His shoulders twitched almost imperceptibly. "No."

"Liar."

"Pot, kettle."

Law let Saki leave the sickbay after he was done cleaning with some excuse about stationary targets being easier to kill. She switched her usual sandals for a pair of boots that still had heels and platforms, but offered better subjection for her ankle and covered the bandage. Rule number one in enemy territory: never show your weak points.

Volkan came soon enough with other two people that they recognized from the sub inspection, a round face woman Saki had seen joking with Banu the first day, and a tall man with a grave expression. None looked as relaxed as the first day.

She watched alongside Penguin and Shachi as Banu as was carried outside and carefully lowered to the dock. A multitude had gathered around and was watching the procession to the nearby inn. The island seemed quieter than usual, muted, as people whispered among them with comments they didn't dare say out loud near the pirates. It reminded her of the way Asterians talked about the local smugglers, as if someone could pop up anytime if they said the wrong thing to give them a ticket to the next life.

Their fears hadn't been unfounded, though. Rickhard wasn't beneath using thugs, but he always liked the idea of having a shadow in the night that could terrorize any dissonant voices into submission. Saki was just the girl of the tattoo shop that always said hello and sometimes made extra money keeping travelers out of trouble. Nobody checked how many of those travelers later got lost on their own, but locals knew that such were the dangers of being nosy.

She wondered how much her previous situation could be applied here. How many people were aware of the identity of the killer? Did they have a support net? Did they even believe in what they were doing, or were they just a tool in someone else's scheme?

The group of children from the first day had made its way to the front of the crowd, and some of them were crying. She may not have been born in the island, but it was plain to see that people cared about her.

A few adults glared daggers at the pirates on the deck. Could any of them be behind the killings?
Saki had to remind herself that they were staying only until they could bolt out of the island, not to solve the murders, but the hints that she may have been the original target would assure that she pulled an all-nighter that day. She needed to find out where Onur got his coffee.

"We should take a look around the inn to see if the killer left any proof behind," Penguin suggested. 
"Last night it was too dark to see anything."

Saki looked at him in surprise and asked with curiosity, "You want to find out who did it?"

"Don't you?"

"It's their problem, Penguin. And what makes you think we'll figure something out if they haven't until now?"

"I think they aren't really looking into it," Shachi intervened. "I mean, with so much infighting, I'm sure they aren't putting all they've got into the investigation."

"Besides, we don't have anything better to do right now."

"Ah, so that was it."

"You coming or not?" Shachi asked, and a voice from behind made him jump..

"We're all going," Law said. "I want to have a word with our host. And pick up anything you left in your rooms – tonight we'll stay in the Polar Tang."

The walk to the inn felt longer than it was under the gaze of so many townspeople. The rock had soaked in some of the blood and the spot where Banu had fallen was still stained, as was the way into the inn. Saki could make out her own footsteps.

Past the bloody entrance and the sign of the Mother that oversaw the door, the Heart Pirates found an undesired welcome committee of nearly a dozen locals.

A wiry man about Onur's age gestured violently at the pirates and yelled, "I demand you throw them out immediately!"

"And who are you to decide who stays and who doesn't?" Said with distaste an elderly woman with a hunched back. "When has our island turned away sailors?"

"You're blind, Hale! Don't you see this is their doing?" Hale said, and nodded respectfully towards Law. "Well met, Trafalgar Law. Don't mind the accusations of this bumbling fool."

"Who would have attacked one of ours if not an outsider?" Another man said. This one looked younger than the other two, but still reclined all his weight on a cane. The tall man who had helped carry Banu stood near him. "We cannot allow these people to roam the island freely."

"Please, stop. Stop this," a weak voice said, and they turned to see Onur walking down the stairs. "If it weren't for these pirates, Banu wouldn't be with us anymore. I saw it with my own eyes. I won't allow you to cast aspersions on them." He struck the floor with his cane, the same way he had when Law questioned the effectiveness of their security. "And if you have nothing better to do in my home than bicker like children, I'll ask you to leave me and my daughter to rest."

A few protested under their breaths, others nodded vigorously, and Hale flashed a smug smile at the
men she had argued with.

Volkan, who had remained silent during the entire scene, clapped his hands and said, "You heard him! Clear out this place! This discussion is better left for the next assembly."

The unwanted guests marched to the door, and their attitudes when they passed the pirates ranged from quiet thanks to openly hostile gazes. One of them, the vendor that had sold Saki the diadem, lingered and asked Onur to speak privately, so both left together upstairs.

"I should be going as well," Volkan said. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to talk to the owner," Law replied.

"It may be better if you came later." Volkan shook his head. "He's inconsolable. I haven't seen him so down since his wife passed away."

"They said Banu was Onur's daughter." Shachi asked out of the blue. "We thought she moved here when she was young."

Volkan's eyes widened a fraction. "You don't know? I thought she had told you." He scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. "It isn't my place to tell, but since you already heard… When Banu was a child she was in an accident at sea. Onur took her in and raised her." He glanced at the stairs with concern. "In any case, feel free to stay here as long as you want. You've already seen how our elders argue, but they won't actually do anything." He nodded at them. "See you around," and he made for the door.

"Why are we getting an infodump every time we talk to this guy?" Penguin said.

"He's much nicer to us now," Bepo commented. "He's grateful."

"I don't know, but the more we find out we don't know, the less I want to be here." Saki said.

"Yeah, it's like everybody's hiding things," Shachi agreed. "Let's pick up our things and go."

Law found Onur deep in conversation with the other man and, much to his irritation, had no choice but to turn around. The others were waiting for him outside by the time he came out with his hands stuffed in his pockets and a frowny face.

"That didn't take long," Bepo said, passed him Kikoku, and they started walking.

"He's still busy. I'll talk to him later."

Bepo nodded. "I'll come with you."

Law smiled, and at that moment, the group of children from before intercepted them. At the forefront was girl about 8 years old with wild curly hair. Law had a feeling that he and his crewmates were being sized up.

"Did you help Banu?" The girl asked, and a few of her comrades shifted nervously behind her.

"Yeah," was Law's reply. He was actually curious about what the child would say.

She pulled a woven bangle out of her pocket and handed it to the pirates. Saki, who was closer, was the one to pick it up.
"We found it this morning near the inn. It's Banu's, but our parents won't let us see her."

"Do you want us to return it to her?"

"Uh-huh."

Saki glanced up at Law tentatively. So much for not trying to help random people.

"Two minutes," Law said, and he felt like an enabler.

Saki flashed an amused smile and broke into a jog towards the inn. "Be right back!"

So much for an injured ankle, too.

Saki got to the second floor skipping steps on the staircase and checked the open doors for a sign of Onur and the vendor. They must have gone to another floor, because they were nowhere in sight when she found Banu sleeping soundly in a bed at the end of the hallway. The walls were painted light blue instead of the white or naked rock of the rest of the inn, and there was a picture on the bed stand that showed a young Banu sitting on Onur's knees and another kid with a ponytail blowing in his face. She was unmistakable, with the scar that crossed the right part of her face already present. This was her old room.

Saki was about to leave the bangle beside the picture frame when she paid attention to Banu's arms. The two bangles were there, same as when she had showed them the day before. She looked for tan lines on her other wrist, but there was nothing to indicate that she wore anything there often.

Red and green and white circles with dots in the middle. Saki hid the bangle on the back pocket of her jeans and made her way back out as quietly as she could.

She gave the kids a heads up once she was out and they scattered, Law chewed her out for taking too long, and she decided to keep to herself until she could talk somewhere where less ears could be listening.

Replacing the sails took the better part of the day, with the ongoing stream of onlookers that passed by the sub trying to watch them in a way that was meant to be discreet, but you could only be so subtle when you were stopping right before a ship and craning your neck to see what was going on on the deck.

Penguin was sitting on the floor when he looked down at the docks and caught a man staring, who let out a small yelp and ran away. "Should we throw peanuts at them?"

Shachi stretched next to him, popping a few muscles, and laid on his back. "They should be throwing the peanuts at us. At least we'd get something out of this."

Saki stood up and dusted off her jeans, "I'll be in the kitchen. When you're ready to stop lazing around come inside and I'll tell you something weird I saw."

"No way, don't make me move now."

She pointed at the docks. Penguin's eyes followed her finger and he saw a couple casting furtive glances at them, whispering, and leaving embarrassedly when they noticed they'd been caught.

"We're the local attraction," Penguin groaned.
"Talk to you when you can move."

Saki walked inside at the right time to find Law and Bepo leaving the bridge.

"Good timing!" She exclaimed with fake enthusiasm. "I've been meaning to tell you something." She got the bangle out of her back pocket and showed it to the guys.

Bepo was taken aback. "You stole it?!"

"No!" She replied quickly. "W-well, technically it isn't mine but—ugh, that's not the point!"

"What were you doing inside the inn if you weren't returning it?" Law asked.

"I wanted to, but then when I looked at Banu's arms I realized she was already wearing hers. This one is someone else's."

Law took the bangle to examine it. There was some blood on it, not strangely, considering how much there had been on the ground, and the cords that had tied it together were torn, as if someone had grabbed the rigid part and pulled until the threads ripped.

"A tug hard enough to break this would have left a mark on her wrist," he said. "I didn't see any."

"Were there any signs of struggle when you examined her?"

"None. Whoever shot her didn't try to hit her first."

"But for this to break," she pointed to the bangle, "they should have been up close."

"It could belong to the shooter. She may have tried to stop a fleeing attacker, and got shot in return. It's only logical that she'd go after anyone suspicious if she was keeping watch."

"Makes sense." She felt the cords of the bangle and said, "I've looked it over and the material seems to be the same as my diadem. Maybe I could ask the vendor if he sold it to anyone."

"Or maybe the shooter was the vendor. Have you thought about it?"

Saki went on the defensive. "Yes, but don't you think that—"

"I think that you're trying to help, again, with something that doesn't concern us."

"Maybe not you, but need I remind you that she was shot right under my—"

"Guys."

"We'll be leaving in less than two days, just stay inside the—"

"GUYS."

The two stopped their bickering to look at Bepo, who had been listening intently up to that point.

"Until now we thought that Banu had been shot from a distance, right?"

"She was. The firearm didn't leave burns around the wound," Law said.

"But now we know at some point they were within arm's reach, and the killer had to turn around to shoot."
"That's likely, yes. So?"

"Wouldn't she have seen her attacker's face?"

There was a moment of silence as Bepo's words sunk in.

"They'll come back to kill her!" Saki exclaimed.

"Aren't you jumping to—" Law stopped when he saw Saki's and Bepo's incredulous face. "…Okay, yes, they will," he grumbled.

"So…"

"No."

"But…"

"Captain…"

"Still no."

Saki sighed.

"We tried," Bepo told her.

Just as Bepo and Saki accepted defeat, Shachi and Penguin came inside the submarine running and tripping over each other on the narrow space of the stairs.

"A bunch of guards came and said we won't be able to leave tomorrow!" Penguin yelled.

"What?"

"Some of the old farts have said that we won't be free to go until they clear up what happened," Shachi explained.

"Whatever. The woman will wake up soon, and when she explains we'll be—" He felt Bepo's and Saki's eyes on him, brought a hand to his eyes and rubbed them. "For fuck's sake."

"Rescue time?" Saki probed.

"…Rescue time," he groaned.

"…Did we miss anything?"

It was getting dark and the streets were empty when the Heart Pirates reached the inn. The door was locked tight, but they could hear heated voices arguing inside even from outside. "Absolutely not! I won't do this anymore, I won't let you do it!"

"I thought you were a reasonable man, Onur. There's no turning back now; you know it's for the good of—!"

"There will be no point if she dies! Let me through!"

Law banged on the door loud enough to wake up every neighbor in the vicinity.

"Open the door!"
There was a strangled sound on the other side and something hit the floor heavily. Bepo tapped on Law's shoulder and the captain moved away with without need for words.

"AI-YAAAA!"

Bepo's flying kick was astoundingly precise, breaking the door in the exact spot where the lock was and leaving the rest intact and open.

Inside, they found the younger elder they had seen arguing with the others in the morning, running behind the counter, while Onur held his stomach and scrambled for air on the floor.

Law ran to the older man and yelled, "Bepo, get him!"

Bepo was already sprinting when Law gave the order, and instead going around the counter he leaped over it and landed with all his weight over the unfortunate man, who had tried and failed to get inside the backroom.

"Upstairs," Onur wheezed. "They—"

Saki rushed to the stairs, and she had barely stepped on the last step when she saw a lump fly from a room and hit the hallway's wall so hard it echoed through the stone building. She got closer and recognized the street vendor from two days before. To her left, Banu came out of the room, holding her side with a pained expression.

"Looks like a girl can't catch a break nowadays," Banu said between her teeth.

"You tell me. Need a hand?" Saki offered, approaching her.

"Or a new liver," she replied, and put an arm around Saki to lean on her. "Has anyone ever told you that you're the perfect size for an armrest?"

Saki's face went blank. "Suddenly things make sense."

"…What?"

"Nothing." Saki kicked the leg of the unconscious vendor. "Was this guy who tried to kill you?"

"Kill you, tiny. I was collateral damage. What are you even doing here?"

"We figured someone would come finish the job."

"Altruistic pirates. That's nice!"

Saki guessed she'd better keep quiet about what had convinced Law to help. She could also keep to herself that she had only wanted to find the killer to ensure that he wasn't after her as well. "Is there anyone else around?"

"I don't know. I woke up to yells and this asshole was hovering over me with a pillow. Where's Onur?"

"Downstairs with one of our crewmates," Law said. He was walking nonchalantly towards them. Thwarting murder attempts was apparently something he did every other day. "The other elder hit him with a cane, but he's fine."

"The other…" Banu's face switched from confusion to understanding. "Taner," she said, then turned to Saki. "Can you help me get closer to this guy?"
"Sure."

Banu hobbled to the vendor, took a deep breath, kicked him on the groin, and doubled over in pain.

"Was that necessary?" Law asked.

"Absolutely," she breathed out.

Suddenly it sounded as if a herd of elephants was stomping up the stairs. "BANU!" Volkan appeared and stormed towards her as soon as he laid eyes on her. "You're awake!"

Saki let go in time to avoid being smacked aside, and Volkan pulled Banu into a bear hug.

"OW! Let go, idiot, let—"

"Are you hurt?!"

"Of course I'm hurt, I got shot, ow—!"

Saki walked over the unconscious guy and passed Law. "I don't think I want to stay for the tender reunion."

"You—" Law glanced at the other two, the vendor, and caught up with Saki. "Did you knock out that man?"

"Nope, she did it." Silence. "What, you aren't going to say anything?"

"I was wondering why none of my patients can't stay still."

"Because we wouldn't need a doctor in the first place if we could." She waited for a beat. "Still no smartass comment?"

He pulled on some hair that had strayed from her diadem. "Have some respect."

She tried to bat his hand away, but caught herself at the last moment when she realized she had almost willingly come in contact with those things. "What's that for? I already have far more respect for you than any strung-up guy who calls himself a doctor because they have a shiny diploma." She ran a hand through her hair and tousled it. Law stopped, but she didn't notice until she was at ground level. "You can talk, despite what they told you at med school it's not bad for your health."

Law walked down the remaining steps and said with a smirk, "I didn't go to med school, and you talk enough for the two of us."

Saki let out a silent sigh and contemplated the scene before her. A few members of the militia had just arrived along with Shachi and Penguin. The elder Bepo had captured was handcuffed, and on a sofa sat Onur.

Law pointed over his shoulder and told them, "There's another one above."

They brought the vendor down, who was slowly coming to his senses, but still not quite there. Taner refused to speak, but Onur did it for him. Banu sat beside the old man, who refused to even look at her.

"It's all my fault. I should've said no. I never meant for you to get hurt."

"Onur, what are you talking about?" She said softly. She tried to take his hand, but he moved it away
"Taner said that if I let him handle it, the assassin would strike again last night. That it would be easier to convince people that we should let Marines in if there was another incident."

"YOU'RE LYING!" The accused roared.

"YOU PUT MY DAUGHTER IN DANGER!"

"She's in danger every time a pirate crew comes to our island!"

"Onur…" Banu started, incredulous. "Are you… are you telling us that you knew the killer would come to the inn?"

The man stared intently at his hands, trying not to look up to face her. "I was to keep quiet and leave open the passage to the shrine…"

"What passage?"

"The trapdoor under the pantry. The one you found blocked when you were little."

"There's a passage to the Mother's shrine there?"

Onur nodded quietly, on the verge of tears. "There used to be one behind every door marked with her symbol. This is the only remaining one, aside from the two entrances everybody knows. Only us elders were aware of this one."

Volkan's eyes were about to fall off from their sockets. "This can't be true. You've been allowing the killer to come through your inn with his victims…?"

"No!" He whipped up his head, horrified. "It was only this once! I never thought Banu would be attacked! It was all for her sake…"

"F-for my sake? For my sake?! What are you saying? How was this going to help me?"

"You have put everything aside to work with the militia. We know this situation won't hold up. Sooner or later, a pirate crew or the Navy will try to force their way into the island, and what happens to you then?" At last he looked at her in the eyes, and then to all the other guards gathered around. "Are we going to let our youngest die for nothing?"

"Onur…"

"So just let another pirate die, and you can press easily for Navy presence in the next assembly. Is that right?" Law said with ice in his voice.

"I… I am sorry…"

Law didn't say anything, but his face was enough to get across the meaning that he was above his apologies.

"I can't believe…" Banu said, and closed her eyes with a pained expression that had nothing to do with her injury.

"I am sorry, Onur, but we'll need to arrest you as well," Volkan said. It seemed like all his characteristic energy had left him with this turn of events.
"Of course," Onur said affably. "It's only right."

The guards escorted Onur, Taner and the vendor out to bring them to their cells, and that left only the pirates with Banu inside the inn.

"I don't want to sound ungrateful, but I'd like to be alone," she told them.

"We should head out too," Law said, and hesitated before adding, "Try not to move around too much. The wound could reopen."

"I'll be careful," she said absently.

The Heart Pirates left the inn with one weight less on their shoulders.

The town was even quieter than the nights before. There were no patrols in sight. With everything that had happened, it wouldn't have been strange if the militia didn't roam the city that night. They had their culprits. And it had hit some of them hard...

The sky was a perfect circle full of stars that twinkled above them, bright, careless, beautiful.

"So…" Shachi broke the oppressive silence. "What are we having for dinner?"

"First to get to the sub picks the menu," Saki said.

Both mechanics and Bepo started a race the likes of which hadn't been seen in the world since motorized yagaras were banned in Water 7.

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*Law spent an hour alone in the operating theater for Banu's surgery. When he finally came out, looking more tired than usual, he pushed the gurney outside and made sure all the equipment was working correctly before speaking to Saki.*

"How's that ankle?" He said at last.

"Still in place," she said, too busy counting the flasks on a shelf to look at him.

"Shame, we could have used it for a beach ball."

"Hm."

"Who wrapped your bandage?"

"I did."

*He took a closer look, undid the ends, and yanked.*

Saki let out a string of colorful curses rivaled the one when they slid down the sewer, but Law noted that this time she avoided mentioning his mother. It didn't make him tug at the bandage less forcefully, but he appreciated the thought, and at least she wasn't sulking anymore, which was a plus.

*Coldly, he said, "Who the fuck jumps from a second-floor window, unarmed, after hearing a gunshot?"

She. She did. "Sorry."*
"Don't be sorry; think. We went over this already."

"Not really. Last time it was about not taking care of my health."

"You jumped out of a damn window. Same difference."

She waited for more, but it didn't come.

"That's it?"

"What else do you want me to say?"

"No... Nothing. Forget it."

"If you feel guilty about your outburst, apologize to Shachi. Don't expect me to scold you just so you can feel better with yourself."

She made a pained face. "Am I really such an open book?"

"It didn't take a genius to see that you regretted what you said even before it was out of your mouth."

"...Said the genius."

Law finished taking the bandage off, rolled it up, then started wrapping it around her ankle again. Saki couldn't see much of a difference with her handiwork, and wondered if he had tugged it off just to have a chance to chew her out.

"You should've asked for help," he said.

"I knew there was more coming," she said with a wry smile.

He shot her a glare.

"No, it's okay. I fucked up, you can say it as it is," she said offhandedly. "Bad shit always happens at night, it shouldn't have caught me off guard, and I should've stayed calm and asked for help."

"Bad shit happens all the time," he said dismissively. "Why did you do it? You couldn't have seen who the victim was."

"I acted on reflex. I saw somebody hurt and jumped."

"Is this going to be a recurring event?"

"Me jumping from windows?"

"You trying to help random people." She looked at him, surprised, and he answered even before she could ask the question. "Don't get me wrong. We would have gained nothing by letting her die. But we're pirates, not a charity. We can't go around helping people just because, especially if it puts any of us in danger."

Saki took a while to reply. "Do you want the short answer or the personal answer? Because the short one is that no, I don't usually run around helping strangers, but it seems to me that you're digging for something else."

Law paused. "I didn't mean to."
"It's okay. I'd be angry in your place too."

"I'm not angry," he said irritably.

It clicked then. "You were worried about me?"

He tightened the bandage more than necessary, she winced, and he replied. "No."

It made her smile for the first time that day.

He cut the excess bandage, rolled it up and took it to its cabinet. So that's where she had messed up...

"You're almost cute when you're embarrassed," she said, possibly because she needed risk like the air she breathed.

He closed the cabinet with more force than necessary. "Do you honestly have a death wish?"

"Apparently, according to your regular sickbay assessments."

His annoyance seemed to subside, but he still said seriously. "You need to be more careful. Mistakes are going to be costly from now on."

"I know," she said, and watched him walk towards the door. She didn't know why she kept talking, but she felt it was now or never, and to her own surprise, she actually wanted to share it. "They shot my father. The smugglers. Rickhard."

Law stopped to turn at her and waited for her to continue.

"They shot him one night and dragged him home. He died in front of me and I couldn't do anything for him."

Law tried not to think. "Was that when you started to work for them?"

"Yeah. Don't look at me with that face. It's not a secret. I just don't like thinking about it if I can help it. I suppose last night I... ah, who cares, I wasn't thinking. But there's your reason. No one should die like that."

Law's amber eyes were fixed on her. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking, so she simply met his gaze, sincerely, defiantly. There was nothing she had to hide.

"I suppose you should get a question now," he said at last, and at her look of confusion he added, "Like the last time."

He surprised her again, and it brought her thoughts to the conversation in the galley three days ago. Of tangerines and parents and unspoken questions about hearts and Joker. She had a lot to choose from, and her pick was clear.

She smirked and asked, "Will you let me fix your hands already?"

The discomfort in the air dissipated and Law and returned her gesture. "I'll pass on answering that one."

"Figures." She tried to get down from the cot, but Law stopped her.

"Where do you think you're going?"
"You aren't going to keep me in here."

"And why not?"

"It's a sprained ankle!"

"Exactly. Be sure to keep it on the pillow or face the consequences."

"You're threatening me? After I just poured my soul out for your benefit?"

"What am I supposed to do with a soul? Get me something practical."

When Saki came to, it was hard to breathe and her eyelids were made felt like they had been glued shut. She was laying on a rough, cold and humid surface. The fog in her mind was thicker than that surrounding Twin Cape, and she tried to move her body, but couldn't. She tried to feel her heartbeat, but it was so faint she couldn't. Was she asleep, or was she dying…?

The last thought made her heart leap. There it was. Arrhythmia, again. What was going on? Her mouth tasted like garlic, but she hadn't eaten anything with it, had she...?

Dinner. That was it. She had been in the mess hall after dinner. When it got late the guys went to their rooms, but before Shachi helped her carry the dirty dishes, and they said goodnight in the galley. And then…

Her blood ran cold and suddenly it was easier to push through the fog. A stab in her neck. Someone covered her mouth. A man's arm. She kicked and scratched and bit, but her body stopped responding right away, and everything turned black then.

She was going to murder the fucker who had done this.

That thought alone was enough to find the will to move. She managed to open her eyes. Her head was throbbing and she felt a wave of nausea. She tried more, but her hand only twitched. Not yet. Whatever sedative she had been injected, it was wearing off quickly. The question was if she had enough time to wait it out.

She scanned her surroundings from her admittedly inconvenient position. She was in a cave, not very big, and unlike Onur's inn, its walls had their natural shape. She smelled salt. About a foot away from her, there was a pond of still water. And when she looked farther, at the end of the pond, she saw a huge statue of a naked woman, roughly carved on a protruding rock. She oversaw the cave with vacant eyes and open arms that reached the ceiling, and Saki had the impression that it was trying to swallow everything.

At the base of the statue, a crouched figure appeared to be reciting a prayer. That must have been the man who assaulted her, and he definitely wasn't the vendor. Too muscular, too young. Was he alone? She couldn't see or hear anyone else.

This had to be the famous shrine where people appeared dead. 'Drowned,' Volkan had said. The pond didn't look so pretty now.

She needed to do something. She willed her body to move, but the most she did was twitch her hands. What had she been injected to knock her out so fast? She hoped whatever the man was doing gave her enough time to recover.

She heard steps then, nearby, and through narrowed eyes she saw two, three, four, pairs of boot pass
her and approach the man. Some were familiar. Guards? It would have been so much easier to carry the bodies to the shrine if the militia had been cooperating with the killer. Why didn't they give more thought to it before? It seemed so obvious now…

The man before the statue turned around, and his face was familiar. One of the guards who had inspected the sub, and one of the people that had helped carry Banu down the sub. The one who had been standing next to Taner that morning.

He told the others something and the group scattered, some passing her again, others taking a small entrance at the end of the cave. Good. She still had a chance against one man, if she could regain her mobility…

She wasn't even afraid – she felt impotent, frustrated with herself for letting her guard down again, bad shit always happens at night, this was what she got for getting comfortable with her new life and her new friends…

Friends.

It hadn't even registered in her mind that she could have asked for help. It just wasn't something she did. When did she learn to be so inefficiently independent and forget that 'can you pass the salt-slash-get me that can off the shelf-slash-help me fend off a serial killer' was something she could and should say?

If the guys were her friends, she supposed she was being a very lousy one.

She hoped somebody would notice her absence. Law was surely awake, you idiot, he would've heard you if you screamed, but how long would it take him to realize that she was gone? Come to think of it, she wasn't sure that she hadn't made noise when she was attacked. She tried to remember, but her head was killing her, she couldn't even know how much time had passed since she lost consciousness, and ultimately hoping for a rescue was counterproductive to rescuing herself.

She tried moving again, and this time she managed to flex her fingers. Just a little more time…

Ten minutes before, a metallic noise coming from above made Law look up from his book. He listened for a bit, but he only heard the faucet running and quiet steps. False alarm. Butterfingers had a habit to drop pans when she was tired.

A few more minutes passed, and he could still hear the faint sound of the water running, but he hadn't heard more steps. Wondering if she had left and forgotten about the tap, Law made a monumental effort to get up from his bed and walk all the way to the galley.

He found it empty, with the pot he had heard earlier still lying on the floor, and he didn't need more to know that something was very wrong. He went to the sickbay, in case she had gotten hurt and was there trying to fix herself, he even checked the empty bridge before rushing downstairs to wake up the others.

He opened the door and pounded on it, which prompted several groans.

"Everybody, wake up! Saki has disappeared!"

"What do you mean, disappeared?"

Law an unimpressed face at Penguin, who was blinking his bleary eyes. "What do you think disappeared means? Get up, we're going out to find her."
Bepo ran behind Law, who went back to his room only to get his weapon, while the other two tried to get dressed as humanly fast as possible.

"Do you think someone took her?"

Law realized that he hadn't even considered that she may have left willingly. "Did you have the impression that she wanted to leave?"

"No."

"Yeah," Law said bitterly, stepping to the deck. "Me neither."

"We'll find her!"

"Oi! Where are you going?"

Bepo and Law looked down from the deck to see Volkan staring up at them with his trusty rifle on his back.

"Have you seen anyone suspicious tonight?"

"No, I just came from visiting Banu. Is something wrong? Can I help you?"

Her breathing went back to normal, and by the time the future corpse at the end of the cave was done with his villainous preparation rituals, she was sure she could, at least, use her arms to lift herself from the ground. Not so sure about walking straight, but a girl needed priorities.

She stayed still, eyes half open, because the last thing she wanted was the man thinking she needed restraining. She'd bide her time. She was good at that.

He didn't seem to be in a rush as he walked up to her. There was pure concentrated hate in Saki's eyes when their gazes met. He, on the other hand, sounded more detached when he leaned next to her.

"You must be wondering why I'm doing this," he said, quietly, sympathetically.

She wasn't. She was actually thinking it was a pity she didn't have enough strength for a sucker punch. Maybe the neck… He was in a good angle, but it wouldn't work with her bare hands, not in her state…

He touched her neck, presumably to inspect the place where he stabbed the needle, and she twitched.

"You should be more awake by now. I thought I had been careful with the dose… Maybe I overdid it… I need you aware."

"Do you always monologue before you kill?" She rasped, and it worried her with how much difficulty the words came to her lips.

No, that shouldn't bother her. Forming words required more precision than anything she could try to escape.

"So you can talk. That's what you all do," The man sneered, and all the composure from before was gone. "You think you are smarter and stronger than everybody else. The Grand Line attracts your kind like moths to the flame. You don't respect anything or anyone. You think yourself kings everywhere you go. But we've had enough. This island is for us, and you aren't welcome. It's only a
shame that the other woman didn’t die too.”

"She's your companion."

"She's a foreigner who has polluted our town for too long."

Saki felt him tug at her diadem sharply, and the ends snapped. He held it before her eyes. "This wasn't made for the likes of you." Then he grabbed her by her hair and dragged her to the edge of the pond, scratching her knees along the way. "If you can talk, you're awake enough."

He plunged her forward roughly. Saki grabbed him by his shirt with all the strength she could muster, and momentum and gravity did the rest. The killer fell to the pond, which as luck would have it was shallower than it looked from the surface.

Saki stumbled her way onto her feet, and, as much as she would have liked to stay to smash the man's face in, she knew the most she could aspire to was getting away. She turned to the opening behind her, rushing ahead by virtue of sheer adrenaline and willpower and knowing it wouldn't last long, and that there were two guards waiting at the exit and the man behind her was already getting up and coming to finish the job. Even then, they were better than the odds she had had in Asteria.

She heard it then, coming from above, from the passage full of stairs that stretched in front of her. A lone bullet pierced the air, the sounds of metal clashing and people falling to the ground – it had to be them, if only she could get outside—

The killer grabbed her left arm and she twisted around before he could get a chokehold around her neck. He was seething, and the water slipping down his hair and face was mixed with a trickle of blood that came from his nose. There was no way she could make it up in time if she was having trouble to stay upright. She couldn't even get rid of his slippery hold when she tried to pull her arm away.

"I'M DOWN HERE!" She yelled. "THE KILLER'S HERE!"

The response was immediate on both sides. She heard groans above and steps rushing down the passage, and the killer unhanded her and stood frozen for a second. Saki leaned against the wall and boosted herself forward in hopes of slamming her arm against his nose with all her weight, but the man backed and started running towards the opening at the far end of the cave.

She was watching the merciless edges of the stairs approach her face, goodbye remains of my nose, it was nice knowing you, when a bear's arm wrapped itself around her waist and lifted her like a sack of potatoes.

"It's been a while since you tripped."

"I didn't trip. I may be tripping, but I'm not sure, because I don't think I'm hallucinating. Can hallucinations pick you up mid fall?"

She heard Penguin whistle.

"How many fingers do I have?" Shachi said, waving a hand in front of her.

"Presumably twenty."

"Captain?" Bepo sounded concerned.

"She sounds normal to me."
"I'll try not to drop her."

"Bepo, I don't want to alarm you, but I feel like puking and this position isn't helping."

Bepo got out of the passage and readjusted her so he was giving her a piggyback ride. It was uncomfortable and perhaps in another situation somebody would have made a crass comment about Saki's ability to spread her legs so wide, but circumstances being as they were, nobody paid attention to it.

"As promised," he said.

"'When no one's watching.'"

"Desperate circumstances call for desperate measures."

Someone cleared his throat behind the group. It was Volkan and he didn't look amused. "Don't we have a killer to catch?"

"The bastard's one of your friends in the militia." Saki pointed with a shaky arm towards the other passage. It was so hard to move now that she felt safe. "He fled through there."

Shachi tapped the scabbard of his sword against his shoulder and grinned. "Let's kick some ass."

"Try not to walk into a wall with those shades," Penguin replied.

"And you try not to trip on a step without eyes."

The rear passage reached the upper levels of the town, where the only light shining was that of the moon and the stars. They didn't know where the killer was going, and they followed as close as they could, but he had too much advantage and the Heart Pirates had to be careful with their steps. Banu had been right – the streets were narrow and dangerous, slippery with the ambient humidity. It wasn't long before Volkan was ahead of the group, knowing every shortcut as he did, but the others had to follow through less treacherous paths if they didn't want to risk it.

They hadn't met the other guards Saki had seen when they came out in the open, but at last they made their appearance. Somebody tried shot Bepo in a godawful display, because no one who was able to miss such a big target should be allowed to fire a weapon, and the bear and Saki fell behind to take care of the attacker.

They heard more weapons firing ahead of them, and Saki couldn't tell if it was Volkan shooting at the killer, or more people from the militia trying to stop her crewmates. She heard agitated sounds coming from inside the caves, but no one came out to find out what was going on. She couldn't blame them.

"Hold on tight," Bepo warned. "I need to let go of your legs."

"Do your thing, I'll be fine."

She didn't need to tell him twice. Bepo jumped down a flight of stairs and his fisted paw connected directly with the attacker's jaw, knocking him out in a single hit. The motion made Saki's stomach lurch, but Bepo didn't stop. He headed up the stairs again, and when Saki looked back for a moment, she saw another guard jumping over her fallen companion and running towards them wielding something akin to a machete.
"There's an extra behind us with a pointy blade and by the way I'm so sorry but I need to throw up."

"Aim backwards."

"What?!"

"Desperate measures," he reminded her.

She had nothing to lose. When the wave of nausea came, instead of holding it, she let it flow. flow, with the force of a cannon blast, complete with gurgling noises and maybe an undigested chunk of dinner of two. The precision of the shot, the stylized arch it drew against the starry night and the bay, could have been described as a thing of beauty if we weren't talking about vomit. The guard at the bottom of the stairs never knew what hit her until it was too late.

"There go the baked potatoes."

"They were put to good use!"

She would have laughed if she had the strength to do so. "How did you find me so quickly?"

"You're easy to track. I followed the smell of tangerines."

It was becoming harder and harder to see the silhouettes of their companions, and the uneven ground didn't help, so Bepo had to slow the climb a bit while they headed to one of the noise sources.

And when they got there, right around a corner, instead of their friends, they found Banu smashing the butt of her shotgun against a guard's temple.

"Yo!" She said between pants.

"You should be sleeping!" Bepo said.

"With all this noise? I'd be surprised if there was anybody still in bed in town." She took a deep breath, holding her side. "What's going on?"

"Go home, Banu. Your wound needs rest."

Banu craned her neck to see Saki's head over Bepo's shoulder. "I didn't even see you there!"

"Screw you," Saki said with a grimace. "Long story short, the serial killer is one of your coworkers, he tried to kill me and now we're chasing after him so somebody can wring his neck. Preferably me."

"Mother's soggy pants." She let out a groan. "Are you okay? What the hell is wrong with this town?"

"You tell us. You're the local."

"Some of the guys have come out to help. The ones who aren't trying to kill anybody, at any rate."

"That just makes it more difficult," Saki said, and Banu stared up in confusion. "To know who's friend or foe..."

"Just try to avoid any fighting. I'll be heading up, I know the fastest paths – are you coming?"

"You know it!" Bepo replied, and they resumed their climb.
"'Just try to avoid any fighting!'" Saki mimicked against Bepo's shoulder. "Is she serious?"

"Guys!" They turned around to see Penguin running a level above them, following Law's trail along with Shachi, who had just knocked out a guy with a gun. "Are you coming this way?"

"We'll go the other way around!" Banu said. "You keep going that way, we'll surround him!"

"Roger!" Penguin saluted her from above with a grin, and Shachi waved excitedly at them as they turned a corner and vanished from sight.

The few minutes that passed since meeting Banu and seeing the shapes of their friends on the level right above them seemed an eternity for Saki. She distinguished the killer with Volkan right at his heels, close enough that he could have made a grab for him. Law followed from farther away, trying to stick to the paths Volkan was choosing. The top of the mountain was near.

With an unexpected move, the killer turned to the wall, grabbed at a ledge and pulled himself up. She heard Volkan yell at Law, "Take the path around! We'll corner him!"

"We're almost there!" Banu told Saki and Bepo, ignoring the pain coursing through her entire body. "There's a direct path here, follow close—"

The sentence died in her lips as time stopped. Volkan grabbed the ledge to go upwards, and the ages worn stone broke under his weight. The next they saw, Volkan was falling, trying to reach for anything, anyone, and Law's Room was too late, too small to catch him before he disappeared into the darkness below.

"NO!"

Bepo had to jump to Banu and hook an arm around her waist to keep her from jumping down from their street to the lower levels.

"LET ME GO! LET ME GO, YOU BASTARD! VOLKAN! VOLKAN!"

Bepo just put another arm around her and pushed her further away from the edge of the path as Saki slid down his back.

The stars above them twinkled brightly, carelessly, beautifully.

It happened too far, too fast. Volkan slipped right outside Law's Room range, and nothing could stop his fall. Nothing short of a miracle could have saved him.

But the killer was alive and within his reach, and he wasn't going to let him escape. With one last sprint, Law reached the highest street of the mountain. The other man could only run now towards him, or to the path where Bepo, Saki and Banu were. He had cornered himself.

"Will you let me finish this, or do you still intend to put up a fight?"

There was dried blood on the killer's face and his clothes, and he was panting heavily. It was plain that he was in no condition to resist. "And what will you do when you kill me? Do you want to play hero for Qaryn?"

"Who said anything about killing? Human specimens for vivisection are rare to find."

The killer's eyes nearly popped from their sockets. Law was used to amusing reactions from creepers
when he outcreeped them.

"You chose a bad crew to mess with," Law continued, unsheathing his sword as he closed the
distance between the two. "So what will it be? Will you come quietly, or in pieces?"

The man didn't have time to make a decision. A bullet from behind tore through his shoulder and he
fell to the ground. Banu had been the one to shoot, but instead of finishing the job she pointed her
shotgun at Law.

"I know I owe you my life," she said, voice trembling and hands steady, "but this man isn't yours to
judge."

Law glared at her, sword pointing to the killer's head meanwhile. "He attacked my crew."

"He destroyed my home," she countered. "If you get any closer to him, I'll have to shoot. Please,"
she took a shaky breath, shut her eyes for a brief moment and pleaded, eyes full of determination,
weapon unwavering, "let this nightmare be over."

Law hesitated. Bepo and Saki walked up until they were behind Banu, but the woman didn't seem to
register them as dangerous. It would be insultingly easy to disarm her and let Law have his way.

Instead, he said, "That isn't my choice to make," and he looked at Saki, who judging by her face,
hadn't expected to be included in the conversation.

Banu glanced over her shoulder and her eyes widened in recognition. She opened her mouth to say
something, but she thought it better.

"Sure," Saki said, avoiding everyone's gazes. "He broke my diadem and I broke his nose. We're
even. Do what you must."

Banu lowered her shotgun towards the killer. "Thank you," she said, but it rang hollow in the face of
loss.

"—was likely sodium thiopental, if I had to guess from the side-effects and the time it took you to
recover consciousness. A normal dose lasts less than fifteen minutes. It was actually fortunate that
you weren't taking sleeping pills, or you may not have woken up in time. The interactions with
benzodiaze—" Law looked over his shoulder and Saki her staring vacantly at the ceiling from her
cot. "Are you listening to me?"

"Yeah. I can't promise I'll remember what you said in an hour, but it's interesting. Keep talking,
please."

"Still can't focus?" He walked up to her with a small lantern. "Worst case scenario, you may be
feeling the side effects until tomorrow, but—"

She shoved a hand to his chest to keep the demonic source of light away from her face. "You know
what we should do one of these days? Sleep. I hear it's all the rage nowadays. People even get beds
to sleep in them! How wild is that?"

"I believe you're asking to get sedated."

"Come on, I can't be that annoying. What's keeping you from throwing me overboard? Surely it can't
be compassion."
"The food. And the coffee. Penguin's is dirty water."

"Great. Went from token girl of the team to Mom."

There was a knock on the already open door. Banu was smiling at them, and her crop top showed off the bandages around her midriff.

"Speaking of people who can't stay still."

"Can I steal your patient for a while?"

"As long as you bring her back in one piece."

"I promise I'll treat her as if she were one of mine."

"Hello? I'm still here."

They oversaw the port from the deck of the submarine. Life went on, almost cruelly, as if the events of the last hours had never transpired. The group of kids ran between the stalls of the market without a care in the world, getting yelled at by vendors and buyers alike and laughing.

Banu took an envelope from her bag and handed it to Saki. Inside, there was a fat stack of beli bills.

"For the surgery and the help." She said before Saki could ask. "Don't try to refuse it. I won't accept a no."

Saki kept her face a mask. "How's Onur?"

"He's being held for questioning, but it won't be for long, not at his age and when there's something much bigger to deal with. And they'll let him go to the funeral."

"Isn't there a wake? I thought you'd be there."

"I would, but I'm not welcome. Volkan's family never liked me much," she said with a sad smirk, gesturing all over herself, as if it was obvious why no one would want her for a daughter-in-law. "They can't keep me from the funeral, though. We do them in the open. The body's put on a raft, we set it on fire, and we let it sail into the bay. Born from the Mother, back to sleep in her arms."

Saki gulped at the memory of the stone woman, arms stretched to envelope all. She didn't think she could ever forget it.

"I'm very sorry," Saki said, and she meant it. "But why can they keep you from the wake? You were —"

"Friends."

She hadn't expected that. "Just friends?"

"I thought that was enough. His family wouldn't have accepted anything else."

"But you don't anymore?"

"I wasted what little time we had together. Now it doesn't matter."

Banu's tone had been final, but Saki didn't want to leave it at that. She wouldn't have forgiven herself
if she did. "I don't think any time spent with someone you love is lost." A knot formed in her throat and she swallowed it. "No matter how short it was. It's never lost."

'That's what I need to believe,' she wanted to add.

"You sound like you haven't had it easy, either."

She dodged the concealed question. "You should've seen Volkan when you were in the sickbay. It took a polar bear and the Surgeon of Death armed with a scalpel to keep him from jumping to your side."

Banu laughed, and it sounded like she wanted to cry. She fiddled with one of her bangles until it was undone and put it in Saki's empty hand.

"I can't—"

"Shut up and keep it. Just so you can have something nice from this town. And, maybe… maybe so you can remember not to be like me."

Saki looked at Banu's warm, sad smile, and thought she'd be lucky to be half as strong her.

For the first time since they left North Blue, Law got his hands on a newspaper. There hadn't been one at the inn on the first day, the next he hadn't even thought about it, and now that he had one in his hands, he wished he hadn't, but reality had a nasty habit of not going away even when it was being ignored.

She found Saki in the hallway, fumbling with a bangle that she was trying to tie around her right wrist. He waited from a distance until she was done juggling an envelope in her left hand while she knotted the cord with the help of her teeth. There was something almost admirable in her stubbornness to not ask for help.

Except last night, he reminded himself.

When she looked up, she grinned at him and lifted the envelope. "Great timing!" He didn't think so. "I bring you money!"

"I… What?" He took the envelope and looked at the amount of bills inside. "…Is there something you want to tell me?"

"No," she flicked his hat with a finger and a smile. "Also, payment from Banu. For the surgery and the help."

Feeling guilty, which was a sensation mostly foreign to him, he gave her the newspaper. "There's something in today's paper you should see."

He had it already opened by the relevant page, so it didn't take her long to find out what he meant. It was at the bottom of the page, just two lines.

Rescue efforts continue in Asteria after massive fire earlier this week. List of identified survivors in page 60.

She flipped the pages in an instant, and her eyes went through the column of names almost as fast.

Law paid attention to her reaction. Worry at first. Then, a small frown that lasted a fraction of a second before she concealed it and nothing more could be inferred from her face.
Law had felt more uncomfortable in the minute it took her to read and reread the column than he had in the past few years. It was bad news that usually came to him. He wasn't used to being their deliverer, unless you counted him as the bad news.

"Thanks," she said, folded the paper and gave it back to him. "Don't tell the others, okay?" And she stretched her arms, cracked her fingers and walked into the mess hall.

"Saki," he called after her, but she didn't stop, so he followed.

"I still have dishes to wash from last night and I need to get started with lunch, so unless you want to help I suggest you leave."

And true to word, she turned on the faucet and started humming a song so off key that its composer must have been turning in his grave.

He tossed the newspaper on the table and walked into the galley. "I'll help if you stop producing that dismal sound."

Saki sprinkled him with soapy water, but snickered all the same. Banu's old bangle hung from her wrist, its cheerful colors a good match for its new owner. Law returned fire, doing the dishes ended up taking more time than it would had Saki been washing them alone.

Her laughter rang in his ears, and he had to wonder how she managed to make it sound so genuine.
From that day on, Saki was the one who picked up the newspaper every morning. That was the only change in her routine.

She'd open it as soon as she got it, search for the list of survivors, leave it on a table in the mess hall, and head to the galley to make breakfast.

The first morning that she did it, at the crack of dawn, was the day of their departure from Qaryn. She stepped onto the main deck, and on one of the ends of the bay, she saw a crowd of people standing on the shore. So many people, young and old and solemn, all staring at a raft that a small group was finishing to prepare for its first and last travel. It seemed as if most of the island's inhabitants were in attendance. Banu was at the edge of the main group, watching from afar, with Onur by her side. Even in the end, she hadn't been allowed to come closer to say goodbye.

Saki thought in anger that it wasn't fair, and it surprised her, because she had long ago given up on finding fairness in life.

When the raft was ready, an elderly man carrying a torch set it on fire, and the ones closest to him pushed the raft into the water.

The currents dragged it to the center of the crater as the flames became taller and the smell of burning wood started to fill the air.

Saki didn't know for how long she had been watching when the door behind her opened and Law walked up to her. She hadn't mentioned the ceremony the day before, so chances were he had come out for the newspaper and found himself staring at a surprise sea burial.

"I had wondered what they did with their dead," Law said as a manner of 'good morning'.

"Banu said that it was supposed to be symbolic. Children of the Mother coming back to the Mother." She tucked behind her ear a strand of wavy hair that the breeze kept flinging to her face. "Kind of creepy if you ask me, but I may be a little biased."

"Religions tend to cause that impression when you don't follow them."

"Do they? Then I guess the murder attempt has nothing to do with it," she said flippantly, and then more seriously, "Details aside, it's a nice way to send off someone."

The flames towered into the sky by the time that the raft was completely engulfed by them. The bay was in dead silence, the only sounds that could be heard were the waves of the sea and crackling of the fire.

"Yeah." The smell of burned material became stronger. "I'll never get used to this smell."

Saki looked at him curiously. "You can go inside now." She passed the newspaper she was holding to Law. "Here you go."

Law hesitated for a split second, and instead of taking the newspaper he asked, "Any good news?"
"Not yet," she said. 'Yet' was the keyword. 'Yet' was the word she had to repeat to keep a resemblance of hope. "When are we leaving?" She asked, changing the subject without any subtlety.

Law didn't seem to mind. "Before noon. If you need something from the town you should go as soon as the market opens."

"To be honest, I'd be happy not to set foot on this island again. I think I'll do just that."

"A sensible decision. Who are you and what have you done to my crewmate?"

"Rude. Don't you have anyone else to nag at this hour?"

"No."

"There you go." She shoved the paper at him with a smirk and, deciding that keeping on watching a burial that didn't even matter to her wasn't the best she could do for her peace of mind, she walked to the door and stopped before taking the first step down. "And thank you for keeping me company yesterday," she added without looking at him, then turned around to say, "Coffee will be ready in five!" and closed the door behind her, not giving Law a chance to reply.

A light. There was a light blinding her, but it wasn't the warm light of the fires, it was cold and white and it didn't flicker.

It took her a few more seconds to realize that she was breathing through a mask and she was on a bed. She had a headache. The light was hurting her eyes. Where was she?

Take.

She jerked up from her position, sitting up and lowering the mask. In doing so, she rattled all the tubes connected to her (why were there so many?), made herself dizzy, and startled a machine that had been beeping softly but now cried loud enough to wake up an entire neighborhood. The headache got worse, and she hid her face in her knees and covered her ears with her hands in an attempt to keep the light and noise away.

Take. The fire.

Something tugged on her sleeve and then she heard the unmistakable sound of her brother crying. She looked up, and Take was there, leaning on her bed and holding onto her hospital gown as if she was going to disappear.

"W-what—?"

Her voice was hoarse enough to scare her further, and he didn't get to give her any answers before the door to the room burst open and at least four people came inside, some with white coats, some that didn't look even remotely like doctors.

And… the girl. The pretty girl with the orange hair and ruffled skirt was in the group and moving towards her really fast with a smile, and putting her hands on Take's shoulders—

Without thinking, Tsubaki's hand shot forward to grab the girl's wrist. "Don't touch my brother," she rasped out, and, judging by the girl's unshifting smile, failed to sound intimidating.

The girl placed a hand on top of Tsubaki's own said soothingly, "Don't worry, we won't take him away. He can stay here, but the doctors need to give you a checkup. You've been out cold for days.
But you can move, right? That's good!" The girl grinned widely. "Take told us how you got him out
of the fire. Do you remember?"
"I…" Fire. Smoke. Screams. Shots? Running, the waterfront… "It's blurry."
"Typical symptom of carbon monoxide poisoning," one of the men in a white coat said. "Matches
our diagnostic so far."
"Great!" The girl said, "Then I'll sit here with your brother while the doctors to their job. Is that okay
with you?"
Tsubaki supposed that she was, but she didn't know what to say to this girl she had only known for
less than five minutes before she started talking to her as if they were longtime acquaintances.
The girl suddenly smacked her own forehead at the sight of Tsubaki's confusion. "Oh, silly me, I
haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Koala, Fishman Karate assistant instructor for the Revolutionary
Army, and you are in one of our transport ships, currently heading to Baltigo." She grinned again.
"We met the other day in Asteria. Do you remember me?"
Tsubaki nodded dumbly and tried to process what she had just been told, but her mind refused to
cooperate.
"Good! Then I'll explain everything later. And you have nothing to worry about. You and Take will
be safe here."
Marina had spent an entire week in Asteria, helping the locals, before the real relief efforts came and
she could head back to the Lymes base with her unit. She didn't want to, but after an extra half a
week and her fellow captain avoiding her all through it, she complied and took her men with her.
She knew that her superior officers would be angry at her, so it didn't surprise her at all when the
repaired Den Den Mushi in her office rang, not ten minutes after she had stepped inside, note to self:
there may be a mole among us, and the stern voice of Commodore Curtiss greeted her upon picking
it up.
"Marina."
"Commodore."
"You know why I'm calling."
"I would rather hear it from you, sir."
The man on the other side of the line sighed. "Captain Marina, you are getting a transfer to G-11
along with the entire unit that accompanied you to Asteria." Marina took a breath to reply, but the
man left no room for interruptions and continued. "And if you try to argue in any way, someone,
somewhere, will make sure that you are demoted to Warrant Officer and keep that rank for the rest of
your career."
Feeling a stress headache setting in, Marina stared at the receiver with enough intensity to set it on
fire. "Commodore," she said composedly, and it took a lot of effort, "my men were only obeying
orders. I request that you do not transfer them. Going to Asteria was my decision and I alone should
be the one to shoulder the responsibility for it."
"Then you should have thought about them before giving your orders." There was no hint of mercy


in the man's voice. She hadn't expected it, either. "You made the call, and they will have to face the consequences of your rashness. Your men are your responsibility as much as the civilians in your area. Note that I said *your*." Curtiss sighed on the other side, and said in a more relaxed tone, "Akainu's smoky pants, what possessed you to sock a colleague in the face?"

That had an easy answer. "He deserved it, sir."

"...Why did I even ask." The man groaned on the other side. "I am not doubting you, but you knew how shaky your position was already. You need to learn to keep your temper in check."

"So I've been told several times."

"Yes, by me. And you still don't listen." His voice became harsher, but his words did not. "Marina, you have a week to get everything in order for your replacement. You and your men will get the official notifications soon, but I thought you could use some advance notice."

"I appreciate it, sir."

"You better. Why am I always stuck with the problem kids?"

Marina smiled wryly and muttered a quiet thank you. The Den Den Mushi, who had been sweating bullets expecting another smashed receiver, rested easy when the captain put down the receiver delicately. Marina placed her elbows on the desk, intertwined her fingers, and rested her chin on them. The framed picture of Marineford on the opposing wall stared at her mockingly. It had been inherited from her predecessor, who had sat on her current chair for twenty years straight, maybe literally, given how worn down it was, before getting a transfer to headquarters. Marina had managed one year, and she couldn't say her butt had been in contact with it for long during that time.

Marina liked to see things in black and white. Good and bad guys. Good and bad actions. Fairness for all who worked hard.

Her brother, for instance, up and left one day. He didn't tell them until he was with one foot out of home. He didn't write. He abandoned *her*. So it was only expected that he shipwrecked and got stuck in the Grand Line with no way back home. That's what happened to people who didn't do things right.

Marina had done things right. She had gone through her school years with brilliant grades, and that trend only continued at the naval academy. She worked twice as long and three times as hard as her companions. She got noticed. She was promoted fast. She had built a successful career before thirty because she believed that she could, and that she would help people on the way. And now, it was helping people what had put her job in jeopardy.

Helping the people of Asteria has been the right thing to do. What was she supposed to do? Ignore the trail of the smugglers? Turn around once she saw that there were none left in the destroyed island? Punching a coworker may have been on the morally grey side, *but still*. She was being punished for doing the right thing, of that she was sure. It wasn't just. And when one literally worked for the side of justice, that thought was a bitter pill to swallow.

Perhaps she would have been better off working as a ship engineer, but Marina had never been able to stay still and sit down for long. Which brought her back to the worn down chair her predecessor had left her in her soon to be vacated office.

Maybe she'd do better in the Grand Line. Someone where she wouldn't be watched by hawks all the time and she wouldn't be made responsible of an entire sea's worth of Marines' failure to stop the
pirates that each month trickled into the Grand Line through Reverse Mountain.

The chair creaked under her weight, and for the first time since she had inherited her office, she peered at the picture of Marineford with doubt and a little bit of disdain.

But despite her internal turmoil, Marina couldn't deny that she was glad to leave Lymes behind for good. She leaned back on her chair and wondered if her brother had felt the same when the opportunity to get away arose.

"Howe, Philip," Marina casually asked the two men she knew were outside flanking her door, "how would you like to see the Grand Line?"

If she somebody was really opposed to go, well, she could rewrite a few documents. No one high up had to know how many soldiers had actually followed her.

Law closed his eyes and concentrated on expanding to its limit the dome that his ability created, then released it. Bepo was with him, right at the point where the blue area stopped, and the sounds of his rustling through a box of old medical journals were the only ones in the training room.

Still without opening his eyes, he heard Bepo throw one in the air, and he used the sound as a cue to create his Room and switch the journal with a dumbbell near his foot. As it hit the matted floor loudly, Bepo threw another paper, and this one flew farther. Following the sound, he tried to reach it with his ability, but the dome hit a blunt stop as it expanded, and the paper completed its trajectory to the other side of the room. It hit the floor louder than the dumbbell. Somewhere in that situation, there was a joke to be made about the weight of academia in the modern world.

Law opened his eyes to see that he had missed by a foot. A gap that he could close with less than half a step, and it could be the difference between life and death.

"Your reaction time is getting slower," Bepo informed him. "We've been at this for an hour. You should rest."

Law felt sweat building up on his temples, cold, the bad sort that happened when his stamina bottomed and he needed it the most. If he couldn't push himself now, when he was safe, there was no telling if he would be able to do it when he actually needed it.

That man from Qaryn hadn't meant anything to Law, but letting him fall to his death when he should have been able to prevent it was eating at him, if only because he had helped when Saki had gone missing and it was only luck that none of the crew had been the ones to fall.

"Not yet." He could feel his muscles cramping.

"I think there's a hard limit," Bepo said, closing the cardboard box and sitting on it. He sunk in it until the journals inside stopped him. "And you will not get over it if you overwork yourself."

"We can't know if I don't try. Just a little—"

"You're the captain and we need you alert at all times. I won't allow you to fall unconscious training. Because that's what happens when you push yourself too hard. Remember?"

Law didn't know how to handle a contrarian Bepo, particularly a contrarian Bepo, armed to the teeth with arguments, and who had been with him for long enough to know exactly what to expect from him before he did anything. He rarely got like this, usually only when Law was being unreasonable, but this time he felt perfectly justified in his reasoning. As he always did. Until he cooled down and
thought it better.

All right, maybe he was being a little unreasonable.

"It was pretty bad that Jerkface died, but these things happen," Bepo said, making use of the Law-mind reading capabilities he had developed over more than ten years.

Law took off his hat and mussed his hair in an attempt to dry off the sweat. He didn't care that the man had died. What bugged him was his lack of skill to stop it. He tried to divert the subject. "Did you get that nickname from Saki?"

Bepo nodded. "It caught on with Penguin and Shachi too. I think it's fitting."

The corner of Law's mouth quirked up. "Yeah."

But Bepo didn't let the breather to continue. "We are tougher than him, so don't worry. That won't happen to any of us. And if it does," he looked away momentarily, and then shrugged, "I don't think anyone will regret it."

Law retaliated to this massive attack on his innermost thoughts that he didn't even want to entertain — how dare he — by flinging his hat at his friend and switching it with the journal near his feet at the last second.

Bepo caught it in the air. "This means I win," he said with a glint in his eyes.

"Wow, Captain, is this how you treat your subordinates in private?"

The scuttle to the lower deck had opened and Saki was poking out of it, leaning on the floor with half of her body hidden. She was standing on the ladder below.

Law gave her an unamused look and she grinned.

"Why don't you use the door like a normal person?" He asked.

"Because I'd have to take the loooong way around." She made a circle motion with her index finger to accentuate the 'loooong'.

"There's a door to the lower deck."

"Still longer."

"It's scenic," Bepo said.

"It's a waste of time, Fluffy."

"Aren't you wasting time now?" Law asked.

"Nope! Well, right now I am, but that's because you're distracting me with things that don't matter." She shot a half-hearted glare at him. "I just wanted to check if Penguin had told you about the tattoo he wants."

"Ah, you mean the one on his arm? Yes, he asked me first. Why?"

Saki's face suggested that she didn't know if he was asking to make her waste more time or he was sincerely dense. "I don't copy someone else's work without permission. I have morals, you know."
Law raised an eyebrow.

"Professionally inclined morals. And on the same subject, I wanted to ask if you'd let me work in the sickbay this afternoon. It's not like I need to be there, but it'll be more hygienic."

"As long as you don't move anything around. Wouldn't want his arm to spontaneously fall off."

"Good decision," she gave him a thumbs up. "Anyway, I'll leave you to your business."

"You don't need to look at the tattoo first?" He asked a bit surprised.

Saki blinked a couple of times and wiggled her eyebrows. "Are you coming on to me, Captain?"

"Are you drunk?"

"Never drink before work. Except when I do."

"Right."

"It's not like I haven't seen it plenty of times, but I guess it won't hurt." She stretched her arms and then pushed her body up to the training room. "Okay, let me see," she said as she walked up to him.

Law lifted his left forearm towards her. Saki eyed it suspiciously, gaze lingering for a brief moment on his fingers. She frowned. Law felt a small surge of satisfaction and smirked, very proud of himself. She gave him a tired look but took the arm anyway, bringing it a little closer, and leaned to look at the ink with an expert eye.

Bepo observed the silent exchange from the box with critical interest.

"Why couldn't you let whoever did this ink your fingers too?" She complained with a grimace.

"I was young and irresponsible. It was another time."

Saki snorted. "Sure it was. I'd be crying myself to sleep if I were you. I don't know how you can laugh about it."

"It gets easier every time you complain about them."

Shaking her head, she let go of his arm like it had a contagious disease. "I've seen enough, thanks." And she walked to the door muttering 'shameless' to herself.

"You left the scuttle open," Law called right before she went out.

"I'm taking the scenic route to get rid of the bad thoughts."

She closed the door with a click.

Law turned around to try again to convince Bepo, but he found his friend staring fixedly at him.

Feeling strangely unnerved, he asked. "Is something wrong?"

Bepo blinked slowly a couple of times. "No. Nothing."

"Then what is it?"

Bepo tilted his head. "Did something happen?"
"Such as?"

Bepo didn't reply right away. "Nevermind."

Law would have insisted, but annoying Bepo was counterproductive to his plans. "If you say so. Can we get back to training?"

Bepo frowned. "No. Go take a shower and sleep."

"You don't need to be here if you want to go, I can… Bepo?" The bear stood up and began to approach him with a serious face. "Bepo. No."

"It's for your own good," he said in a paternalistic tone.

"Bepo. Bepo!"

Bepo spread out his arms and ran towards Law. Law, in turn, ran towards the scuttle.

Polar bears were faster than they looked.

Sometime after Trafalgar Law had been caught by his navigator and forcibly thrown and locked inside his quarters, in the sickbay, Saki held up the stencil she had been working on so Penguin could give his approval.

"Is this okay with you?"

He inspected it for a good minute, with Shachi looking at it close by. "I don't see any difference with Captain's."

"That should mean I did it right. Hold your arm this way, I want to check if it fits." Saki placed the stencil against the skin and adjusted it until she made a pleased sound and turned to the tray where she had placed everything she'd need for the tattoo.

"Penguin, are you sure you want to do this?"

"Why wouldn't I? I even shaved my arm," Penguin said seriously. "That takes a serious commitment."

"Shachi," Saki said, now busy cleaning Penguin's arm and applying a roll-on on it, "if you keep nagging I'll tattoo your ass in your sleep."

"No you won't!" He exclaimed, and his sunglasses slid down his nose a fraction. "I would notice!"

Carefully, Saki placed the transfer paper on Penguin's forearm, making sure it didn't wrinkle, and pressed it against the skin. "Is that a dare? Because I don't want it to be a dare, but…"

"No?"

"Thanks," she peeled off the paper and told Penguin, "Is this alright with you?"

He inspected the design on his arm and grinned. "Yeah. I'm ready."

She smiled. "Perfect. Now you," she said to Shachi, "take a couple of steps away, I don't like people breathing on my neck while I work." Then she said more seriously. "Okay Penguin, put the arm on the mattress and try to relax." She took the tattoo machine from the tray next to her and turned it on.
The paper on the cot creaked under the weight of Penguin's arm. Shachi gulped. Saki did her best to ignore him.

"I'll do the outline first and then fill it in. We can stop if you like once the outline's done, or we can finish it in one sitting. Depends on you."

"It's fine, you can do it all today."

"Of course I can. Doesn't mean you do. It's your first tattoo."

"Better get it over with in one day if I can. If I wasn't sure I wouldn't have told you to do it."

Saki smiled up at him. "That's the spirit. I hate people who don't think their tattoos through and later want them fixed."

A tense silence filled the room until Penguin muttered, "Uhhh…"

"Captain doesn't regret a thing," she said blandly, and Penguin nodded sympathetically. "That said, it's okay to ask for a break, so do it if you need it."

"Yes, ma'am."

Saki put herself to work. She took one last glance at Shachi, and he looked far tenser than Penguin. Penguin, on the other hand, watched with interest as she started to work and the line began to appear on his skin.

"It's bleeding," Shachi pointed out.

"Tattoos bleed," Saki said, wiping some of the blood that was dripping out with gauze. "Are you okay, Penguin?"

"Peachy."

"It doesn't hurt?" Shachi asked.

"Rock hippos were worse."

Saki prided herself on having a steady hand when she almost laughed. Geometric figures always took more precision than artistic drawing. They weren't her first choice whenever she did a design, but a job was a job, and the fact that she didn't like it as much as other types of drawings didn't mean anything as long as she could do it well.

Besides, it may not have been her personal preference, but she had to admit that the design was aesthetically pleasing.

By the time she had finished the outline, Shachi hadn't spoken again, which actually made her more uneasy than his constant quips, and when she lifted the machine and her eyes from the tattoo, she saw that the color of the man's face had drained from his face.

"Shachi," Penguin called.

"Y-yes?"

"Maybe you should sit down," he suggested.

"Maybe you should leave and lie down. Or just lie down on a cot," Saki said, fearing that he
wouldn’t make it outside.

He opened his mouth to reply automatically, thought better, and said without much enthusiasm, "Maybe you're right."

In other circumstances Saki would have thought that the lack of resistance meant that he was on the verge of death, but she knew how sick one could feel when needles were involved. *Freaking needles*, making her feel sympathy for Shachi when she could’ve laughed at him. But she didn't, because she knew how bad it felt. Losing control of your own body over something inoffensive was the worst.

She didn't get why watching a tattoo machine at work could make someone dizzy, though. They were great. They weren't anything like those other needles that went through muscles and vessels and ugh, she was getting queasy and she didn't want to think about it while she worked. But the point was that tattoo guns were the work of the gods. Mostly painless compared to traditional tools, making getting the tattoos more hygienic, and her lines more accurate and neat. What was there not to love about them?

"You want to keep going?" She asked.

"Sure. It isn't as bad as they make it out to be."

"Nothing will be as bad if you compare it to the rock hippos," she joked.

He grinned at her. "Aren't I lucky?"

She switched the rounds on the machine and fixed her stare on Penguin's arm again. "This might bother you more than the outline, though."

"Do your worst."

She grimaced. "No, you don't want me to do that. And neither do I."

He shrugged. "Then do your best."

"That I can promise," she said, and she turned the machine on again and started working.

"And the other arm tomorrow?"

"That too."

Marina wasn’t fully aware – scratch that, she had never wanted to be – of how hard it must have been for her brother to leave until she had to do it.

She still told herself that he abandoned them because he wanted to, but she was different. She had been transferred. Her actions were justifiable.

She knew that she should have gone inside the inn to say goodbye, but she didn't want to. And Marina, awfully honest as she was, didn't want to do something she'd feel bad about. Not in a moment like this.

Just imagining her mother trying to convince her not to go, and the locals joking that she would never marry was enough to make her feel physically ill.

So instead of walking in, she did the next best thing in her mind, which was deemed as such because
it was the only thing that she could see herself doing without risking a nervous breakdown. The feelings of self-hate were going to follow her anywhere, anyway. At least she would avoid the drama.

Before the sun rose over Lymes, she went to her old home and dropped a letter in the mailbox. That was her farewell. She was aware of how much of a hypocrite she had been regarding her brother, then.

She just couldn't face these people anymore. Her brother had simply reached his breaking point earlier than her.

She looked at the inn one last time, watching the old sign she had helped his brother install when she was little and she had learned how to make circuits for the first time. The few lights that survived the recent storms flickered weakly, casting intermittent shadows behind her.

It was for the best. It had always been. She understood that now.

Two weeks after Law had shown Saki the news of Asteria, the newspaper stopped publishing the list of survivors.

She skimmed over the issue three times in case she had missed it. She hadn't.

Although she had known that this was the likeliest possibility since she had read the first list and found no trace of her family, although she had tried to steel herself for this moment, the confirmation tore her inside.

If she hadn't left the island. If she had just sat down quietly at home and waited to die. If she had insisted more to the old man so he took a boat with the kids and never came back to the island. There were too many ifs and every single one of them made her responsible for what had happened. The fire hadn't been a coincidence, it couldn't have. The remains of the smuggling ring had done it to destroy evidence. And what better way to do it than burn everybody along with it? She should have seen it coming. But she hadn't, and this was what her lack of foresight had brought her.

Once again, Saki wasn't used to think about the future.

She folded the newspaper and walked back inside, heading to the mess hall with heavy steps. Moving when she had woken up at the Mother's shrine had felt easier.

She didn't get it. How was she able to put herself in constant danger and still come out fine when people who hadn't done anything kept dying around her?

She put the folded newspaper on the table and walked into the galley to work on crepe batter. It would do as a distraction.

She tried not to sob while she worked. *Don't think. Don't think. Just keep moving.*

Not long after she had begun cooking, the sound of tired steps signaled Law's arrival to the mess hall, and he walked to the door of the galley to see what she was doing. Noting the first appearance bowl of batter since the day they had left North Blue, he asked, "Are we celebrating anything?"

"Yeah," she said with a strained voice, trying to sound happy and refusing to look away from what she was doing. "We're alive."

She heard Law pick up the newspaper right away, but she didn't turn around to look. The rest of the
crew appeared in the room shortly after, and he didn't say anything to her for the rest of the morning. She didn't talk much to anybody, either, and she stayed that way for the next few days.

In a well-travelled place of the Grand Line, where industry literally boomed and tourism consequently flourished, lay the Island of Coconuts, with capital letters, or Coco Island for short, because the island had an older, more dignified name, but if you mentioned coconuts to anybody with a business sense, they'd know the place you were referring to.

As a general rule, pirates didn't have great business instincts if business didn't involve Marine-related destruction and general chaos, so the only previous info that Law had gathered about their destination was that it was a summer island, safe enough for pirates to dock as long as they didn't do it in one of the fancier ports, and that local trade was somehow tied to coconuts.

In any other part of the world, a factory explosion big enough to blow up thousands of coconut trees and scatter all its contents over the island and up to the sky would have made the news across the entire sea, but this was the Grand Line. Something bigger had blown up two islands over on the same day, probably, and very likely in an intentional fashion, so instead the accident had made it into a corner of the sixth page of the newspaper. A local entomologist, who had been taking pictures of the local bees at the moment of the explosion, was very disappointed that his picture of a coconut-mushroom cloud wasn't published alongside the story.

Way before the Polar Tang got near enough the island to dock, a strong coconut odor began to permeate the air. As the submarine got closer, the Heart Pirates saw that it wasn't pearly white sand what lined the shores of the island, but coconut flakes.

When they stepped down on firm land, Shachi adequately blurted out what everybody else was thinking.

"What the hell is this place?"

Bepo appeared to be having a hard time since they had entered the island's range. He was covering his nose with a paw and there were tears on the corner of his eyes. "Smell… too… strong… it's hot…"

It was, indeed, hot, and for a bunch of North Blue natives and a polar bear, a wonder that it had taken over ten minutes with those temperatures for one of them to complain.

It didn't come as a surprise that Bepo was the first one to do so. Saki would bet that the next one would be Shachi or Penguin with their stupidly practical boiler suits (not that she was still bitter about being caught in the middle of a storm in Lymes, while they were in waterproof suits, that would be silly and petty).

"Newcomers?" A sailor working on the vessel next to the submarine asked.

Standing on the docks like idiots, looking around, wiping sweat from their foreheads and smelling the air had probably given them away.

"Yeah," Penguin replied. "What's with the coconut everywhere?"

"A processing plant exploded a decade ago," the sailor said solemnly. "Nasty day. Everything's been like this since then."

"Oh. Thanks."
The man shrugged, picked up a crate and made his way onto his ship.

"One less mystery," Law said, unfazed. "First we should find somewhere to stay." Bepo sniffled, and Law gave him a worried look. "And we should be on the lookout for interesting people. You need a hand with maintenance, right?" He asked his mechanics.

Shachi pointed accusingly at Bepo. "You filthy snitch!"

"We're managing fine, Captain!" Penguin said. "But, uh, some help wouldn't hurt," he admitted.

"Our girl's becoming too much for just us two to watch after her."

"You know what you need better than I do," Law said with a shrug. "Keep an eye out and tell me if you find someone who can help."

"Roger."

"Right, then… Bepo?" Law frowned upon turning to his friend.

Both his paws were now on his snout, and his voice came out muffled. "I want nose plugs."

"It isn't that bad," Shachi said. "Smells tasty."

"That's because you're nose-impaired," Bepo said, irritated.

"I'll have you know that my nose is very regal and perfectly functional."

"If that was true you'd change your deodorant."

"W-what do you mean by that?"

Bepo sniffled and looked away from Shachi haughtily.

"I don't smell!" He turned to Penguin, "I don't, right?" Penguin gave him a shit-eating grin, so he tried with someone else, "Saki?"

Saki had until then been ignoring the conversation for two reasons, mainly: one, because she didn't feel like being around anybody since she had received the bad news, which was pretty tiring considering she lived in an enclosed space with four other people. Two, because coconut flakes, unlike sand, floated on the surface of the sea, and she was engrossed by the amount of them on the water, swaying with the waves like white petals. Edible petals. Which meant free food. And free food was good, especially when she was in charge of it.

"Someone's in her own little world," Penguin pointed out.

"Do you think those are sweet or salty?" She asked quietly, more to herself than the others.

"Don't let her," Law warned, and began to walk towards the city.

Penguin and Shachi's eyes met for a second, and they moved in unison to take her by the arms and drag her away from the edge of the water.

"I-I wasn't going to jump! Who do you take me for?"

"A madwoman," Shachi said with a grin.
"Let go, you assholes!"

To Saki's misfortune, she was short enough for them to be able to lift her up by her arms, so they walked into the main district of the city making a happy scene.

The inn the Heart Pirates decided on was kind of dingy even by Saki's standards, especially after Onur's, but the price was fine and a nicer place might have brought them unwanted attention. At the entrance, there was a chalkboard that announced in shaky letters, 'COCONUT JELLY NIGHT!'

"You've come on a good day," a young receptionist said while she looked for their room keys under the front desk. "Tonight we'll have our old cook in the kitchen. It will be noisy, but I promise it will be worth it! He works at the casino restaurant nowadays—that's how good he is! Ah," she resurfaced, golden curls bouncing, "here they are. Your rooms are on the second floor. Sorry in advance if you find the view a bit lacking. You've seen how packed buildings are in this city." And she smiled widely.

Shachi and Penguin, absolutely enchanted with the girl, looked on the verge of drooling if she smiled their way again.

"Now, for the registry…" She opened the book on the counter, looked critically at the Jolly Rogers on the guys' clothes, and after thinking a bit wrote something that to Saki looked suspiciously like 'Falafel Low,' 'Marshmallow A,' 'Marshmallow B,' 'Cutie,' and 'Christmas'. "That will do. Here's a map of the city," she handed Shachi one from the stack to her right and he flushed. "I'll be going inside now. If you need anything, just ring the bell."

"Wait," Bepo said. He was feeling better indoors than near the beach. "What's the setting time for the Log Pose?"

The girl smiled wider and looked up at the polar bear like the mechanics looked at her. "A week. You are welcome to stay with us for as long as you need." Bepo didn't look happy at the news, but the girl still said, "Have a nice day, and see you for dinner!"

Outside, Saki approached Shachi silently from behind and whispered into his ear. "You have no chance."

He shivered and jumped away from her, rubbing his ear like it was dirty. "Shoo! Don't do that!"

She lifted her hands. "Just saying she likes them taller and hairier."

"She just thinks he's cute," Penguin said. "Like a teddy bear."

"Yeah. Besides, who did she give the map to, huh?"

"If that helps you sleep at night…"

"I am here," Bepo sniffled, sounding miserable, "you know…"

"We know," Law replied, and took the map from Shachi's hands. "Next order of business?" He said to his crewmates.

"Don't look at me," Saki said. "The pantry's well stocked and we shouldn't buy perishables until we're about to leave."
"Our front's taken care of too," Penguin said.

"Bepo?"

"Can… can I get a face mask? I want to go back to the inn."

Law stared at his face with concern. Bepo's eyes were puffy. "Sure. Will you be okay?"

He nodded and rubbed his nose with a paw. "I just want to be indoors. It's hot, too…"

Bepo waved them goodbye and headed to their inn, just around the corner.

"Poor dude," Shachi said.

"Don't be so soft, he said that you smell," Penguin replied.

"But I don't."

"And he's going to steal the girl," Saki added.

"Will you drop it already?"

She folded her arms and looked away, absently running her right hand over her tattoo and observing the distribution of the buildings. It reminded her of Asteria, though the construction looked more solid, and everything was decidedly more tropical. It didn't look like any of the images pictures she had seen of summer islands, but she guessed they only chose the pretty ones for books and left the working neighborhoods out of them. She was starting to think of good angles to draw, maybe find a high spot that overlooked the city, when she remembered that she hadn't even finished Qaryn's and had no one to send it to. A rock dropped inside her stomach. Bepo would still want the drawings for the logbook, though…

Shachi's voice gave her an excuse to think about something else. "Maybe we can do something when she comes back to the real world."

"Sorry," she said forcing a smile. "I was just looking around."

"Welcome back," he ribbed again. "Do you want to go somewhere?"

She thought for a moment. "I'd like to see if I can find a tattoo shop to restock some supplies, but it won't be urgent until someone makes up his mind," she wiggled her eyebrows at him.

"Hey," Shachi complained, and Penguin wiggled his eyebrows at him too, and though the effect was lost under the shadow of the cap, his friend seemed to get the message. "Hey you too."

"I'll go with you," Law said to Saki. "I'm curious about—"

"No," she cut him off.

The other three looked at her strangely.

Still, Law had an idea of what had prompted the sudden refusal. "I hope you have a more convincing argument than that."

Saki's eyebrows twitched. "You know what the argument is. I won't say it out loud. I'm just asking that you do not spread your shame onto innocent people."
Law smirked as he casually cracked his knuckles, and the other two got what the conversation was about right away. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Saki knew there would be no way to convince him. "At least keep your hands in your pockets."

"I'm not promising anything."

Penguin cleared his throat nervously. "Well, now that that's settled we should get moving."

Law nodded at him. "See you for dinner at the inn," and he passed them back the map.

"Aye, Captain."

Saki supposed that if she had to feel mopey around other person, it was lucky that Law was someone she didn't have to give explanations to. She didn't want anybody's pity, Law didn't seem to be treating her differently from before, and that's how she wanted it to continue. There was no point on dwelling on what had happened, even if she kept thinking about it day and night, even if she felt like dying every time something reminded her of her family.

But of course, he had to go and do the exact opposite thing of what she wanted.

"How are you holding up?" Law asked after the others were out of hearing range.

She wasn't expecting the question now. He could have asked her at any other time before arriving to the island.

"I'm fine," she said with a smile, avoiding his eyes.

"You always are," he replied blandly.

"I am."

"At least look at my face when you're lying."

Saki's smile dropped and said a little disgusted. "Why do you have to be so difficult? I'm trying to make this simple for everybody. Just ignore me, you've been doing great until now."

"Since you didn't mention anything, I thought you didn't want to talk about it."

She clapped her hands and said very fast. "Well thought! I really, really don't, because talking about it will make me think and I'm pretty sure that you need a cook and not a walking human mess at this time, so let's just do as if nothing happened, find a pharmacy for Bepo, and I promise I'll do my best not to space out from now on. Deal?"

Law looked as if he wanted to say something, but he took a glance to the busy street they were on, and in the end he just sighed quietly and put his hands in his pockets, looking slightly dejected. Well, to be fair, he was frowning as always, but she could tell he wasn't happy with her reply.

Saki felt guilty, but she ignored it and took a tentative step forward. "Let's go?"

"Yeah," he said, falling into step with her and looking forward. "As long as you remember that whatever your duties are, you are allowed to be sad."

She stiffened at his words, but it didn't seem like she was looking when he did. It clicked in her mind then that maybe it hadn't been lucky that she was stuck with Law for the shopping trip. That maybe he had done it on purpose so she didn't have to keep faking in front of the others.
Or maybe she was reading too much into it.

"Thank you," she said anyway, avoiding looking at him just as much as he was. "I mean it."

"No problem."

"For putting your hands in your pockets," she added.

Law did a double-take, and after her words sunk in pulled his left hand out of his pocket and threw an arm over her shoulders like he had done in Indent Bay.

"Noooooo," Saki complained.

"You brought it on yourself."

"The shame never ends," she said, defeated. Even if the touch was strangely comforting.

He let go soon, though, because when they passed a specialty shop that was giving out coconut bonbon samples, and Saki being Saki, sad or not, she had to go and taste them.

Maybe she wasn't at the top of her game, but she managed to charm out of the shopkeeper a few more samples for the guys.

Law and Saki got far earlier than dinnertime to the inn, much to Bepo's relief, who looked like Christmas had come early when he was presented with a box of extra-large surgical masks. He didn't want the bonbon.

As dinner service approached, the noise level at the inn started rising, and by the time Penguin and Shachi were back, the dining room was booming with people. It was on the small side, and it was obvious that tables and chairs had been added for the occasion, because half of them didn't match and some were so close together that the staff had trouble moving through the room.

The receptionist, who doubled as a waitress, waved them over to a table and tripped against another waiter who was making a beeline for the kitchen. She was back in a moment at their table to hand them the menus.

She looked as enthusiastic as earlier. "Tonight's specialty are lasagna and, of course, the jelly for dessert! You know what you want to drink?"

When the girl left after taking note of their orders, Penguin sighed dreamily. "She's an angel. A customer service angel."

"Aren't they all?" Shachi agreed.

"She is," Bepo agreed. "She let me into the cold storage room earlier. This island's too hot."

Two people on the table glared surreptitiously at the bear.

"Is that even legal?" Saki asked.

"No," Law said. "But we're pirates."

"Do we really want to be above food-safety laws?"

"Who was looking at the coconut flakes on the water, again?" Shachi said.
"Shut it, Marshmallow B."

"Sure, Christmas."

Thankfully the waitress was back with their food before somebody had the great idea of calling their captain Falafel.

Dinner passed without incident (other than a sneeze from Bepo that made the people at the nearest table jump), but by the time the waitress was bringing their desserts, many of the customers had left, the most of the waiters had been dismissed for the night, and only a scarce few tables were still occupied.

Little did the Heart Pirates know that someone in the room had been watching them during the entire dinner, and was still doing so.

"The coconut smell was starting to turn my stomach out there, but this is really good," said Penguin, shoveling a spoonful of jelly in his mouth.

Bepo sniffed Penguin's dessert suspiciously. "Can I have some?"

"Why don't you ask your girl—"

A loud crash on the other side of the room made everybody turn to look at the kitchen's door.

"NO CUSTOMERS ALLOWED!" A voice boomed.

The waitress, clutching a tray to her chest, ran towards a man on the floor, apparently knocked out by a battered pan that was still vibrating near him. "I told you not to bother him!" And she proceeded to fan the unconscious man with the tray. "Oh my, oh my…"

A fork flew out from the kitchen and embedded itself inches away from the man's hand, on the floorboards.

"Felicia, don't let any drunks in," the same mysterious voice from before said.

"Sorry! I'll send him home right away!"

She didn't have to say anything else for two men to get up from a table, put a few bills on it, and go to lift the man by his arms and legs.

"We told him not to," one said to the girl apologetically.

"Oh, no, no, don't worry! Just be careful on the way home!"

The man was carried out while his friends muttered curses, and some of the customers left laughed before going back to their meals. Felicia laughed nervously and resumed picking up the dishes from the empty tables.

When she came near the Heart Pirates, Law said to her, "Someone in that kitchen has really good aim."

"That's Mack!" She smiled. "He likes to say that the raspberry syrup on his jelly is actually the congealed blood of his enemies."

Shachi's spoon froze on the way to his mouth, Penguin started coughing, and the rest just kept eating. Saki wondered about the recipe and how she could copy it.
"Aaaah! It was a joke!" She exclaimed, mortified, and fanned Penguin with the tray as she had done before with the unconscious man. "I'm so sorry!"

Penguin just waved at her while he coughed and fought for air.

"He's saying he's fine," Shachi translated.

"Oh… okay…"

Then another table called Felicia, and on her way she tripped over the fork stuck on the floor, saving the dishes she was carrying with a belly flop that only a person who was more acquainted with the ground than she had to could have acquired. Saki sympathized.

Felicia then fought with the fork for a long minute until she decided to leave it for later. Whoever was in that kitchen was in possession of an amazing throwing arm.

White beaches. A fragrant aroma. A luxury complex built around a small lake with milky-looking water. And many, many coconut trees. That was what tourists looked for when they went to Coco Island.

The complex was in its own secluded part of the island, strictly separated from the industrial sector. If you looked out from one of the balconies of the several hotels there, the only things you’d see would be crystalline water, luxury cruises and white beaches.

Meanwhile, a city for the less fortunate stretched behind the complex. Employees of the coconut factories and the facilities in the complex (always expanding past its current borders) lived there, going on with their ordinary lives right next to opulence they’d never personally know. There were hotels, coconut themed spas, a casino and high-end shops so the tourists only needed to go out of the complex to step on the island’s pristine beaches.

All of this continuous expansion could only be supported by an iron rule. The Commercial Association of Coconut Affairs ruled all coconut related matters and extended its tentacles anywhere it could reach. And at its head was a man who managed everything.

President Carpus was forty-seven years old, and the younger brother of the owner of the factory that had exploded over a decade ago, turning Coco Island into a fruity summer paradise. He had never liked his brother much, and he was relieved to have their parents' inheritance all for himself. With a keen business sense and little scruples, he was the man who had transformed a tragedy into the island’s saving grace. The citizens admired how well he had handled his personal loss and made it to the top despite the tragic circumstances. In turn, he admired the landscape of the island that he was helping renovate from a luxurious office on the fifteenth floor of the CACA's headquarters.

Still, dangers loomed everywhere, and not even he was exempt from them.

Said man had to look away from his shiny, golden-framed windows when somebody knocked on his door.

He took a moment to right his meticulously curled hair and moustache before saying, "Come in," with an affected tone. He stood as straight as he could to look taller.

What must have been the plainest man in existence walked inside the room. Grey slacks, light blue shirt tucked in, brown thinning hair and a surprisingly nondescript face. He was the kind of middle aged desk worker that you saw on every commute to work and made your eyes simply glaze over him. He was undetectable in a crowd, and completely unremarkable and inoffensive-looking when
alone.

Carpus, since he had the soul of an accountant neck-deep in balance sheets at the end of the fiscal year, didn't believe in ninjas and flashiness. That's why he had chosen Bob. He was the perfect spy.

(He didn't remember how he was called, so he referred to him as Bob. Bob didn't mind as long as he got paid. Or maybe Bob was, by some sort of divine coincidence, his actual name.)

"Sir," Bob began in a high pitched-voice that could have belonged to a prepubescent girl. It didn't detract from his ability as long as he didn't speak much. "I have located the pirate crew you asked me track down. They are staying at Arnold's."

Carpus' face remained blank. "Who?"

"At the coconut jelly inn," he clarified.

"Oh, that joint," he said stiffly, and he made a dismissive gesture with a hand. "Well, I am not going there. We'll extend them an invitation. Tell my secretary and she'll take care of everything."

"Yes, sir."

"Good job, Bob."

Bob bowed and left the room, but he might as well not have, because before he was out, Carpus had his hands clasped behind his back and was looking through the window again, at the resort that he had built, and that *that* woman was trying to take away from him. Not for long.
Saki greeted a new day full of promises by getting the heel of a sandal stuck on a broken wooden step and tumbling down the remaining three.

"Ow."

She wasn't a superstitious person. If she had been, she may have interpreted the fall as an omen for what was to come, and she would have been right. Instead, she started picking herself from the floor, checking for injuries and finding none, while she heard someone rush to her.

"Are you hurt!?"

Felicia was in a flowery robe, clearly in the middle of getting ready for the day. Her eyes were wide, her curls were flying everywhere, and she had a five o'clock shadow and her jawline was way more pronounced that it had looked with her make up on.

Saki tried not to stare. It made no difference to her, but the revelation had caught her off guard.

"I'm fine," she replied. "I think I just woke up."

Felicia reached out to her with a hand. "Are you sure? You're going to have some nasty bruises."

Saki took her hand, pressing the other one to the spot of her hip where she had landed. "Yeah, don't worry. I've had worse."

Felicia looked confused for a moment, then laughed nervously. "Of course. I suppose they go with the profession."

"Yeah." Saki smiled back.

"Well, I'll, ah…" Felicia tightened the robe around her, covered most of her mouth and chin with a hand and gave Saki another shaky smile. "I'm going back in. The boss should be serving breakfast already."

"Thanks."

Felicia scurried nervously to the hallway and disappeared behind one of the doors.

To Saki's surprise when she got to the dining room, Penguin was already sitting on a table there.

"Did I wake up in a parallel reality?" Saki asked.

"Haha," he replied. "You'd be up later too if you were working in an engine room until late at night."

"Come on, half the time I visit you you're just chatting with Shachi."

"Yes, but the other half we're making sure when don't all die a horrible salty death."

"Touché." She took a chair near Penguin and sat on it. She was grasping for the paper on the table to
look at the breakfast options when Penguin shoved an arm in front of her nose.

A black tribal tattoo done with geometric precision was on his forearm, black, neat and settled.

"I am good," Saki declared with a smirk.

Penguin grinned. "Is that your OK? Is it completely healed?"

"It looks like it. Does it bother you when you move your arm or you touch it?"

"Nope."

"Then welcome to the club of people with well-done tattoos. It's an exclusive one. Not just anybody can be in it. For instance—"

"Finishing that sentence is mutiny," he said conspiratorially.

"Who's going to know it?"

"I don't know, Bepo has pretty good hearing." Penguin reached for the paper and passed it to Saki.

"Thanks." And while she tried to decide if the fresh waffles were worth another assault on her hips, she added, "I think he has other concerns right now."

"You think he'll be better today?"

"I hope so. The mask seemed to do him good..."

Shachi appeared shortly after and announced his presence by slamming a hand on Penguin's shoulder. "You," he said darkly, dragging every sound, "are an asshat."

"Good morning, sunshine!" Saki greeted him.

"Getting up earlier than Captain should be forbidden."

"Captain doesn't wake up, he stumbles his way from his bed to the coffee pot."

Shachi furrowed his brow. "Does he even sleep at night?"

"I think he just falls unconscious every now and then."

"If I didn't find him sometimes napping with Bepo on deck I wouldn't believe he did," Penguin said.

"Well, he has to sleep sometimes. He's human. I think."

Shachi chose a chair and plopped down. "Do they have to do it where we all can see them, though? In the middle of the day."

"While the rest of us are working," Penguin nodded sagely.

"The privileges of being captain and first mate," Saki commented sarcastically.

"We should ask for a raise."

"Yeah, I really want a taller bunk."

Saki snorted, and when she looked up again she saw a boring looking man standing behind her
crewmates, coughing discreetly, as if trying to catch their attention.

"Guys." Saki pointed in the man's direction.

When they turned around, they looked on the verge of a heart attack after seeing the man so close to them.

"Holy f—" Shachi stumbled on a chair and sat on it.

"Say something when you go near people," Penguin said, hand on chest as if his heart had tried to jump out.

"My apologies. I have been trying to catch your attention for a while."

The three pirates at the table exchanged panicked glances that confirmed that they all had to work on their awareness skills. Saki was especially rattled by it. She was good at paying attention and she had not been doing it as she should if this and the abduction a few weeks ago were anything to go by. But she wasn't being as inattentive at the moment as she had been in Qaryn. She was aware of the customers around the room. The man before them was in a whole another level of stealth.

"Do you need something?" Shachi asked.

"Yes, of course. I want to speak to Trafalgar Law. Are you Heart Pirates?"

Once again, the three looked at each other in the eye, in the faces printed on bounties strewn all over the Grand Line and in the Jolly Rogers of the guys' boiler suits.

They all looked away from each other and towards the man.

"Nope."

"Wrong people."

"Can't help you."

"Oh. I see. Thank you."

The man left as fast as he had appeared, and when they looked around the room to see where he had gone, he was nowhere in sight.

"That… worked." Shachi said.

"We're amazing."

Penguin nodded dumbly. "Damn right we are."

Law and Bepo showed up not much later, and the other three told them of the strange encounter.

"Keep an eye out for him," Law said, masking a yawn in a coffee mug. He hoped the second and third ones were coming already. "If he really wants something with us I doubt your lie will keep him away for long. I'd rather we go unnoticed in this island."

"A breather after the last one would be good," Bepo commented.

"It can't be helped," Saki said while she looked around distractedly. "It's not like we travel in something discreet. Someone is bound to notice we're around."
"Hey, watch your tongue," Shachi warned.

"Yeah, careful with what you say about our daughter."

Saki raised both eyebrows. "Your daughter is bright yellow and has a giant black Jolly Roger with the word 'death' painted above in capital letters."

"So?"

"You should have taught her to dress better."

Shachi made a face of disbelief. "You dare talk shit about our daughter's clothing sense? You?"

"If you have something against shirts with orange and green stripes you can say it to my face, Marshmallow A."

"He's B."

"Right. Thanks, Bepo."

"Why do you two keep siding against me?"

Penguin smiled knowingly. "Because you're a bully, Shachi."

"And you're a douchecanoe, Peng."

"Being low-key is definitely not your forte," Law said, though he didn't look angry. He was either resigned, in the process of waking up, or both.

"Sorry, Captain—"

"We'll be more careful."

"We didn't mean to—"

"Besides, the Polar Tang is perfect as it is," Law declared bitterly.

They eyed Law's hoodie, bright yellow with their Jolly Roger in black, and his fingers tattooed with capital letters. Someone present may have held back a grimace in an unusual display of politeness.

"Of course, Captain."

"Never meant otherwise."

"Yellow and black go so well together."

"So striking, so… intimidating."

"I think it would look nice in white, too," Bepo said happily.

"Who asked you, fluffball?"

Bepo automatically lowered his head. "S-sorry…"

"Leave Bepo alone, you third rate bully."

Law contemplated the possibility of drowning in the mug, but he had drank too much already, and gestured to Felicia for another one.

He then heard a polite cough not two feet behind him, and it took a good measure of self-control not to choke on the coffee he was swallowing. He turned to see a middle aged man in a grey suit. His features were so boring that his eyes barely registered him, leaving him as this blurry nondescript entity. It had to be the guy from before. He had never heard him approach.

"Excuse me," he began. "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. May you be Trafalgar Law?"

Before Law could answer, three voices around the table said a rotund 'no.'

Law stared at his crew as if wondering why exactly he had recruited them and what could he have done better, but recovered quickly to project an air of confidence. "I am."

"Oh. So you lied before," Bob said with the same tone an accountant handling the re-invoicing for three different companies at once may have had: completely dead. "Very smart of you."

The others snuck unsure glances at each other.

"But how should I know that you aren't lying now? It's your word against theirs."

The uncomfortable silence stretched. The Heart Pirates were starting to wonder if there was a hidden surveillance Den Den Mushi and this was someone's idea of a joke.

"Well," Bob said, apparently making his mind up while the pirates assessed the stupidity of the situation, "I should tell you just in case you are. Because," he took a perfectly folded paper from his pocket, opened it and showed it to the pirates. It was Law's newest bounty, "You look a lot like the man in this picture."

Bob was radiating so much second-hand embarrassment that they were almost regretting the lie. Was he this dense, or was it a tactic to… shame them? Get them to apologize? They didn't know. It didn't make sense. They just wanted him to stop being so cringe-worthy.

"Mr. Bear?" he said, and Bepo jumped a little on his seat. He didn't expect to be dragged into the conversation, and his big black eyes searched frantically everybody's for help. Nobody threw him a lifeline.

"M-me?" Bepo answered.

"Yes, you. You look trustworthy. Would you care to tell me if this man is Trafalgar Law?"

A chorus of frustrated sighs and facepalms erupted around Bepo. Only he had the power to put an end to it. He understood now. He had to rescue them, not the other way around. "He is."

"Oh, that's good. Now I can complete my task." Bob smiled beatifically at Bepo, and it looked so unnatural that they all wished he hadn't. "Mr. Trafalgar, my employer would like to extend an invitation for a meeting. He would like to talk business with you."

Law eyed him suspiciously, more alert than before. "I don't see what kind of business I could have with anybody in this city. Who is that employer of yours?"

"I am not allowed to reveal that information. He is a person of remarkable fame. You will understand when you go to the meeting point."
"And what makes you think I'll be going?"

Bob was thrown off by the sudden burst of rudeness. "Excuse me?"

"If he wants to speak to me, he should be the one to come, not me."

"Oh. Oh..." Bob thought over his words. "That is a solid reasoning. However, I don't think it will be possible."

"That's not my problem," Law declared, and a staredown between the two men took place. It lasted only a few seconds, but under Bob's fish stare, it felt like hours.

"Very well. I'll inform my employer of this situation. Have a good day, Mr. Trafalgar."

And with a little bow, he left the place.

"That was..." Bepo didn't know how to complete the sentence, but a few nods agreed with him nonetheless.

"Too polite," Penguin said.

"Too calm."

"He looks like his soul is dead. Do you think he'll be back?"

"What does he want with Captain, anyway?" Shachi asked.

"I don't know and I don't care, and I'm not going to stay here and wait to find out. Let's go, Bepo, we've got things to do."

And with that, Law left abandoning his second coffee unfinished with Bepo closely in tow.

Saki returned to the inn in the early afternoon after buying two second-hand adventure novels and a fuzzy red sweater at half price. Life was good. She left the booty upstairs and went to the dining room, which was empty at that hour save for Felicia.

With an ice coffee and the day's newspaper in hand, she sat on a table near the window and resolved to pass the remainder of the day in peace and quiet.

She hadn't been five minutes alone with her drink and her wanted posters when she heard someone walk straight towards her. She lifted her eyes from the papers slowly and unenthusiastically to be faced with a man that looked like he spent way too much time doing his hair, given the end result.

"You must be one of the pirates Bob told me about." He looked at Saki's hair and left arm tattoo like they were infectious illnesses instead of perfectly innocuous and well-chosen pigments, so Saki disliked the man automatically. "Where is Trafalgar Law?"

She returned her gaze to the posters, though her attention was on him. "Who knows? Ask around."

The man clucked his tongue. "I am Carpus, President of the Commercial Association of Coconut Affairs, and I have come here, leaving several important matters unattended, only to speak to him. Is he here?"

"Nope," Saki said, switching to the next poster on the stack. 'Magician' Basil Hawkins; 70,000,000 beli.
"I do not have time to waste on whatever games you rabble play. I need to see Trafalgar Law."

The superiority complex of the man was irking her. "Boohoo. Cry me a river. He isn't here."

Carpus huffed nervously, clearly not used to rudeness being directed towards him. "Bob said you were a liar. I see he was right."

"Well, yeah, I am, but he still isn't here."

Carpus slammed a punch on the desk in a pathetic intimidation attempt. Saki looked up at him, very irritated. Who was he trying to scare? He was shorter than her.

"I will repeat myself one last time," he said slowly, stressing every word. "I demand to see your captain immediately. Where is he?"

"My captain," Saki replied equally slowly, "is wherever the fuck he wants, which right now doesn't happen to be here, and even if I knew I wouldn't tell you, so stop wasting your time and mine and fuck off."

Carpus, who didn't have to deal frequently with rejection and much less being told to fuck off in such uncertain terms, acquired a curious maroon shade. Saki wondered what the reaction would be.

Apparently, the man thought that repeating his certifications would cause her to magically conjure a pirate captain, as if they meant something to her. "I am Carpus, four times elected President of the Commercial Association of Cocon—"

"Mr. President," Saki interrupted, "what part of 'fuck off' you don't understand, the first or the second word?"

Mercifully, heaven sent her a way to leave this conversation loop, of which she'd had too many in a single day.

"What is going on here?"

She threw her arms up in the air. "There you have him! Happy now?"

Law looked at the man with curiosity, with Bepo mimicking him, though they could imagine what was going on. "Who are you?"

Carpus took air and puffed out his chest to say his tirade. Saki wanted to crumple one of the posters and throw it at the back of his head just to see the reaction. Shachi and Penguin chose that moment to make their appearance, and they went from chatting happily to looking at the face Saki was making behind Carpus' back and directing all their energy to glaring at him while.

"I am Carpus, four times elected president of the Commercial Association of Coconut Affairs, and since you rejected my first invitation to my office, I have come to see you in person."

"Namely: I'm a pompous prick and I don't wanna hide it," Saki mumbled loud enough for everyone to hear.

Carpus didn't deign to acknowledge the comment. Law crossed his arms and stared at the man, utterly unimpressed. "And why are you so interested in speaking to me?"

"Because I have a job and I require someone of your… ah… caliber," the way he pronounced the word, like it was bitter and stuck to his tongue, made clear that that was far from what he was
thinking, but unlike the present company he was too polite to say it, "to pull it off. Of course, I will compensate you for the trouble. Payment won't be an issue."

Of all the problems Law was expecting since he heard that someone was looking for him, a job offer had been the furthest from his mind, and he didn't want it anyway. This man appeared to be important in the island and well-off, and involving oneself with those types was never worth the hassle. "We aren't thugs for hire."

Carpus dismissed Law's words with a wave. "All thugs are. One needs only to find the price."

"We are not—"

"I will make my case as politely as I can," Carpus rose his voice, and it was strident and as unthreatening as his appearance. "You either help me in my little endeavor, or Marine soldiers will be knocking on this inn's door within the hour. If you don't think I have the connections to do that, you only need to wait here and see for yourself."

The pirates stiffened. That threat would have been a death sentence in most situations.

Law's glare hardened, and Saki noted, to her satisfaction, that Carpus shifted slightly under that stare. "What do you want from us?" He asked.

Despite the situation, Carpus found the guts to flash a self-satisfied smirk. "See? I found your price." Then the smile fell, and he was back to business again. "There is an annoying woman inside the association vying for power that is rightfully mine. I want to give her a scare, and you will do it for me."

"Details," Law pressed, at the end of his patience.

"Do you know the resort in this island? Of course you do," he answered himself, "but you haven't set foot inside it. Your target will be in a business meeting at the finest restaurant of the resort in three days. You will interrupt that meeting and deliver her to me. She will be given a stern talking to, you will make some money and I will remove a nasty thorn on my side. Isn't it wonderful?"

It was clear by everybody else's expressions that they weren't on the same page as him. If the man hadn't told them that he had a direct line with the Navy, he'd be dead by now. Law looked like he was trying to decide what was better, chopping his head off for real and going into hiding for the rest of the week, or complying with his blackmail.

"What is the plan?" He asked reticently. "I assume you have one."

"Not so fast," Carpus replied. "I've talked enough here and I'm a busy man. You will get the minutia in my office. I expect you there at nine sharp. Bob!"

Bob was right beside Carpus as he made the first step towards the exit, and he prompted from the pirates a few starts and a mumbled 'motherfucker.' "Yes, sir."

Saki's eyes went from left and right frantically, examining the room and trying not to look panicked. She had been on high alert and had never heard him coming. Judging by Penguin's and Shachi's reaction, they hadn't noticed either. Law's face, on the other hand, was unreadable.

Carpus didn't give the pirates a second glance as he left. It would be so easy to wring his neck while he wasn't looking.

"Oh, um…" Looking at the direction of the sound, they pirates watched golden curls and matching
amber eyes emerge from behind the wooden bar. "Is it okay to come out now?"

"Were you there the whole time?" Law asked.

Felicia just ducked behind the bar again. Law let out a weary sigh and slumped on a chair. "A beer, please."

The guys followed his example, and Felicia rose once again from the depths of the bar when she realized that she wasn't going to die a gory death.

"It's tough being a pirate, huh?" She said conversationally while she got the bottles and glasses. "Who would have thought that President Carpus would be this kind of—AAAAAHHHHH!" Felicia absentmindedly hit a bottle with her elbow and almost made four more fall, but she caught them in time. "Whew." She continued as if nothing had happened. "I shouldn't be surprised. It's always the respectable looking ones."

"Is he really that famous around here?"

"Sure he is!" She put the drinks on a tray and walked up to them, tripping for a second on a wobbly floorboard and recovering amazingly afterwards. Someone with a weak heart could die watching her. "Mr. Carpus is the most important person in this island. The association generates most of our wealth – you know how it goes – they establish trade regulations, taxes, yadda yadda. Merchants sell, money comes in for everybody. Well," she tilted her head and grimaced a little, "some of the money."

"So he really can call the Marines anytime?" Penguin asked.

"I guess so. There's a base close enough that they could be here in a matter of hours. Sometimes we see some rank and file here when they are on leave, but they avoid coming here when they can. I think it reflects badly on the resort to have soldiers around."

"So even if we don't want to do what he says, we're screwed."

"I'm sorry." Felicia gave him a sympathetic look, and Penguin got red, put a hand over his heart and looked away. "You can't go anywhere while you wait for the Log Pose, right…?"

Law took directly from Felicia the bottle she had brought him. "And even if we shook him off for a few days, the Polar Tang is at the docks. We can't leave it unattended for days."

"Speaking of which," Saki said, looking sadly at the empty contents of her cup and feeling the onset of a headache, "I'm heading there for clothes. Anybody else coming?"

"Me," Bepo said. "I want to stop breathing this air."

"We should all go. Might as well check that no one's messed with it."

"If they've laid a hand on her, there'll be a fresh corpse this afternoon," Penguin said.

"We can agree on that."

"Be careful out there," Felicia warned them. "The President has eyes everywhere. Best do what he asks without making much of a fuss."

The general mood was sour enough that she only received a few hums for replies. With the constant possibility of that ninja hovering around, any conspiracy attempts that might occur to them were
better kept for private quarters.

They didn't find anything out of place in the sub other than a festive pair of patterned boxers that had escaped the laundry baskets to roam the empty halls, but spirits were still low when the hour of the meeting neared and they had to leave for the city.

It was easy enough to know where to go, even if they didn't know exactly how. The white building of the association towered over all the others, and even at night was so shiny that the reflection of the streetlights off it was offensive to the eyes. It didn't fit with the parts of the city they had seen thus far – industrial, stained grey and brown and yellow, and full of life.

The streets became gradually straight and ample as they neared the association. This part of the city was newer and clearly intended for show, not solely use. Buildings barely showed the wear and tear from the years, and to Saki's infinite relief, not even a single cobblestone seemed to wiggle when she stepped on them. The paths to the association looked especially well-kept, and the main building of the sector, the jewel of the crown, had been polished so thoroughly and shone so much that it could blind an unsuspecting prey bird. In fact, every morning a janitor was in charge of making a round around the perimeter and picking up any unfortunate knocked-out owls from the night before. He had the animal refuge on speed dial.

In case that there had been any doubt about what the place housed in its interior, above the wide glass doors was a sign displaying the acronym of the Commercial Association of Coconut Affairs with bold, golden letters for everyone to see.

A pregnant silence of exactly three seconds and a half passed as they stared at the sign and let it sink in. Then Penguin cleared his throat, which prompted Shachi to snort, which ultimately pushed Saki to make a strangled noise that sounded like a mouse was dying in her throat, and all the built up tension of the situation was gone as the two mechanics began to howl with laughter. Slightly less loud, Saki and Bepo started to laugh as well, and even Law seemed to crack a badly disguised smile.

"Guys," he said, trying to sound serious, though his success was up for debate. "Guys."

They quieted down enough to speak.

"Who chose that name!?"

"Did they vote?"

"Yeah, and then they voted president the guy they liked the least."

"Four times in a row."

They broke into laughter again.

"Guys." The admonishment was followed by shaky breaths, fake coughs and a few snickers. He walked to the doors and pushed one open. "Try to keep it down. We wouldn't want to offend the President."

The guy at the reception desk didn't understand why the group of newcomers began laughing simultaneously, firstly because he didn't see anything funny, and secondly because people who came to see Carpus were never happy. Had he not been warned beforehand of their arrival, he would have assumed they were there to commit a murder or steal the blueprints of the new coconut processing plant. He handed Law a pass that was nothing but a formality, because the staff that checked them had gone home hours ago.
Carpus' office was in the upmost floor of the building, because that's where raving megalomaniacs made their secret bases to be able to stare at the city at their feet and feel superior. It was especially important for the man, given that it was the only way that he'd ever be able to look at somebody from above their shoulders.

The operator in front of the elevator kindly informed the pirates of that fact save for the snark, and told them that the elevator was reserved for Carpus' personal use and special guests, hoping that they got that they were not included in the latter category. They did get it, and did the only reasonable thing one could do in those circumstances: shove the operator aside and take the elevator anyway.

Carpus' office was impossible to miss. The door was white and made of solid wood, and somebody had thought it was a great idea to gild the frame and decorate it with tiny reliefs of coconut trees. The man was obviously trying to compensate for his own perceived deficits.

"That is the tackiest shit I've seen in a long time," Saki said in awe.

Shachi gave her a disbelieving glance. "Did you even look at your shirt when you put it on?"

"Again with my clothes, you—"

"Do you have to start now?" Law cut them.

Both mumbled apologies to their captain and shut up.

Carpus was already waiting for them inside the office, as expected, staring down at the city from an enormous window – gilded, too – with his arms crossed behind his back, so his face couldn't be seen when they entered the room. An ocean of lights could be seen from that vantage point, and only then they were able to appreciate the magnitude of the resort. It was a separate world from the part of the island where the regular citizens lived. In comparison, the other sectors were dark and decadent.

Saki also thought that Carpus made an amazingly easy target for assassins from both the front and the back, so he either wasn't worried about attempts on his life or thought himself too far above lowly hitmen to die. She would have pounced on a chance like this they had wanted him dead. Empty office, mostly empty building, at night, with enough time to put distance between herself and a corpse. Could he make it any easier?

"I could hear you arrive from here. It appears that discretion isn't your forte."

Anybody who had looked for a split second at their ensemble jolly ensemble could have deduced as much.

"It matters not, but I'll ask you to refrain from being so loud while you carry out my job."

"Get to the point," Law said, all amusement from before gone. "What do you want us to do, exactly?"

Carpus walked to his desk in a slow, solemn and very irritating pace, then sat down on his plushy chair. He didn't offer a seat to them. Maybe it was a good thing. Someone might have felt tempted to throw it at his head.

"You will abduct Pomona Hazel from her private room during dinner. She is about to sign a contract that I have no interest in, and I want her to rethink how much she needs it. You will infiltrate the place as staff, remove her from the premises, and hand her over to my men, who will be waiting outside the restaurant. And she will be unharmed. Is that clear?"
"Why resort to us? We're pirates and you just said you have hired men."

"Because in the – I expect – unlikely case that you get caught, you are deniable assets, and you seem to have experience in the matter."

"We do?" Bepo asked.

Penguin looked from Bepo to Law, and suddenly pointed at Shachi and exclaimed, "Ah!"

"That was a willing kidnapping," Shachi clarified. "The papers lied. There was none of that 'you're coming with me whether you like it or not' stuff."

Saki coughed, and Shachi glared just to remind her that he hadn't forgotten their first encounter. Saki thought that it might have had more effect if he wasn't wearing his perennial sunglasses.

Carpus blinked deliberately a couple of times as he absorbed the new information. "Well, now that you know the plan you will be helping anyway, or else I'll get you a one way trip to Impel Down."

If they could have killed the man without the entire building knowing the culprits, they would have gladly done it, then tossed him into the coconut-flaky water of the docks with weights tied around his ankles.

"Now, about the operation," Carpus said, taking a fountain pen and a white paper, "You may be more difficult to place, since someone may recognize your face," he said to Law, "but luckily for us the rest of you are a bunch of nobodies, so we have plenty of freedom to choose your roles. Do you have any abilities I should be aware of before I assign you a job?"

There weren't crickets in the office, but if there had been, this would have been their moment to shine.

"Pirates," he sighed, "always making things difficult." He scribbled something. "I'll send a message to the inn to inform you of your jobs. I will attach a plan of the restaurant's layout so you can study it. I leave the small details to your expertise. And remember," he said very seriously, glaring at every one of the very pissed off pirates, "she needs to be unharmed, or this deal will be off. Dismissed," he said waving his hand and turning his chair to face once again the window and away from the pirates.

It would be so, so easy.

As promised, the next morning came the letter with the plans, and they all huddled around them during breakfast. There was also a package with the uniforms they'd need to wear.

As she read the list of jobs, Saki could guess the entire thought process Carpus had followed to assign them. By some miracle of the universe, possibly five planets aligning while a solar eclipse happened in the background, and also because they wore those freaking boiler suits everywhere, Penguin and Shachi had been placed with the maintenance team. Law would have to take on the lowly role of cleaning around the restaurant, because those were the people nobody ever paid any attention to. Bepo was tall, wide and extremely conspicuous, so he got assigned to security.

"Are you kidding me?" She said when she got to her placement, thoughtfully rendered as Girl – Server.

"Yeah, I can't imagine who'd want to see your face while getting their food," Shachi said.

Saki ignored the quip and kept talking to herself. "Who should we put to serve tables? Send the
"woman! Sorry, the girl. Heaven forbid you've got to watch a guy's mug while he pours your fancy-ass wine, you sexist prick."

"You haven't carried a tray in your life, have you?"

"…That has absolutely nothing to do with my objections."

Felicia, who, as always, was tidying up the room in the background, turned her attention from the windowpane she was cleaning to the four of them and said, "I could help you." When Saki looked at her, Felicia avoided her gaze and continued in a barely audible volume, "That is, if you need help. I'm sure you don't."

Saki could almost make out a halo of sunshine and goodwill around the girl's head. It may have been explained by the sunrays bouncing off her already golden hair, but she liked her version better. "My heroine," she said.

Felicia blushed and giggled.

For the next two days, Saki became Felicia's shadow whenever she wasn't at the reception or waiting on actual tables. At first Felicia had been shy, if chipper as ever, but as they got used to each other she began to sound more confident.

Shachi had taken to sitting on one of the tables to watch the training sessions unfold, sometimes alone, sometimes with Penguin, who kept insisting that they memorized the entire layout of the restaurant in case of emergency. This was one of those moments.

"This is a show for the ages," Shachi heckled.

"Shut up, asshole! Don't you have any new pipes to feel up?"

Shachi began to splutter something, because how dare she cast shadows on his decency in front of Felicia's angelic presence, but then a cooking pot slammed on top of Saki's head with a resounding clang and he decided his honor was avenged.

"No swearing!" Felicia said, tapping her weapon menacingly on the palm of her left hand. "And keep your back straight!"

"Yes, yes…" Saki sighed, straightening her posture. "I am not cut out for this."

"Don't worry," Felicia said kindly, "I used to think the same. And I still trip and drop things all the time. The trick is to catch them before they hit the ground! Or yourself. But that's not as important. Your body is expendable. Only the tray matters."

The way she said it, so convinced that she made it sound like a mantra, was kind of unsettling. The beatific smile didn't help.

"…Right. Now I'm even surer that I'm not made for this."

"Not with that attitude!"

Saki chuckled. "You sure are, though."

"Arnold is getting old. Nowadays he only works in the kitchen, does the shopping and crunches numbers. I need to prepare for the day I take charge of the inn."
Arnold was like a phantom figure that every patron knew that existed, but very rarely showed his face around. Saki had only seen him once, chatting with a customer during lunch.

"You're going to inherit it, then? Is Arnold your father?"

A hand flew to Felicia's mouth. "Goodness, no!" She tried to hold back a giggle. "He took me in when I had nowhere to go. Even gave me a roof. I owe him at least this much."

"So you aren't from this city?"

"I am. I just didn't get along with my parents."

Saki wondered if it had anything to do with what she had seen the morning before, and the look Felicia gave her and what she said strengthened her suspicions.

"You... you didn't tell anybody?" She asked in a hushed whisper. "About... when you saw me without make up?"

Saki shrugged. "Of course not. That's not anyone's business."

Felicia relaxed visibly, and the smile returned to her face. "Thank you. You guys are nicer than you look."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

Felicia laughed. "Really? They seem to be a fun bunch." She motioned to the table with her head.

"They are."

Felicia lifted a tray filled to the brim with water glasses on one hand. "Alright, back to work!" She announced, more energized than before. "You need to rest the tray on your palm like this, and when you get to the table you always offer the drinks from the right side of the custom —AAAAAAHHHHH!" She tilted the tray while she spoke and the glasses began to slide down. Some actually fell, but with a superb mastery of her trade, she shoved the tray below them and caught them mid-air. Then she raised the tray again as if nothing had happened. "See? It's all about falling to the level of your training."

Saki could smell the scent of disaster looming in her near future.

"How do I look?"

"Like a polar bear in a penguin suit."

"That's silly. I don't fit in Penguin's clothes."

Later in the afternoon, the crew was reunited in Law's and Bepo's room to plan their escape route. Bepo took the chance to try on his clothes for the security gig. He had even been given sunglasses to match, and between those and the mask he had to wear everywhere, it was difficult to tell if he was a bear or a very hairy man.

"Where did they get a suit his size?" Penguin asked. He was sitting on a bed, right next to Saki.

"Don't mind them, Bepo," Saki said. "I'm sure you'll make every lady bear that sees you swoon."

"He's not gonna see any," he whispered to her.
"So? Technically not a lie." And Security Guard Bepo did look quite spiffy.

"When has that ever stopped you?"

"I try not to lie to people I actually like, you know."

"Those are some standards."

"My nose may be stuffy, but my ears aren't," Bepo grumbled.

Shachi, who for once wasn't joining the argument, was busy with the floor plan. "Peng, there's a maintenance door hidden at the end of the second-floor hallway. I think we'll need to get it open to get the woman outside. They don't usually leave these open unless they're being used."

"It's the most direct path," Law said, eyes glued to the paper. "The only other ways out are the kitchen backdoor and the main entrance."

"There's the windows," Saki said.

"Let's not use those if we can avoid it."

For obvious reasons, Saki didn't argue back.

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The private room where their mark was going to be was on the second floor of the building. It was a long hallway with private rooms at each side, two bathrooms for customers, one for staff, and right at the very end, hidden from sight, the hallway turned to the left and ended in a door. It was for staff only, and it was connected to the lower floor by stairs. On the paper, it had been marked as 'Maintenance Area.' There, on the first floor, there was the exit they'd need to use to pass unnoticed.

"So then… We get that door open from inside, and you drag the woman there so we can run through the back door," Penguin confirmed.

"I think we should wait until the last moment to do it," Saki said, "If the restaurant's packed I won't be able to spare enough time to help and get out without somebody noticing."

"Not to mention that the less people there are on the floor, the better," Law added. "I'll try to be in the second floor most of the time, but you'll need to be the judge of when we should move."

"And we don't know how many people there will be in the room," Bepo said. "I'll try to block the way from the first floor to the second if you need extra time, but…"

The problem with the plan was evident. Nobody knew where they would be at any given point, exactly. That slimy ducker Carpus had left the real planning up to them with the excuse that the less he knew, the better if he had to deny any involvement.

"We play it by the ear," Law said. "I don't like the idea of splitting up the entire night, but there's no other way. If worst comes to worst, though," at last, he lifted his eyes from the plans, "we get out of there no matter what we have to do. We'll worry about the consequences later."

The evening of the operation finally arrived, and Saki was donning a very professional outfit consisting of black shoes, fitted black skirt, white shirt and black bow that made moving a hassle.

Saki would have spent a long time staring off into space and wondering how the heck she had gotten into this situation if she hadn't been in a rush, but with a manager yelling in the kitchen to anybody that showed the smallest bit of inactivity, and a crime to commit in the following hours, she couldn't
allow herself that luxury. Instead, she took three plates onto her tray and did her best to not drop anything.

"You," a voice said behind her, and a dish almost slipped her hand. She turned around to see a man around her height, pudgy and with fluffy brown hair. She'd seen him giving instructions in the kitchen before. "You aren't a waitress."

She wasn't expecting that. She smiled and looked at him in the eye. "I started this job today, that's why you haven't seen me before," she said. "I'm still a little clumsy, though," she added with a light laugh.

*Let me out of the kitchen, you bastard.*

"That's the thing. I have seen you before," he said, low enough that with all the coming and going in the kitchen no one else could hear. "You were at Arnold's."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You are a pirate. Why are you in my kitchen?"

*Shit, shit, shit.*

"You are mistaking me for someone else, mister..?"

"Are you tampering with the food?"

"No!"

She felt as if every single pore of her skin was being analyzed under the man's beady stare.

"I see. A waitress friend of mine told me she had been training somebody. I thought it may have been you."

"That explains the confusion," Saki said.

She was expecting security to burst into the kitchen at any time, but the man just warned her. "As long as you don't touch the food, I don't care what you do," and he went back to his pans.

He knew and was letting her go. He was friends with Felicia and had seen her and the crew before. Was he the chef from the inn's jelly night? It had to be him. Saki didn't remember his name. She also couldn't think of a reason why he wouldn't out her right away. She had to find the others and tell them that they had been discovered. Maybe the guy wouldn't say anything or, more likely, he was waiting to catch them all at once, if he suspected there were more of them. In that case, she shouldn't find the others. What to do, what to—

"How much longer are you going to stare at the dishes?" The manager suddenly yelled at her. "Move, move, move!"

Saki picked up the tray and headed for the second floor. The plan was done for. Even if the cook didn’t intervene right away, as soon as somebody noticed that something was wrong, he would point to the Heart Pirates, and it wouldn't matter if they had sneaked out unseen. He knew where they were staying, and even if they didn't set foot on the inn again, one didn't need to be a genius to find the submarine at the docks. Why the hell couldn't Law get a regular ship that people didn't pay attention to from miles away? The value of discretion had managed to go so over her captain's head that she couldn't fathom how he had managed to elude justice so far.
Saki left orders in two different rooms before heading to the last occupied one. As shown in the floor plans, it was in the middle of the hallway. She looked around to make sure that nobody was around and dashed to the end of it, where there was a small turn, and a metallic door stood where otherwise there would have been a cul-de-sac. It was for maintenance workers only.

At some point, Penguin and Shachi should make their way to the other side and open it from inside. She tried to turn the doorknob. Yep, locked. She knocked lightly and no reply came. They weren't there yet.

She hurried to the damn room from where they'd need to abduct Pomona. She wouldn't be alone, and it was Saki's job to determine whether they could get to her without a ruckus or not.

There were three people inside.

Pomona was a woman in her early forties, though she seemed younger despite the few expression wrinkles that lined her eyes and mouth. She looked severe when she turned upon Saki's arrival, with icy eyes and her lips pressed tightly.

"About time," she said.

Saki was pretty much immune to the rudeness of rich fucks, and there was no doubt that this woman had more money than Saki had seen in her life—and she had seen quite a lot of it go through Rickhard's hands, even if it never stayed in them. She had delicate gold jewelry dangling from her neck, hands, wrists and ears, all contrasting nicely with her tan skin and the modest green dress she wore. Saki wondered just who she was so interested to impress, if she really had this much money to flaunt.

"My apologies," Saki said in a light tone as she put the food in front of them, remembering Felicia's lessons. "We are dealing with many orders at once."

"You should prioritize," she said. "And pour us more wine, girl." And with that if Saki had disappeared from the room, or better, she was no more important than a fly on the wall, she resumed the discussion with his business partner.

Saki stared at him from the corner of her eye. Short dark beard that made it hard to gauge his age, but she'd assume he was in his thirties, hair combed back and a suit that looked decent enough, but wasn't top quality. He didn't look important, although Pomona was certainly treating him as if he were. An intermediary, then.

That was more than Saki had needed to know, at any rate. He didn't look threatening, and the third person at the table was a bodyguard sitting near Pomona. He was twice as big as his charge, and might have posed a problem if dealt with directly.

"This is where the cargo should be dropped off. I'll make the arrangements for my men to pick it up."

Pomona placed a wooden frame on the table that contained a glass sphere with a needle inside. It looked a lot like a Log Pose. There was something written on it, but she couldn't make it out.

"What about the locals?"

"A lot of country bumpkins. I rented a part of that death trap they call a port for a pittance, and they'll be happy to turn a blind eye to the merchandise as long as we don't inconvenience them."

Smugglers, Saki thought. She was sure that Carpus would love to have this dirt on his political rival.
"It's a pleasure to do business with someone so efficient, miss."

"I told you before, Bastos, as I told your master – with our product making better revenue than that social climber's, I'll be in control of the association soon enough."

"You will get the first shipment during the first week of the month. Two crates with varied contents."

"Excellent. I have lined up a few clients interested in buying. Some of them in bulk, if the first trial goes well, so be sure to tell Joker that he will need to increase the amount."

Saki was filling the man's glass when she heard the name, and her grip in the bottle trembled for a second. Thankfully, she didn't spill anything out, but Pomona's attention was back on her.

"Don't they teach you anything at trade school, girl?"

"I am sorry, miss."

"He will be very pleased if you manage to secure this island for us, since we recently abandoned a major trade center in North Blue."

"Oh, that island that went up in flames? I read about it in the news. It didn't look like a big loss, though."

"It wasn't. It was useful while we had it, but it was nothing more than an old warehouse in a slum. We thought it was better to forget about it now that new business paths were opening up."

"Good riddance, then. We'll make this a much better place."

Saki put down the wine bottle when she was done and exited the room as quietly as she could.

She needed to talk to Law immediately, but he wasn't in the second floor yet. It would have to wait, so she went back to the kitchen for more orders in hopes that she'd catch sight of him.

Law's evening, so far, could be summarized thusly: there was a birthday party downstairs, somebody's stomach hadn't agreed with the seafood, and the restroom had been too far away. That was all one needed to know to accurately gauge how happy he was feeling. Who the fuck served oysters on a ten year old's birthday party, anyway?

As soon as he had been able to, he had disappeared into the second floor men's restroom and put a sign outside cautioning of the wet floor, determined to stay inside until they had to kidnap the woman.

He heard someone come in from his stall, and he realized a couple of seconds later that he ought to be paying attention because whoever was inside was wearing heels.

"Are you there?"

It was Saki. He opened the door.

"Finally! Do you know how late it is? Where were you?"

"It isn't time yet, is it? Did something go wrong?"

She looked like she didn't know where to begin.
"One of the cooks is the one that was in the inn the other day and has recognized me, but for some reason hasn't called security, there is a bodyguard inside the dining room aside from Pomona and her guest, who by the way is called Bastos, and he fucking works for Joker and they are trying to set up a business in this city."

"All right, deep breaths," he tried to calm her down. "How do you know?"

"Because they were talking about it in front of me, how else?" She said, still agitated. "They were laughing about Asteria!"

Law had to give her props for not doing something stupid yet understandable in that room. Her knuckles were white as she held the tray with a hand, and there was so much contained rage and impotency in her eyes that he didn't feel as bad about what he was going to say as he should.

"That man becomes the priority. Kidnapping Pomona is secondary."

"But the others—"

"Penguin and Shachi will get her out and to the boat by themselves. Think they'll be able to?"

"Yeah. She doesn't look like she'd be able to do much."

"Then it's settled. The bodyguard dies, we get whatever information we can from Joker's minion, and we get the hell out of here after the others. Unless you'd rather leave with the others first."

"Who do you take me for?"

Law smirked.

"Why are you doing this?" Saki asked.

The smirk dropped. "You said he knows about Asteria."

"You aren't going to risk the plan for something that irrelevant. And I wouldn't let you put everyone else in danger for something like that."

The unsaid part was that she was still letting him change the plan because she trusted he had a better reason. Law didn't know what to reply to that.

"You are doing this for the same reason you helped me when we met." She said, and she didn't need to ask because she was perceptive enough to know that she was right. "And you still aren't going to tell me what it is, are you?"

"Would you still trust me if I said no?"

Saki's stare was hard and unflinching. Sometimes it was difficult to remember that under the corny jokes and the smiles, both real and fake, was someone who had spent the last eight years lying and killing people without getting caught. You didn't last that much in that line of work by being soft-hearted or careless.

"Of course I would."

Against his better judgement, he raised a hand to her face and touched her cheek, "Then we know what we've got to do." His fingers lingered for a little too long, but Saki made no gesture to move away, and didn't complain about contagious ink. "Let's get that bastard," he said, and took back his hand and stuffed it in his pocket.
Saki looked like she wanted to say something to him, but decided against it, so she nodded and left the stall without looking back.

Like they had planned two days earlier, it was near the end of the night service, the pace at the restaurant had slowed down, and it was time to strike.

Saki had made a quick run to the kitchen to retrieve the desserts and coffees for Pomona's table, and to hide a sharp knife inside her right sleeve. She was exceedingly nervous for someone who had spent a good part of her life working as occasional hitwoman and full-time liar, and though the hand under the tray didn't waver, like Felicia had taught her, she could feel her heart pounding on her ribcage with every beat. She needed a cold head to do this sort of job, and it worried her. It may have been the lack of practice for months, or the fact that the immediate fate of the crew hinged on her ability to pull off her part of the plan. The stakes were higher than ever, she realized. Before, the only victim of her screw ups would have been her. She had liked it better that way.

To top it off, the hits had never been personal, and she had set her limit when Rickhard had made them so. It was much easier, more impersonal, to have a higher up point to a random unlucky guy than facing someone she had a reason to hurt. She could gloss over those. She didn't have to worry about her emotions getting the best of her. Once more, she realized how lucky she had been that she had met Bepo and Law before she tried to storm the smugglers' base. She feared that the wound of what had happened to Asteria and her family was still too fresh to allow her to be professional, and she didn't want to find out what would happen if she messed up.

Saki did her best to hide her feelings of inadequacy as she rapped on the door and opened it. Everybody was counting on her, and while the others were doing the delivery, Law would be counting on her.

The feather-like touch of his fingertips was still fresh in her mind as she began to serve the coffee with a polite smile that hardly anybody present deserved.

She took care to spill a cup of the almost boiling-hot liquid only on top of the bodyguard. He said something rude, and so did Bastos, but Saki didn't pay any mind to their words while she apologized profusely and offered the bodyguard a change of clothes. Pomona demanded to speak to the manager while Saki led the man outside and to the staff's restroom.

"I'll call him right away, miss," Saki said, trying to sound embarrassed.

"I don't know how they hire them nowadays…"

It was always the less guilty ones that got caught in the crossfire. Saki had learned that soon, made it happen with her own hands a few times, and it was what she thought about as she locked the door behind her when the bodyguard was inside, let the knife slide into her hand, and stuck it in the man's throat as he turned around. There was a gurgle, and he fell to the floor without being able to let out as much as a cry.

She didn't think that killing was something to be proud of, but she tried to be good at everything she did.

Law came out from one of the stalls. "That was fast."

"I tried."

They moved the body between the two and hid it inside a stall. Saki locked it from the inside, wiped a few bloodstains on her hand with toilet paper, and stepped on the toilet to propel herself to the
space between the top of the stall's door and the ceiling. She didn't understand why not even expensive places like this couldn't grant a person full privacy when they had their pants down, but she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

It was a little difficult to maneuver with the skirt, but she managed to leave the locked stall without getting stuck or flashing her captain.

"Bepo was pacing near the stairs on the first floor," she said. "I think he's trying to stop other people from coming up."

Law nodded. "I'll get Shachi and Penguin."

"I'll…" Saki looked down at her hands. The stains weren't completely gone. "I'll wash this off. See you in a minute."

She watched the water run pink down the drain as she heard three pairs of steps hurrying on the hallway. She wiped her hands on her black skirt and went outside to join the group.

They had moved admirably fast, and by the time she was in the private room, Shachi was shoving pieces of Pomona into a burlap sack that Penguin held open. Both were covered in dust bunnies and scratches, and Saki had to hold back the urge to ask what the heck had happened to them. They must have also gagged Pomona, because only muffled sounds came from inside the sack as Penguin slung it over his shoulder and Shachi helped carry half of it.

"Captain, are you sure you aren't coming with us?"

Law was holding Bastos head against the floor and his arms behind his back, though he didn't seem to be resisting. "Go ahead. Take Bepo too if you see him. We'll meet at the inn."

"Roger that."

Saki peered outside, gave the guys the green light, and they ran down the hallway. She locked the room when she saw them disappear around the corner and heard the metallic door close behind them.

"Y-you don't know who I am!" The man snarled.

"A nobody," Law said levelly, reminding Saki of how Carpus had referred to them three days ago. "Joker wouldn't have sent you here otherwise."

A familiar blue dome stretched just to envelop Law and Bastos, and Law let the head go to plunge his hand into the man's back. "Mes. It emerged with a beating heart in it.

Bastos went so white that he could have passed for dead. "What-what did you—?"

"You are going to answer our questions," Law continued, the man's question falling on deaf ears, "and if you tell us the truth, we'll let you walk away in one piece. Do you understand?"

Saki knew he was lying. Letting this man go would put them all in danger. The question was if he knew Law was lying, too.

"What sort of cargo does Joker want to move through this island?"

"I don't know."

"Saki, make sure he can't scream."
As soon as she was told, she grabbed one of the fine cloth napkins on the table and stuffed it in the man's mouth.

"Your loyalty is admirable, but I doubt your boss is worth this." Law's face was unreadable as he squeezed the heart in his hand, and Bastos' eyes went wide as he tried to scream through the cloth. In other circumstances, Saki would have sweated bullets thinking that this was exactly what Law could have done with her heart when they met. Right now, she was too angry with the man on the receiving end to care.

"I will ask once more. What is the cargo?"

Saki removed the gag slowly, just in case he tried to yell, but he didn't.

"Joker is selling fruits," he said between heavy pants. "That's why he thought this island would be a good place to start."

"Fruits?" Saki asked.


"Y-yes. I don't know how, but he's gotten his hands on a ton of them. All Zoan. That's all I know, my job was just to set up this contract, they didn't tell me anything else!"

But Law wasn't letting him go so easily. "Before this, did he send fruits anywhere else?"

"I think he sent a few to some distribution points, but they weren't meant for sale."

Saki realized what Law was getting at. "Sent any to North Blue?"

"Y-yeah, I think so. I mean, we had Asteria before the revolutionaries came—"

"What?"

Bastos seemed to get a little bolder at Saki's confusion. "Why do you—" Then realization set in, and he said, "I remember your bounty info. You are from Asteria," he smiled incredulously. "Don't tell me you are the mole who butchered that idiot Rickhard. The dregs you left alive were looking everywhere for that one."

Saki's eyes became two slits, and she balled her hands so tightly that she drew blood. "What do you know about what happened in Asteria?"

"So it's true?" He laughed humorlessly. "You did Joker a favor. He didn't want that island anymore."

Saki's hand flew to the man's throat and tightened around it.

"Saki," Law warned her, but she ignored him.

"Your people set the island on fire to get rid of the evidence," she said.

"The revolutionaries did," he countered. "They noticed the confusion in our distribution lines and showed up in Asteria. There was a fight, our side lost and they set us on fire."

"Why would they do that?"

"Why not? They burned what was left of our network. You left the place unprotected and they took
advantage of it." He had to be aware that he wasn't walking alive out of the restaurant, because otherwise he wouldn't have added, "That was your home, then? How does it feel to have set it on fire?"

Saki was ready to discharge all her rage on the man, but before she could to anything more than dig her nails into his neck, his eyes glazed over and he was dead, and she turned around, seething, to see that Law had taken one of the knives on the table and stabbed the heart right through the middle.

"Law!" She said, louder than she should have, but she couldn't keep her anger inside anymore, and she rose and walked up to him, gesturing violently with her hands. "Why the fuck did you do that?"

He caught her by the wrists, and it only made her want to hit someone more. "It was enough. We got what we came for."

"He was still talking!"

"He was just trying to get to you."

"I know that, but—!"

"Stop it. You are acting irrationally."

Saki swallowed a knot in her throat. He was right and she hated it, but she let her arms down, and he let her go.

"He wasn't important enough to know anything, Saki."

When she spoke, she sounded defeated. "How can you be so sure?"

The look on Law's face told her that had unwittingly tried to cross again the line he had firmly drawn on all matters related to Joker, and she was getting nowhere. It was the last confirmation she needed to be sure that his involvement with that man was closer than she had thought at first.

She took a deep breath. You're acting irrationally. Boy, that stung.

She kneeled beside Bastos' body again, and Law was about to object to whatever she was going to do when he realized that she was searching his pockets. Soon enough, she produced the device that Pomona had given Bastos during the dinner, and she handed it to Law.

"This is an Eternal Pose," he said, surprised, and looked back at her for an explanation.

"Pomona said it points to the place where the cargo was going to be carried."

She didn't know if it would make up to Law the scene she had just made, but it made her feel less useless.

Law accepted the Eternal Pose, and the tension in the air disappeared. He pocketed it. "We should go before somebody starts stumbling upon corpses."

"So much for a clean job," Saki commented.

"All things considered," Law opened the door a fraction to make sure the hallway was safe, and then went out, "both were quite clean."

"We're such professionals. If we ever need a career change we know what we can do."
Saki followed him close by, and when they got to the maintenance door, she regarded the doorknob with suspicion – because no plan could work so seamlessly, ever – and felt a mix of surprise, relief and even more suspicion when it turned without further complications.

Law paused for a split second to eye the doorknob as well.

Saki bit back a smile. "You didn't expect it to work either, did you?"

"Do you ever feel uneasy when everything goes according to plan?"

"Yes."

Then a telltale scream of somebody finding something highly horrifying and unexpected – say, a dead body – rang through the floor, and they looked at each other knowingly and booked it through the door. They shut it as quietly as possible, bolted it with a flimsy latch, and dashed down a flight of industrial stairs, following the same way Shachi and Penguin had taken. It was dark, but they didn't want to risk turning on any lights. Less than a minute had passed when the exit door and the promise of freedom stood in front of them.

Of course, that doorknob didn't budge. "Well," Saki said, turning to Law and looking expectantly.

There was movement on the other side, and both froze.

"Saki?" A voice whispered.

"Bepo?" Law tried.

"Captain?"

"Now that we've all been introduced, we could get to opening the door," Saki said crankily.

"I'm so sorry!" Bepo apologized from the other side. "A maintenance worker noticed the guys had left the door open and locked it. I offered to stand guard in case I saw anyone suspicious, but I haven't…"

"I'm fairly sure it's us they meant, Bepo," Law said.

"Oh. Right."

"Can you open the door from your side?"

"Not without attracting attention."

"Can't you cut it open?" Saki asked Law.

"I need a tool to cut with," he said. "I don't suppose you've got extra table knives on you?"

"I wasn't planning on murdering anybody else, but at this rate I may change my mind."

The door upstairs rattled, and they shut up immediately.

"It's locked," someone said.

"As it should. Let's check the bathrooms first."

Both pirates let out a breath they didn't know they'd been holding. The discovery of the second body
was imminent.

"Maybe there's something around we can use," Saki said, turning around and squinting to see.

"Bepo, if we don't find a way to open from here, you kick the door down and we run."

"I'll be ready!"

A door, the one they had seen on the layout that connected to the first floor, opened in that moment, and Law was getting ready to knock out the approaching figure and give the signal to Bepo when it spoke.

"Looks like you need help." The rustling of keys grabbed their attention faster than the identity of the newcomer, but Saki was able to make him out against the light that got through the door.

"He's the cook I told you about," she said to Law.

He nodded in understanding and extended his arm to expand his Room and swap the newcomer's keys with the gloves hanging from his belt, but the cook raised both hands in a sign of peace.

"Hey, not so fast, whatever you want to do. I'm here to open that door for you."

"Why would you do that? And why haven't you told anybody we're here?"

"Because a friend warned me beforehand," he explained.

"Felicia?" Saki asked, though she knew the answer.

"You kept her secret," he said, walking quietly to the door. The click of the door sounded like a celestial chorus direct from heaven, "I keep yours. Go here," he passed Law a slip of paper. "It'll be safer than the inn."

"This can be a trap," Law said.

"You've been in Carpus' trap from the beginning. What's one more to deal with?"

The cook had a point, and it wasn't like they had a better idea.

"Get going before I get in trouble to. We can talk later."

They were shooed politely but sternly through the door, like unruly kids meddling in adult's affairs, and they joined Bepo outside. The cook closed the door and they listened to his retreating steps until they could no longer be heard.

"That was weird," Bepo said. "Everything and everyone in this island is weird. I'm getting tired of it."

Saki patted his arm.

"He mentioned a secret. What is it?" Law asked her.

"Now, now, it wouldn't be one if I told you, hm?" She said irritatingly, but it was enough to convince him that it wasn't relevant, because for all the stuff she kept to herself – never forgiving hiding the needle phobia – she wouldn't be reckless enough to hide critical information from them.

Keeping to the shadows until they were at a decent distance from the restaurant, they left the resort
with no more than a cursory glance from the guards stationed at the exit.

"I wonder how those two are," Saki said, looking at the sky. It was cloudy and it promised rain.

"I saw them drop a sack into a cart before I was called to the door," Bepo said. "They looked like they had been through a tornado."

"They were already like that when we saw them upstairs." Law took out from his pocket the paper the cook had given them and unfolded it. "Anybody have any idea where this place is?"

Since they obviously didn't, they wasted a bit of time asking the few people around until they found the right street. It was the address of an apartment in a modest looking building.

"I guess we'll have to wait for him by the door," Saki said at the same time as Bepo pushed on the door and it opened.

"It wasn't locked, I swear!" He said in a hurry, putting his paws in the air. "I didn't break it!"

With a half-smile, Law pushed the door open and walked inside.

"Surprise!"

Though Saki would have called it a heart attack-slash-homicide attempt instead of a legitimate surprise, she was relieved to see that the people inside were none other than the two guys and Felicia. Penguin and Shachi had changed and looked clean, and they were all sitting around a square wood table and playing cards over pints.

"Why are you here?" Bepo asked.

Felicia giggled. "I brought them. I thought you could be somewhere safer than the inn. And, well, Mack offered."

"Mack?"

"The chef from the fancy restaurant," Penguin said. "You know the one that came for coconut jelly night?"

"He helped us get out of there," Saki said.

"Oh, no! You got in trouble?"

"Almost," Law said. "The backdoor was closed by the time we got there. He let us out."

Felicia smiled widely. "I thought you could use the help, so I asked him to keep an eye out for you."

"Why?" Law tried. There had been too much kindness for strangers in a single night and he couldn't help but doubt everyone.

But Felicia was immune to his scowly powers, and she spread her arms towards Bepo, "I couldn't bear to leave such a cutie to his own luck," she said, and quickly hid the bad pun with, "Also, the inn tab isn't going to pay itself if you end up in prison."

"Did you just—"

"You sure got us out of a beary hairy situation," Saki said.
"Oh, shush, I bearly did anything," she waved it off.

"Just know that we appreciate it beary much."

"Do you think all women are like this when they talk or it's just them?" Shachi said in a mock whisper to Penguin.

Mack got home a few hours later, well past midnight, and in that span of time everyone had been able to change to their regular clothes, courtesy of Felicia, and Saki had been able to make an intriguing discovery. On one of Mack's shelves there was a picture of him, a few years younger, and a teenage girl with shiny brown eyes and curly hair. The kicker was that she was wearing a pale blue dress patterned with daisies and dandelions. Saki didn't want to believe that she lived in a world where two of those existed, which only left one option.

Both Mack and younger Marina had the same hair, if she stared long enough. Weird island with weird people, indeed.

"I hope you weren't trying to act subtly," was the first thing Mack said when he went through the door. He shook his coat for some coconut powder to fall off before hanging it. "Because you didn't. The restaurant closed, security is going crazy because they don't want to put the resort on a lockdown but they can't find the culprits either, and it will be overrun by soldiers in the morning."

"There was a change of plans," Law said.

"A change of plans that involved two murders," Mack deadpanned.

"Yes."

"It did?" Penguin asked.

"Had to keep the bodyguard and the other guy from talking," Saki intervened quickly.

"Oh, yeah. Didn't think about it."

"So only Miss Pomona saw your faces?" Felicia asked.

"If Carpus said the truth, she won't talk," Law commented with clear distaste. "If."

"She probably won't," Felicia reassured him. "Miss Pomona won't want that kind of attention brought upon her. It's bad publicity for business."

Saki looked at her strangely. "Who told you her name? Carpus didn't say it in the inn."

Felicia covered her mouth and turned pink.

"I keep track of our usual patrons, and I knew she had requested a private room a month ago. It wasn't difficult to guess who your target was when Felicia told me about Carpus' plan."

"So… we are clear? For good?" Shachi asked, as if it was too good to be true.

"I think so," Felicia said. "I mean, a Marine or two may show up at the inn and ask for the guest registry, but with Arnold's system that isn't a problem."

"What system?"
"Make up a name for every pirate that rents a room. I'm really good at it," she grinned. "I can still promote you to Strawberry Sundae."

"I'm worried about the sub," Bepo said, completely ignoring Shachi's attempt to form a coherent response.

"You aren't the only pirate crew here," Mack said, "and they won't go out of their way to arrest someone who's not a big name." Upon the glances he got for that, he shrugged and said, "Sorry, but it's true. And anyway, wanted criminals are banned entrance from the resort. They won't be looking for you, so just don't get in their way."

Bepo seemed to be appeased by that, and even Law appeared to grow a bit more relaxed.

"Then, what now?" Shachi asked.

Mack shot him a skeptical glare. "I don't know about you, but I'm going to sleep. Feel free to use the floor," he said, stepping towards a doorframe that led to the inner part of the small apartment.

Shachi muttered when he was out of sight, "Cranky."

"He isn't a night person," Felicia said, and with a yawn, she put her cards on the table and got up. "I should go too."

The mechanics started protesting that she shouldn't be alone so late at night, but she wouldn't have any of it.

"Try not to come to the inn until the afternoon. By then the Marines will have cleared out."

After she left, and there was no more noise coming from the rest of the apartment, Penguin said, "It feels kind of bad to leave it like this."

They all knew what he meant. You didn't become a pirate to have your chain jerked around by the first opportunist that came by, no matter how important he was. It looked bad in the eyes of other crews, and it reflected badly on the captain, too. Carpus had something coming, even if they didn't know what, yet.

"We won't leave it like this," Law replied.

Penguin looked at him expectantly.

"I'll think of something. For now, sleep. I think we deserve it."

"Dibs on the couch!" Bepo exclaimed, and all hell broke loose.

Saki watched the scene unfold from a corner on the room, sitting on the carpeted floor, resting her head lazily on her knees.

To absolutely no one's surprise, Saki turned around on Mack's carpet for the umpteenth time that night. She may have been able to fall asleep in an uncomfortable surface in other circumstances, in part thanks to beginning to regain a semblance of a proper sleep cycle since they left the North Blue, but the events of the day plus two men and a nasally congested bear snoring in the living room made it an impossible mission.

Law was also awake. She knew, even with her eyes closed, because he wasn't breathing deeply and evenly, like one usually would – providing you weren't attempting to wake up an entire apartment
building with your snores. Saki also had trouble sleeping when there were others awake around her, so she wasn't even trying. It was good enough to rest on the floor and hear the pitter-patter of the rain outside.

In a way, she was grateful to have them around. Lately, when she was too tired to shut out unwanted thoughts and she dropped down her guard to slip into bed, she had taken to crying herself to sleep. It was the moment of the day she allowed herself to let go, it felt awful and it gave her nightmares. Having an excuse to stay awake was welcome, even if her mind kept replaying the events of the evening.

It was her fault they were dead. She had known since she had read the news. She didn't need anybody to say it out loud and hearing the confirmation from a stranger hurt more than she was willing to admit.

She let out an involuntary sigh.

"You need to stop thinking so much," she heard Law say.

"I bet you never thought you'd have to say that to me."

He hummed. "I'm not sure I would've taken you up on that one."

"Thanks for the credit, I guess."

Saki opened her eyes to see Law sitting on the floor against the couch and staring at the window. She sat upright and blinked three, four, five times before it sank in her brain that she wasn't seeing things.

"It's snowing?" It couldn't be. It was too hot for snow, and she would know, because Asteria spent most of the winter season enveloped by a white mantle. Unless... "Coconut," she said with distaste. "It's coconut, isn't it?"

"It must be."

She let her full weight fall back on the carpet, covered her eyes with an arm and declared, "I'm sick of this island." Then she started to laugh to herself.

"Fantastic. My cook just broke."

She wanted to reply that he may find a more suitable replacement deeper in the apartment, but that only made her laugh harder.

"Want to hear a good one?" She said when she regained the ability to talk.

"Surprise me."

"Mack is related to the Marine captain that chased us in Lymes."

"I saw the picture." Of course he had seen it. She had expected him to. "Do you really think it's her?"

"I don't know, but it's that godforsaken dress for sure."

Law seemed to accept it as conclusive evidence. Saki thought he had given up on talking when he asked, "Do you regret joining the crew?"
Saki moved the arm from her face just enough to give him an unsure glance. "Please tell me you are joking."

"Do I ever?"

She was quiet for a moment. "Quite often, actually. At my expense a lot of the time."

"I didn't give you much of a choice back in Asteria," he reasoned. "It wouldn't surprise me if you had second thoughts."

She sighed and sat up again, because it was difficult to make a serious point sprawled on a carpet. "You saved my life twice in the span of two days."

"You fished me out of a sewer a month later."

"You rescued me from being sacrificed by crazy xenophobic cultists."

"You were already rescuing yourself. How the hell did you manage to move so quickly after the anesthesia?"

Saki scratched the back of her neck, and she shuddered a little when she touched the place where she had been injected. "I can be stubborn sometimes."

"Don't you say."

The wind picked up outside and a bunch of coconut flakes got stuck to the window. That had to be a hard mess to clean, Saki thought.

"You shouldn't let what that man said get to you," Law said.

She'd rather be cleaning that window than having this conversation. "Easy to say when you didn't basically kill your own family."

"They may still be alive."

Saki gave him a sad look. "I'd rather not get my hopes up."

"The papers lie, and people do too. Your old man didn't strike me as the kind of person who would just lay down and die."

That got a small smile out of Saki. "I know. I just can't get over it so fast. But I'll be fine." She said that last line more to convince herself than him.

"I know," he echoed.

They were just two words, but the way he said them made them heavy. Charged with his own memories, perhaps.

After another moment of silence, Saki found the courage to ask, "Do you have any family left?"

Law glanced briefly at Bepo, but didn't reply. All of a sudden Saki became very interested in her own hands. "Dumb question. Forget I said anything."

"I thought I told you to stop backpedaling."

She remembered that conversation. It was the first time he had talked about his parents, even if she
hadn't asked directly about them. Then, she had been afraid to intrude where she shouldn't, too.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"I was born in Flevance."

Saki’s heart skipped a beat as she lifted her face to look at his. There wasn’t a single soul in the North Blue who didn’t know about the White City.

This time, it was him who wasn’t looking at her. He kept staring at the white-speckled window. Maybe it worked as an illusion of a home that he, too, didn’t have anymore.

The questions piled up in Saki’s mind faster than she could ask them – and worst of all, she didn’t know if she should, but she knew she wasn’t supposed to stay silent, either. "Did you leave before the quarantine, then?" She said with hope, because the other option, and the one that was most likely true, was too horrible to contemplate.

"No. I was there with my whole family. My parents wanted to stay and take care of the ill."

His whole family. Not just his parents, then. It was likely he’d had siblings.

"You survived the Amber Lead sickness," she said in wonder, not a question, but a certainty because he was there in front of her, and she could scarcely believe it after what she had just learned. "I thought it was incurable."

"For a person without the Ope Ope no Mi, it is, as far as I know."

("Were you sick?"

"Very," he said, pensive, staring idly at some point of the kitchen’s wall. "Until I was thirteen.")

She couldn’t begin to imagine how it would feel for a child so young to be left completely alone in the world. And he had somehow found the strength to keep going and become who he was.

She had never been so grateful for his presence as in this moment, thinking of all the tiny coincidences and successes and tragedies that had piled up, and it the end had worked together and brought them to meet in a dingy island in a corner of the world. She realized how slim the chance of the two of them ever stumbling upon each other had been, and how that meeting had turned her life upside down.

She had known she owed him from the moment he agreed to help her, but she hadn’t been fully aware of how many other people, known and unknown, she owed as well.

"So the papers lie," she said.

He smiled at her. "My point exactly."

She was sure that she was the luckiest woman alive.

Feeling particularly daring, which Saki would forever refuse to attribute to the two beers she had had because no one ever had ever gotten tipsy with so little, she got closer to him and risked grievous injury by hugging him without previous notice. Thankfully, for her and for the time he wouldn’t have to waste fixing her, he only tensed for a moment before he relaxed. By then, though, the hug was mostly over, because Saki was an idiot sometimes, but never full-on suicidal.

"Whatever happened before we met," she said, because she didn’t want him to think that had been a
filthy, insulting pity hug, "I'm very happy that it took you to Asteria. And I'm happy to be here with you and everybody else. So sorry that I can't... really feel sorry for what happened to you. I'm selfish like that."

After the shock from the hug wore down, Law gave her an amused smile that no normal person could have mustered after being told that they didn't feel all that bad about the mass destruction of their hometown. Saki was sure she wouldn't have been able to take it as well, but there was a hint of gratefulness in the way he looked at her.

"You'll have to try harder to offend me," he said.

"I don't want to. You know where I sleep."

"Good, because it was a pitiful excuse for and insult and for a compliment."

"It wasn't meant to be a... Ah, it doesn't matter." She made herself comfortable against the couch, near him. "Whatever makes you happy. I'm awful."

"You are," he agreed, "but we're all going to hell here."

Saki closed her eyes again, and oddly enough, she felt more comfortable in the close proximity of this man and a polar bear than on her own.
Worth a thousand words

(The pictures tell the story)

The wooden blinds of Mack's lone living room window, even pulled up as they were, were rattling with the wind when Saki came to, and, to her surprise, she realized that she had somehow managed to fall asleep. It couldn't have been for long, though – the only light from outside was the orange hue of the streetlights and nothing hinted at dawn yet. There were coconut flakes stuck to the glass, but it wasn't raining anymore.

For someone who liked to pride herself on being so aware of her surroundings, though, Saki took a good half minute to realize that she wasn't leaning her head on the couch, but rather on Law's shoulder, and that she'd be a prime candidate for a stiff neck come the morning.

However, he was asleep too, creating a sight akin to a butterfly coming out of its cocoon or a snow leopard giving birth to her cubs. You know, one of those miracles of nature that you just stumbled upon and proceeded to stay very quiet, very still while watching, and hoped that they would be burnt into your mind for the rest of your painfully mediocre and uninteresting life.

That was Saki's first and foremost excuse for not moving, in the unlikely case that someone asked. Admittedly, there was another that weighed about as much, and that was that she was comfortable and didn't feel like making the effort. In addition to that, she couldn't remember the last time she had slept next to someone that wasn't family – she wondered if she had ever been able to, because she honestly couldn't recall, and she was aware that if she had a surname and middle name they would be Intimacy Issues, in this order – and maybe, maybe she wondered if that meant anything at all, but it was entirely too early to think, she was tired, and her pillow-captain was warm and made her feel safe, so this was a discussion that she refused to have with herself.

Just as she felt being drawn back to sleep, Law shifted, and she was disappointed for a split second, thinking that she'd have to give up her position. But instead, she felt a weight on the top of her head, and Law didn't seem to be awake yet, and he was leaning his head against hers and their bodies were touching, not uncomfortably so – lies, her hip hurt where she had hit it days ago –, but enough to make her scoot away had she not been too lazy to move and had he not been, well, him.

Questioning that last part wasn't worth the headache.

She drifted into sleep once more thinking that she had probably read a similar scene in one of her mother's cheesy romance novels, only the heroine would have been considerably more wide-eyed and the hero much more presentable.

The cruel return to reality came a few hours later, brought by a doorbell that woke the entire crew up at once, and Saki, who was prone to reacting badly when woken up by loud noises, jumped at the sound, which prompted Law to jolt awake, and before any of the two could realize what was going on, where they were and who needed to be fucking murdered, their skulls collided with the force a rock hippo hits a penguin, sending them towards the carpet holding their heads in pain. Luckily for their egos, everybody else was too busy being cranky and cursing at the door to notice what had transpired. Law and Saki shared the universal look for 'let us never speak of this again,' and directed their attention to the door. Mack, already dressed and looking fresh, was on his way to answer it, and once he opened it, Law felt the urge to slam it close.
There was none other than Bob, staring at them with his beady eyes, completely nonplussed at the four pirates glaring at him from the carpet and the polar bear on the beaten up couch.

"Who are you?" Mack asked, likely feeling the tension in the room and trying to find out if he needed to kick everybody out now.

"My apologies for showing up unannounced. I came to deliver something for Mr. Trafalgar Law." True enough, in his hands there was a manila envelope.

Mack glanced at Law over his shoulder and Law nodded, but when Mack extended his hand to receive the envelope, Bob said, "No. I must personally give it to Mr. Trafalgar."

Cursing up a storm under his breath, which prompted Saki to forget the pain to look at him with amusement, Law blinked the sleep away and got on his feet. At the door, Bob passed him the envelope and said, "Payment for services rendered," he explained. "My employer thanks you for your efficiency and vigorously encourages you not to contact him again."

Law didn't say anything to that, still trying to think of the most effective way to get to Carpus, but Penguin retorted, "Well, your employer should have thought better before trying to blackmail pirates."

Shachi shushed him, but Penguin only stared at him defiantly. Maybe. The cap was already on and it was hard to tell.

Bob only nodded at him, though if in agreement or mere acknowledgement, no one could tell. "That is all. Have a good day."

And he turned the way he came, soon disappearing down the staircase.

The awkward silence stretched until Mack hummed, went through the nearest door and called from inside, "Who wants breakfast?" as the sound of pots and pans began to fill the apartment.

That got everybody else up fast, and as they followed Mack into the kitchen, Law stayed outside and opened the envelope to see that there was a ridiculous sum of money inside.

Saki took a quick glance at it and whispered an 'oooh' before disappearing into the kitchen, but Bepo lingered behind and watched as Law counted.

"This should last us for a while," Law commented, closing the envelope and pocketing it.

Bepo only made an affirmative noise and then got in his face, sniffing.

"What the hell, Bepo?"

"You smell of tangerines."

Law stared at his friend blankly as the info set in. Bepo blinked innocently, and Law saw the shadow of a smile creeping on his face.

"No," Law said sternly, stepping around him to flee to the kitchen.

"But I didn't say anything!"

"Still no."

His crewmates looked at him with curiosity, but since Bepo didn't insist they shrugged it off in favor
of the bacon sizzling on a frying pan.

Following Felicia's instructions, the Heart Pirates avoided the inn during the morning, and after breakfast split up for a few hours: Law and Bepo headed to the sub, and the other three were left to their own devices as long as they tried to stay out of trouble, or else, and they were all smart enough to not want to find out what Law's threat meant. He split the money and gave them their shares, feeling a like a negligent father handing out the weekly allowance to his kids and letting them run wild without supervision.

Back at the port, the Polar Tang didn't seem to have attracted any Navy attention, but, like the majority of ships around, it was covered in coconut flakes that he wasn't in the mood to clean, so instead he went inside with Bepo to show him their newly acquired Eternal Pose and discuss their options. The route they had originally chosen seemed to be one of the safer ones from what little info they had been able to gather before entering the Grand Line. Diverting their course now would mean that the rest of the journey to the Red Line would be completely unpredictable, and though Law wasn't reticent to the idea, the fact stood that they were only five people on board, which was starting to seem too few for comfort, and that the navigator should be the one to have the last word on the issue.

Bepo shooed him out of the navigation room after a while, and Law left him on a desk, surrounded by books that he didn't understand and feeling more useless than he was content with admitting. He passed by the kitchen to get a lettuce leaf on the way to his room, and once there put it in front of the Den Den Mushi on the shelf, who blinked sleepily but soon grabbed it to eat. At least it wasn't sick anymore. It had serenaded him for weeks with its snores.

He set the Eternal Pose next to it, realizing that he was unwillingly dedicating a small section of the shelf to Joker-related memorabilia that he knew he could use, but still wasn't sure how to, and that both pieces of the collection had come from the same person. A person who had given them to him, he had to remind himself, because she wanted to even though he hadn't been sincere with her when it came to Joker, and she knew it. Law didn't count on that benevolent streak lasting, and he knew that one day he'd have to come clean to the entire crew, not just Saki. But for now, he didn't want anyone other than Bepo to know. It wasn't necessary, and Joker – no, Doflamingo, the king of Dressrosa, was still a faraway shadow that his crew didn't need to be concerned with. Perhaps never, if he could help it. It was his problem, and he'd deal with it alone when the time came.

Staring at the shelf, he could argue, in fact, that the Den Den Mushi had been a thank you and the Pose an apology for losing her temper, not two acts of good faith. But then, she could have so easily kept that Eternal Pose a secret in her efforts to try not to think that her old home was gone, but she hadn't, and he had refused to tell her of his involvement with Joker after she asked directly, and still she hadn't. And then he'd put on an incredible display of tact by asking her if she would have rather stayed with her family rather than leave them to their own luck to go who knew where with a pair of criminals she had just met. In retrospect, that had been a dick question even by his standards. Really, he should have gotten punched for that one, not hugged.

Law didn't do hugs, which was why his brain had deemed that staying frozen in place was an appropriate course of action, and generally avoided close proximity with others, but he was aware that he needed to work on that if he had the intention of sailing in a submarine full of people. It wasn't like he minded the company, either, but he had grown unaccustomed to it. His first reaction at being touched unexpectedly usually was to shove and stab, though judging by the lack of grievous injury in his latest human interaction, he could say that he was getting better at it. He rubbed his jaw, feeling a dull pain where it had collided with Saki's head, which probably was a good indicator of why he wasn't a fan of being in close quarters with anybody and that he should not think overmuch
how exactly he had managed to end up sleeping in that position. He tended to use others as pillows, and Bepo was living proof of it.

But just in case that the living proof decided to be smug again about his sense of smell and get weird ideas, Law went into his bathroom to take a long shower.

The North Blue was known by many things: ancient kingdoms, the tale of Liar Noland, criminal syndicates, rampant crime, and a chilly weather that froze the bums of careless travelers that underestimated just how fun a northern winter could be. That one last particularity, however, ensured that it wouldn't be known for its ice-cream parlors, and that was exactly the reason why Saki, Penguin and Shachi made a beeline for one that the latter spotted and chose a table on the terrace. It was late autumn, and on a summer island that meant a fair amount people were wearing long sleeves or thin jackets already when for them it was prime short-sleeve weather. The Heart Pirates low-key thought that the townspeople were a bunch of pansies, most of all Saki, who was wearing the striped tank top from the day before and green denim pedal pushers. The life of the tattoo show-off was hard and full of sacrifice, and she was thinking that she could afford another one with the money Law had given her when the waiter came to their table to take their orders.

Like any sensible person would have in their place, they avoided coconut at all costs, which made them discard half the options right off the bat.

She didn't do much talking, partly because she was still processing the events of the night before, partly because the raspberry chocolate chip ice-cream was assaulting four of her five senses in the best of ways, and partly because she had a tendency to shut up and listen when she felt comfortable and wasn't being directly addressed.

Saki didn't know when it had happened and didn't care to find out, but she had taken a big liking to the other members of the crew, even if they were all kind of jerks to each other (but it always evened out, so it was fun), and the revelation, if she could call it that, of how lucky she had been to stumble onto them had lifted some of the weight in her chest. Asteria had stopped being home at some point in the past, and now that she saw it, she could try to let go of it more easily. She couldn't forget, or stop thinking about her family, but…

Maybe she had a new family now. Maybe that was all that she really needed to keep going.

She smiled at Shachi inspecting Penguin's tattoo so up close that his nose almost touched the skin, and she spoke up, "Do you want a matching one?"

She said it sincerely, though she expected a snarky remark from Shachi, but he surprised her.

"I don't know. I mean, I like how it looks and all, but… you know."

Ah. "The needles," she said.

Shachi's cheeks flushed. "Yeah, so what?" He said defensively.

"So nothing," she replied blandly. "We all have stupid fears." Needles, of all things. It could have been dogs or thunderstorms, but no, that wouldn't have been ironic enough in the grand scheme of the universe.

"It would be cool if we all had them," Penguin said.

"Yeah," Shachi agreed, but still looked unsure. "I'll think it over and tell you something."
"Whenever you're ready," Saki said.

"That's…" Shachi hesitated. "Do you have a fever?"

"Man, let it go, she's going easy on you."

"He always needs to complain about something."

Shachi pressed up his sunglasses in a nervous gesture. "H-hey, don't start now, it's you who was being out of character."

"Maybe I'm going through some development," she said. "When will you?"

"I'm a fully developed character!"

"You don't even have a character arc, do you?" She said, taking a big spoonful of ice-cream.

"This is why no one writes stories about you," Penguin said.

"No one's writing stories about any of us," Shachi retorted.

"The papers may disagree," Saki managed to say with a full mouth. "But we're pretty pathetic when you look at it from up close."

"Only from up close?"

She snorted, but Penguin lifted his spoon and declared, "No defeatism! We're badasses."

"Big bad pirates," Saki said, lifting her spoon too.

"Some not so big," Shachi added, and deeming the jab satisfactory, he dug into his cookie dough scoops.

Saki kicked him under the table, he sniggered, and then Penguin ribbed him with an elbow and motioned towards the opposite sidewalk, where a group of men were making their way to the sea with towels and an umbrella.

Saki approved. This was beach weather and those guys knew what was good. Then one of them turned his head towards them and waved. Shachi and Penguin waved back. Saki had no clue what was going on.

"That's the maintenance crew from last night," Penguin explained, "Well, some of them."

Three split up from the group and crossed the road to go talk to them, a chunky guy with a buzz cut, a very big one with a bandanna covering the lower half of his face, and a freak with spiky hair that was wearing a white mask.

"Yo, guys, how're you doing?" Mask guy called, and he was about to shake hands with Penguin when he stood rooted to the spot and so did the other two. "Holy shit, are those for real?" He pointed to the boiler suit's Jolly Roger.

"Uh… yeah."

Saki watched the exchange with morbid fascination, wondering if they were in trouble and they were going to find out what 'or else' meant, but apparently she had nothing to worry about, because at least two of the guys grinned.
"No wonder you dealt with those giant rats like nothing," Giant said.

"Yeah," Buzz cut said, crossing his arms, "I've never met anybody with the guts to get them out of a ventilation shaft."

Saki gave Shachi the side-eye.

"We kind of needed to get in there," he supplied.

"Oh, now I remember you faces!" Giant said. "You guys have bounties!"

The three pirates grinned at them, very pleased with themselves.

"You're that crew… What was the name… Don't tell me, I'm about to remember!"

"Something to do cards?" Buzz cut tried to remember.

"Yeah! Club pirates?"

"No," Mask guy said, "Wasn't it Diamond?"

"Heart," Saki said with a clipped tone. "Heart Pirates."

"Oh, yeah." Giant said. "It sounds kinda corny."

"No offense," Mask guy quickly said.

They were offended. It was their hard-earned right to complain about their captain's stylistic choices, and nobody else was entitled to that.

"So, was last night your doing?" Buzz cut asked.

"That depends," Saki said with in a sickly sweet way, and Shachi made a horrified face upon hearing her. "You aren't going to tell the Marines, are you?"

The guy smiled shyly and shook his head.

"Good!" She said, not dropping her smile. "Because if you were, we'd have to kill you, and nobody wants that, right?"

It became clear in their faces that those three weren't sure if she was speaking truthfully or it was a joke, and she made no attempt to dispel the confusion.

"Seriously, though," Giant after the awkward moment, "We wouldn't."

Mask guy nodded. "Serves them right. They always treat us like shit."

"And pay worse," Buzz cut added. "It was about time someone stuck it to them."

"Besides," Mask guy slammed his hands on the table and leaned towards Shachi and Penguin. The creepy mask made it look more menacing than it was, "you guys are heroes. The size of those rats!"

"Oh, it was nothing," Shachi waved it off with a wide grin. Saki wonder if that hurt his face, with all the scratches he sported.

"Yeah, we've dealt with worse."
Going only by the smiles and the impressed whistles of those guys, Saki would have bet that they were developing crushes on her crewmates.

"Do you mind if I sit with you?" Giant said. "I wanna hear that story."

"Me too," Buzz cut said.

"Yeah! I want to know if the stories on the papers are true!"

The guys looked at each other, then at Saki. She shrugged.

"Sure," Shachi said.

After shuffling a few chair around they called over the waiter to place their order. All things with coconut. Really good specialties, they said, you must try them, they insisted. Though that lost them respect points, Saki thought they were nice, even if they also looked like a circus number, but then again, she wasn't the best to talk, considering the company she kept nowadays.

She didn't catch the guys' names.

After the maintenance crew left, Saki wandered a bit more with the others, going as far as the posh district to scout, but the only thing they saw were soulless office workers and people wearing in clothes more money than Saki had had at any given point in her life, and her rates weren't cheap.

On their way to the sub, Shachi and Penguin dropped her off at the inn, since she wanted to check if it was safe already. Felicia was reading a home décor magazine at the reception desk. Blue curtains appeared to be in that season.

"Hey," she greeted happily, lowering the magazine. "We got a patrol asking if we'd seen anyone suspicious, but that's all. What do you think about lace trimmings?"

"Lace…?" Saki looked a bit lost. "They're… fine, I suppose? I've never had lacey decoration."

"I should've guessed you weren't the type." Felicia gave one last look at the pictures and turned her full attention to Saki. "Your rooms are ready whenever you want to come back. Though…" She looked thoughtful for a moment, and then said in a lower voice, leaning towards Saki. "How come you don't share a room?"

Saki had no idea where that was coming from, but nonetheless had an inkling of where it was going. "Share a room with who?"

"Don't play dumb," Felicia giggled. "Mack told me he saw you and your captain sleeping next to each other this morning. There's nothing wrong with it!"

"No," was Saki's knee-jerk reply.

Felicia seemed confused. "No?"

"No. Never." She waved her hands in front of her, and why did this keep happening everywhere they went, they'd been doing so well for the last two islands. "We are not together."

"You… aren't?" She asked, and her expression was a mix of surprised and suspicious. "But you stayed behind together at the restaurant? And you slept against each other?"

Saki covered her face with her hands. "Felicia, no." She felt like a broken record.
"Ah…" She sounded disappointed. "If you say so. You look cute together, though."

"We are not having this conversation."

Felicia giggled louder. "Why not? It's a shame! Besides, you," she rolled up the magazine and bopped Saki on the head with it, making her look back up. She then pointed with it at her face, "have an obligation."

"An obligation," she repeated, wondering if she was going to regret staying there to find out what she meant.

"Yes." Felicia looked deadly serious. "For all the women, men, and those that aren't either that have looked at that piece of man but couldn't get near it -- you must tap that."

Saki was officially and thoroughly weirded out by how the exchange was going. She had only come to find out if it was safe to return. Clearly it hadn't been for her. "If you have the hots for my captain leave me out of it, you go ahead, the path is clear."

Felicia appeared to hesitate for a moment, but the hand that held the accusing magazine didn't waver. "...While that's a tempting possibility, I really ship you two now."

"Oh for fuck's—" Someone coughed politely behind her, and Saki screamed bloody murder. She turned around with a hand on her chest, and she would have been worried about her heart had it not already been in the hands of a very competent doctor.

Felicia had gone white when she noticed Bob standing a few paces away, and who knew for how long he had been there. Saki tried to find a clue in his dead fish stare, but the depth of his eyes was impenetrable.

"Excuse me. I am looking for Mr. Trafalgar Law."

Saki proceeded to slam her forehead against the reception desk.

"There isn't any guest by that name in our registry," Felicia noted helpfully, patting Saki's hair.

"Oh. Is that so? My apologies, then."

Saki heard steps, and after a few seconds Felicia said, "He's gone."

"Thanks." She straightened up. "I better go warn the boss that they are looking for him again."

"He's a very sought after guy, huh?" Felicia commented, innocently passing pages of her magazine, but then she looked at Saki and wiggled her eyebrows.

Saki narrowed her eyes and said dryly, "The most innocent-looking ones are always the worst."

As the door of the inn closed behind Saki, she heard Felicia laughing out loud.

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One of the best things about Law, Saki thought, and about the others while she was at it, was that they didn't expect anything from her. She wasn't used to having guys about her age be nice to her and genuinely not want anything. But they lived together, they hung out, they had fun, and she didn't need to worry about one of them suddenly flipping his lid because he had been nice to her and she wasn't putting out. That would be awful, and as silly as it sounded, because she knew it wasn't true, the mere suggestion that one could have hidden intentions towards her unsettled her.
But then, if she closed her eyes and remembered, she could feel the tingle on her cheek where Law's fingers had brushed it.

She'd rather not remember.

She'd rather not pay any attention as the disgusting state of the deck, either, currently covered in coconut flakes and glistening with oil under the afternoon sun. She'd have to clean that, wouldn't she?

She went inside and followed the voices and the slippery fruity trail that went downstairs, where she found Penguin and Shachi at Law's door, updating him on the encounter at the ice-cream parlor. Law listened with interest, and it wouldn't have surprised her if they were planning to do some recruiting – the sub was still pretty empty, and the guys had been complaining for a while about needing more hands for maintenance. Saki wasn't sure how she was going to be able to cook for so many people, but she'd have to manage somehow.

The guys paused their conversation when she approached them, which suited her fine.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said, "but I ran into Office Ninja at the inn. He's looking for you." She stared pointedly at Law. "Again. And before you ask, I don't know what he wants."

"He'll come here sooner or later, then," Law groaned with a dark look on his face and apparently resigned to suffer Bob's ability.

"He better not come inside," Shachi said with indignation. "We should fling him overboard if he tries."

"Motion approved," Law said.

"Is there any way we can get info out of him?" Penguin asked, sounding impatient. "He could be useful if we want to get back at his boss."

"In any other situation I'd say there is, but I don't think that man is a normal case."

Shachi crossed his arms. "We can get the guy at his office, if he stays past closing hour. Like the last time. Don't bosses do that often?"

"Or we can run into a buttload of security plus the Marines that are already on the island thanks to us," Saki said.

"I don't see you coming up with a better idea."

She avoided looking at him when she replied. "His home."

"We don't even know where that is."

"And it may even be in the complex, so we couldn't get in," she added.

Shachi frowned. "Weren't you arguing in favor of this?"

"Just tossing ideas around. Plans aren't my forte."

Law looked at her in a way that made all too annoyingly clear that he thought the same, but he didn't disagree with her idea. "It may be better," he said, thinking over the possibilities. "We can catch him with his guard low, not to mention that there will be more valuables than in an office building. That is if we can get in there, though."
Penguin sighed. "Which brings us to how we should get that info. And that creep."

"We can ask Felicia first," Law suggested. "She'd have an idea of where he lives, even if she doesn't have details."

"Then you know where to find her," Saki said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a shower to take and we've got a sub to clean before the coconut gets stuck forever to the floorboards."

The guys grumbled a bit as she walked past them to get to her quarters, but they began moving right away. Hygiene first, vengeance second. This was another thing that she appreciated about them. They had their priorities in order.

The coconut stuck everywhere. The deck, the soles of her sandals, her skin, even the mop, all were covered in flakes, and Saki wanted nothing more than to take a high pressure water hose at the deck and at whoever was responsible for that curse in the first place, not necessarily in that order. Carpus would have done, too, but she might have whacked him with the mop first.

A few steps away, Penguin and Shachi were wasting precious energy bickering about who was throwing flakes at whose clean part, and on the upper deck, Bepo and Law were trying to get the stuff off the wood with as much success as the rest. Bepo was currently near the railing that oversaw the lower deck, fighting a lost battle against the small bits of coconut that were stuck in his fur and sneezing every other minute. He was a true survivor.

When Saki diverted her attention from him and the floor for one moment to take a look at the street, she saw something strange. Not because she noticed that Bob was standing in front of their gangplank and looking up – probably at the spot where Law was waging his own war against the local elements – oh no, they had been expecting that from the start. It was the woman next to him that piqued Saki's curiosity. She was sitting on a wheelchair and carrying a carved wooden cane on her lap, and she couldn't be much older than thirty. She, like Bob, looked up at their sub, but unlike her companion, she was showing a hint of amusement in her face.

"Bepo!" Saki called, and he looked down at her. She pointed at the harbor, and Bepo had to squint through teary eyes to notice the newcomers, but as soon as he did, he dropped the mop and ran towards the prow. The exchange attracted the guys towards Saki, who didn't need much time to realize what was going on.

"He really has come?" Shachi said incredulously. "To a pirate ship? Is that man nuts?"

Penguin grimaced. "And with someone else, too. That guy doesn't have any sense of self-preservation."

Saki tried to make out what Bob was saying when Law got closer to him, but he wasn't speaking loudly and she couldn't. After a short exchange, the woman spoke up, and they could hear that one clearly enough.

"I'm Pomona Hazel," she told Law with a polite smile, "and if we can speak somewhere more private, I have information that may be of interest to you."

"That isn't her!" Penguin exclaimed right away. "We would know!"

"Or the other one wasn't," Saki offered.

Soon, they saw Bob push the wheelchair up the gangplank, and with all the discretion that heels and heavy duty boots granted them, the two boys and Saki made their way into the sub and up the metal
staircase until they found themselves huddled up next to the mess hall's door, listening into the conversation. Law had taken a chair by the table and Bepo had done the same next to him. Bob, on the other hand, stood straight, and Pomona was facing them from her wheelchair, with the table as the only security measure between her and the pirates.

Someone who so easily went into a pirate ship was either stronger than she looked or too powerful to be touched, and knew it. And very self-confident, too, or she wouldn't have risked her presence in the first place.

"Who was the woman at the restaurant?" Law asked coldly.

"My stand-in, Layla, and also a long-time friend of mine." The woman's hands were decorated with several thin gold bands and chains that contrasted beautifully against her skin tone. "Fitzwilliam relayed to me that Carpus was planning something, and I couldn't take the risk to go to the meeting personally."

"Fitzwilliam?"

"That would be me, Mr. Trafalgar," Bob said.

"My companion is Remington Fitzwilliam the Fifth," Pomona introduced them, "though I believe Carpus calls him something much more classless." The distaste was clear in her voice, but she was too polite to say anymore out loud. "He is a brute who thinks himself subtle, as has been evidenced by this sorry affair. Luckily for all of us, he isn't half as intelligent as he believes."

"How so?" Law said. "He managed to mangle the deal between you and Joker."

Pomona arched a pair of elegant eyebrows. "Oh, you know of Joker? How interesting," she tapped her lips with a finger, smiling and thinking, "But no, what he really wanted was to scare me from competing against him. And given the circumstances, I have no further interest in that arrangement. I have not been impressed by his plays, so far. And that is why I have come to you with an offer."

Law shifted in his seat, apparently relaxed, but actually getting into a more comfortable position to lunge out of it if needed. Behind the doorframe, the three hidden pirates looked at each other as if making sure that they'd be ready to strike anytime.

"We don't want any more 'offers,'" Law replied.

Pomona, though, seemed to notice the change in body language. "There's no need to get nervous, Mr. Trafalgar. As I said, Carpus is a brute. I am not. But I can't leave his threat against me unanswered, either. And, tell me," she said, smiling slyly. "Am I wrong to think that you hold a grudge against him after he put you and your crew at risk?"

Law didn't say anything. He stared at her, analyzing her and her easy demeanor for the smallest hint of weakness, but she acted like she was having a friendly chat with a business partner over tea, and judging by the growing smile on her face, she took his silence as a positive reply.

"I bring you a proposal that you may or may not take. It won't make much of a difference to me, but for the sake of honesty, I admit that your participation would make things easier." She then entwined her hands on her lap, and the smile vanished. "I know a way into Carpus' state that is entirely devoid of security. I also know the location of a safe where he holds vital documentation along with precious valuables. I want those documents, and you want your revenge. I care not about what happens to Carpus or his state."

"And you call him a brute?" Law sneered. "How is this any different? You just want us to go in
there and do your work for you."

The woman sighed. "That is awfully simplistic. Fitzwilliam will assist you, and as I said, I am going
to follow this plan through no matter what you decide. I would not have resorted to this if his brash
actions hadn't forced my hand. I merely thought having some common ground would help us work
 together. And…" With a pause and a slight tilt of her head, she seemed to debate what she was going
to say, though it was likely calculated to attract more sympathy. Still, she sound honest when she
said, "Believe it or not, I am grateful that it was you who kidnapped Layla. The usual kind that
Carpus hires wouldn't have been nearly as considerate with her."

"Say what you want to yourself, but none of those reasons paint you in a better light than him."

A tense silence followed, but it was once again broken by Pomona. "Your opinion of me is
ultimately irrelevant to the issue at hand. Of course, I understand if you want to discuss this with your
crewmates just out there in the hallway." The aforementioned three grumbled and relaxed against the
wall, though they still didn't show themselves to maintain a small pretense of discretion. "Fitzwilliam
will seek you later to get your answer."

She tapped her companion's arm, ready to leave, but Law stopped her.

"We can't know you are who you claim to be, and we are supposed to believe that this man has been
working as a double agent for you all this time. Don't you think it's a lot to take on faith?"

Pomona smiled again, amused. "It is not faith that I ask for, but logic. If this were a trap, why
couldn't this message be relayed by Fitzwilliam alone? And what need does Carpus have to catch
you inside his home when the complex is overrun by Marines and you are sitting ducks until your
Log Pose sets?"

Law's eyes narrowed at the unspoken threat. "We'll consider your offer."

"That is all I can ask." She bowed her head twice, once for Law and once to Bepo. "It's been a
pleasure."

She seemed awfully calm when she passed the pirates at the door, and Saki watched her get up with
difficulty once she reached the stairs to the upper deck and hobble step by step with her cane. Until
then, she had never noticed until then how disability-unfriendly the Polar Tang was.

They followed at a distance, and when Pomona and Bob reached the gangway, there was a small
pause in which she steeled herself, nodded quietly at Bob, and with a small push she let the chair roll
her down the ramp, throwing her hands in the air and yelling 'WHEEEEE!'

The pirates exchanged a stare, and Law looked like he needed a vacation from life.

Once they were gone, the crew came together on the upper deck, where Law's and Bepo's admirable
cleaning job had been marred by two track marks belonging to the wheelchair. Saki thought that that
probably stung as much as being patronized by rich jerks nonstop.

"What do you think?" Law asked them.

"They should suffer for dragging more coconut inside," Shachi said irritably.

Law's patience was wearing thin. "Aside from that."

"Let's do it," Penguin said. "It's our best bet."
"Do you really think she isn't the real Pomona?" Bepo questioned.

"No. I just wanted to see what explanation she came up with."

Saki knew what he meant. A fake would most likely have come to them with an ironclad excuse or would have been left bumbling for an explanation, if she had come unprepared. She had done neither, which meant that she was either very good at lying or her confidence was through the roof, which aligned well with the fact that she had gone into pirate territory out of her own free will.

Whoever she was, she was way more dangerous than Carpus, and it looked like, for once, as if the stars had aligned in their favor and it wasn't their heads someone was after.

"I don't think they were lying, either," Bepo spoke quietly. "I didn't notice anything strange."

"I think we should go for it too," Shachi said. "Look, what's the worst that can happen? We can deal with some security on the way out, and we get to punch the daylights out of that dude and get something on top of it."

"Now you've done it," Saki said.

"What have I done?"

"You never say 'what's the worst that can happen.' She made a dramatic pause. "Ever."

"Come on."

"You know what's the worst that can happen? You—"

"Rock hippos," Penguin interjected somberly.

"…Well, maybe that can't happen," Saki conceded.

And with that said, they resumed their cleaning duties, and maybe they whacked each other with the mops during a fencing contest, but even as they deemed the decks clean enough after hours of effort, they knew they'd be digging coconut flakes from the space between the floorboards for months to come.

Back at the inn, after the evening rush was over, the only people left in the dining hall were the Heart Pirates and a few patrons minding their own business. Bob hadn't shown up again, or so they thought. Nobody was sure of anything anymore.

"Miss Pomona comes from old money," Felicia explained while she took liquor bottles from a crate and stashed them below the counter. "Her dad co-owned the coconut processing plant with Carpus' at the time of the explosion. They used to be important until then."

Saki had walked up to the bar of the dining room and sat on one of the stools, armed with her sketchbook and a lot of questions. Qaryn's picture was far overdue, and even if she hadn't been in the mood to draw after hearing the news about Asteria, she owed it to Bepo. She wasn't going to allow herself to dwell in things she couldn't solve.

"What happened to her family? It doesn't seem to have affected Carpus."

"I heard that her dad was blamed for the accident," she said, invisible behind the counter. "He lost a lot of money paying compensation for the victims. His own daughter was caught in Cocopocalypse – I hear she never quite recovered from it."
"The… the what?"

"The Cocopocalypse? It's the unofficial name for the explosion. It was horrible, but don't think the humor was lost on us." And then she added with a bit of disgust. "You don't know how many busting nuts puns I've heard in the last ten years."

"I don't think I want to."

Felicia chuckled. "Yes, I figured."

"So, what did her family do after that?"

"They took a backseat, kept trading on a second plane while Carpus grew more relevant. Miss Pomona is rumored to be a capable woman, though. Much smarter than her father. She keeps landing very profitable contracts, and everybody expects her to take Carpus' place as President sooner or later."

"And Carpus is trying to push her out of the competition."

"He must be comfortable at the top," she said, and rose, dusting her hands off. "What are you drawing? Can I see?"

Saki doubted for a moment, because she wasn't quite finished, but she decided it looked more or less decent. "Sure." She turned the sketchbook towards Felicia, showing her the view of the bay that Shachi had taken Saki to see a few weeks ago. "It's the last island we were at."

"It's so pretty! I can't draw at all." She took the sketchbook from Saki's hands. "And there are so many tiny details," she said, eyeing the market stalls and the clothes blowing in the wind from the windows. "How do you come up with those?"

"I don't," she shrugged. "I'm drawing mostly from memory."

Felicia lifted her eyes slowly to stare at Saki. "How long has it been since you were there?"

"I'm not sure," Saki admitted. "Three weeks, maybe?"

"And you remember how many stalls there were in the market?"

"I have good memory for these things." Saki twirled the pencil in her hands and replied sheepishly. "It's not that weird."

"Woah," was Felicia's answer, and she stared at the drawing for a while. "I guess I can see why someone would become a pirate. I'm a little jealous."

Saki looked at her, puzzled. "You are?"

Felicia laughed a little embarrassed. "Don't get me wrong, this is my home. But sometimes I wonder how things are out there, you know? Mack tells me about when he was on a ship, sometimes."

"I had no clue he was a sailor."

"He traveled for a while on a pirate ship. They didn't get too far in the Grand Line, though. Mack saw they were getting nowhere, jumped ship in this town, and the crew continued traveling. They shipwrecked soon afterwards, I think."

"That's really interesting," Saki said. Someone who could actually handle a kitchen would be
welcome on board.
"You think so?"

"Do you think he'd be willing to sail again?"

Felicia thought about it. "Honestly? I think he misses it."

"Hm."

"I'll be sad if you take him away, though," she said with a wry smile. "He's like a big brother to me."

Saki could sympathize, but she wasn't in the mood for sibling-talk. She wasn't sure if she'd ever be again. "You two do look close," she said softly.

"We lived here together before he found a place of his own." Felicia took a long look at the room, recalling who knew what and smiling fondly, and then she changed the subject suddenly. "Hey, have you gone to the beach yet? Arnold gave me a free morning and I was planning to go tomorrow."

"I haven't gone to a beach in ages," Saki admitted. Asteria's was okay, but she never had much time to go after she started working at the studio and then for the smugglers. Most mornings she could have been there were spent scouting for tourists she could make some money off of, or for people Rickhard wanted gone. She was glad not to have to endure that working rhythm anymore.

"Well, that won't do! You are a pirate, aren't you?"

Saki laughed. "Sometimes I wonder that myself. But I miss swimming a lot."

Felicia clapped her hands eagerly. "Then get your swimsuit ready, because we're going first thing in the morning!"

Saki was flashing a grin at her when she heard the steps approaching from behind her, and someone looked over her shoulder to see the sketch. "Hey, that's the place I showed you!" Shachi said, as if rubbing it in her face.

Saki poked his nose. "Even you do things right sometimes," she replied sarcastically, and she was rewarded with a light punch on her right arm.

"We heard you talk about the beach," Penguin said, grinning.

Since neither had manifested any interest in going to the beach before, Saki deduced right away that they only wanted to see Felicia in a swimsuit, and she hid a snort behind a hand.

"You want to come too?" Felicia beamed. "The more the better!"


"You're going to love it! The sand and the water are really good for the skin, you'll see."

"The… sand? And the sea water? Since when?"

"Ours are different! With all the coconut bits that are mixed in, it's like taking an exfoliating and moisturizing bath at once! You come out of the water all fresh and shiny."

The smiles fell off their faces and Penguin laughed humorlessly as Felicia began to list all the benefits
that coconut oil had for the skin, especially for people who spent so much time on the sea. So much for not having to deal with fruit flakes for a day.

Saki ran to the edge of the breakwater and did exactly what no one should do by jumping into the ocean headfirst.

The water was cold and clear past the surface. She knew that last bit because she opened her eyes underwater until the salt sting became bothersome.

She resurfaced soon, flakes on her hair and on her tongue (note to self: salty) and stretched her right arm towards the cloudless sky. Banu's bangle slid down her wrist to her forearm, and she contemplated the blank skin. It was definitely time for another one.

She was jerked out of her thoughts by Shachi dive-bombing and showering water all over her. He let out an agonic cry that she didn't understand, and apparently Penguin didn't either before he jumped, but he followed his friend's example as soon as he broke the water surface.

Saki's worry disappeared right away when she realized that they were complaining because of the scratches all over their bodies, and she laughed shamelessly until her stomach hurt. When the other two stopped screeching long enough to try to get to where she was, she dived and made a hasty retreat towards the shore, hoping they wouldn't find swimming after her worth it.

Felicia had set up two big umbrellas because, as nice as coconut oil was for the skin, it was very easy to get baked under the sun after a short swim. Saki's skin was naturally dark enough to not burn easily, but she didn't want to take any chances anyway.

She didn't know how Shachi and Penguin had convinced Bepo and Law to join them, especially Bepo, the poor thing, who occupied most of the shadow under one of the umbrellas, wearing swimming trunks and the ever-present mask. She thought he'd be having a worse time, but apparently the sea breeze was being gentler on his nose than the smells of the town.

Then there was the matter of Law, who had tagged along with the crew, maybe because he saw it as part of his duty as captain, maybe because he actually enjoyed the beach even without being able to swim. In any case, she wasn't going to complain, and that wasn't only because he was shirtless and he had an amazingly well-done tribal tattoo over those… amazingly well done pectoral muscles… and how did he manage to look so lanky in a hoodie when the reality was that, and why did he keep that hidden all the time while he had his fingers on display to make her look bad by association?

(Truth be told, she was actually feeling too much relief over the quality of the tattoo to take notice of the rest of the surface, appreciating how the lines turned and twisted and didn't look blurry or faded. Someone had done their job properly, and she was thankful for it.

But if she was going for full disclosure, there was the fleeting thought that it was a damn shame that his mother was dead, because she deserved congratulations for making that son.)

He was getting his feet wet on the shore, and she felt a little bad for him. Half the fun of going to the beach was being in the water. The sympathy was dispelled soon enough, however.

"You've got coconut on your eyebrows."

She immediately rubbed them, but her hands were oily and she couldn't get the flakes off. He chuckled at that, and now with her eyes surrounded all around by white specks, she grumbled as she passed him, "You've got something stuck on your fingers."
He smirked at her, the self-satisfied bastard, and she glanced at him over her shoulder for a moment. That was when she noticed the most exciting thing she had seen that morning: his back was devoid of ink.

She pointed at him and declared, "I want that! Uh, wait, that sounded wrong," she quickly corrected herself. Oh, brain to mouth filter, where had you gone? "I want to tattoo that."

The smug smile was replaced by a momentary look of confusion as he noticed where she was pointing at. "Ah. I had an idea, actually."

She grinned. "You never got me anything for my birthday."

He thought for a second before saying, "We hadn't met."

"Details."

"We'll see."

"You know where I live if you make up your mind!" She said, winking at him and excited at the prospect of doing a big piece.

"Do you always do business like that?"

She laughed and continued on her way to the umbrellas while trying to rub away the fruit on her eyebrows.

Felicia, who was lying next to the shade of an umbrella, clad in a royal blue sling swimsuit and sunglasses, followed Saki with her eyes until the latter sat next to her and began drying herself with a towel. When she noticed she was being stared at, Saki took a quick glance to make sure that her bikini was where it should be – it was, pink and yellow hibiscus against bright green fabric, almost matching the majestic bruise on her hip – and readjusted the decorative straps of the bandeau top just in case, but still not knowing what was wrong, she asked, "What?"

"Now you'll tell me you weren't flirting," Felicia said accusatorily.

Saki was taken aback. "I was not!"

"Suuure you weren't," she said with a little smug smile.

"Who was flirting?" Bepo asked.

"No one!"

"Please."

"We were talking about tattoos!"

"She does it often," Bepo confirmed.

"I want that!" Felicia mimicked.

Saki facepalmed. "I didn't mean it that way! I was talking about tattoos," she said, stressing every word.

"You are so bad at coming up with excuses."
"You were flirting with Captain?"

She whipped her head to look at him in disbelief. "Bepo, no."

He stared thoughtfully at her for a second, and then said, "I believe you."

Giggling at the rise she had gotten from Saki, Felicia looked in Law's direction, pushing down her sunglasses for a moment to see. "Still. Wow."

"Leave me alone," Saki said, dropping down face-first on her towel with her eyes closed.

Felicia did as asked, but the quiet didn't last very long.

"Who are those?" Bepo asked.

Saki made the colossal effort up looking up and saw that Penguin and Shachi had managed to drag themselves out of the water and they were standing on the shore along with Law, talking to the three guys from the day before.

"The guys Shachi and Penguin met at the restaurant. They seemed very interested in us actually being pirates."

"How are they?"

"Enthusiastic and weird."

"That fits."

Unexpectedly, someone stuck a third umbrella in the sand behind Saki.

"Mack!" Felicia greeted the newcomer. "You made it!"

"It isn't like I have much to do with the restaurant closed," he said, putting down a small cooling bag and a towel under the shade. He was wearing an orange cap and a white t-shirt in addition to orange and yellow swimming trunks.

"The investigation's still going?" Saki asked.

He made an affirmative sound. "I don't know what the hell they expect to find, but I'm sure happy that I have a few days off. Looks like those guys do, too."

"You know them?"

"In passing," he said, sitting on the towel. "They call them to the restaurant for maintenance or whenever something is malfunctioning. They do repair jobs here and there."

"One of them came to the inn once to help fix the boiler."

"But why is he still wearing that mask...?"

"I think he uses it when he's welding."

"That isn't an answer, Mack."

"It's the only one I have." He opened the cooler. "Want a drink?"

"Yeah!" He passed her a bottle with a whitish liquid inside.
"Is that made with coconut?" Saki asked.

"Yep. Want one?"

"Ah," she said dispassionately. "I guess I can give it a try."

A scream and a huge splash made them look at the water. Law was walking towards the umbrellas, and by the looks of it, Shachi had just been launched into the water by the other four, who ran after him when they realized he was making dying noises.

"Cards?" Felicia asked, ignoring the ruckus and taking a deck from her bag.

As she watched her mix and deal the cards, Saki felt like she had fallen into an alternate reality, but it was nice to have a breather and pretend to be normal for a change.

That afternoon, Saki went with her sketchbook to the tattoo studio where she had been with Law the first day in town. They had been looked at with a mix of pity and horror, but she was pretty sure that that had been Law's fault and the reaction wouldn't be dramatic if she went alone.

Behind the counter there was a man dressed all in black with a shaved head and more piercings and tattoos than she could count at first glance, the sort that no parents would approve for their daughter, but Saki wasn't interested in marriage and she was pretty sure no one sensible would approve of her, either.

Only one thing mattered, and it was that they had made small talk while she bought supplies the other day, she had seen his work, and she had liked it.

The man greeted her and she said hi, walking up to him and opening the sketchbook on the page she had used to draw Penguin's tattoo for the first time.

"I want this on my right arm. Can you do it?"

The artist stared at the drawing with interest, taking in the details of the design, and at last he said with a smile full of teeth, "Yeah. Do you want it done now?"

"You're free?"

He glanced at the clock on the wall. "For a couple of hours. Someone cancelled."

Saki smiled back. "Then lead the way."

The wind had picked up when Saki returned to the inn, and she was praying to every god she had heard of – well, not every single one, murder-happy water goddesses didn't get her stamp of approval – that it didn't rain again, because her hands still hurt a bit from using the mop so much the day before.

She had changed into a three-quarter sleeve dark green blouse because she didn't want anyone to make a fuss over the bandages covering her new tattoo, though her wearing more than a t-shirt in that weather may have been enough to arouse suspicion.

She found Bepo on a bench near the inn. He had pulled down the surgical mask and was sniffing the air tentatively.

"Feeling better?" Saki asked, dropping down on the bench next to him.
"Captain gave me more antihistamines. I think they're working."

"Hold on. We don't have much time left here."

"Yeah," and then he stopped his general sniffing and got closer to her. "Are you hurt?"

She leaned away instinctively. "Huh? Why do you ask?"

"Because you smell like you have an injury – Ah! You got a new tattoo?"

She let out a sigh. There went the idea of keeping it to herself. "How can you tell?"

"Because it smells like blood and ink. And disinfectant. But the ink is what gives it away."

"Woah," she said, genuinely impressed. "I wonder what it's like to see the world with your senses."

"Overwhelming, sometimes."

Saki smiled at him. "Can you not tell anybody? Please?"

"It's a surprise?"

"Something like that."

"Okay! What is it?" He asked enthusiastically.

"The same thing Penguin got."

"Oh, you're all getting one?" He seemed disappointed as he took a glance at his fur.

"Shachi's still up in the air. But you could get a **secret tattoo**."

"No, thank you."

"Boring," she said, glancing up at the sky.

The remark bounced off him. "You look happier."

Saki turned to look at Bepo in confusion. "Do I?"

"You've been kind of down since what happened in Qaryn. Captain's worried about you."

"He told you that?"

He shook his head. "I can tell. He also worries about our route, and Shachi's eyesight because there isn't much light downstairs, and not having enough people on board, and…" He trailed off. "Well. He worries a lot."

She felt bad for adding to the pile. "And you're there to worry about him"

"I suppose." Bepo smiled at her. "Did something good happen?"

She thought a little before replying, watching the people passing by, the dirty streets that were so much like Asteria's, and the sidewalks caked with the remains of the rain that the townspeople hadn't been able to sweep away. Just like when they arrived at Qaryn, she wouldn't be seeing this and swearing she was never going to take another bite of coconut in her life if she had remained home, and somehow that made her feel like it had been worth it.
Well, no, that wasn't entirely correct. She hadn't left her home behind. It had merely switched places with a yellow submarine. She could see that now.

"Not really. I guess I realized some things." She crossed her arms, and unconsciously brought a hand to the flowers on her left arm, hidden by the shirt. She grinned at Bepo. "I figured I've been moping for long enough."

Bepo grinned at her, too, and leaned towards her left arm. "Can I see what you got?"

"Nuh-uh."

"I outrank you, you know. I was in the crew before you. It's an order."

"Not going to work, Fluffy."

His face scrunched up in thought for a moment, and then he conjured the best puppy… bear cub eyes he could manage. "Pleeaase?"

Saki was mostly a smart woman who didn't fall for crude manipulation attempts. She had to close her eyes and look away to say, "No."

"Ahhh…"

"I won't budge."

"I can be very convincing."

She snickered. "In due time."

Bepo didn't look very happy with that reply, but he let it go.

They spent the next half hour staring at the passersby and discovering how prone to slipping and falling on their butts they were when the streets were coated with coconut goodness. Shachi then came out of the inn to tell them that Office Ninja had just been there and Law had given him their answer, so Saki got up from the bench with a lazy groan and followed him inside. Another day, another job. She was pretty certain that she was never going to find the time to get bored with these people.
Inside of the inn's dining room, without uttering a word, Felicia calmly took a chair, sat on it, put her hands together under her chin, glanced at the clock, and then stared at the group of seven men, one woman and one bear in front of them, five of them looking worse for wear and covered in some sort of white dust. She gestured towards the table, inviting them to take their own seats.

White powdery clouds went up as they sat.

"Someone please explain," she began when the air cleared, and the quietness of how she said it made her scarier, "what you did this time."

Mack, who was a little to the side of the group and nearest to her, only uncrossed his arms to point to the others and say, "They broke into Carpus's mansion."

Felicia's composure disappeared to allow her jaw to hit the floor.

"But you helped!" Penguin retorted.

"I was already inside!"

"Oh my God," Felicia said in a tiny voice, and she began thinking out loud. "He'll be looking for you everywhere. Did your Log Pose set already? And Mack, if he saw you—"

"He didn't see anybody because he's dead," Law said. Everybody except Bepo whipped their heads towards him, and he had to cut short the barrage of questions and curses that ensued. "He was dead when Bepo and I got to the studio, and someone had opened a safe before us."

"You're talking as if there had been more than one." Saki said, frowning. "I thought you'd opened it when the alarm went off."

"There were two. Ours was a dud."

Saki hit her head against the table in response, leaving a white circle on it.

"We've been played. Twice." Shachi groaned.

Law didn't appear concerned. "We got what we wanted, nonetheless. We had a message to get across, and we did."

"I can't think of any way to make it clearer and louder," Penguin said, and on second thought he added, "I mean, literally. A collapsing mansion is pretty visible."

"Exactly. And that Marine officer is probably alive, so he'll pin everything on us."

"Officers," Saki corrected him. "I overheard the other calling the hammer psycho 'Commander.'"

"Oh my God. Oh my God," Felicia repeated over and over holding her head in her hands.

"Carpus's... Carpus's mansion has collapsed?" Buzz cut guy asked.
"And we missed it?!"

"Amazing."

When the newly received information sank in, Felicia gulped and, with the face of someone who's suffering from a severe case of trainwreck syndrome and just can't look away, said, "So, assuming we have a few hours before law enforcement arrives guns blazing, will any of you tell me what exactly happened?"

Carpus lived in a state located between the outskirts of the tourist complex and the financial district of the city, where the people who were far too distinguished to be bothered with expensive apartments in the city had their homes.

It was, incidentally, the area where Pomona Hazel lived as well, but that wasn't relevant. It was also the former home of the Pomona family before they had to sell it to pay the settlements to the victims of the explosion a decade ago, and that detail was relevant only as far as knowing the placement of a few things inside the manor, one of which was a concealed exit.

The night in which the Log Pose was going to set, a team comprised of Law, Bepo, Penguin and Saki went to find that secret exit with the purpose of getting back at Carpus and stealing the documents for Pomona. Bob had guaranteed them his support from the inside, which he couldn't roam freely because he didn't need to sneak into the mansion like a thief in the night, and since that was exactly what they were, the job had fallen on them.

There were to security guards in front of the main gate, but that wasn't where they were headed. Following Pomona's instructions, they walked to a block away of the place, where they found a square storm drain.

They let Bepo go ahead and take out the grate. It was rusty, likely because it hadn't seen use for its real purpose in a long time, and it creaked loudly when Bepo managed to get it unstuck after a slight struggle. Once removed, it revealed an opening and an old metal ladder.

"There was a time in my life," Penguin said flippantly, "when I thought that being a pirate was more about the adventure and the treasure and less about treading inside sewers. Silly, I know."

"But both things are so thrilling," said Saki, sounding bored and just a little bit spiteful, "especially when you're wearing a skirt."

"That was a nice dress," was Penguin's reply. "You still got it?"

"Screw you too."

"This isn't a sewer," Law said as soon as he lowered himself down the ladder, and when he hit the ground the rest followed right behind. Bepo needed help when he got momentarily stuck in the hole, and they tugged at his legs until his midriff slid in and he almost dropped on top of his crewmates.

The tunnel was dry and made of stone masonry. There were grates on the floor that kept it dry, probably connecting to the actual sewer system, and the walls were lined with soft orange emergency lights, bright enough to see inside, but dim enough to not be noticed from the street above.

"Secret passages are adventurous," Bepo said to Penguin after he stopped panting from the effort. He inspected his surroundings with suspicion, trying to see if there were any other spots that could turn into a trap for him.
Saki walked a few steps ahead, somehow managing to be mostly silent despite her heels. "It doesn't look like it branches out."

"It should lead directly to the first floor, according to our info." Law said, glancing the direction they had to take, and then turned to look at his crew. "Is the plan clear?"

"You go to the studio with Bepo and we look for the basement," Saki answered.

"I cut the power from the generator and she whacks anybody who finds us while I'm doing it," Penguin continued.

"And we open the safe while the power's out so the alarm doesn't go off," Bepo finished.

Law nodded approvingly. "Try not to go loud unless it's unavoidable."

"And what do we do if we go loud?"

Law gave a shrug and a small smirk. "Whatever. Do what you thought being a pirate was about. We'll be leaving tomorrow anyway."

Penguin grinned at that.

The path was straightforward, and in no time they found themselves staring at a narrow staircase that led to a trapdoor above. Once again, Bepo went ahead and opened it, this time with less difficulty than before, and the Heart Pirates surfaced in such a pitch black room that they wondered if the other team had already pulled out the district-wide blackout, but as soon as they got squished against the oddly narrow walls and even Saki managed to hit her head on the ceiling, they realized they actually were inside somewhere much smaller. They pushed each other in a pathetic attempt to get some space while a bear tried to make its way into an already cramped space, and Saki fumbled with her hands on the wooden walls until she found a doorknob and turned it. The three of them were sent forward and tumbled into a plushy dark red carpet as Bepo managed to finish squeezing himself up, and Saki's hand went to where she was hiding her newly acquired tattoo, because she had fallen on that arm and it hurt.

It was a lavish hallway, with beige walls and golden lamps, and they had just come out from a cupboard under a flight of stairs.

To their right, there was a dead end decorated with a small palm tree that only a miracle had allowed to stay upright after they had hit it with the cupboard door. To their left, the corridor split left and right, and the windows along the way showed the lights coming from the lamps and the neighboring homes. The other team hadn't cut off the district's power yet.

They kept quiet for a few tense seconds, taking in the location, until Bepo's confused but judgmental stare made them realize they were sprawled on the floor and wasting time like the bunch of awkward idiots they were, and they got up right away.

"I can't hear anybody nearby," Bepo informed them, ears twitching.

"There isn't supposed to be much staff at this hour. Security should be low too." Law eyed the stairs next to them. "Bepo, let's get going. We'll reunite here when we're done."

"We should wait inside the cupboard, at least," Saki said. "How much time until the first blackout?"

"They should be cutting the power in about…" Penguin pulled out a pocket watch from his boiler suit to check the hour. "…Ten minutes."
"Ten minutes to find the studio and the generator, plus turning it off," Saki said to herself, "plus opening the safe, plus another few to get back here… What will it take, twenty to thirty minutes?"

"Ideally," Law replied. "Let's assume that if we aren't all here by then, someone, somewhere has fucked up and needs help."

"I like that way of thinking." They had a long chain going on, and it could go wrong at way too many points.

"Let's be fast," Law said. "The longer we're here, the easier we'll get caught."

"Right. See you in half an hour."

"Come on, Bepo."

"Aye! Later!"

Saki watched them take the steps up, which creaked painfully loud in her former sneaky hitwoman ears. Penguin passed her and walked towards the fork silently but way too casually for someone who should be on high alert. She rushed to catch him, feeling grateful that the plushy material was muffling their footsteps. Then again, the same could be said for those of the people they wanted to avoid at all costs.

"Crouch down a little at least," she whispered as she pulled him down. There was no doubt in her mind that if this had been Shachi, he'd be complaining about her trying to literally drag him to her level. "Anyone outside can see us through the windows."

"Huh." He looked back and forth between the windows and Saki. "Right. I'll be careful."

"Listen closely before turning any corners. Walk close to heavy furniture whenever possible; there's carpet, but the floorboards will creak less anyway and you'll be able to duck behind them in a pinch. And if you really, really need to take out someone, either knock them out with a single blow or go for the throat to minimize the noise."

Penguin stared at her blankly and said, a bit impressed, "You know, Shachi's been right all this time. You can be fucking scary when you aren't being dumb."

Saki wanted to say that she had learned all that because she had needed to, not because she wanted, but time was of the essence and that wasn't the moment to start caring about what others thought of her, even if it stung a little.

"Let me walk ahead. You're the one who knows how to operate the generator, and if someone has to soak up hits it should be me."

Penguin looked like he wanted to say something, too, but he swallowed and only uttered an unenthusiastic, "Fine."

Saki nodded at him with a more serious expression than she usually wore, and doing her best to remember the directions they had been given, began to guide Penguin towards the basement.

Fifteen minutes later, Saki and Penguin had made the trip back and forth from the basement without any hold ups, which surely had to mean that all hell was breaking loose upstairs while they huddled up together inside a cupboard, hiding from three Marines they had just seen coming out of one of the many, many rooms on the hallway.
"This isn't a good place to be," Saki said, equal parts nervous and concerned.

"We're fucked," Penguin replied succinctly.

"I was trying not to say it."

Saki remembered the joy she had felt when, for once, she had been able to take her sword with her before heading headfirst into danger, rubbed her cheek against it and even whispered sweet little nothings into its hilt. Now, in a cramped corner of a cupboard shared with Penguin, straining their ears to hear what was going on outside while they sat in complete darkness, it felt more like a bother, because swords had a tendency to be good for fighting and a burden to lug around, which was why hers tended to end up stored in the sub more often than it should.

Then again, she thought side-eyeing the spot where Penguin was, even if she couldn't see a thing, it wasn't as bad as a spear. Who in their right mind used spears anyway?

The sound of steps near the cupboard made them hold their breath. Boots pounded on the plushy carpet of the hallway, and they seemed to be all over the place. What was nearly sure was that Law and Bepo had been found out already, or the soldiers wouldn't have been moving that hastily.

It was supposed to be just them, a few security grunts, and Bob keeping an eye on Carpus, not a Marine contingent roaming the mansion doing who knew what.

"We should try to reunite with the others," Saki said. "And this place is huge."

"They'll be easy to find. Just listen for the sounds of scuffle."

"I'm not sure 'scuffle' is the right word for what Captain usually gets into."

"Then just listen for the cries of terror." Penguin shifted, presumably to look through the gap under the door, but it wasn't like he could see anything from there with all the lights off.

Saki crawled from her spot to where he was, and as quietly as she could, opened the door a fraction. There was no one in sight, but more importantly, she couldn't hear anyone.

It was eerily silent, and if those two had really been found out, it didn't make sense. The inconsistency put her on edge.

"Are we clear?" Penguin whispered.

"I think so," Saki replied, opening the door all the way and stepping outside to stretch her legs. "But we aren't going to find them by ear."

"Then let's head to the studio. That's where they should be, anyway."

"This is gonna be fun."

"At least the blackout went right. That should buy us time."

Saki was about to say that something was bound to go right sometimes when the lights came back on. She stared at Penguin with a sad face that he returned, and both sprinted towards the nearest staircase.

Although Shachi considered himself more of an action man, he couldn't deny that he was acquiring a taste for ninja jobs, especially now that he had his own particular minions to order around and
supervise. This was how Bepo tried to feel, probably, though they thwarted his attempts by ignoring him on a regular basis.

These guys, though, they were different. They were enthusiastic. Eager to prove themselves. The perfect mix of thrill-seeking, useful, and indifferent to a degree towards human life, that attitude one tended to acquire when repeatedly fucked over by superiors who just wanted to to work for the least amount of money and only had the decency not to crack a whip at you because they didn't want a union man breathing down their necks.

Strolling under the streetlights, as if they weren't about to commit a city-wide crime, Shachi’s team headed for the posh district in search of a way to cut off the power. The one leading the group, Uni, was the most energetic of all, and Shachi wondered how he was able to see with that mask in the middle of the night, never mind the irony that he was wearing sunglasses in the dark.

"It's around the corner," he explained for Shachi's benefit, repositioning the bag with his welding materials on his shoulder. "We'll get it done in a moment. Tuttu, get ready."

Said man nodded and patted a finger against a crowbar he was carrying. "Already ahead of you."

Shachi only paid passing attention to the exchange. He was busy looking around, searching for people who might be watching them. "I was wondering the last time I was near here," he said. "Is this place this empty all the time?"

"At night," said the buzz cut guy, also known as Asuka, donning a pair of rubber coated gloves. "Lots of housekeeping staff running up and down during the day, but everyone's sleeping at this hour. There's no reason to be out."

"Sad, don't you think?" Uni asked, stopping before an electrical box in an alley and fumbling with a ring of keys. "They're so fancy they don't have a frigging bar in their neighborhood. Those are for poor people."

"They've got the complex."

"If they want to sell a kidney for a beer," he replied, sliding the key into the lock that kept the box closed. It opened easily. "Guys, in position. Shachi," he turned to face him, puffing out his chest in pride and signaling to a spot in the box. His voice was grinning. "It's this button. You can do the honors."

Shachi grinned back. "Sure. Whenever you're ready."

Tuttu inserted the crowbar in a small crevice on the hefty-looking manhole cover and pulled it open with a grunt.

"Now." Asuka said sternly, and Shachi pressed the button. The streetlights flickered for a few seconds and then went off. Whithout missing a beat, Asuka took out a huge cable cutter and nipped a few select ones with an amazing degree of mastery. He removed himself from the manhole as the cover fell back in place.

"My turn," Uni said, taking a welder first to the manhole, then to the box lid to seal it completely.

The only light on the street now was that of the sparks, thankfully concealed from view between the buildings.

"No reaction," Shachi said.
"Not here," Tuttu said once he stopped panting. "But you'll see in a minute."

They waited patiently for Uni to be done, watching out for anyone who might approach, but the area was quiet. At last, they left the alley, went to a nearby park to watch from a higher spot, and Shachi was treated to a magnificent view of the area and half of the faraway complex with its lights out.

"I give them 30 minutes before the generators die," Asuka said.

"With all those neon signs? Make that 15," Uni replied.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Tuttu asked to no one in particular.

"Hell yes," was Shachi's reply.

Carpus' studio was heated by an electric fireplace that had absolutely no use in a summer island other than looking pretentious and casting hypnotic light patterns on the brown leather couches. Its owner was contentedly sipping wine like an evil overlord that knows his plan has gone off without a hitch while his impending doom loomed over him unexpectedly, and Bob was standing by the wet bar like a well-trained watchdog along with a man so burly that he only fit through the doors sideways. He was inspecting a bottle of coconut liquor with a distrustful stare, and he had leaned a war hammer against the wall, much to Carpus' disapproval, who was sure that was going to leave a mark.

It was a small price to pay for the security he provided, though. Carpus hadn't been bothered by that pirate crew of nobodies, and if they had been waiting for their last day on the island to strike, he had taken the appropriate steps to ensure his own safety.

Said steps took the shape of a commodore and a commander of the Navy that were looking into the restaurant incident.

"My apologies for coming here with such short notice," the commodore, late fifties or early sixties, said to Carpus. He had neatly cropped black hair, with a goatee in the shape of a triangle and broad sideburns that curved up in a pointy end just frustratingly short of becoming a moustache, creating the distracting illusion that there were three arrows pointing at his nose. He wore his Justice coat over a plain hot pink shirt and sandals, donned for the sole purpose of giving off a more tropical feel. The formal black pants with pinstripes killed the effect nicely. "I understand that you are a busy man. But between the reports and what happened earlier this week, I thought it necessary to meet."

"No need to apologize, Commodore Curtiss." It had been Carpus who had insisted on that night, after all, when he had expressed his wish to visit. "My only grievance is that, had not been the restaurant closed for the investigation, I wouldn't have had time to book for tonight the best cook our island has to offer."

Curtiss hummed appreciatively. "The dessert was lovely. Is there a recipe?"

"He won't give it to anybody," Carpus replied with a smug smile. "Trade secret, he says."

"Understandable, but a shame. The food at the base could use an improvement." Curtiss replied, scratching his goatee. There was a glass of wine in his other hand, but he hadn't even smelled it yet. "In any case, we should get to the matter at hand. The investigation at the complex isn't turning up any suspects, which would point to the staff. I have heard that there are new waiters on the floor often."

Carpus fiddled with his glass nervously. "Yes, that is true. You know how these entry-level jobs are, people come and go." He took a large sip for courage.
Curtiss hummed. "That constant influx of new people, considering who the target was, leads us to think that someone influential in this city ordered a hit on Miss Pomona Hazel."

The wine of a well-executed plan went down a wrong pipe, and during the coughing fit that ensued, managed to drip from Carpus' nose to his cravat. "E-excuse me?" He wheezed. "Wasn't this the work of thugs? Heaven knows there are more than we can hold in the more… modest neighborhoods."

Curtiss shook his head. "This was too well coordinated to be a spontaneous attack, and too risky for a simple robbery. Besides, the restaurant staff claims they didn't see anyone suspicious. It could have been one of them or a customer, I suppose, but a customer couldn't move around as freely. Hence our deduction."

"And what about the dead man?" Carpus said in hopes of diverting the subject. "Do we have a name yet?"

"No. Miss Pomona insists that he was supposed to be a merchant, but we haven't found him in any registries. Truth be told, there is a possibility that the target was him."

Carpus saw the ray of sunshine that theory offered. "An unknown man meeting with Pomona for business? I'd hate to suspect of a colleague with such a good reputation, but couldn't the hit have been her order?"

"It is a possibility," he conceded. "There have been concerns about the legality of some of the trade in this island, as you know. If she had been involved, and wanted to cover it up… Ah, but this is all speculation for now. I just thought you should know that it is very likely that foul play between the members of your association was involved. We'll need your cooperation to investigate further. Could you give us a list of—?"

The lights went off.

"A general blackout, I'm sure." Carpus said, trying to sound calm and failing. A chill ran down his back. He had a bad feeling about this whole situation. "The basement generator should start in a moment."

A moment, two, even three or four by the most generous standards passed, but as they waited in silence, the lights didn't come back on. Carpus got up from his seat, fear of being arrested overruled by annoyance that something of his wasn't working like it should, and was reflecting on him deplorably. "What in the blazes—"

Then, the door to the studio opened quietly, and Carpus' face drained of all color, not that it was noticeable, when he saw two shadows cast by the moonlight. No one in his staff was that big and wide, and no one else either carried a menacing-looking stick taller than a person.

"Who is that?" Curtiss asked.

They were gone in the blink of an eye, and Curtiss, conditioned from decades of chasing after guilty people whose first reflex when they saw him was to run, took off after them.

"Emil! Take the lower floors!"

"Yes, Commodore, sir!" The hammer-man exclaimed, and disappeared into the hallway after his superior, closing the door behind him with a slam.

"B-Bob?" Carpus called. There was no reply. He looked all around him, but there weren't any
windows in the studio, so there was only pitch black darkness around him. "Bob?"

The carpet kindly muffled the sound of his wine glass and his body hitting the floor.

Pomona was in her bedroom, reading over customs documents, when the lights in her room blinked and went out. It lasted only a few seconds, until the generator she had home picked up the slack, and then someone knocked on the door.

"Hazel?" A deep woman's voice called.

"Come in, Layla."

The woman that had been abducted in her place stepped into the room carrying a small, untraceable Den Den Mushi. Former maid, childhood friend, and now right hand, Pomona had wondered many times how much Layla would put up with in her quest of recovering what the Pomona family had lost when the factory exploded, or when she'd grow weary of hiding while suitors hounded Pomona in a futile effort to grab at the prestige the two of them, along with Fitzwilliam, had worked together on regaining.

Hopefully, years of work would pay off that night.

Layla placed the Den Den Mushi on Pomona's desk, and Pomona gave her a fond smile that she didn't return, not because she didn't appreciate it, but because she wasn't keen on such gestures.

"Thank you," she said. "Can you stay here?"

Layla's expression softened somewhat, and she took a chair near the window and scooted it close to Pomona. "Nervous?"

"Elated," she replied with a demure smile as she dialed a number on the untraceable Den Den Mushi. It rang a few times before someone picked it up and a yawny voice replied on the other side. "Good night, Director. Tonight you will receive documents proving Mr. Carpus' involvement in a fraud related to the Cocopocalypse. I suggest that you prepare to print a supplement for tomorrow's edition."

"Who is this? How did you get this number?"

She ignored his questions. "Please wait for the delivery, and thank you for your cooperation. I assure you that it will be worth your time."

Pomona hung up, let out a small sigh and stretched on her chair. "Now we wait."

There were many things going through Law's head as he was faced with a dead end in the shape of a closet broom on the second floor of a mansion: that he had done well telling Bepo to split at an earlier fork, that the other two hopefully had been able to sneak into the hidden passage before they were discovered, that in the worst case he could jump out of a window, that Bob was still nowhere to be seen, not that that was remarkable in and of itself, and that he didn't want to find out what was the whitish substance that the Marine commodore was trying to aim at his feet.

A scream from the floor below made Curtiss hesitate, and that was all the time Law needed to extend his Room and switch the Marine with one of the brooms.

He unsheathed Kikoku with the intention of dismembering him, but the man recovered surprisingly
fast and threw at him a punch covered in the aforementioned goo that he dodged narrowly, and when he sidestepped to put distance between them, he moved right on top of one of the failed throws from earlier. Curtiss lunged at him again, and when Law tried to dodge this time, his feet didn't move, and he got a fist to the face that unstuck him and sent him to the floor.

The man seemed to be dripping glue from his arms, but Law was fairly sure that he was a Paramecia type. As long as he had a physical body, Law knew he could stand up against him, especially when he was so familiar with a similar Devil Fruit.

Law moved his nodachi through the air, aiming to slice the Marine in half, and as the torso began to slide from his lower body, more glue came out to hold it in place.

"So you really are that Trafalgar Law," Curtiss said, unfazed. "I heard you gave one of my old subordinates trouble in North Blue."

"I wouldn't know who that was," Law replied, smirking, watching out for every twitch, every possible cue that hinted at the next attack. He needed to dodge until he could stun him long enough to cut him in several pieces. At the rate he was able to put himself back together, single slices weren't going to do the trick, and he had wasted a precious opportunity getting out of the way when he had sent him into the closet. "I gave trouble to a lot of people back there."

That answer didn't seem to sit well with the Marine. "And are you proud of it? Of all the people you've hurt along the way?"

"Get off your high horse," Law sneered. "Your side has much more blood on its hands than me."

"Don't compare yourself to justice, kid!" Curtiss bellowed, and lunged at him suddenly.

This time Law didn't dodge and tried to cut the hand Curtiss was trying to punch him with, but instead of slicing through it, the sword got stuck on the glue, which hardened and turned rock solid upon contact. He was flung around and tossed to the floor again, but he didn't let go of Kikoku. Tiny sparks shot around his hand as he prepared to attack. "Counter Shock!"

The electricity traveled through the sword and struck Curtiss before he was able to fall on Law, and when he stumbled back, the glue softened for a second, which enough for Law to take back Kikoku. The only problem was that, when he had fallen on the floor, his left shoulder had landed once again on glue, he did the most effective thing he could think of in a split second to get out of the way before Curtiss recovered: he cut off his own arm.

Wisps of smoke were coming from Curtiss, and the look of pain on his face and the way he held his abdomen as he got up told Law that he had fried him enough to hurt some internal organs, but not to keep him still. He was going to prioritize working on that when he was back at the sub.

He tried cutting again, and this time he hit Curtiss' right leg above the knee and the other at the hip. The glue haphazardly fixed it once more, and though it didn't seem to hinder his movement by much, Curtiss looked like a broken action figure that had been put together by a particularly unskilled preschooler.

The sounds of fighting coming below that he caught made any hopes he had that his crew had safely gotten away vanish, but he couldn't afford to get distracted by that while he still had to find a way to hold up the Marine long enough to cut him into tiny pieces. Kikoku weighed heavily in his single hand, and he knew he wouldn't be able to move it fast enough without a really good opening.

Curtiss, however, wasn't wiling to give him one, and instead of going back to close combat, glue
started shooting out from his fingers, intertwining and creating a web similar to a spider's.

"I'll bring your head to Mari, pirate," he spat the word in the same way Captain Marina did.

Law tightened his grip on Kikoku and got ready to slice at the glue strings coming for him.

Penguin stared dumbfounded at the kitchen he found himself in, where a dishwasher cowered behind a counter, and a very annoyed cook, who had been busy scrubbing a stove, glared daggers at him.

"What are you doing here?" Penguin asked when he found his bearings.

"That's my line," Mack said. "Can't you stay out of my business for one blasted week?"

"We, uh," he began uncomfortably, "we didn't know you'd be here."

"Get up from there, you're going to stain your uniform," Mack snapped at the dishwasher, who immediately straightened up, then turned back to Penguin. "Do you know what hour it is? Do you know how long they're going to hold us up again because you came here to break shit?"

"We didn't come tomhhppfffffffffffhhhhh—!" Penguin's retort was cut short by a wet scourer to his mouth. While he spat it out and hacked, Mack kept going.

"You know what," Mack said in a fed up but decisive tone, "I'm done here. I'm done working for this asshole, I'm done with working on kitchens that aren't mine until the wee hours of the night, and I'm done with all the goddamn airborne coconuts in this island." He took off the white cap he was wearing, tossed it aside, and did the same with his apron, but flung it at Penguin instead for good measure. "And you are going to take responsibility for this. Bring me to your captain, now."

"W-wha—"

"Did I fucking stutter?"

Penguin gulped. "No, sir. R-right away, sir—I mean, I was trying to find him."

"Then time's wasting." And with that, he took a handful of knives from a drying rack and stuffed them in his belt, grabbing Penguin by a sleeve on the way out and stomping with the fury of an angry lapahn.

Saki had lost Penguin at some point during the scuffle, when a stray Marine had gotten the jump on them and called reinforcements, and when most of them had gone after him, she had been left to deal with a couple of guys that were too green to pose a problem. She dispatched the last one when a voice boomed down the corridor.

"There you are!"

A muscled man, wide as he was tall – and he was really tall, not just by Saki's standards – with a large hammer appeared from a little further up, blocking Saki's way to the floor up.

She looked around for alternate paths. There were a few doors around, but they were far more likely to lead to rooms than potential exits, and no windows in sight guaranteed that the only way to get out of there was through that man. She was going to have to fight seriously for the first time in months, and look at how well the last time would have gone without Law's help — Ah, but it wasn't the time to be insecure. The Old Man would have clobbered her if he had heard her thoughts.
Wherever he was, he was going to show him that all he had done for her hadn't been for nothing.

"Would you mind stepping aside?" She said, because in her mind there was always time to be cheeky with somebody that scared the clovers out of her. "I need to go upstairs."

"Yeah," he grumbled. "I would."

"Had to try."

Saki lifted her sword and ran towards him, but she had to dodge before she could strike, because the man was surprisingly agile for his size. The hammer fell, leaving a melon-sized indent on the floor and Saki's eyes on the brink of falling out from their sockets.

She made an effort to compose herself and regain her stance quickly, and aimed at the man's arms in hopes of making him drop the hammer, but she only scratched him with the tip of her sword, and he turned around to swing the hammer at her head. Saki rolled under his legs to avoid the hit and get behind him, and she managed to cut the man behind one of his knees.

He hissed in pain, but it didn't stop him. He swung around so fast that she wasn't in time to fully dodge, and was struck in the stomach by the handle of the hammer. She broke the fall on reflex with her arms, careful with her sword's position to not to get cut by it, and got on her feet with a fluid motion.

The man flinched when he rested his weight on his injured leg, but he didn't pay it much mind. Instead, he looked at Saki clinically. "Where did you learn to fight?"

"I wasn't aware I knew how to."

"Playing dumb won't hide that you know what you're doing."

Saki stared at the man in silence. He was right handed, which meant he could swing more easily to the left, and he was leaning most of his weight on his right leg. It was all the info she needed to charge. She feinted to the left, and crouching low to avoid the hammer directed at her head, went right to slice the Marine's leg upwards, near the crotch. His leg gave in, and Saki took the brief opportunity to kick his knee with her heel and bring the sword down on his left hand. Thankfully for the Marine, the edge wasn't what it used to be, and though it cut deep, it didn't sever it from his arm.

"Give up," she said. She was aware of the sounds of fighting coming from above and the ruckus below, and she needed to get out of that hallway before reinforcements came from somewhere unexpected, or Law and Bepo got into more trouble than they were currently in. She trusted that Penguin could, if worst came to worst, make his way through the passage and get out, though she doubted he would.

"I didn't get where I am running with my tail between my legs!"

With a huge howl, the man rose, and the blow he gave in Saki's direction struck a wall and made a hole that opened to a room, making bits of brick and plaster fly everywhere. Seeing a door on the other side, Saki leaped through the hole, too small for the man to pass, and ran straight through a bedroom to grab the doorknob. When she crossed the door, she stumbled into a hallway with windows and more stairs at the far end, which she made a beeline for before the Marine could make a bigger hole to pass through.

She was too busy with the immediate danger to appreciate that, for the first time in her life, she could fight and run for her life without her heart weighing her down.
Penguin and Mack ran upstairs, whacking a couple of Marines out of their way as Penguin tried to make sense of what was happening.

"What the hell are they doing here?" He wheezed after using his spear like a baseball bat to hit a Marine.

Mack dodged him elegantly and the Marine fell over the stairs' railing. "They've been snooping around the entire evening."

"And you haven't told security?"

"I don't get paid to talk."

"Dude."

"What? Nobody likes Carpus. You think the rest of the staff hasn't noticed? If he's being investigated nobody's going to stick their neck out for him."

Penguin had the impression that if they had asked the right person at the door, they would have been let in with no need to sneak through a tunnel. "I'm starting to pity the guy," he said.

"Save the pity for yourself, you need it more."

"Are you always this cranky?"

"I wonder whose fault that is."

As soon as they set foot upstairs, Penguin saw a blur coming towards them that his brain at first registered as a Christmas decoration launched at high speed. Upon closer inspection, it was Saki, running like her life depended on it while sounds of mass destruction that made the building vibrate went on in the background.

"UP! GO UP!"

"That's what we were doing," Mack replied.

"THEN STOP STAR—!!" The wall next to Saki exploded, and the shower of construction materials would have caught her had she not tripped on the carpet and face-planted a few feet away when she saw Mack. "The fuck are you doing here?!!" She said, scrambling to her feet and looking back, only to see the Marine officer making his way towards them. The only saving grace for their group was that he couldn't run, but damn if he couldn't turn them into pirate pancakes if they didn't hurry.

"More vermin?" He said to himself, and without further warning, he lifted the hammer and threw it at the stairs. They crumbled, cutting off their only way upstairs as the Marines who had been hot on Penguin's trail showed up as well.

Penguin, Saki and Mack ended up surrounded and back to back with several firearms pointing at them and a giant man stared them down.

"Your luck is disgusting and contagious," Mack said, disgruntled, but as he spoke, his hand went to the knives in his belt.

"Nah, I think it's genetic." Penguin said. "We all had it from before."

"Seriously. I'm having flashbacks of Lymes," said Saki with an exhausted voice. Still, she tried not to
let her fighting stance drop as she eyed the enemies, searching for a small opening.

Penguin gripped his spear and pointed it outwards, creating some distance between them and the soldiers, not that it was going to help much it they wanted to gun them down. The officer took this chance recover his hammer.

That seemed to pique Mack's curiosity. "Ran into trouble there, too?"

"I think your sister ran into us, actually—"

"You've got a sister?" Penguin asked at the same time Mack said, "How do you know I have a sister?"

"There's a lovely photo in your living room—"

"—I knew I should have burned everything—"

"What picture?"

"—and I wasn't sure but that dress—"

"That dress? The dress? What does it—?"

"That does it." As he spoke, Mack threw four of his knives in quick succession and stuck them in the barrels of the Marines' weapons. "Try and fire those now, assholes."

Penguin was able to exert enough self-control to not waste time staring at what just happened, and jumped the Marine closest to him. He saw from the corner of his eye Mack doing the same, somehow taking back his knife and a rifle from an enemy to whack him on the head with its butt.

The two remaining Marines were unsure what to do at the sudden reversal of the situation, and they looked at their officer hoping for orders that never came, because Saki had run straight at him as soon as there weren't guns trained on her to keep him busy while the others took care of the soldiers. She was breathing heavily, but the man was in worse shape, and there was a glint of determination in the way she looked at her opponent that Penguin had never seen before. Come to think of it, she hadn't seen her fight other than that bar brawl in North Blue, but her posture didn't look like that of someone who had learned to fight on the streets.

Penguin then redirected his attention to the Marines and stared down at them with a smirk, and the shadow the cap cast over his eyes gave him a sinister aura when he said, "Come try us, amateurs."

Law watched as the glue net closed in on him after he had cut it with his powers again and again, and the thing had just put itself together each time, when something slammed into a window from the outside, smashing the glass to bits, and a polar bear came in with flying kick to Curtiss' face, who ended up embedded into a wall.

Bepo landed gracefully and went into a kung-fu stance as he growled menacingly at the commodore, who was already dislodging himself from the wall. "Captain, are you alright?" He asked, and then he did a double take and panicked. "Your arm's on the floor!"

"Hadn't noticed," he said as he picked the offending limb with a tug and reattached it. Immediately, he cut the Curtiss in several pieces, and as soon as the glue began to put them together, he said, "Shambles," and switched a fragment of debris that had broken off from the wall with Curtiss' head, then flung it out the broken window.
The shrill scream he emitted reverberated across the neighborhood.

"Time to break into the safe," he announced, and Bepo followed after him without a word.

The studio, which they haven't been able to see while it was occupied, was not what they had been expecting. Carpus lay immobile on a pool of blood, and the rug had been shoved aside to reveal a hidden safe on the floor, already open.

"What…"

"Someone got here before us," Law said, approaching Carpus, careful not to step on the blood, to check his pulse. "He's dead."

"B-But why? This isn't even the safe we needed to break into, is it?"

"They used us as a distraction. Which means that they knew there would be Marines in the house."

Law rose and went to the one of the paintings on the wall. It wasn't the biggest, but it was the one they'd been told to look behind, and when he did, he was surprised to see that there was indeed a safe, a small one, hidden behind the frame. He tossed the picture aside, said, "Room," and immediately cut the safe's door open.

The alarm was set off, but it wasn't like they cared at this point, and Law refused to leave the place with their hands empty, aside from being curious.

Pomona and Layla were making eyes at each other when the bedroom window broke with a crash and a scream, and a severed head with glue coming from its neck rolled on the desk and finally got stuck on it.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH," the head cried.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH," they replied.

This went on for a while, up to and including when all the remaining staff in the house went to the room to find out what was going on with the mistress.

Saki didn't know how long she had been fighting the guy – rationally, she was sure that no more than a minute could have passed, but it felt like hours when an unholy noise started to blare through the house. Not that it mattered anymore, but it could complicate matters when – *haha* – if they managed to get out of the mansion.

She dodged on autopilot a blow from the man as Penguin and Mack rushed to her side to help, and the hammer struck the nearest wall to them, but when the Marine lifted it again, the walls shook, not just that one, but every single one in the building.

She only heard Penguin say the words, "master wall" and Mack's "shit" before fissures began forming from around the spot the hammer had hit, and the mansion started crumbling before their eyes in a sort of domino effect helped by the damage already done to the structure. Everybody present stared dumbly at the walls coming down and the situation didn't fully sink in until a great crack appeared of the ceiling, and the plaster that fell on their heads was the last warning they had before it came down on them, too, dragging with it all sorts of material, furniture and their two missing crewmates.
The floor also broke when the rubble hit it, and Law and Bepo continued their downwards descent, leaving the other three again on their own against the Marines until Saki said, "That's convenient," sheathed her sword and jumped down the hole without looking back. The other two caught on quickly and went right behind her.

She looked for her two companions among the rubble and discovered them nearby, getting rid of the debris on them and looking disgusting, but not grievously injured, which was probably how every single one of them appeared at the moment.

As soon as Law saw his crewmates jump through the hole, he yelled, "Go to the passage!"

Mack, who didn't know what the coconuts he was talking about but was finally in front of the Captain, thank goodness, got dragged along by Penguin to a closet under the stairs, and with a superhuman effort that no one should ever be asked to do, three adult men, one woman and a polar bear fit into it before the Marines gave chase.

A few moments of tension were lived when Bepo couldn't get through the trapdoor, and while Saki didn't generally approve of abusing animals, much less him, this was a situation that required drastic measures, such as shoving down with their feet until the poor beast stopped blocking the passage, which would have sent them to certain death or arrest. They ran the length of the tunnel as fast as their feet allowed, and when they were outside they kept going, trying not to draw the attention of the onlookers that had gathered around Carpus' mansion (at a safe distance, though – nobody wanted to get caught in another Cocopocalypse), and made for the working-class district through the unlit streets.

They only stopped to catch their breath when they were right next to Arnold's inn, and a scarce few seconds had passed when the other team opened the door and began to bombard them with questions, with Felicia looking at them curiously from behind.

"How did it go?"

"Did you find the safe?"

"You look like ass."

"Something happened?"

"Why did the lights come on again?"

Mack, however, when he saw those four appear before them, so enthusiastic, so innocent, so infuriatingly clean, took that chance to say exactly what he had been keeping inside for the last hour.

"You pack of soggy noodlebags!"

"Wha—"

"Do you have any idea of what it's like to be cooking for prissy douchecanoes day and night without pirates barging into your workplace every other day?"

"We didn't—"

"You didn't know? That's what you're going to say? Would knowing that I was there stopped you?"

"We might've—"
"Asked for more help, huh? I'm done with this. I demand compensation for fucking up my night shift twice—"

"Compensation?" Shachi said skeptically. "Seriously?"

"—keeping me awake again after I opened that door for you and hid you out of the goodness of my heart—"

"Dude, do you even know who you're talking—"

"—and since you have absolutely nothing I want other than, presumably, a functional kitchen, I'll take that, because after tonight there won't be a soul left in this island who'd hire me."

There was a moment of silence where everybody stared at Mack, and somehow Mack stared back at them all and almost made them feel guilty for existing.

"Um, what?" Penguin said.

"I think he's asking to join your crew," Felicia translated, a little disconcerted but mostly amused.

"Nobody's asking anything. This is non-negotiable."

"Sure, dear."

"Don't 'dear' me."

"We don't need a cook," Law intervened.

Saki's eyes shifted from Mack to Law nervously. "Actually, Captain, no offense but we kind of—"

Law took in a deep breath and sent her way a glare. If mind reading had been a thing between them, Law would have probably said something along the lines of, 'His sister is a Marine, dumbass,' and Saki would have replied, 'And isn't that a beautiful way of getting back at her?' But it wasn't, so that exchange didn't happen, and Saki backed out of the conversation, suddenly very interested in the coconut flakes still stuck between the cobblestones.

"I don't mean to be rude, but can't you have this conversation inside? You look pretty conspicuous," Felicia chimed in with the understatement of the century, and they followed her and decided to resume the argument once they were past the inn's threshold.

Somewhere in the island, the editorial staff of the local newspaper cursed the Heart Pirates, Mr. Carpus and their entire lineages as they typed nonstop to get the amended issue ready for print before the morning edition came out.

Felicia stared at the group before her with a blank expression. The wall clock, which had been pointing at midnight when they had begun their summary of the night's events, now announced that it was a half past one.

"You have to get out of here," said Felicia with a deadly serious expression as soon as the story was over.

"I was hoping for a shower, to be honest," Saki said, smudging white dust across her cheek when she scratched it.
"I mean the island— There'll be Marines everywhere in a matter of hours – your ship isn't very subtle, you know—"

Shachi bristled. "Hey, you got a problem with our ship, you got a problem with—"

"Oh, hush!" She cut him off, annoyed. "Go up, shower and get out. All of you. You'll get Arnold in trouble if they find you here, and if you do," she leaned slightly over the table, locking her eyes with Shachi menacingly, "I don't care who you are. I'll make you regret you ever set foot in our home."

And with this, she managed to kick the maintenance crew out and the pirates up to their rooms, though Law lingered behind to hand her some money.

"For the stay," he said, though Felicia hadn't prompted him for an explanation.

"Don't think I would've allowed you to leave without paying," she said, taking it from his hand way too fast.

The corner of his mouth curled up as he watched her count the bills with a frown. "I would've liked to see you try."

"Don't get cocky, Mr. Falafel," she replied, but the edge in her tone was gone. "People like you are a dime a dozen in this sea."

His only reply to that was an unimpressed glance, and he left for his room as well. The only remaining people were Mack and Felicia, and she wasn't looking at him when she asked, "You're leaving for real?"

"Might as well," he said tiredly. "I don't think I'll find a better chance."

"I don't think you will, either," she admitted. "They're pretty decent."

"I noticed."

"I'll miss you," she said quickly, just to get it over with, because she didn't want to get sentimental.

"Right back at you."

She looked at him and smiled, sweetly, sadly. "You better say goodbye to Arnold before you take off."

"You don't have to tell me. Is he in his room?"

"Yup."

Felicia watched Mack make his way towards the innkeeper's bedroom, leaving her on her own as she sat in the empty dining room, feeling acutely lonely all of a sudden. She then rose from her chair, and not minding how many guests she was going to wake up, she yelled, "I won't forgive you if you don't write at every port!"

She didn't get a response, but she knew she had been heard. Closing her eyes and taking a deep, deep breath, she decided that in the end, things had worked for the best for everybody. Mack was going to have another chance at a life he liked, and she had this place. Her place.

She resolved to keep it in tip top shape in case he ever came back, not that she had ever considered not to. She wasn't going to let him be the only one to gloat, after everything was said and done.
Whistling a happy tune, she set out to get a rag and a mop to wipe the dusty trail the pirates had left in their wake.

Three, four, five hours passed. People packed, some said goodbye in a hurry, some didn't need or want to.

Saki watched from around the corner as the new guys carted their luggage in and made themselves at home in the men's quarters. They were chatting so easily between them, so happy and making everything look so natural that, after the initial shock, she felt a little sad thinking about how much their lives must have sucked to be so willing to give them up like that. Although, to be fair, those three seemed to be buddies already. It was like Penguin and Shachi all over again; good friends starting a new life together and leaving nothing they'd miss behind.

She ignored the pang in her heart at that last thought and decided to go to the galley to make something for breakfast. She put on the apron hanging by the door on autopilot, but she stopped when she was short of opening the fridge door and realized that she didn't know what the new guys liked or even if there was something they couldn't eat. It was silly, but in that moment it made her feel incredibly out of place. Just when she thought she had gotten used to being around the others, the newcomers had sent her back to the start.

It wasn't like Saki thought she was bad with people, if by people one meant acquaintances. However, having to see someone on a daily basis was different altogether. She hadn't been close to anybody but her family before leaving Asteria. She wasn't sure she even knew how to.

Her hand dropped to her side, and she stared at the door of the fridge with no energy as if it was going to give her life advice, or at least solve the breakfast dilemma, but she turned around immediately as she sensed someone approaching from behind.

Mack was there, staring at her with his eyebrows raised.

Saki guessed the incident in Qaryn had made her twitchy. "Hey," she said, thinking that saying 'sorry, I got kidnapped and drugged by a cultist in this very kitchen, nothing personal' was probably not a good way to make the situation less awkward.

Mack let it slide, and instead he told her, "This is my job now."

With an inaudible sigh, she said despondently as she tugged at the string of her apron, "Sure, all yours. I'll go somewhere else..."

What was she even supposed to do on the sub from then on, anyway? Scrub the toilets? Stay put and look pretty? She didn't know if she could get the last one right.

Mack looked at her with a curious expression. "I don't mind if you stay. I could use an extra hand."

"Oh," she said at first, then perked up when the words got through her brain. "Thanks. I'd like that."

"Don't want to stay idle?" He said as he opened the fridge.

"Yeah," she put her hands behind her back and looked over his shoulder to see what he was picking. He was around her height, and that automatically gave him bonus points in her books. "Something like that."

"I understand that you were in charge of cooking before?"
"Mm-hm."

"I don't intend to kick you out of the kitchen, so relax."

"It's not like that. I'm glad you're here," She scratched the back of her neck sheepishly, and said, "I couldn't have kept up when the crew got bigger. I just gotta get used to it."

"That should be my line."

Saki smiled at that, but then something she had been wondering about came to her mind, and she guessed it was a good moment to ask. "You really don't mind that we gave your sister trouble a few months ago?"

"She's given me trouble for years," he said with a trace of fondness. "How is she?"

"Ah, well… Dismembered, last time I saw her," then she added quickly when she noticed how close Mack was to the good knives. "But it's very easy to reattach the pieces! Captain's power is handy, haha…" She tried to joke to diffuse the tension, but Mack was still eyeing her suspiciously.

The moment was thankfully broken by Law walking into the mess hall and heading towards them. "There you are." He stopped at the doorway when the same look Mack was giving Saki was directed at him. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing at all!" She said too fast, unconsciously resting her left hand on the spot where her newest tattoo was. "What takes you here?"

Law gave her an odd glance that she thought lingered for a bit too long, but then he turned to Mack as he dug out an envelope from his pocket. It was crumpled and stained with liquid, and he probably would have thrown it to the sea had he remembered he still had it, but it had remained abandoned in his desk drawer for months.

"I didn't even remember it had it until now. It's for you."

Mack was taken aback at that. "For me?" He took the envelope and inspected with clear disgust in his face.

"It's from Mrs…" He trailed off when the name didn't come to mind.


"Right."

The disgust in Mack's face only grew. "My mother. You just gave me a letter from my mother."

The other two waited for him to elaborate, but instead of that, he searched around for a match, lit it, and set the paper on fire, dropping it on the sink and turning on the faucet to wash the remains away.

"Thank you for the delivery. Now that that's settled," he said casually, "what do you want for breakfast?"

Law blinked a couple of times, said, "Anything's fine," and then to Saki, "Don't think I haven't noticed the thing on your arm just because your sleeves are longer," and left the kitchen.

She noticed then the edge of the bandage peeking out the slightest bit from under her sleeve. "Oh well, it was time to let it in the open anyway," she muttered to herself. As soon as Law was out of hearing, she said to Mack, "He lied. He won't touch bread with a ten foot pole."
Mack contemplated for a few seconds the implications of that and resumed his forage into the fridge saying, "What a weirdo."

Saki had to smile at that. "Like you wouldn't know."
Drops in the ocean

(Take these broken wings and learn to fly again)

Lately, Bepo worried that Law may be making some questionable decisions. The Eternal Pose in front of him was proof of it, procured through personal risk when he should have been running to safety, and the 'Niva' engraved in a metal tag was the only clue he had to where they were heading. So far, Bepo hadn't found any info about the place in his maps.

Together, they had outlined the course for this journey to the best of their ability. They didn't exactly know what to expect – and where would the fun be in that – but they had chosen a route that, as far as they knew, was marginally safe.

Bepo understood that following the planned route and going to where the Log Pose pointed at would be like telegraphing their position to the Marines. That was the reason Law had given him to alter their plans. But Bepo's sense of smell was good at catching half-truths, too, and he had the feeling that his captain was lying by omission.

He hadn't complained about his decision, because whatever his other motives were, he was right and they didn't need a fleet chasing after them during their travels. But Bepo had the feeling that he would have found an excuse to take them to that island, too, had they not had a run-in with the Marines. He would bet on it.

He would also bet the secret tattoo that he did not want to have that Law was being secretive about this issue because it had to do with Joker, and Law seemed intent on keeping the rest of them out of his personal issues, no matter how nonsensical that was, since he was Bepo's captain, and they were best friends, and they knew all there was to know about each other. As much as Law had always supported him, at times Bepo felt like a nanny.

He took one fleeting glance at Saki, sitting on the desk behind him, writing in the logbook with a face that screamed that the sweet embrace of death would be welcome if sleep was no longer an option that night.

It had been the same with her. Law had said they needed more people in the crew and that at worst she'd be a fine guinea pig, but his motives had not been so clear cut. Not when they'd gone back to the smuggler's den after Saki was gone to retrieve what little info, what little connections to Joker they could find, and left the hideout with an armful of alligator jerkface.

Saki had been the one to find the Eternal Pose in the restaurant. Sometimes, Bepo also wondered how much she knew, and how much she had been told. But he didn't want to stick his snout where it didn't belong, and it definitely did not belong in whatever understanding there was between those two. Neither were the simplest of people, and he was just happy they got along.

But that was enough pointless thinking for the day, he decided. Soon the rest would wake up, and he'd be able to go to sleep.

"It's almost six," he said out loud to Saki, and watched with amusement how she broke out of her sleepy trance to look at him.

While Saki adjusted to Mack's presence in her-not-anymore-kitchen and became the official potato
peeler of the ship without much of a fuss, there was a point of contention that caused some tension between them: breakfast.

Mack insisted that it was his job to do. Saki's sleep patterns, though restricted to nighttime, were still atrocious and only second to the captain's in their whatthefuckery, and if one day her sloppily wired brain decided that she was going to wake up at 4 AM, she was going to wake up at that hour and no one was going to keep her from getting something to eat and making a new coffee pot, so if she did it for herself might as well do it for the rest, too.

When first informed of this situation, Mack said that okay, that she could take whatever she wanted and make the coffee, but that would be the extent of what she'd do. Saki begrudgingly agreed.

Then Mack tried her coffee for the first time and declared that she was never allowed near a coffee bean again, ever, or he'd report her to the Marines for torturing innocent civilians. He meant the beans, not the crew.

Needless to say, from that moment onwards, Saki wasn't very happy drinking stale coffee from the day before until Mack woke up and put a fresh pot to brew. Worse than that, Mack's coffee was ridiculously weak. And even worse, the rest of the crew liked it better.

And so she found herself, one of those times when she had woken up and didn't manage to fall back asleep, before daybreak, hanging out with Bepo in the bridge, helping him with the logbook while he kept an eye on the sea and told her about the stars he was using for navigation.

Saki was not a morning person. She wasn't either a very late night person, and depending on her mood she wasn't a day person, either, and the paltry orange juice she had taken from the refrigerator in hopes of waking up her brain cells wasn't helping matters. Bepo's words easily came in one ear and flew through the other with the ease of a seagull soaring on wind currents.

The logbook was filled with Bepo's and Law's handwriting, with some odd additions from her during nights she couldn't sleep and Bepo was on duty. The drawings she had made of the islands they'd been to were in a separate file, with scrawled references to know where they belonged after it had become apparent that they wouldn't fit in the logbook. Bepo wanted them anyway, and who was she to say no to him?

"It's almost six," Bepo told her, pulling her out of her mental haze.

"Guess Mack will be in the galley soon, then." She pushed the chair back lazily and got up with a great effort, taking the orange juice glass mechanically and looking at Bepo with dead eyes. "I updated yesterday's record. The technical stuff is up to you, though."

Bepo stared with concern. He looked tired, too, but not like he was wishing for death. It probably had to do with not being a compulsive caffeine drinker. "Careful with the stairs."

Saki grumbled, not appreciating the condescension, and was on the last step to the lower floor when she tripped and fell down the stairs with a shriek.

Bepo ran to the rescue, but when he saw she didn't look injured, he sighed and went back to the bridge.

_Come on._ Even the bear had lost faith in her.

She picked herself up from the floor along with a few glass shards and went to grab a mop before someone actually got hurt.
She would admit to herself, and only to herself, that there was something more aggravating than the coffee issue.

Mack was an early riser. Not random early, either, he was usually in the galley every morning around six. It was also around that hour that chances of a zombified Law turning up in the kitchen went up, sometimes with the days' newspaper, sometimes without if the News Coo was running late.

He didn't talk much. Saki didn't talk much either, because it was almost immoral to have a decent conversation so early and even pirates had standards. But he was a soothing company, a constant she'd had since she embarked on this trip, and it was their quiet moment before everybody else woke up and reality kicked into gear again. Now she didn't have that. Give an unstable woman a little bit of stability, universe.

From what she could see, Law didn't seem to be bothered at all by the change. His routine remained the same, and the only hint of acknowledgement of the new situation that Saki had detected was the small pause he made after Mack made his coffee for the first time. He drank it all the same, and any hopes of retaining her rights to the coffee pot were lost when Shachi said he was glad they wouldn't have to deal with that sludge anymore.

Breakfast rush came and went, and by the time she was done washing the dishes, Mack was rearranging the pantry for the third time that week (order freak) and Law was on the last pages of the newspaper. Apprehensively, she filled her own mug with coffee that didn't smell like the gods had ground caffeine into powder, mixed it with coal and poured water on it, and walked to the table way more asleep than she should have been. Was that a withdrawal headache she felt? She wasn't sure what to believe in anymore. Reality was crumbling around her like a dry cookie.

As soon as she sat down and without a word, Law handed her the wanted posters tucked inside the newspaper. She mumbled a thank you and took a first sip of the coffee. It was warm, dark, slightly bitterish water, and it was good.

She must have made a grimace without realizing, because it prompted a comment from Law.

"Something wrong with the coffee?"

"No," she said blandly. "It's fantastic."

"Yeah," he agreed with as much enthusiasm, and after a pause he said. "I liked the other one better."

She looked up at him, surprised and grateful, but not grateful enough to keep the snark inside.

"You'll have to talk it out with the chef."

"Hm." He folded the paper, already finished with it, and dropped it on the desk before getting up to leave. "You might want to take a look at today's news."

Saki set the posters aside and was left alone, with news of the Commercial Association of Coconut Affairs having elected Pomona Hazel as their new president after her predecessor's early demise, and a new Marine base being set up next to Qaryn to stop wanted criminals from using that route into the Grand Line. There was also something about the Straw Hat boy she'd been seeing lately on wanted posters messing with a Shichibukai in the Kingdom of Alabasta. That something took the entire front page and stole the spotlight from everybody else. What was the point of committing crimes if you weren't going to make it to the headlines?

She tossed the paper on the table with disdain and went back to her posters. There he was again, smiling at the camera like an idiot. Didn't even have the decency to try to look badass. There were
more of his crew, a bunch of weirdos from the Baroque Works organization, and... a kid?

*Devil Child Nico Robin. 79,000,000 beli.*

According to the description, she had to be a grown woman now. Saki was fairly sure she had never seen her before, but the face was familiar, and she couldn't fathom why.

She took the poster from the stack for further research.

And then, after all sifting through those, she saw the posters that actually mattered, and they were a whole week late. She jumped from her chair, ran to the stairwell and yelled, "New bounties are out!"

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What Marina and her crew found when they arrived to Qaryn, their first stop in the Grand Line after her superiors had urged her to go to do damage control for some incident, was something she'd internally refer to a shitshow. Not out loud, of course, because she had to set an example in front of her men, but it was what it was and she wasn't one to deny the obvious.

A serial killer, a gaggle of elders pointing fingers, a leaderless militia, and one woman trying to reason in the middle of the chaos and being ignored because she was a foreigner. Marina could sympathize with her, but she had come to the island with clear orders, and though Qaryn wasn't one of the nations adhered to the World Government, it had no pull to go against its wishes, either.

Marina had been told to stay there and put some order until a new retinue arrived to set up a base, then to continue her route onwards. Patrol the Grand Line some, come say hello to Marineford and get chewed out by old men that had sticks shoved up so far up their bottoms that they had forgotten how pleasant life was when one was able to sit on a chair without feeling a stabbing pain inside.

A few weeks into her stay in Qaryn, when her crew was already making preparations to leave the island, she received a call from Commodore Curtiss.

Marina oversaw Qaryn's bright bay from her office as she picked up the receiver. Even the most beautiful places had a dark side. She'd seen much of it in her admittedly short career, and she only guessed it would get worse as she spent more time in the Grand Line. The North Blue was dangerous, but it didn't hold a candle to the kind of people that roamed this sea.

"Marina," said a gruff voice on the other side as a greeting.

That was unusual. Commodore Curtiss usually sounded professional, stern, or angry. The way he grumbled her name hid a tinge of mortification and suggested that he wasn't annoyed at her in particular. Marina could tell because she had known the man since she began her training, and telling apart his levels of annoyance was second nature to her by now. She had been on its receiving end more times than anyone else she had known.

And somehow, he still had supported her appointment as captain of the Lymes base. He was a grumpy man with a squishy core made of glue. And to be quite honest, Marina had been wondering when the call would come.

"Sir," she said. The Den Den Mushi couldn't be furrowing more its brow if it tried. "I heard what happened. Have you fully recovered?"

"What hasn't recovered is my ego," he replied bitterly. "So while it was still in tatters, I thought it would be good to take the chance to say that I don't blame you for letting the Trafalgar rookie escape."
Marina was thankful no one was looking, because her jaw went slack and nearly hit the desk. She composed herself quickly.

"I did my job to the best of my ability. If Headquarters doesn't deem it adequate for my former position, so be it."

Yes, that sounded exceedingly professional. It was a good save.

"Headquarters wouldn't take danger seriously until it bit the Gorosei's collective buttocks." He grumbled. "And you talk awfully big for someone who isn't even thirty and nearly got demoted to Petty Officer."

Marina smiled a little. "I'm sure I have you to thank for that 'nearly' not being more definitive."

"Yes, you do, Marina. Yes, you do."

"Thank you, sir."

"Why do I get the impression that you are making fun of me? Is that laughter I hear in your voice, Marina?"

"Wouldn't dream of it, sir."

The commodore clucked his tongue. "Cheeky youngsters who think the sea is theirs." He paused, and then sighed. "Well, I suppose it already is."

Marina's face softened. "You still have a long way to go."

"I do have a promotion to Rear Admiral lined up, now that you mention it, but I suppose it'll have to wait until this sorry event is erased from recent memory."

"It won't be long, at this rate," she said, sounding a little ominous. Lots of new pirates were making waves these last months. "Did Trafalgar really give you that much trouble?"

"Everything was fine until a polar bear crashed through a window and into me and then the building came down."

The delivery was dry, matter-of-factly, and made the statement impossible to react adequately to. Marina was at a loss for words for a few seconds. "I see how that could go down badly."

"Don't you say." He sighed again. "Well, that was all I had to tell you."

"I appreciate it. All you have done."

"Don't mention it. It's my job." And as an afterthought, he added, "I'm going to send you the latest bounties. And Marina, be always on your guard. The Grand Line isn't a place where you can relax. Not that you did much of that before."

"Thank you for the advice, sir."

"Until next time, then."

He hung up.

He hadn't been completely sincere, Marina thought. Looking after her wasn't his job anymore. Not
since she had been posted on the North Blue away from him, but that was how he was. Sometimes she thought he had been more of a father than her own.

And it was ironic, it really was, that even if she was now in the Grand Line, where danger loomed in every corner, Marina hadn't felt this calm in years. She'd always felt the pressure of having to prove herself, to do double than the men did to get half the recognition. She had trained until she dropped, studied more than any of her colleagues and fought tooth and nail to show herself and her parents that she had done the right thing with her life.

She wasn't sure she had managed either, but it didn't matter anymore. Here, in the Grand Line, she was just one more officer with her own crew and no jurisdiction to protect. The only things that mattered were her ship and the orders that occasionally came from above.

In all the time she had stayed cooped up in the Lymes base, going back and forth between towns to keep pirates and smugglers in check, Marina had forgotten how much she loved the sea, but now just one look through a bull's eye in her office was enough to make her remember.

As promised, soon one of the Den Den Mushis began to print miniature versions of the day's bounties. Marina looked at them without much interest until the last one came out, and this time her jaw did hit the desk.

*Nicchi Maccarello, 20,000,000 beli.*

"Your name isn't Mack!"

"Why does he have a bounty and we don't?"

"The Marines didn't see you."

"Aw, man, mine didn't go up."

"Why… why is my bounty so low?"

"He has a surname."

"Who does he think he is to have a surname?"

"Yeah, that was Captain's privilege."

Five mechanics and a glorified potato-peeler-slash-tattoo artist shuffled closer together and stared at Mack and Law with distrust. Bepo just sulked on the side with his five hundred beli bounty.

"Look at them, having surnames like they mean something," Shachi said.

"How classy of them," said Saki sarcastically.

Penguin side-eyed Mack hard. "I'm sure they think they are better than us."

"Us surname-less need to band together," Tuttu joined in.

"You can have the surname if you want it so much," Mack said apathetically. "Make a raffle. Profits go towards galley supplies."

"We don't need your charity," Uni retorted.
"Yeah," Shachi agreed, "Not having a surname is cool."

Penguin nodded effusively. "It's like the name packs more of a punch."

"What would we do with one, anyway?"

Asuka was still looking at the poster in Mack's hands. "Maccarelo, really?"


The jabs didn't seem to affect Mack. "You should hear my sister's name, then."

"What is it?"

"You have a sister?"

"Can you introduce me?"

"Dude, aren't you coming on a little too strong?"

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"You're a bunch of twits," Mack declared, and left the improvised gathering in the middle of the hallway.

The group shared uncomfortable glances until Shachi scooted closer to the stairs and shouted up, "So are we throwing a party?"

"Come up and help if you want one!"

The reaction was immediate, and the guys ran upstairs towards the mess hall. Saki took one last look at the few posters remaining in her hand. Her bounty was now up to 30 million. She didn't know if that was really worth celebrating compared to the monstrosities that had been assigned as bounties that day, but she didn't intend to kill anybody's buzz, so she began to walk towards the galley again. She had a cold coffee to retrieve and more tubers to peel, probably.

"Wait," Law stopped her and Bepo before they could go. "Come in a moment, you two," he said, nudging with his head towards his room.

They followed and waited until Law was done searching inside a drawer of his desk. He took out the same logbook Saki had been writing a few hours ago and a metal box that tinkled with the sweet sound of belis.

Oddly enough, he passed them to Saki, who looked at both things like she had been handed a living, breathing creature instead of a notebook and a box and didn't know what to do with them.

"From now on you two are in charge of the logbook, and you," he said specifically to Saki, "keep the funds."

She had been promoted from Lady of the Potatoes to treasurer in a completely unexpected turn of events. "Why?"

"You already take care the shopping, so it's more convenient. And I'm still doing the accounting, so don't think you can pull anything funny."

"I'm not going to swindle you!"
"I know that."

She huffed and held the logbook towards Bepo. Better to keep it in the bridge than in her room. "I'll go find a place for this where no idiots can stumble into it."

He made a curious face. "Why would anyone?"

"Because nobody bothers to knock on the door anymore? Anyway, see you later."

And she left Law's quarters, feeling the literal weight of responsibility in her hands. But it was confirmation that she hadn't become dead weight in the crew, which was something to be happy about. Yes, one less worry feeding her lurking insecurities. Only the coffee remained now.

She decided the best place to avoid stumblings and shenanigans was the trunk where she kept her clothes, so she rearranged it to make room for the box, and when she was done, she took the bounties she was still carrying and placed them in a desk drawer. Her books were sitting on top of it, the few she had brought from home and the ones she'd bought during their travels. But the one that caught her attention was the big history tome that Shachi had brought her when she had been grounded in the sickbay, the one where she kept the only picture she had of her mom. For some reason, she had never wanted to take any others.

Saki opened the book to pick up the photo. If it weren't for this picture, she'd probably have forgotten her mom's face by now. She stared at her smiling face for a few seconds before something else stuck out. There was another woman, older than her mother, with white hair and a strong nose and wide brown eyes…

Saki opened the drawer she had just put the bounties in and took out Nico Robin's poster.

Even as a child, she looked so much like the white-haired woman. Could the two be related? She discarded the thought right away. What would a woman like that be doing with Saki's mom and her friends? The Devils of Ohara didn't go around sightseeing and taking group pictures.

She put the book, the picture, and the poster away, but she couldn't shake off the nagging feeling that she was overlooking something.

While she was alone, she also took the chance to roll up her right sleeve to check out the tattoo. She'd been keeping it covered while it healed, but about two weeks had passed since she'd gotten it and it looked good enough for show already. Short sleeves were in order.

Two weeks. It took two weeks for every bastard in the crew sans the captain to wear a boiler suit.

Shachi and Penguin had the original idea, so it was okay. The three new guys worked deep down in the entrails of the Polar Tang, too, so she could understand. But the day Mack appeared in the galley wearing that godforsaken white, smiley, hideous boiler suit was the day she couldn't keep it to herself anymore.

"What have you done?" She whined.

Mack seemed perplexed at the outburst. "It's more practical to get rid of the stains."

Saki stared at him speechless, mouth slightly ajar and not quite believing what she had heard.

"Why does it bother you?"
"You don't get it," she said pathetically. "They'll hound me."

"Don't be so dramatic."

And true to her expectations, the first thing that happened when the guys came into the mess hall, before they sat down at the table, before they asked what they were having for breakfast, was that Penguin and Shachi walked to the galley, shit-eating grins and all, and asked, "When are you going to wear yours, Sa—"

Saki flung a pair of tongs in their general direction. She hadn't even paid attention to who had spoken, and it didn't matter, because both were guilty. The tongs flew to the mess hall, hit the table, and stopped where the other three had taken seat as a fair warning of their fate if they pushed their luck.

"Woah, did someone piss in your coffee?" Shachi asked, peeking over his sunglasses to see where the tongs had landed.

"No, but I can and will piss in yours if you don't leave me alone. Shoo!"

"Aww, don't be like that," Penguin said sweetly.

"Shooooo."

"You shouldn't have thrown those," Mack remarked without turning to look at them, busy scrambling eggs.

Saki suddenly felt awkward at the reprimand. She didn't want to make mad the guy who fed them and she had to work with. "Sorry. I'll get them—"

"No, I mean you should have thrown something else. Blunt or sharp weapons are fine if you need to make a statement."

"Oh," she said eloquently. "Um." She had all the words. "What do you suggest?"

"That fillet knife to your left, for instance—"

"We'll wait at the table!" Penguin said immediately, dragging Shachi by the scruff of his neck.

"…Thanks," Saki said.

"I can show you the technique later."

"That would be nice," she said sincerely. "You have an amazing throwing arm."

"It's necessary. The kitchen is our territory. It falls on us to defend it from intruders."

Saki laughed. "We are warriors."

"We are, and they are vermin invading our land. Never forget that."

"Our?"

"You pioneered it."

It was good to have confirmation that he didn't see her, too, as an intruder on his territory.
"Actually, Captain did. He just wasn't cut out for this kind of life."

Mack pondered for a moment. "Not going to lie, I have wondered where the scorch marks on the ceiling had come from."

"He's a menace."

"Duly noted. Now go retrieve those tongs or you're taking the bacon out of the frying pan with your fingers."

"Yes, sir!" Then she added, because she had to try, "Will a good defense grant my coffee pot rights back?"

"No."

"I'm going to sigh very audibly and passive-aggressively so you know how displeased I am with this."

"I don't care."

Saki sighed and left to retrieve the tongs, with which she had to threaten an idiot again before going back to work.

When you live for so long with the same people either in the middle of the sea or underwater, it's the little things that make you go crazy or save you from a mental breakdown. The boiler suits issue was beaten to death and then some, and Saki had no doubt that the accusations of lacking team spirit would be a recurring theme for a long time.

She was in her room, on her bed, flipping through the pages of a reference book when someone opened the door without knocking. Months ago, she had cared. Now it was another fact of life that the only person in the whole freaking ship that had the decency to knock on doors was Law.

"If you want to see me naked that badly, listen in until you hear the shower stop running and the bathroom door open, then barge in," she said without any bite to it.

"Ha ha, you are so funny."

The silence stretched for a few seconds while Saki kept looking at her book and Shachi kept waiting for her to drop it, until he couldn't take it anymore and pointed at her. "Will you look at me for a second?!"

Lazily, she sat up on her bed, crossed her legs and said, "Yes, your Majesty, what will you have of me today?"

Shachi's arm dropped and his demeanor switched from combative to unsure in the blink of an eye. Now that was interesting. And worrying.

"Something wrong?" She asked.

"Nope. Nothing. There is no thing that is wrong. Such a thing doesn't exist and—"

"Spit it out."

He took a deep breath. "I want a tattoo!"

For a moment, Saki's face was inscrutable. For a moment, Shachi breathed easy and believed he'd be
spared any disparaging remarks.

The moment of peace and quiet and mutual understanding was broken when Saki grinned from ear to ear and said, "So now you want one!"

Shachi spluttered before he could form a coherent sentence. "Not just now, you know I've been thinking about it for some time!"

"And now that you see the cool kids all have tattoos you want one too, is that right?"

"Fuck no, you aren't cool."

"Oh, that's right! I'm not cool because I'm not wearing a boiler suit! Whatever shall I do? How could an uncool person tattoo such a cool guy?"

"Are you seriously holding that over me now?!"

"You know, I think I know exactly what a very uncool person that is definitely not a pirate nor a friend would do."

Shachi's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What is it?"

"Make you fucking pay for it," she said deadly serious.

"You're kidding!"

"Of course, silly of me!" She said with a smile and a sigh, putting a hand to her cheek. "Since money grows on trees and I live in a fucking forest beli bills drop on my lap with every spring shower." The smile disappeared. "But you know what, it's winter and the trees are bare."

"Wow. Wow. You're more of an ass than usual."

"A woman needs to make a living, Shachi."

Saki thought that he was going to turn around and leave, but to his credit, he crossed his arms and asked seriously, "How much?"

"Hm…" She put a hand on her chin and tried to look thoughtful. "How does forty thousand beli sound?"

All the aplomb he had vanished. "I don't have that sort of money to throw around!"

"Don't be a cheapskate with something you'll have to wear all your life."

"Just… Forget I said anything."

"Wait!"

He halted under the doorstep and glared at her. "What?"

She pointed at her own new tattoo. "Same design, same place?"

Shachi didn't reply right away because he was too busy looking for a trap. "Yeah."

"Okay, I'll make the preparations. You make the call when you want it."

"I told you I don't have that much money."
"I'm not gonna charge you, dumbass."

Shachi's expression froze and morphed the most pure representation of offense Saki had seen in her life, and she had seen a lot of those telling smugglers that their tattoos were cheap and shitty.

"You ginormous bitch."

Shachi slammed the door shut and Saki went into a fit of laughter that lasted for a few minutes. Payback was sweet.

But when the laughter stopped, she left her room and went to find Law and ask him for permission to use the sickbay again. She had no clue where he was, so she was going to tour the Polar Tang and hope that he wasn't taking a nap with Bepo on the deck, because waking those two up when they looked so adorable together was nothing short of a crime.

For the record, it was Bepo who gave them the adorable feel. Definitely not Law.

Her search was cut short very soon when she tried to knock on the door, because she had been given a proper education, unlike that herd of oafs, and she found it unlocked. She pushed it carefully to look inside, and she saw Law asleep on his bed and pinned in place by a book that she'd wager was half his weight. How could he breathe with that thing on top?

She tried to leave without disturbing him, but sadly, that was not to happen. He blinked blearily and for an expressionless and confused moment felt with his hands the thing on his chest until it was determined it was a book, he had fallen asleep reading it, and his lungs weren't collapsing. He put it aside.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up, the door was open and—"

"It doesn't matter," he said, rubbing his eyes.

Saki noticed how the frown seemed to be perpetually carved into his features from the moment he woke up. It was a fascinating ability to have. Was it some sort of natural self-defense, like those colorful amphibians that scream to their predators, 'DANGER, DANGER, POISON COURSES THROUGH MY VEINS'? Or was it merely a warning for any strangers that approached him? That sounded about right.

It wasn't the time to think about it, though. "I was wondering if you'd let me use the sickbay again."

He caught on at once. "Another tattoo? Who is it now?"

"Make a guess!" She said, but upon second thought on seeing his not-quite-there expression she added quickly, "Shachi."

"Don't scar him for life," he commented, stifling a yawn.

"I don't take orders from a guy with that mess on his fingers!" Silence. Oh, that was dumb. "Well, not about my job. The thing I'm good at. I wouldn't tell you how to operate either… I'll go now, thanks."

"Saki," he called.

"Yes?"

"Are you still forbidden from the coffee pot?"
She grimaced. "Yeah."

"Then buy a new one when we hit the next island. That is an order."

Saki's smile grew at the rate the meaning of his words sank in. "That's one I can follow."

"You better."

She held back a snicker. "And I thought I was desperate."

"Close the door when you leave."

"Aye, aye, goodnight, Sleeping Beauty."

Something hit the door as Saki closed it, and by the sound of it, she would have guessed it was a book.

Tsubaki wasn't sure for how many weeks they had been sailing, since she had been out cold for a some days and stayed disoriented for a few more. They had made stops in various islands, but neither she nor Take had been allowed to disembark – an anti-espionage policy, they explained – and their contact with the outside world had been limited to what the revolutionaries told them and what the newspapers said.

She had been intently following the news reports from Asteria, hoping that her grandpa's name appeared in the survivor lists, but when they stopped publishing them, she switched to believing that he was alright and somehow had found his way to safety without the Marine's help. He was that kind of person.

It didn't hit her, until days after the last list was printed, that her sister may have been reading the newspapers too, that her name and Take's hadn't been on any of them, and that she may have assumed that they were dead. Tsubaki's stomach lurched at the thought, and she had ambushed a kind fellow named Bunny Joe for a way to contact Saki, but he had explained that there was no way to send a letter to a pirate ship, because pirates didn't want to be found and wouldn't stay long enough in one place to be easily accessible.

Tsubaki had been inconsolable for days. And somehow, Take, who by all rights should have been feeling even worse, had been the one to hold himself together and try to cheer her up. Tsubaki felt like she was failing spectacularly at being a big sister.

She kept reading the newspapers. Every morning, she waited on the deck from dawn until the News Coo came for delivery, and the crew jokingly nicknamed her Papergirl once it became a routine.

Each time she read reports about the Heart Pirates, she ran to show them to Take. When the new bounty for her sister came out, she nagged the ship's carpenter until he gave her a frame to put it in.

Every little bit was proof that she was fine, that Tsubaki didn't need to worry because if there was someone that could make it no matter what life threw at her, it was her sister.

"Did you check this one out?" The artilleryman asked her one day during lunch, when reports that the Heart Pirates were behind a couple of civilian murders came out.

"Yup. First thing I read in the morning," she said chipperly.

"It says they offed two merchants. Your sister sounds like someone I wouldn't want to cross."
"My sister wouldn’t—" She thought through what she was about to say, because the knee-jerk reaction of saying that Saki wouldn't hurt a fly was Yagara bull shit. "She wouldn't do it without a really good reason. Besides, aren't you guys complaining all the time that the news make up stuff?"
And she started shoveling food in her mouth.

"If you say so," the man conceded, not caring much for an argument. "But we aren't like pirates, Papergirl. Most pirates are just raiders. We fight for freedom."

Tsubaki got up from her seat, cheeks full of food like a hamster, and proceeded to chew him out.  "Doncha dare—" She swallowed with a lot of effort and downed a glass of juice to wash it down. The man looked like he was holding back laughter. "Don't speak of my sister like that! She's a good person!"

He snorted. "And what about this Surgeon of Death, he's a good person too? Doesn't sound like one."

"Yes, he is!" She said, prompting a few heads to turn to listen to her. "He saved her and he helped us, and if it weren't for him Take and Saki and I would've been dead way before you lot rescued us!"

The artilleryman threw up his arms in surrender, and said with a smirk. "Woah, alright, point taken. They're saints, it's all lies and slander."

"Don't talk to me like I'm dumb!"

"You ain't dumb. You're young and innocent, and it's about time you woke up. Pirates don't do god things because."

"That's not true!"

"Hey, that's enough," Koala, a few seats away from them, intervened, and the bickering stopped.

From that day onwards, Tsubaki began to avoid the artilleryman.

Since the day she had picked them up, Koala had been checking in on Tsubaki and Take constantly, and she was the one who had explained the situation once Tsubaki's mind was again fit to take in information.

They were headed to the Revolutionary Army's headquarters in a place called Baltigo, in the Grand Line, and though both kids had been welcomed with open arms among the revolutionaries, they'd never had any choice in the matter, anyway. Koala had made the decision for them, to either abandon them on the docks of Asteria or recruit them. They'd already seen and heard too much to let them go.

Not that they had a place to return to, and Tsubaki wouldn't have known what to do with herself and Take, so she was glad for the sense of purpose this sequence of events had dumped on her.

And what to do when they were in Baltigo? Make friends with other kids, Koala said. Study. Get stronger. Help the cause.

Tsubaki could get behind that. She'd been living all her life in Asteria, knowing the government and the Marines turned a blind eye to what was happening there. She had lost half of her family to the smuggling ring, and she'd never thought she would have the opportunity to get back at them for it.

Saki had done her part with the criminals. Now, Tsubaki thought, it was her chance to help take down the guys who tried to look good but were just as guilty.
Later that day, she rushed outside when Take called her, excited because they were about to reach land.

The ship approached the white shores of Baltigo, the midday sun reflecting on every surface like it was snow instead of sand and rocks, and Tsubaki thought it was the most beautiful place she had ever seen.

This would be home, now. And wherever her sister was, she'd have to trust in her to be alright until they had the chance to meet again.

Some days were harder than others.

Saki was past the stage of thinking constantly of her family, which she was aware many people would call it being cold, while she'd say it was a magnificent display of her ability to compartmentalize.

She'd had many things to distract herself lately: getting used to the new crew members, and the good coffee, and not being as useless as she thought by having the crew's finances in her hands.

But now that she was getting used to the novelties, she had more time to think, and time to think meant letting her mind wander to places she didn't want it to go. If there was one thing she missed about living in Asteria was that she didn't have a moment to be idle and think about how much her life sucked.

She quite liked it now. She just couldn't stomach the thought that what she had left behind might be gone forever. And every time her thoughts were down that path, she remembered something so obvious and trite that, had it not been Law who said it, it would have bounced right off of her.

*The papers lie.*

Of course they did. They kept pinning crimes on them on top of the already very questionable and illegal crap they pulled, she saw that every day. Half of the things she was wanted for, she hadn't done, and about another half of what she had actually done was unaccounted for. Official sources were lying, conniving and incompetent. It stood to reason that they were wrong regarding Asteria as well, and given their track record with the place, she'd be surprised if they weren't actively hiding things from the public.

She hoped they'd be able to uncover something, anything, now that they were headed for the island the Eternal Pose pointed to. She wanted to thank Law for that, but she hadn't been sure how without sounding awkward. It wasn't like he had chosen that route to help her.

He was looking for something else there, she knew it, and he didn't want to let her know more than she already did. But it had been a convenient move for Saki, all the same, and she had all the right to feel thankful.

She looked forward to what they'd turn up, she mused while she stepped out of the shower. Wrapping a towel around her body and throwing another of top of her hair to dry it, she opened the door that connected the tiny bathroom with her quarters, and she was immediately greeted by the door to the hallway bursting open and no less than four dimwits pushing Shachi through it. Mack was, logically, missing from the bunch, because he was an adult instead of an oversized child.

Saki stared at them with a deadpan while they stood frozen by the door, possibly realizing that they had almost stumbled onto a naked chick with allegedly violent tendencies and that knocking before entering suddenly seemed like such a small price to pay when the other option likely entailed losing
chunks of their nether regions.

Luckily for them, Saki wasn't easily embarrassed to mind, and she was so used to this that she sounded way more tired than angry when she said, "Will it fucking kill you to knock one of these days?"

There was a chorus of mumbled apologies, so Shachi's very much not-sorry statement stood out. "I didn't want to come here!"

"Yes, you did!" Uni said.

"No I didn't!"

"Yes you—"

"No I—"

"He wants the tattoo," Penguin explained calmly. "But he's too much of a chicken to get it."

Saki scowled and took her sweet time to send a dirty glare to every one of them. "Did I miss something? Are you all running for the asshole of the year award?"

"Eh, no…"

"We didn't mean to catch you like—"

"I'm not talking about me!" She pointed accusingly at them. "How would you like it if everybody made fun of you for having a fear? Have some shame!"

There was an uncomfortable silence.

She waved them out forcefully. "Everybody out of here before I get angry for real! And if I see any of you pressuring someone to get a tattoo from me I'll make sure that you wake up with an indelible dick on your forehead."

The group scattered at her order, but Shachi lingered for a moment.

"What?"

"Thanks."

She rested her hands on her hips. "I didn't do it for you. Worst publicity an artist can get is a customer regretting the purchase."

He let out a small snort. "Yeah, of course. My bad for thinking you were being charitable."

"As long as that's clear."

Shachi left, shutting the door quietly behind him.

_Dang needles_, she thought, throwing her head towel on the chair.

She didn't have to wait long for the conclusion to that hanging plotline in her life. Later that evening, someone knocked on Saki's door while she was sitting at her desk.

"It's open," she said, expecting Law and failing her prediction by a long shot.
"Why don't you lock it if it—"

She threw an arm over the chair's back and looked over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't imagining things. "Shachi?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"Let me take note of this day for posterity."

"Don't start now, I've come here peacefully." He looked around and, for lack of a white flag, resorted to pinching a side of the boiler suit and waving it.

Saki piped down. "Sorry, I'm all ears."

"I'm ready!"

She tilted her head to one side and watched him like a hawk. She couldn't sense anything fishy, but she'd admit that if the guy wasn't so overall expressive, the sunglasses perma-glued to his face would make her play in hard mode. "Is anybody listening in around the corner to make sure you say this? Is it a bet? Are you being blackmailed?"

"No," he said very seriously. "I came here on my own."

She broke into a smile. "Cool. Give me ten minutes and I'll be in the sickbay."

"Cool." He repeated, and scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. "Um…"

"I have no intention of giving you a hard time about this," she said before he could ask.

He looked visibly relieved at that. "Oh. Okay. Thanks."

She waved him off with a half-smile. "Don't. It's my job."

Saki was sweeping the lower deck with Asuka when the speakers of the sub announced, at long last, what they'd been dying to hear for weeks.

"Land ahoy!" Bepo voice rang out. "We'll reach Niva in two hours!"

Both Saki and Asuka threw up the brooms and cried out in joy. There was only so much time a person could stay cooped up in a ship without losing their sanity.

Then they picked up the brooms again, because leaving cleaning supplies strewn around on top of a submarine was silly, swept at the speed of the light, and prepared to disembark.

One of the first things they noticed, when the island was still a dot in the horizon, was the cold.

The more the Polar Tang approached it, the more Niva looked like a winter wonderland, and the part of the crew that was furry or from the North Blue greeted the icy breeze like Christmas had come early. The rest of the crew was cursing the weather up and down and rummaging through their clothes for the warmest thing they could wear inside the boiler suits.

"This is heaven," Penguin said, taking a deep breath that probably contained snow crystals.

"Do you think it's snowed in Indent Bay already?" Shachi asked with a grin.
Saki leaned against the deck’s railing, eyes never leaving the island. "Asteria sure used to be white by this time of the year."

"Shouldn't you go put on something warmer?"

"Oh?" She took a look at her half sleeves and shorts. "Yeah, I guess. But it's so nice out here."

"You kind of have to pity the other guys," Shachi said. "Well, I don't know about Mack."

"Hope he never got too used to coconut climate. But man, this is a throwback…"

The three sighed contentedly.

"I can't believe they'd rather smell like a mammoth's sweaty armpit than," Penguin spread his arms, "this!"

The wind picked up and snowflakes began to flutter around. Storm clouds gathered and swirled above them.

"Nice superpower," Saki said.

"They don't call me Penguin for nothing!"

Saki snickered and skipped her way to her room, trying not to laugh too loud at the smell of desperation coming from the men's quarters. She dug out from the depths of her trunk a pair of grey pants, a pear green turtleneck sweater, brown boots and a black coat with a faux fur-trimmed hood. She laid out the clothes on her bed and looked at them with obvious disenchantment. It was impossible to shop for bright colors in winter.

Ah, well. She wasn't going to be discouraged by a minor inconvenience. She had a good feeling about this island.

She put it all on and headed out again. She had never worn that coat much, because it had been a present from the old man on her twentieth birthday, and it was so nice she kept saving it for occasions that never came. She stopped in front of the stairs and felt the pockets with urgency when she realized she may have been missing something critical. No gloves. She'd need to get a pair in the island.

"Lost something?"

She turned around to see Law come out of his room with a long black coat under his arm.

"Didn't pack any gloves." She shrugged. "I've got pockets."

She began walking up the steps and Law followed.

"I've always wondered how cold a winter island in winter is compared to North Blue," Law said conversationally. He may not have been as expressive, but it was clear to anyone who knew him a little that he was as pleased with the weather as everybody else.

"Well, no matter how you look at it we were closer to the pole, so…” She took the last stairs to the deck and saw he had stopped. "Aren't you coming out?"

"I'll see how Bepo's doing in the bridge."

"Okay," she gripped the doors' handle and twisted it. "See you la—"
The parting was cut short by screams of terror, and when she opened the door all the way, she had no time to register what was happening before Shachi and Penguin lunged into the sub, crashed against her and made the three tumble down the stairs, sorry pile of limbs and shrieks taking Law down with it too, who instead of dodging had suffered from a sudden bout of trainwreck syndrome and stayed rooted in the spot.

They rolled until they hit the stairs to the bridge, and immediately they heard Bepo rush down to help.

Saki had an acute sensation of *déjà vu* as it became apparent that what had made Penguin and Shachi tackle her like the pair of savages they were was a sudden hail storm.

She tried not to think of the last time this had happened, because if it was any indication of how the next days would go, she'd rather lock herself in her room for a week and wait until everybody was done with running from law enforcement through sewers.

Bepo's thoughts must have been along the same lines, because she heard him ask, "Don't you guys get tired of this?"

They weren't spared the indignity of disentangling themselves before the rest of the crew came to the rescue, alerted by the noise, but at least they kept the inappropriate jokes for themselves, if only because they owed some respect to their captain.

Mack, meanwhile, watched the sad display skeptically from the mess hall's door.

Saki's boots sank in the snow and left a trail of footprints that looked tiny next to her companions'.

Winter was her favorite time of the year.

If you had asked her a year ago, she would have never thought that she'd be spending it in the Grand Line.

If you had asked her in that moment, she would have never guessed that on that same day, twenty-four years ago, her dad had stepped on that same island and caught sight, for the first time, of the woman who would become Saki's mom.

If you had asked her what her parents had been doing when they met, she would have said that her dad was on shore leave and her mom had been busy having her nose buried in a book and falling into a tree well. And while that would have been true, technically, it wouldn't have been the entire truth, though there was no way Saki could know that yet.

But in that instant, in the docks of a white town surrounded by mountains, with Penguin and Shachi showing the new mechanics the proper technique to make a snowball, Bepo looking the most content he'd been in months, and Mack almost smiling, there was no room in Saki's mind for memories of the dead.

"Happy?"

She clasped her hands over her mouth when she noticed she had been grinning while she stared, but the smile didn't drop.

Law was smiling too.

"It feels like home, doesn't it?" She asked him, and an unruly strand of hair escaped her hairpins to
flutter in the stormy wind. She tried to catch it as it blew in her face, but she couldn't see it well and missed it.

Law caught it easily and secured it behind her ear. "Isn't it?" He replied, and walked ahead to join the rest of the crew.

Saki could no longer blame the beat that her heart skipped on a medical condition, but she'd say the blush on her cheeks was, without a sliver of doubt, due to the winter cold.
Through the window behind the wooden sofa of the common room, the view was an undistinguishable smudge of grey and white and black. Ahead, a there was a semicircle of armchairs in front of the fireplace occupied by desperate newbie sailors for whom the closest thing to snow they’d seen in their lives was coconut frosting.

It was nighttime, and only a few hours after the Polar Tang docked on Niva, the sky had turned grey, the first snowflakes had begun to fall, and suddenly the wind wasn't as nice as it had been before, and staying on the street while freezing water buffeted you in the face wasn't exactly the Heart Pirates’ idea of a fun time. A local who had been hurrying to his home pointed them to an inn, and they’d gone inside just before the storm fully hit land.

Virtually indistinguishable from other houses in the village were it not for its bigger size and the sign on the door, it was built with rough stone and black slate roofing, and the floor was covered in thick carpets of different red, brown and orange shades.

Saki craned her neck to take a look outside. There was a small draft of icy wind coming in, which had made some of her crewmates vacate the area. She thought it was pleasant. The wind, not the vacating, though she wasn't going to oppose the latter, either.

Bepo was on the opposite end of the sofa, leaning back with a content smile. Shachi, Penguin and Mack occupied three armchairs around a low table with hot drinks and almond biscotti, which Mack kept munching on with a deadly serious expression, and nobody was sure if it was a good idea what to ask what he was thinking.

Saki took a sip of her spiced chocolate after she got bored of not seeing anything outside, and when she looked up from the mug she saw Penguin watching her. Even when she noticed, he didn't look away.

"Is there something wrong with my face, or have you fallen in love with me?" She asked, rising her brow.

Penguin cracked a smile. "You keep getting more freckles."

She lifted a hand to her cheek. She had noticed them getting darker since the last island. "Oh. Yeah, I've been getting more sunlight than usual lately."

"Psh, she isn't even a real redhead," Shachi commented disdainfully, but he was smiling. "She has no right to those."

Saki smirked at that. "Heh, you've been getting them too."

"Come to think of it," Penguin said. "What color is your hair?"

Her face fell. "Ever seen a wet rat crawling out of a drain after a storm?"

"Yeah?"
"That color."

"…Oh."

It also curled loosely and stuck out in every direction when it got too long, and she was starting to feel the need for a haircut before someone confused her with an anemone.

She took another sip of chocolate, this time a little somberly, while she gave the room a quick glance. There were a few other patrons stuck in the inn while snow kept falling, but the place was mostly empty. From what they had gathered, not many visitors that weren't from the surrounding villages or islands came to the village, so there wasn't much use for inns.

Niva had turned out to be an island scarred through the middle by cliffs that had pushed human population towards the edges of the land, and pines and fir trees had claimed every surface humans hadn't. If the townsfolk of Qaryn had built into the mountains, these people had built around them.

Log Poses, it seemed, couldn't point to this location, and the only way to reach it was with an Eternal Pose. The explanation for this was that there were other, bigger islands easily visible from the waterfront of Niva, and their magnetic field was much stronger, and that was just as well, because there was absolutely nothing of relevance in Niva itself. The other islands looked geographically similar, like the whole archipelago was the result of a submerged mountain range and the islands were merely its peaks. The configuration of the islands, when coupled with their influence fields, created a windy weather that, in winter, gave them top quality blizzards, which was why the Heart Pirates were comfortably sitting on their butts instead of doing what they thought being a pirate was about, whatever that was.

Law entered the room with a mug in his hand and a sour face. It was hard to tell, because he was a sour person overall, but the dip between his eyebrows looked more pronounced than usual. He plopped down on the sofa next to Bepo.

"Bad news?" Bepo asked.

"Bad weather forecast for a week, and the Log Pose will take a month to set."

The heads of the entire crew turned to him.

"A what?!" Tuttu asked from his spot in front of the fireplace.

"Don't worry, we'll find another way," Bepo said, still lying back, eyes closed. "And if we don't, it's just a month."

There were a few mumbles of resignation around the table, but the fireplace troupe didn't take it so well.

"Just a month? Are you serious? How are we gonna endure this?"

"You're a polar bear! Are you sure he won't sabotage us, captain?"

Law took a look at Bepo and waited a little too long before saying, "Yeah."

"That doesn't sound very convincing."

"We'll be fine," Saki said, not getting what the fuss was about. The weather in their island had sucked. "We've found a good place to stay. It could be much worse."
Shachi nodded sagely, hiding a smirk. "Like unreasonable weather."

"Aggressive fauna." Penguin said.

"Heat," Bepo chimed in.

"Marines," added Law.

"Coconuts," Mack sentenced.

A riot around the fireplace ensued, but the others were a majority and they thought they deserved the break after unrelenting coconut rain and weeks of sailing.

"We were lucky we found a place to stay before the storm hit," Shachi said, ignoring the ruckus behind them. "Heating the sub wouldn't have come cheap."

Penguin asked, "Did we come to this island for anything in particular, anyway?"

"To shake off the Marines," Bepo said.

"Yeah, but we don't have anything to do, right? Looks like that we can relax for a while."

Law took a few seconds to reply, "Yeah. We can take it easy."

So, given that statement, the next day was irony waiting to happen.

The entire village was snowed in, and by the time the Heart Pirates began to come down from their rooms, though the front door of the inn had been cleared, many of the other houses in the vicinity hadn't had that privilege. In fact, the inn still was surrounded by snow up to the windowsills of the first floor.

It looked like somebody had thrown a white blanket over the island and the locals were doing their best to carve it out with shovels.

If they wanted to check out the docks, it could either be a fantastic day to do it, if there were fewer workers around, or a terrible one if they were all there trying to make the area passable. Also, Layla had said that they had rented an entire section of the port, but maybe they were too late and they had gotten rid of the shipment when nobody had showed up to pick it up. It had taken them weeks to reach Niva, after all.

Those were Saki's general thoughts as she left the inn through the front door with her breakfast in hand, some sort of sweet flatbread, to bask in the early morning sun before its reflection on the snow started to burn. All the benches she had seen the day before were hidden from sight as a result of the blizzard, but she wasn't above plopping down on the snow and eating there.

On her search for a flat surface to sit on, she saw Law just a few paces away, ever the early riser, looking towards the sea. The village was on flat ground, right at the base of a mountain, but there weren't many buildings, and the horizon was visible between the gaps of the houses from their spot.

Indeed, all the benches were unavailable and villagers were too busy with making the streets usable to work on them. She located a crate against the inn's front wall that had been spared the worst of the storm thanks to an awning, dusted off the snow with a bare hand, and sat on it.

Thankfully, her coat was long enough to cover her bottom so her pants didn't soak. She took a bite of her breakfast and stared at the starer, wondering how long it would take him to realize that she was
there.

The loud crack of the pastry gave her away. So much for ninjaing her presence for a few minutes.

Law turned to her with a facial expression that hinted at a sore lack of caffeine in his system, which reminded Saki that she was on an official mission to acquire a new coffee pot to make shitty morning coffee so they could begin their mornings a little less shittily. She personally though that the others were a bunch of degenerates for being able to tolerate good coffee upon waking up.

"You're up early," he said.

The last bits of pink had faded from the sky, and winter nights were long, and even when it wasn't winter she was used to being up before the sun was out, and he knew all of this. He was thus speaking nonsense, which could mean that he was trying to make small talk, or that he was trying to steer the conversation before it could even begin so he didn't need to put up with her questions.

Law didn't do small talk. Not before the third coffee and with a notable shortage of interest, at least.

"I can pretend you just didn't say something painfully obvious and I can pretend I wasn't going to ask what was in your mind," Saki said while she chewed.

"I'd appreciate that."

"Consider it done," she said, happy to have guessed right, and she showed him the pastry. "Want some? You look like you need the sugar. And a vacation, but I don't have any of those."

"Maybe you should ask the captain for one," he suggested.

"Another time, maybe. I'm fine for now."

A small smirk made its way onto his face, but he still sounded tired. "Such a hardworking employee, aren't you?"

"I just don't know how to be idle. Want some or not?"

He shrugged, but approached her with a curious look. "What is it?"

The pastry was a flat strip of baked dough, very thin and brittle, painted with crystallized sugar on top.

"No clue," Saki said as she bit it and used her right hand to break it in half. "But I don't think it will kill you."

"That's a very low bar you're setting."

He sat on the crate next to her and took the piece she was holding in her mouth instead of her hand just to be contrarian.

Saki didn't know if she was supposed to feel offended, but she went for self-deprecation instead. "Careful, you may catch idiot germs."

"I've developed an immunity."

"Ah, yeah. Forgot that having the jerks immunized you against that one, sorry."

"Don't be. The epidemiology hasn't been as thoroughly researched as it should, given its spread."
That was a fairly long string of words. Saki took it as a positive sign.

"Well," she said, "you're a doctor and have plenty of study cases on board, so get on it."

"The sample size is too small in order to conduct a rigorous study."

"Then get a bigger sample."

"I was under the impression that you didn't like much having new people on board."

"Woah, rude," she said. "After I made the effort not to ask if you were thinking about what kind of cargo of Joker's we were going to find in this place."

Law regarded her for a moment with a mildly impressed face. Saki knew because his brow had raised enough to not be frowning so hard. "Not bad," he said, smirking through a bite of the pastry. "On both accounts."

"Told you," Saki said, taking a bite of her own piece. "And I blame the first bit on sharing a home."

He remained silent for a bit, staring at the street ahead. "Is that how you perceive them? Like intruders at home?" He asked, though it didn't sound like he was putting much stock in the theory. However, Saki's eyes widened and flicked with interest to Law.

"I've never thought about it like that."

"I wasn't expecting you had."

"You may be onto something, though." She crossed her legs, rested her arms on her knee, and her gaze wandered away to the people working on cleaning the street, not really paying attention to them anyway. She was swinging idly the flatbread between her index and thumb as she spoke. "Don't you have trouble getting used to people? I mean, it's easy enough to get along with strangers. I can say or do whatever I want because I'm not gonna see them again. But what do you do with people you have to see on a daily basis?"

Law's answer was dry and a perfect example of why Saki always used to get the morning coffee ready before he tried to speak to her. "That's because you are a liar. You wouldn't worry if you acted like a honest person."

"You're so goddamn charming," she muttered between her teeth. "I don't want you of all people telling me that. And when have I ever lied to you anyway?"

"Actively or by omission?"

She should have chosen a better rhetorical question. "That's not fair! I haven't lied to you on purpose since we met!"

"Point in case."

"Sometimes I hate when you're right," she huffed. "Give me back my pastry. You don't deserve it."

The only warning Saki had was the glint of danger that appeared in Law's eyes, and she dodged out of the way before he could make a grab for the piece she was still holding. However, the victory was short-lived, since it slipped from her fingers and fell to the snow.

She did what any sensible person wouldn't in her place, but no one could blame her. It wasn't like one had the luxury to stop and think in these sorts of situations.
"Five second rule!" She announced as she dived to retrieve it.

Law was very much not impressed as she blew on the pastry and went for another bite.

"You're going to catch something unspeakable. Do you not realize that bacteria in this island could be diff—"

"Live a little, Mr. Trafalgar," she said with a full mouth.

"That sounds so strange when you say it," he commented uncomfortably, and while she was distracted snickering at her own amazing wit, he reached in swiftly and broke off another piece from the remainder of her pastry.

"Thief!" She said, and a man clearing the entrance of a nearby home looked at her with concern. She waved at him with a forced grin.

"Pirate," he corrected.

"Jerkface doctor without a license," she grumbled, looking elsewhere. "Shadier than any other I've met. Freaking doctors."

"I thought you preferred me to them," he said sarcastically.

"Of course I do," she admitted without shame, surprising him. "But it's probably because you don't have the license."

"I wouldn't want it anyway. I can't stand patients."

She observed him with an amused expression. "That's so you."

"That's so descriptive."

"'Please Saki tell me what you mean.' Did I hear that right? Ah, yes I did!"

"You did not."

"Let's see…" She began anyway, taking a moment to organize her thoughts. "You like to take people apart and figure how to solve the problem, but you don't want to deal with the human component. Doctors have to. If they want to keep their job, that is. That's so you."

"That… isn't a bad assessment," he conceded reluctantly.

"But it doesn't matter, because for all the things you say and do you're still a softie inside, so you're just playing yourself," she said, because dang if she wan't going to get him back for the stolen breakfast.

"'I volunteer to clean the hull at every port.' Did I hear that right?" He mimicked her.

"You should get that checked, hearing voices isn't nor—"

The door to the inn opened, and they turned to see Mack coming out, looking disgustingly awake, with his hands stuffed inside his pockets and wearing a pair of blue earmuffs under his cap. He seemed a little surprised to see them, and automatically turned around.

"Didn't mean to interrupt," he said.
While Saki just groaned into her hands, Law was a bit more eloquent. "You didn't interrupt anything."

Mack's stare cut like a carving knife. "I did not?"

"No," Saki insisted.

"Really."

"What is it with you people? Can't you get your minds out of the gutter?"

"You might want to stop sitting so close if you don't want to give the wrong idea."

That irked her. What was so strange about sitting next to somebody? "There's no more room on the crate!"

"Lovely day we're having," Mack said offhandedly, looking at the sky. A cluster of dark clouds loomed in the distance, a fair warning of an oncoming storm. "Reminds me of my hometown. Bye."

"The heck— Mack, don't run away!"

"Leave him be," Law said, kicking back against the inn's wall. He had already eaten the pastry, even the piece that had fallen to the ground, and still looked like he wasn't fully awake.

She huffed. "Seriously, those people."

And they had been doing so well in Qaryn. Maybe the ratios of shippers and religious nutjobs had an inverse correlation going on.

"Who cares?" He said, bored.

"You don't? At all?" She asked, simmering down.

"As a rule, I don't care what other people think about me."

She wondered if that was really what he thought or the absence of caffeine making him cranky. "It's your crew."

"And a confusion that's easily cleared up."

"Hmm," she said, not entirely convinced, partly because he had seemed to care back in Lymes. "If you look at it like that."

"Stop thinking so much about everything."

"Again, that's something I don't want to hear coming from you." She shifted on the crate, her expression changing to something more serious. "Are you going to check out the port?"

"Later."

"I'm going too."

"I was counting on it."

She stared at him appraisingly, and she had to hold back the impulse to pinch his cheek because she didn't want to lose any fingers. "See? You aren't as bad as you try to appear."
"Tell that to the papers."

"Nah, it's fun reading about your reign of terror."

He snorted. "Reign of terror?"

"Aren't you going to be King? Gotta start somewhere."

He side-eyed her and a half smile spread on his face. "That's right."

"Then let the papers have their stories. But if anybody asks me, you're the guy who likes bad coffee and claims to hate bread but steals mine anyway."

He didn't reply right away. "That wasn't bread."

"And that's an argument for another day!" Saki said with a grin as she got up to head inside. "I'm going to get my rightful share of breakfast now since someone's taken most of it."

"Your fault for offering."

"Don't forget your morning coffee, you're impossible without it."

"Yeah, yeah, just go ahead already."

And she did, closing the door with care behind her, leaving him to deal with himself alone. Dear coconuts, he could be a handful.

Inaction was bad for him. That was one of the things that had been on his mind when he had so rudely been stared at and been forced to notice through the haze of a caffeineless early morning.

Inaction allowed him time to overthink, to reminisce, to hesitate.

To look at the snow under his feet and see red instead of white.

One step at a time. He was in Niva for that very reason.

It wasn't a very long way to the port, but it was made slower by Bepo and Saki stopping every now and then to window shop. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought that she didn't care at all about what they might find. He had to wonder how much of the carefree act was self-preservation to hide weak spots, how much trying not to worry anybody, and how much being good at compartmentalizing.

Upon reaching their destination, fishermen were unloading nets and crates of fish onto the docks, and a flock of loud seagulls was already circling the area, waiting for a chance to collect their spoils. Conspicuously empty, a small section of the already small port housed a few tiny warehouses in disuse that had seen better days. The ramshackle walls and ceilings were so rusted that it was just a matter of time before they caved in, and the snow piled on top of them couldn't be helping matters.

But despite the villagers not having much use for them, a man stood guard in front of one, sitting on a stool with a blanket covering his legs and at least four layers of clothes. He was old and wrinkly, sporting a white goatee that curved upwards, and giving the pirates that cynical stare that someone who has run out of fucks to give often displays in the face of novelty.

He took a swig out of a hipflask he had concealed inside his brown coat and a drag out of a cigarette before saying, "If you're here for the boxes, you've got to pay the fine."
"Excuse me?"

"I know you lot aren't used to pay for what you want, but we're backwater, not dumb," the man said curtly. "Pay or leave. Try something weird and the guys at the docks will take care of you and your ship."

True to word, a few fishermen and docks workers were drilling holes into their skulls. Law's first instinct was to sever some limbs, but he couldn't afford that. Not while they didn't have an immediate way out of the island.

"You don't have any idea who you're talking to, do you?" Said Law, whose mood had gone from okay to sour in the span of an unwarranted threat, and was now intent on delivering it back.

"I do."

"Then—"

"You're the man who's either going to pay for the overstay of his cargo, or turn around and go back where he came from." He paused. "It hope it's the first one. It's cold out here."

"When was the cargo delivered?" Saki intervened before Law could say something not so nice.

The old man relaxed slightly, but he still gave her the stink eye. "About a month ago, which is how long I've been sitting here too. Shouldn't you know that already?"

Law stepped in again. "That cargo isn't ours, and the buyer isn't interested on picking it up anymore."

The man looked at Law straight in the eye. "Well, that changes things. No point in keeping it here." He breathed out a puff of smoke to the side. "Into the sea it goes."

Law frowned. Bepo's brow went up and his mouth opened in surprise. Saki's mouth twitched and Law was sure that she was holding back a smile, which made him frown even more in a 'what-the-hell-do-you-find-so-funny' way. She noticed and coughed awkwardly to the side.

"Is there no way we can retrieve it instead?" She asked with a smile.

The man turned his attention on her, intrigued. "What are you offering?"

"Not money."

His eyebrows arched. "You drive a hard bargain."

"So?" She grinned. "Anything we can do for you?"


"Captain," she said, giving him a 'let me do the talking' look.

He rolled his eyes discreetly and left her to her own devices. He would admit he wasn't the best at talking people into doing something voluntarily. If heavily pressed to it. And not very loudly.

The man seemed to consider the offer, and after a while he said, "My wife's at home with a mountain of snow blocking the door."

"She's snowed in?" Bepo asked with alarm.
The cigarette fell from the man's mouth onto his lap. It burned a hole in the blanket before he reacted and tossed it away. "You can talk?!!"

"What are—!"

"So you were about to ask us to clear the snow, right?" Saki interrupted them loudly before the conversation could devolve anymore.

"Oh, yeah."

Law wasn't so sure. "You really don't want the money?"

Saki's eyes were spikes straight to Law's vital organs that he shrugged off like nothing. "Captain, please leave this to me."

"Yes, leave it to her, she's faring better than you so far," the man said, raising an eyebrow at Law. "I don't get to keep the money of the fine and orders are to destroy the cargo if it doesn't get picked up by the owners. You want it, saves me the hassle of moving the crates. And the snow is more important."

"Yes it is," Saki said in a hurry to prevent Law from replying. "Your wife must be having a hard time alone."

"She's tough," he shrugged. "You lot don't look like much, but any help's good." He got up with an effort, and nobody was sure if what had creaked was the stool or the man's joints. "Name's Ruddy," he extended a hand towards Saki, and she shook it. "C'mon, follow me."

And with an uneven gait, he started to walk head into the village.

"Thank you!" Saki said as she hurried after him, then shot at Law in a lower voice, "You could be a tad more cooperative."

Law grumbled an insincere thank you that seemed to amuse Ruddy.

The trek to Ruddy's house was a convoluted walk between stone houses and with a brief detour at the village's plaza, where a fountain with a wide trough was frozen solid, and a group of kids were trying to skate on it and building snowmen around.

"Who do I have the pleasure of guiding into my humble abode?" He asked sarcastically.

"The Heart Pirates."

"Huh," Ruddy said in wonder, "so who's who?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who is The, Heart and Pirates?"

Was this man punning them? Really? Did pirates not instill fear in anybody anymore?

"I love this man," Saki said.

He turned his head to gift her a smile that lacked several teeth. "Sorry, lass, happily married for fifty years."
"Damn," she said, disappointed. "Had to give it a shot."

"Can't blame you. When I was your age, all the girls in the village—"

"Ruddy! 'Bout chillin' time you arrived! Who are these people?"

In his mind, Law had conjured many images, most of them consisting in an old lady trapped inside her own home, or, alternately, struggling to clear a path in front of her door, armed with just a shovel and an age-worn body.

Instead of that, he found a house so buried by snow that it might as well have been an igloo, and a wiry woman shoveling snow with the fierce energy of a ten year old in the middle of a sugar rush.

"I brought help, honey!"

"Huh?" She looked at them over her thick, tortoiseshell glass frames, hair white as snow coiffed in a tight bun. She wouldn't have looked out of place in a library. "They're noodle people and a bear, Ruddy."

As he had told Saki that morning, Law didn't mind what people thought about him, much less an old woman he didn't know, but he felt justly offended on the basis that she wasn't the most adequate person to make that remark. The shovel looked thicker than her arms.

"Don't worry, Hilda, sea people are sturdy."

Saki stared at the snow hill with wide eyes. "I don't know if this much."

"Pfeh," Hilda said, and she went back to her work.

"No work, no cargo," Ruddy reminded them.

Saki turned her panicked eyes to Bepo, who also seemed to be in shock, and he redirected their combined feelings towards Law with a puppy stare.

Law, stony as ever, looked at the snow, then at his crewmates, and declared solemnly, "We need reinforcements."

"What about your Room?" Saki whispered to Law.

"Not wide enough to drop it anywhere else." Not to mention he didn't want to use his Devil Fruit for something like this.

She grimaced. Hilda gave them a disdainful glance.

"City youngsters. Can't stand a little hard work."

Bepo put a paw on Law's shoulder when his captain twitched.

"We'll be back soon!" Saki said in a hurry to get Law out of there. "We're going to get some friends to get this done faster."

"Sure," Ruddy said, walking to his wife to help. "But don't take long, we need to get inside for lunch."

"My balls. Are. Freezing."
"Shut up and keep shoveling," Shachi spat with all the crankiness he could not direct towards the
owners of the house.

But he could throw the snow far away to find some release for his bad mood. In fact, if one paid
attention to the way the entire crew shoveled, there would be a palpable difference between the
technique between the people who had spent a good part of their lives in the North Blue and those
who had not. That is to say, those who hadn't looked like they were about to injure themselves from
a lack of practice.

"How did you get out of the house?" Saki shouted at Hilda as she drove the shovel into the snow
with a foot.

"How else?" She nudged up, a cigarette like the ones Ruddy smoked hanging from her lips.
"Through the chimney."

The chimney was, indeed, the only discernible part of the house, and there was a small
circumference around it devoid of snow. They had probably lit a fire inside to melt the blockage and
climb out.

"You wouldn't believe the puddle inside." Ruddy took a gulp of the concoction in his hipflask and
burped in her wife's general direction, making a flame come out from her cigarette.

"Oops," he said, and broke into laughter.

"Gosh dang it, Ruddy, fire elsewhere."

"Remind me why we're here," Asuka grumbled, getting his shovel stuck in the snow and needing
Uni's help to get it out.

"Loot," Uni said, pulling as hard as he could. Both landed on their butts and the shovel landed on
them. "We get rid of the snow and it's ours."

"I thought pirates didn't need to work for what they wanted," Tuttu commented. He was so big that
he was clearing his side of the house twice as fast as the rest of them.

"Ha!" Shachi said sardonically, "We work ten times harder than normies! If you wanted an easy job
you should have stayed home."

"It's not like we can go pissing off everybody we meet," Penguin added. "Well, technically we can,
but it isn't healthy."

"And we're a very healthy bunch," Saki said insincerely.

"I expected more alcohol going around, actually," Uni remarked.

"No one's getting drunk on duty," Law said, more out of obligation than conviction, probably
because he could have done with a strong drink at the moment.

"Good policy, son," said Ruddy with a sage nod and a swig of his hipflask.

"Someone's taking the piss out of us," Shachi said with gritted teeth.

"Y'all foreigners are lightweights," Hilda said. "We don't go gettin' drunk in Niva."

"Yeah, sure."
"It's true," Ruddy said. "Some doctor fancypants came to study Nivan genetics because we have a mutation or something."

"That could just mean you have a high tolerance," Law said in a monotone. "Humans can't not get drunk."

"Try me," Ruddy grinned.

"Spoken like a true lightweight," Hilda mumbled.

Saki thought that Law was probably testing his own self-control by not slicing this woman into tiny bits, and suddenly she was glad that he wasn't using his Room to get rid of the snow, because surely that would not have helped the temptation. He was glowering in a way that suggested that he was about to steal a liver for science.

"Captain," Bepo called him.

Law shared a look with him and kept shoveling as if nothing had happened, back turned to Hilda. Every bit helped to quell the bloodthirst.

Clearing the surroundings of the house took hours, a grueling effort, and a makeshift blowtorch courtesy of Ruddy's breath when they got tired of shoveling and people started to complain that they were hungry.

"You can stay here for lunch if you want," Hilda offered, leaning against her shovel and looking at the gigantic puddle inside her house. "But I'm not cookin'."

"We can take care of that," Mack said with a long suffering expression as the entire mechanic crew, navigator and treasurer turned to him in a silent plea. "Show me the kitchen."

Hilda went inside and stayed with Mack for the whole duration of the cooking, despite not doing any of it herself, watching over the man's shoulder to make sure that he wasn't going to poison everybody, probably. Mack acted normal, but behind the stoic demeanor and after spending so many days in the kitchen with him, Saki could see the stiffness of his back as he moved, and she made an effort to stay far from the kitchen's doorway because the chance of flying pans with a side of knives looked high. Hilda had an amazing ability to get on the nerves of the men of the crew, it seemed.

She realized they'd been conned into doing more work – namely, cooking and cleaning – when, only moments after they had entered the house, boots deep in a puddle, Ruddy appeared from somewhere inside carrying mops and passed to the perplexed pirates saying, "While you're here, make yourselves useful."

Saki tried to stay as far away from Law, too, after that, though no one inside the house could be safe from him if he decided to wreak havoc, and he looked like he really, really wanted to.

Lunch was ready about the same time they were finished with the puddle and Ruddy had managed to start the fireplace and hang the rug in front of it to dry. Between all of them, they occupied every single chair and stool in the house, and a small wooden bench between a pair of shelves. There wasn't enough room in the table for everybody. Saki took the only available spot on the bench, because two precarious-looking piles of books had already been sitting on it.

That was the thing about the house. Everywhere on the dark wood furniture there were heaps and heaps of books, piled on every available surface that wasn't the floor and the dinner table, and many of the stacks were dusty and oddly reminiscent of her own home in Asteria. She liked it.
They also had the same blue curtains trimmed with lace that Felicia had been considering for her room, and Saki choked on her soup upon recalling how that conversation had gone.

"You sure you don't want to sit over here?" Uni offered, sticking his chair next to Penguin's and huddling next to him to leave her room. "It's narrow but—"

"No, thanks, it's fine," she said, feeling a drop of soup sliding down her nose.

"Really?" He glanced at the book towers with uncertainty. "Because that looks dangerous."

Saki glanced over the books with nostalgia. "Nah, they're solid. It's alright."

"She's right," Hilda said. "They've been there for twenty years, they aren't goin' to start fallin' now."

No wonder they were dusty. Saki approached a tentative index finger towards the books. She heard some crewmembers holding their breath. She poked the pile, which now that she noticed, was interwoven with the one next to it, giving it more stability. It was a miraculous feat of practical engineering.

Saki knew about piling up things because her mother had been an expert at it. She could play Jenga with those books and win, she thought, but she didn't say it out loud because she was pretty sure the others would be as enthusiastic to see it happen as Hilda would not.

So instead, she said, "Rock solid."

"They're the missus'," Ruddy explained. "Stocks for the shop."

"You have a bookshop?" Bepo asked, ears perking up. He was always looking for new navigation material.

Even though she answered, Hilda was still looking at Saki, and seemed to be deep in thought. "Second-hand, yes. Can't say it's goin' well in this weather, but it's the same every year."

"You mean it's the same all year 'round, Hilda."

"What am I s'posed to do if people aren't interested in what I sell?" She countered, plainly annoyed.

Saki thought the best course of action would be to close up the shop, but she could see in Ruddy's face that he'd had this conversation a hundred times before and it was a royal waste of time.

Lunch went by without incident, and after that, the crew said goodbye to Ruddy and Hilda and scattered again to explore the village. Hilda did not stop staring at Saki's face, and she was feeling self-conscious enough to throw on the hood of her coat as soon as they were outside and she had an excuse to do so. Ruddy told Law it was a good time to go to the docks because there weren't many workers at that hour, so off they went, again only the three of them plus their guide.

The sky looked grey again that afternoon, and the worst of the snowfall had been shoveled away, but the villagers hadn't done a very thorough job. It most likely meant that they expected another blizzard soon, which also meant they needed to be swift about this whole deal. Salt and ice fragments crunched under Saki's boots as Ruddy brought them to the warehouse once again.

She didn't know what she was expecting to find, but if pressed to make a wish, she'd have hoped for a clue about what had happened in Asteria. In all honestly, she was banking on learning a little more about Law's motives to have sailed to Asteria, and with some luck, one day get out of him what he had been looking for when he visited her hometown.
She didn't need to know. She wasn't going to hold it against him if he didn't tell her – all right, maybe a little, if only because it made her feel untrustworthy. But she just wanted to find out and put that doubt to rest.

The door of the warehouse was stuck and Ruddy could open it, so they left the honors to Bepo and he unintentionally tore it off its hinges.

"I'm so sorry!" Bepo said turning blue, still holding the door in his paw.

Ruddy stared at the remains of the door with a clinical eye and clapped Bepo on the back. "City hall's problem, not mine." He waved a hand and motioned them inside.

The place reeked of humidity, and what little light that came through the very small, dirty windows at the top made it the perfect place for mold to grow. There were two big wooden crates in it, and they were going green like the walls.

"That's it," Ruddy said. "Have at them, I don't want to see those things again."

Upon closer inspection, the lids were nailed, and someone had slapped invoices on them with the current address of the boxes, the word 'SMILE', and an outrageous money value.

"Damn," Saki said under her breath, wondering on what kind of shipment a fruit merchant could spend millions of beli. But while she was feeling a little lost, something seemed to have clicked in place for Law when he saw the price tag.

"Bepo, please," Law said, and without further ado, Bepo grabbed one of the lids and pulled it up, sending up rusted nails and wood splinters.

The box was full of mango-like fruits, their color a sky blue Saki had never seen on any, and there was a swirly pattern on their peel. The Grand Line sure had weird things.

"So that was it…” Law muttered, and nudged Bepo towards the other box. He repeated the process, and found the same contents in it. Law lowered himself to pick up one of the fruits and inspect it, and his two companions got closer to him to watch.

"How can there be so many?” Bepo asked him.

Saki's attention turned to Bepo. "Do you know what this is?"

"These are—"

Bepo was interrupted by the sound of someone spitting and maybe dying, and when they turned in the direction of the sound they saw Ruddy with a bitten fruit in his hand, looking at the offending produce as if it had tried to murder him. "This thing has gone bad. I knew I should've thrown them in the sea." And he chucked it against the floor, where it rebounded and rolled until it was before Law's feet.

The blue mango was cream white inside, and for a moment, Law's face had been the same color as he gaped.

"That's a Devil Fruit!" Bepo yelled.

Two head whipped towards him.

"What?"
"WHAT?"

Law smacked his face. Saki's gaze fell on the crates.

"Those are Devil Fruits?!" She tried to do a quick count of how many there were. There had to be about thirty in each crate. "Aren't they supposed to be rare?"

"You people are reaching," said Ruddy behind them. "There's no way these are Devil Fruits. …Ugh, my head feels heavy."

Saki glanced over her shoulder to look at Ruddy and she stumbled into Bepo. "EEEEEH?"

"What? Something on my face?"

"You've grown antlers!"

"I have—" He started to rebut with indignation, but then he waved his hand above his head and hit solid. "—indeed grown something, lass."

Saki stood dumbstruck at the general situation. "So what now?"

"Yeah, what now?" Ruddy kept trying to sneak glances at the antlers, but he couldn't look up high enough, and it became a bit like watching a dog pursuing his own tail. "Am I stuck with these antlers for life? How am I supposed to go through doors?"

"You can make them disappear anytime," Law explained with a patience that was wearing very thin. Saki internally acknowledged the display of infinite patience Law was making that day. She just hadn't found a moment to tell him, and in retrospect, after he had stolen most of her breakfast, she wasn't sure he deserved it.

"Well, I sure don't know how to."

"Don't look at me; I don't know either. We can't even know for sure what model this fruit is."

"It looks like a reindeer to me," Saki said.

"It's a moose," Bepo replied.

Ruddy wasn't giving up in his attempt to catch sight of his antlers. Evidently, he failed. "My wife must have something about Devil Fruits in the middle of all those books. Might not hurt to take a look…"

"That's a good idea," Law said, letting a smidgen of pleased surprise in his tone. "There are Devil Fruit guides, but even then, this particular fruit may not have been classified yet."

"These are called Zoan, right?" Saki asked, staring at the antlers. The only way Ruddy was going to make it through a door with those was walking sideways. "Why do we need a guide if we have an idea of what it is?"

"Because it's easier to find the market value for a classified fruit than one nobody knows about. And in light of what these crates have inside, the price tag strikes me as too low."

Saki's brow furrowed when she looked at him. "But these invoices are for tens of millions," she replied.
"Precisely."

"Really? How crazy expensive do they get?" She said, not really expecting an answer, but Law was quick to supply one.

"Highest price I've seen is five billion," he said somberly.

Her mouth opened wide. It wasn't like she was underestimating a fruit's power, after watching Law in action a few times, but even then, she doubted many people were as skilled as him at using theirs, and his fruit could do pretty amazing things. But apparently, some people paid millions to grow reindeer antlers. Or moose's. Whatever.

"You mean we could sell these for that?" Ruddy said while Saki picked up her jaw from the floor.

"No. The average is a hundred million, give or take."

"A hundred million?" Ruddy didn't look discouraged at all. In fact, his smile kept growing steadily.

"Who would pay that much to eat one of these and never be able to swim again?" Saki said, arms crossed and frowning a little as she looked at the crates' contents. "No offense."

"None taken."

Saki doubted very much Law had paid for his, anyway, which brought up the question of how one stumbled upon a Devil Fruit in one of the Blues, but it didn't seem like something that should be asked, whether in the present company or alone. It was related to the Amber Lead sickness, and she knew better than to dredge up painful memories.

"Who cares about that?" Ruddy said. "If you can get this much out of one..." He trailed off, eyes sparkling when he looked at the crates. His pupils were halfway into morphing to beli symbols.

"...Then nobody in their right mind would abandon the cargo," Saki said, pulling Ruddy out of his daydream. "Something's wrong with these."

"They are all wrong," Law said.

"Huh? Am I going to die?!" Ruddy asked right away, grabbing his antlers and trying to yank them off.

"We're all going to die eventually," Law replied without an ounce of sympathy.

"What Captain means is that there's only one of each Devil Fruit," Bepo explained. "That's why they are so rare and expensive."

"And you can't tell where they'll grow, so this..." He bumped a crate with a foot, hands firmly stuck on his pockets. "Is not even a statistical miracle. It's downright impossible."

"But they are here! And they work, see?!" Ruddy interjected, trying to wave an antler around. It came off with a pop, and his eyes bulged out. "WHAT?!"

"Moose shed their antlers," Bepo said calmly.

"Oh. Right. Er..." He started tugging at the other one. "Can anyone help with this? My head's out of balance."

"Just go back to full human form," Law grumbled, and turned his attention to the cargo. "We'll take
the invoices and a few samples. And we’ll impose on you some more, if you can help us find that book."

Ruddy halted his struggle with the remaining antler. "Just… just a few? You don't want them all?"

"You can do whatever you want with them. Just don't try to eat another one."

His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why?"

"You'd die."

"Well, isn't that charming," Ruddy said between his teeth. "There isn't enough money in the world to make me bite another one of those anyway."

Saki picked up from the floor the remains of the fruit Ruddy had eaten and sniffed. Despite being used to all sorts of foul smells, it triggered her gag reflex, and she immediately threw it away.

"Bad?" Law asked as if he had expected the result.

The sour smell had stuck to her tongue and throat and it itched. "It's like rotten eggs and spoiled milk had a baby, left it in the sun for days, and coated it in blue paint."

"Sounds about right."

Saki knew that Law didn't appreciate pity, but she couldn't look at him with any other emotion once she realized he'd had to swallow one of those monstrosities. No wonder he could eat his own cooking after that experience.

He took a pair of untouched fruits and gave them one last glance before putting them under his arm. "Let's get going," he told Saki and Bepo. "Take another two each of you. I'm going to run some tests." He then said to Ruddy, "Where can we find your wife's bookshop?"

"Fourth street to the right from main street, right turn when you reach the plaza, second left alley, under the arch until…" He stopped when he saw the faces of the pirates. "Just ask around. Everybody knows where it is."

"Will do," Law said. "Come on."

"And buy a lot from her! We need to make room!" He shouted at them as they were leaving.

"Sure!" Saki replied with a grin, and she pushed Law towards the door when she saw him pause and rise his brow at Ruddy's comment. The man had no manners.

Law walked fast through the snowy streets to the sub, and while Bepo could keep up no problem, Saki's legs were shorter, and she ended up falling into a jog that made her discard her coat as soon as they were inside the Polar Tang.

"What's the hurry?" We're stuck here for weeks either way," she said. Tall people never had any consideration.

Law wasn't looking at her when he replied. "The less people see us with these, the better."

"You're paranoid, and coming from me that's saying something," Saki remarked. "No one's going to know what these are."

"Have you considered that somebody may have remained in the village until the deal was done?"
That somebody might be after the trail of the shipment?"

Saki's face darkened. "Nobody's investigating this shithead. I don't know who Joker is, but he's well connected."

"We aren't having an argument because you have short legs," Law sentenced.

"And you don't need to be a dick about it either."

Law and Saki glared at each other for a moment. Bepo coughed to catch their attention.

"Where do we leave the fruits?"

Law's stance relaxed. "In the sickbay's fridge. I need to get a few things ready before I work on them."

"What do you want to do?"

"Compare them to each other. Check them against references, if we find any."

It was a well-defined plan for someone who had just come across a situation this weird, which meant a theory was already forming in his head.

"Something on your mind?" Saki asked.

"Remember Rickhard's autopsy?"

Saki turned her nose. "Is it 'disgust Saki day' today?"

Law took that as a yes. "These may to do something with it."

She tried to recall the conversation they'd had, but the foremost thing in her mind was the pungent smell from the decaying corpse, and she could've done without it. "You said the transformation was wrong," she remembered, "but I don't get it. He had just eaten the fruit, chances are he didn't know how to use it." Law opened his mouth, but she continued before he could retort. "And I know you said it isn't supposed to happen. I just want to know why."

Law piped down, annoyance gone from his features if you didn't count the sour look, but that was permanently etched in his face.

"When you eat a Devil Fruit, you instinctively know how to activate your power, even if you can't handle it yet. Zoan types are simple in this regard, because the transformation is the activation in itself. You can transform into one of the forms or not be able to do it at all, but you can't stop in the middle. Not accidentally. It's simply not how it works."

"And if it wasn't accidental?"

"That requires extensive training, and you've said a few times he had just acquired it."

Saki pondered on Law's words, unable to see any holes in his logic. "What's your take on the impossible being possible, then?"

Law meditated his response, but when he spoke, he did it decisively. "If these Devil Fruits aren't subject to the same rules as the ones we know, then it means they are not."

"You think it's a different strain?" Bepo asked. "But how…?"
Saki gasped inaudibly when he realized what he was hinting at. "You think they're artificial," she said. Maybe even mass-producing them, as it made sense with what they had found and what Layla had said in the restaurant. "But can that be?"

"Yeah…" Bepo said, thinking hard. "Where do you get the technology for that?"

"Let's look at it from another angle. What are Devil Fruits?" Saki and Bepo looked at him expectantly. "They are essentially weapons. And who is biggest developer of military technology in the world?"

The entire group fell silent as the implications sank in.

"The government isn't sponsoring these smugglers," Saki said. "If nothing else, they actively try to sink or capture their ships in North Blue."

"They don't need to be behind them. There just needs to be somebody leaking information to Joker."

Silence fell between them again, and Bepo bowed out of the sickbay after it was clear that there wasn't any more conversation to be had. Saki lingered a bit longer with the idle thought that some of these might have been sent to Asteria, if Law's theory was true. Had he been following their trail, as he had suggested earlier someone else might be? He hadn't known about the artificial Devil Fruits, so he had been interested in those. She didn't have to think much to find the missing piece. With him, everything always seemed to point to Joker.

"What are you after? She ended up asking, quietly, eyes fixed on the blue surface.

He didn't say anything immediately, as he was wont to do when she asked a heavy question, often inadvertently, but she didn't try to take it back this time. She knew better than to interpret the pause as annoyance, now.

"Settling a debt," he said in a tone that betrayed no sentiment, so, by virtue of how guarded he was, she deduced he was being honest.

Whether he wanted to pay back a favor or an offense, she couldn't tell, but she knew the need to even a score all too well, and what going through with it could mean, and that was why she didn't like hearing him speak in those terms.

"Careful with the price," she said, and she saw him glance at her sideways. "Sometimes it isn't worth paying."

"This one is," he said after a second's consideration, in a way that left no room for argument.

And that only made her sad, because when you didn't set a price limit for something you wanted, you always ended up paying more than you should have. It was true shopping in a market, and it was true in life. Otherwise, someone would eventually end up squeezing the last drop of value out of you.

She let out a resigned breath through her nose and, not wanting to intrude in his thoughts any longer, gave him a light squeeze on the arm that she hesitated about in an attempt to be comforting, and left the sickbay.

She considered going to her room until her mood was better, but in the end decided to head up to the upper deck in hopes for a distraction. She found Bepo sprawled on the snow that had covered it overnight, looking at the dim sky.
They shared a solemn look, unspoken understanding going between the two of them, and Saki tossed on her coat again without bothering to zip it and dropped next to him. The world became a cloudy circle with fake fur borders when she landed.

They stayed like that a few minutes, Saki not really thinking about anything, until she finally said wearily, "Why is he so difficult all the time?"

Bepo let out a tired sigh of his own. "You can't help someone who doesn't want to help himself," he said wisely. "Only try to make it easier for him."

Saki thought about what that meant for Bepo, Law, and the rest of them. "I'm not sure what he's doing, but I don't like how it sounds."

"That's all right," Bepo replied with a tinge of sadness. "Do you want to leave?"

Saki turned her head to stare at him. "What?"

"Leave the crew. You can go if you aren't happy. I don't want you to, but if you—mpffhhh!"

Saki had sat up swiftly and thrown a snowball straight to his mouth. Properly directed, the fire in her eyes could have melted the snow on the entire deck.

"How dare you!" She said with overflowing indignation.

Bepo stopped coughing snow to say, "W-what?! What did I do?!"

"What is it with all you dickwads asking me same?! Do you think I'll bail after all the shit we've been through?! Who do you take me for?!" She punctuated every question with a new snowball.

Bepo flinched. "N-no, sorry, I—"

"Do you think I'm here because I owe you? I'm here because I like you and I care about you, so stop trying to kick me out of my home or I'll, I'll—I'll only cook vegan from now on!"

"You wouldn't—!" He stopped mid gasp. "Wait, Mack's in charge of the menu now. You have no power over me."

That was the wrong thing to say. Saki automatically began to pelt him with more snowballs, perfectly designed to hurt after a childhood's worth of experience throwing them at the kid down the street, and Bepo, horrified, covered his face with his paws and made a strategic retreat towards the other side of the deck; not that it deterred Saki.

The door to the sub opened with a creak that meant someone had to oil those hinges soon.

"Stop bullying my navigator."

She made a one hundred eighty degree turn and hit him with a snowball square in the chest. Law's only reaction was glancing at the spot where it had hit expressionlessly.

"That was pathetic."

"Your face is pathetic!"

His brow twitched. A small victory.

"…Seriously?"
"It's your fault that I'm angry! Bepo can tell you!"

"Bepo, that's insubordination."

"She said she likes us!" Bepo shouted from the end of the deck.

"What the hell, you furry traitor!"

She was caught by the wrist before she could launch the next barrage of projectiles.

"Cease fire immediately," Law said with a straight face.

Sometimes, people do stupid things. Often, they don't know why they did them. People who work at an ER soon learn to ask their patients what they did instead why, and Saki sure did something stupid without thinking about it when she asked defiantly, "Or else?"

Anger is a terrible thing to have clouding your judgement.

Thankfully for her, Law wasn't angry. There was no point, and he thought that blowing off steam was a healthy thing, but he also had to worry about the wellbeing of his crew, and his navigator's honor was also his to protect.

Saki's world was quite literally turned around when he picked her up from her legs and tossed her over his shoulder, face smacking solidly against his back.

"What the hell?!"

"Let's go before the weather gets worse, Bepo," he said, completely ignoring her yelling and flailing.

"Aye!"

"Put me down!"

"You're heavier than you look," he said just to be nasty, because he had the weights of his entire crew in their medical records.

"Do you practice to be a bigger asshole every day?"

"Some people make it easy."

They were making their way through the village and attracting a lot of undue attention when Saki said, "This is exactly the kind of shit that makes people think we're—AAAAHHHHH!"

He had let go of her for a second and she had slid downwards, face inches away from greeting the snow intimately.

"You were saying?" He said as he readjusted her for his own commodity.

"I still don't know why I put up with you."

"Because you like us," he said like a smartass.

Powerless to defend herself, because she doubted pinching him on the side would have any positive consequences for her, Saki let herself be quietly carried like a sack of potatoes just to not give him the satisfaction of hearing her whine, but when they had been walking for five minutes and she was getting tired of staring at Law’s footprints, Bepo spoke.
"There's a big storm approaching."

"Let's leave the book store for another moment, then."

"I think the blood's getting to my head," Saki said blandly.

"Don't worry, it won't make much of a difference."

"Worst unlicensed doctor ever."

"Do you really want me to drop you?"

He made good on his threat when they reached the inn and let her go on a pile of snow under a window that no one had bothered to clear. Law went inside and Bepo remained just long enough to check that she wasn't hurt and tell her, "Get up soon, the storm's about to hit."

She gestured him from her icy mattress to go ahead, and she was pulling herself up when the window opened outwards and the windowpane hit her smack dab on the forehead, sending her down again.

"Shit, sorry!"

She couldn't see him while her hands covered her face, but it sounded a lot like Penguin.

"No prob," she said tiredly. At this point in her life, she was just grateful that she had only broken her nose once.

"What's the deal?" That was Shachi. She stopped blocking her eyes and saw the two guys leaning on the windowsill. "We were watching."

"I was throwing snowballs at princess Bepo when his white knight came to the rescue."

"By tossing you over his shoulder?"

She considered her reply, and her eyes glinted when she realized something. "Maybe he was the steed and I'm the prince?"

Shachi snorted. Meanwhile, someone inside the inn yelled at them to close the window, to which they paid no attention.

"I was thinking…" She said, pressing tentatively on her forehead, and she winced.

"Oh no," Shachi replied.

"…How long has it been since you were in a snowball fight?" She finished, paying him no mind.

Penguin grinned. "Oh yes."

"Come to think of it," Shachi said, going down the memory lane, "it's been years. And these guys have never seen snow before."

"I bet they played with muddy coconut balls," Saki pointed out.

Penguin's mouth turned in disgust. "That should be a crime."

"We're all criminals, Peng."
"But we have standards."

Saki contemplated their discussion with a mischievous smile. "So what will it be?"

"Tomorrow morning," Penguin announced.

"Tomorrow morning!" She raised her fist for a fistbump.

"Dude, your hands are frozen," Shachi said after touching it.

"It's under control, I can still feel my fingers." She wriggled them.

"Here, lift the other," Penguin said, reaching over with his.

She did as asked. "Why d—aaaaahhh!

Both guys grabbed an arm each in unison and pulled her inside through the window, dragging her between them, on the couch, upside-down.

"Thanks for the warning!" Saki said, turning around and accidentally kicking Shachi in the face.

"Tell us," Penguin said from very close up, throwing an arm around her shoulders as Shachi did the same. "What did you find?"

She crossed her arms and gave the two an unimpressed stink eye. "Is this an intimidation attempt?"

"No! We're co-conspirators!"

"No one's having any respect for my personal bubble today." She sighed, and then threw her arms around them too and said in a hushed voice, "Weird fruits."

"As in…?"

"Yeah. Captain thinks there's something wrong with them, though. Talk to him for details."

"Huh…" Penguin mused. "I've never seen one before. How are they?"

"Tell me they don't look like coconuts."

"They're pale blue mangoes with swirly doodles on the peel."

"Cool."

"Sounds like the kind of stuff you don't believe it's real until you see it," Penguin said.

Saki nodded. "I'm sure he'll show you if you—"

Someone from outside their cool conspiracy group interrupted them. Uni and Mack were playing cards on the other side of the room, but the distance wasn't doing much to help the draft of cold wind that was passing through the window. Mack didn't look fazed at all, but was he ever? Uni, however, was getting smaller on his chair by the second.

"Close that window!" He growled. "And what are you talking about?"

"Your face," Penguin replied.

He reached tentatively to touch his mask, maybe wondering if there was something wrong with it.
"Anyway," Penguin whispered again to his couchmates, "let's talk about the actually important stuff."

"Yeah," Shachi agreed with a serious expression. "Do we build a fort before they wake up, or not?"

"Definitely," Saki said without thinking.

"It's a tactical necessity," Penguin agreed.

"This way they'll learn that they need to be prepared at all times," Saki said.

"It's a valuable lesson to teach them," Shachi said. "Since we're their superiors…"

The war strategy meeting was interrupted by a flurry of snow that hit them on the back of their heads, prompting Uni to yell at them once more to close the goddamned window already.

They did, but not without thinking of what awaited him the next day. Let him lower his guard, they thought. In a few hours, he'd learn what kind of stuff North Blue people were made of.
The situation was dire.

So dire, in fact, that Saki was one hundred per cent certain that never in her life she had been cornered in such an unexpected way. She had a sixth sense for danger, and after years of relentless training she knew how to strike swiftly and effectively to render her enemies defenseless before they could counterattack. But this time, the danger had gone completely over her head, and thanks to this oversight, they were all paying dearly for it.

In any case, humans are animals, no matter how wrapped up they get in their little civilization game, and one thing that happens with cornered animals is that they lash out.

Saki had been playing this game for far too long to give up. This was a fight for survival and for honor; she had not fallen in battle in her twenty-three years of life and wasn't about to pick up the habit now.

"Shit!" Shachi exclaimed as a projectile knocked his hat off, bypassing the solid snow wall they had built in the early morning. If he separated his back from the wall to recover the hat, he ran the risk of falling victim to the cold bullets raining from above.

Penguin examined the fallen headwear darkly, may its fibers rest in peace. "They are tougher than anticipated," he said.

Shachi was in an equally somber mood. "Who would have thought mud balls were more difficult to make than snowballs?"

Indeed, the other guys may not have grown up playing with snow, but the snowballs they were throwing were so compressed that for all intents and purposes they hit like hail.

Something that Saki, Penguin and Shachi had failed at preventing when they had begun their assault and the teams had spontaneously formed was that Mack had been pushed back by the oncoming snowballs and fallen in the opposing team. It had proven to be the biggest mistake they had committed.

If snowballs were rocks, they'd still feel softer than what Mack threw. They were fueled by fury, spite, and deadly aim.

Then again, he had competition in the fury and spite parts. The last one would only take practice.

"We should think about a strategic retreat," Penguin suggested.

"Piss off," Saki retorted, tossing a snowball over the protective wall with concentrated rage and hiding in one smooth motion. "Deserter." The word rolled on her tongue like it was dirtier than the back alleys of Asteria, and she picked another handful of snow and gave it shape to throw it.

Every other pedestrian that walked by stopped to watch with open interest how four pirates were hiding behind a curved snow wall while a volley of snow missiles attempted to fall on them and the smallest and angriest of them retaliated incessantly.
Days were pretty slow in Niva, so events like these warranted, at least, a thirty second curious stare.

"Okay, fine. Captain, why don't you—"

"No," said Law. He was almost lying on the floor, since with his height, no matter how he sat, his head poked over the fort.

"I haven't even finished the question."

"I know what you were going to ask. The answer is no."

"But it would be much easier!" Penguin insisted, likely feeling like the only sane man left in this senseless war.

"That would be cheating," Saki said. When she threw the next one, she heard an ouch coming from the makeshift parapet the others had built with empty crates.

"Now you're having morals?"

"It's called having pride. You know what you do when you pick a battle you can't win, Penguin?"

Saki said, compressing between blueish hands another weapon of mass destruction. She needed a pair of gloves urgently, but there were more pressing matters to attend to.

"Surprise me," he drawled.

"You keep fighting until you win it anyway."

"That would be inspiring if you weren't batshit insane."

"We could be doing something if you were helping instead of complaining."

"She's right," Law said, making Saki almost drop the snowball at his unexpected support. He threw one over the fort, and another pained sound came from the enemy base. "You started this, you finish it."

"It was her idea!"

"And I'm acting in consequence!" She said. An enemy ball hit her shoulder as she peeked out to throw another one and she stumbled backwards. She knew it wasn't Mack's because it didn't penetrate her coat.

Shachi took the remains of the projectile in one hand and after a cursory glance he exclaimed, "They're putting rocks in!"


"Are you going to take it lying down?" Saki taunted him.

Penguin leveled his gaze at her, but some of the effect was lost because his cap cast a shadow over half of his face. "Never."

They scrambled quickly to make more weaponry, and when they had an arsenal of snowballs, they opened fire at the other team, hoping that the relentless attack would make them surrender.

They retaliated, although more weakly despite Mack's deadly throws because they hadn't been expecting the pushback, and the decisive moment of the battle came when Bepo, oblivious to the war
that was being waged outside while he was taking a bath, exited the inn and was caught in the crossfire.

He fell to the barrage like a drunken sailor from a crow's nest.

Another snowball hit him while he was down.

When the pirates looked in the direction it had come from, they saw a pint-sized kid with a backpack who ran for the hills as Law unsheathed Kikoku with full intention of harming and the rest yelled indignities at him because how dare an outsider mess with Bepo. They threw a few snowballs at the kid for good measure, too, and some more at a group of school kids who had stayed aside to watch, just in case they got ideas.

They may have been a bunch of nerds, but they were still fearsome pirates with a reputation to uphold.

An indefinite truce was called in order to reanimate Bepo, so they put the snowball fight past them because they were adults and playtime was over, but they also held onto great amounts of resentment because they were petty as heck.

As the guys started to talk about exploring the outskirts of Niva, and Saki stuffed her hands in her pockets feeling pins and needles all over her fingers. Not getting the gloves before pulling this stunt had been a miscalculation, and she needed a pair before she decided to do anything else.

When soon everybody began to scatter to do their own thing, she was stopped from going on her own on a late shopping trip by Law, who called her when she was already heading down the street. She saw the others were leaving without him, so she guessed he wanted to do something in town. Maybe cut up innocent produce or look for that Devil Fruit guide.

"Where are you going?"

"Anywhere they can sell me a pair of gloves," she said, putting up a hand to show him the red spots already forming and shoving it again in a pocket.

"You should have done that sooner."

"I know. Did you need anything?"

"Remember that we need to look for Hilda-ya's shop."

Saki's eyebrows rose. "Are you sure you want to volunteer for that? I can go by myself after I'm done shopping."

Law looked at her like the temptation of not having to listen to that person again was too much to resist, but after a moment's consideration, resist he did. "I'll go."

A small smile escaped her. "Suit yourself."

The gloves took only a quick detour, since Niva was definitely not in short supply of them, and soon they found themselves wandering through the town's old winding alleys and trying to remember Ruddy's directions instead of asking, because they honestly had nothing better to do. This ended with them becoming completely lost and finding the fountain square instead of the bookstore. The water in the trough was still frozen solid.
"No kids today," Saki commented, knocking on the ice to check how thick it was.

"They must be at school," Law said from behind.

"Oh." She took a glance over her shoulder and hid the hand in her pocket again, walking back to Law. "Right, they were carrying bags," she said. "I wonder how it is."

Law's piercing, curious gaze set on her. "What do you mean?"

"Going to school."

"Are there no schools in Asteria?"

Saki's expression went blank for a second, and immediately she burst out laughing. "That would be offensive if it wasn't a reasonable question," she said when she calmed down a little and Law was giving her the stink eye.

"There are," Law answered blandly in the vain hope to cover that he was embarrassed.

"There is," Saki replied. "Just one. But I was homeschooled." Her expression became thoughtful, and she added, "I thought you knew. I must have told someone else."

"First I hear of it," he replied, sending a skeptical glance her way. "You don't seem the type to be homeschooled."

"Oh? What type do I seem according to you?"

"The one who left home with her bag every morning, skipped class, and came back in time only to tell her parents how interesting school had been that day."

She stuck her tongue out without looking at him. "Not even close. I was stuck home all day long. It was so boring. Class hours were the best thing that happened most of the time."

"How did that work? Did you have a tutor?"

"There was aunt Fern – Take and Tsubaki's mom – she was a teacher at the local school, actually. And there was my mom too. She was…" She trailed off and looked at the sky, lost in thought. Had it been sixteen years yet? In a day just like this one, though it snowed far too often in North Blue for her mind to have made any lasting association, and she was grateful for that. "…extremely smart. Not just by a child's standards, mind you. Everybody who knew her said it. She had the absentminded genius thing going on." After a brief contemplation, she said. "Guess I only got the first part from her."

Law stared at her for a few seconds before deciding to ask, "What happened to her?"

"I don't know. She disappeared." There was no deep-seated sadness in her voice or any emotion of the sort. She spoke like it was a fact of life, like it had happened to somebody else.

Time healed the gravest of wounds and only left numb scar tissue to show for it.

"Just like that?"

She nodded. "She vanished one day. We never found her. That was before the smugglers settled in Asteria, so it wasn't a really dangerous place back then."

"What do you think happened?"
"No idea. Don't think I'll ever know. But I've always wondered…” She tugged the front of her collar up, concealing her face in part. "Maybe she was tired of us. She was… too much for such a regular place. Regular husband. Regular daughter." She shrugged. "It doesn't matter." A grin. "Now you have my family's entire sad tale! Feel privileged yet?"

"If she really abandoned her family, that would only mean she didn't deserve them."

Her grin faltered and became something smaller and more genuine. Amused. "I didn't know you were a family man."

In all honesty, she had been torn between thanking him and lovingly punching him on the arm in hopes of leaving a bruise.

"I'd say that's having basic decency."

"I didn't know you had any of that, either."

He pulled the hood over her head and eyes in retaliation and started to walk towards a slope, fast. "Speak for yourself."

"I never pretended to have any," she said, hurrying towards him as he went down a small slope, crossing under a stone arch that linked two houses together. The stones that paved the street were irregular and age worn, and Saki turned around to look at the arch as she walked backwards to keep up with his strides. "Didn't Ruddy mention an arch? I think we're going in the— shit!"

The ground trembled under her feet and she tripped, threw her arms back to stop the fall and shut her eyes in preparation for the impact, but a miracle happened and she stopped way before her head could hit the stone.

The miracle went by the name of Trafalgar Law and oh how low she had fallen, or had been about to, anyway, to think about him that way, even if he was making a frowny face that was entirely too close to hers to be comfortable.

When mild earthquake stopped, he was holding her with an arm around her upper back, and spoke with infinite disdain. "Your affair with the ground is going to end up badly someday."

"I don't suppose you'll fix my head if I split it open?"

"There's no fixing your head, I'm afraid."

"You know," she said sincerely, ignoring the jab, because any opportunity to fall that ended up not materializing was one to be celebrated. "I really appreciate that you've tried to keep me from diving headfirst onto the pavement since that first time."

She was sure faceplanting into Asteria's icky cobblestones had made one hell of a second impression. And after she'd managed to look reasonably badass saving Bepo from a backstab, too…

Law's frown relaxed. "I had completely forgotten about that one."

"Damn." She had played himself by reminding him. "So much for leaving a lasting impression."

If she didn't know better, she'd say there was a hint of pity in his eyes. Perhaps she did not know better.

"Rest assured that you did."
"Enough to make a good guinea pig, anyway."

"Pretty much." He set her upright. "Watch your feet."

"I won't make promises I can't keep."

Law let out a long-suffering sigh that most likely meant he was reconsidering his life choices.

She smiled. "I'm insufferable."

"And very self-aware."

"That was my selling point, right?"

He deadpanned. "Don't make me regret catching you."

"You wouldn't let me fall on purpose."

"Wouldn't I," he said apathetically.

"Yeah, because you like me too."

Law stared at her for a few seconds, and surprisingly, he didn't throw any sassy remarks her way. He just looked away with that perpetual frown of his and kept walking along the street while Saki decided if it was safe to follow him or potential repercussions were still in the air, because there may have been snow at the end of the slope, but she didn't feel like getting intimately acquainted with it at the moment.

Another earthquake replica hit the town again, but it was so small that it would have passed mostly unnoticed, if not for the snow that slid down the roofs of the buildings nearby.

"I hope this isn't a recurring event," Saki said.

"Earthquakes tend to be," he replied, sounding a tad sour.

She trotted after him when he was at a safe distance, looking at the buildings on either side of the street. Most were private homes, and shops were far and few in between. Hilda's bookstore was hidden around a corner, easily recognizable because the owner was sitting on a simple wooden bench right outside, smoking.

"Was wonderin' if you'd come," she said, putting the cigarette out on the snow. "Where's the talkin' bear?"

"He's with our crewmates," Saki replied, sparing Law the need of talking to her. The less he did, the better for everyone involved. "Why?"

"Just curious. He wouldn't fit inside the shop, anyway," Hilda said, motioning them to follow. She pushed a reddish brown wood and glass door and led the pirates inside.

The shop could have been big or small, but neither Saki nor Law could tell, because there were bookcases as far as the eye could see, filled to bursting, leaving only narrow passages to navigate them that were further obstructed by more stacks of books that didn't fit anywhere else. There must have been walls somewhere, but they were nowhere to be seen.

And dust. There was lot of dust. Books had a special ability to gather it, and there was enough of it in that place for dust bunnies to become actual living, breathing animals. Saki wouldn't have been
surprised if those were actually a thing in the Grand Line.

In the present circumstances, trying to find a needle in a haystack seemed a good idea to pass time if searching for a particular book in the bookstore was the other option.

"I've got what you're lookin' for," Hilda said. Relief washed over Saki way too quickly, because then the older woman leaned right to look though the space between several rows of bookcases, squinted her eyes, and after pondering for a moment said, "I think I saw it somewhere over there last time."

"When was last time?" Saki asked, unsure, looking in the same direction. Books were stuffed in the shelves in no particular order, and it didn't look like anybody had touched them in about two decades.

"Does my face look like a calendar?" Hilda snapped. "You want somethin', you work for it, youn' lady." And for good measure, she whacked Saki's arm with a rolled up magazine she had lying around.

It left a grey imprint on her coat's sleeve.

"I'll help you search too," Hilda said, going ahead first. "It's not like any customers are goin' to show up."

Saki and Law shared A Look, with Saki silently pleading him to not open his mouth and him declaring just as quietly that there wasn't enough treasure in the world to make him strike up a conversation with that woman.

Saki stared at the mountain of books as her Captain's 'we can take it easy' statement resounded in her mind.

Some things you cannot say out loud.

Hours went by with only the sounds of book-shifting and stilted conversation for company. At this point, Saki was starting to really get the depth of Ruddy's resignation with her wife's books, because she doubted anyone, local or not, would ever be interested on buying any of the copies of 'Seven Ways to Wear Your Underwear Before Changing It' or 'Garden Gnomes: Alive or Only Unsettling?' that she had found, if only so they could be spared the embarrassment of being caught owning them.

She was bored enough that she was considering asking Law how many illnesses one could catch by consistently wearing the same underwear for a straight week when something caught her eye. Under the dust, she could make out a collection of four familiar-looking books, and she took an old ladder to reach the shelf, hoping that the titles would at least be interesting. Besides, they were looking for some sort of guide-slash-encyclopedia. Those looked like a good bet. That's what she told herself to justify breaking the methodical, highly efficient and utterly boring system she was using to search.

But it wasn't a Devil Fruit guide. It wasn't even an encyclopedia. They were four thick history manuals pertaining to the same collection, and as soon as she read the titles on the brown spines she knew why they had looked familiar. They belonged to the same series as the lone book where she kept her mother's picture, and she was excited at the prospect of finding all the volumes together. She didn't have any particular interest in history, but after having one of the books all her life, she had wondered about the contents of the rest.
But that collection wasn't complete either, and seeing which was the missing volume gave her pause.

*First Civilizations, volume I. First Civilizations, volume II. First Civilizations, volume IV. First Civilizations, volume V.*

She took out the first one with a hiss, the pressure to get it unstuck from the shelf hurting her bruised fingers, and sat on the ladder. The covers, unlike the spine, were squeaky clean, and the cream-colored letters under the title read *Dr. Clover and Dr. Clover.*

She sat there in contemplation, rubbing a fingertip against the words in case she was having a weird dust mite-induced hallucination. But the names didn't budge, proudly displaying the authors of the book and filling her with the feeling that her life was nothing but a continuous string of nonsense and cosmic irony.

Tentatively and just a tiny bit scared of what she might find, she reached out for the next book and checked out the cover.

*First Civilizations, volume II. Dr. Clover and Dr. Zadie.*

She pulled the next.

*First Civilizations, volume IV. Dr. Clover and Dr. Nico.*

The first book slipped from her legs and dropped to the floor, almost toppling over a tall book stack.

"Gosh darn it, be careful," Hilda said gruffly from somewhere Saki couldn't see, and on cue, she appeared from behind a bookshelf to check out the damage. She gave a cursory glance and was starting to turn around when she noticed what Saki was holding. Her expression hardened, eyes sharp and mouth thin as she said, "What are you doing with those?"

Saki, who didn't know why he was being looked at like she had stolen a toddler's lollipop and in her rather rattled state didn't care, asked, "Do you remember how you got these books?"

It was instantly obvious that that had been the wrong question to ask.

Hilda took a step back and snapped, "Who are you and why are you here?" She hadn't finished the sentence when Law walked up to them, stopping right behind Hilda.

"What's the matter?" He asked in a glacial tone.

"That," Hilda turned around on her heels and stabbed her right index finger on Law's coat, "is what I'm askin' you. Who do you think you are to come nosin' 'round? What are you after?" She puffed out her chest and said defiantly. "Because whatever you want, I'm givin' you nothin'."

Law batted her hand away from him and repositioned Kikoku against his shoulder just to make Hilda aware that it was there and that she better watch her mouth, but turned his attention to Saki instead.

"What happened?"

"Nothing!" She said quickly, and lifted one of the books in the air to show him. "I have a book from this collection and I was checking them out."

He huffed, briefly closing his eyes. "We aren't here to waste time."

"No, you don't get it—it's the same collection literally! Book three is missing and it's the one I have."

"That could be a coinc—"
"You have the missin' book?" Hilda cut him, eyes open like plates as she faced Saki. She frowned, and stared with intensity, as if she was trying to rearrange a miriad thoughts. "How?"

"That's why I was asking—I know it's a long shot, but... these may have been owned by someone I... knew?" Saki said hesitantly, realizing as she spoke how dumb that was, because it had to be a coincidence like Law was saying, and there was still the matter of the names on the books, and nothing made sense.

Hilda put her hand on her hips, her shrewd eyes boring into Saki. "Remind me your name, youn' lady."

"Saki."

"And what else?"

"Just Saki."

Hilda held her gaze, hard and appraising, and Saki was hit by the feeling that she had stumbled onto something more serious than she had imagined. "Who gave you that book?"

"My mom."

"And what was her name?"

"Dubia."

"And what else?"

Saki paused before replying. Her mother had never used her surname in all the years she had known her.

But as far as she knew, she had used it up to the time she married, and she had been sailing the Grand Line before that.

"Clover. Clover Dubia."

Hilda just stared for a long, long minute while the pirates waited for a reaction. It was a deep intake of breath and a, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"And you are tellin' me you didn't come here on purpose? To an island where Log Poses don't point to?"

"You know what we came here for," Law replied instead. Hilda's glare could have ripped a lesser man to shreds. "We were following the trail of the shipment at the warehouse."

Hilda gave him a skeptical glance, and asked Saki, "Where's Du now? Still in North Blue?"

Saki wasn't sure how two of her conversations in the same day ended up revolving about her mother. "I don't know. She disappeared all of a sudden."

"What do you mean, disappeared?"

"She went to run some errands and never came back home."
"Never…" Hilda repeated, and the harsh edges of her face went away as she paled, but suddenly she snarled with so much rage that it was hard to believe she was able to hold it all in her body, "Those bastards."

"Who do you mean?" Saki said with alarm, leaning forward on her step. "You know something about her?!"

"She never told you, did she?" Hilda shook her head and brought a hand to her forehead. "I can't believe…"

"Could you please explain to me how do you know my mother?" Saki insisted, tone not nearly as polite as her words.

Hilda reciprocated the attitude. "Do you at least know where Du was from?"

"West Blue," she replied.

"So you don't." She pressed a temple with her left hand. "Ohara. Have you heard about Ohara?"

A few times, and only from her mother. She had been too little to be aware of the world news. "A fire burned it down, right?"

"Ha!" Hilda snorted. "Do you believe everything you read? The World Government burned it down."

"The official story said Oharans were conspirators trying to overthrow the World Government," Law said.

Considering how young he had been back then as well, Saki had to wonder if he had been looking into suspicious disasters that ended in the destruction of entire islands. She wouldn't put it past him, to look into similar incidents if only to find out if there was a thread that linked them. She also had to be in awe at his information sources. She'd been more sheltered in Asteria than she'd ever noticed, in retrospect.

"That lot of nerds wouldn't have hurt a fly," Hilda retorted. "A ship full of them spent a year in this island looking for something, and soon after they left, their island was wiped out and no one else heard from them again. Du had split from the group and stayed here to leave with that Marine boy…" She shook her head again, as if after all those years she still didn't approve of the idea. "And before you ask, I don't know what they were looking for. But I know they found something dangerous. Du never talked about it."

"Then… she was here…? And those people were all from…" Saki didn't finish the question, because she was too deep in thought to form coherent sentences, and Hilda had already answered her questions anyway.

But then, if what she had said was true, it meant… the picture Saki had, the white-haired woman in the group, the Nico and Clover surnames on those books—

"You're her captain, right?" Hilda said at Law, inspecting him from head to toe as if trying to ascertain if he was worth her time or not. "Do you know what this means, boy? You have on board one of the last links to those archaeologists. To Du's research."

Saki was feeling a headache tryingt to creep up on her, and she barely managed to utter the foremost thing in her mind because of how unbelievable it was. "My mother—my mother was one of the Demons of Ohara?"
"Du was a chillin' angel, that's what she was! Always with her nose stuck in books, helpin', always had a smile for everybody. We thought she'd be safe when she left with that Marine boy." Hilda sniffed, and Saki realized that under all the bitterness the old woman was sad. Maybe she was using it to cover how deep the feelings ran. "You don't know anythin', then? She never told you?"

Saki shook her head weakly. "I am a little overwhelmed at the moment, to be honest."

"I could say the same." Hilda sighed, and stared around, at a loss what to do. "You can keep those books. They're only takin' up space here anyway. I'm goin' to get some air."

And she moved through the narrow passages until she disappeared from their view and they heard the front door close with a thud.

Saki glanced at Law, who was looking up at her with an expectant face, and at the topmost book on her lap. She cracked it open and began passing pages without paying attention. The friction hurt her fingers.

When she didn't break the silence, Law did. "You could say something."

She stopped flipping pages and lifted her eyes to look at him. His arms were crossed, and he tapped a finger against Kikoku's scabbard while he awaited her reaction.

"I'm trying to put all this information in order. Might take a while."

"You had no idea of any of this?"

She ran a hand through her hair absentmindedly. "I knew my parents met in the Grand Line. Dad was a low-ranking Marine, mom was travelling with friends. That's how much I knew."

"So she's what the clovers are for," he said.

Saki's lips parted in surprise. "Oh, yeah. Cat's out of the bag, I guess." She laughed nervously. "My mom never liked using her surname. Makes sense if she was a fugitive," she shrugged with a humorless smile plastered on her face. It fell as soon as her eyes fell on the book again.

"That's why you reacted like that when you saw your first wanted poster." It was a statement, not a question.

"Of course! You have no idea how weird it was seeing that 'Clover' attached to my name."

He leaned lazily against a bookcase. "At least it seems to be a coincidence. No doubt the Navy would have added to your bounty more charges if it could." "What did we talk about lying by omission?"

"Hey, don't grill me about this! How was I supposed to know my mom's maiden name had anything to do with... anything?" She groaned and hid her face behind her hands, resting her elbows on the book. "Lucky Clover my ass."

Because Law didn't know tact and wasn't all that interested in getting acquainted with it, he said, "Technically you are the luckiest, considering the rest are dead or missing."

Saki gaped at him poorly concealed indignation. "When did we get to the stage where you can joke about my deceased family?"

"Around the time you said you weren't sorry about mine."
Saki put her hands on her face again, tried to smother a laugh and failing. "We're horrible."

He smirked at her. "Tell me something I don't know."

"That might take a while, too." When she calmed down, she took a deep breath and looked up again. "Hey, do you think I could write a novel about my life?"

He actually considered it. "Too unbelievable. Maybe split the drama between a few characters."

"Yeah," she agreed. "I wouldn't read a book life that, myself. I'm not the writing sort anyway." She looked down at the book cover again. She supposed that Dr. Clover that repeated itself in every tome was her grandfather. Somehow, the idea that she had found a small connection to him made her inordinately happy. Her dad had been an orphan, so for a long time she had been curious about her mom's side of the family.

This discovery made them officially a family of criminals. She had to smile at that. "So what if the Navy finds out now? That Nico Robin child alone was worth eighty million. Will you kick me out? Should I try to join the Revolutionary Army with this newfound knowledge?"

Law lifted an eyebrow at her. "You wish. You aren't going anywhere until Mack learns how to make a decent coffee pot."

"Aww. I think that's the sweetest thing you've ever told me," she said with a teasing smile.

The smirk came back. "Don't get used to it." He walked where the first volume had fallen and picked it up, examining the cover with keen interest. "Doctor Clover?"

"Doesn't surprise me. I told you she was really smart." Redirecting her attention to their surroundings, she began to ask, "Do you it's worth going through all—"

She was cut off by the sound of the door slamming open, a few books hitting the floor in the distance, and Ruddy's agitated voice filled the shop. "Emergency! Emergency in Lurte!"

Lurte happened to be one of the biggest islands of the winter archipelago, the one with the tallest mountain, and the one most geared to foreigners, because this was precisely the one that Log Poses pointed to. And after the last blizzard, so much snow had built up on one of the faces of the mountain that, when the earlier earthquake hit, the trees had finally given out and there had been an avalanche.

It happened sometimes, Ruddy had told the Heart Pirates when they had all gathered near the inn, the townspeople running up and down and getting ready to sail for Lurte, because they only had a small margin of time before the next snowfall came, and all capable hands were welcome to help before it was too late. The avalanche had hit the outskirts of the town, where houses were few and far in between, but several farms had been affected, and they weren't sure how many people had been injured.

This would have been indifferent to the Heart Pirates if it weren't because a dozen well-meaning neighbors had asked them to give them a lift to Lurte to lend a helping hand, since Niva only had small fishing boats and there weren't enough to carry all of them.

Law didn't like the idea of civilians in his submarine, even if it was only for half an hour. On the other hand, Law did like the idea of monetary compensation and not having to pay for their stay at the inn. He made clear that that was going to be the extent of their help, but for the people of Niva it had already been a long shot that a pirate crew had accepted to give them a ride, so they were fine with it.
As the townspeople filed in, Saki thought that Log Poses were a curious thing, because as much as pirates were a danger to coastal towns, a crew that had no intention to destroy a village was at the complete mercy of its inhabitants until the magnetic field was recorded. It was a fine line that both sides walked all the time, the civilians trying to avoid violence, and the pirates trying to avoid sabotage.

Since she had been sailing in the Grand Line, she had understood much better how people could live there. It was a dangerous sea, granted, but it wasn't as lawless as the stories told.

Of course, none of this applied to pirates who had no qualms about killing and ransacking towns. She saw a few of those when she read the bounties every morning. If the posters told the truth, and she knew she had to take them with a grain of salt, a newbie was out there racking up a huge bounty by razing every village he set foot in. Saki thought he had the kind of face you just wanted to kick in. Actually, there was a bit of resentment towards him in the Polar Tang because the crew felt that he was taking the easy way to increase his bounty and look more fearsome than he was. Besides, Law had an infinitely cooler flair.

When about twenty people boarded the sub to assist in Lurte's relief efforts, Saki stayed along with Shachi on the snowy deck, hugging her sword, to keep an eye on them, and she was reminded of Law's question the day before, about intruders at home.

These were totally intruders, and she couldn't see them get off their ship soon enough.

She wasn't the only one thinking along those lines, if she were to judge by Shachi's tense posture. He confirmed her suspicions. "This is weird and I know it's stupid but I don't like it."

"Yeah," she said. She didn't know when agreeing with Shachi had become so easy. "They're stepping on your daughter."

Shachi glared at the villagers' boots. "They better have clean soles."

Both watched the group with apprehension, but the Nivans merely spent the entire half hour it took them to reach their destination chatting and getting pumped to shovel like there was no tomorrow. They were perfectly respectful, and didn't move around much, and that's why Shachi and Saki felt like jerks when the Polar Tang docked, and all those people went their own way, and relief washed over the two of them. They even said thank you and waved at them and all. Normal people weren't supposed to thank pirates. They were likely failing at their job.

"Did you get far this morning?" Saki asked conversationally.

She looked at the town below. Lurte definitely had a higher population than Niva, and a lot of its buildings looked newer and bigger, if still made in the same style.

"Nah, the forest was difficult to navigate. Too much snow, and when we felt the earthquake we turned back. But Bepo said he could see old paths around."

She couldn't help but think if that had anything to do with what her mother and her friends had been looking for, and she wondered if she wanted to check it out for her own sake or just to dig deeper into the story. "Cool. Will you go back?"

"Dunno." He kicked idly at the snow. "We could try to find another way further into the mountain. I mean, it's not like we have anything better to do."

"Really," Saki said. "A month is a long time to be stuck somewhere when you're used to travelling..."
all the time."

Shachi chuckled. "Yeah. When I look back now I don't know how I was able to live all my life in
the same place."

"Oh, I know that feel. It's like everything—"

"—becomes so small." Both said the last word at the same time. "So what were you doing with
Captain earlier?"

"Searching for a book at Hilda's. It was thrilling," she said, tone contradicting her words.

"Did you find it?"

"Nope." She thought she could tell him that she had, however, found out that her family life until that
point had been a lie, but she wasn't sure how one started telling that sort of story. It really wasn't
book material. "But it turns out Hilda knew my mother."

"What?" He pushed up his glasses, which had slipped down when he had whipped his head around
in her direction. "Really? What were the chances?"

"Really fucking slim."

He snorted. "So what, did you find any embarrassing family secrets that your mother never told you?"

"…Not embarrassing."

"I'm all ears," he said with a grin, and probably not believing that they weren't embarrassing.

There was no better way to say this. "Well, apparently my mom and her family and all her friends
were wanted and killed by the World Government for mysterious reasons, and that's why she hid in
North Blue and dropped her surname and never ever told me anything."

"Wow. That's… wow." He made a pause, and suddenly his brow furrowed. "Wait, are you saying
you have a surname?! You name traitor!"

"Shhh! Not legally!" She said in a loud whisper.

"What is it?" He said eagerly. The indignation had just been an excuse to take a cheap shot at her.

"I don't have a surname." She repeated. "My dad didn't have a surname, so I didn't get one."

"That's bollocks. Everybody takes the mom's surname when the dad doesn't have one."

"What part of 'dropped her surname' you don't understand?"

"I bet it is something embarrassing."

That was a direct strike to her jimmies and made them rustled like nobody's business. No one made
fun of her mom's name on her watch. "She had a very pretty surname that you've seen a thousand
times, so if you can't guess it that's your problem."

"Sheesh, okay, give me a heads up when you pull the stick out of your ass."

She punched him on the arm. Someone had to receive that punch today. "Any plans for the
afternoon?"
"None whatsoever. You?"

"I need to buy a coffee pot."

He shifted away from her with a suspicious demeanor. "I'm not gonna help you poison us all."

"Don't worry, you can keep your good morning coffee, you disgusting degenerate."

Shachi looked at her with pity in her eyes. There had to be a lot of it, because she could sense it through the sunglasses. "You are a nutcase."

After the shopping was done and the new coffee pot safely put away in the Polar Tang, Saki and Shachi joined the rest of the mechanic crew and Mack to find a place for dinner. They actually had a choice in this island, and after a short walk they found a restaurant that looked nice enough to have good food but not so nice that they'd try to kick them out when their merry band appeared at their door.

They let them in. They ate. It went so well that even Mack approved of the food. They spent longer than planned in there, talking about their days and how cold it was and that they were weenies because it wasn't that cold and what's up with your hands and why do they have red spots oh god is that a thing that happens when it's cold?

But as soon as they stepped out of the restaurant, the door opened behind them again, and a man barged out and into Uni's back, sending both of them down. There was a ruckus coming from inside the restaurant, and when the Heart Pirates turned to look at what was going on, they saw another two men at the door, and a scared waiter trying to hold them up.

"Watch yourself!" The man who had fallen on Uni said, shoving him away and getting up. The other two passed the pirates bumping into them to join him.

The first offender had a face only a mother could love, as long as a paper bag covered it and she had a serious visual impairment. Uni picked himself up and retorted, "You bumped into me!"

Meanwhile, the waiter was timidly saying from the doorframe that they had to pay before leaving. He couldn't have been older than seventeen, and he should have gotten cookie points for trying.

The man clucked his tongue with disgust and began walking away, but Saki did what generally a five feet tall woman shouldn't do when faced with a big human and his two oafish sidekicks, and snatched the guy's wrist with a quick movement.

At the same time, to her surprise and joy, a knife embedded itself just an inch away from the man's foot. Someone else had caught on.

"The hell do you—" The man began, but he stopped when he saw Saki and replaced a look of irritation with a lecherous grin.

She made a face of disbelief even before he could say anything else. This was the type of idiot she abhorred the most.

"You tired of these—"

"Give me his wallet," she said with a deadly stare, cutting to the chase.

The grin became smaller as his face scrunched up progressively. "What?"
"Give back the wallet you took from my friend."

Uni started to frantically pat all his pockets. "I-it's gone!"

The man laughed in her face, and Saki lost most of her will to live when she saw a saliva droplet rain inevitably fly and land on her face. He grabbed her by the front of her coat and pushed her hard, saying, "Fuck off, bitch."

The reaction was immediate.

Saki had honestly expected having to get up from the ground (streets paved with round stones and devoid of snow for the extra ouch factor; these people were more diligent about cleaning their street than Nivans) and as she fell she was already deciding how many times she was going to kick that son of a coconut's testicles, but she didn't have a chance to do neither. Uni had rushed to stop her fall and, in the blink of an eye, the rest of her crewmates were pouncing on the three guys, with Shachi leading the charge, and while they were busy beating them up, Mack had cut pockets with excellent aim, collected Uni's wallet and three more, and given the waiter what was owed plus a generous tip, because he knew what working at a restaurant and having to deal with assholes all day long was like.

As all these things were happening, Saki stood there and marveled at how amazing was having people who had her back, and how frustrating it was that she hadn't been able to kick those guy's nuts up to his throat and tie them into a bow. Nonetheless, she felt touched and very out of place at having people willing to commit violence for her without even asking.

She didn't think she could ever get used to this.

As these events took place, Law and Bepo were roaming the town at their leisure, walking through a street with several bars, when someone made a comment about Bepo.

Now, people talked when they saw Bepo. That wasn't a remarkable occurrence. He was a bear, and there was no hiding it, and surprise was a natural reaction. But there was a difference between shocked remarks at the sight of a mink and a scathing 'fucking furfags' from a middle aged sailor who had had one too many.

Law had always drawn a very firm at those kinds of insinuations, and he wasn't going to drop a good habit like that.

The aforementioned someone got a scabbard to the face and a few broken teeth to the ground. It was a big loss, because he hadn't had many to spare, for starters. Then someone else got upset for their friend's sake, and he helped him lose some more teeth so they could commiserate together. By the time about five seconds had passed, the third had jumped into the fray and Bepo was in action to assist him with getting embedded in a nearby wall, and the fourth and fifth had the luxury of trying after Law had set up his Room, so when the incident was over, they had left in their wake a trail of body parts, a few horrified townspeople, and another handful applauding them from a bar's doorway.

They insisted they drink something with them, first round's on the house because those guys were obnoxious as hell and they keep trying to grab the waitresses, and when Law rejected the offer saying thanks but no thanks, he needed to go with his crew, the patrons told him to bring them too, the more the merrier, and aren't you the captain of the ship that's brought the reinforcements?

Law and Bepo shared a short look and, in that beautiful way that longtime friends have, they knew what they were thinking without the need for words.

Why not? They had nothing better to do.
It was two hours and six rounds since they'd gotten to the bar when Saki realized that what Ruddy and Hilda had said about these islanders not getting drunk was true, and she watched Law's expression go through several stages, from expectation to suspicion to shock to curiosity – it was just a matter of knowing how far the eyebrows moved – in that span of time, very aware that he was adding reasons to the pile of stealing that one glorious liver for science.

She had also seen every other of her companions save for Mack and Bepo descend into a state that could only be described somewhere between absolutely smashed and beyond shitfaced, and she was ninety-nine percent sure that, morning come, Mack would be on board with waking them up banging pots and pans. Even Tuttu, who was a big guy, was starting to look like he was going to close his eyes any second.

Saki would have fallen too, had it not been for the characteristic underlying camel piss smell that the Old Man's brews had and also rose from these, and she knew better than to try to down a glass of that at any reasonable speed unless someone was betting she couldn't.

For the record, she could.

The thing was, while most of the crew was in a deplorable state, the locals thought this was really funny, and a few of them were taking advantage of the rare opportunity of having so many drunks in their midst and talking to them like a grown man talks to a baby. Saki would have also thought it was funny if it wasn't so tragic.

But some things that the locals said, no doubt soon to be erased in the guys' minds by the comfortable mind void of alcohol poisoning, were interesting.

Such as the mentions of a treasure.

A treasure, said the stories, that was somewhere in these islands but nobody had ever found.

While the guys broke into ooohs and aaaahs and tell me mores, Saki disengaged from the conversation, because a secret treasure that had been around for centuries and nobody had found despite knowing it was there was definitely a treasure that did not exist.

Such were her thoughts when someone kicked the door open and fifteen men, give or take, with the biggest and baddest of them leading the group, entered the bar.

The leader, who probably thought he would look tougher than the snow by not wearing a coat, was a muscular man with a well-cared for beard and moustache, and Saki scrunched up her nose in disgust when she saw the blurry, shapeless tattoos visible on his neck and hands.

He gave the room a glance that made clear he thought everybody present was below him.

"Commander, it's them!" One of the men behind him pointed at the two tables the Heart Pirates had occupied. She hadn't seen him before, though she thought she saw the guy she had grabbed before somewhere at the back of the group. But what caught her immediate attention were more lousy tattoos, matching his superior's, on the back of his hand. It was a mess of greyish black blurry ink that made her want to puke. She took a gulp of the concoction in her glass in hopes of keeping her dinner down.

The bar had become mostly silent, though contrary to what had happened the last time they'd been in a similar situation, many of the patrons weren't making themselves smaller on their seats. Rather, they looked ready to pick up their bottles and smash them against the table to stab the newcomers in the eye. It was so much like home she almost shed a nostalgic tear.
Oh, how she missed Asteria's joints sometimes.

And because for once she had her sword handy, and that bunch had come looking for trouble anyway, and, let's face it, she was who she was and it was against her nature not to be a smartass, she told Law quietly, eyes fixed on the rival captain's face to avoid looking at those indecencies, "Captain, I think I'm starting to see your hands in a new light."

A brief, blink-and-you'll-miss-it ray of hope shone in Law's eyes. "Does that mean you're dropping it?"

"Never."

Law threw his head backwards and sighed deeply as he stared at the ceiling.

"I should be doing that," Saki muttered.

"Wha'cha talkin' about?" Penguin slurred, leaning towards Saki and losing his balance so hard she had to catch him before he crashed onto her.

"Have you seen that dude's hands?"

Penguin squinted at him, and so did the other drunk crewmates. Even several locals seemed horrified at the sight, and the whispers in the room grew.

The commander cleared his throat loudly in an attempt to catch a more intimidating kind of attention.

"You messed with my men," he said.

"Is this happening again?" Saki muttered, interest piqued.

"Been a while since last," Penguin managed to say slowly and with a lot of effort.

The Heart Pirates shared a few glances between them, at the clock on the wall, at their drinks. It was too late for this shit.

Shachi stood up with a wobbly motion and pointed at the pirate commander. "You're wrong," he said.

"You're calling us liars?" He said with a sneer that showed a lot of teeth.

"Nah. 'M sayin' we trashed 'em," Shachi declared proudly.

Saki thought it was one of the patrons who threw the first bottle when No-Name Commander of the Joke Pirates started advancing towards them, but it didn't matter, because an all-out brawl exploded in the following seconds.

Apparently, using his breath as a flamethrower wasn't a thing only Ruddy did.

Grand Line people were made of tough stuff.

More surprisingly, though, none of Saki's companions got hurt in the middle of their own drunken stupor. They moved fast and hit hard, even if very ungracefully, but who cared about graceful when the opportunity to fight evil arose? This was how Marines felt every day, surely.

The goons ended up on a pile outside the bar and the contents of their pockets in the hands of everybody who had been inconvenienced by their interruption, because it was only common
courtesy that they got compensation for their time and the bar owner got the money to repair his property. He didn't look very happy at the prospect of having to replace half of his furniture.

They were nearly done collecting when Shachi pulled something out of the commander's pockets that he discarded because it was too big to be a beli bill, but Mack caught it in the air and opened it.

"You tossed a map," he informed Shachi.

Saki drew closer to Mack, along with the others, to look at the paper. It was a little yellowed, not ancient, and it depicted an island with a mountain range in the middle and a circle on it.

"A treasure map?" Shachi said excitedly.

"Do you buy everything you're told?"

Bepo took the map from Mack's hands to examine it closely. "There isn't a name on it. Do you think it belongs to any of these islands?"

"Don't ask me, you're the navigator."

"We could ask Hilda when we head back to Niva," Saki suggested. "If she doesn't know, at least she'll have maps to compare."

"Are you volunteering to find that book should it come to that?" Law asked her.

She did as if she hadn't heard him. Bepo folded the map again and put it in his pocket, and after a day of too many good deeds, the Heart Pirates said goodbye at the bar to return to the Polar Tang, just in case the opportunity to do someone a favor arose again and they somehow went along with it. A reputation to uphold, and all that.

Despite how tired she was, when Saki dropped on her bed, she did so holding her mother's book and no willingness to sleep anytime soon.

For a place that was supposed to be so uninteresting, she sure had had two eventful days.

To be fair, at times she thought the boredom would have been better. Finding out that her mother had actually been a wanted woman for as long as she had lived in Asteria painted the entirety of her life in a different way. The fact that she had stopped using her surname meant that she was aware that she had been in danger all that time, and she had tried to protect Saki by not telling her anything.

Had Fern and Arthur known? Had the Old Man?

She stared at the book in her hands, and she had wondered why exactly her mother had taken this one and left the rest behind when she realized that it was the only one in the collection that didn't bear her family name. *First Civilizations, volume III* by Dr. Gram.

She had left behind everything that could be linked to that name. She guessed it must have been important – that other Dr. Clover, Saki’s grandfather if she was guessing right, must have been famous in scientific circles. If nothing else, respected enough to co-write nearly an entire collection of history books.

Saki made a mental timeline of what must have happened. Her mother had left her hometown with her colleagues, sailed the Grand Line for a while, met her father, and split from her group to go live in North Blue. Sometime after this, her friends had been captured, and the island of Ohara put to the
torch. That dredged up feelings about Asteria she didn't want to dwell in. And years after this, she had disappeared.

Saki and her family had always known that something bad had happened to her, that she wasn't the type to disappear without warning.

They looked for her for weeks, but it was Saki's own dad who called off the search, way too soon in most people's eyes including Saki's, and she had never forgiven him for that. Even now, sixteen years after she had disappeared and several years after her dad had died, too, she realized she was still holding onto that bitterness.

But in light of this revelation, she realized that he must have suspected what had happened. That there was no way to get Dubia back, that the enemy was far too strong and far away, and that it must have torn him apart to accept that and let go.

Saki remembered bawling her eyes out day after day, and Arthur and the Old Man and a very pregnant Fern trying to keep her distracted, and she remembered finding her dad crying one day too and berating him for giving up.

She was the worst.

She fought back the tears threatening to spill and put the book aside without any care, deciding that all this thinking wasn't doing her any good, and she got up and left her room to go to the upper deck.

But on the way there, upstairs, she heard rustling sounds coming from the sickbay. She didn't need to look to know who it was and she didn't want to bother him, but truth be told, she didn't feel like being alone with her thoughts, not when they would inevitably go down a depressing path, and not when the afternoon and evening had gone so well while she was in friendly company.

It then occurred to her that she had something to keep herself busy with, so she sauntered to the kitchen and unboxed the holy instrument she had bought that afternoon, cleaned it, and did a couple of dry runs before she put ground coffee in the pot and set it on the stove again.

In a few minutes' time, the entire kitchen smelled like the glorious beverage that Shachi was so fond of calling black sludge, so she poured two mugs and made her way to the sickbay as stealthily as she was able to, cracked open the door just enough to allow her hand through, left a mug on the nearest counter, and closed the door again, leaving for the bridge because, on second thought, it wasn't a particularly bright idea to be on a snowy deck at night without a coat.

She set her coffee on Bepo's desk, took a sheet of paper and a pencil and began to sketch Niva's fountain.

The irregular noises coming from down below served to pull her out of her thoughts and back to reality when her mind started to drift and remember and ponder what ifs that made no sense now.

She took a sip of the coffee. It left an indelible bitter aftertaste in her tongue, and it was perfect.

She didn't remember at which point it happened, but she was so tired that she ended up falling asleep on the desk.

She didn't recall hearing anybody entering the bridge, either, fast asleep as she was, which was noteworthy, since she was a light sleeper, and even the smallest noises near her were capable of waking her up. But the undeniable fact when she woke up as the sun rose and illuminated the room, was that someone had put out the light she had been using to draw, and covered her with a small blanket they kept in a cabinet, for when nights were cold and someone had to replace Bepo on the
Saki smiled to herself. No matter how much he insisted on denying it, Law was a softie at heart.

Reluctantly, she folded the blanket, put it away, grabbed her dirty mug, and went to the kitchen to make a fresh batch of coffee so it would be ready by the time Law was up, and when he appeared half an hour later, looking like he was treading the limbo between life and death and losing in favor of the latter, Saki couldn't hold back another smile as he sleepily reached for a cup of steaming coffee.

In the end, no matter how many things changed, she could always take comfort in the ones that remained the same.
There was a marked difference between what had transpired with splintery-man's crew during the Heart Pirates last stop in North Blue and the ass-handing they had so generously given that crew in Lurte: that commander had been, well, just a commander, not a fancy title for a captain. Which meant there was a captain, somewhere in the archipelago, who hadn't received his ass as scheduled, was very angry about that fact, and was looking for the Heart Pirates from island to island since their trip back to Niva.

It took him a few days, because he had a lot of tiny islands to check, but he was a persistent man. It was also fair to assume that after half a week of searching, stopping would have looked terrible and would have lost him too many brownie points with his men, so the man found himself in a conundrum from which he couldn't gracefully bow away. The Heart Pirates had also, presumably, left with the lousy treasure map his commander was carrying and that had been surreptitiously taken from Lurte's town hall (it had involved threats, a heavy duty bolt cutter and no subtlety at all, which hadn't made them popular among the locals). Lurte's townspeople had also been quite tight-lipped about the location of the Heart Pirates, so he had been forced to do this the slow way.

But once he managed to locate them, another problem stood in his way.

The problem was that when he saw their Jolly Roger, he realized that the rival captain was a nasty piece of work that dismembered his enemies, and after changing his soiled underwear he decided he wasn't too eager to join that exclusive club.

Revenge would require finesse, some field work, and hopefully not any more bolt cutters.

Saki had made the bookshop her second home after the emergency trip to Lurte, and though she had managed to coax some of the guys into helping her out in her search for the Devil Fruit guide, they hadn't returned after a first try. She didn't blame them. Hilda's attitude towards the guys had only become more hostile since finding out Saki's connection to Dubia, and there were only so many scathing comments a man could endure before swearing not to set foot in that place again.

(The most remarkable exchange had happened when Hilda made an offhanded remark about them being together all the time, wink wink nod nod, and Penguin had replied with perfect composure and ever increasing annoyance under the surface that they weren't gay, to which Mack had retorted, 'Speak for yourself', and Hilda had made a sound of approval because she respected men who could cook and said things straight no matter if they weren't. The next day, she had handed Saki a metal tin with homemade cookies to give them to the chef and ask what he thought about them, after repeating three times not to let any of the other ruffians have them, especially not the captain.)

At this point, it had become her self-appointed mission to find the book, one that looked less and less promising as days went by. Even Hilda had admitted in a moment of weakness that she was starting to worry that she had remembered wrong.

The upside to her many trips to the bookshop was that she had shown the stolen map to Hilda and she had told her that it looked like a drawing of Niva made by a seasick toddler, and that that round shape in the middle was a dip between the mountains where there was a lake. It was frozen nine
months a year and inaccessible during winter due to all the snow on the way.

Of course, in the minds of Saki's crewmates that had sounded like a challenge and a prime opportunity to prove Hilda wrong that they couldn't let slip away.

Saki doubted they would find anything at all, but it was good that they had something to keep them busy while the Log Pose set. She, on the other hand, was getting tired of wasting so many days among dusty shelves for something she wasn't sure would be any help, all while the rest spent their time investigating a forest in this fantastic weather.

She wasn't the only one behind, though. According to the reports she heard every night at the inn, Law had been keeping to himself for a few days, locked up in the sickbay, torturing swirly blue mangoes.

Saki understood needing space to think. She also understood how bad it was to overthink when left alone too much, and she worried that Law had fallen right into that pitfall since they had found the cargo in the docks. He sounded particularly snappy the few times she had heard him speak lately, and she found herself wishing that the Log Pose was already set so they could leave Niva behind and go somewhere he could entertain himself with something else.

She'd give up nice weather in a heartbeat if it meant Law would stop moping around already. It was bound to get to everybody if he didn't snap out of it.

After another evening of literal fruitless searching, Saki was about to leave when Hilda surprised her by calling her from behind the counter. The woman reached into a drawer, and her age-spotted hands took out a brown envelope and thrust it towards Saki.

"You should have this," was her explanation.

Saki wanted to ask what it was, but it was clear by the face Hilda was making that she wasn't in the mood to talk, and any questions she perceived as useless would only annoy her, so she took it and just said thanks. Judging by the weight, it was filled with papers.

Dusk was setting in and the town's lamplighter had already passed that area, leaving the streets well-lit and rendering the fact that she tripped on her way up the slope under the arch completely unjustifiable.

With most people at home having dinner, the square was empty again. Saki couldn't linger too much if she wanted to get to the inn in time to eat, but she sat on the trough's wide stone edge anyway to check out what Hilda had given her. Taking off her gloves with her mouth and stuffing them in a pocket to free her fingers, she opened the envelope and looked inside.

It was full of letters.

Dear Hilda,

I'm writing this letter as soon as I have been able to. Ramon's friends were waiting for us at Asteria's harbor, and they didn't let us go for hours. Truth be told, despite what I told you, I was afraid of what I might find or what they would think of me, but they've welcome me as if I'd always been part of the family. Arthur and his father have been playing with the baby since they've seen her, and Fern, Arthur's girlfriend, has promised to give me a tour around the island tomorrow. She can be a little overwhelming, but I feel like I've already made a friend. She told me she moved here recently, too.

Saki was born on the 7th of August, while we were still sailing. Ruddy was right! She's a girl, and
Ramon says he looks like me, but he's either trying to be nice or he's making fun of me, because all newborns look like angry wrinkled monkeys. Mind you, she's my gorgeous, splendiferous girl, but I'm afraid that won't shine through until she is a little older.

I trust you haven't had any strange visits in Niva? I hope we haven't brought you trouble.

I'll never forget your kindness taking me in when I decided to leave the expedition. Have you had any news from them? I wonder how they're doing. I'll be writing to my father today, too, and asking how the investigation is going on their side.

I hope that after we've settled in we can take a vacation and visit you so you can meet Saki.

Love,

Du

The realization of what she was reading didn't fully hit Saki until the last syllable of the letter, hope growing bigger as she read on, but also worry, because she didn't want to get to the end and somehow have it turn into something different.

She reread it, now fully aware of what she had in her hands, and was pleasantly surprised that she was reading it in her mother's voice; that she still hadn't forgotten.

Saki had seen her write lots of letters when she was little. To friends, she always told Saki when asked who she was writing to.

She stared absently at the papers in her hand for a good minute, remembering the little details she hadn't thought about in ages, like the calluses on her mother's left hand from gripping the pen in an odd way, the way many nights she disappeared for hours behind piles of apparently unrelated books, underlining and taking notes and marking pages, before Saki decided to switch to the next letter.

There were a lot of them to read. Seven years' worth, to be exact. In light of that, dinner at the inn didn't seem so urgent that she couldn't stay there a few extra minutes and check out a few of them.

Marina split from the rest of her men when they reached the stairs that went down to the cells, where four soldiers struggled to bring with them a captured pirate that had been regaling their ears with insults the whole way from the ship.

Marina turned right on the hallway and left them behind, nursing a headache. The prisoner's 'let me go fucking fucksticks' screams faded as she put distance between them until she couldn't hear them anymore and she was alone in the corridor, her shoulders sagged and she let out a sigh of relief.

Those had been a few entertaining weeks in the ship. Entertaining, as in having to restrain her own men from throttling the pirate before he could be sent to Enies Lobby. The only thing that had kept Marina from ending the prisoner herself was a firm sense of justice and a pair of earplugs.

The base they had just docked in had been abandoned a few years before, left in favor of a new one after the bad weather had blown away an entire section.

According to Headquarters, they were going to send construction workers to make repairs as soon as possible, but until then, Marina and her sailors had to make do with what they had. She doubted those repairs would happen anytime soon, anyway. Her appointment there had been a punishment, so throwing money at an old base in the middle of nowhere wasn't a priority for any of her superiors. She did hold some hope that Commodore Curtiss could make somebody upstairs take pity on them,
but she didn't count on it.

She didn't want anybody's pity, anyway.

The part of the base that hadn't been torn down wasn't in such a poor state, all things considered, but the years without maintenance showed as dirt on the inside, and the outside was in sore need of a new coat of paint and new frames for doors and windows. The weather of the Grand Line wasn't kind, and that stretch in particular was worse than most for sailing, with strong winds and currents that could sink unprepared ships in the blink of an eye. Just like her North Blue area, so really, it wasn't much of a problem. Her navigator just needed to remember that hurricane weather could carry hail and giant sharks, now.

She approached a window and rubbed a finger against the sill. It left a mark on the surface and came out black, and she had to fight the urge to pick up a rag and start cleaning right away.

Not that it mattered much. She had been assigned to that base to stay, and she'd have all the time in the world to make the place squeaky clean anytime she wasn't sailing.

Now to find an office she could inhabit, and a place to put her Meccano replica of Mariejois.

Law was late to the inn that night, enough that he almost missed dinner, and it was the only reason he had showed up to begin with. He had considered eating in the Polar Tang, but a healthy dose of respect for his new cook's aim had made him rethink it, in case he accidentally decorated the ceiling with a new burn mark.

Besides, everybody needed to have their work space. He wouldn't like another to mess around in his sickbay or his operating theater.

Predictably, the rest of the crew was already done with dinner by the time he got there, but when he went over to the main room, some of them were missing.

"Yo, Captain," Shachi greeted him from behind his cards. "Wanna join in?"

He had been locked up alone all day. A little socializing wouldn't do harm. "Sure."

He was pulling out one of the free chairs when Penguin asked, "Where's Saki? Did she go to her room already?"

Shachi glanced at the wall clock. "Too early."

His hand rested on the chair's back. "She isn't here?"

"We thought she was with you."

Law looked over his shoulder at the window. Night had completely fallen, but it was a rare day in which the weather wasn't threatening with another storm.

"She must be with Hilda-ya," he said.

"Still? She's been gone all day," Penguin remarked.

Shachi didn't appear too concerned. "I bet she hasn't noticed the hour."

"…Yeah, that would be like her."
Scratching the back of his head, Law let go of the chair and let out a contained sigh. "I'm going to take a look."

"Do you want us to go?" Bepo offered.

"It's all right. I'll be right back if I need assistance."

He glared at the clock before leaving the room. It was past eleven.

He was absolutely missing dinner.

This woman.

It wasn't like he thought anything had happened to her, seeing as the townspeople had gotten used to their presence already and they seemed to be grateful for the help days ago, but he took his nodachi either way and set off into the night. One could never be too sure.

As expected of a town where the word nightlife became an oxymoron, the streets were deserted, and he took the shortest path he had found, so far, to the bookshop.

He had expected to find it closed, not devoid of people. But he could see from outside that the lights were turned off and the door barred.

Well, that eliminated the likeliest place from his mental list.

Internally grumbling because of course she couldn't make things easy and just be there nose-deep in a book, and most definitely not the slightest bit anxious with the events of Qaryn still fresh in his mind, he walked away from the shop.

Getting oneself kidnapped twice was probably grounds to kick someone out of a pirate crew, come to think of it. Law didn't need recurring damsels in distress on board. This fleeting thought vanished as soon as he reminded himself that there weren't damsels in his crew, but anyway, no one better make a habit out of disappearing unannounced.

The next place on the list was Hilda's, though he didn't get that far. Walking up a slope that had started to freeze, below the arc, ice cracking under the soles of his shoes, he arrived at the square and found Saki sitting on the edge of the fountain, hair burning red and orange under the light of the streetlamps.

His idea had been calling out to her and chewing her out for making him not worry and go out to find her. Instead, not entirely sure of what hit him, he stopped before stepping into the square to stare.

She hadn't noticed him yet, too absorbed by the papers she had in her hands to pay much attention to her surroundings, which was another mistake he should be berating her about if—

She lifted her head immediately and looked in his direction, tense, fully back to reality and with a frown that shifted to a look of confusion right away.

"Law?"

He was outside of the streetlamps' range, so he must not have been easy to make out in the dark, but she had been able to tell anyway.

Well, maybe he couldn't scold her for being careless.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" He said, walking towards her.
She blinked once as his words sank in, opened her mouth to reply, shut it, and instead groaned. "Shit, I missed dinner." She looked up tentatively, "Are you angry? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be out so late!" She let out a defeated sigh and said to herself. "Of course you're angry."

He had been, but the feeling mostly went away when he saw the genuine 'oh-I-fucked-up' face she sported. He huffed. "I am not."

She looked up at him as if she didn't believe him, but she didn't care, because soon a small smile appeared on her face and she said excitedly, waving at him to get closer, "Look what I have here! There really is something in the island!"

Annoyance put aside momentarily, Law sat next to her and peered at the papers she was holding. They looked like letters. He couldn't tell from whom, but he didn't have time to ask before she supplied the information.

"Hilda gave me these," she said, searching for one inside an envelope. " Turns out my mother sent letters to her after she moved to Asteria. And," she pulled out one of the letters and leaned towards him to show him, "in this one she confirms she and the rest of scientists found something hidden somewhere in the island."

'—it was a shame we had to leave everything behind, but there was no way we could have moved it. Even though we documented it, I'm worried that someone unscrupulous might find it, though it may be better if it happens and that makes people lose interest into investigating further... Please, be very careful if you notice any probing from strangers near the lake. No treasure is worth putting your lives or the whole of Niva in danger.'

"Not bad, huh?" She asked Law with a bright smile. "Actually, I hope it isn't bad because it's the only thing of interest I have to show you after riffling through most of this stack."

There was something in that blunt honesty that made her likable and utterly annoying at once, he thought. Saki was the kind of person that walked the fine line between having too much cheek for her own good or just enough to get away with saying just about anything.

Or maybe he was getting soft. That was a concerning thought.

Whatever the case, he could tolerate that sort of thing as long as she had enough sense to know when to stop, which she did. Quite surprising, given her personality, but it was one of the things that betrayed that she was more tactful and, well, intelligent than she tried to appear.

He'd been aware of that since she had told him about her plan to storm the smuggler's den in Asteria, though.

"No mentions of what it is?" He said, extending a hand, and she passed him the letter.

"Other than whatever it was they couldn't move it? No."

"What makes you think that this is an actual treasure and that we'll be any luckier in taking it with us?"

"Nothing, but aren't you curious?"

Law peered at her suspiciously. Her smile didn't budge. He returned his attention to the paper in his hand.

"I'm not sure of this."
"Live a little, Mr—"

He shoved a hand against her face and pushed her away. "Finish that sentence and I'll push you into the fountain."

"Ow, so violent," she said, rubbing her cheek with a hand and hiding a smile behind it. "Is manhandling me going to become a trend?"

Law snorted and replied without thinking. "No man could handle you." After a pause, he looked at Saki and quickly added, "That wasn't supposed to sound like a compliment."

"Really? Could've fooled me."

Lazily, he pushed her backwards and into the trough, but the frozen surface broke her fall.

"Dick move," she said, sitting back up and touching the back of her head where she had hit the ice.

"Had it coming."

"That too."

He felt her eyes on him for a few seconds before she returned her attention to the stack of letters, picking another one to read over. The corners of her mouth went up as she did, then she folded the letter, put them all away, and looked at him.

"Are you done?"

He handed her the letter, and when she reached for it, he saw the marks on her fingers and caught them with his other hand before she could take the paper. If he had grabbed an icicle, the sensation would have been the same. "Are you trying to lose a finger or two?"

The marks from the day of the snow fight had turned purple, but new red ones were appearing after what, he guessed, had been hours of exposure to cold wind.

"I couldn't sort through the papers with gloves on," she said. "A few more won't make a difference, anyway."

He pressed one of the bruises, and he watched all the skin around turn white except for a dot in the middle. She held back a wince.

"Just cover them already," he said, letting his grip just loose enough for her to remove the hand. "And put them in warm water when we're back."

He had expected her to take back the hand and the paper as soon as she could, but she made no attempt to move, instead looking at him with an expression that didn't give away what she was thinking. It was the way she looked at something when she wanted to commit it to memory to draw it later, taking in every detail, like she was trying to see something that one couldn't catch at first glance.

He may not have been too far off the mark about that.

He also noted that no snide remarks about his fingers were made, either.

Unsure what he had done to prompt that kind of non-reaction, he asked. "What is it?"

It was an awkward position, holding someone's hand but-not-really. But it was more awkward
getting stared at like that by someone whose moods he could usually read with either a cursory glance, or gauging how much strength she applied to screw the coffee pot together.

Her reply was simple and not very explanatory. "I don't get you."

Her face didn't change.

"What have I done to prompt that now?"

Her stare wavered at the question, and it took her a few seconds to ask with an earnest voice, "Why are you always so good to me?"

The question gave him pause, because of the way she said it, like she really didn't understand, because it wasn't unlike his own thoughts when he had been on the receiving end of a stranger's concern.

A stranger who had ended up becoming a father, and placing so much trust and hopes in him that he was sure he had never deserved.

Law was sure that seeing oneself reflected on another person was one of the most uncomfortable feelings a one could experience.

"I'm not doing anything out of the ordinary," he said, as if he wasn't aware of what she was getting at, and felt the slightest hint of remorse for paying her honesty back with that.

Her shoulders slumped a little, and her gaze became softer around the edges. "You really think you aren't," she said, still staring at him like she was considering if she was seeing all that there was to see.

Law still didn't understand what had prompted this kind of response.

But she didn't drop the subject. "Not only you have never tried to screw me over, you also look after me. I don't get you."

"Is that so rare?"

She opened her mouth to reply right away, but held back on whatever she was about to say and substituted it with a, "Yes."

The fingers that were brushing his already felt warmer when she took back the hand to cross her arms.

"I'm way past the point where I would start to expect anyone to ask for something in exchange."

He thought of coffee mugs that appeared out of nowhere, and breakfast pastries he'd otherwise have skipped, and a Den Den Mushi, and an Eternal Pose that pointed him a little closer to an objective he hadn't disclosed, and thought she had no right to accuse him of doing things without expecting something in return.

And he did expect something in return, even if that wasn't why he did those things. Loyalty. Friendship, maybe. The satisfaction of knowing that he could be something more than a thorn on someone's side, when fancy struck. Try as he might, a doctor couldn't be completely devoid of empathy. Not with a person he spent so much time around, at any rate.

That made for the least messy answer he could conjure.
"Why are you still hung up on that?" He replied, eyes narrowing in frustration at his own thoughts. "I've told you before. Making sure you are alright is literally my job."

After a few more seconds of contemplation, she fished the letter back from his hand. "Can you believe I just found out from a twenty-something year old letter that I wasn't born in Asteria? My whole life is a lie," she said, intentionally dramatic.

The non-sequitur, however, momentarily threw Law for a loop. "Where, then?"

"A ship, somewhere in the Grand Line. A Marine ship, at that. My parents were on their way to North Blue, and my dad had just quit his job. Loving the irony here."

"I'll need to update that." He added when she looked at him with unspoken curiosity, "On your file."

She hummed approvingly. "If family history matters, add that my mother had brass ovaries for boarding that ship."

If Law needed confirmation that she had put aside whatever she'd had in her head moments prior, cracking a joke at the expense of dead relatives was probably a good one.

"The trait seems to run in the family."

She cracked a half-smile. "You couldn't pay me enough to board a Marine ship willingly."

"But you don't seem to have the same reserves about pirate ships."

The expression on her face froze, and she blinked for a thoughtful moment. "Didn't have much of a choice. Besides, I'd rather take my chances with the pirates." She hid the envelope inside her coat, pulled on her new gloves and stood up. "Let's go? Not that I'm not enjoying the conversation, but now that you've so kindly brought my attention to the cold, I'd rather have it somewhere else."

He had missed something during this exchange. He wasn't sure what, but he knew he had, and he didn't know if it was worth it insisting to find out. If what he had been expecting, about her eventually getting fed up of his secrecy, was already happening.

"Don't let Shachi hear that," Law said, getting up as well, and both began to make their way to the inn.

"Oh, screw you," she grumbled, pulling her coat's zipper closer to her mouth.

Law hid the hand that wasn't busy with Kikoku in a pocket. It was cold where it had held hers.

He didn't know why he was so acutely aware of these details.

"Do you think the innkeeper will take pity on me if I beg?" She asked.

"I wouldn't count on it," he said dispassionately. "And I missed dinner too."

"Oh, then I can cook something quick in the sub—"

A sound from one of the streets that led to the square caught their attention, and though that wouldn't have been damming by itself, the noise of hurried steps stomping on the snow as soon as they turned to look was.

Saki began to walk towards the alley where the sounds had come from, and while Law wondered if self-preservation was a word that got erased from her dictionary from time to time, he held her up
with a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back.

"Let's get moving. If they want something, let them show up first."

She glanced up at him and nodded, stuffing her hands in her pockets. Law didn't remove his hand as they both headed to a street that was much better illuminated than the suspicious one.

"Did you notice anybody following you?" She said very quietly. Only the proximity allowed him to hear it.

"No. Anybody around the square earlier?"

She shook her head. "I was alone all the time I was there. And I would have heard if someone approached." She looked pointedly at him.

"It may be a coincidence, but keep an eye out just in case." He took one last look back. "The inn should be safer."

There went the perspective of dinner. He should have tried his luck with the frying pan.

She was silent for a bit before saying, "You know, I'm feeling a little skittish since I found out the government may go after my head if they find out I'm breathing."

"It already is."

"Yeah, but doesn't this sound more serious than piracy? I mean, we're a dime a dozen in this sea."

"No one's sending secret agents to track you down to Bumfuck, Nowhere."

"You have a gift for making me look unreasonable."

"You don't make it too difficult."

She elbowed him lightly. "I was being serious."

"If it happens," he said, thinking that there was an infinitesimal possibility that it did, "we'll deal with it."

She let out a long breath. "This is exactly what I meant earlier."

"Hm?"

"This is not your job. Your job is to keep your crew in check and healthy."

"Maybe you are right."

She looked surprised at his admission. "Am I, now?"

"Maybe I do like you."

She tripped over her own feet, or so it seemed, and the only thing that kept her from going down was Law's arm around her shoulder.

She looked at him in astonishment, clearly unsure of what she had just heard, but when he didn't take it back she burst out laughing so hard that even she had the decency to cover her mouth to stifle it and not wake up the neighbors.
"If I could pick a moment and frame it—" She began to say with a lot of effort.

Law sighed deeply, ruefully, tiredly.

"—I would take this one and hang it on my wall—"

"Forget I said anything." Curse him for trying to be friendly. This is why he wasn't most of the time.

"—to remember forever that you said it out loud."

"And you made me regret it immediately," he said dryly.

"I promise to keep it a secret."

"You better."

"It's not like it shows that you care," she continued jokingly. "Like, the guys would never suspect that you decided to deal with a coffee you didn't like for the better part of a month when you could've stopped Mack from brewing it, or that you often take the night shifts at the deck so we can sleep at night, or that you turn the boiler room's AC on before the guys get to work when you know they're going to be stuck there for hours."

He remained silent at all these outrageous and true accusations that he was used to have Bepo sling against him, but not someone else.

Saki snickered. "Are you embarrassed?"

"No."

"Then why aren't you replying?"

"I have nothing to say."

"Are you turning red?"

"Fuck off."

Her shoulders shook with contained laughter. "Don't be shy, Captain, we all love you, just try asking around."

"Do you want to die tonight?"

The sight of the inn greeted them with bright yellow lights and frosted windowpanes that insinuated a fireplace burning warmly somewhere behind them.

"It's not a bad night to die, all in all," she said, gently brushing his hand aside and skipping ahead of him, "but I'd rather spend it alive, given the choice. Wouldn't you?" She pushed the inn's door and held it half open as she waited for him.

He pushed it completely open and she slipped into the reception.

"Definitely," he said, smiling when he knew she couldn't see.

Insecurity was a bitch.

Being not so gently reminded through a dead mother's letters that the world was out to get you had
the unfortunate side-effect of rekindling that feeling. Because of course she had to begin questioning things again just when she thought she had found a place to call home.

Those dusty four walls, or whatever was actually hidden behind the bookcases, weren't doing her any good.

It was stupid, from her waiting for government agents to show up out of nowhere to get her to asking Law point blank why he treated her well, but one could only live so many years trusting no one except three select people until that left some sort of imprint in you, she guessed. No one could blame her for having brief relapses, right? Right. Especially when no matter how many times she asked, her captain refused to disclose what he was after.

She hadn't pressed him much with the questions, to be fair, but prying didn't feel right and she would think that at this stage he could reveal whatever he was planning to do. What was he hiding?

She battled with a tome that had no name on its spine and was persistently stuck between another two that were decidedly not what she was looking for. That smug bastard she had for a captain better be happy when she found the guide.

Because she was going to find it. She had already been over a week stuck in that place, sifting through books, only to leave when Hilda closed shop and get to listen the tales of the others' adventures around the island, escapades to nearby islands included, while she swallowed dust and smelled like mold.

It wasn't even worth the effort anymore. Even Law had suggested she drop the search. But as she had told Penguin a few days before, when you pick a battle you can't win, you go ahead and win it anyway.

She'd come out of this with something to show for it, even if it was a decrepit book on supernatural produce.

Such book had become loose after much insistence on her part, and since she wasn't a Devil Fruit user and thus the laws of physics did apply to her, the strength with which she had pulled made her take a step backwards, which made her trip over a pile of books on the floor, which made her hit the back of her head with a bookcase, and several books fell on top of her from where they were piled above the highest shelf. It would have been more comical if she had knocked down the bookcase and began a majestic domino effect inside the shop, but she didn't weigh nearly enough to topple over one of those.

The noise was still enough to alert Ruddy and Hilda.

"Great. You did it." Saki took a book off her face to see Hilda looking disapprovingly at her through her thick glasses, hands on her hips. "That stack of books was twenty-four years old."

"No offense, Hilda, but I don't think I care," Saki replied, taking a glance at the book that was still in her right hand. Lo and behold, it was 'A Complete Guide to Devil Fruits.'

It also looked older than the owner of the shop, which made her wonder if she had wasted her time royally, but sunk cost fallacies made life easier to bear and she refused to give more thought to that possibility.

"Is she all right?"

Ruddy's voice came accompanied by the sounds of more books dropping and him getting stuck. Saki couldn't see from where she had landed, but Hilda did.
"Ruddy! Out with those antlers!"

"Easier said than done!"

"You too!" She said to Saki, hustling her from the corridor where disaster had hit. "Out with both of you, you give me nothing but trouble!"

At this point in time, Saki had a clear idea of why nobody in their right mind came to shop at this bookstore.

She went out behind Ruddy, who had to exit through the door sideways because he didn't fit through it otherwise.

"Still can't put them away?" Saki asked conversationally.

"No, but look!" He said, looking chipper, and felt around the base of the antlers, pulled a little and unscrewed them before her eyes. "What do you think? Good party trick, isn't it?"

"I don't think it's supposed to work like this," Saki said, trying to understand what she had just seen.

"It is how it is." He shrugged and placed them on again. "So!" He eyed the book under her arm. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yeah!" She put it up to show him. "Hopefully we'll get some info on what you ate."

"Has your captain found out anything about the ones he took?"

"Not that he's told me. I could ask him for you."

He fished for a cigarette inside a jacket pocket. "I'd like that, yes. I want to know if I'm going to grow hooves too."

"I'd assume you can grow them now if you want to."

"Huh, really?" He dropped it. "How?"

"I'm not the one who's supposed to know," she replied blandly.

"Well, I sure don't know either! How am I supposed to?"

"I don't know, the expert said you just should."

"Hm." He stroked his beard. "He has eaten one too, hasn't he?"

Saki wasn't sure if she was supposed to answer that one truthfully. "Why do you ask?"

"I've been paying attention to the wanted posters since you lot turned up in Niva." He glanced at her up and down, and then grinned. "Du's daughter has a bounty. Ha! That's a really good one. And his captain's about to go Supernova, too."

Saki cocked her head to the side. "What do you mean by that?"

"Supernova? You don't know what it is?"

"Never heard it before."

He raised his eyebrows skeptically. "You Blues people are weird. A Supernova is a newbie pirate
who racks up a hundred million bounty in less than a year. There are a few each year."

"So many?"

"And it looks like there's going to be more than usual this year, too. You have tough competition!"

She grinned. "They don't hold a candle to us."

Ruddy laugh loudly. "That's the spirit! You don't get that many decent pirates nowadays anywhere…" He bent down with some effort to pick up his cigarette. "It was different in the old days, when the Pirate King was alive… It's just scum everywhere now, coming to this sea like it's theirs. No consideration."

His words reminded Saki of a humid cave in the depths of a mountain, a lake, stone hands facing up and her neck burning.

She unconsciously reached to rub the spot where she had been injected with the tranquilizer. "I've been told something similar before."

"I'd expect so. You're sailing under a Jolly Roger. That's not gonna make you any friends."

"That's okay. I didn't come here to make friends."

Ruddy took a long look at Saki with a mildly shocked expression. She just waited for his reaction, and it wasn't what she had expected.

"Du said something similar to us, too, when she stayed with us. She wasn't too far along yet. Her friends had already left and she was alone waiting for the Marine boy." He dug a matchbox from another pocket and lit the cigarette. "I didn't believe Hilda when she told me you were Du's kid, but she looked so sure of herself I…" He puffed out a cloud of smoke.

"Can't blame you. I had a hard time believing it too," Saki said. "I don't know if it's completely sunk in, to be honest."

"Nah, I see it now. Same freckles, same stubbornness. How many days have you spent in my wife's shop?"

"Too many."

He let out another hearty bark of laughter. "Same honesty with none of the tact."

She shifted on her feet, feeling a little sheepish. She wasn't used to talking to people about her mother. She had become a sort of taboo topic at home after her disappearance, and she had never asked many things about her. She wondered if she should have. Saki had the impression as she read her letters that she had never gotten the chance to know her. "And you haven't heard the worst of it."

"I'm sure I haven't," he said cheekily. "The way you speak at your captain, I can imagine how you speak to the rest of the crew."

"Eh, we're all friends. What's a little ribbing between us?"

Ruddy chuckled. "Those are the best kind of friends," he said, taking another drag of his smoke, and something caught his attention somewhere behind Saki.

She turned around to see a piratey looking man going down the street and keeping his eyes glued to them.
"What are you looking at, you scurvy son of a barnacle?"

The other man bristled, and gritting his teeth together, he stomped toward them. "What did ya call me?!!"

Unperturbed, Ruddy reached for his hipflask at the same time that the pirate went for something inside his coat, and sensing the danger in the air, Saki stepped in front of Ruddy and looked at the newcomer with a smile. Better if she could stop an incident from happening in front of the shop, especially if it was going to involve bullets and fire-breathing. The hands of the men froze in their respective inner pockets.

"Do you need something?" She asked.

The man looked at her distrustfully from head to toe, as if he was mentally comparing what he was seeing to something. "You're the wench that was with the Trafalgar bastard in the bar fight?"

In a split second, Saki's smile dropped and she slammed the Devil Fruit guide in his temple, and for good measure, when he was on the ground, she stepped on his side several times.

"Say that again if you dare," she spat, stepping several more times on him.

"Such violence."

The comment hadn't come from Ruddy.

Saki looked up from the man to see Penguin and Shachi approach the scene of the crime.

"What did he do?" Shachi said. "Ask if the curtains match the carpet?"

"He insulted our captain!"

Immediately, the man found himself under two more boots.

"Don't you think that's enough?" Ruddy asked.

The three stopped to look at him, and the man, who had curled up and gone into turtle mode, took this small lapse to scramble away on his fours.

"Deserved."

"Absolutely."

"Can't let nobodies insult us."

"What are you doing here, anyway?"

"This!" Shachi lifted a bag by its handles.

Saki blinked. "That."

"It's take out! We were going to eat out with the other guys. Are you coming, or you still have work to do?"

"Nope!" She knocked lightly on the book. "Found what I was looking for!"

"You did it," said Penguin, not quite believing it.
"I did it," she repeated proudly.

"Then let's not waste any more time! I wanna eat at a decent hour today," Shachi complained, grabbing Saki by the hood of her coat and tugging.

Saki turned to Ruddy and waved as she was dragged away. "Thanks for the help! See you!"

"Youth," he said, shaking his head with a wry smile and puffing out some smoke.

"I thought you'd be out of town all day," Saki asked the guys.

"Nah, today we've decided to relax," Penguin said.

"But we found something yesterday!"

"Bepo did, actually."

"Yeah! He thinks he's found a path to the hidden lake, but we're leaving that for tomorrow."

That sounded interesting. Hell, everything sounded interesting as long as it didn't involve searching shelves near Hilda. "I'd like to go. I think if I spend any more time inside four walls I'll die."

Shachi snorted. "Sure. The more the better."

Saki followed her crewmates' lead to the square where they seemed to end up all the time, and where everybody save Law was.

"Couldn't get a hold of Captain?"

"He's holed up in the sickbay. Better not disturb him."

"...Yeah."

The months they'd spent traveling together had been enough for all of them to stumble into Law doing something or another unspeakably creepy, but the newer members hadn't had the pleasure yet, so they didn't get what the dark looks they exchanged were about.

There was no need to make them lose their appetite. Time would take care of those details, she was sure of it.

"Hey, it's meat pie!" Asuka said with a smile when he opened one of the bags.

Blessed innocence.

"Are we ready?"

"Yeah!"

"Okay, at the count of three. One—"  

Shachi kicked the door open anyway.

"—motherfu—"

"Take positions!"
Saki and Bepo held up the book from the bottom and the top at once, putting, a knee on the floor, at the same time that Penguin and Shachi stood at their sides, balancing on just one leg, pointing with their hands towards the book like TV hostesses, all while grinning with the satisfaction of a job well done and yelling, "TA-DAAAAAA!"

Law looked at them like he was recounting all the mistakes he had committed in his life that had led him to associate with these people. He then turned back to his specimens like he didn't have four dumbasses making poses on the door of his sickbay trying to catch his attention.

They stayed there, grins frozen on their faces, for a few good seconds, but when they realized that Law was refusing to react at all they groaned and got upright.

"Captain, you're no fun."

"Loosen up."

"Could've at least twitched."

"So. Rude."

"What did you want?"

"Here!"

He was faced with a book occupying his entire field of vision.

"Oh. You found it." He took it from Saki's hands and passed a few pages idly.

"You're welcome," she said bitterly.

He kept eyeing the pages, then went to the back and looked at something in small print. "It's outdated."

"I'm starting to be seriously offended."

"I told you that you could drop the search. Not my problem that you insisted on finding the book."

"Okay, I am offended now."

Law released a long breath through his nose while still looking at the book without much conviction. "I suppose it could be useful. It's not like someone discovers a new Devil Fruit every day."

"Do you need to say it like it pains you to admit it?"

"Leave. I'm busy."

Saki opened her mouth in indignation, stunned to speechlessness that he was being that rude after all her efforts, but just in case that she decided to let what she was thinking flow out, a paw covered the gaping orifice while human hands and voices patted her on shoulders and head and told her, 'there, there,' and dragged her out of the sickbay against her will. Not that she opposed any resistance. The gall of that man. The guide had been his idea in the first place, and she had honestly thought that it would help. She could be stubborn when she wanted, which admittedly was most of the time, but even she wouldn't have spent over a week locked up with Hilda and all those mountains of dust if it wasn't going to amount to anything.

When they got outside, she kicked at the snow on the deck dejectedly, sent some flying overboard,
and hit a dock worker with it. Getting insulted by a random guy didn't put her in a better mood, but whatever. As a pirate, so she could afford to be unapologetically evil if she felt like it.

Tousling her hair with barely contained annoyance and readjusting a couple of pins she had taken to wear lately so it didn't get in her face, she looked elsewhere on the port, to the boats and small ships that lined the coast. Among them, she saw a middle-sized one, not as big as the Polar Tang, but definitely bigger than fishing ships. That one was meant for long-distance travel, and if her sight didn't fail her, it boasted several gun ports on the side of the hull.

There was no flag to be seen, and that was extremely suspicious.

"Guys," Saki called, "do you know if that ship's been there for long?"

They directed their attention to it, and it was Bepo who answered. "I don't think it was there yesterday."

"Hm…"

"Is that were the guy from before had come?" Shachi said.


"Let's keep an eye on it," Saki suggested. "We shouldn't lower our guard if they have any beef with us."

"You really think they would start any shit after what happened?" Shachi asked incredulously.

"Better safe than sorry," Bepo said, and they all agreed with his assessment because maybe messing with Bepo was a must, but he also had good judgement when it mattered.

He and Saki prowled the area of the mysterious ship afterwards, but they didn't get see anybody on deck or around. Deciding that the best they could do was tell Law about it and wait, they left and headed up the main street, where the same kids the Heart Pirates had scared during the snowball fight saw Bepo, said hi, tossed a snowball at him and ran away faking they were afraid. Bepo smirked, put up his arms and chased after them growling.

As she watched Bepo play with the kids, Saki thought she really had missed a lot while she was in Hilda's bookshop, and she plopped down on the snow against a house to wait until they were done, thinking how lucky she was to have friends like that.

The winter wind was bitingly cold in the morning that the Heart Pirates chose to go explore the lake. The suspicious ship was still docked at the port, and the entire crew had been alerted of it by then, but there still was no movement to be seen around it.

Law stayed behind, saying he was wary about leaving the sub unattended, though they were pretty sure he simply didn't want to be dragged out of his makeshift science lab.

Bepo led the way once they got to the outskirts of the town, making his way through a path that they could barely see and possibly nobody else treated in the colder months, and luckily for all he was going in front of them and making the way easier for those behind, because winter vegetation was persistently in the way, and when it could, persistently in their faces.

Saki trailed behind the others, taking in the sights because, unlike them, she hadn't seen anything outside the town yet. The fir forest was painted white, and as the group ploughed through the snow
some fell from the branches above them.

A few minutes after leaving the visible path, Bepo signaled with a paw towards something between the trees. "That's what I saw the other day."

Another short struggle and they were before a tall stone, half-buried by the snow and very out of place. Some part of Saki, probably the one that went from her knees and below, felt a certain kinship with it.

"It's a stone marker," Bepo said while Uni circled it, inspecting the surface.

"There's nothing on it."

"Whoever's come up this high knows where they're going," Penguin replied.

Bepo spent some time sniffing and looking around before leading them higher up, his instincts the only guarantee that they'd find solid ground under their feet as they walked. But, Saki thought, it was a chance that she could take without any worries. If he was able to keep them out of trouble in the chaos that were the waters of the Grand Line, a dingy mountain wasn't going to be above his capabilities.

Whether it was above the capabilities of the bunch following him, herself included, was something else to be determined.

"Have you been climbing like this every day?"

"Hell no," Uni rasped out.

Penguin's face was red, though no one could tell if from the cold or the effort. "This is the highest we've gotten."

"How long to the top, Bepo?"

He didn't reply.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to keep going?" Saki wondered out loud.

Shachi whipped his head around with a grin. "Can't keep up?" He said.

Saki picked up a handful of the snow around her knees and smacked it in his face. Shachi returned the favor by shoving her head down into the snow, but she wasn't the only one who got her face wet.

Snow began to come down from the trees as the world under their feet trembled, and when Shachi lost his balance, he grabbed at Penguin to stay up and ended up dragging him down, too.

It was the longest earthquake they'd experienced since their arrival, and its effects were felt right away.

When the earth stopped shaking, there was an eerie moment of quiet, just long enough to allow them to feel relieved, before a rumbling started to sound in the distance, first dull, then growing in intensity.

Only three people connected the dots fast enough to realize what the sound meant before it was too late, and it made sense, because Asteria was completely flat and the newer crewmembers simply were not used to the mechanics of solid water.
Bepo, bless his animal instincts, lunged at Uni, Tuttu and Asuka and tackled them into the thick of the forest so the trees sheltered them, but Penguin and Shachi were a split second too late, and with the snow slowing them down, the most they managed was to motion Saki towards the nearest fir and hold onto it for dear life.

Watching the snow implacably moving towards them felt surreal, and the only thing Saki had time to think before it was on them was that for all the adrenaline she had felt every time she'd been about to die, she was like a deer in the headlights as the inevitability of human mortality came to say hi again, haha, how's this for an undignified end?

The avalanche hit them and Saki saw through narrowed eyes that they had managed to not lose their grip on the trunk, but when she thought the worst of it had passed and they hadn't been buried alive after all, the tree came loose and the snow dragged them with it, pushing them a long stretch down the mountainside and a cliff that, before the sliding snow had taken its toll on them, had been hidden by the trees and bushes growing on its edge.

Saki's stomach floated up at the same rate she dropped thirty feet down, and she let go of the blasted tree when she realized that there was a good chance she'd end up squashed under it when it hit the land below.

Contrary to the popular belief, usually held by people who didn't know what a real winter was, landing on snow was not soft. It was pretty fucking painful, in fact, and it felt even worse when more snow fell on top of you.

Everything hurt like she had landed on concrete and her whole body save her left hand was buried, but at least she knew in which direction to dig before she suffocated, and she set to it in a panic.

It was only when she managed to break the surface of the snow and take a breath of fresh air that she noticed that she'd been under just a couple of feet of snow. A bit more and she would have been a goner.

Lucky Clover, indeed.

But she didn't have any time for dallying. She looked around and saw the trunk and roots of tree they had been hugging poking out the snow, and just a few paces away, a mop of red hair that was emerging from it cursing up a storm.

She started panicking again when she couldn't see Penguin anywhere, until she noticed the two boots sticking out next to the trunk.

"Shachi!" She yelled, or she tried, because it sounded like she was coughing, and she pointed at Penguin as she ran to him as fast as her achy limbs allowed.

Shachi was on the move before she was able to finish saying his name, and they dug at the snow frantically with their hands as fast as they could, and when a reasonable portion of Penguin's legs was in the open, they pulled him until they got him unstuck, and they were all sent backwards.

Penguin looked slightly blue, but somehow his cap was still on. If Saki hadn't seen him without it on a few times, she'd have thought he glued it.

"Peng?" Shachi asked unsurely. "Are you still with us?"

"Gimme a minute," he wheezed.

Saki spent that minute inspecting the mass of snow that stood between them and the path. She made
an attempt to climb, but the snow was too loose and she couldn't hold onto anything more solid than broken tree branches.

Looking around and judging by the side of the cliff that wasn't covered by snow and revealed smooth rock, she guessed they were inside a gorge.

That could be good, in the sense that following along the gorge should lead them to the sea. It was also pretty terrible, in the sense that they could go the wrong way, or worse, get to the ocean and have no option but to swim in freezing water until they reached a shore.

Shachi yelled behind her. "Anybody up there?!"

But no reply came.

"I hope they're okay," Peguin said.

"Bepo's there. I'm sure they'll be fine," Shachi replied, and then said to Saki. "Do you think we can climb back up?"

"No dice."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"So… what do we do?" Penguin asked. "Do we stay put until they come for us, or do we try to find an exit?"

"Even if they're okay, we don't know if they can go ask for help," Saki said, though she wasn't sure if she wanted to move from the spot. In the worst case scenario, the others couldn't get back to the village, but surely Law would hear about the avalanche and put two and two together when they didn't come back. "Though Captain…"

…Oh, who was she kidding, he could stay locked up for days in that sickbay as long as nobody forced him out to take care of his basic human needs.

Or maybe he'd pry himself away from his work when he ran out of coffee. That was a possibility, as long as he didn't try to concoct some in a Bunsen burner. Again.

Saki became acutely aware that they had to get out of there, not only for their own sakes, but to prevent their captain's untimely, negligent death.

We she turned to look at her crewmates, something in their faces told her that their thoughts hadn't strayed too far from hers.

"There's Mack, though," Penguin whispered, as if he was afraid of being heard.

"Remembered what happened last time he and Captain argued?" Saki replied.

There was a moment of silence.

"We move?" Shachi said, more an affirmation than a suggestion.

"We move," Penguin repeated.

Saki scratched her hair and threw one last glance at the top of the gorge. "We move."
The hours passed for Law like for a college kid before finals: way too fast and with no grip on reality, lost in unquantifiable amounts of concentration and caffeine.

…Which was beginning to abandon his system, if the repeated attempts of his eyes to close against his will were any indicator.

He should still have in the cabinet below the sink some of his old coffee stash. He eyed the Bunsen burner carefully.

No, not worth having Mack catch him in the act like last time and getting an hour-long earful and a cup of good coffee.

With a sigh, he put down the Devil Fruit guide, got up from his chair like an ailing octogenarian, and dragged his feet to the door just to have it open before he could grab the handle.

Mack was on the other side, looking at him from one feet below. He should have learned earlier that small people compensated their lack of height by being full of rage.

"What?" He croaked, because he hadn't spoken to anybody since that morning and it was never a bad time to lose a few more dignity points.

"People in town are saying the earthquake from earlier triggered an avalanche in the outskirts."

"What earthquake?"

Mack lifted a pair of judgmental eyebrows, skeptical and slightly impressed. He stared at Law for two seconds that felt like half a minute and ignored his question. "Aren't the others out of town?"

He looked away and lazily rubbed the back of his neck. "It would be too much of a coincidence that they got caught in—"

"CAPTAAAAAAAIN!"

His hand stopped mid-motion and after a beat, smacked his face while he let out the lovechild of a sigh and a curse.

Three panicked humans and a polar bear appeared behind Mack and started to talk at the same time, and he didn't need to pay any attention to their jumbled explanations to understand what they were saying.

He should've put the burner to use when he could, he thought as he sent Bepo for Kikoku and reached for his coat.
Heavy puffs of misty breath came out from Saki's mouth as she trudged on with her companions, trying to find the exit of the gorge. She couldn't tell if a long time had passed since the avalanche had thrown them off its edge, because it sure felt like it every time she took a step forward with her aching muscles, but the sun was still well up in the sky. That was a good sign. The worst thing that could happen to them at the moment was getting stuck there overnight with no refuge in sight, and the more they advanced, the more the suspicion that they were going in the wrong direction solidified in her mind.

Well, to be fair, the worst-worst thing that could happen was that a replica of the earthquake would manage to trigger another avalanche and drop a metric fuckton of snow on top of them, but this was a factor they couldn't control, and the only thing they could do to avoid it was finding their way out, the sooner, the better.

She was secretly glad that the rest of the mechanic crew hadn't fallen alongside them, though. Even though they had gotten better about it during those weeks, they weren't made for snowy weather, and what was now a relatively silent trek following a frozen stream would have become an unstoppable string of complaints about the cold.

"It's lunchtime," Shachi said, and Saki had to wonder for a second if she had actually been speaking her thoughts out loud.

"How do you know?" She asked.

"Because I'm so hungry I could eat a bear."

"A bear coated in coconut."

"And sneezing, if it came to it."

Penguin snorted. "Hope you never get stranded in a desert island with Bepo."

"I don't know; he'd last a long time as rations."

"Dude."

"I mean, if we're looking at this strictly from a survival point—"

"I wish he was here," Saki mumbled tiredly. "With the inner compass he has, we'd be at the village by now."

"You want a piggyback ride, don't you?"

She kicked white at him. "Stuff some snow in your mouth, please."

"Guys," Penguin said, "look ahead."

Following Penguin's prompt, they turned to pay attention to where they were heading instead of each other, and found that the path was no more. A wall of rock blocked the way, and climbing was out
of the question.

Saki threw her arms up weakly. "Yaaay! A dead end!"

Penguin wasn't up to faking energy. "I wonder if we can ever take a fifty-fifty chance and come up on top."

"Well, we're pretty much at the bottom, so—"

"I totally called that," Shachi interrupted before she could finish the pun.

"Not out loud," Penguin replied.

"You'd have told me I jinxed it."

Saki approached the crag in front of them, its bottom covered by piled up snow that seemed to have fallen recently from the plants growing on its surface, if them being devoid of any was an indication. The ice of the stream disappeared under it, but she couldn't see its source.

"Looking for something?" Penguin asked.

The river should have had its origin around there. "The spring, actually."

"Must be under all the snow."

Saki hummed quietly and tried to step back when Shachi, frustrated, kicked a small rock next to him and started a chain reaction when hit a bigger rock at the base of the crag, which became unstable and fell, making the piled up snow slide and knock Saki down, burying her from waist down.

She lay down on the ground after faceplanting, arms stretched in front of her to break the fall, and she only lifted her head to say, "Shachi, I hate you."

There was a small moment of silence where the two men looked at the crag with surprise written all over their faces, but then they hurried up to her to help her out of the snow pile by her arms.

"Look at this the positive way—" Shachi started.

"Shachi, I don't know if you're trying to get punched, but—"

"Look behind you first, punch later," Penguin said with a curious smile.

Turning her head when she was upright, still held by the arms, she saw that there was an opening at the base of the rock, only too big to be a spring. It was wide enough to allow two people to pass, and the source of the stream's water was nowhere in sight. Rather, it continued its course into the darkness, undisturbed.

"Nice, huh?"

"I'm trying to decide if it was worth getting avalanche'd again."

"Come on, it wasn't that bad."

The last word had barely left Shachi's mouth when, deadly serious, Saki jumped him and tackled him down, only to take a handful of snow and smack it on his face before rolling away and making a colossal effort to get up on her own.
"That was worth it," she said, dusting off white powder from her coat with a pained expression.

"Everything hurts," Shachi complained.

"Don't be dramatic," Penguin replied, taking a few steps forward to check out the cave. "I can't see a thing."

Saki skipped after him and poked her head inside with Shachi following right behind. She went deeper in than them, struggling to see, though she was being more successful than the guy with no eyes and the asshole who never took his sunglasses off.

The floor of the cave was completely frozen, but, on the bright side, the ice broke every time she stepped on it, so she could move forward as long as it wasn't too fast.

After a brief inspection, she located an elongated shape above her head. She made a grab for it, but when she pulled, she found it was stuck and it wouldn't budge. Maybe pulling up—

The thought died as soon as it was about to be born, short arms and legs completely to blame.

She contemplated if her dignity was worth sacrificing for this discovery, and she wondered what would be worse, asking for help or starting hopping in the spot to dislodge the thing, but she didn't have time to decide before Shachi spoke.

"Need help reaching something?" Shachi said, seemingly innocent if it weren't for the grin he was sporting.

"Yeah, Mr. Sunglasses in the dark. Think you can give me a hand?"

"Honestly," he said, unfazed, as he walked up to her with caution and reached up, "You should consider carrying a portable ladder around. You can't count on having us around all the time."

"Thankfully," she said in a monotone.

As Shachi brought the object down, Penguin got closer and something clicked in his hand.

The small flame of a silver lighter illuminated the torch that had been on the wall and that Shachi was currently holding.

"Think it will still light up?" Saki asked, poking it tentatively with a finger. It was cold to the touch and kind of humid, but it appeared to be in a good state, otherwise.

"It doesn't seem to be wet," Shachi said. "Maybe that's why it was so high up."

"Oh, of course. The water would ruin it."

"No way to know other than trying," Penguin said, and immediately put the flame on the tip of the torch. It took him a few seconds, a curse when he burned his thumb from holding the lighter too long, and Shachi fumbling to miraculously catch it in the air, but after the second try the torch caught fire, and the flame kept growing until the walls of the cave around them became completely visible.

The stream they had followed to the cave continued through a tunnel heading towards the depths of the mountain, and the walls were lined with more torches like the one they'd found.

It was clear that the place had seen frequent use, or else they wouldn't have bothered with the lighting. What was more, it couldn't have been abandoned for too long, if the torches weren't crumbling to the touch.
What mere instants before had been a fortuitous discovery suddenly became something else.

The three shared a look full of anticipation and childhood dreams threatening to come true.

It wasn't hard to guess that Penguin and Shachi were thinking that they had stumbled into something related to the treasure. If the cave did indeed continue to the center of the island, there was a good chance that they'd end up at the marked spot in the lake.

But after talking to Hilda and reading her mother's letters, Saki had to wonder if they were actually getting closer to what the Oharan scientists had found and what it was.

She needed to at least try.

She attempted to not sound overly excited when she commented, hopeful, "So, we could do the sensible thing and turn around, or…" She trailed off.

"Or be pirates," Shachi said with a grin.

"Treasure hunters," Penguin added.

"Loot seekers."

"Booty chasers."

A very unladylike snort escaped her. "Okay, okay, I get it," Saki said between snickers. "Let's go?"

"To the adventure!" Shachi declared, lifting the torch up high.

Law set out of the Polar Tang with Bepo leading the way and Mack in tow and enough rope to supply every cowboy in the West Blue. The rest had been told to wait in case they didn't come back in due time and someone needed to ask the townspeople for reinforcements. He hoped it wouldn't come to that, because if there was something worse than civilians asking pirates favors, it was pirates doing the asking, but knowing how things usually rolled for them, he wasn't going to discard any options outright.

Once they reached the forest, it wasn't difficult to find the spot where the crew had gotten separated – a massive slope made by the snow the avalanche had dragged down, marred by panicked footprints scattered everywhere, and Law had to wonder how much time they had wasted running in circles and screaming before going back to town for help.

"They were pushed off the cliff," Bepo said. There was only snow and a freefall where the avalanche had torn off the trees in its wake, and at the bottom, a frozen river that in less cold weather, Law assumed, ran through the gorge. "We couldn't see them and we couldn't get down, and that's when we went to warn you."

Law looked down. There was a thirty feet drop to the bottom, and no way to get there without jumping or walking up the entire length of the gorge from the sea.

"Mack, is there anywhere—"

"Already on it," he replied, and Law looked back to see him testing the stability of a robust-looking tree and tying the rope around it.

"I think there's a trail on the snow," Bepo said, squinting at the bottom.
Law felt some relief, because that meant that they had been healthy enough after the fall to move. "They must have gone to find a place they could climb or take refuge in."

Bepo was more expressive and let out a big sigh. "That means they're okay?"

He didn't want to say yes in case they weren't. "Worried?"

"Of course I am!" He said, swinging his paws frantically. "They were my responsibility! I can't let them get hurt!"

"They'll be fine," Law said, though he wasn't certain if he was trying to reassure Bepo or himself. "And if they aren't, I'll fix them."

That wasn't what Bepo had wanted to hear, though. He fell to his knees, utterly defeated. "I-I didn't want to give you more work…"

"It's not your fault, Bepo," he said.

"Captain," Mack called, either unaware or uncaring of Bepo's crisis, "the rope is ready."


"Is that a punishment?!"

"…If the rope snaps with your weight, it will be easier to rescue you if we're still up here."

"Oh. Right. Sorry."

Law gave Bepo a few pats of encouragement on his back, and with Mack's assistance, they helped Bepo rappel his way down the wall.

Thinking back, it had probably been a bad idea to tell the polar bear to go first when it was just two puny humans holding the rope, and they should have thought their move through before, but it was too late when they realized that they couldn't slow down Bepo's descent even if they put all their strength into the task, and to make matters even better, the rope tugged at them with so much force that it made them trip over the edge of the cliff.

Thus, three more pirates made their way to the bottom of the gorge the same way their predecessors had, though avoiding the risk of dying buried and clubbed by falling trees.

Law slammed against the fallen snow and rolled until he was stopped by the opposite wall of rock. He picked himself up, listening to his entire body protest and telling it to shut up, and asked, "Is everybody all right?"

Mack grunted and Bepo made a weak affirmative sound.

He lifted his hat and shook off the snow on his hair. He saw the rope still hanging from the tree and tied around Bepo's waist, which he supposed could still be used as a way up. Several feet away from where they had landed, he could also see the trail Bepo had mentioned before. Mack cut the extra rope and rolled it up.

Accidental landing aside, it didn't look like they would have a very difficult job, unless his crewmates had done something unspeakably dumb.

A possibility that was certainly likely, but that he didn't want to entertain, for the sake of his own sanity.
Torches lined the course of the tunnel, and that confirmed without a sliver of doubt that, at some point in time, people had had business there. Shachi was in front of the group, holding his up to light the way.

As Saki listened to them talk about the riches they expected to find when they reached the surface, because the way went slowly but steadily upwards through the mountain, she had to admit that the situation felt sort of magical, and at that moment she felt like a kid playing at being a treasure hunter.

In the meantime, she observed their surroundings, because someone had to do the job when two thirds of the team were made up of someone who only took off his sunglasses in the shower and a guy whose cap was screwed so tightly on his head that his eyes had disappeared into it, never to be seen by mere mortals again.

Though the cave was natural, someone had taken the effort to seal some turns with rocks and mark the walls with signs whose significance she didn't know.

The marks didn't look very ancient. The rocks blocking the passages had jagged ends, unlike the smooth walls of the tunnel, which meant they hadn't been there for long, either. Just to be safe, they kept following the main course of the stream.

Speaking of which, Saki was suspecting that the frozen pittance that reached the outside was probably an honest-to-god river when the snow melted and that it filled most of that passage. The mystery was where all the water came from.

Only a few minutes had passed when Penguin accidentally kicked something that went flying and rebounded with a metallic sound.

"What's that?" Shachi asked.

Penguin and Saki hurried to the source of the noise, and after a moment of confusion looking at the floor, Penguin picked up something among a few stones.

It was a carefully crafted brooch, made by entwined threads of gold, with a stone at the center that gleamed red under the light of the flame.

"...Wow," Saki said.

"There's really a treasure?" Penguin said, not believing what he was seeing.

Shachi started swinging the torch around to illuminate more parts of the passage.

"Watch out, dude, you're gonna catch us on fire!"

"Uh, sorry," he said sheepishly, staying his hand holding the instrument of doom. "But do you see anything else?"

"Maybe the water washed it up from somewhere else?" Saki suggested.

"That means there's more ahead!" Penguin said, grinning. "Let's go!"

"Look at the one who's usually the sensible guy," Shachi joked.

"It's called character development."

"Don't bother with him, Penguin, he's flat, we already determined that."
"I told you I'm fully developed!"

It didn't take long to find the source of the brooch. Following the frozen stream, they arrived at a chamber littered with treasure. Literal heaps of gold and silver coins and jewelry.

Saki stood at the entrance of the chamber, dumbfounded. The two guys recovered faster from the impact and rushed to look at their discovery from up close.

"It's the real deal!" Shachi exclaimed, kneeling to inspect the treasure.

"Pass the torch," said Penguin, "I want to see this."

Saki walked around the chamber with a hand on the wall, trying to find out how big it was. The floor was covered by a thin sheet of ice that broke under her heels with each step. The water had to come from somewhere, but where? And what was all that treasure doing there?

"Saki, don't you wanna see?"

"I'm trying to find out where the secret mechanism that's going to kill us all is hidden."

"You read too much."

She saw something over her head, mounted on the wall, a shape like the ones lining the whole cave.

"I think there are more torches."

"I'll light them so we can see."

Not all of them caught fire, but when Shachi was done making the rounds along the wall, it was enough for them to see the entirety of the chamber without having to wave the first torch all over the place.

The walls were slick, worn down by a water current, like the rest of the cave, and a few ice stalactites hung over their heads like swords ready to drop. They looked quite solid, and they had been fortunate that none reached low enough for them to have walked into them while the room was mostly dark.

There was nothing on the surface of the walls other than the torches, not even markings like those scrawled along the tunnel. Saki had been expecting a tomb or something of the sort, but it was just as if someone had dumped an obscene amount of riches on the floor of the chamber and left them there for someone to find.

"What's wrong?" Penguin asked.

She didn't reply right away, because it wasn't like she had seen something undeniably weird, but still… something wasn't quite right. "Don't you think it's fishy?"

"Why do you say that?"

"What is this doing here?" She said, gesturing at the nearest pile.

"Someone must have hid it and never came back. You are a pirate. Ever heard of pirate treasures?" Shachi said like she was particularly slow.

"We even had a map," Penguin agreed. "This must be what it was marking!"

"So… they dumped it here? No chests, no bags, just dropped everything and left?"
"Maybe the container broke or decomposed. These look old."

"Or maybe someone found the treasure before and only took a part," Shachi offered.

"But there are torches built on the walls. You don't do that if you aren't going to come and go into a place often."

"Who's to say this wasn't a hideout?"

She didn't reply. It could have been, but was that really the answer? It was safe to assume the snow had blocked the entrance to the cave before the earthquake that had loosened it, and if a river ran its course through it, the warmer months would make it even harder to walk into it. That would make it a good spot to hide, yeah, but not so much to reach in case of need.

Feeling increasingly silly after the conversation, but still not budging, because her instincts were telling her that something about the place was iffy and she knew better than not to trust them, she kept inspecting the cave while the others rummaged through the treasure and put some pieces inside their coats to show the rest of the crew when they got back.

But try as she might, there was nothing suspicious other than the sensation that something wasn't quite right. She walked to one of the still shadowed parts of the chamber, careful not to trip where she could not see, but of course, she managed to slip on the ice anyway, and when she tried to lean on the wall she supposed was in front of her to stop the fall, only one of her hands hit solid rock.

She remained glued to the wall for a confused second, waving her right hand in front of her and touching only air. She realized that there was an opening between the wall she was leaning against and the one she could see to the right. Trying her darnedest not to lose her balance again, she advanced literally hugging the wall to test her theory. It seemed there was a passage behind that went to somewhere else, and it was kind of slippery.

She guessed she had found where the stream of water came from.

"Guys!" she said before walking further ahead. Her voice echoed, which automatically made her lower it. "There's a passage."

"Where are you?"

"Behind the part of the wall you can see. I'm going to walk up ahead and tell you if it's a dead end or —" She took an unsure step, another, then a firmer one, but then the floor of the passage did something odd, and when she set foot on the ice that covered it, she fell to her butt and downwards she went. "AAAAAARGH!"

Saki heard her friends yelling her name in a panic, but she was too busy screaming her lungs out and covering her head until she stopped on a dip on the floor. It seemed like the path continued, again, upwards.

The reverberating voices of her friends spoke of how much faith they had in her. "ARE YOU DEAD?"

Other than the inevitable bruises that would form, she had come out of the trip fairly unscathed. It was okay, just a few more to add to the collection. "You wish!"

It took her a moment to realize that she could see where she had landed, which meant that, against all odds, there was light. A cold, expansive light that cast strange shadows on the floor at the end of the tunnel. She crawled her way towards the source of the light, and when the passage gave way to
another chamber, she wasn't sure she was seeing right. If the discovery from before had been difficult to believe, this one was straight up taken from a strange dream.

The chamber was twice as big as the other one, bathed by the light that filtered through a block of ice that covered the entire ceiling and stretched beyond. There was something between the ice and the chamber, transparent and thick, maybe glass or a material she didn't know, that prevented what was on top of it from falling down. Beams of ice connected the ceiling with the rock; running water that had filtered through several holes in the glass and had frozen mid-fall due to the low temperatures. The floor was covered by more ice, and in a platform in the middle of the room, there was a stone cube.

"Can you climb back up?" Penguin asked.
"I don't know," she said after a moment's contemplation, "but this is awesome."

She definitely would go back up right away if she could and drag them down with her.

"What? Did you find something else?"
"More treasure?"

She stared up. "I think I'm under the bottom of the lake."

That was the only explanation.

"How do you know? Water leaks?"

"It's…" She kept looking between the ice columns and at the icy ceiling. "It's kind of hard to describe, honestly."

"Is there any light over there?" Shachi asked.

"Yeah, it's almost like I'm outside."

"'Kay, wait for me, I'm going with you."

"Wait, what if you can't get—" She realized it was too late when she heard something sliding through the passage. She also knew it was too late to get out of the way, so Shachi got to the end of the slide ride to crash against her.

"Ow," he said. "Why didn't you move as—"

"I just want to stop getting hit," she whined.

"What is that?!" Shachi yelled.

"...Yeah, I told you it was kind of hard to explain."

Shachi stood up and slid to the closest ice column. "Dude, this is awesome."

"I said that first."

"Are you okay?" Penguin shouted from above.

"Yeah, he just lunged at me like the sad thirsty man he is."
"Don't listen to her!"

"Shachi, have some shame," Penguin said.

"Honestly."

"Screw you two!" He skated deeper into the room, using the ice columns to push himself further in.

Saki, meanwhile, tried to get up the slide again, but it was proving to be pretty difficult. "Penguin, try not to fall down. This thing is hard to climb."

"I'm going to look around and see if there's any rope."

"Alright!"

"Hey, this thing has something written on it."

Saki walked into the room once again and saw Shachi standing up in front of the stone cube. She skated towards him, using the ice columns for stability, until she was by Shachi's side and before the stone.

She vaguely recalled a drawing of something similar between her mother's documents, but she had never asked much about her research. Anxiety, anticipation, excitement and disbelief welled at once inside of her as she saw the strange symbols etched on the surface, from top to bottom, telling a story that she was unable to read, but that must have been important enough to be immortalized in stone and hidden.

Important enough, perhaps, to give up lives for it. Important enough for the World Government, at least, to kill for it.

The thought made her stomach sink, and she placed a hand on the letters, tracing over the lines with her fingers in an attempt to jog her memory. She was sure she had seen some of those at her old home, mixed in her mother's books and papers, but those were gone along with Asteria, and the only people who knew the truth of what had happened had died many years ago in Ohara.

'You have on board one of the last links to those archaeologists,' Hilda had said. 'To Du's research.'

But she didn't know anything. For obvious reasons, her mother had kept her away from her findings, and Saki hadn't insisted.

It was a grown up thing, she used to think. She had assumed she would learn when she was older, and she had been content to let time pass in ignorance, because surely her mother would tell her one day, if it was important.

But Dubia had disappeared, and with her, the last hope to solve the mystery.

Or...

Fully aware that it was a long shot that she'd likely miss, she remembered that woman whose bounty had begun to circulate again, the Devil Child who had fled Ohara, accused of sinking several warships. Her new picture. That face that was so much alike one of the woman's in the picture Saki had.

If those two women were related, if there was something else behind the claims of a government who had placed a ridiculous bounty on a child's head, if she knew what the stone before Saki and
Shachi was… would she be able to do anything with this finding?

Saki didn't have any strong feelings about the contents of the text. She could have turned her back on it and lived with the curiosity of yet another thing she would never know, leave it as just another anecdote of her wacky trip through the Grand Line.

But it had mattered to her mother, if her assumptions were right. It had been relevant to her investigation, even time after leaving for the North Blue, a quest that had absorbed her for as many years as Saki was able to recall by her side, and, now she knew, had probably been left unfinished.

Saki felt like she had done so many things wrong regarding her family, and had let so many opportunities escape, that she didn't think she could forgiven herself if she abandoned this lead that had remained hidden from the world since her mother and her friends had been in Niva, over twenty-three years ago.

"You are very quiet," Shachi said, eyeing her with uncertainty, and then, not bothering to hide his suspicion. "What are you scheming?"

She debated whether to come clean or not, but that was a conversation she didn't feel like having at the moment. It was… too personal. And she had no solid proof of anything she was assuming. For an instant, she wished it had been Law asking so she could tell him and ask him, in return, what he thought. She would have saved her many explanations.

Instead, Saki said another possibility that had crossed her mind. "You think the treasure back there was planted to hide this?"

"Still overthinking that?" He replied. "Now that you mention it, I guess it makes more sense to leave all that treasure on the ground it's supposed to be a distraction, but… I don't know, why wouldn't they have taken the gold anyway?"

"Maybe they took a part. Or whoever was here wasn't interested in the money."

Shachi took another good look at the stone. "Does that mean it's valuable? It looks ancient."

"Depends on what you're looking for, I guess," she said without much energy. She was confused about how to proceed, and was more inside her mind than in the conversation.

"That's for sure. Have you looked at the ceiling?"

She had, but she did again when prompted, wondering why he was bringing it up. "What about it?"

"What about it?" He was offended by the question and made no effort to hide it. "Are you for real?"

She looked down as she scratched her head, which was a pretty good to hide her flushing face behind a hand. She hadn't thought anything of it, other than it was pretty. "What's going on with it? Is that glass?"

Shachi’s mood got instantaneously better when she asked. It seemed like he just wanted an opportunity to share his thoughts. "That's what it looks like. But, pay close attention: if what we're seeing is the bottom of the lake, it means somebody brought this huge thing here from above after crafting it. By the way, I have no idea what it's made of, but anyway, unless it was here to begin with, there's no way it would fit through the tunnel we've come from. And after that, that somebody made what amounts to a glass lid that perfectly fit the rock walls in order to create a chamber here, and also thought of making those holes so water could still flow and the river didn't dry out completely. Do you know how difficult this would be with current technology?"
"A lot?"

He ignored her. "And this was supposedly done so long ago that nobody in the archipelago remembers it's here." Then he declared solemnly, "The people here had some fine engineers."

"And so it turns out that Captain isn't our only resident nerd."

Shachi huffed and turned slightly pink. "Hey, what would you know? It's damn awesome, is what I'm saying. Penguin should get down here too."

"If he does, there's a chance none of us go up again."

"Yeah, I know. We need to come back later and better equipped." He seemed to think something over, and then said, "Looking at it like this, this place is worth marking on a map."

Saki smiled a little. "See, it depends."

Shachi hummed, looking as happy as if he hadn't been beaten to submission by a gang of enraged snowflakes earlier. "Are you going to draw this?"

It hadn't crossed her mind, though she probably would have found it worth drawing later, when she could settle down for a while. "Sure. I'll need some time to memorize everything, though, and that isn't something we have a lot of…" The last word left her lips so weakly that it was barely audible, because she had lost track of her thoughts when a sudden idea occurred to her.

Shachi said something, but she wasn't listening, lost in her little world. Even if the possibility was so small it was laughable, there was something she could do, instead of lamenting she didn't know anything useful.

Because it was obvious that she didn't have the knowledge to make out what the stone said, nor the means to decipher it. She could try to come back later, but nobody could guarantee the cave would still be accessible by then, and the Heart Pirates would be long gone by the time the snow melted.

So really, there was just one option left, and it had taken Shachi of all people to make her realize.

There could be a person out there able to do the job, and Saki could bring it to her.

"Why don't you try to join up with Penguin? I need to do something first."

"Here?"

"Don't worry, it'll only be…" She glanced at the stone appraisingly. "Oh, who am I kidding, this is going to take a while."

He didn't insist, which surprised her, but maybe he was learning what that strange concept called tact was. "Whatever. But if I get out, you come with us too."

"Uh-huh," she said, intent on not following through if she wasn't done by then. "Sure thing. Now let me concentrate."

Shachi turned his nose, unconvinced, and knowing after all this time that Saki was stubborn as a mule and moving her would take an angry Mack warning her to show up in the kitchen if she didn't want to be stabbed with the blunt side of a butter knife. But that only happened in days when she was really, really tired, and really, really lazy and hiding in the boiler room with them. He half walked, half slid away, leaving her alone in front of that stone whose significance she didn't know,
but with a lot of luck she could eventually learn.

The trail the Idiot Trio had left led Law's group to a cave, half hidden by a hill of fallen snow. The tracks left nearby suggested that someone had been caught under it and dragged out, and Law wondered who of the three had been the walking disaster it had dropped on.

The footsteps disappeared there, but Bepo was already sniffing inside of the cave. "They've been here recently. It smells like something burnt, too."

Mack followed after him and Law did so right after, which was when he took note of the size of the footprints that had run to the rescue of the buried person, and concluded the victim by process of elimination. As much as Saki said she liked the cold, he didn't think the sentiment was mutual.

"They can't have gone much farther in," Mack said. "It's dark."

"But..." Bepo smelled the air again. "I'm sure the scent goes inside."

"They aren't dumb enough to go into a cave without a light source," Law said, and this time he was sure he wasn't just saying it to convince himself. "Close, but not enough," he added, to be fair. "If you say it smells like something burning, they may have a torch."

"You're right!" Bepo exclaimed, surprised. "I wonder if there's anything lying around?" He strained to see the floor of the cave and advanced very slowly. With each step, the ice coat that covered it cracked loudly. "I can't really—OW!"

"Bepo?" Law asked quickly.

"I bonked my head against something," he said, voice pained as he held his head.

Law walked to his side waving an arm above his head until he hit something metallic. He felt about the object until he managed to dislodge something long from the wall and hold it to the light.

"There's your torch," Mack said, tapping a finger against his chin. "So they really are inside."

"Told you so," Bepo replied.

"Don't get smug with your elders."

"Sorry."

"But why would they do it?" Mack continued without acknowledging the apology. "It's not like they need to take refuge. The weather's fine and there's sun outside."

Law could think of an obvious reason, but not a smart one. "Why would they set out into the mountains in the first place, knowing the path was blocked by snow?"

"Ah."

"Sorry," Bepo repeated in a guilty tone, and Law, who had forgotten that Bepo had captained the expedition, regretted his remark immediately.

"Do you have anything to light this with?" Law changed the subject quickly.

"I should have matchsticks," Mack said, reaching into one of his pockets and pulling out a box along with a handful of snow. He stared silently at them. "Wet matchsticks," he said, and unceremoniously
tossed them aside.

Law tried to say 'great,' but was came out instead was a grunt.

"I could make a fire with sticks and dry leaves," Bepo offered.

"Dry leaves," Mack repeated.

"Oh. Um, I'm—"

A familiar voice coming from inside the cave interrupted Bepo mid-apology.

"Hellooooo?"

"Penguin?" Law tried.

As soon as he did, the echoing sound of footsteps filled the cave, soon to be followed by a resounding 'OOPS' and a crash that made everybody wince, but before anybody found the will to ask if he was fine, the running resumed, and soon a warm light appeared from behind a turn, carried by Penguin, who smiled after looking at them. "You okay? I could hear you from all the way in the back."

"Yes," Bepo said. "Why are you here?"

"We kind of, uh, found some treasure," Penguin said, avoiding the self-incriminating part of why they had actually entered the cave.

Bepo beamed when he heard that. "Really?! The treasure?!"

"There is something…?" Law said quietly, but after that momentary lapse, he recovered and said, thinking that at least one of them had to make an effort to keep his priorities straight, "Are the others back there?"

"Yeah, and it's a good thing you came, because I'm having trouble fishing them out."

His brow furrowed. "They fell into a hole?"

"Nah," said Penguin, sounding absolutely unconcerned. "More like they slipped down a hidden tunnel. They're okay, it's just kind of hard to walk back up."

"We can pull them up," Mack said, moving the arm where he was carrying the coiled rope.

"Good thing Captain recruited someone reliable," he said, unknowingly putting into words Law's train of thought. "Here, let me light your torch." Penguin offered his, and Law approached the tip until it caught fire. "Let's go. I'm sure you'll like what's in there. Oh, and Shachi says there's something awesome where he landed, too…"

Penguin talked all the way to the treasure chamber, which only took them a couple of minutes to reach at a quick pace.

"There you go!" Penguin announced with a theatrical wave of the arm.

"It's an actual treasure!" Bepo said, and then ran towards a pile of jewels.

It was difficult to tell what Mack was thinking, but the hum he made seemed to angle towards approval, rather than annoyance.
Law picked up the closest thing on the floor; a fat gold coin with the face of a man and some sort of star on the other side. He had never seen anything of the sort in any catalogues, and Law had read a lot of coin catalogues.

Not that anybody knew or had to.

He pocketed the coin while no one was looking, and his attention was directed to the back of the room when he heard Shachi's voice, kind of muted, coming from a spot that wasn't illuminated. He guessed that there was a pathway there, instead of the expected wall.

"Yo, Peng! What's going on?"

"The rescue team is here!"

"Good, cause my ass is sort of freezing and every time I try to speak to her she tells me to shut up and leave her alone. Everything is cold here. Not a single trace of warmth."

Law deduced from the casual and barb-filled exchange that, as Penguin said, nobody was too injured.

"What is she doing anyway?" Penguin asked.

"Hell if I know."

Law approached the spot where Penguin was standing. "I take it you aren't hurt?" He asked.

"Oh, hey, Captain!" Shachi's voice saluted. "Yeah, we're fine if you don't count the bruises."

"I should give you more than bruises for getting stuck here," he said with a deadpan.

Shachi laughed nervously from up ahead. Law couldn't see inside, but he guessed he was nearby.

"Wait a second, we'll throw you a rope."

"Roger. And by the way, if anyone wants to see what's here, you should do it before it gets dark."

"Is it really that great?" Penguin asked. One didn't need to be a genius to see that he wasn't looking forward to going down that tunnel.

"You seriously need to see it."

While they talked, Law motioned at Mack to come over with the rope, threw it into the tunnel, and after just a few seconds, Shachi appeared looking completely unruffled.

"Thanks, guys." He flashed them a smile.

"Is Saki okay, too?" Bepo asked, trying to peek behind Shachi.

"She's acting like she hit her head on the way there, so I guess everything's normal. Though you may, uh, need to convince her to come out," Shachi suggested, looking at Law.

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Beats me. But even if she wasn't there, it's worth a look."

Law, who after so much insistence was curious about what lay beyond, edged closer towards the
path and tentatively set a foot on it. It seemed safe.

"Why couldn't you come out by yourself?"

"The way actually goes up, but there's a stupid dip in the middle of the tunnel and it's really easy to slide because it's—"

Law took one, two, three steps further, and tried to take a fourth but instead he went down rather ridiculously.

"—pretty steep," finished Shachi with a sigh.

"I see," Law said, blandly, from the floor. Fortunately, the others had not been able to see his descent and landing.

Getting up and looking ahead, he noticed light at the end of the tunnel, and doing what most people would recommend not to, because that was the basis he had built his life on, he walked towards it.

He saw ice covering the floor and dripping from a clear ceiling. It took him a moment to realize that they were frozen water columns, and another to notice the stone cube in the middle of the room, in front of which his last missing crew member was sitting.

Saki's eyebrows were knit together as she stared at the stone and made strokes with her index finger in the air. If she had noticed Law's arrival, she was doing a superb job ignoring him.

The most efficient way to get closer seemed skating, so he did. He stopped near her, and when he saw the symbols on the stone's surface, he wondered if she could make something out of it. At this point, it wouldn't surprise him much if that was the case. "Are you reading it?"

She didn't reply right away, but when she did, her forehead lost its wrinkles. Her eyes didn't move from the stone, though. "Can't. I'm memorizing the symbols."

"You are…" He started, glanced at the stone and then back at her with disbelief written all over his face. "You are what?"

"I won't remember for long, so I want to write it down as soon as I'm at the village, but I think I've got it down pretty well already, so if you can give me a couple minutes—"

They were looking at what was basically a small wall full of symbols. It was absurd to even make the attempt to memorize it, but of course such an ordinary notion wouldn't stop her. "Do you know these letters?"

"No. Well, to be fair, I must have seen them when I was little because they look very familiar, but I never paid any attention, so…"

"No, that isn't what I meant. How…?" He sighed, because he felt too tired to ask and she seemed to be fine, which was what he had come to check in the first place. "Whatever."

"It's good that you're here. I wanted to run a theory by you."

He looked at her with interest, in silence. Her hands were now hidden in her pockets and her hair under the hood of her coat, and her cheeks had taken on a red shade from the cold.

"I think this was what my mother and her companions found in this island," she said. "Remember the letter I showed you? She said there was no way they could have moved it." And she pointed at the
rock. "I don't think she would have said that if they meant the treasure back there, and let's be honest, how many secrets like these can one tiny island hold? I don't believe we've happened upon this and it has nothing to do with them."

He didn't remember, really. He hadn't put any stock into the contents of the letter because he didn't think they'd end up stumbling into anything before they left for the next island. He had taken the ongoing treasure hunt as a benign pastime for his men while the only thing they could do was wait for weeks in the middle of nowhere with no means of entertainment.

But he made an effort, because whatever his thoughts were on the matter, this was important to her, and if it was true that she had been waiting to speak to him, it meant that she hadn't told the guys about her mother's identity. And while, considering the circumstances, it was probably the safest thing to do, it left Saki with nobody but him to talk to about it.

"She… said something about the lake in it, right?"

"Yup," she confirmed, and he felt a tinge of relief that he had remembered at least that much. "Whatever it was, it was nearby. And there's also the treasure back there…"

"Like someone put it in a visible place on purpose."

At last she looked up at him, and her eyes were shining with gratefulness. "I knew you'd get it. Those two kept saying there was nothing fishy about it."

He didn't know what to do with her sudden appreciation, so he diverted the subject from him. "They aren't the most perceptive guys out there."

"They haven't really needed it." There wasn't any disapproval in her tone. Law understood what she was getting at. Their circumstances had been different. Safer. It wasn't their job to think of all the ways that a seemingly harmless situation could go wrong. "They know their stuff really well, though. I just thought the ceiling was nice, but Shachi was geeking out hardcore about it."

A smile tugged at the corner of Law's lips. "That goes to show how much he likes his job."

"Yeah, I thought so too!" She said with a grin, and then, a bit more seriously. "Sooo… Do you think I'm way off the mark thinking this may be the thing my mother wanted to keep hidden?"

She looked at him like what he chose to reply would actually matter. Law was unsure how to feel about that. Someone so single-minded and decisive should have had no business seeking reassurance from others. Every time that insecurity showed up he ended up wondering where the blazes it had come from.

"I don't think you are," he said, and he thought he saw a smidgen of surprise in her expression. "What I don't know is what you mean to accomplish by trying to memorize this. Can you even?"

It was a colossal waste of time, and no one could reasonably expect her to do it.

She pouted slightly when he asked, and she tugged on the cords of her hood. Law thought she was trying to hide from sight. "I keep telling you guys that I have a good memory. How do you think I'm doing the drawings for the logbook?"

Come to think of it, he'd never seen her drawing at the actual location since Indent Bay. "I thought you were just winging it."

She grimaced, and he knew he had made a mistake saying that.
"What would be the point of drawing them, then? I like to do things the best I can, you know..." She looked kind of disappointed as she spoke, but she took a long breath and that was gone to be replaced with determination. "Anyway, I don't have a Cameko Den Den Mushi or sheets to make a carbon copy, and there's no guarantee I'll be able to come back here at a later time. This is not a matter of being able to do it or not. I don't have any other option, so I will."

"...You have a point." He admitted. "But that only answers one of the questions."

For some reason, she looked away from him and sounded almost shy when she replied. "It's not that I can do anything with this, you're right... but... what if someone else could?"

"Someone."

"...Yes?"

"You are doing this on the off chance that you randomly find someone who can read the text."

She pursed her lips. "Um... Have you looked at bounties lately?"

Law had to think for a while before he recalled anything relevant. "...The woman from Ohara that's with the Straw Hats," he said, an affirmation, not a question. "Are you serious?"

"I know there's a very small chance, but maybe—" She stopped in her tracks. "Well, it's the best I could come up with. And I suppose I won't do anything if you don't want me to."

"Now you are deferring to me?"

"That's what a captain's for, isn't it?" She said with a smile that didn't ring completely true. "I know that that woman's in a rival crew and ours comes first. And if the World Government was trying to cover up so badly what the scientists found out that they'd destroy an entire island, it's going to be dangerous." It was as if she was making a list of everything that was wrong with her idea before Law could raise any of those objections. "It doesn't concern you or any or the others. But I can't... I can't just forget about this and move on."

Law didn't know what to say, because he may very well have said the same about his own situation. He'd be a hypocrite if he tried to argue.

But she continued, unaware of his internal dilemma. "I know it's silly, because my mother's been dead for so long, and I don't care about her goal, but... I think I owe her memory this much."

That was the last nail in the coffin.

"Two minutes," he said.

He should have told her that she was thinking too much and to forget about it, even if he didn't want to. A good captain would have done that.

"Huh?"

"You said you needed a couple of minutes to finish. We're getting out of here then."

Her perplex expression gave way to a brilliant smile. "Thanks, Law. I promise I won't bother you with this anymore."

"I don't mind. Just don't do anything stupid."
If only he could take his own advice.

The sun was starting to set by the time the pirates reached the village with pockets full of treasure, and the only plans Saki had for the evening were showering, stuffing her mouth with every meal she had missed during the day, and dropping dead on the first available bed she came across.

However, the urge to strangle whoever had come up with the idea of telling impressionable little kids that dreams came true arose when they saw the state of things at the docks.

Tuttu was lying down on the middle of the pavement, big as he was, surrounded by a few locals that looked absolutely terrified.

Silent and imposing, mostly because he was frowning more than usual, Law walked briskly to the group and crept behind them like a tall shadow to ask, "What happened here?"

Despite it looking like there had been a chain of heart attacks among the villagers, all of them had the sense to take a few steps back, one of them shaking like a leaf and proclaiming very loudly that they hadn't done anything, and another few declaring that they had forgotten something on the stove. One of them, in his hurry to get away from Law, walked backwards over the edge of the dock and fell to the water.

It was after the splash caught their attention and made them look towards the ship that Saki and the rest of them saw something far more egregious than a crewmate suspiciously napping in the middle of the street.

Someone had scrawled on the side of the sub, next to their Jolly Roger and taking all the space above and below the row of windows, 'YOU SUCK.'

Saki's mouth fell open wide enough to be confused with a mailbox. When she looked at her companions, she found them in a similar state, though Shachi was white, Penguin's hands were trembling, Mack's expression was more incredulous than indignant, and Law… Saki wasn't aware until then that mouths could go rectangular with surprise.

She thought that he was such a square all the time, and though she had enough sense to not mention it out loud, she regretted missing the chance to unleash such a witty pun.

Tearing her eyes off from the offending statement, she looked down at Tuttu and went to crouch near him when she saw him twitch.

"Hey," she gave him light taps on the shoulder, "hey, big guy. Wake up."

He mumbled something groggily, but that was the extent of his response.

"I asked you a question," Law said at their remaining audience somewhere behind her.

The villagers were absolutely terrified. But although, yes, Law sounded really angry, Kikoku was still safely tucked between Bepo's arms, and Law wasn't a fan of using his bare hands to inflict grievous injury. Saki was sure they were safe.

One of them started spluttering, "W-we don't kn-kn-know—"

"It was the other guys!" A high-pitched voice said.

Between the legs of two horrified adults appeared the same kid that had thrown a snowball at Bepo
while he was down. Saki thought he had a lot of guts and very little self-preservation.

"Which guys?" Bepo asked him.

The boy was quiet for a beat, staring at every Heart Pirate, as if attempting to identify whose voice that had been. Then, very, very slowly, his mouth opened so wide it put Saki's earlier attempt to fit in all the letters of the Grand Line to shame, and said with unbridled excitement, "You're a bear! And you can talk! Can you talk again? Please?!

"Oh, er," Bepo wasn't sure what to do when put in the spotlight. "Okay?"

"Wooooooooaaaaah—!

"Boy," Saki said, "can you tell us what happened? You can talk to Bepo later."

He whipped his head towards her. "I can? You promise?" He then gave a fleeting glance to the spot where Saki supposed Law was standing, and his smile fell a bit. "It was the guys on the other ship," he pointed at a spot in the docks that was now vacant. It was where the suspicious vessel had been. "A bunch of them came out, argued with the boiler suit guys, beat them up and took away two of them."

"They took them?" Law repeated.

The way he sounded, Saki was not so sure about being safe anymore. The villagers seemed to think the same, and while it was good to see that their Captain could terrify civilians with a sentence, it was decidedly unpractical when they needed information from them.

Thankfully, after just a moment of uncomfortable silence, the gods smiled upon them and Ruddy appeared among the crowd, parting it by slapping everybody with his cap until they got out of the way. "Hello, lads! I went to the town hall to get you a map."

"A map," Saki repeated, and glanced at Bepo in case he knew what Ruddy meant, but he seemed to be as lost as her.

Ruddy had expected more enthusiasm. "Oh, you had one already? But this one's the latest edition, it came out a month a—"

"Why do we need a map?" Saki said.

"What do you—" And he turned to the crowd. "Useless whippersnappers, you haven't told them yet?!" And before any Heart Pirate had to ask again, he said, "They took two of your guys to a small island in the archipelago and said that if you want them back unharmed, they want something you took from them, too."

"Tomorrow at dawn," a woman who hadn't spoken up until then said. "They said that you need to show up then."

Law's hat obscured his eyes from the angle Saki was, making him look more unnerving, if that was possible. "It isn't far, I assume?"

"Just around the corner. Here, who's in charge of…" Ruddy held the map towards the pirates, and Bepo reached for it. "Hm. I knew you looked like a dependable person."

"Shachi, go get a stretcher," Law said, and Saki got out of the way when he stepped up to Tuttu to check his pulse. "As soon as I give him a checkup, we're going after them."
"Won't it be too early?" Saki asked.

"There isn't any guarantee that they'll keep to their word, and I'm not going to stick to their terms. If they've got the nerve to mess with us, they'll face the consequences."

Saki hadn't seen Law this serious in a while. It was easy to imagine that some of that contained anger was directed towards himself, not just the attackers, for letting harm come to his crew, and she was especially aware at the moment of how lucky they were to have someone like him watching their backs.

"And I don't know about the rest of you," Mack piped up, "but even if I don't give a steamed broccoli about that stupid map, hell if I feel like giving it back now."

"We'll make them pay," Penguin said as he stared at the ship. His face was hidden from sight, but he sounded like he was going to cry. Saki thought he must have really bonded with the rest of the guys in a short time when she realized that he was likely more affected by the state of the Polar Tang.

Shachi came back, and mainly thanks to Bepo, they loaded Tuttu onto the stretcher and boarded the ship. When they left him in the infirmary with Law, Bepo went to the bridge, Mack left for the kitchen, from where immediately the sound of sharpening blades started to come, and Saki went downstairs with the other two.

Penguin was still pallid with indignation, and Shachi punched the railing of the stairs when they got to their floor.

"We'll take care of it," he said. "'Sides, you didn't get to do the first paint job because you couldn't even hold up the brush, remember? So we can beat up those assholes and then stick it up to the hippos."

Some of the pent up tension seemed to leave Penguin. "Yeah, that sounds good."

They made for their shared quarters as Saki thought how nice it was to have someone who understood you so well that only a handful of words could make you feel better.

She walked to her own room, and for the first time, upon opening it, she thought it felt the slightest bit lonely.

Then again, it wasn't like she had to go very far if she wanted company.

Taking off her coat, if only to unload the weight from the treasure for a while – note to self: collect the rest from the other guys, because she was supposed to take care of the crew's money and she wasn't going to make any unapproved concessions – she reached for the sword leaning against her desk and unsheathed it, inspecting the blade to make sure it wasn't damaged from lack of use. Funny how it had been seeing much less action than before she was a pirate, but maybe that meant that she was doing something right. She wanted to think so, at least.

She put the sword back in the sheath and left it at the end of her bed, and contemplating it briefly before slipping into the bathroom, she thought that, if she had to put it to use, it felt undeniably better to do it for someone else's sake.
Ideally, Marines fought in numbers, and that was how they were trained. They used formations, had rules to follow, and relied in cooperation to take down pirates, at least the rank and file. They were also used to fighting in open spaces.

Soon during Saki's sword training, the Old Man had realized that this didn't apply, since she'd be alone, and remarkably smaller than most people who tried to kill her, and she'd have to defend herself in the cramped alleys of their dingy town. Parry, sidestep, and hope the enemy eats dirt thanks to momentum had been some of the smartest advice Saki had been given when learning how to fight.

She had never seen her size as a disadvantage when trying to stay alive, because the smaller one was, the easier it was to go unseen, and to be underestimated, and use that to her own profit. But circumstances had changed.

So Saki regretted, if only marginally, that the Old Man had never really taken the time to teach her how to watch out for enemies that came from every direction, but, on the other hand, there was another piece of advice that had proved to be useful consistently.

As said before, Marines had to follow rules. She didn't need to. In fact, she was highly encouraged not to.

Standing on the deck of an enemy ship, she held her sword in front of her, facing the man rushing towards her, and instead of trying to block the blow, she stepped aside at the last moment, put forward a leg, and the man tripped on it and onto the other pirate that was approaching her from behind.

She thought she managed to pull off pretty cool things sometimes, but sadly no one was looking to see it, and she moved onto the nearest poor sod that looked distracted.

The island where the other pirate crew – whose name still eluded them – had brought Uni and Asuka was so small that one could stand in its middle and throw a rock across it, and from the Polar Tang, Bepo was able to make out campfires on the snowy shore. Two ships were docked nearby, flying diamond-shaped Jolly Rogers, and one of them was recognizable as the one they had seen in Niva.

The Heart Pirates had sailed to their destination underwater, and gotten as close to the ships as possible without running aground. Since it was likelier that their companions were in one of the ships instead of the shore, specifically in the one that had been in Niva, Law ordered Bepo to surface, and Saki was able to add to her collection of pirate experiences boarding an enemy ship.

She may have enjoyed the moment better, reminiscing about the swashbuckling adventure books she had read, if the cold from the cave hadn't set in her bones, if she wasn't bruised, or if she wasn't impatient to get this over with and sit down with a pencil and paper before she forgot some part of what she had painstakingly memorized.

However, if someone on that deck had enough salt in him to fill the five seas and the legendary All Blue, it was Penguin, who was swinging his spear like a baseball bat at the pirates' heads. Saki made sure not to step too close to him in case he couldn't tell friend from foe anymore, and when the deck was reasonably clean and the perimeter around Penguin still reeked of danger, she busied herself
sniping at the boats of pirates that approached from the shore with the weapons of their fallen comrades.

That meant she was throwing blades at them, because while there may have been a few pistols strewn around, she had never fired one, and she didn't doubt for a second that she would manage to injure herself in the most stupid way imaginable.

Instead, Mack gave took the chance to give her the promised master class on throwing knives.

"The key is in the wrist," he said, staring at Saki, moving it back and forth as he held a small blade between his fingers, and then he threw it without even looking. Someone yelped down there. "Once you've got that down, the rest is muscle memory. Try it."

Saki's fingers were kind of numb when she took another knife from Mack, and she didn't trust herself not to stab her own hand with it. Mimicking Mack's earlier movements, she aimed at a boat where two guys were frantically padding away and flung it. It hit one on the back with the handle.

"You need more practice," Mack said. Though he didn't sound pleased, the assessment didn't seem to carry any disapproval, so Saki guessed she hadn't done so badly. At least she had hit something, right?

He tossed two more knives as nonchalantly as assault can be committed, and those hit as intended. "Found them!" Shachi yelled then from the other ship, and disappeared below the deck in a rush.

Saki and Mack jumped over the railings onto the other ship, and when they started to descend the stairs, they saw Uni heading up with messier hair than usual and fuming. They stopped short of bumping into Shachi mid-staircase.

The wood creaked painfully with each of Uni's steps. "Tell me you've left some for me!"

"I thought you'd be more beat up," Saki said, stepping to the side to get out of his way. She wasn't one to get between a man and his revenge.

After him, walking at a slower pace, was Asuka, and right behind Bepo followed with two tentative paws outstretched, in case his companion tumbled down. Asuka didn't look as hot as Uni, sporting a black eye and a split lip. "Masks block hits."

Saki thought this was a fine moment to refrain from being a smartass, since she wasn't wearing a mask, either.

Mack seemed to have lost all sense of urgency when he saw both rescuees walking out on their own. "How did they get you?"

"From behind and being fifteen to twenty, mostly," Asuka said, annoyed. "Where's Tuttu?"

"In the sickbay, which is where you—" Law began to say, but he was interrupted by a loud string of curses coming from above.

Asuka looked up, alarmed, "Enemies!?"

He ran out before anyone could tell him the likely source of the outburst, and they didn't have to wait long until Asuka joined Uni's rant.

There was an uncomfortable beat of silence as Shachi pulled down the brim of his cap, shadowing
his face, and solemnly walked outside as well.

"Was there anybody else inside?" Saki asked once he was out of sight.

"Just one guy keeping watch in the cells."

"Cells? Really?" She said under her breath. She understood the necessity of having those in a Marine ship, but the kind of pirate that set out to get a ship with cells wasn't one Saki wanted anything to do with.

"I asked him about this captain before Bepo kicked his teeth in, and turns out he isn't here."

Mack spoke before Saki had a chance to. "Where, then?"

"He didn't know. The bastard took off with a ship and left the others here."

"Then what was the point of this? Didn't he want the map?"

"He probably thought better about messing with us," Bepo said.

It made sense, but it didn't convince Saki. She guessed by Mack's frown and Law's silence that it was the case for them, too. Why go as far as taking two of them hostage to just run away in the end? And leaving so many men behind… then again, one could safely assume that a few dozen men could take care of a crew as small as the Heart Pirates. One who hadn't seen Law in action or a very pissed off Penguin, that was.

"So what's the plan now?" Saki asked.

"We search the ships, take anything that looks useful, and get back to the Polar Tang."

"And the idiots that are still on the shore?"

"Leave that to me."

Saki didn't question Law and headed back to the other ship with Mack, but she found out what he meant when she dropped off a crate full of medical supplies on the deck of the Polar Tang and proceeded to watch Law extend his Room and cut down a piece off a ship with a single stroke of his nodachi. The second one went down just as easily, wood planks splashing against the water and objects spilling out of the section of the ship. It was a matter of time until the ocean claimed them and dragged them to its depths.

"Who has the map?" Law asked in general.

Penguin replied that he had, and Law extended a hand to him to hand it over. As soon as Penguin complied, he tore it in half, balled the papers and threw them overboard.

Much whining from the mechanic crew ensued, but he rested Kikoku against his shoulder, put his other hand in his jeans' pocket, and turned his attention to the slowly sinking ships like one watches a pleasant sunset.

Saki knew he had been training to increase the radius of his Room, and as proven by recent events, it was already wide enough to reach other ships if Law was standing on the sub's deck. If it had been like this back in Qaryn, he would have reached Jerkface in time.

Saki was surprised by her own thoughts, because it sounded like she was blaming him for what happened when he had already done more than he should have, considering that man had meant
nothing to them.

She picked up the crate again, unintentionally glancing at her right wrist, where the bangle Banu had given her was hidden by long sleeves. If there was someone to blame for that, it was her for getting caught off guard. Some of the guys cheered on Law, but this time Saki couldn't feel as euphoric over payback as she should have. It had been a long day, and she'd done a lot of thinking. She kept determining that that didn't do her any good, and she kept doing it anyway.

Bepo was near the door, which showed signs of an unsuccessful attempt to open it, and had been hastily fixed by a murderous Penguin when they'd had to go underwater.

He was holding up a crate of his own as he stared at Law. Saki stopped near her fluffy companion.

"He's getting better."

Bepo made an appreciative sound. "He's been training hard," he replied.

"I can see that," she said softly, and after some thought, she added. "I don't envy him."

Bepo blinked and turned his head towards her. "Why do you say that?"

"Because he needs to be at his best all the time, and keep getting stronger for our sakes. He always tells me that it's his duty to take care of us. That would be hard even if we weren't pirates. It's a lot of pressure to put on a single person."

And there was that debt he had mentioned and that he was willing to settle at all costs. Too many things weighing on him. She understood now all too well why Bepo felt like he had to look after him. She was wary of leaving him to his own devices, too, and how long had it been since they had met? A little less than half a year? It felt like a whole life, in some ways.

To think she had been afraid of him, at first. It was laughable.

"He tells you that?" Bepo said, ignoring her reasoning.

Saki was confused by that. "Is that weird?"

Bepo contemplated his answer, looking towards Law once again before speaking. "One day, you and I will have a talk."

"O... kay?" She said, unsure of what had prompted that reaction. That furball hid a lot of mysteries.

He hummed, and with a short nod, he smiled at Saki. "C'mon, hurry inside. It's cold for humans out here."

"Are you getting cheeky with me, Bepo? Am I seeing a trend here?"

"No talking back, sailor. In you go before you get sick and give Captain extra work."

She shook her head, but did as he said. Partly. She did talk back. "I'm fine."

Everything hurt as she walked down the stairs. The tumble down the gorge hadn't been kind to her.

"I'm sure you are," Bepo said.

She wasn't fine at all when she woke up in the morning. Or rather, when she was woken up by a
rather badly-tattooed hand on her shoulder.

In better circumstances, she would have shrieked and slapped it away, but it felt like too much work. It was a nice hand, too. Easily fixable. How irritating.

She had fallen asleep on her desk, and she had a cheek stuck to a page of one of the volumes that Hilda had given her. Strewn all over the wood surface were the papers where she had transcribed the symbols she had memorized from the stone, and some of the other books. It had seemed like a great idea to look for clues last night after she was done writing.

On a good day, she would have jolted awake the moment she heard the steps right outside her room. But it wasn't a good day, and her body ached from the bad posture and something else, her head throbbed, and it was hard to open her eyes to try to take a good look at her captain, or at her clock, and she was too tired to even wonder why her body felt like it was made of lead.

She managed to focus her vision enough to tell that Law was displeased.

"Sorry," she said without thinking, mainly because she was too tired to do so.

He frowned harder. That was a bad sign.

"Why?"

"Dunno," she mumbled. "You look like I should apologize."

The hand on her shoulder suddenly moved to her forehead, and she winced under the cold touch.

"You're hot," he muttered.

"Tell me something new," she replied.

Law looked at her like she was stupid. "You're running a fever."

"…Oh."

That made a lot of sense. It certainly explained why Law was in her room without her letting him in first, and it also explained why she hadn't heard him knocking at all.

Because she was sure he had. The others didn't anymore, but it would be weird if he stopped now.

She tried to recall if she had done anything that warranted catching a bad cold, and she remembered getting buried twice by snow and spending hours in a frozen cave like it was a distant memory. That could have had something to do with it.

Was it late? She glanced at the clock, but the handles refused to point just at one number.

"What hour…?"

"Eight in the morning."

"Shit," she said immediately, and pushed herself up with a heavy effort, staggering. "Tell Mack I'll be—"

Law took her by the shoulders before she could try to stumble her way to the galley and redirected her a couple of steps left, towards her bed. "Sick. For about a week. Forget about cooking."
"Nooo."

"Saki. Go to sleep."

She realized then that he wasn't angry. He was worried.

She'd rather have him annoyed at her.

With no warning, she dropped onto the bed, startling Law. "Bepo was right," she said.

She had gotten sick and added more onto Law's plate. She would stew in her own misery if it didn't require so much work.

"What about?"

"That's between us."

And she, too, had so many things to do. Books to check. Questions to ask Hilda and Ruddy. Snowmen to build before the only water around her was again liquid and salty. She had to ask Law if there had been anything useful in the Devil Fruit guide. If there had been any leads within the fruits themselves. Had she been useful at all these last few weeks?

She didn't doubt Law could have found out anything he needed without her help, anyway. She felt like more trouble than she was worth, between getting ill and what Hilda had dropped on her about her mom.

"Has he been bothering you?" Law asked, watchful.

"Bepo is unable to bother," she said, suppressing a yawn. "He watches. He helps. He worries about you."

There was a delay in the reply, but his tone was softer. "I know."

Saki closed her eyes. "I want to help too, but you don't want help, and you're trying to do something dangerous and I don't know what to do or tell you. And now I'm here. She lifted an arm and dropped it dead on the mattress. "Sick. Taking up space. I'll sleep the fever off. Go do your thing. I'll be fine."

"Not if your legs are hanging down from the bed."

"Stop being smart," she whined. "I can't think straight."

"Get in bed. I'll be back."

She vaguely remembered changing into pajamas and slipping under the bed sheets, but not him coming back.

He must have, though, because when she woke up a few hours later, there were pills and water on top of her clothes' chest, and a thermometer, and the chair of her desk was pulled up near the bed and an offensively old Devil Fruit guidebook rested on top of it, open on a page that showed a swirly blue mango.

She didn't have the strength to move to take the medicine, so she went back to sleep, and she had a recurring nightmare about snow, an empty submarine, and being alone.
It had been a split second decision, and it had paid off handsomely.

When his men had told him what they’d found while the skulked around Niva’s docks, he didn't believe them until one of them put a blue fruit on his hand.

He had ordered the crew that sailed his own personal ship to and make a quick nightly incursion into the town and left the others behind to take care of the Heart Pirates when they showed up.

He had expected the rest of his crew, two ships' worth, to be enough to handle the Surgeon of Death’s attack. Hours later, standing on the deck of his remaining ship among the wreckage of the other two, and watching the survivors on the shore crying for help, he found out that he'd been wrong, but he couldn't say everything had gone so bad.

The crates they had taken from that godforsaken shack were the biggest treasure they could have laid their hands on, much better than anything that old map could point them to. With those Devil Fruits, he would be set for life.

Losing two thirds of his crew in a night was a regrettable thing, but in every island there were always men willing to join a successful pirate crew.

Before any Marines could be sent to round up what was left of them, captain Diamonds Theo sailed away from the archipelago where he had spent the last weeks making everybody's life difficult, with a smile that showed his rhomboid teeth and an Eternal Pose that pointed to his favorite island. Next stop, Jaya.

Saki wasn't the only one who had come down with a fever. Shachi also ended up in bed coughing up a lung, and though Penguin wasn't sick, for a few days he was feeling like a mountain had fallen on top of him, which was too close to what had actually happened for comfort. If Law took into account the rest of the injured guys, he had to admit it was a good thing they had to spend one last week in Niva before they could set out for somewhere else. This way, the ones who were sick could stay in the sub, while the others could stay at the inn and make repairs to the Polar Tang. He caught himself glaring more than usual at the dock workers that passed by, and still he had been the one who had to intervene when one of them stared funny at the graffiti and Uni decided to defend their honor by proving that a blowtorch was mightier than the Nivan's alcoholic breath.

Saki was out cold for three days until the fever relented, and that made Law overconfident. He realized his mistake when he knocked on her door on the fourth day, she told her to come in, and the smell of shampoo and shower gel hit him as he turned the doorknob.

He glared at her like she had been the one to vandalize the submarine. "I'm going to tie you to a bed until you learn to behave."

"I've heard that threat a few times," she said, sheets drawn up to her nose, watching him shiftily.

Law decided to ignore a mutter coming from under the bed cover and that suspiciously sounded like 'kinky.' "Maybe it's time I made good on it."

"I was disgusting. I wanted to change the bed sheets too, but I'm sore." And she yawned.

"Color me surprised." He walked to the chair near Saki, picked up the Devil Fruit guide on it, bonked her on the head with it, and put it at the feet of the bed as he plopped down.

"You're mean," she said, sitting up and rubbing her forehead.
"And you're a dumbass, so it evens out," he said drily.

She laughed a little at that. "See, that's where you're wrong. Stupid people don't get sick."

"Shachi's come down with the flu, too." Never mind the inexistent scientific basis for that belief, but given the choice between logic and a burn, Law knew the former had a better chance of working.

"Exception to the rule," she rebuked. "There's always one."

"Who's to say it's him?"

Judging by the ensuing silence, that one had hit home. She threw her hands up briefly and said, resigned, "Sure, kick me while I'm down."

He cracked a smile at that. That made her stare with open curiosity.

"Are you in a better mood?" Saki asked.

She didn't look pale anymore, cheeks slightly flushed from the shower, but the dark rings under her eyes betrayed a lack of rest.

He realized he had been staring after she cocked her head to the side, still staring, and he hurried to say, "As compared to…?"

"The time you spent locked up in the sickbay. I know the fruit stuff was important to you, but you looked like you'd gone to three funerals in a row and were getting ready for the fourth."

She hadn't meant anything by it, she couldn't have, but he could nonetheless put a face to each of those funerals.

"Well, that's over now," he said, trying to rest importance to it. He hadn't meant to worry anybody. Worrying was his job, not the others'. "And I've got news," he added, hoping that she wouldn't insist.

He knew it had worked when she perked up. "Good or bad?"

He wasn't sure what to reply. They probably were on the mildly interesting to worrying spectrum. "More like unexpected and expected."

"Oh. Hit me with the first one." Her eyes twinkled with the excitement of someone who had passed the last 72 hours skirting the limit between never-ending boredom and feverish delirium. Hours were slow in the sub when no one else was around.

"Ruddy was looking for us a couple of days ago to ask if we had taken more fruits from the warehouse."

"You had?" She asked automatically, but upon second thought, she said, "Didn't he throw away the rest of the cargo?"

He crossed his arms and leaned back against the chair. "Apparently, he had been waiting for the results of our investigation, in case we needed more samples."

"How… helpful."

"It's a vested interest. He doesn't know how to take off the antlers yet."
Her posture relaxed and she let out a quiet snort. "That makes sense."

"To answer your other question, I haven't been there since we took the fruits." And if he had, it would have been for no other reason than to set that shack on fire. "Ruddy went to get rid of the remaining ones after I told him what model he had eaten, and he found a busted lock and not a single crate."

Despite the fever being gone, Saki wasn't yet to full speed. She stared blankly at nowhere for a few seconds in silence. "Was it that pirate crew? Who were they, anyway?"

"You're the expert," he said. He didn't particularly care. They had been in the way, and then swiftly removed. The world was full of insignificant people, though a few less since a bunch of nights ago.

Saki's eyes narrowed into slits from the effort. Law wanted to tell her to stop thinking before she broke something. "I'll check the posters later," she said. "But was it them?"

Law shrugged. "We think so. Remember how the captain was missing? His ship probably stopped by Niva while we were out."

"But we would have seen them, assuming he made his way from that other island—"

"Not necessarily. It was dark, we were underwater and maybe they didn't take the shortest path."

It took her a few seconds to process everything. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense," she admitted. "So is this a problem?"

"Not for us, but whoever tries to fence them will be dead as soon it reaches certain ears."

"Good thing Ruddy didn't try anything with them."

Law caught himself agreeing with her before he remembered that he didn't care at all for that man, and wondered if being a bleeding heart was contagious. He changed the subject, slightly weirded out by this development. "I confirmed the theory about the fruits, by the way."

"They are artificial? How could you tell?"

"They are identical copies. Multiple Devil Fruits of the same kind aren't possible, to begin with, so two of them matching to that extent…"

"Was there any info in the guidebook?"

"There was," he replied. "It was classified as the Deer Deer Fruit, Moose model, and at the time the book was written there was no known user. I would assume that, at some point, someone got their hands on the real one and found a way to synthetize more of them from it. There was also an old market price, and it was higher than in the invoice we found, so even without taking into account the inflation over the years, it's impossible that they are original."

Again, all he got at first was a blank stare, but Saki sounded pleased she said, "That's something."

"It is." And as an afterthought, because he had been kind of a jerk when he had been handed the book, he said, "Thanks."

She waved him off. "Don't. Finding that book was a matter of pride."

His lack of acknowledgement had bothered her before, though, so that was probably modesty showing. In her. That was a novel thought.
"Not at the beginning, though," he said.

"Eh, can't say I'm against getting one over Joker."

Law sometimes forgot that he wasn't the only person in the sub with a bone to pick with that man. But contrary to him, Saki didn't seem to be directing her resentment at him. It seemed like she was able to let go of the things that hurt her with relative ease, and it wasn't the case for him.

"Do you…" He started, and regretted it as soon as he did, so he decided to shut up.

But she didn't want to let him. "Do I?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It evidently does," she said with disbelief.

He was hesitant about asking, but it was pointless to dance around the subject when asked point blank. It had been a stupid question, anyway. "I was wondering if you had a grudge against Joker."

She blinked, and her eyes lowered to her hands on her lap while thought about it. "I should, shouldn't I? I really should."

"But you don't," he followed.

"There's no sense in holding grudges. I don't have it in me anymore."

So she had, before.

"Forgive and forget?"

"Neither," she replied, shaking her head slowly. "They're just… not worth the price."

Law fell silent, reminded of the brief conversation they'd had in the sickbay when they had retrieved the Devil Fruits.

"You know what's disgusting about grudges?" She continued, looking up at him. "There's no winning. You either carry them forever and become bitter about them, or you get your revenge, and when you do, there's nothing left. Suddenly there's a big empty space where the hate used to be and you are lost without it."

Law almost said that it was easy to say when she had killed the man who had murdered her father, but caught himself in time to think that maybe she was speaking from experience.

He had never gotten the impression that she had gone through an existential crisis when she joined the crew, but as always, looks could be deceiving.

"What would you do if you had even the slightest chance of getting back at the people who hurt your family?" He had spoken without realizing that he was, in a sense, looking for validation. And, in a sense, he knew before she answered that they wouldn't see eye to eye on the matter.

He couldn't put anything past him. Not now, not ever.

Saki let out a soft breath. "At what cost? Whatever I did wouldn't bring them back. Besides…"

Law stared at her, waiting for the end of the sentence. She stared back for a moment, then turned her back to him, lay down, and buried half of her face in the pillow.
Denied.

"Out with it."

"No. You're depressing me."

Law lifted his hat to run a hand through his hair and put it on as he stared at the back of her head. "I wasn't thinking when I brought up your family."

She groaned, sounding like strangling him was a tempting course of action, and sat up to glare daggers at him. "*My* family? Seriously? How dense can you be? You're supposed to be the smart one!"

He was taken off guard by the sudden aggressiveness. "What's gotten into you?"

"I can't believe I have to spell this out for you," she said very fast and quiet, incredulity painfully obvious. "*My* family is here now, and *my* home is this submarine. Why would I risk what I have for something I can't take back no matter how much I try?"

A knot formed in Law's throat, and he was tempted to stand up and get out of the room because there was no way to answer that, and the only thing that kept him from doing so was that he had dug that grave himself.

Getting a crew had been a means to an end, at first. A matter of survival. A way to sail the Grand Line finding safety in numbers, perhaps having fun along the way, until his objective was within reach and he could…

He could… do what, exactly?

Tossing them aside wasn't an option. It had never been an option, if he was honest with himself. Passing the torch onto Bepo and going off on his own was the most likely one.

If he had been another kind of person, he could have gotten them involved. He could have used them against Doflamingo and stood a better chance against him. And when he entertained the idea, he hated that he wasn't that kind of person.

But when he looked at Saki's piercing green eyes staring him down, and at the new tattoo on her right forearm, he wasn't sure what was worse, trying to use them against an enemy that was far beyond their joint ability, or telling them to go on without him.

It had only been half a year since North Blue, and he couldn't imagine a life outside his submarine, without his crew. He didn't want to. Saki was right. Everybody had helped build their ship into home.

She spared him the need to reply, and she didn't look angry anymore. Like she had deflated after the outburst, as she was wont to do when she thought she had bothered him. But she didn't try to backpedal this time. Quite the contrary. "I know I'm missing most of the picture, but there's something I can tell you: that man isn't worth your attention, your time or your life. He'll never be. The fact that you're after him is proof of it."

"How so?" He said dispassionately. He didn't feel like arguing back at this point. He wasn't even looking at her anymore. His hands looked like a better choice.

She took the opportunity to bop him in the forehead with an accusing index finger, and he had to look up.
"Because you are a good person, no matter much how you want to hide it, and it would take something horrible for you to hold a grudge like this."

"I owe someone," he said, and he was surprised at how strangled his voice sounded. "I can't let it go."

"Is that someone alive?" She asked softly.

"No."

The ensuing silence rang in his ears, hollow and insufferable.

"I get it." Saki said, downcast. "Those are the worst debts. You never know when you're done paying them back."

Law took a breath that sounded sharper than he had intended.

When had he become an open book to her?

He almost spoke of Cora-san. He almost told her what he had done for him, and who his brother was, and why he wanted to keep her out of it, and why telling her would defeat the point of it.

But he hesitated, and she didn't grant him the opportunity to explain himself. Instead, she outstretched a hand towards him, face up, waiting for him to place his hand on hers.

He did, watching her expectantly.

Such a travesty would have been unthinkable only a few months ago.

She squeezed his hand and said, "Don't tell me. I don't need to know. But if you think this is something you must do, let me help."

"You don't know what—"

She cut him off. "I don't care. It's important to you."

His hand twitched in hers. "How is that enough?"

"Because there's no stopping you when you are set on something, and because I'll be damned if I watch you lose yourself to whatever mess you're in when I could have helped. You are not alone. You shouldn't have to act like you are."

She spoke like he mattered, and he didn't know how to face someone who put more value on his life than he did.

He wanted to pull his hand away and tell her to leave him be. He wanted to pull her close and steal a kiss before she regretted holding his hand and looking at him like he was irreplaceable. Before she found out that the crew had been nothing but an excuse to get to Doflamingo, and that becoming Pirate King was such a faraway dream that it sounded like a lie in his head. He had promised her a future he wouldn't live to see.

"Please," she insisted.

He hated how she could make him question everything. He hated how she was able to cut past the surface, past veins and blood and muscle and stubborn determination with clinical precision to hit where it mattered most.
But that was also why he leaned in, until his head was against hers and his lips were nearly brushing her ear, eyes closed, hand now holding hers, too, for a moment that felt too long and short at once. She had stilled at the contact, and she was holding her breath, but all of that seemed to be drowned by the sound of his heart pounding and a faint scent of tangerines.

"Thank you," he whispered against her ear, lingering after he did, but he still drew back before she could move or say anything.

Saki seemed to relax as soon as he was at a prudent distance, and her gaze followed Law as he walked towards the door.

"Hold it right there!" She said. "You haven't given me an answer."

He didn't stop or turn around so she could see the small smile drawn on his face. "Make of it what you will."

"Cheater," he heard her say, dejected, as he closed the door.

He closed his eyes, took a silent breath, and made for his room, intent on not seeing anybody else for the remainder of the day.

Saki was good to go the next morning. The sub was mostly empty while the guys spent the last hours in Niva stocking up on consumables and possibly drinking themselves to a stupor before they had to work again.

But someone hadn't been able to go.

Saki skulked over to the hallway she never went to, because she had no business there.

The door to the man's quarters was cracked open, and though the windows were closed, there was a bedside lamp lighting the room.

"Are you alive?" She said from behind the door.

Right away, she heard shuffling around and something falling to the floor.

"What are you doing here?!" Shachi yelled. His voice had the telltale signs of someone who wasn't yet clear of a head cold. "You can't come in! It's forbidden!"

"By whom?" She asked. She certainly hadn't been told anything of the sort by Law, possibly because she had showed zero interest in snooping around other people's quarters. But come to think of it, this was the sort of thing that was probably a rule in other crews.

Whatever. They never knocked on her door. She should have been the one complaining.

Shachi was likely thinking along the same lines, because he made a pause before retorting, "By us! No women allowed!"

"Are looking at porn, Shachi?"

"No!" He spluttered.

"You sound kind of guilty!"

"Come in already," he groaned.
The last time Saki had been in this part of the ship, Bepo had been its only inhabitant. It had looked unnaturally clean and too wide for a single person.

Now that the bunks had been claimed by more owners, the beds were undone, clothes were strewn all over boxes and wooden trunks, and suspicious contents poked from under mattresses. Only one bed looked used but immaculate, and Saki would have bet good money that it belonged to Mack.

Shachi looked miserable in his pajamas, without his cap and with his hair sticking in every direction. Saki had escaped the most annoying symptoms by instead getting KO’d by fever. He, on the other hand, seemed to have been hit by the opposite.

"I dropped my glasses when you knocked and can't see shit." He admitted. Indeed, Saki saw his sunglasses on the floor. That explained why he was squinting.

"That was the problem?" She said, bending down to pick them up and pass them to him.

"Letting your guard down near the enemy is a bad idea," he said, taking the glasses from her and putting them on. "Much better."

"What was it again? Photosensibility and…?"

"Astigmatism. With nearsightedness sprinkled on top."

"That sucks."

"Yeah. So, what did you want? Come to laugh at me?"

"Well." She paused. "Yeah."

Shachi’s smile dropped. "Fuck you."

She pointed backwards towards the door with a thumb. "I'm going out. Do you want anything from town?"

"Nah, I already sent Peng on an errand."

"Okay. I'll be going then. I want to say goodbye before we leave."

Shachi looked mildly impressed. "I thought you were going to rub it in some more."

"I think getting healthy first is the best dig I could take at you."

"That's true." He sighed. "You should have heard the others. 'Ooh, look at the tough guy from North Blue getting sick! I thought they were immune to the cold! Maybe they should eat more coconut to build up defenses!'"

Saki's reaction was immediate. "Set their beds on fire."

"Could spread to mine. Can you do something to their food?"

"Mack would end me."

He fell in thought. "I'll think of something. But not now."

"Yeah," Saki smiled. "Sleep all you can before we sail away."
"Will do." He took off his sunglasses again, put them next to the lamp and dropped on his pillow. "Thanks for the visit."

"No problem. See ya!"

"Try to survive Hilda."

Saki left the room with a snort and headed upstairs with a spring in her step.

It felt so good to be out of bed.

She briefly crossed paths with Law, who gave her the stink eye when he saw her on her way outside, but she was wearing a coat and a scarf and gloves and boots and they were leaving in one or two days at most, so she suspected he went easy on her so she could step on land one last time before being at sea for weeks.

Or maybe he didn't want to talk much to her after their last conversation. Saki herself wasn't sure how to take what had happened or what he had meant by it. She only knew she hadn't minded, and…

It was not the time to think about it.

She tried to find Ruddy once she hit the town, but he wasn't at the docks, so she changed her plans and took a walk to Hilda's store. She didn't feel like being in there, memories of coughing dust for days still vivid, but it was only right that she dropped by to say goodbye. Saki didn't think they would see each other again, but Hilda had given her something she thought she had lost forever. A piece of the enigma that had been her mom, kept safe and loved in a corner of the Grand Line.

Luckily for Saki, she killed two birds with one stone when she found Ruddy smoking in front of the shop.

"Morning, lass." He said with a grin. "Feeling better?"

"Amazing." She mirrored his expression. "My captain told me you had trouble at the warehouse."

"Ah, well, what can you do. Pirates." He let out a puff of smoke. "No offense."

"Hey, I'll take that as a badge of honor."

"It's good being proud of who you are." He nodded. "You need anything? Any reading material?"

"I was hoping to find you and Hilda, actually. We're leaving soon."

"Come to say goodbye?" He asked, eyebrows arching. "That's nice of you. I wouldn't have heard the end of it from the missus if you hadn't."

"I couldn't leave just like that," she said. "You've been a big help."

"We've helped you kill time in this place, all right," he said gruffly, but he couldn't hold back a pleased smile. "Not much to do for seasoned adventurers, huh?"

"Yeah… well. There was something."

"There was?"

Saki looked around her. As usual, there was nobody in the street but them, but she didn't know if she
should say what she wanted to. Her mom hadn't told them what she had found, so who was her, who had just met them, to make the opposite call?

But her mom had told them she had found something. She could risk that much.

"Can we talk inside? I don't want to explain myself twice."

"Sure." He put out the cigarette against the snow on the bench and pocketed what remained of it before turning towards the door of the shop.

Hilda was behind the counter, looking sour as ever, but the expression of her face softened for a second when she saw Saki. It was so brief, it was easy to chalk it up to her imagination, though.

Hilda got up from her seat and walked up to Saki.

"Hey!" She greeted her with a smile.

Hilda paused momentarily before starting to pat her arms, body, pinch her side and taking her face into her hands to inspect it from every angle.

Saki started flailing her arms, because she wanted to swat her away but was also trying really hard not to be rude.

"Hilda, let the kid go. She's healthy as a horse."

Hilda stepped back reticently and crossed her arms. Her magnified eyes only made the glare she was sending Saki more prominent.

"What was that about?" Saki asked, feeling assaulted.

"She was worried, is all," Ruddy replied.

"I'm not trustin' that greenhorn to keep her healthy," Hilda spat, walking back to her spot. She picked up a thermos and a mug from under the counter, filled the mug, and handed it forcefully to Saki. "Drink this."

Saki took it, confused. "He's a doctor."

"And I'm a nun. Drink."

"No, really—"

"Pah. Every ship thinks they've got a good doctor, 'til the quack actually needs to work an' suddenly the crew starts droppin' like flies. They don' know nothin'."

Ruddy clucked his tongue. "Stop getting your granny panties in a bunch, Hilda. The lad's not that bad."

"That Marine wasn' that bad either, an' look what happened to Du! What's the use of bein' not that bad if when push comes to shove they let 'em die?"

Saki's grip on the mug tightened unconsciously. She hadn't thought Hilda worried so much about her well-being, but the accusations she was flinging at Law didn't sit well with her, either. "He saved my life," she blurted out before she even realized what she was saying, and she decided that might as well tell the story when she immediately caught the attention of the bickering couple. "Right after we met. I was dying and he operated me when other doctors couldn't." She tapped her chest lightly, right
where her heart was. "He's the only one who could have pulled it off. He isn't just good, he's the best." And then she said with fake annoyance. "And I don't like to hear people badmouthing my captain."

"I'll vouch for that," Ruddy said with a cheeky grin. "There you go, straight form the horse's mouth. Lad's dependable."

"Until he isn'," Hilda said weakly. "I don' trust 'im. You should stay 'ere with us and let those men go. They'll get you in trouble they can' pull you out of."

Saki smiled apologetically and laughed. "I don't really need help to get in trouble."

"All the more reason not to go!"

Saki wondered if her mom had had to deal with this before she left Niva, too. She had been there for over a year. She also wondered how much of this was Hilda trying to make her stay, and how much a way to recover a connection to the Dubia she had known.

Saki hadn't talked much about her mother after she disappeared. Her dad avoided the subject, and she learned not to bring it up to anybody. Seeing the kind of imprint she had left in other people made her feel more real than she had been ever since Saki was a kid, cooped up at home, sitting on her mother's knees as she went over books and told her stories of cities long gone.

Her mother had found another family in Niva; that much she could see. And Hilda and Ruddy must have found a daughter in her, too.

Saki had never met her grandparents, so she couldn't tell if this was how they were supposed to act with their grandchildren. The Old Man had always had a kind of hands-off policy towards kids.

"There's a good chance I'll make things complicated for you. And…” She scratched her head, recalling the events of the other day. "There's something I've got to do."

"That's right. She was here to tell us something before you went off on your tirade," Ruddy said.

"Hmm." Hilda took another mug from under the counter and poured a cup for herself. "Are you drinking?"

Saki hurried to take a gulp. It was warm, sweet, and tasted like cinnamon, lemon and clove. She stared at the mug. "My mom used to make this."

"She drank it by the gallon every day. The neighbor said her kid would be born dumb. As if that could be. Du had more smarts in one toenail than this entire town combined." And after that, Hilda clammed up again and took a sip from her mug.

Saki nodded absentmindedly, letting the smell of the drink bring up some nostalgia. "We found something the day of the avalanche."

"We heard you got caught in it," Ruddy said.

"Yeah, but it opened up a path. Temporarily, anyway. I think it's the same thing the expedition from Ohara was looking for. I'm not going to tell you what it was, though."

"Why?"

"Because my mom was way smarter than me and she never told you, either."
Hilda stared her in the eyes, silent at first, then said, "What are you goin' to do about it?"

"I'm not really sure. I can't do anything by myself." The admission stung. "I don't know the things she did and I don't think I could learn them by myself. But I think there's one person that can help."

"Jus' the one?"

"Probably."

"An' you're going to find 'em?"

"Yeah."

Hilda sighed. "And you think it's worth the danger?"

"My mom thought it was."

"And she was smarter than all of us put together," Ruddy taunted Hilda, who scowled.

"And look what that got her!" Hilda retorted.

"But I'm not her," Saki said, prompting Hilda to close her mouth and press it until her lips were just a line. "You said my mom wouldn't have hurt a fly. I'm not her. I don't have half of her smarts, and not half of her goodwill either. I can fight, and I have people who'll help me." It felt strange to be able to say that sincerely and without a trace of a doubt. "I'll see this through as best as I can." She almost said she owed her at least that much, and her heart jumped when Law's words the previous day came back to mind. "No matter who gets in my way."

She had just argued with Law about risking too much for a personal objective and now she was telling an elderly couple that was worried about her, in so many words, that she was willing to face the World Government to continue her mother's work. A work she had no idea what it was about.

Hilda got her drift. "So that's it, huh? That's it. 'Nother kid gone for the greater good." She sounded tired, and sad, and for once, she looked her age, and Saki didn't know how to make it better without making promises she didn't intend to fulfill. But Hilda didn't want consolation and didn't need it, and the sadness came out as annoyance. "Stubborn as a mule," she muttered. "Had to run in the family, 'course."

"Maybe she got it from you?" Saki tried to joke. Hilda gave her an alarmed look, and Ruddy broke into laughter and patted Saki on the shoulder.

"Well said," he told her. There was a warm twinkle in his eyes. "Don't mind us, lass. We're old and tired. You have all the time in the world to settle down when you're done adventuring."

"Don't encourage her," Hilda warned.

"Stop being a spoilsport. She didn't come here to hear you whine." Hilda grimaced, but stepped out from behind the counter again and looked straight at Saki. Her fragile-looking hands rested on her hips, gripping with unexpected strength. Saki almost feared she was going to get kidnapped so she couldn't leave with the others.

"Write to us when you got the time," Hilda said sternly. "An' when you get tired of sailin' with that good for nothin' bunch, come 'ere an' get a proper job stackin' books. Did Du teach you how to?"

Saki's mouth dropped a little, and she didn't know what to reply other than, "Yeah?"
Hilda didn't wait for her to find any other words. "Now wait here while I write somethin'. Give it to that cook of yours. And stay close to him. He's the only decent one in that tin can."

Saki couldn't hold back a smile. "I think you're right about that."

By the night before they left Niva, Saki had left the fever-induced nightmares behind for good. She dreamed of uncle Arthur teaching her how to use a needle, of the soothing rumble of the machine as she worked, of warm lips brushing her skin and not wanting to let them go away, and she got up because she wasn't able to sleep anymore.

She woke up to find Hilda's scrawled note pinned to a wall of the galley when she got there, and a cooking pot resting on the stove. Saki lifted the lid, and it smelled like an old home and her mom on late winter nights.

A loud yawn behind her made her jump and drop the lid, and she looked at the doorway to see a sleepy-looking Bepo watching her.

"You nearly gave me a heart attack," she said, and with a short glance at her chest said. "Well, maybe not."

"It has to work better than that now."

"It does. Hasn't bothered me in a while."

"That's good." He reached for a juice pitcher and shook it to make sure there was enough before looking for a glass.

"What are you doing up at this hour?"

"I stayed up tonight reviewing our route."

"When are we leaving?"

"As soon as everyone's awake. Penguin heard from someone at the inn that Marines are heading here and we need to get the hell out of..." He stifled another yawn, and in the process, he missed with the pitcher. "Ah!"

Saki went to the rescue with a kitchen rag. "You need to sleep."

"So do you, but I don't nag you about it."

Saki lifted her eyebrows at him.

He looked instantly apologetic. "Sorry. I get snappy when I'm tired."

"Don't worry about it."

They spent a few minutes in silence, Bepo drinking, Saki brewing coffee, and also trying to suppress the feeling that she had something to hide.

'You and I will have a talk', Bepo had said.

The feeling of Law's hand holding her own and his temple against hers, and him whispering in her ear came to mind and prompted a furious blush that she tried to hold back.
For a stupid, stupid moment back in her room, she had thought he was going to kiss her, and the tragedy was that she was disappointed he hadn't.

She hoped to every god in the Grand Line and beyond that Bepo's uncanny ability to read minds wasn't real, because there wasn't a big enough rock for her to crawl under with all her embarrassment.

She scrubbed insistently the surface where the juice had spilled to look busy, and casual, and to try not to think of every moment she had spent in close proximity to Law in the last few months, to no use.

Had he been flirting with her? Had she been flirting with him? Was Mack right all along and she was the only one who hadn't caught on?

She discarded that option, because she didn't know how to flirt seriously and without being intentionally cheesy, and Law had the social skills of a mashed potato.

She was thinking too much and giving too much importance to something that hadn't had any.

Right.

"That spot is clean," Bepo said, and it sounded like an accusation.

"Right," she repeated out loud, and put the rag aside.

"You're acting weird."

"Reality's always weird after you pull an all-nighter," she deflected.

"Maybe you're right." He said, setting the glass down. "But you don't look well. Are you red?"

Curse that bloody bear. "No."

"Maybe you should rest before we leave."

"What's with the early reunion?" Law asked, appearing at the doorway too, and Saki cursed out loud.

"I think she still has a fever," Bepo said.

"That's not true!" She shrieked.

"But—"

She pointed out. "Out of my kitchen, you mangy cur!"

Bepo became mighty offended. "I'm not a dog!"

"Bear, mink, whatever, out I said!"

"What's going on here?" Law asked blandly.

"And you too! Who do you think you are to step in here without Mack's permission?"

"The captain?"

"That only works for the rest of the ship."
Law conceded the point with a tilt of the head. "Bepo, leave her alone."

"But I wasn't doing anything wrong!"

"Easy, now. It's her that's a hazard this early."

Saki gave him an incredulous look.

Bepo was appeased by this, though. "I'll lie down a bit. Give me a heads up when everyone wakes up."

"Got it."

Bepo went away and left the two of them alone at a moment Saki really didn't want to be.

"What happened?" Law asked, turning to her.

"I take back what I said the other day," she replied, facing away from him to watch the coffee pot. "He was prying."

Law made a sound that she guessed was of acknowledgement. "That's not bad."

She glanced at him over her shoulder.

"He sticks his nose in places because he cares."

She looked back at the stove and crossed her arms defensively. "I know."

"Do you actually feel sick?"

"No."

"Why should I trust you over him?"

She turned around indignantly. "Law!"

He was smirking. Making fun of her at that ungodly hour where fun was simply not permitted.

"Remind me why I make your coffee every morning."

"Because it's the same you drink," he said, walking into the galley to take the pot from the stove. This was a transgression that only happened when Mack wasn't around, because he feared Law's mere presence near the fire would make the kitchen combust, and everybody thought it was a reasonable assumption, Law included.

She shifted a little to leave room for him. "Bepo said there are Marines on the way," she said conversationally.

There was nothing strange in the way he acted around her. He was the same as always, and that put her at ease.

She could act like always. It was a shift in paradigm what scared her.

"Looks like it. Someone reported the thefts at the docks were done by pirates," he said nonchalantly. "We had to leave anyway, so the sooner, the better." He turned his attention to the cooking pot on the stove. "What's that?"
Saki lifted the lid so the scent wafted out. "Hilda gave Mack this recipe."

He closed his eyes as he tried to identify the smell. "Well," he determined after a few seconds, "maybe she isn't that bad. Even if she's insufferable."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's tea for cold. Lemon, cinnamon and clove. Clove has analgesic properties, though only when the oil's applied directly, but it helps with digestion, and there's probably honey in there too for sore—" He stopped when he glanced at her. "What?"

Saki's lips had curled into a tiny smile while she was listening. "You're kind of cute when you're nerding out."

He blushed. She only saw it for the smallest fraction of a second because he lowered his hat and took his mug and made a swift departure from the galley, but he didn't fling any threats at her, and that made her smile get bigger.

"Did you get the newspaper?" She asked innocently.

"Go get it yourself."

She snickered. What a sourpuss.

She poured a coffee for herself and leaned her back against the wall, closing her eyes and listening to the sound of the waves outside. It was still silent enough that it wasn't drowned out by the noise of daily life.

"Remember the tattoo we talked about?"

She peered at the mess hall tentatively. "This isn't about your fingers, is it?"

"No."

"Damn. Then it's about my birthday?"

"...If you want to take it like that."

She let out a laugh and straightened her back, resting her free hand against her hip. "So? What do you want?"

"Our Jolly Roger. I think it's long overdue."

Saki could feel the bubbles of excitement from a new project building up. She had been aching to do something new, and used as she had been to having customers every other day, she felt like she had been getting rusty since she started sailing. "How big?"

"I wanted to ask you about that," he said, idly tapping the handle of his mug. "I guess you'd know better what to do."

"Well, it's round, so theoretically it could be as big as you're wide. But it's symmetric, so unless the shape's perfect it will look off. It's better to draw the topmost lines between your shoulder blades so the circle can rest below, because if it went over them the shape would look deformed when you moved your arms, and if we're leaving some space at the top you'd need to do the same on both sides so there's an equili..." She trailed off when she noticed that there was a sarcastic smile on his face. "What?" She asked, suspicious. "What did I do now?"
"Nothing. It's just that you're cute when you're nerding out."

"Ass," she said, and unable to be truly annoyed at the comment, she went back into the galley to finish her coffee while Law chuckled in the background.

She thought it was a nice laugh.
When the going gets tough

(And you can tell from the smoke at the stake that the current state is critical)

Saki hadn't worked on a big piece since that tacky dragon for the big burly pirate she'd made cry. She wouldn't deny that that had been unprofessional of her. She wouldn't admit that it may have colored Law's view of her ability and thus made him reject her magnanimous offer to get rid of the eyesores he wore on his fingers.

But that was a subject for another day, because if she thought about it at the moment, she was liable to do something indelible and that she'd likely she'd regret later.

Simple tattoos were often more difficult to do than busier designs. Lines were longer and cleaner, and any mistakes stuck out like a sore thumb. To make it even better, their lovely Jolly Roger was symmetrical, which meant all of it had to be perfect.

Saki had a steady hand, despite what her attempts at eyeliner might make one think. The real difficulty came from the client, who had to stay very still so the movement didn't make her screw up a line. The last guy she had tattooed in Asteria, for instance? Would have been terrible. Even if with years of experience one learned which spots were more sensitive and made people move on reflex, being half a second too late to take the needle away could be a problem. Thin lines would need to be evened out, affecting the end result. The client would notice, or not, and she'd be grumbling and sulking the rest of the day because somebody could not stay still.

Law didn't even twitch through the whole process. Which made sort of sense, she guessed, because he already had a lot of tattoos, but it struck Saki as unnatural and had her on edge for the whole session, because what if she lowered her guard, and he twitched out of nowhere, and she botched up a line? This was their captain. It wasn't like he went around shirtless out there and any random person was going to see the tattoo on his back, but she had a duty to make it perfect, both as a tattoo artist and as a Heart Pirate.

"Are you even breathing?" She asked after a while, when she passed over bone for the third time and no reaction came from him.

"I might fall asleep." He did sound sleepy.

"Please don't. Sleeping people move."

"I won't," he said.

More time passed in silence, the rumbling of the needle the only sound in the room. From outside, sometimes Saki could hear the tinkering of the mechanics, and Mack with his cooking utensils. She'd asked him for permission to skip some of her duties that day, because she had expected the tattoo to take the whole afternoon. Law had asked to do it in one sitting, if possible, and she had agreed. It made sense that he'd want to get it out of the way as fast as possible, instead of having a wound on his back for over a week. In their line of work, they were bound to see action sooner than later, so better get it out of the way soon.

"Do you know finger tattoos fade away very fast?" She asked conversationally.

"Really?"
She couldn't see his face, but she knew he was smiling.

"Uh-huh. They need touch-ups pretty often."

"I see."

"How long have you had yours?"

"It's not going to work, Saki."

She lifted the needle to wipe away excess ink and blood from the skin, and also to let out an unrestrained sigh. "Can't blame me for trying."

"I'm not."

"What's your problem now, anyway?" She said as she resumed her work. She didn't sound accusatory, because indignation required a focus and energy she needed to put into something else, currently. "You know I'm good at my job. You've seen it first-hand and you even asked me for a big tattoo. Why won't you let me fix that mess already?"

"Part laziness, part having fun seeing you squirm."

"Oh joy."

"Don't take it personally."

"This is revenge for when we first met, is it?"

"I am neither denying nor confirming that claim."

"Should you be taunting me when I'm holding a needle to your skin?"

"It won't make a difference," he replied with absolute confidence. "You are still going to do your best."

Saki kept quiet for a few seconds. "How am I supposed to stay annoyed at you when you say things like that?" She complained. "And don't laugh. This is delicate enough as it is. In another life, please, pick a less symmetrical Jolly Roger."

"You don't like it?"

"I do. But it's easy to mess up."

"That's why I'm letting you do it."

"Oh, shut up," she said with a smile.

The flags of the newly arrived ships danced wildly in the wind, and so did Marina's hair, so she missed her superior officer disembarking and by the time she'd secured it behind her ears, the man was in front of her.

"Congratulations on your promotion, sir," Marina said, back straight and hands behind her back, giving no hint that she'd just been waging war against her own curls.

She and her men hadn't been able to work on the ruins of the base yet, and other than wait until
qualified personnel got there to fix what was broken and throw out what was destroyed for good, it
didn't look like they could do much. They were sailors, not builders. But at least the new docks and
the main tower, which had remained upright despite the unholy winds that tried to topple it down
every day, were in good shape for visits.

"Thank you."

Former Commander Curtiss, now Rear Admiral, because memory in Marineford was in short supply
if it meant sweeping failures under the rug faster, surveilled the tower in front of him with approval,
though his face changed when he looked to his right.

"I see your requests have fallen on deaf ears," he said.

"I'm sure help will be on its way when the time is right," Marina replied with an even tone.

Curtiss shook his head dismissively, "I suppose we can't expect efficiency where power struggles are
involved."

Marina's brows knit together. "You sound critical of the system."

"You would too if you spent as much time as I do on Marineford. Trust me, I'd swap places with you
in—"

"What is this pile of rubble?"

Curtiss stopped speaking and immediately looked as if he had swallowed a whole lemon. Marina
looked behind him to see who had spoken, and her day was unmade when she laid eyes on the
newcomer.

"Do we honestly need to make a stop here?"

An officer approached them, glaring at the demolished tower like it was personally offending him,
green waves straight out of a shampoo commercial billowing in the air behind him. The all-white suit
and boots he wore under his official coat gave Marina the urge to pick up a fistful of mud and fling it
at him.

But since she refused to be so infantile, she only said "No" to Curtiss.

"Apologies, Marina. We'll depart to Enies Lobby in a few days."

"Nothing to apologize for, sir," she replied sounding very, very tired.

The irritating man walked with airs up to Marina, a condescending smile growing on his face at the
same rate Marina's frown deepened.

"Marina! What a surprise," he said, as if he hadn't noticed her before, which he had, and he put a
hand on her shoulder. "To think you'd grace us with your presence in the Grand Line! How long has
it been?"

Marina weighed her options, and though clocking him in the face was the preferred one, she hadn't
forgotten yet what had brought her to an abandoned base in the middle of nowhere.

"Flagel," she said curtly, slapping away his hand without contemplation. "Since the academy, as you
well know."

They had never gotten along, and he had never forgiven that she broke his wrist during a public
training demonstration. It was a small consolation for every ill-intentioned comment she'd had to endure for years.

If he was offended by her gesture, it didn't show. He probably had wanted to provoke it. He put his hand behind his back, too, mirroring Marina. "It's Commodore Flagel now, haven't you heard? I even received a Devil Fruit for my services."

"Really? I had no idea. You know how news work in the sea. Word only gets out when something big happens."

That jab seemed to hit the mark. "One has to wonder how you got to ranking officer at all with that attitude."

"Kids," Curtiss said, and both stopped glaring daggers at each other to look at him.

"Follow me," Marina said, turning away from Flagel, "I'll show you to your chambers." She glanced at the crowd where her soldiers had gathered and picked up Howe and Philip near the front. "You two, show the sailors around the base."

"Yes, ma'am," both said at once, heading to the two ships at the docks.

Marina dismissed the rest of her soldiers with a hand wave, and they followed the other two to help the newly arrived sailors securing and unloading the ships.

Bepo wasn't happy. It wasn't about being sleepy, or tired, or sick of his job. It was that Law had gotten them into a problem that should have never happened, and he had kept quiet about it in hopes that he was just worrying without reason.

But his worries were turning out to be founded, and he didn't feel like shutting up anymore. The situation was dire enough that the captain had to be notified. He'd just come down from the bridge and was about to start looking for him when he saw him and Saki coming out of the sickbay.

She was lecturing Law without paying attention to his attempts to interrupt, and Bepo was glad to have companions who could draw the line when Law was being stubborn.

Because, let's face it, he needed to be stopped sometimes. Or sent to bed. Or reminded to eat.

"You need to apply this three or four times a day for—"

"I know how to take care—"

"Do I argue with you when you're operating? Same shit applies. You basically got minor surgery."

"And I'm the surgeon here."

"So here," she put a tin on Law's hands, "if you notice something weird, tell me, and don't scratch it or pick at it or—"

"Saki—"

"—wash it with a scrub like that dickwad from three years ago did and then came to complain—"

He grabbed her by the shoulders and looked her in the eye. "Saki. I am not stupid."

Her gaze drifted to one of the hands on her shoulders and lingered for too long. Then she looked
back at him. "Right."

If Law felt insulted by that, it was difficult to say. And then he looked up from Saki – because everybody had to look down to see Saki – and saw Bepo, and Bepo was denied an answer to his doubt.

"You need anything, Bepo?"

Bepo hummed. "I wanted to talk about the route."

"Who's at the helm now?"

"Tuttu. He's big, so he's good at steering it."

"I'll have to keep that in mind," Law replied.

"That's my cue," Saki said, and stepped aside, but not without pointing at Bepo before leaving and saying very seriously, "You are next."

Bepo didn't realize immediately what she meant, but when it dawned on him he shuddered and he put his arms around himself in reflex.

"Don't touch my fur!" He said.

"Don't threaten my navigator," Law warned her.

As a reply, she blew a kiss at Bepo and disappeared around the corner.

Bepo stared in her direction with worry for a few seconds before he relaxed and turned to Law. "Captain, I'm seeing something I don't like on the way to our destination."

"Bad weather ahead?"

Bepo shook his head. "Whirlpools."

Law rubbed his forehead as he thought, and through Bepo's mind briefly passed the accusation that they could have avoided this had they stuck to their original course.

"What can we do?"

Nothing short of ignoring the Log Pose and getting lost. "Try to avoid them when we see them. I'll need help at the helm."

"Whatever you need."

Bepo nodded curtly and thought to go back to the bridge, leaving the conversation there and not point any fingers. It wouldn't have served any purpose, anyway, other than blowing off some steam and making Law feel guilty.

But Law stopped him as soon as he moved. "Bepo, wait."

He did. He wondered if he should have come down at all, maybe waited until later, because he felt like he had only approached Law to take his bad mood out on him.

"Are you upset?" Law asked.
"No," Bepo said without thinking.

They stared at each other.

To hell. If he wanted to know, he would tell. Throwing his arms in the air, he exclaimed, "I am!"

"Is this about the route?"

"Of course it's about the route! Do you know how long it took to gather all that info before entering the Grand Line? There's so little, and we spent so long putting together the pieces—"

"I know," Law said, sounding a tad guilty, which made Bepo feel guilty in turn. "But we knew there was a chance we couldn't stay on that course."

"I know that, but did we really have to, this time?"

Law didn't reply right away. "We had to shake off those Marines, Bepo."

"That's not the only reason and you know it," he said, regretting right away how accusatory he had sounded.

He huffed. "What were we supposed to do, then?"

"I don't know! I'm not saying you did wrong! But…"

Bepo knew that, as the captains any important decisions were ultimately up to Law. He could accept that. But if he had no say in the matter, at least he wanted to know the reason why, and the feeling that Law was hiding something from him was more unsettling that he cared to admit.

They had been friends longer than anyone. It wasn't fair.

"You are wondering if I made the decision for the right reason, aren't you?"

A perk of having longtime friends was that, often, they knew you before better than you did.

"Yeah," Bepo admitted, eyes downcast.

"I'm sorry."

Bepo looked up alarmed, "No, forget I said anything! You've got enough work as it is."

"No, you're right. I should've been honest with you."

Bepo mulled over Law's words. "You know you don't have to do everything alone."

"I can hardly do anything alone nowadays."

"You know what I mean."

Law closed his eyes briefly and exhaled. "I'll try to be more considerate form now on."

Bepo's stare filled with doubt. "Just try?"

Law crossed his arms defensively. "What's up with all of you? Does no one in this ship have any faith in me?"

"No offense, Captain, but you're a human disaster."
Bepo felt much better at his indignant face. Maybe that was what he needed to put the matter to rest finally. Sometimes uncomfortable conversations had to be had. It didn't mean anyone had to dwell too much on them.

"From now on you'll refrain from spending time with Saki."

"You wish," Bepo said smugly, but on second thought, his face fell a little. "I think she's avoiding me."

Judging by his reaction, he hadn't noticed. "Really?"

"Do you think I've offended her?" Bepo asked in a whisper.

"It's hard to imagine."

"I was hoping she had told you something." But Law didn't seem to be worried, so he guessed it was nothing important. "She's been acting weird since Niva. Weirder than usual, I mean."

"She's had a lot of things on her mind."

"So you know," Bepo said smugly.

Law sighed. "Corner her in the galley if you need to talk something private. I won't say anything."

"Private?" That was suspicious. His ayes narrowed as he searched for Law's reaction. "What do you mean private?"

Bepo expected a reply. What he didn't expect was Law taking a step back and shutting the sickbay door in his face.

"Captain!" He cried, pounding with a paw on the door.

"Go bother someone else. I have work to do."

"That's a fat lie! Captain!"

But he was ignored until he gave up insisting, and Bepo was pretty sure that Law would get actually mad at him if he took the sickbay's door down.

Besides, unlike others, he had a job to do.

The smooth sailing only lasted a couple of days, and then Bepo had interrupted dinner in a hurry to say they were in danger.

The ship had entered an area of strong winds and currents, so Bepo had decided to avoid half of the problem and sail underwater.

The currents were unavoidable, though, and Bepo had warned them that there were whirlpools ahead and to prepare for a night on the lookout.

Mack, Saki, Uni and Asuka were sent to bed, to relieve in a few hours the ones that would stay up throughout the night. Bepo was hoping that by, morning, they would have gone through the worst of it.

Saki had been listening to the rumbling of the Polar Tang's turbines for most of the night, and it was
no different when she got up to see what was going on. She popped her head down the stairs to the engine room, where Penguin and Shachi had to be working. They had been unable to rely on the sails since the day before, and the engines had to be working full time against the currents of the area, so they had decided to stay up during the night in case an emergency repair was in order.

Mack, Uni and Asuka were still sleeping. The remaining three were in the bridge, trying to get them out of those waters as soon as possible.

While Saki might have felt nervous about a million things since she had embarked, navigation hadn't been one of them up to now. But seeing Bepo so worried that he had asked for help, for once, and the routine of the entire crew upended, made her realize the gravity of the situation.

She had known Bepo was exceedingly good at his job, and that was why she had underestimated what the Grand Line had in store for sailors.

"Guys, do you need something?" She called downstairs.

Penguin replied immediately, "Saki? What hour is it?"

"Around five AM."

"Damn, you wake up early."

"I wasn't sleeping much anyway."

"No wonder, the sub's swinging like—"

"Can you get us something to drink?" Shachi interrupted. "This room's an oven."

"Sure, I'll check up on the others and be right back."

"Thanks."

Skipping steps on her way up, Saki got to the bridge to see Law and Tuttu steering the rudder, or rather, trying to prevent the rudder from going the way it shouldn't. Bepo was staring through the windows and giving instructions, and when Saki looked in that direction, she understood why he had been so worried.

It wasn't only a whirlpool. The submarine was surrounded by them on every side and, more than sailing, they were sneaking in between them. The only things that kept them from getting swallowed by one were Bepo's indications and the sheer power of the engines fighting against the underwater currents.

Hesitantly, Saki asked from the door, "Can I help with anything?"

"Not now," Bepo said without looking at her.

"Alright. I'll be on standby downstairs."

And, feeling less than useful, she headed to the galley to retrieve a couple of glasses and a pitcher full of juice from the refrigerator. She guessed it was better than bringing the guys hot coffee.

Someone, however, complained when she got there.

"You could've brought us beer," Shachi said.
"I could have not brought you anything, ass," she said, shoving a glass his way, which he readily accepted. "I don't know how you can stand the heat down here."

"Same to you when you're in the galley," Penguin said.

"Mack gets the worst of it now, so I can't complain."

She sat down on a step and placed the pitcher on the floor between her feet. The sub moved erratically, and she didn't trust it wouldn't tip over.

"You okay about it, though?"

She looked up from the swaying liquid. "About what?"

"You used to spend a lot of time working in the galley."

She shrugged. It was true that she missed being more occupied. "There are more hands on board, so I don't need to do so much now."

"That's the thing. You seem like the kind of person who needs to be always busy."

"Oh. I can deal with that."

"He's asking because he's lonely," Shachi said. Penguin glared at him and sighed. "Don't look at me like that, it's true. You don't come down here anymore," Shachi said, and it sounded pouty.

Penguin pointed it out. "You sure you aren't projecting on me?"

"It gets old being surrounded by the same dudes all day, you know?" He admitted grudgingly.

It made Saki smile, and she realized she had needed it. "It's nothing against you, really."

It was true that she didn't visit as often since the other guys had joined the crew, but she had figured they had enough company with the new additions and she wouldn't be missed.

"Too many people in here, maybe?" Penguin asked.

"I suppose," she replied weakly at being caught.

"You don't like 'em?" Shachi asked.

"It's not like that. I thought you could talk about guy things if I left you alone. Screwdriver types, monkey wrenches, all those things you like."

"Oh, yes, the arguments about welding methods are savage," Shachi said sarcastically, and he made a pause for dramatic effect before declaring, "Iiiidiot."

"…I can't really deny that, you know," Saki said sheepishly.

But circumstances wouldn't have allowed her to make her case if she'd had one, anyway.

Before they could register what was happening or take cover, the world around them started shaking, the lights went out, the floor switched places with the ceiling, and the last thing Saki heard before she hit her head hard enough to fall unconscious, even over the roar of the engine, was the yelling two floors above.
Saki's head hurt like a flock of woodpeckers had been broadcasting SOS messages against it for the last several hours. The feel of the floorboards under her arms told her that the submarine wasn't capsized, but it took her minutes to open her eyes and focus them to confirm her location.

The absence of sound told her that the engine was dead. She sat up with a huge effort and realized that only the emergency lights were on. So power was out, too.

It took her even more time to realize that she hadn't been alone in the room, because why would she be, and it was then that she started panicking at the lack of movement.

"Shachi? Penguin?"

She heard a muffled sound nearby. Slowly, not because she wanted to, but because she tried to stand upright and couldn't, she crawled towards the source of the noise. The cap she bumped against and could barely make out revealed that she had found Penguin.


"...Huh?" He rolled over and his hand went straight to his head. Saki let out a long breath. "What's going—" He winced at the sound of his own voice.

"Concussed," she said. "Both of us. Sit up."

Penguin didn't argue, and with some help, he was sitting in a moment. "Where's Shachi?"

"No idea. We need to find him."

As if on cue, an unidentified person came rolling down the stairs, and before Saki and Penguin were able to get close to check who it was, another very identifiable someone came jumping from above with a war cry to land on the man who had just fallen.

Their abused brains needed a few seconds to take in the situation, which Shachi used to punch the man on the floor repeatedly.

"Shachi?" Penguin asked. "Who's that?"

Only then, Shachi took notice of his surroundings. "You're awake!" He squinted at Saki. "You too! Hurry up and help me beat these guys!" And he grabbed the now unconscious man by the collar and wave him at them.

He was wearing a Marine uniform.

Fortunately, the other two made the connection quite fast, and scrambled to their feet in a lamentable display of balance.

Shachi wasn't impressed. "Well, shit."

"Thanks for the reassurance," Saki said without thinking, which she took as a good sign that her reaction time was going back to normal.

Right after that, more footsteps of people coming down the stairs resounded in the room, and as soon as the shapes of another two Marines came into view, the three pirates tackled them without remorse and punched like their lives depended on it.

Which they did.
But the guys were still breathing when they stepped back, so there was that. Saki hoped their bad karma was cancelled by the fact that they had acted in self-defense.

While Penguin and Saki stood guard at the bottom of the stairs, Shachi ran to grab a rope and tied the knocked out Marines together. And, once they were secured, Saki and Penguin dropped side to side on the stairs. Shachi just sat on the floor to catch his breath.

"Guys, this is really bad," Shachi said, fanning his face with a hand.

Penguin's voice was hushed by necessity. He was pressing a hand against his forehead while he spoke. "Why do we have Marines on board?"

"Beats me. They were here when I woke up."

"Where are the others?" Saki asked, glancing above. If the uninvited soldiers hadn't been proof enough, the sunlight coming from the hallway confirmed that they had surfaced, and that must have been intentional of Bepo. If they had been in risk of sinking, staying underwater would have been a death sentence for everybody, since with the ballast tanks flooded and no power, they would've had no way to leave the ship.

"Gone," Shachi croaked out. "When I woke up and you wouldn't answer, I went upstairs following the noise, and instead of the guys I found those three rummaging through the sub."

"You think we were raided?" Penguin asked.

"I think we washed ashore after a whirlpool swallowed us. I saw land through a window."

"Best case scenario, they've been captured," Saki drawled. "They wouldn't have disembarked and left us down here."

"That's what I thought, too," Shachi said.

Penguin didn't sound so sure. "I find it hard to believe that someone could capture Captain." But he didn't want to come up with another possibility. The options were too grim.

"Maybe they got him while he was knocked out, too? That whirlpool gave us a good thrashing."

"There must be a lot of Marines out there if they also got everybody else," Saki muttered. Her head protested every time she spoke any louder, but it was clear she'd have to get over that soon.

"Then we'll have more company anytime now," Penguin said. "We need to find them."

"We can't go out blindly. For all we know, we're surrounded."

"We don't need to," Shachi replied.

Saki didn't know what he meant until she stooped staring at her knees saw him nudging towards the bound Marines.

"Ah."

Penguin stood up, significantly more stable than before, and also more clearheaded at the prospect of forming a rescue party, and said, "Dibs on bad cop."

Marina wasn't sure if hers qualified as good or bad luck.
She had been sent away from Lymes after punching a jerk.

That was good.

She had been assigned to a derelict base in the middle of the Grand Line.

That was bad.

It was only her and her soldiers there.

That was good.

Then another jerk that she wanted to punch more than the previous one showed up.

That was pretty bad.

The ship of the pirate that had ridiculed her a few months ago had washed ashore on her base.

That was good.

Said ship, as she had dreaded the moment she saw it, contained her older brother.

That was the worst fucking thing.

The scales undeniably tipped towards bad.

Mack eyed the cracks on the ceiling's paint with interest, handcuffed and sitting on a chair in front of her desk. Marina was trying to drill holes into his skull with a glare, and her interlaced fingers were white from the pressure.

Deep breaths, Marina, deep breaths.

She was, as always, fascinated and highly annoyed that his brother could take the muddiest situations with unshakeable aplomb.

They hadn't seen each other in the last decade, and this was not the kind of reunion she had imagined. Hers involved more parents, feelings of relief, and less law enforcement.

"Why are you doing this?" She said. An accusation, and not the smartest or the most professional thing she could have said, but damn if she hadn't wanted to ask the question since he had left their home island.

Mack lowered his gaze from the bad paint job and looked at her with that unreadable face of his. "I could ask you the same."

She froze momentarily at his words. "You have the gall the compare me to you?"

"When did you get so snippy? You always said you wanted to sail when you were older."

She slammed an open palm on the table. "I didn't run away to become a criminal!"

Mack's eyebrows rose, but that was the only recognition he conceded to his sister's outburst. "I didn't 'run away.' I would have been running away from myself if I hadn't left."

"That's your excuse?"

"I left to be me. Isn't it the same for you?"
That hit too uncomfortably close home, and he had absolutely no right to hit that mark when they hadn't spoken in so long. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Are you running away, then?"

She got up from her seat, nails digging into the desk so hard that she made indentations on the board. "Do you realize what position you're in?"

Mack stared quietly at her sister, rubbing a hand over suspiciously curling lips, and replied, "Do you, Mari?"

"This is straight out of a bad comedy," Shachi complained as he peeked out of the door of the main deck.

"Actually," Saki replied, "in those stories the clothes always fit."

"Proof that no one's writing a story about our adventures keeps mounting."

Because dressing up like Marines to be slightly less conspicuous wasn't embarrassing enough on its own.

Perhaps they would've been able to come up with something better, if they hadn't been in such a hurry and they hadn't fallen to collective hysteria when the Marine they managed to wake up told them they'd had the misfortune of drifting onto a Marine base.

Managed by the woman who had almost got them in North Blue, no less. Then again, it could have been a blessing in disguise if she had any sort of sympathy for Mack.

Saki hadn't shared this one little detail, in case the matter didn't pan out as she hoped, because Marina hadn't struck her as the sympathetic type.

"Are you sure you aren't gonna trip in those?" Shachi asked her.

"I shoved the pants into my boots and rolled up the sleeves four times. If you have any better ideas, I'm all ears."

"Mine's kind of tight at the seams," Shachi said. "Maybe we should trade?"

"Maybe we shouldn't waste any more time," Penguin grumbled.

Gripping their weapons, they stepped onto the deck.

The view that greeted them wasn't pretty.

Past the beach where they had run aground were the ruins of a collapsed building and several smaller constructions that for all they knew could be teeming with hidden soldiers, and on the opposite side of the island stood a tall tower. It was the only hospitable building in sight, so it had to be where their crewmates had been brought.

They observed the tower for longer than it was advisable, taking into account that they were in a very visible spot, but Saki had hoped to notice some sort of disturbance. Anything that indicated that their captain was alive and kicking.

Penguin was thinking along the same lines. "Looks like we've got our work cut out for us."
"This is going to be fun," Saki said without any joy, trying to adjust her sword in her belt.

"It kinda loses its charm when we aren't all together," Shachi said.

"No kidding." No time to have fun when you were worrying tis much about someone else.

"Time's wasting," Penguin said. "The sooner we move, the sooner we'll be back."

He led the way to the makeshift gangplank the Marines had placed against the hull, and Shachi followed behind. Saki gave one last look at the shut door behind them, the door to their home, and went after them with an uneasy feeling that she wasn't able to shake off.

"LET. ME. OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUUT."

"Fuck me," Uni grumbled.

A guy they couldn't see due to cell placement hadn't stopped screaming his lungs out since they had been thrown behind bars.

"LEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEET MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE OOOOOOOOOOOO—"

Tuttu agreed. "Someone kill him."

"—OOOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUT."

"I'll do it myself," Uni said, "just get me a tool. A rope. A paper sheet. I'll make it work somehow."

"LEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEET MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—"

"SHUT. UP," Asuka yelled at him from his cell.

The screaming prisoner, against all expectations, shut up and only to reproach him. "You're going nowhere with that attitude."

"He speaks human," Uni said, aghast.

"Rude." And then they heard a sharp intake of breath, and he continued,

"LEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEET MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE OOOOOOOOOOOOOOO—"

"Just wait until I'm out of this cell," Uni said. "You'll be begging to go back."

Law had had better days.

He was quite sure he had broken a couple of ribs during the tumble in the Polar Tang, his left arm had been shot, his sword confiscated, and he'd been handcuffed before being thrown in a cell separated from his crew. Which still wouldn't have represented that big of a problem if the aforementioned handcuffs weren't made of seastone.

The man guarding him on the other side of the bars was a familiar face, as had been the other woman prowling the base. Last time he had escaped him thanks to Bepo's timely entrance, but he couldn't
count on that at the moment. However, he had the advantage of knowing what he had to face, this
time, and could plan accordingly.

With the guys down in the dormitory captured, along with everybody in the bridge with him, their
best option were the three that had been in the engine room, assuming they hadn't been gravely
injured.

Law wasn't a man of faith, so he kept watching his surroundings like a hawk, waiting for an opening
to break free. As the captain and doctor of the crew, it was his duty to keep everybody safe, and he
was doing a poor job at the moment.

He thought back of Bepo's annoyance at his decision to change their course. Let the current situation
be a lesson to not take any important decisions regarding the ship without consulting him first.

The Marine keeping him unwanted company saw fit to bring him out of his thoughts.

"It seems we're destined to cross paths," Curtiss said from a wood chair, rolling over Kikoku in his
hands and inspecting the blade.

"Don't flatter yourself," he replied. "It's a stroke of bad luck."

He had never understood how Cora-san had been able to consider the Navy a home. Filled with self-
righteous people that thought their way was the only one, inflexible, corrupt, preaching about a
higher good that in the end only benefited those in power. As far as Law was concerned, Cora-san
was the only Marine that deserved his respect, and that Marine was no more.

"For you, certainly," Curtiss said, and it grated on his ears. "You and your lot have caused enough
trouble. Where are the missing people in your crew?"

He didn't deign to look at him. "The sea saved you work. They fell overboard when we lost power.
Aren't you happy?"

"Death should never beget rejoicing," he said gravely. "Though I don't expect a pirate to share the
sentiment – nor can I take his words at face value."

"Don't let me stop you from wasting your time on an empty chase. It's in the job description, after
all."

"There's no use in trying to taunt me, Trafalgar. This is the end of the line for you. The ship to Impel
Down departs tomorrow, and you'll be in it." He ran his fingers over Kikoku. "I don't know much
about swords, but it seems like a fine blade. Does it have a name?"

"It does."

"Is it ranked?"

"Cursed."

Curtiss seemed taken aback at the revelation, "You carry such a thing with you?" And the moment
he turned the sword over to examine the edge, he accidentally split the palm of his hand open.

"Are you sure I am the one struck by bad luck?" Law commented.

"I am not a superstitious man," he replied, setting Kikoku on a table, and from the wound in his
hand, glue started to pour out until it was sealed together. "But I'm not one to leave things up to
chance, either."

And, to make a point, he shifted on his chair, crossed his arms, and leaned back.

The one stroke of good luck Saki, Penguin and Shachi had took the shape of a cage near the sub, between the ruins, with a sleeping polar bear inside. The group of Marines guarding it was a laughable obstacle in comparison. Finding Bepo first was hitting the jackpot.

The three pirates huddled behind a corner as they tried to agree on their next move.

"We've got our first man," Shachi said.

Saki craned her neck to stare at the soldiers closer to the cage. "Do you think any of those guys have a key?"

"Are you sure you can't pick the lock?"

"Shachi."

"I don't know how flimsy the bars are, but I'll bet they aren't prepared to keep a kung-fu bear inside," Penguin commented.

There was a hum of general agreement.

"So we wake up our boy and press onwards?" Shachi asked.

"Sounds good. We kinda need reinforcements."

"Okay," Saki said. "We should split up for a moment and sneak behind the soldiers."

Shachi made a face. "I was hoping we could jump them like the ones in the sub."

"And then we can have the whole island on our asses," Penguin retorted.

"I know, I know!"

Saki gave one last glance from behind the wall they were using as hiding and advanced towards the soldiers, using the debris as cover. The crunch of the gravel with each step made her extra cautious, and thus slow, which she didn't need help with after taking a blow to the head. When she managed to sneak behind a nearby wall, she positioned herself behind two of the soldiers and waited for signs of the other two.

There were five of them, and she didn't see any others roaming the vicinity. She thought they had good odds with the surprise factor.

She jumped out of cover when she heard the shifting of gravel behind another half-demolished wall and stabbed the nearest soldier. The second one was quick to react, but even then, he didn't have enough time to load his carbine before Saki closed in.

She wasn't sure she wanted to know when she had made the switch from thinking killing people was horrifying to a necessity, but she didn't doubt those soldiers would have returned the favor without a second thought if they could.

When she looked up, Shachi and Penguin were done too. They stayed still for a few seconds, waiting for sound of alarm, but none came. They were still safe.
Any pretenses of sneaking the rest of the way passing as Marines were out the window as soon as Bepo tagged along, but the longer they could stretch the stealth phase, the better. First, thought, they had to get him out.

They circled the cage, shook the bars and kicked the lock to no avail. Bepo didn't budge, either. After further inspection, they found no keys on the Marines.

"Those bastards shot him a tranquilizer," Shachi said after circling Bepo a few times. Indeed, there was a dart sticking out of Bepo's backside. He put an arm between the bars and reached for it, and then he threw it to the ground and stomped on it until it wasn't unrecognizable.

"I was almost waiting for the needle to prick you through the sole," Penguin remarked.

Shachi contemplated the possibility. "That would've been plain sad."

"But very much in line with our track record."

Saki crouched down to look at Bepo's face from closer up. "I wish I could sleep like this."

"Do you want a dart too?" Shachi asked.

Saki scrunched her nose. "No more needles to go to sleep, please."

"We can't really yell in his ears, can we," Penguin murmured. "I guess there's only one way."

He lifted his spear and pointed its butt at Bepo. Following his example, Saki took her scabbard in one hand.

Shachi's sword didn't have one, so he took off his Marine cap and proceeded to slap Bepo while the other two poked him relentlessly.

When Bepo finally stirred, he went through several stages that were plain on his face:

First, confusion.

Then, agitation.

Afterwards, rage.

Lastly, recognition when three pairs of hands reached inside the cage to cover his mouth before his cries were heard everywhere. The owners counted themselves lucky to keep all their fingers.

Saki had never seen Bepo so affected, but he was holding back tears as he bended the iron bars like they were made of butter and threw them out. He was shaking of rage, and she didn't need to be a bear expert to know that it was a really bad idea to be near an angry one.

With caution, they made him sit down while he came back to his senses fully and summarized the situation.

They were fortunate the bear was on their side.

Marina was fuming, and Mack didn't seem to mind at all.

"What am I supposed to do with you now?"
"Isn't there a protocol for that?"

"Do you think I am following protocol right now?" She sneered.

"You could let us go. Say we broke out or something."

"You, not them."

"Differentiated treatment? That doesn't sound very professional."

"What, do you honestly want to end up in Impel Down?"

"I don't know, Mari, do you want me to end up there?"

Marina felt tempted to flip the table, leave the office, and forget her brother was there. Let it be someone else's problem. "Don't turn the question on me!"

"I think the fact that we're having this conversation is an answer itself."

Before Marina could protest, Mack directed his eyes to something behind her.

"Is that a Meccano model?"

"...Yes."

He strained to see. "Does it light up?"

"There's an individual switch for every window and streetlight under the board," she said very quickly. "Now can we stay on topic?"

"Sure," he replied cheerfully. "By the way, do you still keep that blue dress?"

Marina facepalmed hard enough to leave a mark.

In the end, shoving Bepo back in the cage was their only option. They covered it with a tarp and pushed to the tower, managing not to draw more than cursory attention. It looked like the Marines were busy preparing two ships, and they didn't think odd that they would be moving an unidentified lump through the island.

"I can't believe we've made it," Shachi said as he surveyed the main entrance of the tower.

"Told you," Saki said. "You can get anywhere you shouldn't if you look like you're meant to be there."

"Getting in's the easy part, though," Penguin whispered.

"Bepo and Captain alone are one-man armies. We should be okay as soon we're all together."

"Maybe we should send a group ahead," Shachi said. "I'm not sure the sub will start up without a once-over."

"Shit. Hadn't thought of it."

"Not your job," Shachi shrugged it off. "I think Tuttu, Asuka and Uni can manage, and I wouldn't count on them being in shape to kick ass. We should send them back right away."
Saki kept to herself the thought that they weren't in any shape to do so, either.

"I can help get us ready to sail," Bepo offered from behind the tarp.

He was promptly shushed by his three companions when a soldier stopped them as soon as they entered the tower.

"Wait," he said, getting in their way. "What's that?"

"That bear that was with the Heart Pirates," Saki said with a grin before any of the others could get them in deep water. "It's sedated, but the tarp's to keep it in the dark. Just in case."

"Oh," the soldier nodded. "Can I look? I heard it talks and walks on two feet."

"It's asleep now," Penguin said.

"A shame," the man said. "I wonder where they got a pet like that."

Saki laughed out loud to cover an offended sound coming from inside the cage. "We need to lock him in the dungeon. Where should we head?"

"Oh, you're from the Rear Admiral's crew? No wonder you didn't look familiar."

Saki liked easily convinced people, but she didn't like people who spoke too much, especially when she was in a hurry to get lost. "That's right!" She said, hoping he wouldn't question more.

He nodded assertively, as if Saki's confirmation made a lot of sense. Going along with assumptions was usually a good way to lie to someone's face without breaking a sweat.

"I don't think you'll be able to get that down the stairs. There's a lift around the corner that goes to the basement." He pointed them the right way.

"Thank you!"

"You're welcome." And when Saki passed near him, he commented, "By the way, you should get that uniform fitted."

"Ahaha, yes, I had an accident with the older one."

"They don't make small sizes anymore," he lamented. "Anyway, good luck with the prisoner."

Saki smiled and waved him goodbye, though she wondered what he had meant by that last remark.

"Sometimes I think you could charm the pants off any guy," Shachi said, looking back and forth to make sure they really weren't being followed.

Saki held back a snort. "Pants are like the easiest thing to charm off anybody."

"Don't go there."

"You called me an 'it,'" Bepo moaned.

Saki automatically felt like a terrible person. "I'm so, so, so sorry, Bepo, you know I didn't mean—"

"There's the lift," Penguin interrupted. "Ready?"

They pushed the cage into it and squished themselves in the remaining space.
"Ow, ow, ow—

"Screw this, I'm getting in the cage with Bepo."

"Stop it, madwoman, you're crushing me!"

The lift stopped while Shachi was grabbing Saki by the back of her shirt, and when the door opened, they were greeted by an infernal ruckus.

"—

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUT."

"Kill him!" The prisoners yelled at them.

"We'll say we did it!"

"Guys?" Penguin asked with uncertainty. "Are you okay?"

"Penguin?"

"Uni?" Shachi tried.

"Shachi!"

Saki lifted the tarp to allow Bepo out, who stretched as he stepped on the stone floor and rushed to the cells at a speed that someone so big had no business moving at.

"Bepo!"

"Tuttu!"

When the two guys and Saki got to the cells, they saw bear and mechanic joining hands and jumping in joy from each side of the cell.

"Well," Saki said, turning back, "I'm going to look for keys over there."

"Me too," Shachi hurried behind her.

Penguin followed along. "Me three."

"Don't act like you're ashamed of us!" Uni yelled at them.

"Alright," Saki without looking them in the eyes, "can we keep it quiet for a second while we get you out?"

Penguin picked up a ring of keys hanging on the wall and set to trying them on the locks.

"Where are Captain and Mack?" Shachi asked.

"Mack was here with us, but the Marine captain took him out a while ago," Asuka said from his sitting spot on the floor. "Captain was brought elsewhere."

"Damn," Saki muttered, looking into every cell in case there was something interesting. Instead, she found another prisoner leaning against the bars and staring at her in silence.

"What?" She asked.
"Are you friends?" He asked. "You gonna let me out?"

Uni reacted immediately. "DON'T!"

"Keep it down!" She hissed.

Shachi craned his neck to look. "Who's that guy?"

"A murder victim, that's who," Tuttu replied. The four new arrivals hesitated before saying anything else, because Tuttu was only this verbally violent when someone stole the last slice of pie.

"Come ooooon," the prisoner whined, "I was only trying to help."

"Let's be sensible. We could take out his tongue with pliers," Asuka suggested. "Uni, you cauterize the wound with a welder and he doesn't have to die."

"Sounds like a plan."

"You can't blame a guy for trying until the very end."

"Oh, your end is near, that's for sure."

"Who the hell are you?" Saki asked.

"Sturgeon. Got thrown in here a while ago. I've been working. I got rid of the guards here without moving because I'm useful."

Saki appraised the guy quickly. He had a dark toupe that had seen better days and was growing a rather sad beard, but she supposed it was to be expected after being locked up for whoever knew how long.

Bepo, done busting locks, walked up next to Saki while Penguin removed handcuffs and Shachi stood guard near the lift.

"What do you think?" She asked Bepo.

"He's offending my nose."

"The bear can talk?!"

She threw her hands up and began to walk away. "Sorry, buddy, the king of the ship has spoken."

"WAIT! I can guide you to the rest of your crewmates!"

She turned away immediately and roared, "WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY SO EARLIER?"


She let out a very long breath and had to resist an urge to reach for her sword. "Someone else do the talking here."

"Now you get us," Uni said.

"Listen, I was a pirate, too! I know how to sail a ship! I used to come to this island before the Marines took over! I know how to fight!" He tried to do some sort of karate move on one leg, but fell on his butt. "I'm top quality! You won't get any better for this price!"
The Heart Pirates looked at each other.

"I guess he's in bad shape after all those days," Shachi conceded.

"I can't believe—" Uni started, only to get cut by Penguin.

"Do you really know where the others are?" He asked Sturgeon, deadly serious.

"I swear on my mom's grave," he said. And he spat on the floor. Bepo made a face.

"Worst case scenario, we use him as bait for Marines," Saki said. "We should really stop wasting time."

"That's the spirit, cupcake!"

"Call me that again and I'll rip off your eyeballs."

Bepo took her gently by the arms and guided her towards Shachi.

"What would that worst case scenario, exactly, entail?" Uni asked with too much interest.

"We're trying to keep him alive now," Asuka said, patting him on the shoulder.

"Right. Right."

Sturgeon grinned. "So I'm out?"

Penguin looked at Bepo. "Boss?"

"Go ahead."

"FUCK YES!"

"VOLUME!"

Sturgeon lifted both hands in a gesture of apology, but he didn't drop the grin.

"We need to decide who goes back," Shachi said. It was odd to see him act so businesslike, but he'd been thinking about the state of the Polar Tang from the start of this mess. "Peng?"

"I'm staying."

He nodded. "Alright, guys. Time to prove what you're made of. We need you to sneak back in the sub and make sure we can get the hell out of dodge the moment we come back with Captain and Mack. You already got the hang of how it works?"

They looked at each other and nodded. "We can do that," Asuka said.

"Good. Then…" He eyed Bepo.

"I know. I'll go with them." He paused in thought, and then got Shachi, Saki and Penguin by the shoulders and pushed the three together in front of him. "I leave Captain in your hands."

People who spoke of being weak for puppy eyes had never seen a polar bear looking at them with that face.

Saki patted the paw on Penguin's shoulder. "We'll bring him back safe."
Bepo nodded. "I know you will." And with a commanding pose, he turned to the crewmates behind him, motioned them with an arm, and said, "After me, subordinates! Let's get back our ship!"

The three mechanics agreed with yet another cry that should have alerted someone if they weren't having such suspiciously good luck, and left the dungeon through the stairs.

"We don't give him enough credit," Saki said.

"It'd go to his head," Shachi quipped though he was nodding.

"He's bossy," Penguin added.

"Give him an inch, and he'll take an arm."

"He said 'subordinates,' didn't he?" Saki asked.

"So!" Sturgeon interrupted them, sounding entirely too energetic. "Who am I working with, guys?"

"Heart Pirates," the three said at once.

Sturgeon's jaw dropped. "For real? The guys in the newspapers?"

They had a moment of trying to act detached and cool, and posing a little so they looked like their bounties.

"Those," Shachi replied with a smirk.

But Sturgeon didn't seem to find that so impressive. "Oh, cool, it was nice to meet you, my dudes, but I left the stove on and—"

Three hands grabbed Sturgeon as he tried to slink away.

"What do you think you're doing?" Saki asked.

Shachi threw an arm around his shoulders, and truth be told, it only needed to be tightened a little more to become a chokehold. "Where's our new best friend going?"

Penguin blocked his escape route with a sinister smile. "We had a deal."

Not for the first time that day, Saki thought there was something very dark inside Penguin.

Sturgeon put his hands up in surrender. "Okay, it's not like I'm not grateful to you guys, but you gotta understand me, I'm out of my depth—"

Saki stepped next to Penguin, arms crossed. "You said you could fight and knew your way around here."

"Yeah, but that was before I knew who was dealing with here."

"Weren't you a pirate, too?"

Sturgeon sighed, looking displeased that he had to explain himself. "Look, maybe we raided a few ships and towns here and there, but we weren't like you. We didn't go around blowing up buildings and dismembering people. Standards, man. Woman. Bear. Whatever."

The other three stared at each other silently, and the mood in the dungeon changed.
"Nobody blew up anything!" Saki said.

Penguin seemed to be very offended at the accusation. "We just cut the main powerline of a town."

"And you can put the body parts back together, it's not like it hurts."

"Besides, it was self-defense."

"Definitely."

"We don't attack civilians; that's disgusting," Shachi sentenced.

"We technically kidnapped you," Penguin said, and he laughed a little as he remembered it.

Shachi snorted. "Yeah, I don't know what I was thing back then."

Sturgeon looked at them strangely. "But your captain's bounty—"

Shachi put his face very close to Sturgeon's. "Do you believe everything you read, you wilting cauliflower?"

Penguin took a step forward too and leaned near the man. "You got a problem with our captain, you got a problem with us."

"I'll help. I'll help," he said quickly. "Now please leave my personal bubble."

Law didn't look away from the wall when an alarm started blaring through the speakers of the base.

About time.

He shouldn't have felt relieved to have his crewmates found out, but it was good to have confirmation that they were in there and moving.

He couldn't help the smirk growing on his face.

"What's so funny?" Curtiss asked.

This time, he looked at him. "I heard once that cursed swords don't take kindly to strangers handling them."

"If anyone's been cursed here, it isn't me."

"We'll see about that."

"How did they find us?" Penguin asked, extremely confused, while he and his three companions ran for their lives inside the building.

"To be fair, I was yelling nonstop for two weeks, so maybe the silence was suspicious."

"I'm going to kill this guy," Shachi muttered. "I'm going to kill this— Yargh!"

"Why are they shooting?!" Saki exclaimed, and then yelled some more over her shoulder.

"BULLETS RICOCHET INSIDE CORRIDORS, YOU UTTER MORONS, WHO TAUGHT YOU TO—" She was yanked by the arm by Sturgeon and led down another hallway.
"If they've put you're captain in a cell, he must be in the cells upstairs," he explained, and Saki didn't know what lung capacity he had to be able to run like that and not run out of breath. "If your other friend's with the Marine captain, they must be in their living quarters. That's another way."

"I don't get why she picked out Mack," Penguin wondered.

"Interrogation?" Shachi suggested. "Torture?"

Saki didn't get what was so mysterious when she realized that she had put together the pieces when she had seen the picture in Mack's house, but not those two. "She's his sister!"

"She who?"

"How many women do you know in this island?"

Shachi almost tripped and took Penguin down with him. "What, no, that can't be!"

Penguin shoved him off unceremoniously. "What are the odds?"

"And how do you know?"

"It's not my fault you're denser than Mack's pumpkin soup and this is not the time to explain!"

"Yours is all watery."

"Shachi, I'm going to bash your skull with a cooking pot when we get back."

"Children, save the hostility for the enemy!" Penguin yelled.

"Are they always like this?" Sturgeon asked.

"Yes."

Shachi was offended by that, "Like you're any better, you just keep it—"

"Halt, pirates!"

The four pirates stopped bickering, but not running. A green-haired man clad in all white clothes stood proudly in the middle of the corridor, blocking their path to two sets of stairs.

He looked like high-ranking trouble, so they did what any self-respecting pirates would do, and, instead of slowing down, ran him over.

Which would have worked perfectly, had it not been for Shachi's scream as they were headed to one of the staircases.

The Marine's left arm had extended with tendril-like consistency and wrapped around Shachi's ankle to pull him down. He snapped it back as he rose, and when the tendril retracted and turned back into an arm, it had torn Shachi's pants and left a red mark.

Penguin ran to help Shachi up, and as he moved, so did the Marine, plucking a hair from his head and whipping it towards the two. The hair widened and elongated, and it was about to hit Penguin when he stopped it with his spear.

It was torn from his hands and landed out of reach.
"The vermin thinks they can stand against Commodore Flagel? Please," he threw his head back and whipped the hair against the floor. A trail of blood was falling from his nose from the previous impact. "You'll be a stepping stone towards my next prom—"

Sturgeon smashed Penguin's weapon against the back of Flagel's head and slid it back to Penguin.

"Thanks!"

But before any more pleasantries were exchanged, Flagel was up and whirling more whips in every direction, making indents in the walls andcornering the pirates near different staircases. The rank and file waited at a safety distance to not get hit.

Shachi and Penguin watched Saki and Sturgeon in a panic, clearly at a loss of what to do.

Sturgeon, however, proved to be a quick thinker. "Yo, tentacle man!" He taunted Flagel with a hand. "How are you gonna catch us if you just stand there? Are you waiting for reinforcements?"

Flagel hissed. "I don't need help to deal with you!" And he lunged towards Sturgeon and Saki, who didn't have enough space to escape his reach.

Shachi and Penguin took the opportunity to bludgeon him down.

Try as she might to avoid them, Saki felt one of the whips wheeze past her nose and a trail of blood going down her face. She wiped it with a sleeve, and it felt like a shallow cut, but even those bled like crazy when made on the face. With a quick glance at Sturgeon, she saw he had taken a hit to an arm.

Saki cursed as the Marines that had been waiting stepped forward, some to reanimate their superior officer, others to capture them.

"Your captain should be up those stairs!" Sturgeon yelled at the two mechanics as he dug an elbow in a soldier's stomach. "But the woman and your friend will be in the wing over here!"

Saki parried a blow as she stepped backwards, careful not to trip on the steps behind her. "Let's split up!" She yelled. As much as she disliked thinning their forces, it didn't look like they had any choice. The longer they stayed there, the worse they'd have it.

"No way!" Shachi snapped.

"Get Captain, and we'll be able to get out!"

Those two with Law had a good chance to get out, at any rate, and Bepo was with the others. Her team's chances didn't look so bright if they were going against Marina, but she guessed that if worst came to worst, she could send Mack ahead while she distracted her.

She wasn't counting on reinforcements this time.

"We're not leaving you alone!" Penguin yelled. He and Shachi must have been aware that she couldn't win without help.

What was certain, though, is that they couldn't win at all without Law. "Don't be stupid! Captain needs you more!"

"Remember!" Sturgeon yelled. "At the topmost of the stairs! There's only one way!"

The guys looked conflicted as they stabbed and kicked Marines down. Penguin was making a good
job of creating a perimeter with his spear.

"Don't you dare kick the bucket before you draw this island for Bepo!" Shachi yelled.

A mirthless laugh escaped Saki, and she turned around and started to fight her way up the staircase while the guys did the same on the opposite end.

The tower shook and some dust fell from the ceiling. Law chuckled at that. Either they were doing well, or they were screwed beyond salvation. But chaos played in their favor.

Curtiss frowned at him and got up to take a look from the doorway. But he didn't notice anything out of place.

"Nervous?" Law asked.

"I don't see any flying bears around."

Law didn't appreciate a sense of humor when it came from a Marine. "Give it time."

A gigantic man with a hammer and a squad of Marines cut the path of Bepo and his guys.

Bepo growled at the leader of the group as everybody readied their weapons.

But to his surprise, Bepo's three human companions made a wall in front of him and stared down the Marines.

He didn't understand what was going on. He was responsible for them. He had to be leading the charge. "What are you doing?"

"There are three of us," Tuttu said, getting into a battle pose, "but there's only one of you."

He swallowed all the retorts that came to mind, which were many. He didn't want anybody getting hurt on his behalf. They were his to protect.

It so happened that this wasn't the way he was meant to protect everybody, that day.

And in that instant, Bepo understood exactly how Law felt, and hoped he never had to take over his job.

"I don't like this," Saki told Sturgeon. "If more soldiers go after them before they get to Captain—"

"We should keep going this way, because if you're right about your friend, he won't be in a cell." He tugged her along a bend of the hallway. "It should be one of these doors, this is where the best rooms —"

He was interrupted by two voices arguing nearby.

"YOU LEFT ME ALONE WITH THEM!"

"You were a kid, Mari, I couldn't bring you along—"

"You didn't even write!"

"Wha—I never stopped writing to you all this time!"
"Don't lie to me!"

Saki had to imagine who the woman was, but the other voice was unmistakable. "Mack!"

A curly-haired head emerged from one of the doors. Mack didn't look physically hurt, but there was something in his expression that Saki didn't like. "Took you long—"

"What are you doing here?!” Marina bellowed.

Saki froze mid-step and looked back for a second. A few stray Marines were still coming after them, but thankfully they weren't shooting anymore.

Marina shoved Mack aside – she stood a head taller than him, but they absolutely had the same hair, only hers was much longer and out of a shampoo advertisement – and Saki didn't have time to dwell on the family resemblance when she caught Marina's hand going to her belt to take out her chisels.

"Sturgeon?" Saki said, trying not to pay attention to her frantic heartbeats, nor the memories of when she very nearly got her ass handed in Lymes. "You may want to take care of the guys in the back, because this is about to get ugly."

"You don't have to tell me twice," he said, facing the approaching Marines. "But, uh, try not to bite the dust, because I have a feeling your friends will kill me if you do."

"Don't worry about that," She said, unsheathing her sword, her eyes glued on Marina, "they're going to kill you anyway." And with that, she leapt forward before Marina could throw the first chisel.
Saki swung her sword at Marina, and she missed the mark, too. Out the corner of her eye, she saw Mack inside the office, but she couldn't count on him being of help while he was handcuffed and unarmed.

Oh, how she wished she could get out of this one talking, but Marina didn't look in the mood for a chat.

But she had to buy time while she thought of a way to escape with Mack, so she tried anyway. "I take it that the family reunion didn't go well?"

Saki ducked Marina's reply to her head by a hair's breadth, marveled at its eloquence despite it not containing a single word, and she decided not to ask again.

"Stop this farce," Marina said through gritted teeth, drawing out more chisels and holding them between her fingers. "Your captain is under tight surveillance and your ship can't sail. You have nowhere to go."

Saki supposed that decent Marines had to be like this, trying to get their targets to surrender before jumping at the chance to maim them, but she wondered if it ever worked with anybody. She wasn't keen on giving up just because a figure of authority asked, and Saki considered herself a pretty decent person compared to some of the unsavory fellows that were roaming the seas.

She eyed Marina's weapons warily. "See, that's not true," Saki replied with the first thing that came to mind. Talking was easy and let her steal a few extra seconds to think. If only she could injure an arm or hand, she'd have a much better chance at getting out of there. "I have somewhere I need to be soon."

Marina's reply was lapidary. "The only place you'll be is a cell." And she punctuated the statement by throwing a chisel that flew past Saki and cracked the floor before lunging at her.

Saki sidestepped Marina and drew an arc with her sword hoping to get a hit in, or at least keep her at a relatively safe distance. But she had the short end of the stick no matter what she did, because Marina could attack from afar, and if the way her chisels got embedded in the hard tiles was an indication of her arm strength, she couldn't risk a hand to hand fight, either.

Marina avoided the slash, and before she could regain solid footing, Saki advanced towards her to try to cut at her shoulder. She missed, and immediately went for the opposite arm, but in a display of dexterity and brute force that Saki would not have believed could be possible before living in the Grand Line, Marina caught her blade between the chisels in her hand and swung it away, and it took Saki all the strength she could muster not to lose her grip on the sword.

She stumbled backwards for a moment, enough for Marina to regain the initiative and throw a chisel that hit the mark and ended up stuck on the wall behind Saki.

Saki ignored the flash of pain in her thigh and the blood starting to soak her borrowed pants. It hurt, but it hadn't injured her badly. She could stand, and she counted on the adrenaline to help her keep moving, and for the wound to hurt like nobody's business when she woke up in the morning.
She let out a measured breath as she regained her stance, and Marina stopped briefly to examine her.

Saki didn't like the way she was looking at her and tried to make it know. "I don't usually mind when pretty girls stare at me, but—"

"Where did you learn to fight?" She cut her.

Saki frowned a little. She tried to rest her weight on her healthy leg without making it too obvious that the other one hurt like Asterian noses after the wake of Rotten Feet Joe. "Why should I tell you?"

"You fight like a Marine."

Saki remembered when the man she had fought in Carpus' estate had asked her something similar, and it finally clicked what he had meant. She had been taught by an ex-Marine, so it was only natural that she'd picked up things they taught in their good little soldiers academy, or wherever their fledglings went to learn to swing their brand of justice around.

She didn't get why that was so surprising when there were Marines all over the world. Their style was bound to get out in many places.

"I'm not a deserter, if you're worried about that," Saki said flippantly.

Marina sneered, "Of course you aren't. You don't—"

Saki launched her next attack before Marina finished talking, because waiting was for evil overlords, Marines and people who could afford to lose, and Saki didn't fit in any of those categories at the moment.

With a hiss, Marina stepped aside and diverted the blade's direction again with the chisels. But this time, Saki was ready for it and she didn't lose her balance. It didn't stop her from leaving her guard wide open, though, and Marina didn't miss the opportunity to jump back to put distance between them and throw another chisel.

Saki was ready to dodge, but she didn't need to.

Mack stepped in between the two women and put his shackled hands in the middle of the chisel's trajectory. The chain linking the handcuffs split, and with a smooth movement, he caught the chisel as it fell to the floor and twirled it between his fingers.

Saki wished the guys had been there to see that, and then dare them to try to sneak again into the galley without Mack's consent. "I'd clap if my hands weren't full," she said with admiration.

"Save the smart comments for another day, will you?"

Saki shut her gaping mouth and nodded, even though he couldn't see her.

Marina's face, meanwhile, had turned the color of the walls at the sight of her brother. He was acting as a human shield in front of Saki, and while Saki was grateful, she couldn't say she liked it, either.

But it was a good thing that his hands were free. Saki took advantage of the confusion to glance back and see that Sturgeon was holding his own against the few Marines that had followed them and pressing them towards the staircase. Not bad for a guy who'd been in a dungeon for days.

That they hadn't been caught in a pincer by the enemy meant that the whip guy was either
unconscious, or had he gone after Shachi and Penguin, and the latter made more sense, given that those two were headed to Law's location. Securing him would be a priority for the soldiers, and that took some pressure off the three pirates in Marina's corridor.

On the other hand, it meant that they were wasting time dealing with her when they could be helping out with the whip man. The longer the crew was separated, the likelier they'd be picked off.

Saki was trying to convince herself that Mack, Sturgeon and her would be fine and the two others plus Law would be able to deal with whip guy when something she'd heard earlier clicked in her mind.

The one they'd come across called himself a Commodore. The soldier they'd met at the entrance had mentioned a Rear Admiral. And Marina had said Law was under strict vigilance.

"Mack," she whispered in a hurry, "you need to go with the others."

He took a fleeting look at her before deciding that it was best to keep glaring at his sister. "Are you nuts? Why?"

"There's a Rear Admiral where Penguin and Shachi are headed," she said as quickly as she could.

"Wha— Then what are you going to do?"

"You and the guy on the back go ahead and I'll buy us time." No that she wanted to be left alone against Marina, but she saw no better way.

"She's going to kill you."

She thought that saying that she meant to try really hard not to get murdered wouldn't be very convincing. "There's been a few attempts and history is in my favor," she attempted.

"Absolutely not."

"Look, leave your sister to me," she insisted. "I'll do my best not to hurt her."

Mack sounded exasperated. "It's you who's gonna get hurt, you fucking dimwit."

"If you have a better idea, I'm all ears."

Meanwhile, Marina was listening to their conversation with open disbelief. "You think you can deal with me alone?"

Mack ignored her in favor of telling Saki off. "Sure. You go ahead while I distract her."

"I can't run."

Mack cursed under his breath. "This is suicide."

She couldn't deny that it kind of was, but saying it wouldn't help her cause. "Have some confidence!" She needed it too.

He stayed silent, and while Saki couldn't see his face, she knew he was torn about what to do.

"I'll be back with Captain," he said, sounding none too pleased.

"Right. I'll hold the fort."
Before running towards the stairs, Mack said, "Potatoes aren't going to peel themselves."

Saki immediately ducked to the side. "Message received!"

"Where do you think you're going?" Marina yelled, and threw a chisel at her brother that missed the mark by far too much to not be intentional.

Saki took the chance to approach her, wincing as she put her weight on her injured leg to launch another attack. "Where do you think you're looking?" She retorted.

An upwards slash managed to connect with Marina's arm near the wrist, but it wasn't enough to rend that hand useless.

"Out of my way!" Marina yelled, and her swing nearly brushed Saki's nose.

Truthfully, Saki would have liked nothing better than to do as she asked and let her go after someone else, if that wouldn't mean letting the rest of the crew get trapped between three Marine officers. As things stood – and Saki couldn't stand very well at that point – she didn't have much of a choice.

"What's your problem with Mack?" She asked. In normal circumstances Saki wouldn't have asked at all, because she knew better than to pry into family matters, but any that bought her a little time was welcome. And, in truth, she was slightly angry that she was willing to threaten her own family. "Is this how you treat your brother after so long?"

Marina was visibly taken aback by Saki's question, likely because the last thing she had expected was to be given moral lessons from a pirate. Saki didn't blame her. She wouldn't have accepted advice from herself, either.

"Who do you think you are to question how I deal with my family?"

Somehow, that didn't sit well with Saki. Because she knew what she had asked was none of her business, but Marina was Mack's sister, and she didn't like to hear her talk about him like that. "Are you really?" Saki snapped. "Because I don't know many sisters who would treat their brothers like you."

She supposed she found her ungrateful for wasting what little time she could spend with her brother after so many years.

Marina was also getting angrier with each reply. "I'm not going to stand and listen to you prattle about something you know nothing about."

"I know Mack well enough to know he's cares about you and he doesn't deserve to be treated like that," she retorted.

"Shut up! Don't talk as if you know him!" And with that, instead of throwing the next round of chisels, Marina lunged at Saki to stab her.

Saki dodged the attack and, with her free hand, grabbed at Marina's injured arm with all the strength she could muster. With a yelp, Marina's hand let go of her weapon in reflex, and Saki was in a perfect position to slash at her torso, but doubted for a moment and only grazed her. This woman was Mack's sister. She couldn't go overboard. She had to incapacitate, not to kill.

That small hesitation was all that Marina needed to kick Saki's weapon hand and make her drop the sword, and next thing Saki knew, she was shoved with inhuman strength and hit the floor, some of the rubble created by Marina's chisels digging sharply into her back.
"Maybe I know him better than you now," Saki said, panting and staring at Marina defiantly, trying to goad her into moving closer. If she tried to get up immediately, she was getting stabbed, and reaching for her sword was out of question if she fancied keeping both hands. "How long has it been since you had a proper conversation?"

Marina inhaled deeply, and the outburst from before was a thing of the past. "Your entire crew is trapped in this island. Your captain is getting shipped to Impel Down in a day," she replied in the composed tone of someone who knew that the battle was settled. She was breathing heavily too, but other than the blood running down her hand and the dust her attacks had created, she didn't look much worse for wear. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you right here and now. Give me just one reason."

The answer was obvious to Saki, and she wondered why it wasn't to Marina. "Because if you wanted to kill me, you'd already have."

Once upon a time, when Saki was still very young and learning the ropes, the Old Man had told her that what made a good Marine were not combat skills or officer ranks. A good Marine knew they worked for justice, while a bad one thought they were justice. That was what made all the difference. Hunter, judge, and executor, he had said, should never be the same person.

To Saki, that had been a matter too philosophical to consider, and it wasn't her problem, because she had never even thought about becoming a soldier. It wasn't until the words had left her mouth and Marina's stoic mask split that she noticed that she was onto something, so she pressed.

"Good Marines aren't butchers."

Heaven knew that the Old Man and Saki's father had been the last thing from it.

Saki watched some of the tension leave Marina's shoulders, but in exchange, she drove at Saki a stare meant to disassemble her.

"Don't speak as if you know me." The words left her mouth like they were painful to pronounce.

"I don't. But Mack wouldn't care for a bad person, so there's that."

Marina started to walk towards Saki, and as soon as she lifted a foot from the floor, Saki saw her opportunity and swept Marina's other foot from under her with a kick from her injured leg that made her see stars.

Quickly, she reached for her sword at the same time an enraged Marina threw a chisel.

And in that moment, time seemed to slow to a crawl.

Every movement of Marina's seemed to unravel before Saki's eyes before it happened. In the heat of battle, caught between the pain and the slight blood loss and the adrenaline coursing through her body, she was only vaguely aware that this was happening, but it was how she sensed Marina's chisel before it even left her hand, and consequently ducked it before it hit her.

Both women were back on their feet at the same time.

Marina had a sardonic smile on her face when she spoke. "I don't know why I expected a pirate to not play dirty for once."

The hand gripping two of the chisels at her waist was shaking ever so slightly, something imperceptible had Saki not been in such an extraordinary state of awareness. She had managed not
only to enrage, but also distress Marina with her words. Perhaps she had hit the nail on the head and something had rung true to her. And, as long as Marina's attention was split between the battle and somewhere else, Saki knew she had a chance.

"You really should've known better," Saki breathed out, somehow feeling lighter on her feet. As if time had slowed down only for her, she was acutely aware of Marina's shifts, her quick breaths, the way her fingers twitched as they held her weapons, the tension in her legs as she was ready to jump at any time.

She could say she was even having fun, despite the situation not being conducive to that in the slightest.

Marina's fingers slid down the handles of her chisels and Saki ran forward to attack. This time, she was able to avoid Marina's weapons before they trapped her sword, and crouching at the last moment, she drove her left elbow into Marina's solar plexus. Marina stumbled for a moment, but she slashed at Saki anyway, and though Saki was able to see that coming at the last second, her injured leg didn't allow her to get out of the way, and blood started to pour from a new wound on her left elbow.

"Yeah," Marina said dispassionately, "I should have."

The next blow came as Saki was widening the space between them by swinging her sword back at Marina, and Marina threw a chisel that went off course as she got out of the way of the slash at the same time.

Saki immediately pressed on, knowing that that chisel would graze her at most, and though she was right, she didn't count on something else.

Marina's weapon flew too close to her wrist and ripped Banu's bangle.

It caught Saki off guard, and, out of pure reflex, she glanced at the colorful threads falling to the floor. That minimal distraction proved to be crucial.

Three chisels left Marina's hand at once, and two nicked Saki's right elbow and left leg to finally lodge themselves in the wall at the far end of the corridor.

The third one, however, hit the mark, between Saki's collarbone and her right breast, and when she fell to the floor this time, she had so much difficulty breathing that she couldn't even attempt to push herself up.

"I don't get you," Marina said from a few paces away. Saki couldn't see her. The feeling of awareness from before was gone, and her field of vision was limited to the grey-white stone of the tiles slowly turning red.

Saki had wanted nothing more than to see her siblings again, but if this was how she had to meet them, she hoped that they would take much longer than her to show up on the other side. Though in the meantime, maybe she could ask her mother about the stone cube, and say sorry to her father…

"You go on about morals like you know what they mean."

She didn't think her crewmates would take kindly to her dying, and she was exhausted just by thinking how much apologizing she'd have to do if they got on her case in the afterlife. It was enough to make her want to stand up again, if it would save her the hassle, but will alone didn't make her able to.
It was a pity. There was so much she still wanted to do, so many places to see with them. Saki had been scared at the prospect of dying many times, but never sad until then.

Marina's voice sounded like it was far away. "How can you leave everything behind and speak of family like it matters?"

She had bought them time; hopefully enough to make a difference. And, when all was said and done, that was all that mattered.

Saki heard Marina's footsteps approach, and while she could only see a pair of scuffed leather shoes, she understood her words clearly.

"Don't you have any regrets?"

And as Saki's eyes closed against her will, her silent reply was a smirk that vanished with her consciousness.

Law didn't have to wait long for the very much awaited reunion with his crewmates.

Penguin and Shachi entered the hall guns blazing, if by guns blazing one meant screaming bloody murder and adequately running like their lives depended on it while a Marine officer with whips for arms swung his appendages wildly behind them in an attempt to catch them.

Curtiss reacted like he hadn't been expecting such a bombastic entrance. Law, on the other hand, who at this point in time was very much used to how his companions rolled, was able to put aside his surprise and even feel some relief that all of their limbs were still attached to their bodies.

"Captain!" Shachi yelled as soon as he saw him, and Law lifted his arms as much as the seastone allowed him to let him see the cuffs, and then Shachi stopped on his tracks because he had just noticed Curtiss standing up to block his way, and Penguin bumped against him and sent them both to the floor, the result of which was an unending run-on sentence and one of Flagel's arms hitting his superior officer square in the forehead and getting it stuck in glue.

Law, hit by a glorious case of reverse trainwreck syndrome, remembered to scuttle his butt along the wall until he was next to the bars so one of the guys could unlock the handcuffs with the keys that were next to where Curtiss had been sitting.

Penguin took advantage of the momentum to roll over a flattened Shachi without an ounce of remorse and leave the filling of the pirate sandwich currently happening between Curtiss and Flagel, and when he was behind Curtiss he snatched the ring of keys from the wall and Kikoku from the table.

A wave of glue that knocked the breath out of him plastered him against the wall, but not before he was able to throw what he'd grabbed in Shachi's general direction, and with a big grunt, Shachi sprung from the floor, grabbed the keys and managed to fit one of them in the keyhole of Law's cuffs at the same time that Flagel's free arm wrapped around his leg and swung him at the ceiling.

But the instant the cuffs slid from Law's wrist, he commanded, "Room," and the tables turned.

Law reached for Kikoku as Curtiss shot a surge of glue that hit it halfway out of the scabbard, but the sharp edge was able to cut the solidifying glue clean, and Law was able to slide it all the way out.

In one swift slash, he cut the bars of the cell and the stream of glue that was keeping Penguin prisoner.
He didn't think the man with the whip hands would pose a threat, but Curtiss was another matter entirely, seeing how he'd been able to put himself back together the last time they had fought. Luckily for Law, this time he had more material to work with.

Penguin wiggled free of the remaining glue and hit the floor, and so did Shachi when Law cut the stretched arm that was holding him up.

Flagel screeched, prompting a brief halt in the battle. "My arm! My arm!" He was tugging violently at the one stuck in Curtiss' forehead as he watched the one in the floor. "How dare you! My—"

"Pull yourself together!" Curtiss bellowed, and he retracted the glue covering his body, letting Flagel's arm free.

At the same time, Law yelled, "Get out of here!" And at his command, Penguin and Shachi started running the way they had come without question.

Given the choice, Law preferred to be at the first line of battle whenever possible. His powers could be used with precision in less stressful settings, but cutting with Kikoku in a fight when allies were in the middle was always a hassle, and he couldn't afford that sort of caution now.

He slashed in a wide arc that cut both men through the middle, and Curtiss shot at him the same glue web that he had used last time, but before he could be caught by it, he used Shambles and switched himself with one of the cut bars in the ruined cell, positioning himself slightly behind the two Marines and gaining enough to time to slash at them again, before Curtiss cut fix the first cut, and before they could realize what had just happened.

"Shambles," he said again, and he swapped Flagel's midsection with Curtiss's head before cutting their legs and reattaching them upside-down.

He dislodged Kikoku's scabbard from the glue on the floor and ran towards Penguin and Shachi. They were more beaten up than he had assumed at first, particularly Shachi's face, and he didn't have time to ask where the rest were before Mack showed up at the top of the stairs and yelled, "Saki needs help! She's holding off my sister!"

Whatever relief Law had felt upon defeating the two Marines vanished, and he steeled himself to hurry towards Mack, saying, "Lead the way."

Just one moment to catch her breath.

That was the excuse Marina told herself over and over when she slumped against the wall. The gash on her right arm wasn't bleeding anymore, but a brown-red layer had dripped over her hand and dried out, making it uncomfortable to flex it.

In her other hand, there was the bangle that had distracted the pirate in that last exchange of blows, and her eyes were fixed on it with an empty stare. Red, white, green. It looked so much like the handiwork of Qaryn's artisans, and she remembered her short stay there, and the people she had met, and the woman she had spent most of the time with, trying to make sense of the situation at hand. Banu, she was called. She closed her fist around it, exhaled, and put it in her pocket as she rested her head against the wall. Briefly, she wondered if she had already moved on and found out what she wanted to do.

The worst of the noise in the tower had ceased, and tough she knew she needed to check up on the men that had been pursuing the pirates, when she pushed herself from the wall, she slipped down it instead, until she was sitting on the floor and she couldn't attribute anymore her ragged breathing and
her constricted chest to the fight.

This wasn't how she had wanted to meet back with Mack. She hadn't wanted to find him on the wrong side of the law to throw accusations at him. She hadn't wanted to hear excuses and have him escape in a way that made her unable to help him anymore. She didn't know why she wanted to help at all, after all these years, but if there was something she was sure of is that her brother didn't deserve the same punishment as his crewmates. He wasn't a bad person, and he wasn't a liar—

He'd said he had written to her, hadn't he? Were those letters even real? Her chest hurt even more at the thought.

And then the woman, that infuriating woman lying in front of her had had the gall to say she knew Marina's brother better than herself, and Marina was shaken by the doubt of it being true.

So many years had passed. Perhaps she had told the pirate that she shouldn't speak about family, but did Marina have a right at all to do the same?

But she wasn't allowed the time to set her thoughts straight as the sound footsteps approached through the stairs.

She didn't know where she found the strength to grip a discarded chisel on the floor and stand up to watch the staircase at the end of the corridor, hoping that it was a friendly face. Only hoping. Expecting would have been too much, given the circumstances. She glanced nervously at her midsection. She could've been the one to go down, had her opponent not hesitated, and she didn't know how to interpret that reticence to kill her and be done with it.

She'd never understand how a pirate's mind worked.

Her worst fears were confirmed when, only seconds later, she saw Mack and Trafalgar Law appear from the floor below.

She barely registered the expression on the Surgeon of Death's face when he looked at the body near Marina, because she was too busy taking in the horror etched in Mack's features when he saw the scene.

Her brother had never looked at her like that, and Marina felt a stabbing pain in her heart. Would he rather have seen her bleeding out on the floor than his crewmate?

"Stand down," Law said, taking a step in front of Mack. His sword was in his left hand, still sheathed.

Marina glared at him defiantly. He had the injury from the bullet he had taken when he had been captured, but nothing that remained from the fights he'd surely gotten in to get to her – and she was forced to face the fact that if he was here it was because Curtiss had been defeated again – so Marina's self-confidence wavered again. But at the very least she could keep him at bay with her weapons, and with some luck, reinforcements would come soon to help her.

At the same time, she was infuriated and reenergized by that damn pirate who dared to stand in front of Mack as if he was his shield, as if Marina had any intention of hurting him.

"I don't take orders from—"

Marina was interrupted by Law saying 'Room' under his breath, and as the blue sphere grew from his hand and swallowed them, he tightened his grip on Kikoku and he readied to lunge at Marina.
"Captain!" Mack said with urgency, and the worry in his voice was a second stab to her heart.

Why, why did all these people act like they cared? They had left everything behind to become criminals. They had no right to do what they did and still claim to give a damn about each other, or worse, about her.

Marina was no fool. She knew this wasn't like that time in Lymes, when he only had been trying to get away. Those weren't the eyes of a person who would be satisfied with a retreat. But as she took a fighting stance in preparation of what was to come, she couldn't predict what was about to happen.

Instead of running towards her, Law remained in his spot and suddenly Marina was looking at him from inches away, swapped with a piece of rubble that had been in front of his feet.

It happened in a matter of seconds.

Upon switching, Marina lost her balance, and she felt Law's sword pressing against her wounded arm as he caught her. She didn't have time to be surprised that he hadn't let her fall, because right then he plunged a hand inside her chest as he murmured something, and Marina forgot to breathe for a moment.

She saw over Law's shoulder her brother staring wide-eyed at her, mirroring her expression.

Law removed his left arm and let her drop to the floor. In his right hand, there was a clear cube holding a beating heart.

Marina got on her knees and brought her shaking hands – her own body betraying her, showing weakness in front of an enemy – to her chest, only to find an empty space where her heart had been, and when she looked up, she saw Law giving the heart, her heart, to Mack.

She was alive and breathing and it didn't hurt, but he had taken it away, and there was nothing she could do to get it back.

"He'll take care of it for now," Law said icily to Marina. "I suggest you stay where you are, because I won't be so kind if you get in my way again."

Marina could only watch, terrified, as her brother hid her heart inside his clothes and Trafalgar Law hurried down the corridor to retrieve their crewmate.

He crossed the distance in the blink of an eye, heart pounding against his ribcage, and his blood ran cold when he saw the chisel sticking out of Saki's chest. In a daze, he brought a hand to her neck to look for a pulse.

He found it right away, beating fast under his fingertips. How long would it last, he didn't know, and he was worried that it could take its toll on her heart. They had to get out. But the reassurance that she was still hanging in there was enough to make him come back to his senses and start planning.

He assessed the damage as fast as he could. Her breathing was ragged. A scratch on her forehead had released a scandalous amount of blood, but it wasn't important. Her skin had a blue tinge from the lack of oxygen. The wound on her right leg didn't look threatening either, but the one on the left shoulder had soaked her shirt and hadn't still stopped bleeding. She likely had a collapsed lung, and removing the chisel would cause a bigger hemorrhage. He needed—

"Captain!"
Law was starting to dread that word every time a crewmate uttered it.

He looked up and saw Shachi just coming from the floor below, waving a small Den Den Mushi. "Bepo says they're inside the Polar Tang and the Log Pose's set! Should they—" He fell suddenly silent when he saw Saki’s body and started walking towards her, news forgotten. "Shit, shit, shit—" He stopped abruptly when he saw Marina, but realizing that she wasn't moving, he made haste towards Law.

"I can fix her," he said to stop Shachi. And he had no doubt she would recover if she received medical attention, but time was of the essence and his operating room was too far to risk it. "What about Bepo?"

Shachi nodded nervously, sounding like he was making an effort to not freak out. "Right. He says the guys have managed to start the sub."

He'd seen the docks near the entrance of the building, and Curtiss had said that he was going to be sent to Impel Down the next day, so there had to be at least one ship there. There had been three warships when he'd been captured. If the Log Pose on the sub was already set, the ones on those ships must have been too.

The way Law saw it, they had two ways to leave the island, and, looking at Saki, he knew that one was out of the question if no one was to be left behind. "Tell them to go ahead," he said. "We'll reunite later."

Shachi faltered, probably thinking he hadn't heard right. "W-what?"

"The sub's on the other end of the island and we'd have to fight our way through to reach it. We can't risk it."

"Then how… Oh." He lifted the Den Den Mushi receiver and said, "Bepo, you guys keep going to the next island. We're gonna steal a ship and follow you."

There was silence on the other end of the line, and then Bepo said something else. Shachi repeated for Law when he was done, "Bepo says 'See you in the next island' and 'don't you dare shipwreck while I'm not watching.'"

Law had to smile at that. "Tell him to keep the Den Den Mushi nearby. We'll keep in contact."

As Shachi relayed the info to Bepo, Law looked at Mack, threw Kikoku for him to catch and, doing his best not to rattle Saki too much, he picked her up. "Let's hurry. We need to reach one of the ships outside. Go wild, I'll fix everybody once we're sailing."

Mack nodded and led the way down the stairs. Law followed suit, tightening his grip on Saki as she fought for breath, and Shachi lingered until Law was next to him and patted him on the back before picking up the pace and passing him.

It was a small comfort, but it felt priceless to Law.

Saki hadn't honestly expected to open her eyes again after passing out, not even for a scarce few seconds. She knew it was momentary, because she could feel consciousness slipping from her grip again as soon as she tried to focus her eyes to only see yellow.

Her chest hurt like hell and she couldn't speak, she couldn't feel her limbs, and perhaps was for the best, since she was pretty banged up. Her mind was hazy, but she could tell she was being carried
and by someone running, and the ear resting against that someone was picking up a heartbeat that wasn't hers.

"Hang in there," she heard Law whisper, and she didn't know if he had realized she was awake or he was only talking to himself, but his voice made her feel safe. "You'll be fine."

He was okay, she thought. He was free.

She wanted to reply that she knew she would, now that he was with her, but she couldn't, so instead, she let her eyelids close again, relieved to know that she was in the best possible hands.

The ceiling was white and it reminded her of a hospital's.

It was the first thing Saki noticed when she opened her eyes, which made her feel anxious, because she wasn't on the best of terms with healthcare facilities.

The second was Mack's voice and a curt, "Finally."

Saki turned her head towards him and noticed that her elbow hurt, that breathing hurt, and that her mouth was dry, and before she could ask what was going on, Mack got up from his chair and said, "Don't move. I'm going to get Captain."

Saki sat up as soon as he left, mostly because she didn't really register Mack's order, and tried to recall how beaten up she had gotten for everything to hurt this much. Her thoughts felt slow, something she attributed to medication.

She was in a sickbay she didn't recognize. It housed many more cots than in the Polar Tang, but its only occupant was her, though she saw the bedsheets of another two were messy.

She looked down when she remembered the last time she did, there was a chisel sticking out of her. She pressed against her chest with the hand that didn't hurt moving and felt bandages, and inhaled deeply, which made her winced in pain, and in turn made her left shoulder and right leg hurt at the sudden movement.

She was pressing on her shoulder and testing the arm's mobility slowly, and careful not to do anything weird with the IV attached to it, when Shachi stomped his way into the sickbay, sporting a bandaged nose that forced his sunglasses too high up to be comfortable.

"Yo! I thought you'd be out cold longer."

He sounded congested, but Saki was too confused to derail the conversation to poke fun at him. "How long has it been?"

"A few hours since we left the island. It's morning."

Saki idly thought that if this was the only way she could get a full night's sleep, she'd have have insomnia until she died. "We're... at sea?" She looked around. "But this isn't our sub."

"We borrowed a Marine ship."

The words took a bit to sink in, but when they did, her jaw fell open. "You absolute madmen."

"Not like we could fight our way through the island with you in this state." And he added as soon as he saw Saki's guilty face, "Well, we weren't much better for wear, honestly. Mack's the one in better shape. Peng got a fracture too, and Captain had gotten shot—"
That got through her brain faster. The succession of surprises was doing a good job waking her up. "What? How is he?"

Shachi held his hands up to stop her. "Well enough to clear most of the way to the ship. He took out the bullet himself when we started sailing." And he added casually, "I'll never get used to seeing limbs fly, by the way."

Saki was of the same mind. "And what about the others? Are they in the Polar Tang?"

"They are, and we'll join up when we make land," Law said, entering the sickbay. Even though Shachi had said he was fine, she felt better at seeing it with her own eyes. "I've been talking with Bepo over Den Den Mushi. It seems the Log Pose only took a few hours to set in that Marine base, so we should be headed the same way."

Saki thought for a moment, trying to put all the info in order. After a small pause, she realized something. "If Bepo isn't here, who's at the helm?"

Law and Shachi looked at each other for a second.

It was Shachi who spoke. "Remember that guy we found in the dungeons?"

She did, but she didn't want to. "No," Saki replied, hoping it wasn't true.

"That one."

"He knows what he's doing," Law continued, "and Bepo's been saying for a while he needs help in the bridge, so he's staying."

"Makes sense," Saki said without any enthusiasm. Then she tried to wave her left arm at Law, felt a powerful sting because she didn't remember she had a wound, and resorted to pointing at the IV with her other hand. "Can you take this out, please? I'm making an effort not to look at it."

Law rolled his eyes, but checked the solution bag and he seemed fine with whatever he saw, so he walked next to her. He hadn't touched the IV yet when Shachi said a bit too loudly, "Uh, I'll be going, bye!" and left the sickbay.

"I know that feel," Saki said under her breath.

"Lie down," he said. "I don't need you passing out."

"Right, right," she said, and with a lot of pain she obeyed and kept her eyes closed, just in case.

"You needed a blood transfusion earlier," Law commented. The statement was devoid of emotion and she didn't know if that was meant he was okay with it, or that he was mad and trying to keep it to himself.

"Was it that bad?" She asked, worried about the answer.

He considered his words. It looked like he didn't want to say what he was thinking. "Could've been worse."

That wasn't a good sign. She opened her eyes when he was done fiddling with the needle. "Are you angry?"

He glanced at her briefly and let out a small sigh before replying, "Not at you, no."
Saki hadn't expected that answer, but thought that maybe it wasn't best to ask who he was angry at. "How are you? Shachi said you got shot."

It wasn't very obvious, but he had a slight limp when he moved.

He lifted an eyebrow at her. "Worrying about others in your state?"

"Well, you worry about everybody, and Bepo isn't around to worry about you."

"So you're taking his place?"

"Sorry not to be nearly as fluffy, but you are concerning."

He smiled a bit at that. "You are, sometimes."

She blinked a couple of times before realizing what he was getting at. "…Hey. That wasn't a compliment."

"Take it how you will."

She made a face at him, but he looked more at ease now, and the questions in Saki's mind kept piling up as she slowly recounted the events of the day before. "How's Mack doing?"

He took the IV bag from the stand and brought it to another part of the sickbay she couldn't see behind a partition. "Hard to say. You know how he is."

"He seemed upset when I woke up."

"He's upset in general, I think."

Saki sighed. "I didn't want to hurt his sister, but—"

"Actually, that's something I wanted to talk to you about. Are you awake enough to remember this conversation?"

Saki kept quiet as Law came back into view. "What's wrong?"

He crossed his arms at a distance from her cot and regarded her clinically. "Did you fight her seriously?"

She watched him, baffled as to why he was asking that. "Law, if I hadn't, I'd be dead."

Something softened in his demeanor when she said that, but he insisted. "You didn't go easy on her because she is Mack's sister?"

Saki rubbed her forehead with her good arm. "Maybe? I hesitated for a moment, but that was it. She was too tired and medicated to undergo a third degree. "I didn't want to kill her, but I didn't want her to get any of you either. I can take hurt feelings over injured friends."

"Why did you send Mack ahead?"

"I couldn't run very well and I figured you could use the reinforcements, with the other two officers going after you. And it would've been dangerous to let Marina meet up with them. That's why I stayed."

"And what about you needing reinforcements?"
"I knew you'd come for me soon."

Law frowned. "What if we'd been held up?"

Saki tried to shrug, but instead she winced. "Better one down than four of us."

He sighed. "You can't be so reckless."

"I don't think I was," she retorted. "I mean, I know that it's your job to keep us safe, but it's the crew's job to keep you safe. Priorities."

It was a pretty ugly conflict of interests, now that she thought about it, and judging by Law's surprised face, he hadn't thought about it like that, either, but he seemed to accept Saki's reasoning.

"Alright, I just wanted to make sure."

Pleased that she wasn't going to get scolded, for a chance, she smiled, until she remembered she hadn't asked the million beli question yet. "What happened with Marina? Did she go after you when I was knocked out?"

"She was still in the hallway when we got there, but she wasn't trouble."

"I find it hard to believe that she didn't fight even harder to get Mack back."

Law shook his head. "I'm sure she wanted to, but I took her heart hostage."

"You… oh." She recalled the day when he had taken her heart out of her ribcage out of the blue. She couldn't think of a more iconic way to start a working relationship. "That would be so poetic if I didn't know it was literal."

"Mack's keeping it," he told her, and he didn't sound particularly happy. "It was the best I could do without killing her."

"When I grow up I want to be as resourceful as you."

Law smirked at her and just said, "All in all, good job. Just don't do it again."

Saki tried to laugh at that and immediately regretted it, having to be content with flinching at the sharp pain that came from her chest. It was the side that didn't use to hurt, so that a novelty.

"Yeah, I wouldn't do that if I were in your place," he said.

"You don't do it that much in your place, either."

He looked at her sideways and went on with his business in the sickbay.

Saki relaxed against the mattress while Law moved things around. She didn't mind the silence; but staring at the ceiling, she was thinking that it was sort of weird to have a sickbay talk in a place that wasn't the sub, and she wondered if he felt the same way. It was then that she remembered something odd about the fight. "It was like time stopped."

"What do you mean?"

"Fighting against Marina. I suppose it was because I was in a pretty bad shape," she hurried to say. "But it was almost like I could see her move before she did. I was sure I'd win at the time. I've never been able to concentrate like that before. Has it happened to you?"
He stared at her with curiosity. "No."

"Hm…"

The stare didn't cease, so obviously, afterwards came the question. "How come you ended up like this if you were doing so well?"

"I… sort of got distracted for a sec."

Law eyed her with suspicion, waiting for her to continue.

She had the feeling that she wasn't going to get praised for this one. "You know the bangle Banu gave me in Qaryn? It snagged and I dropped it."

"You got distracted over that?"

"It was just a split second, I swear!"

Law spoke with a mix of concern and disbelief. "Being a bleeding heart is going to kill you someday."

"…Won't you be there to stop me?" She said, trying to be charming and ready to be suffocated by a pillow. Deservedly so.

But he was feeling charitable. "Do I have a choice?"

And Saki almost laughed again, but she stopped herself in time that once.

"Rest," he said. "You need it. And don't even try to get out of bed."

"…I won't deny I'm curious about the ship, but I don't think my body will agree if I try to move."

"Good. Listen to it for a change."

She nodded lightly. "Am I going to be stuck here for long?"

The immediate reply was a glare. "How many times are we going to have this conversation?"

"…Every time I get hurt?"

And then she remembered the last time they'd bickered about this, when she got the flu and he got so close, and her brain maybe lingered for too long in that image and she decided that getting comfortable against her pillow and closing her eyes was the most dignified out she had at the moment.

He mumbled under his breath, "What am I going to do with you?" A question that she was certain he didn't expect an answer for, because he followed it up by, "I'll be back later" and walked away.

Saki didn't doubt he was, but by then, she had fallen asleep again and didn't notice.

She was free and, most importantly, able to move, the next day. In that span of time she had received visits from Penguin, Shachi and Law, but she hadn't seen hide nor hair of Mack, and the worry that he was mad at her intensified.

She couldn't blame him. She was sure she'd have been outraged if a crewmate had hurt her siblings.
So the first thing she did when Law released her was roam the ship, *slowly*, because she had no other option with her right leg protesting at each step, and try to find where the galley was. She was determined to stake out the place if Mack wasn't around if it meant she'd be able to talk to him. He deserved an apology.

What for, she wasn't sure. In fact, if she had taken some time to think about her reasons, she could have reached the conclusion that she wanted to apologize because it would make her feel better, and not necessarily because she regretted anything she had done.

But she may have done something wrong she wasn't aware of, and she knew for certain that she had worried Mack. That was surely worth apologizing for.

The ship was bigger than she had thought. Even knowing that Marine battleships were big, walking inside one was a different experience altogether than watching them from afar. The only vessel she had spent any amount of time in – that she could remember, anyway, since at least the first days of her life had been spent at sea – was the Polar Tang. The submarine was part metal, part wood, kind of narrow and claustrophobic when they spent too much time underwater, but overall cozy once she got used to it. This ship was much wider, and emptier, and made her feel completely out of place and also very grateful that Law wasn't the kind of guy who wanted a big-ass float with an equally humongous crew.

After much stumbling about, enough trial and error to find the quarters where the guys had holed themselves up in, and a few undignified stops to sit down on the hallway when her leg said no more, Saki found the mess hall. It was easily three times the size of the Polar Tang's and she felt very lost when she got in, but then she detected the smell of something cooking and followed the trail.

The galley was also disgustingly big and could have easily held ten cooks instead of two and a random visitor – there was always one – fighting for personal space. Mack was working on the stove furthest from the door, and he hadn't turned around to see who was approaching, not that he ever did.

Saki knocked on the doorframe to catch his attention, and he only threw a glance at her and a small nod before turning to the pot.

"Hey. It's been a while," she started, and since she got no reply, she continued, "How are you doing?"

"I'm peachy," he said very unconvincingly.

The only sound in the room was of whatever Mack was stirring in the pot.

Maybe an offer to help would ease the mood. "Do you have any potatoes for me to peel?"

"Not right now." He stopped to look at her now. "Can you, though?"

"Oh, sure, my right hand's just fine!" She lifted it and wiggled her fingers. "What's on the stove?"

"Pumpkin soup," he said, lowering the intensity of the fire and putting aside the spoon. Saki kept to herself her comments opinions about the dish. "Shachi is still having some trouble chewing."

"He looked much better today," she replied, glad that he wasn't cutting their chat short. "It's a good thing we have Captain around."

"Yeah."

And silence fell again.
Undeterred, Saki felt compelled to break it. But from far away, just in case Mack had a good throwing day. He certainly sounded moody. "I'm sorry."

This time he stared at her in confusion, and she wasn't sure why, but then he asked, "What about?"

And since she hadn't thought about all those things she could have thought before starting the conversation, she had to improvise now. "About… you know, your sister."

Mack looked like he didn't want to be talking about that. "That wasn't your fault."

"I didn't mean to hurt her." This was a half-truth, but it wasn't a lie that she'd rather have not hurt her.

He waved her concern away. "Mari's gotten hurt worse putting together the luminous sign at the inn."

Mack wasn't the kind of guy to keep his anger in once confronted, but Saki couldn't fathom why he seemed to be so worked up if he wasn't angry at her. "And her heart?"

"I'll keep it safe until I can return it to her. Truth be told, I didn't expect Captain to be so considerate." And with some distaste, he added, "My former captain wouldn't have been, for sure."

"I'm sure he didn't want to hurt her, either," Saki replied.

Mack stared at her for a few heavy seconds with a blank expression. "No, you wouldn't be so sure if you'd seen him."

Saki was at a loss for words for a moment. It stood to reason that Law didn't want to hold back against an enemy that was putting them all at risk, but she was Mack's sister. It had to count for something, and she guessed it had, if her heart was still beating and in Mack's hands.

"What's going on, Mack?" She asked at last.

He shook his head slowly. "That's what I'd like to know. We talked afterwards," he said, and he scratched his curls with discomfort. Saki wasn't used to seeing him like this. "Captain and I, when he was done fixing everybody. He told me to remember what side I was on."

Oh. It made sense that he would warn him, but she didn't get the feeling that Law had been mad at Mack. "But he trusts you."

"I know that. It wasn't a threat. And I know where I want to be."

"…So then?"

"There was something Mari said that…" The sentence drifted and he got lost in thought. There it was, whatever was eating at him.

"Was it that argument you were having when I got there?"

"Yeah."

"Can I help?"

Mack looked lost when he looked at her. "No, I don't think so. I need to talk to her if I want to set things right. And she has to listen."

"That sounds complicated."
"You don't know half of it." Anyway, he said, changing the subject suddenly. "I am sorry. I shouldn't have left you alone. I should've fought with you, but—"

Saki put up a hand in front of her. "Wait, no, stop right there. No one should ever make you lay a hand on your family."

"But I have to defend the family I have now, have I not?"

Saki faltered and her shoulders dropped. It was foreign to hear someone of the crew consider her family, even if she had told Law something along the lines before. "You did."

Mack let a wry smile show. "I could've done better."

"And I could not have gotten stabbed in a lung, but you know, shit happens."

Mack covered his mouth to hold back a snort and turned around to check on the soup. "You say you're up to peeling potatoes?"

"Sure."

He pointed to a cabinet. "Then get me a handful of carrots and chop them. The rest of the crew will riot if there's only soup."

Saki chuckled. "I don't like that we're separated right now, but I'm really glad I ended up on your team. Heaven knows what the other guys are eating."

"They better not get sick while I'm not watching or I'll use them for throwing practice."

Saki thought he had a knack for doing it anyway, but it was wise not to mention it. "I'm sure Captain is of the same mind." She reached for the carrots and, after selecting the ones that looked better, said, "Chin up, Mack. We'll find a way for you to talk to Marina."

He sighed like he was very, very tired.

"No, really! I get it, family's important. We've got to try to clear things up."

Driving a hard stare at her, he replied firmly, "Only, and only if it's possible. No putting yourself or anybody else at risk."

"That's gonna be difficult, but if it's what you want—"

"It is. Captain's right. I have to remember which side I'm on. For better or worse, I've made my choice." He paused. "And I don't doubt it was for the better."

"I think so too, but I'm biased like that."

He bit back a smile. "'C'mon, get back to work. You've been lazing for long enough."

"I won't argue against that. I was itching to get out of bed."

"Are you ever—" He stopped, and Saki turned around too to see Law near the door. "Hi, Captain."

The random visitor, Saki thought.

Law nodded at him, and then at Saki, who smiled at him. Apparently satisfied with whatever he had seen, he said, "Just checking in. I'll leave you to your own."
And, same as he had come, he went quietly.

"Mother hen," Saki said loud enough to be heard outside the galley.

The steps hurried after that and a knowing smile made its way to Saki's face.

"He's…" Mack began to say. "Well."

"Yeah," Saki agreed, taking a knife to the first carrot.

"Hm."

But Mack seemed to feel better after that, and the atmosphere of the crew went back to normal. At least, as much as it could with half of their companions in another ship, but solving that was only a matter of time. Saki couldn't wait to reunite with Bepo and the others and be back home. And, in the meantime, the company wasn't half bad.
Calm before the storm

Chapter Notes

*barges in two months late with Starbucks and a new chapter*

I just want to thank everyone who reviewed and is still following this. I love you.
You're the best.

(I can feel it coming in the air tonight)

Hissing under her breath, in a corner of the unnecessarily big mess hall, Saki tried to sew the hem of a shirt's collar, but so far she was being more successful at stabbing her thumb without mercy than making three straight stitches in a row.

As soon she'd been able to move at a reasonable, albeit somewhat limpy, pace, she had gone on a quest to scavenge any piece of clothing that wasn't her own torn ones or a Marine uniform, and while she had miraculously found some women's civilian clothes, whoever had left them behind had been a fan of pants and a foot taller than Saki.

She had already been able to fix a grey tank top's straps, which had been well within her ability, and, fired up by the smallest of successes, she had decided to take in the waist of the only skirt she was able to get her hands on and get rid of the blue stripes of a Marine shirt to wear it knotted at the waist, over the tank top.

Seeing how she wasn't doing so hot with the collar, she suspected that the initial victory had led her vastly overestimate her capabilities, but dang it if she wasn't going to keep trying for the sake of fashion.

She pricked her fingers for the umpteenth time as Mack entered the hall, gave the desolate area a quick glance, and sat a chair away from Saki. She looked up from her own work to see he had put some blank sheets on the table and an ink pot.

"Do you mind?" He asked her.

"Oh, no, of course not," she replied, and right away moved her sewing supplies to give him extra space. The ship was enormous and empty, and Saki appreciated the company, if only not to feel as she was a spirit haunting a ghost ship. In the Polar Tang, it seemed impossible to go anywhere without bumping into someone along the way, but here she needed to go out of her way just to find signs of life. "Writing letters?"

"Just the one. Do you want to say anything to Feli?"

"Tell her to ditch the coconuts and come with us."

Mack snorted. "She won't."

"Had to try. She seemed very attached to the inn," Saki commented.
"She's lived there for nearly ten years, and Ernie's known her since she was a kid. He's even invited to the family reunions."

"Her family lives nearby?"

"Her parents are in the neighborhood," Mack replied, checking the contents of the ink pot. "Nice old couple."

"Oh." That wasn't the impression Saki had gotten, from what little Felicia had said about them. "I thought they didn't get along very well."

"Hm?" Mack frowned questioningly, but it he found the answer he was looking for by himself. "Oh, they had arguments when she was a teen, but they came around a long time ago. They are at the inn every Friday for dinner now."

Knowing that made Saki feel a bit warmer inside. "And she never went back with them?"

"She likes it at the inn, and you know how parents are. Always get along with them better when you aren't living with them."

Saki didn't actually know, and Mack's statement made her doubly confused after seeing him burn his mom's letter, but there wasn't enough money in the world to make her bring up the subject. "Well, she can't get any farther than in a ship."

Mack just smiled as he began to write. Saki kept redoing her stitches until she was more or less satisfied with the result, and by the time she had half of it done, Mack had finished writing.

"What are those stitches?" He asked, and the skepticism in his tone took a stab at her pride that hurt more than the ones to her fingers.

"What's wrong about my stitches?" Defensively, she brought the shirt closer to her so he couldn't see them.

"They're a mess."

"I like to think they're eclectic."

"For the love of—" He reached for the shirt and she moved farther away. "Let me see that."

Saki would say that her suspicion was natural and it came with the territory of living with a bunch of little shits, so she wasn't sure he had good intentions in mind. "...Why?"

"Do you want to actually have something to wear, or are you only doing this to pass time and lose some fingers?"

Saki, defeated by cold logic, relented.

After looking at the stitches, Mack said, "Go on."

Feeling very self-conscious, she started to stitch again, and before she could drive the needle into her thumb again, Mack stopped her hand.

"You're holding it wrong; you're going to prick your fingers."

"You're a little late, buddy."
"Quit the sass and watch," he replied, gesturing towards the shirt and needle, which Saki dutifully gave him. "You hold the fabric like this, and don't make these stitches one by one." He passed the needle several times through the fabric before pulling to tighten the stitches. "See?"

A row of three aligned stitches of the same size appeared on the collar, and Saki's mouth dropped a little. "I didn't know you could do that!"

"You haven't sewn very much, have you?" He passed the shirt and needle back to her. "Try it."

Saki nodded, eyes fixed in concentration in the collar. "Okay."

She did try, and, upon seeing the results, she said, "I'm never going to get the hang of this."

Mack huffed. "Do you think you can learn in five minutes? Keep at it."

"But—"

"You aren't moving from this table until the collar is done."

Saki thought about protesting, but she knew how to pick her battles. "Yes, sir."

'I've been thinking about what we talked about, and I think you were right. I can't let my life be stopped here. It's not fair for any of us.

I spoke to the new captain, and he's agreed to take me into his unit. I'll receive basic training here, so no fancy academy for me, and thank the Mother for it. I can't see myself surrounded by kids ten years younger than me.

I can't thank you enough for all your help. I don't know if I would have made it without you. I hope we can meet again soon. Who knows, maybe we'll see each other soon in one of those meetings they like to have at Marineford?

Love,

Banu'

Marina set down the letter on the desk with a soft smile and leaned back on her chair. If she closed her eyes, it was easy to remember the sea breeze and the sparkling water of Qaryn's bay at noon, shining like a million jewels floating in the water. The busy market, the colorful fabrics fluttering from clotheslines, the bone-chilling normality in which daily life kept going on after the crimes committed only weeks prior to her arrival.

It was miles better than the sound of the repairing efforts at the base.

She opened the first drawer of her desk to take a paper sheet, and the woven bracelet the pirate had lost fighting against her greeted her from the top of the stack. Saki, she recalled. The way she fought had caught Marina's attention enough to ask headquarters for a more thorough background check, if only to make sure there wasn't a rogue Marine in North Blue teaching criminals how to fight.

(And she knew for a fact there were some of those, but the more they weren't allowing to roam free, the better.)

She wasn't sure why she kept the bracelet. Maybe it reminded her of her brief stay in Qaryn, which, she was fairly confident, was the place where it had been acquired. Maybe it was a warning of how close she had come to losing that one battle.
Not that she didn't have bigger worries.

She brought her left hand to rest on her chest, right where her heart should have been and only an empty space remained.

She didn't know how, and most importantly, why she was still alive.

She hadn't told anybody what had happened. She still didn't know what to make of it, and she was sure her superiors didn't want to hear that her life was now subject to the whims of a pirate.

He'd given her heart to Mack.

Mack said he had written to her, all those years she'd been away.

Was that true? Was he the one keeping her life safe right now?

Old and recent memories kept popping up in her mind, prompting questions she didn't have the energy, nor the context to answer.

Instead, she dipped her pen in ink and began to write a reply to Banu. Her personal problems had to take the backseat in the face of duty.

It was one of the small mercies of life.

The Den Den Mushi on the desk made a choking sound, and the device it was attached to started to print the new bounties assigned by headquarters, as well as some interesting information.

"What's up with this weather?" Saki complained over the roar of the wind.

She and Penguin were fighting with a rope to hoist a sail as Law and Shachi were doing the same with another one. Gusts of wind came and went, and, while at the start they had seemed a blessing helping them reach land sooner, now they threatened to capsize them. It was also sunny, and an incessant drizzle was coming down, making the ropes slippery. She'd had enough foresight to change into clothes she didn't mind getting messed up, but that also meant she was uncomfortable on top of annoyed.

"Sailboats are an offense to current technology," Penguin grunted, trying to tie down the rope with Saki's assistance. "What's the government's excuse for not going hybrid?"

"I have a feeling that they don't care much about their sold—ah!" The rope almost slipped her hand, but she was quick to catch it with the other one. "I hate them."

"Me too." He tightened the knot as much as he could and let go. "There."

Both looked up to make sure the sail was staying in place and the one that was flopping wildly was not theirs.

"Should we help?"

Saki glanced at her red palms without any energy. "I guess?" She looked up at the sky. "I never thought the day I'd miss being underwater would come."

"Not to mention Bepo smells bad weather miles before we come across it."

"It's animal instinct. I don't think you can blame Sturgeon for this one," Saki replied.
"I can and I will," Penguin declared, already moving towards his companions, who were running after a rope. "Come on, the sooner we get this over with, the—"

And just like that, the wind calmed down, and the rope smacked Shachi in the face. The rain was getting even thinner, and a gentle breeze remained.

"Well, isn't that nice," Penguin said with a smile, though the tone suggested that he wanted to throw something – someone – overboard.

"Everyone!" Mack's voice made everybody look towards one of the deck's windows. Half of his body was out. "Sturgeon says to unfurl the sails!"

Shachi replied right away. "Tell him he can unfurl his—!"

"Shachi," Law said apathetically, "don't shoot the messenger."

"Does that mean I've got permission to shoot the sender?"

He seemed to consider the answer. "No."

They got to work again, and as soon as they filed into the ship to change into something dry, the familiar ringtone of a Den Den Mushi caught their attention.

"Bepo," Law said as an explanation as he started to hurry to his temporary sleeping quarters.

The other three shared a quick look and diverted their course to go after Law. He had picked up the receiver and was about to speak when everybody else crowded around the Den Den Mushi and got the jump on him.

"Yo, Bepo!"

"How's our favorite navigator?"

"We miss yooou!"

"Give me space," Law grumbled, pushing them away with his free arm as everybody else complained. "Any news, Bepo?"

There was a beat of silence on the other end of the line, and there was worry in the atmosphere until Bepo spoke. "Am I really your favorite navigator?"

Law facepalmed, which allowed the others to get closer again.

"Of course you are!" Penguin replied immediately.

Saki stood on her toes and propped herself up on Shachi's and Penguin's shoulders to reach the receiver. "We love you, Bepo!"

"We need you back!" Shachi shouted.

"Everybody, out!" Law snapped, swatting them away mercilessly towards the door, and he made them back away until they were on the hallway.

A faint 'I miss you too!' reached their ears right before Law shut the door on their faces, which prompted much whining but no retaliation, because they knew better than to try to open the door with an annoyed captain on the other side.
"I want him back," Saki said, dejected.

"It's been weeks, I'm sure the island isn't far now."

"Never thought I'd miss that furball so much," Shachi admitted, lowering the brim of his hat.

"Our boilers."

"Our sets of wrenches."

"My clothes," Saki added.

"That wouldn't be a problem if you wore the uniform," Shachi ribbed her.

"You don't get to say that that while you're in regular clothes."

"I do and I will."

"Whatever," Penguin said with a sigh, interrupting the argument. "There's no point in complaining. We've got to wait it out."

Saki lowered her eyes to the floor. "We're making a puddle."

The other two looked down too.

"I'm not moping that up," Shachi said.

"Me neither."

"Last one to change has to clean it!" Penguin yelled before breaking into a sprint.

Saki and Shachi crossed alarmed glances and Shachi pulled her from the back of her shirt, so she shoved a hand on his face to push him back.

"That's dirty play!"

"Be grateful I didn't snatch your glasses!"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me!"

The walk to their quarters was a petty struggle and Penguin was ready by the time they even reached them. He watched them as they hurried to their respective rooms and took off with distilling smug satisfaction.

Saki managed to trip over a loose floorboard on the way to her room, and so she would always blame Marine incompetence for those few precious seconds that netted her third place in the competition.

Later, she was mopping the floor when Law opened the door on her face.

He looked behind the door. "What are you doing there?"

"Waiting for a free rhinoplasty, clearly," she replied, rubbing her face with a hand.

He closed the door, ignoring the sarcasm. "Bepo said they spotted land already. The Den Den Mushi
Saki sighed with relief and slumped against the mop. "Finally!"

"You tell me," he replied, tired.

"Missing Bepo, huh?" She guessed, smiling at him.

Law looked taken aback by her vile accusation, but it was just a moment before the regular frown came back, he shoved his hands in his pockets and started to walk away. "Don't miss any spots."

Saki stuck her tongue at him when he couldn't see and kept mopping the floor while humming a melody out of tune, in considerably brighter spirits.

True to word, a few hours later, the silhouette of a new island appeared on the horizon, and having nothing better to do, Saki went out to stand on the deck and take in the sights.

Absentmindedly, she ran a couple of fingers over her shirt, right on the spot where one of Marina's chisels had left a scar that was itching. Law had told her that it was normal, and that it was healing well, but Saki had seen enough of them to know that that one wasn't going to fade completely. She didn't mind, and it wasn't in a particularly bad place to keep hidden. The wound on her right thigh, ironically, had been bigger, less clean, and harder to heal, and now the remaining scar insisted on peeking out of the orange skirt she had altered with Mack's help.

She didn't mind it, either, but she did mind that every now and then one of the guys would see it and stare for a brief moment. *That* was uncomfortable. It was one thing for her to look at it and remember that she almost didn't live to tell the tale, and another for the others to get reminded of it, too.

She had to do something about it.

"That's a big island," Penguin said behind her.

"Yeah," she replied. She'd leave her idea for when they were back at the sub. "I don't think the Polar Tang's going to be wherever we dock."

"It's not like we have a choice." Penguin sighed. "We'll run into each other as long as we stay in contact."

"I wonder—" Saki started.

Penguin's tone was harsh when he cut her mid-sentence. "We're going to reunite with them for sure."

"No, not that! I'm wondering what kind of shit we're going to get pulled into this time."

Penguin opened his mouth to reply, closed it, turned to look at the horizon, and the ensuing pregnant silence spoke by itself. "I'm sure it won't be as bad as the last one."

She reached up to pat Penguin's shoulder. "Let it be known that I honestly admire your optimism, friend."

"Yeah, well," Penguin said, sounding less convinced than before. "While there's life, there's hope."

Saki let that sink in. "It's amazing how true that is." And then she added, "Do you want to bet?"

"Nope."
Not long after, they anchored the ship near a small beach. There was a dense jungle past it in which animals were making a ruckus. Saki knew it was going to be a joy to sleep in the island, should they not find Bepo and the others before night fell.

They packed lightly, making sure to carry a few valuables from the ship they could pawn off when they got to a town, and took a small boat to the shore.

The sand was very light and thin, the kind that stuck everywhere and hurt the eyes when the sun shone down directly on it. During their inspection of the area they found a narrow forest track, and when they got close to it, something pink and feathery flew past them.

It was a sort of pink toucan, circling the beach and screeching like there was no tomorrow.

And it talked. "HEEEEELP! HEEEEELP!"

They watched the bird for a few seconds until Penguin broke the silence. "That sounds promising."

"We should've made that bet," Saki told him.

Sturgeon didn't seem too keen on the idea of going forward. "Sounds like a good idea to stay on the beach, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't," Law retorted. "Come on, it's just a dumb bird."

Their courageous captain was the first to step on the path, followed by Mack, who was clearly the rational adult of the group, and after a sharing looks of deep understanding and solidarity, Saki, Shachi and Penguin followed suit. Sturgeon was the last to join the line.

They walked a few minutes, paying extra attention to their surroundings because everybody was waiting for a tiger to jump them from a tree, but other than the sounds of animals trying to make their ears bleed, there were no signs of danger.

That was, until they saw someone running through the bush right outside the beaten path and yelling their lungs out. Someone else was after them, and when they approached, enough to see, what they found was a big monkey pelting a girl with pomelos. At one point during the chase, she jumped to grab a low tree branch and climbed up at an enviable speed until she disappeared from view.

Now, the monkey could not climb after her while still holding onto the fruit, but it could make a racket on the ground while yelling menacingly.

Saki fought back the urge to ask if they should do something, considering it had been pointed out once or twice at her that she had a debilitating tendency to lend a hand to complete strangers, and she did not want to be responsible for whatever happened to them this time.

Fortunately, she did not need to say anything, because Shachi did it for her after a few seconds of group contemplation.

"Should we help?"

"Probably not," Law replied with the conviction of someone who knew that they were going to do the silly thing anyway.

Shachi took the reply as a sign to proceed further into the forest, pick up a couple of nuts from the ground and throw them at the monkey, yelling at it to go away.
The animal, who was not going to cave into a puny human's demands, tossed the remaining pomelo at Shachi's stomach, but thankfully for every human involved in that interaction, Mack picked up another nut and flung it at the monkey with righteous fury.

Nobody commented on the instant KO.

Menace gone, Penguin helped Shachi back up as he regained his breath and the others approached the tree the girl was taking refuge at, eyeing the monkey with distrust.

Saki looked up, and between the foliage she spied a pair of big warm eyes hiding behind a mess of black hair.

"Are you okay?" She yelled up.

"Is it gone?" Someone yelled back.

"Yeah. You can climb down."

Despite that, the girl didn't make any attempts to move. "Who are you? I haven't seen you before."

"Heart Pirates," Law replied, stepping next to Saki to look at the mysterious person. "We're looking for our friends."

"Pirates? So you aren't from the west swamp?"

"We just got here," he explained.

The girl didn't reply, so Saki tried to make her talk some more. "Can you guide us to a town, or tell us where to go?"

"I guess…" The girl replied, unconvinced. "Um, let me try to get out of here first…"

Sturgeon, looking enthusiastic for the first time in days, said, "Jump and I'll catch you!"

Saki gave him the stink-eye, and she wasn't the only one.

"I'll pass."

Leaves rustled as the girl shifted from her branch, and right then an arrow cut the air and hit the tree trunk, just barely missing the Heart Pirates. It was better to assume that it was a threat, rather than a mistake, and everybody prepared to attack as they turned in the projectile's direction.

"Don't move!" A gruff voice yelled.

Someone else shouted, "Don't worry, Greta, we're here!"

A group of men and women armed with bows and arrows appeared from between the forestry, ready to shoot at the pirates anytime.

The situation would have been much direr had Law not been present, but since he was, the crew didn't feel in danger so much as annoyed.

"I'm okay!" The girl, likely Greta, shouted quickly. "I just have to get down!"

"Wait up there until we've got the Marines!" The first one shouted.
"Marines?" Greta yelped.

"What?" Shachi asked, incredulous. "You think we're Marines?"

The man who had spoken just before, broad shouldered and with a well-kept beard that covered most of his face, replied, "We saw you disembarking."

His bow was still trained on them.

"Do we look like Marines to you?" Saki asked, signaling at her companions and herself, kind of worried by the man's judging abilities.

"Then what about the ship?"

"We stole it," Law intervened, sounding a little weary. Saki thought she had been hearing that tone too much lately. "We're pirates."

"They said they were," Greta chimed in from above.

"But they were chasing you?" The man insisted.

The acidic reply was immediate. "No, that was one of those stupid chimpanzees!"

The man faltered, and so did some of the people around him, but he didn't lower his weapon. "Then why are you people here?"

Law's patience seemed to be waning at this point, and Saki couldn't blame him.

"Can we talk like normal people?" She said, putting her hands up in the air, which, to be fair, she wouldn't be doing if she wasn't confident that any projectiles shot in her direction would be automatically sent back, but it sent a more convincing message. "Without pointing at each other with sharp tools?"

"Yes, please?" Greta agreed. "I'd like come down."

After a moment of hesitation, the man nodded quietly. "You put your weapons down first."

And then, the mini Den Den Mushi in Law's pocket began to ring.

The pier's wood planks whined with each of Bepo's footsteps as he studied the town where they had stopped. They'd had to sail a bit around the island until finding a place that wasn't all trees and rocks, and he had spotted an opening among the forestry that led them to a saltwater swamp.

The docks were made entirely of wood and some sections were camouflaged by the trees. A canopy of leaves and branches blocked most of the sunlight, making the atmosphere cool, humid and sticky. Streets and houses had been built on wood platforms above the water and they stretched to the shore, where only a scarce few buildings stood up. It looked like the town's inhabitants weren't fond of firm ground, for whatever reason.

Bepo found a quiet spot near one of the many streetlights that made up for the lack of light the trees let through, and pulled out the Den Den Mushi he had taken from the sub. It was a big one, because the only mini they had was with the Captain, but he'd just wanted to take a quick look around before heading back to the sub and get things ready to set sail as soon as possible.

He rang Law's number as he watched Uni toe the huge leaf of a water lily nearby, and Asuka and
Tuttu helping him step on it.

His call wasn't answer immediately, but Law sounded more or less okay when he did. "Bepo, we're having a situation."

"Are you in danger?"

A beat of silence. "Not really. Where are you?"

"We docked in a swamp town. Are you around here?"

"I'm not sure, let me ask."

Bepo heard noises of people talking in the background, but the reception wasn't good enough to figure out what was being said.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, just wait sec—"

Then a voice he didn't recognize spoke. "You're in the swamp?"

Bepo frowned at the receiver.

"Who are you?"

He didn't receive an answer from him, but he recognized Saki's voice right away.

"We're sorting things out with the locals. Do you think you can sail to us? We'd draw too much attention in the Marine ship."

"Of course! Where—?"

"They are not coming any closer," the same voice from before said.

That sparked Bepo's anger, and he was uncharacteristically harsh when he replied. "You don't get to give me orders."

"Maybe we should talk later," Saki suggested to Bepo.

"It's alright!" Another voice, a high pitched one that Bepo didn't recognize, either, intervened. "I can guide them through the jungle!"

"Are you sure?" The voice Bepo didn't like grumbled.

The rest of the conversation was lost to him, but the outcome must have been positive, because soon after, he heard Saki whisper into the receiver, "Always trust a woman if you want to get things sorted out."

Bepo wasn't sure what to say and didn't need to rack his brains much, since right after that he heard the noise of the receiver changing hands, and Law was on the other end again.

"We'll go to you by foot tomorrow. Wait for us in town."

"Understood!"

The phone call was over at the same time Uni dropped into the dark water with a splash.
Saki couldn't help the sound of awe that escaped her mouth when the hunters and Greta brought them to their town.

In a patch of forest that wasn't as dense, the locals had built their homes on the trees, and hanging bridges connected the trees to one another and made a grid of streets in the air.

There was a clearing somewhere in the middle of the town, but with the tree trunks and bridges in the way, she couldn't tell what was down there.

The Heart Pirates were led from bridge to bridge to an unused, unfurnished house, and pointed in the general direction of a couple of places where they could eat and sell the stuff they didn't need. It was clear that these people didn't get many visitors, and no wonder, if they welcomed everybody the same way.

They separated for a moment to take a look around, though they didn't stray very far away from the house, and with no small amount of reticence, the group of hunters also went back into the forest.

Saki saw Mack on a thick branch that doubled as a bench and sat next to him. He was cracking open the pomelo Shachi had taken to the solar plexus.

The contents were a vibrant turquoise color.

"That looks appetizing," she remarked.

Mack smelled it before taking out a section and putting it in his mouth. Saki observed him with curiosity, and when he didn't turn into any shade of purple she took it as a good sign.

He swallowed and offered the fruit to her. "It's good. It tastes like a buttery peach."

"Buttery," Saki repeated, pulling out a segment and noticing her fingers sink a little into the flesh. She tasted it with caution. "You're right, it's pretty good."

"You like it?" Said someone behind them. "I was gathering some when that stupid monkey came after me and I had to drop them."

Greta, now that she wasn't hiding at the top of a tree, looked like a regular young human with black hair and twinkly brown eyes. She had an air that reminded Saki of her sister Tsubaki, and thought stung bad enough that she had to hold back a grimace. The combo of physical resemblance and bursting energy made Saki feel torn between giving her a teary hug or running into hiding until she could pretend again that everything was alright.

Although, to be fair, she could do that without the running.

Saki put on a big smile, and the town seemed to lose some of its shine. "I thought you'd gone back with the others."

"I've had enough forest for today," she said with a pout, then smiled again and clasped her hands behind her back. She was wearing blue capris and a long-sleeved tie-dye t-shirt. "And I thought I could get to know you a little, since we'll have to stick together tomorrow anyway. Sorry about my uncle, by the way, he gets tense with strangers." Her eyes sparkled with interest. "Did you really destroy three warships, level an entire Marine base and fled between raging fires and explosions, leaving a trail of dismembered corpses in your wake?"

Saki looked at her in silence for a second, turned to face Mack and spoke with her mouth stuffed full
of fruit. "Did that happen while I was out cold?"

"No."

Saki shrugged at Greta. "There you go."

She laughed awkwardly, and it didn't escape Saki that she looked a little disappointed. "I guess news can get exaggerated a little."

Saki swallowed and passed the fruit back to Mack. "Is that what's in the press? We haven't been able to get a paper in weeks."

"Oh, well, you aren't missing much," was her vague answer. "Hey, do you want me to show you around town? Since you aren't going to stay for long anyway."

"Yeah, I'd…" Saki glanced at Mack. "You think it's a bad idea?"

"I'll reassure the others that you haven't slipped and fallen to your death when they ask."

"Good!" Saki replied, getting up and dusting off her butt, and then told Greta, "I'd like to, if doesn't take too long."

Truth be told, she wasn't dying to spend time with her, but anything that kept her entertained was welcome after sailing for so long, and she was helping the crew. If she was interested in pirates, there was no harm in indulging her for a while.

Socializing with strangers was her thing. She had this under control.

"Great, then let's go! There isn't much terrain to cover any—"

A yell split the regular noises of the town, and turning to look at the source, they saw Sturgeon hanging onto a long vine and Penguin and Shachi pushing him when he came close to the bridge they were standing at.

"Let's go, I don't want to be here when someone has to pick him from the ground," Saki said.

"Coward," Mack replied, taking another piece of fruit in his mouth and munching nonchalantly while his crewmates flirted with death.

The quick trip around the town took them closer to the clearing Saki had seen before, and when Greta caught her staring down, she clarified before she could ask.

"We cook down there. Doing it on the trees isn't safe." She knocked on the bark of the nearest one. "This wood is special. Durable, doesn't decay, but it's very flammable. An unlucky spark could set everything on fire." She looked at the tree thoughtfully. "People pay a lot for it, though."

"That sounds like disaster waiting to happen."

"We're careful." Then she pointed to a building across the clearing. "You can sell stuff over there. I'll introduce you to the owner."

Saki's eyes followed her finger in time to see another pink bird flying towards them and landing on a branch above.

"Good evening!" It squawked. "Good evening!"
"It's afternoon, though?" Saki commented.

The bird replied. "Why?!"

Saki frowned at the bird and looked at Greta. "Does it understand me?"

Greta laughed loudly. "No, pink toucans just repeat things they've heard. There's a lot of them. You get used to it."

The prospect of hearing them long enough to verify that was ghastly.

"Now that you mention it, there was one screaming for help when the monkey was chasing you." She said. "Was it copying you then?"

Greta thought before replying, trying to remember something. See, taking time to think things through wasn't something Tsubaki did often. The difference was becoming crystal clear. She was absolutely grasping at straws, wasn't she?

"Yeah, probably," she decided. "They live many years too, so they latch onto nonsense and spout it all the time. Don't pay them any mind."

The bird thought it was a fine moment to add his two cents. "Underpants sale, only today!"

"That's advice I can follow," Saki told Greta, ignoring the bird.

"I'm sure you don't take advice very often," the girl replied with amusement.

"What clued you in?" Saki feigned confusion. "Was it the tattoos? The piercings? The scars?"

"The being a pirate part, but sure, those too."

"Ah, well." Her left hand unconsciously went to readjust with one of the piercings in her ear. "That's been a pretty god decision, all things considered."

"Really?" Greta's smile went away, swallowed by deep curiosity as he observed Saki. "Don't you miss having a normal life?"

Saki was never sure what in her life experiences should be considered normal. "Nah, I'm better off now. I have fun and the company's good."

"Are you the only woman on board?"

"At least so far."

"And you don't get tired of them?"

If Saki was completely honest, it was true that she missed having female company every now and then. She remembered a time when she'd tried to explain to the guys that she'd kept the appalling blue dress she fell into the sewer in and no one understood why, even when she explained it had pockets.

Men could be so dense at times.

"It'd be nice to have other girls around," she admitted, "but I don't have any complaints about them. I can spend time alone if I'm not feeling social."
"I do that too," Greta said with a tiny smile. "I go into the forest for a while and come back when I'm ready for civilization. I know this jungle like the back of my hand," she declared, hands on hips and chest puffed out.

Cute. Saki laughed quietly. "Good to know that we won't get lost."

"Was that ever in question?" She said with fake indignation. "Let's get moving, I don't want to keep you away for long."

Saki followed after the girl, and the toucan kept crying out strident 'whys' until they were far away from it.

After shopping around and scaring a whole lot of people every time he spoke, Bepo was pretty exhausted. He wasn't used to choosing groceries, or to distributing tasks to the crew, and he didn't really know how much they needed to stock up until the next island, since Mack was in charge of that, as Saki had before him, and he didn't want to look farther back in time because it was unanimously acknowledged that that had been a disastrous period, and really, neither he nor Law needed to bring it up and give ammunition so the others could take cheap shots at them. They were busy people whose strengths lay elsewhere.

Besides, Bepo knew he was still the better cook.

All in all, he couldn't wait to join back with the others. It was great to have subordinates, but it was not so great to actually have to order them around to do important things. Bepo had realized those weeks to which extent he relied on Law and the people who took care of his basic necessities while he was at the helm, drawing maps, or napping.

At least the guys could come up with edible food, but he wasn't sure they'd been very good at cleaning the ship. Saki was going to chase them around with a wet mop when she came back, and with good reason.

Bepo and Law often talked about their impressions of an island when they arrived, and he was missing this routine too. Doing it over the phone didn't feel right, partly because he wasn't sure who could be listening, and mostly because he was having trouble putting in words what was bothering him, but something was out of place.

He didn't know if it was the obnoxious pink birds screaming nonsense all the time or the murky weather and location that made the local's mood sort of somber, but Bepo noticed he was feeling tense without good reason. Like he was waiting for something to happen at any second.

Law would probably tell him not to worry, and that would make Bepo feel better, and then Law would start worrying himself in his stead, because that was the kind of person he was.

Bepo had to put on his big bear pants for the time being and deal with it.

He was carrying a crate full of produce – perhaps he didn't know how much was needed and he wasn't fond of it, but he knew Mack always insisted on having lemons and broccoli and all that nasty greenery on hand, and Bepo knew better than to disobey the commands of the man who prepared his food – towards the sub when he saw two sailors tying a boat to a bollard.

"Excuse me," he said, approaching them. "Can you tell me how long it takes for the Log Pose to set?"

One of them turned around right away, became slack-jawed and stared at Bepo in silence. The one
finishing the knot replied, "It's thirty hours. But you should wait until—" He was interrupted by his companion tapping on his shoulder. "What do you want now— Holy sea cow!"

"Why should I wait?" Bepo prompted him to continue.

"Ah… Right…" The man regained his bearings. "We've heard reports of a storm to the west. It'll be on us in a few hours."

"Are storms here so bad that you can't sail?"

The man made a face. "I wouldn't risk it."

Bepo nodded dutifully. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

As he walked away, Bepo thought he heard the man say, 'That's one realistic fursuit.'

Saki understood what Greta meant by being careful when most of the restaurant's menu consisted of a variety of salads and dried fish and meat. Not that she minded, because she was in the mood for greens after weeks stuck in a ship without any fresh vegetables, and the sticky heat of the island made sure that nobody in their right mind wanted a warm plate. She wished with all her heart not having to step onto another summer island for the remainder of the year.

There was a fair amount of people in the restaurant, and nobody seemed to pay them any mind. In fact, they paid them so little attention that it looked like they were purposefully ignoring them.

No outright rudeness, though. The waiter took their order and served the food with the utmost correctness and just made sure not to linger.

By the time they were done, it was night outside, and a new sight greeted them.

Hanging along the bridges and platforms around the buildings, many tiny lights hidden among the foliage illuminated the way.

"Nice," Shachi said. "We'll miss out on knowing how it feels to fall from this height."

"Really," Sturgeon replied sarcastically, touching the violently purple bruise on his cheek.

Saki had heard him yell bloody murder and drop from the vine on the way back with Greta, but a branch had broken the fall, so he was healthy enough to complain.

She lingered behind the group for a moment to look at the closest light source, and realized it was a small lightbulb. Cables covered in very thick rubber ran along the tree branches to connect the entire network of lights.

"Kind of odd to see electricity in here," Law commented.

"The wood of these trees is very flammable, so I guess it's safer than candles." And then she added, "Greta told me."

He hummed. "Mack said she took you on a tour."

"I have a feeling she's the only person that doesn't mind having us here."
"She's a kid," Law replied, as if the reason was obvious, and if Saki thought about it, she couldn't think of another reason. "The sensible thing is not wanting us around."

"That's true," she conceded, and then remembered something. "Hey, have you been able to read the newspaper? She said we were all over the news not long ago."

"Not yet. I'll look for one tomorrow."

She had expected more urgency from him to get updated on what was going on in the world. "Do you think our bounties have gone up?"

"They have."

She did a double take. "Waaait," her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What are you hiding?"

He smirked. "Bepo told me. The Polar Tang has a subscription."

"Since when do they read the papers?" She asked before shaking her head in dismissal. "Why didn't you tell us?!"

"It was meant to be a surprise," he bullshitted.

"How dare you," she complained. "So do we celebrate when we're back together?"

"I don't think that's ever been in question."

Saki glanced thoughtfully at the lights again before asking, "How much is mine?"

Law had been expecting the question no doubt, because a smug smile escaped him as he snorted. "That's a secret."

"How's it fair that you know but I don't?"

"Life isn't fair."

"You're the worst."

"Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment," she protested just because she felt she had to, not because she thought it would accomplish anything.

She assumed right.

"I can't hear you over the sound of the birds," he said as he began to walk.

Saki tried to locate the nearest one, who was just screaming very loudly. "I was hoping they'd shut up at night."

"The lights must be keeping them awake. Come on, start walking. I don't want to lose sight of that bunch for more than a minute."

"It's hard being a single parent," Saki replied very seriously as she followed after the guys, leaving a momentarily confused Law behind until he realized she was making fun of him and went after her.

The next morning saw Saki and Shachi dragging their sorry asses to the nearest coffee shop they
could find. It was so early that the streetlights were still on, the sky was a risky sort of cloudy, and their clothes were soaked by a persistent drizzle. Worse still, they were sweating despite the bad weather.

"I'm going to catch one and pluck all of its feathers," Shachi said. "That'll give it reason to scream."

"I'm usually against violence towards animals, but just this once I'll help."

The birds hadn't shut up all night, and without the backgrounds sounds of daily life, they sounded even louder than during the day.

When she and Shachi had foraged into the town for caffeine, they had left a half-comatose Penguin drooling on the floor, a cranky Sturgeon because not only he couldn't sleep, he also couldn't smoke, and a captain whose soul looked like it was about to detach from his body.

At the same time, through the nebulous haze of sleepiness, they noticed that Mack was sharpening his knives, and decided that the wisest course of action was to vacate the premises, though even that couldn't ensure their safety, because they Mack would be able to throw a blade across the entire town. It wasn't that big.

The owner of the coffee shop laughed at them when they came in, dragging water onto the newspaper pages he had laid on the entrance. Their appearance seemed to put the other customers in a better mood, too, and some even smiled sympathetically at them.

Misery loved company, and it seemed that proving they were miserable themselves, instead of helping to make others so, was enough to get the townspeople to warm up to them a little. How nice.

Law had been right about them, of course. No one really wanted to have pirates around if they could help it, and though Saki didn't want to flatter herself too much, they were surprisingly decent compared to some of the guys sailing out there. It was normal, even healthy, that they would be wary of them.

They were waiting for their coffees at the counter when something that had been bothering her since the day before clicked in her mind, something she hadn't been able to put her finger on at the time.

The hunters had almost attacked them when they thought they were Marines. It was them saying they were pirates that got them civil enough to talk, and Bepo's opportune call had helped to that end.

She was curious now, but didn't think it was wise to ask the first person she came across. Maybe Greta? No, she didn't want to say something wrong and lose their free ticket to Bepo and the others.

She'd talk to Law later, if she could catch him alone some time. If something odd was going on, she was sure he'd have noticed it.

Shachi mistook Saki's glassy look for mere lack of sleep. "You sure you aren't going to drop the coffees on the way back?"

"No," she said sincerely. "Are you?"

"Good point."

Saki's gaze lazily drifted to her right, and her eyes widened when she noticed a rack in a corner of the shop holding several magazines and a newspaper, and made for it without hesitation like a magpie goes after shiny.
The first page was Straw Hat Luffy's face and a picture of a destroyed building. The Tower of Justice at Enies Lobby, to be precise.

"The absolute madman," she said to herself, though she'd admit that in between the admiration she also felt a blow to the Heart Pirates' collective pride, because the kid had the gall to one-up them, and so soon after they had wrecked a Marine base themselves.

Inside the newspaper, there was also news of that Eustass Kid guy razing another village, and of X-Drake sinking a warship. Just a regular Friday.

A small column mentioned that, at the rate they were advancing, several newbie crews would pass through the Sabaody Archipelago at the same time, including theirs. The paper talked about eleven Supernova at once in the same place. That sounded like a wonderful time waiting for them, but maybe also an opportunity for Saki...

She leafed through the pages quickly, and the wanted posters inside fell out and landed at her feet. With a barely restrained groan, she knelt down to pick them up. The Straw Hats faces were the primary attraction of that issue, and she stopped at Nico Robin's new poster. She seriously looked like a recolor of the woman in Saki's picture of her mother.

She kept picking up posters, and was gauging how much of a bad idea was to seek her out when and if they reached Sabaody at the same time when she saw a few familiar faces looking up from the floor.

Then she saw the numbers under the pictures and blurted out, "What the hell?!"

"Seventy million?! I'm at seventy million and you didn't tell me?!"

Saki was waving her bounty poster in front of Law's smug face in order to direct her nervous energy to something that wasn't shaking him by the shoulders, which was what she wanted to do in her heart of hearts.

"And it was all worth it," he replied.

She didn't get it. She liked the number, but she didn't understand the logic behind it. "Why is it so high? It more than doubled. This doesn't make any sense."

"Are you complaining?" Shachi complained in turn as well. "Can you pass me a couple ten million?"

"I think Bepo needs those more," Penguin commented, looking at the poster of their favorite furry friend. "Poor guy."

Though tempted to do the pirate thing and escape with the coffees and the paper free of charge, Saki had done the wise thing, which basically consisted on not angering the locals and not running while carrying hot beverages, and picked up a newspaper from a newsstand.

It arrived soaked at the house, but she was way past caring, and dared anyone to complain about the state of the outer pages under the threat of coffee launching.

"Mack's has made a good jump too," Shachi said, reading the description. "They even mention you are related to an officer."

"Let me see," Sturgeon said, scooting up closer to Shachi as he handed him the poster. "What the fuck? Your name's Maccarello?"
"And he has a surname," Penguin swiftly remarked.

"Here we go again," Mack muttered.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and not a minute later, a downpour so strong that they couldn't see out the window came crashing down.

Law didn't bother to hide his disappointment. "I don't think we're going anywhere today."

Perhaps they'd be lucky and could wait out the rain, but after a few minutes, that hope was shattered by a person covered head to toe with a yellow raincoat knocking on the door and cracking it open.

"Sorry, but I don't think we can go into the forest today," Greta said, peeking into the house. "Can I come in?"

Bepo was holed up in the bridge, trying to make out through the rain what was happening in the docks. Several men were loading logs onto a ship, and he didn't need to hear them to assume they were cursing up a bigger storm than the one upon them.

He didn't think they were getting the rest of the crew back in that weather, and that was enough to make this a bad day. When the rain let up a little, he opened a window, one of the few in the whole Polar tang that weren't welded shut, to let the wind through. He didn't mind if some rain fell inside as long as he could stop sweating for a moment.

He noticed, to his surprise, that the birds were silent. The only sounds were those of the rain and the men working down.

He leaned against the window's frame, unzipped the top of his jumpsuit and closed his eyes to enjoy the breeze.

Unfortunately, with it also came the yelling of the sailors below.

"Shit, be careful!"

"Sorry, it's slipping!"

"You two shut up and work faster!"

"Yeah, and let's drop a few logs in the water while we're at it!" The first one commented sarcastically.

"Don't even joke about that," someone else said. "They'll hang us if we mess up this shipment."

"What's so special about it?"

"It's the only one this week."

One of the men said something that Bepo didn't hear clearly, and the discussion that ensued was too quiet to hear.

He was on the verge of sleep when a man raised his volume all of a sudden. "I'm saying that if those savages from Kalawa weren't hogging all the good wood we wouldn't be this screwed!"

He opened his eyes.
"Who cares, complaining isn't gonna get us anywhere."

The conversation was cut with that, and Bepo was left awake, sweaty and curious. He filed the memory of this exchange for later to tell Law about it.

He was just thinking about this and if it had anything to do with the weird mood in town when the Den Den Mushi on the desk rang, and he lunged for it so fast that the snail looked at him in panic before he took the receiver in his paw.

"Captain?"

"Hi, Bepo," Law replied. He sounded a bit down, which Bepo didn't like, but it was good to hear him anyway. "We won't be able to come today. It looks like it'll clear up tomorrow, so we'll be on the way then."

"I thought as much," he said, hopes crushed but happy nonetheless to be talking to him. "Are you all okay? I think I called at a bad moment last time."

"Yeah, we're hanging out in a house until it stops raining. We also got the new…" He trailed away for a moment. "The newspaper," he corrected himself.

Bepo wasn't sure what had happened there. "Oh, that's good to hear. By the way, Captain. Do you know if the place you're at is called Kalawa?"

"Yeah. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. I've heard the name in town."

The was a small pause before Law asked, "Are you okay?"

Bepo hesitated. He still didn't want to discuss this by phone and worry him unnecessarily. "Yeah, just tired. We've been making preparations to set sail as soon as you get here."

Law chuckled on the other side. "We'll be there soon."

"I'm waiting," Bepo replied with a smile.

Greta, who had shown up to bring them raincoats and sandwiches, aside from telling them that they had to postpone the expedition, stuck around for a while talking with the crew, mostly with Saki, and went back home with the promise to pick them up the next day.

She was so nice that it made Saki feel uncomfortable for feeling awkward around her, and after she was gone, and after way too much time confined within four walls with everybody else, she put on a raincoat, pulled the hood over her frizzy hair with great difficulty, thanks to the reigning humidity, and walked outside to sit on the branch-bench from the day before.

The rain wasn't so harsh anymore, but it didn't want to go away. The colors of dusk painted the tree houses in curious shades, and the people coming in and out of them didn't seem to be too bothered by the rain. It was nothing, compared to before.

She almost wished they were back at the Marine ship. In that town, there was no sea to be seen, the trees revealed a lone circle of sky, and looking past the limits of the town, there was solely a maze of trees and branches and leaves. She guessed she wasn't a forest kind of person, because it made her feel horribly claustrophobic. Combined with the unease of the townspeople, and Greta reminding her
of Tsubaki every time she showed up, her thoughts were starting to go down a road she didn't like.

Saki wasn't sure what was worse, knowing that someone was gone for sure, or having to carry the uncertainty and, consequently, the hope that they'd be fine. She just wanted not to think. She wanted to be home. Her room, her bed, her shower, her sketchbook, her books, her inks.

She leaned her head against the tree trunk and tried to leave her mind blank, concentrating on the raindrops sliding from the trees' leaves.

It did work, because after a while she was unsure how much time had passed, and only noticed it was dark and the rain had gone back to drizzle when someone came out of the house.

"Have you been here this whole time?"

She looked up. It was Law. "How long has it been?"

"About two hours."

"Wow." She blinked several times, still not quite back to reality. "I don't remember the last time I spaced out for so long."

"Spit it out," Law said, and the words he chose were much harsher than they actually sounded to her. "What's wrong with you?"

She thought about being open, but it was too much work. She was sincere, though. "I'm not going to whine to you."

"It isn't whining if I'm asking you."

"I'm saying I'd like to hold onto the last shreds of self-respect that I can still find in me."

He stared at her for a moment, and Saki wasn't sure if he was thinking or trying to apply silent pressure.

It was the former. "I want to get out of here too, you know."

She smiled at him, and it felt like the only genuine one she'd shown that day. "Yeah, I know."

He seemed to accept that answer, and was about to head back when Saki remembered her realization from the morning.

"Hey, Law," she called, and he looked at her with interest. "These people are weird." She motioned with her head towards the locals on the bridges.

He regarded them for a moment and nodded very lightly at Saki. That sign that it wasn't just her imagination already put her more at ease.

What he said next just made it even better. "We're out of here tomorrow even if we have to take the ship again to go to Bepo."

Saki grinned at him. "Have I told you later that you're the bestest captain in the whole wide world?"

He turned around from her so quickly that she didn't catch his expression, but she did hear a huff.

"Get ready, we're going out soon," he said with his back towards her as he quickly fled into the house.
It was hard to stay sad with someone so attentive to detail around, Saki thought, taking off the hood of the raincoat and trying to no avail to flatten her ballooning hair. She needed a haircut before Sabaody if she was going to be presentable in front of important people. Colleagues. Whatever the other crews were in relation to her.

Then she recalled her captain's tattoos which she hadn't been allowed to fix yet and, while it remained true that it was very difficult to be sad in his presence, she realized that despair wasn't out of the question.
Told you this wasn't going to take another 20 years! We're getting to Sabaody soon… And now I need to reread the whole saga, Marineford and Amazon Lily to get the events straight… I don't know how long that will take, but I'm excited. I've had a lot of trouble writing this arc, it hasn't turned out how I wished to, and I'm eager to move onto greener pastures.

Plugging my tumblr blog once again: tackyink.tumblr.com, where I complain about what I'm writing, tell you when I'm going to post it, and talk about characters.

As a sidenote, there's a dumb Dragon Age: Origins reference in this chapter, but I couldn't help myself. I am only mildly sorry.

Let's do this!

(They had it coming all along)

The next day was bright and sunny, not a storm cloud in sight, and so as promised, Greta went to pick up the Heart Pirates from their temporary refuge. She arrived precisely in time to see Sturgeon attempting to swing himself to an opposing platform on a vine again, and his weight made it snap and he fell down again, they just yelled at him to wait there, because they had to go down the trees anyway. He complained. Loudly.

If Saki didn't know any better, she'd think he was smoking something suspect, but he hadn't been able to light a cigarette since they'd reached the town, and she didn't want to suspect drugs when it could be attributed to a lot of nervous energy and an unhealthy dose of stupidity. The two grinning maniacs who had helped him to get a hold of the vine were living proof.

Greta looked down, startled, until she saw Sturgeon was fine. Saki walked up to her to say hi and to look down too, out of morbid curiosity. Law and Mack were still hanging near the tree house and couldn't be bothered.

"Why would he do that again?" Greta asked.

"Withdrawal is a terrible thing," Saki replied with zero empathy.

Which did nothing to reassure Greta, but still, she led everybody who hadn't already taken the shortest way to the ground down the trees, to the place where they could pick up what remained of Sturgeon, and past the cooking stations in the middle of the town until they arrived to a winding pathway that was hidden in the outskirts of town.

Though the path was well worn, it looked that it wasn't seeing much use nowadays, and some weeds were shyly peeking out of the compacted ground in an attempt to retake it. After a few minutes into it, it split in two, and Greta led them through the branch that was less trodden. The vegetation was getting bothersome at that point.
Saki was just glad that they didn't need to advance machete in hand, because as cool as it would have looked, she wasn't confident that someone wasn't going to lose a finger during the trip.

Penguin pulled away a thin branch that hung too low to pass under it, and it snapped back, hitting Shachi on the hat, and only missing Saki because she was too short to be in the way.

"Ah, sweet vindication," she whispered.

Shachi huffed, embarrassed. "Whatever you need to feel better." Then he asked Greta, who was at the front of the group. "Is the path going to be like this all the way there?"

"Just for a little while," she said, apologetic, sparing a moment to look at Shachi, but somehow not tripping on anything as she kept walking. "There's another route, but this one's the easiest. We'll reach a clearing soon."

For a good stretch, it was just a mess of tropical forest and squawking birds, but then the trees started to thin out, and Saki realized that there were dark marks on many of the trunks that remained. Eventually, as Greta had said, they arrived to a wide clearing.

"Over there," Greta said, pointing across the clearing. "There's some more forest and then it's mainly fields until we get to the swamp."

There weren't any tall trees in sight, so the sunlight of noon hit it at full blast, and the green of the vegetation covering the area was so bright that the contrast with the previous area hurt the eyes, making Saki squint and trip on something when the cry of a bird flying near her made her give a start.

She fell face first with a short yelp, and she was thankful for the grass softened the impact.

Most of her crewmates were so used to her fatal attraction to Mother Earth that they barely glanced at her, but Shachi had the decency to lend her a hand to get up.

Scratch that, there was no decency in the smirk he was giving her.

Greta, on the other hand, had jumped when she heard Saki fall and seemed to be a little shaken by it. "Are you okay?"

"Don't worry, it happens on a daily basis," Law replied.

"That's not true and you know it," she retorted, trying to get rid of some mud that had stuck to her knees. The ground was still kind of sticky from the rain. "More like two to three times a week," she said, realizing how dumb she sounded mid-sentence.

But she had managed not to fall down from the top of the trees, and that was more than some of the others could say. She decided to keep that moral victory to herself because it sounded even sadder.

"What's that?" Shachi said, looking at the thing Saki had tripped on. Saki had assumed it was an old root, but when he prodded it with a boot, it got unstuck from the ground to reveal a metallic bowl.

It was like the one at the sub where Saki prepared the crepes' batter. Come to think of it, maybe celebration crepes were in order when everybody got back together. She'd talk to Mack about it.

"What's this doing here?" He commented.

"Someone must've dropped it," Penguin replied.
"In the middle of nowhere?"

They looked forward, ready to keep walking and forget about it, but they noticed Greta was still looking at them and the bowl.

"People used to live here, but there was fire a few years ago. There wasn't time to pick up anything," she said, sounding like she was not quite there as she talked, but suddenly her expression changed and she smiled at the group. "Let's move on. I don't like it here. It's kind of creepy."

Saki remembered what Greta had told her about that special wood two days ago, and as they moved forward, she asked, "Were the trees here like the ones back in town?"

"Yeah. And older. There were many more coming up, too, but we sold most of them to modernize the island a little. We needed the electricity." She glanced at the clearing over her shoulder with a sorrowful expression, and sighed. It was clear she didn't approve. "No use thinking about it now."

And so they ventured into the trees again. They stopped to rest after a few hours, and not long after they reprised the march, an enormous open field appeared in front of them. A huge strip of land that was nearly devoid of trees but covered with stumps. Some were larger than Saki's reach if she spread her arms to the sides.

She understood then why Greta had sounded so disapproving. Convenient as it was for them at the moment, it was an irreplaceable loss.

There was another plus to the dire scenery, though, and that was that, without many places to perch on or hide, for the first time since their arrival, there weren't any pink toucans around.

Saki's head felt so empty without the nagging noises that she thought at first that the rumble she heard was her brain filling the silence with something, but after an hour or so, she saw it was not her imagination.

The noise was mechanical in nature, and as they got closer to the source, so did the sound of running water, until a river with a cascade came into view. The waters seemed shallow upstream, but Greta said that she didn't want to cross it because she couldn't swim. Just in case. They thought it was reasonable because no one really wanted to go fish her out of the water, so they diverted their course slightly.

They arrived to a solid wooden bridge that connected the two sides of a wide river right before the waters fell down the cascade. At the bottom, there was a construction with a giant water wheel turning frantically. Saki had no clue what that was, but Penguin solved the mystery soon.

"A water turbine?" He asked, leaning over the railing of the bridge to get a better look, and Shachi ran to his side to do the same. "Is this what lights up the town?"

"There you are!" Someone yelled.

On the other side of the bridge, the man that had welcomed them with an arrow near the head was, apparently, waiting for them. Bow in tow, which didn't make him look particularly trustworthy.

Greta stopped in her tracks when she saw him, but then she ran closer to him. "Uncle Adan? How did you get here?"

"I left town earlier this morning." He scratched his beard as he replied. "I was worried about you. Didn't want you going to the swamp alone."
Saki thought there was something besides surprise in Greta's expression, but she couldn't quite place it.

Law approached him too. "Is it dangerous?"

Saki was sure Bepo would have warned them if they'd be in any danger by going there, and Law was likely thinking along the same lines. The feeling that there was something going on that escaped her was came back stronger than ever, but try as she might, she couldn't figure out why.

"No, he's being paranoid," Greta replied, snooty like only a teenager who'd suddenly been interrupted by an older family member could be.

"Cautious," Adan said to her, and then spoke to Law. "The relations between our towns aren't very good right now, and I don't want anything happening to her. Do you mind if I come along?"

Law shrugged. "I don't care. We only want to get there," he replied, but he didn't let the subject go, and for that, Saki and her curiosity were eternally grateful. "What's going on? We don't want to walk blindly into trouble."

'Blindly' being the operative word in that last sentence, Saki thought, and the assumption that they were going to run into trouble no matter what they did only deepened her regret at not having made a bet with Penguin.

"You won't, he's exaggerating," Greta said, but his uncle contradicted her.

"They want to take our wood," he replied. "You've seen what they've done to the forest, haven't you? They started exporting it to other countries, and now they don't have enough with their part of the island."

Greta didn't say anything at that, instead seemed to get smaller.

"So a war's about to break out," Law said, and when nobody replied, he said, oozing sarcasm, "Good to know."

"As long as it doesn't happen before tomorrow…" Penguin said.

"Nothing's going to happen," Greta insisted, stressing every word. "Uncle, stop scaring them. This is why we never get any visitors. You're all so gloomy!"

The man seemed taken aback by her outburst, and also more than a little embarrassed. He coughed awkwardly and apologized. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to trouble you. Shall we move on? If we don't dally, we'll be there before nighttime."

"Yes, let's go," Law's reply was taxative. "We've wasted enough time."

Greta immediately relaxed and sent a grateful smile to Law before taking the lead again, in front of the group, chatting with his uncle and trying to include the pirates in the conversation.

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After Bepo received Law's call in the morning to announce they'd be arriving later that day, he told the crew one last time to make sure everything was ready, and gave them the day off when they were done making preparations to sail. The guys decided to scout for a good place to celebrate their reunion while Bepo stayed behind in the sub for a while, reviewing their route, and only went out after lunch to do some window shopping before he was once again stuck at sea for weeks on end.
Although, to be fair, he'd rather be stuck in the Polar Tang with his friends than on land with half of them missing, so he wasn't complaining.

He found a store that sold nautical charts not too far from the docks, and after giving the person behind the counter a mandatory scare, he spent a good hour sifting through books and maps and left with a handful of them.

And on the way back to the Polar Tang, one of those obnoxious pink birds passed behind him, screeching 'NO' and making him drop his bags from the scare, which scared him further, because for a second he thought they had fallen into the water.

That didn't stop him from growing as loud as he could at the bird, who had perched itself atop a nearby house, scaring the feathers out of it and a human couple passing by.

As he resumed picking up his things, a raspy, quiet voice coming from one of the houses said, "It's useless. They'll keep doing it forever."

Bepo looked up to see a woman in her sixties leaning against a windowsill.

"Scaring people?" He asked.

"Reminding us of what we did," she said.

Bepo stared at the woman in confusion. "What you did? What do you mean?"

She ignored his question. "You're a sailor, aren't you? You need to leave."

He didn't need to be told twice. "I was planning to."

The woman nodded approvingly. "Good. This curse is ours alone to carry."

Bepo didn't know what to make of the woman's comments, so he chalked them up to old age, but it didn't help stop the unsettling sensation he'd been having for days.

Whatever. For once, they were determined to follow the locals' advice. As soon as they were all back together, they'd be fine.

At long last, after a good day's through tropical forest and, and unending, slightly gloomy fields, the Heart Pirates and their two guides reached the west swamp.

"It's so… dark," Greta said, staring at their surrounding with her mouth slightly open.

Shachi looked at her with curiosity. "You've never been here before?"

She shook her head. "I just know the paths through the jungle. This is new."

"It's a change compared to your town, for sure," Saki said.

Saki was busy watching the town that spread in front of them, so she missed the odd glance that Greta directed at her.

The swamp town was built on platforms above rather murky water, and the sky was obscured by the thick tops of the surrounding trees, the branches extending so far out that it was like the trees on opposite sides of the swamp were trying to touch each other. Electric lights hung from the houses, giving the place a soft, otherworldly illumination.
The air was dense, and humid, and awkward to breathe in.

"We should find a place to sleep before night," Adan told Greta, and she hummed noncommittally.

Penguin was opening his mouth to say something when Law talked over him, "Thanks for your help. We'll go look for our ship now."

"The docks are straight ahead," Adan said.

"Glad to be of help." Greta smiled at them, and she was looking at Saki when she said, "It was nice to meet you."

"Same," Saki replied, honest, but also itching to get going. Home was within arm's reach now. "Be careful with the local fauna."

Greta laughed a little and nodded with a fond smile. Saki returned it without thinking.

"It's the first time we don't run into any funny business in a new island," Shachi said.

Penguin agreed. "Yeah, it's nice for a change."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries and the group split in two at last. The Polar Tang came into view not soon after, and the only thing that kept Saki from running frantically towards it was thinking that she had a significant chance to trip and fall into the water.

But when they were closer and she saw Bepo on the main deck, who by the looks of it had just been shopping, and since she was the only person in their entourage free of the restrictions of performative masculinity – because pirates are though guys, you know – she ran up the gangplank before any of the other could and leaped at Bepo with a flying hug.

He dropped he bags to catch her in the air, and she thought he was going to give her an earful, but instead he twirled her around, and she was so happy that it didn't matter how short she was making her feel.

"You're here!" He exclaimed, turning towards the others excitedly, still holding Saki too high for her feet to reach the ground.

For the remaining instant she was hugging a giant, living teddy bear, and he was hugging back, Saki was in heaven. She was fulfilling a childhood dream of hers and thousands of kids out there. The entire trip through two seas, the life-or-death moments and the scars had been worth it for this moment.

Following her example, Penguin and Shachi jumped at him too, only they tackled Bepo to the floor. Mack, reserved as ever, even after barely speaking a word that day, stretched and began to head inside with a spring in his step, and Sturgeon looked slightly out of place and not quite sure what to do, but he inspected every detail of the sub with interest.

Law moved until he was in Bepo's field of vision, but he made no effort to remove the two grown men that had him pinned to the ground. "Hey, Bepo."

"Captain!" He said, stretching his arms towards him but unable to move.

Law then did the most socially conventional show of personal appreciation Saki had ever seen him display in public and hi-fived one of Bepo's outstretched paws.
"Good job," he said.

No one else bore witness to the gesture, but she had been witness to the love in the air.

She was grinning like an idiot when he turned away from Bepo to go inside the sub.

"Home at last," Law said quietly as he passed her.

And Saki breathed easy for the first time in weeks.

The relief lasted about as long as it took her to take a few steps in the hallway and notice that the soles of her boots were sticking a bit to it. She assumed it was the boot's fault, not the floor's. Then she changed into a pair of sandals, got that same icky sensation, and on her way up she stopped next to a porthole to look outside, running a finger along the metallic edges.

Was… was that black mold she was seeing?

"Bepo!" She called out fiercely, knowing that wherever he was, he'd hear her. Bless small spaces. "Who's been cleaning the sub these days?!!"

There was only silence.

"Bepo, don't make me come for you!"

"Last one in charge was Uni!"

The voice came from above. The bridge it was, then.

"Why are you selling me out?!" Was Uni's reply from the mess hall. "I thought we were friends!"

"I leave for three weeks and I come back to find you living in filth!" She replied to both.

"I'm sorry!" Said Bepo. "We were short-handed!"

"Mold kills!"

"I know!" He said weakly.

"What? For real?" Uni asked. He was now peeking out from behind the mess hall's doorframe.

"For real," she said, not so loud now that one of the culprits was within eyesight. She had no doubt the others were listening in, too, and she had no intentions of clarifying that they would have to be breathing spores day in and day out to feel the negative effects of it. It was disgusting and it had to go. "Go get cleaning supplies, we're getting rid of it now."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and she knew urgency was properly conveyed when he made for the broom closet right away.

Then she looked up the stairs where she knew Bepo was hiding. "You too! The more people cleaning, the sooner we finish!"

She was as eager to spend the next few hours cleaning as anyone else, but it needed to be done. She was not getting stuck underwater for any period of time with moldy recycled air as long as she could help it. Worse still, everybody would be busier than her as soon as they set sail and she alone would have to clean what they had been too lazy to. She was not letting that happen.
There would be time to relax later. To finally be in her room, drop in her bed, get her hands on her clothes and her make up (oh, she had missed them so) and stop feeling like a filthy little goblin. She was sure that had played a big factor in her comfort levels lately.

Reviewing her mental list of pending things, she also needed to cut her hair, find a proper sword now that hers had kicked the bucket and the one she had taken from the Marine ship was too heavy for her taste, catch up on the island drawings for Bepo, ask for the bills of the last few days and check that the amount of money in the safe was correct before Law did and found out the numbers didn't match. Because she was sure they wouldn't. Perhaps Saki had trusted Bepo with the location of the box while she was away, but she didn't trust anybody else to keep the accounting straight.

It wasn't that she thought they were dumb. It was just that everybody had their own strengths, and a care for detail wasn't the forte of most of these guys. But she loved them anyway. That was the thing about family.

The clinking of glasses and loud laughter inside the hole in the wall bar the Heart Pirates had chosen for the night could be heard from blocks away, though that wasn't saying much, because the swamp was rather quiet. Not as much as the other town they'd visited, but enough to attract attention. Several sailors had also come into the bar after hearing the ruckus from outside, and after a few hours the place was as lively as any regular port town bar at dark.

"Then he chucks the fruit at the monkey and knocks it out like it's nothing—"

"That thing was heavy."

"And you took it to the stomach like a champ!"

"We used to do that with the coconuts when I was a kid."

"Oh yeah, they were good ball substitutes."

"You ever played volleynut at the beach?"

"You people are sick," Penguin declared.

"Agreed," Mack said.

Saki was feeling a little overwhelmed by the crowd that had gathered at the inn, her beer had gone warm, and though she was having fun, she'd also trekked through tropical forest for half a day and slept on the floor the previous two nights, so she was in the mood to pay her bed a long visit.

Pushing her chair backwards and standing up, she tapped Bepo's shoulder and said, "I'm going out for some air."

Nobody else seemed to pay any attention, so she left the table, making a short stop at the bathroom on her way to the front door, and went outside in hopes of waking up a little.

Sadly for her, the atmosphere outside was as warm and sticky as it had been during the daylight hours, and she involuntarily grimaced when a tepid breeze brushed against her skin.

"Nice," she whispered to herself, fanning some air with a hand at her face.

Glancing around, the only signs of activity she could notice came from the port and the building she had just exited. Pink toucans flew overhead and perched on branches and roofs, yelling nonsense at
irregular intervals.

With nothing better to do until she sobered up, Saki sat down against the bar's wall and made a mental list of the things they screeched.

No!

That was a classic.

Reef the sail!

That one was new.

Help!

First one they had heard.

Why?

Also pretty common.

Fire!

Something she didn't wish on anybody living around there.

Fine dwarven crafts!

She was sure after that last one that she had drunk too much.

In any case, their cries where very similar to the ones she had heard before. People from both towns didn't seem like they mixed and matched very much, but their birds sure did.

And then, she thought she caught something moving up ahead. Looking into a street flanked by a line of houses, she saw a familiar silhouette thanks to the soft glow of the streetlights.

"Greta? Is that you?"

The person grew still when she called. There was no mistaking that long hair and big eyes.

But instead of replying, or getting closer to her, she disappeared from view again, as if she was fleeing.

Had Saki scared her? Maybe the ruckus behind her? She had probably snuck out to do something, because Saki doubted she had her uncle's permission to be out at this hour.

If it had been anybody else, Saki would have forgotten about it, at most make a throwaway comment to the others later. But Greta was a kid, it was late, and she didn't have any business roaming the streets so late. Her big sister senses were tingling. She thought about going inside and telling someone that she was going to check out where she was going, but she'd probably lose her by the time she could do that.

She could check out the area without straying too far from the bar. She thought that was a fair compromise. She didn't think Law would, but then again, he didn't have to know.

The clicking of the heels of her boots and the creaking wooden boards announced her presence to anyone listening, but she was not walking near the edges of the platforms and risking falling into the
She turned a street corner and looked around, but she couldn't see Greta anymore. She thought she had lost the trail and was about to head back when she heard footsteps again, so she went to check them out.

In a narrow space between two big warehouse-like structures, near the edge of the swamp, she saw Greta standing with her back towards her. She was looking at the lights above, lightly clutching one of her arms behind her.

"What are you doing here alone?" Saki asked.

"Did you know these houses and these platforms are built with the same type of wood as the ones in Kalawa? That's why they endure the swamp water so well."

"I… had no idea," Saki replied, wondering where that had come from. "Your uncle's going to worry if he sees you aren't there."

"He's always worried. I knew he was going to show up earlier today." She sounded somewhat sad as she spoke. "He isn't my real uncle, by the way. My family passed away."

"Oh." Saki wasn't sure what to say. In fact, she wasn't sure what this conversation was about and she had the feeling she shouldn't have left her spot by the bar. "Sorry."

Greta turned towards her and looked at Saki straight in the face, and for the first time since she had known her, she didn't seem to bear the slightest resemblance to Tsubaki. Saki had never seen hate so blatantly etched on her sister's face.

Greta shook her head. "It's them who should be sorry. Them and their blood-soaked wood."

She put a hand on one of the walls to her side.

"I'm sorry too," she said, sounding genuine. "I've used you and uncle Adan, but it's too late to stop. Sorry," she repeated in a whisper, dragging the palm of her hand across the surface of the wall in a straight line, and with the same sound a matchstick makes, a line of fire appeared on the wood.

"What…"

Then Saki remembered. Greta had said she couldn't swim.

"Phosphorus," Greta explained, blowing on her hand like it burned. "I ate it when I was little. I had to be so careful with the trees and house… And then they came one night, from both towns, and everything burned anyway. All because they wanted our land."

The flames were already spreading, devouring the wood at an alarming speed, and then she ran her other hand across the other wall to set it on fire as well.

"They'll blame you for this," she said, eyes devoid of emotion. "Get out of here while you can."

As Greta made to move backwards, Saki grabbed at her arm to prevent her from escaping, and started to pull her towards her when Greta rubbed the skin of her fee hand on Saki's arm, and Saki let go instinctively when she felt her skin burn at the contact.

The flames started to engulf both buildings at an unbelievable pace, bits of charred wood fell on the platform and set it on fire as well.
Saki ran as fast as her legs could carry her to the bar, yelling fire for someone, anyone to hear, but nobody seemed to come out of their homes, and, used as they were to the birds' continuous cries of alarm, it was to be expected.

She hadn't yet reached her destination when she saw something flickering to her right, and in the distance she saw flames.

She hadn't just lit the fires in front of Saki. Greta was spreading the fire as she went.

Saki wanted nothing more than to have a quiet moment and process everything she had just been told and be able to explain herself when she finally arrived in front of the bar, but she had priorities and most of them had names and were currently sitting inside.

One of them was outside, though, and he was looking in her direction when Saki took him by the arm.

Shachi could tell so fast that something was wrong that he didn't even try to call her names for taking off on her own. "What's going on?"

"Go inside and tell everyone we have to leave right now. Greta—" She cut herself short. Explanations could wait. "There's an arsonist out there."

"Shit." Shachi took a panicked glanced around he said, "Give me a second and I'll have everybody here."

"Okay. I'll try to alert more people."

Saki ran to the nearest houses and banged on their doors at the same time she heard a commotion erupting inside the bar, and some of the patrons were outside even before Saki's crewmates.

As soon as she saw Bepo sticking out from the back of the crowd, she ran towards him, and in that moment, three men appeared from the direction of the first fire. Locals were also starting to come out of their houses, and chaos on the street was served.

"We need help with the pump, anyone!" Said one of the men.

The other gestured wildly towards the direction they'd come from. "There's no time to waste, hurry!"

The crowd grew louder, and some of the people took a step towards him to help. Saki could already see from there that the flames had reached top of some buildings.

But the third man, the one who hadn't spoken, didn't move anywhere, instead pointing at Saki. "I saw you! You just were where the fire started!"

"What the hell?" She couldn't believe he was dropping the blame on her like that. "I came here to warn everybody!"

"Don't play dumb! They sent you, didn't they?" He glared at the rest of the crew and spat in their general direction. "You bastards!"

Shoving people aside unceremoniously, Bepo opened a path to stand beside Saki, and Mack followed suit.

One of the man's companions, came back to pull him away. "We'll take care of them later, the fire comes first!"
The man said something under his breath, and right when Saki thought he was going to leave, he yelled, "Fuck you!" and pushed Mack, who was closest to him, before running to the fire.

Saki and Bepo hurried to help him out of the water, and Saki thought that the worst was over when it became clear that some of the bars patrons did not have their priorities straight, rather, a sizeable death wish, because one of the sailors was confronting Law while four or five more backed him up.

"How much did they pay you for this?!" He bellowed, walking menacingly towards Law, and tried to grab him by the front of his hoodie.

Law batted the hand away. "Let us pass if you don't want to regret it."

"Who the fuck you think you are to threaten me?!"

Then the man attacked, and he got his answer in the blink of an eye, as he was sent flying backwards and on top of one of the other onlookers.

"You either move away, or we make you," Law said. "I'm running out of patience."

And it was plain to see for anyone who knew him, or the rest of the crew, for that matter, that he wasn't boasting. They were perfectly able to brute-force their way out, but Law was trying to leave in relatively civil terms.

Common sense seemed to be scarce within the crowd, though, because many of the other civilians decided to attack, and the fight became an all-out brawl between the patrons and the Heart Pirates.

Saki wasn't worried about the fight, because they could handle a bunch of drunken sailors any time, but she was watching the flames progressively encroaching upon the buildings, and she was starting to be afraid. The air was already filled with the smell of burning material.

Was this how the fire in Asteria had started, too? Had people wasted time arguing until there was nothing but ashes?

Bepo, who had also noticed the proximity of the flames, yelled at the others, "We need to go!"

"Would if we could!" Penguin retorted.

"One second!" Shachi shouted.

It took a little more, but they knocked out some of the men and pushed the rest off the platform, and regrouped.

"What the hell's going on?" Law asked as they ran towards the sub.

"Greta's on some sort of revenge quest – I'm fuzzy on the details – she's a Devil Fruit user and—"

"Wait, that girl's the arsonist?!" Shachi asked.

"Does it matter?" Saki retorted. It sort of mattered, if she was honest, but she was having enough trouble let the betrayal fully sink in without having to guide him through the process. "I saw her start the fire, she escaped and now she's running around starting more!"

And along the edges of the town, if the two fires she had seen were any indication. The only exit would soon be through the sea.

Doubts somewhat solved, the Heart Pirates ran towards the docks. People now filled the platforms
and made navigating some sections impossible, and what was even worse was that the fire had spread to the branches and leaves overhead, and smoke and soot filled the air.

A panicked kid bumped against Shachi and rebounded towards the edge of the platform. Instinctively, he reached for him before he could fall, but he lost his balance and Saki grabbed him from behind to keep both Shachi and the kid from going down.

And just then, a flaming branch fell from above, instantly setting the platform on fire and cutting them off from the rest of the group.

The others stopped, with Penguin trying to jump to their side until Shachi yelled at him.

"Don't! We'll find a way around!"

"We can't get separated now!"

"Go ahead!" Saki shouted.

Law stopped to stare at her. He had been looking around frantically for something, and if she had to guess what, it would be something to swap Shachi and her with. Unfortunately, there wasn't much around other than people, and he wasn't the type to toss an innocent civilian behind a wall of fire.

"We'll find a way around, there's time!" She insisted.

He didn't look entirely convinced, but there weren't many other options. "We'll be waiting!" he replied, and the urgency in his tone only fanned Saki's own.

She tugged on Shachi's boiler suit to drive him back, because the more time they wasted arguing, the less they'd have to actually escape.

And when they turned around and saw the area they had left behind only minutes ago, Saki realized that Greta really hadn't been kidding about how flammable the wood was.

"Holy shit," Shachi mouthed out, barely inaudible.

The part of the town closer to land was already consumed by the flames, and the efforts of the people to stop their advance were doing nothing.

"Let's go," Saki rasped out. The smoke was starting to feel like sandpaper inside her throat.

They ran, careful to not get separated again and trying to find another way through the streets that wasn't a dead end or was already cut off, all while dodging the other people trying to flee. They could have climbed on one of the low houses and tried to advance through the rooftops, but with embers flying everywhere and the dark smoke building under the canopy of trees, Saki didn't want to risk either the building or one of them collapsing on their way to the port.

"You should've pushed that kid into the water," Saki joked humorlessly.

"Yeah, yeah, blame it all on good old Shachi," he replied.

"I don't know any Shachi that's good or old."

He snorted, or rather, tried to, because he was out of breath.

The managed to find a very narrow passage, secluded between two houses, still untouched by the fire, and they filed in one after the other.
And when they came out the opposite end, with the docks only a few meters from them, they ran into a family reunion next to a flaming structure.

Shachi huffed. "How is going from point A to point B so difficult?"

Saki didn't pay him any mind, instead saying loudly, or as loudly as she could without choking with the hot air, "If it isn't the person I want to punch the most in the world!"

That got Adan's attention. "You two—"

"What are you doing here?" Greta said, looking nervously around. Saki assumed she was expecting the rest of the crew to show up.

"Stop being stubborn and let's go," Adan shouted at Greta, but the more he walked towards her, the more she moved backwards towards the fire.

She was sweating profusely, and Saki noticed the burns in Greta's hands. She was also barefoot, and her feet weren't looking much better. If the gesture of blowing air at her hand before had been indicative of anything, she could ignite stuff, but she wasn't immune to the heat.

"There's nowhere to go anymore," Greta replied.

"What are you saying? We can catch a boat! If you aren't coming, I'll carry you!"

"No!" She yelled, squeezing her eyes and dragging a foot on the floorboards swiftly. A red-hot mark appeared, and soon flames started rising from it.

"What…" Adan seemed more lost than Saki and Shachi themselves, and that was saying something.

"She hasn't told you, has she?" Shachi snapped. "She did this!"

Adan looked at him like he didn't understand, then back at her niece. "Greta?" He said hesitantly. "Why?"

"You thought I wouldn't find out?" She said accusingly, shaking, and Saki didn't know if it was rage, fear, or her body giving out under the strain. "What they did? What you did?"

And Adan had to know what Greta meant, because he fell silent right away.

"I hope raiding our village was worth it," Greta said, spitting her words, "but now it's time to set things straight." She tried to take a deep breath and ended up coughing. "The survivors will want revenge. Kalawa's done for, too."

"Is this worth it, then?" He said weakly. He wasn't trying to go close to her anymore, and the line of fire had risen so high already that it reached his knees.

A bone-chilling smile graced Greta's face. "Absolutely."

She took a quick look back to the flames that were closing in. The only way out for her was leaping over the line in front of her, and that exit would be out soon.

"Thanks, uncle Adan," she said quietly. "You made me doubt until the very end."

She took one step backwards, and wisps of fire began to catch on her hair and clothes when Saki ran towards her and reached with a hand over the flames to catch Greta.
She had done it, like so many things, without thinking, and if she had to explain herself afterwards, she didn't think she would be able to. Leaving a kid to die felt wrong, and that was pretty much it.

"What do you think you're doing?!" She yelled at her. "You can't fuck up everything and…"

And what, exactly? Kill herself? Going out like a coward to avoid responsibility? She wasn't a big believer in atonement. Even if she was, she didn't think what Greta had done was forgivable.

And Greta, surprised at the outburst, gave Saki one last smile and plunged into the inferno behind her.

Saki did not need to see again the illusion of Tsubaki's face on Greta's, and she definitely didn't need to remember the fire in Asteria and the weeks waiting for news that the paper never delivered, but she did, acutely, and she only stepped away reflexively when a flame licked her shirt and singed it a little.

Meanwhile, Adan, next to her, looked like a soulless husk, eyes fixed where Greta had been and a wall of fire now stood. "We did this to ourselves. We did this to her, we…"

"Need to go," Shachi completed the sentence, and Saki was grateful for the lack of melodrama. She'd had enough of that. "They're starting up the sub."

Saki looked at the Polar Tang, looming over the docks not too far away, and saw her crewmates moving on the deck.

"Adan," Saki said, giving one last try to trying to convince at least one person not to be a humungous cretin, and also attempting not to be offensively insensitive, "it's no use staying here. You can follow us."

"I'm sure the others won't mind dropping you off somewhere safer," Shachi said, and turned to Saki. "Come on, Saki, they're waiting."

And she wouldn't deny that it was very comforting to know to have someone waiting for her when she was done going through hell.

Shachi took Saki's hand, which didn't surprise her, because they both knew that the last thing they needed is to get separated right now when their destination was so close, but she had to wonder if he also did it in case she tried to pull something stupid on their way there.

She wouldn't dream of it, though. Not because it wasn't very much in character for her, but because it would put Shachi at risk, and possibly everybody waiting for them. Again, priorities.

"Race you to the sub," Saki said wryly, speeding up before Shachi could register her words.

Shachi let out a strangled laugh and his strides got longer, so Saki had to outdo herself to keep up. They sprinted through the last stretch to the sub like this, unsure if Adan had listened to them or not, because there was no time to waste anymore. They were cutting it very close, the smoke was getting denser by the second, and the rain of embers was constant and assured that sooner than later the last path to the docks would be cut off.

Saki didn't remember going up the gangplank as fast in her life, and when she got to the top she wondered for a second why Penguin wasn't pulling it up immediately, but then she saw Adan had indeed followed them, and she was a little relieved when he got on the deck next to them.

Accidentally coordinated, she and Shachi released a small sigh, as well as each other's hands.
But with the relief there was also a sense of dread that she tried to bury deep down, because she didn't want to have a reminder on board of what had just happened for another second. She knew offering Adan to go with them was the right thing to do, and she didn't regret it, but she didn't have to like it, either.

Right on cue – Bepo must have been watching from the bridge like a hawk – the sub started to move away from the docks, and in that moment where she could finally pause and settle down, Saki watched how the flames had swallowed the whole town, and only the last few platforms that led to the docks remained.

In just one hour, an entire town had been lost. Her mouth tasted like ashes as she heard the screams of the people left behind and the cries of those who had managed to ride a boat or a ship that wasn't so flammable. She didn't want to think about how many people were trapped there. She would have liked not to think about the tightly packed buildings of Asteria, and how many more people had died there.

She rubbed her face with both hands, hoping she could will the thoughts away if she wasn't looking, but the blistering heat and the sickening smell of the burning wood and everything else didn't allow that little mercy.

Saki removed her hands, thinking she must have gotten soot all over her face when the door behind them slammed open, and she turned around to see Law with an expression that she couldn't quite place. Worry? Relief? If he had been anybody else she would have thought he was also scared, but that couldn't be, because Law was fearless.

"Are any of you hurt?" He said, voice hoarse.

Worry, then.

"We're okay," Saki hurried to say.

"Come inside, you've already breathed too much smoke," he said, and then he spoke specifically to Adan. "And you should do the same."

The man gave Law a defeated look, nodding, but instead of following his advice, he said, "I'll stay here, if you don't mind."

"Suit yourself," Law said, sounding annoyed. Saki didn't blame him for not wanting to deal with a stubborn stranger right now. "But I won't treat you if you fall unconscious."

"That's fine."

With that settled, their extra passenger was quickly forgotten. "You three, hurry up. We're shutting the door." And he started walking back inside.

Saki followed Law, as did Shachi and Penguin just behind her, leaving Adan to grieve alone before the hellish scene.

It wasn't their place to stay, anyway.

And on their way down the steps, as Saki watched Law's back right in front of her, she remembered that he did have a very good reason to be shaken.

After a much needed shower and a change of clothes – her pajamas, specifically – Saki began to
make her way upstairs, but she stopped when she passed by Law's door.

For a moment, she thought of checking up on him. She even had a fist ready to knock on the door when she paused and realized that she didn't even know what she was going to say.

She kept thinking of that seemingly inoffensive comment he'd made while they watched the sea burial, that he'd never get used to the smell of burning things, put in perspective with what she had learned that night trying to sleep on the floor of Mack's apartment.

But how did one breach that sort of topic? She didn't know the details of what had transpired in Flevance, only what she'd heard the adults say and a picture on the newspaper. She might have been making a mountain out of a molehill, and he hadn't seemed to be that agitated when they had gotten caught in the fire, and she was just projecting because of her own neuroses. She might have been looking for an excuse to talk to him, because somehow he always managed to make her feel better, and everything else was just an excuse to get a verbal back pat and be reassured that everything was fine.

Because it was. Nothing had happened to them. The crew was safe and sound, if a bit sooty, and they were all back in the Polar Tang and looking forward to completing their trip through the first half of the Grand Line.

Her hand dropped to her side.

She was just being silly.

Instead, she went to the deck, assuming that Bepo would be alone and maybe needed a hand, but she found him talking to Sturgeon and giving him instructions on how to navigate around the island. She slunk downstairs again before they could notice she was there, and decided to sit at the bottom step of the stairs to the deck and contemplate life from that spot.

For a moment, there was only the sound of the engine and the water running through the piping inside the walls to the showers below. It was familiar and calming, and she started to feel her body relax.

It didn't last, because suddenly the metal door behind her opened and closed, and the unexpected noise made her jump and let out an embarrassing yelp that she attempted to cover with a hand on her mouth. It did not work.

"What are you doing here?"

Law seemed both surprised and amused by her reaction.

"I thought you were downstairs," she said, letting out a sigh and bringing the hand down to her chest. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

There was a curious expression on his face. "Why? Were you avoiding me?"

"No!" She replied a bit too quickly and loudly, and he looked at her weird, and she realized she'd be looking at herself weird, too. "I'm just tired, don't pay me any mind."

"Why don't you go to sleep?"

"You are asking me that?"

He cocked his head to the side with a light shrug and sat just a couple of steps above Saki.
"It's been a long day," he was his explanation when she gave him an inquisitive look.

"You can say that again," she replied. "Were you talking to Adan?"

It was just like him to pretend not to care about someone and right after go back to check if they were okay.

"Yeah. We'll drop him off near the beach where we docked and be on our way."

"And forget that this week ever happened?"

"Please."

She let out a fake happy sigh. "I was hoping to hear that."

There she was, using him as an anxiolytic again. Then again, he didn't seem to mind.

"I can't imagine how she must have felt to take everything down with her," Saki said, at last putting in words one of the many stray thoughts tangled in her mind.

Law didn't reply right away. In fact, she thought he wasn't going to reply, and she wasn't really looking for an answer, either, when he gave one. "Sometimes resentment doesn't let you see anything beyond it."

"That sounds awful."

"Has it never happened to you?"

That question suggested that had replied from personal experience. "I'm more the type to mope and swallow the feelings than to direct them at someone else," she admitted.

"That's not healthy either."

"I never said it was, but we make do with what we have," she said lightly. "I like to believe there's always a way forward. Getting stuck in the past is counterproductive to that."

"So why have you been moping for days?"

She looked at him with mild surprise. She hoped he hadn't been worried since their conversation the other day. She also knew it was a vain hope, if he was bringing it up now, and she felt like an ass.

She avoided his stare and decided that the spiral staircase to the bridge was a good place to vacantly stare at.

"That girl looked a bit like my sister," she said. Simple words, but charged with unspoken meaning. It was a good summary, and she was too exhausted to elaborate further.

She didn't mention any names, because then the sentence would become too real, and hit home closer, and then it would be much more difficult to do the whole process of swallowing the negative emotions to lock them up where they'd never see the light again.

"Now that you mention it…" Law said, trailing off. It didn't sound like a throwaway comment.

Saki supposed he got was she was getting at, and the silent acknowledgement that she wasn't being an overthinking idiot was enough to put her in a better state of mind. There went one unnecessary thought that wouldn't be able to fester unattended inside her, now.
It was nice to have someone to talk to calmly after shit went down. It was even nicer to be able to do that in a ship that actually felt welcoming instead of way too big and aseptic. Impersonal. Hostile.

A pensive silence hung in the air when Saki broke it with a question that had crossed her mind a million times before, though it had never seemed important enough to ask.

"Why a submarine?"

If he was thrown off by the change of subject, he didn't show it. "It doesn't rely only on sails, is able to avoid bad weather, and since it was a prototype, it was cheaper than the other options."

"Oh." She hadn't been expecting that last one. "I thought it was a market model."

"Penguin did something to the machinery. Don't ask me what."

She hummed. "And here I thought it was because it looked cooler than a regular ship."

"That was a factor too."

She cracked up. "I knew it."

His reply was a playful tug on a strand of wavy hair that was sticking up, and she batted his hand away with an offended noise.

The sub began to slow down then, and both looked at the deck's door.

"I'm going to where we are," Saki said, getting up and passing Law on the way up.

"I wouldn't go out in slippers if I were you," he said as she reached for the handle. "The decks need to be scrubbed raw."

Right, it was covered in ashes, and she didn't want to track them inside. "Can't we just go underwater and let nature do the job?"

"With someone outside?" He sounded like he wouldn't have minded and she couldn't fault him for it.

Saki tried to decide what was worse, leaving someone to drown or having to clean four decks, and she couldn't choose either option in good conscience.

She lifted a finger of her free hand. "Just wait until I close the door before giving any orders."

The metal door opened with a small creak, and the first thing she noticed was that, even after sailing having left the swamp behind a while ago, the air still smelled of burning wood. That didn't seem right.

Noticing that something was amiss, Law got up immediately and followed after her, standing right behind Saki, who was under the doorframe, staring portside, and had no intention of actually stepping on the deck.

That side of the island was ablaze, as well.

Saki's first reaction was confusion as to how the fire had spread so fast, but she discarded that thought as soon as she saw that it was focused somewhere inland, and it wasn't hard to imagine that Kalawa could be there. The boats on the shore that the Polar Tang's lights revealed as they got closer were a telltale sign of what had happened.
With a sharp intake of breath, Saki tried to step back unconsciously and bumped into Law, who put a hand on her shoulder to steady her.

She tried to say something, but the words got stuck in her throat when she looked at the man on the deck, covering his face with his hands. Law didn't say anything either, but she felt him hold his breath.

And the only thing breaking the silence were those damn pink toucans, screeching as they flew to escape the flames.


Saki placed a hand over Law's, once again unsure if it was for her own comfort or his.

The next morning, after having dropped off Adan on the beach and a night of no sleep, Law watched, from the uppermost deck, the one behind the bridge, and mop in hand, how Saki drove the rest of her crewmates around to wash the grime off the floor.

"All right, all hands on deck! I don't want to see any slackers!"

"But what about Bepo?!!"

"Do you want us to sink or what?"

Besides, Law thought, the way the decks were, nobody wanted Bepo's fur to catch the ashes that would rise. He'd be brushing them off for weeks.

"I can sail a ship!" Sturgeon intervened.

"And I'm sure you can mop the floor too. Come on, go down and start scrubbing!"

There was much grumbling around, but not another single complaint to her face because she was working too. Fiercely. It had become some sort of personal battle since the coconut rain, and he didn't feel like questioning it while she had something in her hands to smack him with.

The island they had left behind was long lost to the horizon now, and the column of smoke that rose from it had disappeared from sight, too, although later.

It was great to be back at sea. He had spent most of his life sailing, so he felt more at home in the ocean than on firm land, but at this point in time he was also sure that people who said the waters of the Grand Line were dangerous had probably never set foot on one of the islands.

"If she sees you doing nothing, she's going to get on your case too."

He turned around to see Bepo staring at him from his spot at the helm. He sounded a little smug, too. Like he was enjoying that he was the only one spared from cleaning the mess.

Law started to mop because he was right.

"An old lady back at the island said something curious," Bepo said after a while.

"Hmm?" Law stopped scrubbing for a moment to look at him, but Bepo kept staring at the front.

"She said something like the birds were a curse for what they did. They were annoying, but I don't get it."
"They supposedly can repeat things they heard a long time ago."

"Oh." Law couldn't see Bepo's face, but his tone was sad. "That's rough."

"They brought it on themselves."

"Yes, but that girl had to listen to them every day, too. I'd have gone crazy in her place."

He... hadn't considered that.

"Yeah. There's no way to move on like that," he replied.

And after a bit more of scrubbing, he realized that some of the dirt stuck between the floorboards wasn't getting out, no matter how much he insisted. He started to grumble under his breath as he mopped with all his might to no avail.

"What's wrong?" Bepo asked.

"What the hell is this?"

Bepo left the helm momentarily to stare at the same place as Law. "Oh. I guess the coconut flakes are still stuck there."

And when Law looked closer, he realized he was right, and the ashes had tinted them grey.

"Are you kidding me?!"

"You'd know if you swept the decks more often," Bepo replied, and right after he'd said it, he covered his mouth and turned around to look at Law. "S-sorry!"

He sighed. "I deserved that one." And he mopped aside a pile of ashes that fell to the main deck. The reaction was immediate.

"Hey!" Saki yelled from below, and he walked to the railing to be able to receive the scolding in full. "Watch where you throw your—WAH!"

She dropped the mop and put her arms up as protection as a treacherous water spurt hit her from the side while she was distracted. She was drenched in water from head to toe when Law saw Shachi and Penguin appear from around the corner, running with a hose and spraying the floor and everyone in their path.

"Gotcha!" Shachi yelled as they ran away.

"Son of a—" Very indignant, Saki picked back up the mop, took one last look at Law, and threatened, "We'll talk later!"

And she ran away after those two, who were well on their way to catching the guys on the lower deck.

"It's good to be together again," Bepo said, pleased.

He had to agree on that.
We're finally at Sabaody! I can't believe we've reached this point. I can't believe it's taken all this time, either. For those of you who started reading on AO3 it's only been a few months, but this has been going on for three years and a half. Dressrosa was still running in the manga when I published the first chapters. I really did not think this through when I began the story so early in the timeline. But it doesn't matter anymore! We're here! The Supernovas and the Straw Hats are here, at long last!

A few people have asked me what I'm going to do about the timeskip. For those who are curious: I'm planning to cover a some of what happens after Marineford, while Luffy's training, then we're going to skip forward a few months to continue some time before Law leaves the crew to go to Punk Hazard. So, there is going to be a timeskip, but not as long as the one in the manga. About a year or a little less? That sounds about right.

I feel like I must apologize for the absurd amount of bad jokes and puns in this chapter. It's what you get for encouraging me. I'm sorry.

(Seems like the whole damn world went and lost its mind)

"Mack?"

Saki approached his crewmate with a sweet smile and a cheery disposition.

He only stared at her, still soaking wet from Penguin's and Shachi's sudden hose attack. His face was an uncrackable mask of indifference, despite him not being in a better state. "Yes?"

"You look like a guy who knows his way around a pair of scissors."

She batted her eyes at him.

He didn't look impressed at all.

"What do you want?" He asked.

"I need a haircut."

She was still smiling. His face was unreadable.

"Good luck finding one," he replied.

"Maaaack."

It turned out to be a good decision to ambush Mack as soon as they set sail and plead until he gave in.
just to make her shut up, because he came down with some sort of stomach bug the next day.

It was only him, so Law said that he probably caught it when he fell into the swamp, but he quarantined him in the sickbay in case it was a virus. They would have made a great entrance, arriving to Sabaody puking their guts out.

The circumstances left Saki with less time to do a handful of pressing things, because for the first time in months, she had the galley to herself.

The first day was okay, since it was a bit of a chaos without Mack and nobody had the time to complain while they redistributed their tasks. The second day Saki faced a riot during breakfast over the quality of her coffee, and since it was too early to put up with anybody, the argument was settled after she yelled at a few stunned guys (those who hadn't known life at sea without Mack, clearly) that they could either make their own or take turns shoving the coffee pot up their asses.

The third day she woke up, prepared enough breakfast to feed an entire platoon in hopes of keeping the mutinous jerks from complaining too much about the coffee she was not making for them anymore, and went to the main deck, mug in hand, to see if the newspaper had arrived. Usually Law picked it up, but he hadn't woken up yet. Saki was reluctant to call it oversleeping, since he didn't do much of that.

The newspaper was tossed on the floor in front of the door, and she took it and sat down to flip through its pages. Confirmed sightings of several rookie crews heading towards Sabaody at once. That included them. Eleven people with bounties over a hundred million beli were about to meet in the same island, and though the feeling wasn't shared by the majority, Saki couldn't wait.

She took a gulp of coffee, and when she got to the bounties, she choked and spit over the pages. Settling the mug on the floor, she shook the newspaper in the air and wiped off what she could of the stains, and she ran back inside, skipping steps. Nobody in sight. She went to Law's quarters, banged on the door, and waited. No reply. She put her ear to the door, and she didn't hear water running, so she assumed he wasn't in the shower.

"Captain?" She tried, pushing the door slightly.

It was open. The room was, also, empty, so she had been wasting her time.

There was only one other place he could be. Well, there were a lot, but only one that seemed feasible, so upstairs she headed.

The door to the sickbay was unlocked, and when she stepped in, she could see, on one of the beds, Mack, well awake and reading a book, and on the other side, out cold on a stool and crumpled over a counter holding rows of specimens, Law.

Saki looked at Mack, then at their captain, then back at Mack.

"Maybe you should wake him up," he suggested.

"Is he okay?" She asked, unsure.

"Is he ever?"

Saki had to concede that point. "I feel kind of bad disturbing his sleep."

"I'm sure his neck will feel worse if you leave him there," said the voice of reason, who to be fair
looked like he could have tried to, but just couldn't be bothered walk from the bed to where he was.

Saki approached Law, tried calling his name, and when it didn't work, she pressed on his shoulder very softly, because if there was something she had learned of years of bad sleeping patterns and paranoia, it was that sudden touching was Bad with a capital letter.

He jumped awake, and she pretended she hadn't seen him drooling over one of the papers on the counter when she shoved a bounty poster in front of his face.

"This time only you got one!"

He seemed to have a bit of trouble processing the visual and auditory information at first, but he rubbed his face, and when his eyes focused and he took the paper from Saki's hands, he smirked.

"Is this about the last island?"

She handed him the rest of the newspaper. "I guess they couldn't figure out who was specifically involved, so they dumped all the blame on you. Congrats, Mister Two Hundred Million."

"I'll take it." He sounded satisfied. "Not a bad number to show up at Sabaody."

"Speaking of making important appearances," she said in the tone she used when she was about to ask for a favor and suddenly putting a hand over one of his. His smirk was replaced by a fleeting look of confusion, which went away as soon as he glanced at their hands.

Saki didn't have time to keep talking before he smirked again, and by then she knew the battle was lost.

He chuckled, and not in a cute way. "Not a chance."

She pulled her hand away like it was burning and threw her arms up in the air. "Dammit, Law! You can't show up to a pirate gathering flaunting those! Have some shame!"

"I don't want to hear that coming from you," he retorted in a very good spirits. "Nice try, though. You even touched them. I'll give you points for effort."

"Screw you too," she muttered, followed by a quiet, "breakfast is ready," before heading towards the door. She stopped one moment to say, "Mack, I miss you," and then left them behind.

She then went to rescue her coffee mug, took a plate of food from the galley, and locked herself in her quarters to draw and think of beautiful things.

The next day, with Mack having made a full recovery and after the sickbay was thoroughly cleaned, Saki asked Law if she could use it that evening. He said yes, since at that point he was used to her using it for tattooing and she always left the place cleaner than it had been. He asked what for, out of curiosity. She said she needed to make a fix.

And since a fix shouldn't have taken long, when she didn't show up for dinner, he went to look for her.

She found her on one of the cots, sitting with her right leg completely straight and coloring a swirling design of blue, black and white waves that took up most of the outer thigh.

"Hey," she greeted him nonchalantly, without looking up, like she had been expecting him. "I'll be done in a minute."
He could see that. He was also torn between staring in judgmental silence or ask if this was a stealthy way to get under his skin in a surreptitious way, since he hadn't let her do so literally. "You said you were doing a fix," he said in a measured tone.

"I am fixing an eyesore," she replied.

Something that should have clicked form the start did so then. He blamed the surprise and the apparent stupidity of her actions – because what kind of moron did a tattoo that size on themselves instead of getting someone else do it, seriously – for not catching it at first glance.

She had tattooed over one of the scars she had gotten from Marina. It was undistinguishable from the rest of skin now, hidden somewhere under the swirls.

He didn't feel like getting on her case for something so personal. For all the times she said she didn't care about what others thought about her, she could be very image-conscious. "You said it didn't bother you."

She stopped for a second to glance at him, seemingly lost, and when she understood she returned to her work. "It doesn't. But it bothers some of you, and that bothers me." He was about to protest when she continued. "Mack especially. He's not going to say anything, but I know he feels guilty."

So did Law, but he was glad that she was focusing on someone else.

"Besides, I've had this idea for a while, so it's as good an excuse as any other."

Alright, so she hadn't done it for petty reasons or completely motivated by third parties. "You could have waited to find someone at the next island."

"No!" She said, like he had proposed something unimaginable. "I wanted to do it." She looked at the clovers on her calf and ran a gloved finger over the lines. "It's much better this time around. This one could do with a few touch-ups." And she went back to the new design.

Law suddenly felt very silly about trying to think sensitively. There was a reason he did things in a certain way, and see what trying to act like a functional human being got him. It wasn't worth it. "You can't just go and tattoo yourself," he said at last.

"I can," she interrupted him, wiping the last part she'd gone over to inspect it. She looked up at him and gestured at her leg. "Evidently."

"But you shouldn't," he insisted. The theory of this being a subtle revenge scheme was plausible again. "What if it had gone wrong? It's easier to make a mistakes when you're…"

He trailed off when she saw her eyes narrow with suspicion. He didn't like that look.

"Speaking from experience, are we?" She said.

"No," he replied way too fast to be convincing.

She looked like she didn't buy it. "I will choose to believe you because otherwise I'd have to stab you." She directed her attention back to the tattoo. "Besides, it's my job. If I didn't know I could do it, I wouldn't try. Or are you going to tell me you've never operated on yourself? Because that's something you really should not be doing, you know."

He sighed. "I have a Devil Fruit."
"And I have an amazingly steady pulse." She smiled at him cheerfully. "And now it's done! What do you think?"

She stared at her completed work with satisfaction.

On one hand, he liked what he was seeing in more ways than one. On the other, he couldn't admit it because he had a duty not to encourage reckless behavior and he wasn't a hormonal teenager.

So instead of taking a closer look, which he actually wanted to do, or answering her question at all, he huffed and said, "Dinner's ready."

The last thing he saw before heading out was a cheeky grin that confirmed that getting a rise out of him had indeed been part of the objective.

Getting to the Sabaody Archipelago was a matter of weeks that everybody spent in a state of high anticipation, in their own ways. Everybody was excited about having gotten to the mid point of their journey, and for a few days the morning paper passed through more hands than usual because everybody was interested in knowing where the rival crews were. There were several discussions about who looked tougher, who they'd like to run into while they were there, and who had the most punchable face, a prize that Eustass Kid won every time that particular topic came up.

And at last, one gloriously sunny morning, they got to the archipelago, which, according to Bepo, was actually a massive mangrove. Huge trees stood at the center of every grove, painted each with stripes and a number to signal the area, and solid land stretched as far the roots could sustain it. But the most impressive feature were the giant bubbles building up in the ground and floating up, catching the light beautifully. Right after being in a place where the greenery was so thick it didn't let the sunlight through, to Saki this felt like a tree island done right. Even if Sabaody, too, was a little too hot for comfort. It was already summer, though, so she could let that one slide.

The Heart Pirates docked in an area that at first glance seemed to be made up of nothing but hotels and an assortment of shops geared to travelers. Flashy advertisements for a myriad establishments and products filled the streets. Not far from them, one of the trees, marked with the number 72, watched over the grove.

Once they were on land, they stopped a moment to take in their surroundings and decide what to do for the day. It was still early.

The first thing Saki did was try to catch the nearest bubble. She regretted it as soon as her hands stuck to it and she was basically left with a sticky balloon in her hands and a bunch of vicious nitwits that would make fun of her if they noticed her struggle to wipe the stuff away, so she feigned that she was perfectly fine and just interested in the consistency of the thing while they talked.

"Let's split up to explore," Law suggested. "We'll attract a lot of attention if we move in a big group."

Her finger sank into the bubble. She pulled them out, lowkey afraid that it would swallow her.

"Good idea," Shachi replied. "Marine HQ is just a stone's throw away, isn't it?"

"Yeah, and this time they are expecting us," he said. "Then again, they're expecting everybody else as well. Try not to stand out too much." And he added, "And avoid the Celestial Dragons at all costs."

The subject had come up a few days before, talking about the island and its proximity to Mary
Geoise. Saki's only knowledge of those people came from the news and her late mother's rants prompted by her general disregard for authority, but Law and Mack had insisted not to cross them if they didn't want an Admiral sent after them, so it was easy advice to take to heart.

Saki turned to Mack, who also seemed very interested in a nearby bubble. She distracted him before he could commit the same mistake as her. "If you're going to shop for groceries, I'll go with you. I need to do some shopping myself."

"Haggle like our lives depend on it," Penguin pitched in.

"I mean, they sort of do," she said. "The more we save, the better…"

"Sure, let's go together," Mack replied before asking the others, "Anybody else?"

They were either having very interesting conversations and didn't hear Mack, or just wanted to avoid carrying bags, and Saki didn't believe it was the former.

"We could eat cauliflower for a week," Saki suggested in a whisper.

She could feel by just looking that his mind was running through every possible recipe. "That's not a bad idea."

Not many people would have agreed with that assessment, but they had refused their rights to that particular conversation. It was like they still hadn't learned how unwise it was to annoy the man who put food on their table.

"We'll meet back here this evening." Law said, and then turned to Bepo, tossing him his sword. He caught it gracefully. "Let's get going."

The group split into smaller ones, and Saki and Mack were left to their own devices, which involved watching out for discounts and hitting every food stall they came across. But before that, when the others were out of sight, she asked him if he was carrying a handkerchief, by any chance.

Saki had discovered a while ago that she loved shopping around with Mack because he had his priorities in order.

He was also completely nonplussed at her very unsubtle attempts to either flirt with or feed a sob story to a shopkeeper to get free stuff, because he was used to Felicia doing exactly the same. It made her life so much easier than having the peanut gallery hanging around and laughing at her.

What also made her life easier were the low cut t-shirt and the booty shorts she was wearing.

They hit a few grocery shops and left the bulkiest bags there with full intent to send the guys later to pick it up. There was no way the two of them could carry all of it, and they should have known better before choosing to play hooky.

Saki was stuffing her face with a manju she had just gotten from a stall while Mack read a receipt.

"How did you get a crate of oranges for free?"

"Nobody wants a cute girl to fall victim to scurvy when she's short on cash."

Mack's stare was as judgmental as her mother's had been when she skipped her homework in favor of reading comic strips.
"Stop looking at me like I'm not cute and poor," she said.

"You aren't cute or poor."

"You've got to understand," she said with her mouth full. "My womanly wiles only work on people who don't know me."

"I wonder why."

"I don't." And then, she caught sight of what she had been looking for for the better part of the day. "Can we go to that weapon shop?" She said, pointing in its general direction, holding the manju in her mouth because her hands were full of bags, so the sound that actually came out was unintelligible. Mack seemed to catch the drift anyway and marched in that direction.

The shop had a few gaudy blades on the window, so Saki guessed they had put the showiest of the lot on display to attract people looking for souvenirs. She just needed something that she could use with more ease than what she had now and would last her for some time.

Once she was inside, she glanced around and realized that the shop's window was indeed representative of what was inside.

"Welcome!" Said a man full of energy from behind the counter. "How may I help you? Looking for something to remember your trip?"

Saki swallowed the last of the manju with an effort. "To survive it, actually. I need a sword."

"Then you've come to the right place!" He guided them towards one of the shelves and picked up a katana with a gold trim along the sheath. "Made from the finest materials, and also a beauty to match its owner."

Saki appreciated the compliment, even if it was designed to extract money from her. The sword, not so much. "I've never used a katana," she mused, taking it from the shopkeeper for inspection. The first thing she noticed is that it didn't weigh much at all, which could be good or bad depending on how it was made, and she unsheathed it to take a look at it.

She didn't like it. "This is going to bend at the first strike," she said, handing it back to the man. "Do you have anything else?"

He did, at least according to him. According to Saki, each one that he handed her was a bigger disappointment than the last. Bad balance, flimsy blades, everything you'd expect from a shop that sold for show and not utility.

She thanked the man and left the shop empty-handed. "At this rate, I'll have to punch my way into the New World."

"How well do you jump? Because you aren't going to reach many faces."

"We're like the same height, Mack. Don't diss yourself."

"Why do you think I throw knives instead of getting up close with enemies?"

"Huh." She hadn't thought about it. "Well, that explains things. But seriously, how hard can it be to find a decent weapon?" She complained, throwing one last glance at the shop.

"I suppose that's what we get for searching in a tourist area."
"Excuse me," said someone, interrupting them. An old man carrying twice a box twice his size had stopped next to them. "Are you looking for serviceable weapons?"

"We are!" Saki said, her good mood recovering instantly. "Do you know any good shops?"

"You'll have to head to one of the lawless areas," he replied. "That's groves 29 and under."

Mack pulled out a tourist map they had picked up next to a hotel before. "They aren't far from here."

"Keep an eye out for pirates and bounty hunters," the man said. "Marines don't keep watch there, but if you want to risk it…"

"We do," Saki replied, grinning. "Thanks a lot! Let's go, Mack!"

"Glad to be of help," the man replied as they left.

It only took them a few minutes to reach grove 29, and the scenery soon changed from hotels and street vendors to bars, a variety of shops, and dilapidated buildings. The faces also looked considerably less friendly than before.

Saki felt eyes on them almost as soon as they set foot on the grove, though nothing happened as they made their way to groves 28 and 27 in search of a weapon shop. She wasn't the only one to notice.

"They know who we are," Mack commented.

"Kind of difficult not to with what you're wearing," she replied. "As long as they don't bother us, it doesn't matter."

"I wouldn't count on it."

"Oh, I know."

The shop they eventually found was much less inviting than the first one, as was the shopkeeper inside, a middle aged woman with harsh features and her blonde hair tied back in a bun. The screech of a sharpening tool coming from the back room gave Saki some confidence.

"Welcome," the shopkeeper said, without any flourishes. "What are you looking for?"

"A sword. Single-handed, if possible."

"Something not too heavy and long," she said, after taking a hard look at Saki. "Double-edged?"

"Yes, please."

"Alright..." The woman tapped her lips in thought for a moment. "I should have something—" She crouched down below the counter and disappeared for a good minute during which only metallic clatter and the sharpening sounds from inside could be heard. Saki wondered how many things she kept down there.

At last, she emerged with a rapier and placed it with force on the counter, sliding it towards Saki. "Give this a try. It's been sitting there for ages, but I think it may suit you. Sheath comes separately."

Saki picked it up and immediately felt the difference with the blade she had been lugging around since the Marine ship. It was well balanced, lighter than average and slightly shorter. She swung it at the air a few times, trying to get used to the handle.
"It's comfortable," Saki said, turning to Mack. "What do you think?"

"Looks good to me."

"Knew it," the woman said smugly. "It's a damn fine sword, but tall people want tall blades. It's sixty thousand. Will you take it?"

Saki didn't have to think much about it, because she may have been stingy but she didn't skimp money on important things.

"Yup," she replied. "I'll need a sheath too."

"Right away." The woman took one out from under the counter. Saki wondered if she was just taking the blades and sheaths apart to make extra cash. "That'll be an extra ten thousand."

Saki handed her the money, and she was picking up her new purchase when the sharpening screech stopped and someone came out of the back room.

Saki would have liked to say that she knew that face, but that wouldn't have been exactly true. She did know that mask, though.

The man, so tall that he almost brushed against the ceiling of the shack with long, wavy blonde hair, and holding two scythes in reverse grip, also took notice of them.

In the many conversations in the Polar Tang about which Supernova had the most punchable face, he was always disqualified from the competition for obvious reasons, but seeing him in person, Saki couldn't say she was feeling a particularly strong impulse to do so.

She wasn't picking up on any hostile vibes from him. If she had to put her finger on it, she'd say he was as curious about their presence as they were.

"Heart Pirates," he said. "So you're already here."

"'Massacre Soldier' Killer." An auspicious name if there ever was one. She thought it was probably in her best interests not to piss him off. "We were wondering how many of the others had arrived."

"We've seen Jewelry Bonney and Basil Hawkins, so far."

"That's good to know." In truth, she was disappointed by the lack of mention of the Straw Hats. She was looking forward to a chat with Nico Robin about Ohara.

She headed towards the door casually, with no intentions of keeping up the conversation just in case the guy was as easy to set off as his captain allegedly was, but as soon as she cracked it open shots, there were shots outside, and a bullet passed through the opening and by the shopkeeper, getting stuck in the wall behind her. Unfazed, she picked up a cigarette from under the counter and lit it.

"Seriously? Now?" She had expected to get jumped when they were just two shorties and her most threatening weapon was a bag full of cabbages, not now that she had a shiny new weapon and they had run into a murder machine.

"Bounty hunters and kidnapping gangs like to set up ambushes around these parts," the shopkeeper explained. "Send them away, will you? They're bad for business."

"You don't have to tell us twice," Saki replied, and at the same time she did, Mack passed her and flung a knife that, judging by the earth-shattering scream that followed, hit someone.
"Well, better to test it now that I just got it," Saki said, leaving her bags to the side and unsheathing the sword she had just acquired.

"No refunds policy," the shopkeeper warned her.

"Fine by me!" Saki shot back before opening the door with a kick and running outside, swinging to the left.

The guy who had, predictably, been waiting to jump them right by the door was the first to fall, and as soon as she turned around she saw Mack was throwing knives again and that Killer had also come outside and had already taken care of two more.

Spurred by the very real need to look good in front of the competition, she went for the target nearest to her. Not many were left, since a couple had wisely run away.

The new sword was a breath of fresh air, and after the first couple of swings it felt like an extension of her own arm. It had better balance than the one she'd had before and looked better made, though that wasn't surprising, since she had never been one to get fancy swords. They inevitably broke or were lost, and she was of the opinion that as long as they did their job, they were fine, but at that moment she really wished she could keep that one forever.

The second guy was swiftly knocked up, and she sidestepped the third one's attack and slammed the hilt behind his neck. When she looked up, there weren't any attackers standing.

Saki took a second to go back into the shop to pick up her bags and say to the shopkeeper, "Thank you!"

"Told you it was a good one!" She yelled back.

She and Mack started to leave, and she sent one last glance at Killer to say bye and hopefully get out of there before someone had the genius idea of attacking them again when she noticed him staring specifically at her.

Her first instinct was assuming that he was going to attack, but he didn't move an inch, and it was only by the slight inclination of his head that she figured out what had caught his attention.

"Are you looking at my tattoos?" She asked awkwardly and slightly confused. Could he even see well through that mask? Could he eat? Did he take it off or did he live off of noodles and drinking through a straw? Did he wash his face, or had everything fused together? Those were also important questions that she didn't think it was appropriate to ask.

"Who's the artist?" He asked.

So she was right. What was more, he was asking about tattoos, so any awkwardness on her part vanished right that instant. "The one on my left arm was done by someone in North Blue, but the two on my leg are mine." She said proudly, standing on one leg to show the other off. She didn't mention the one on her right arm because she was fairly sure the dude didn't want to join their crew.

"You did those?" Killer asked.

Saki could smell the interest of a potential customer in the air. Saki grinned. Mack called her out.

"Saki."

"Come on," she replied, and then she turned back to Killer. "Why, thinking about getting one?"
Killer cocked his head thoughtfully, and Mack insisted.

"Saki, second warning."

"Money is money," she said, trying to make her case. "I'll give you a Supernova discount!" She told Killer.

She knew she was playing with fire. Not because she thought she was in danger from Killer at that exact moment, but because Mack looked like he was about to stab her in the spleen.

"Saki."

"It's a generous offer, but I'm not sure it's a good idea." Killer replied politely "I'll think about it."

Saki felt a second surge of pride at not being denied. Mack grabbed her by the shirt and started pulling her away.

"Don't take too long!" She shouted at Killer as she let herself be dragged along. "Who knows where we'll be in a week!"

They left the scene of the crime, and when they were a fair distance away, Mack muttered, exasperated, "You're unbelievable."

"It's called building a portfolio, Mack," she said, feeling no guilt whatsoever.

"I'm telling the captain."

"Why would you do that to him?"

Mack faltered and reconsidered. "I won't tell you that you have a point." And he resumed the march.

"That's okay," she said happily. "But you can't deny it would be hilarious to tell people that a guy on Kid's crew was tattooed by one of us."

He did not, in fact, deny it, but he didn't say anything else, either, until they were back to Grove 79.

Saki and Mack were able to snatch some of the guys when they came back to the sub in the evening so they could pick up the rest of their groceries, and as luck would have it, they had rented a few weird contraptions that let them ride the bubbles of the island. Saki, freeloadng style, climbed behind Penguin on one and listened to him ramble about the trees' resin, the bubbles that were made of it, and something they needed to do with it to the ship to go deeper underwater, as they made the trip to the shops and back to the Polar Tang. She didn't understand all of it, but Penguin did and he seemed happy explaining it, so she waited until he was done talking to she feed him one of the manjus she had bought before.

Once the supplies were safely stored in the sub, the boiler room troupe plus Sturgeon hopped back onto their bubble thingies and rode off into the sunset in search of fun for the night. Saki didn't know where they were going and she didn't want to ask.

She decided to go back to a pita stand that she and Mack had come across earlier and wander around, not too far from the sub. The grove had a different kind of beauty at night, and she was hoping to catch sight of someone interesting while being undetected herself, now that she wasn't walking with the equivalent of an advertising board right to her side.

She saw a lot of sailors, merchants, and plain old travelers up and down even at that hour. What she
hadn't seen all day, she noted, were Marines, and there was supposed to be a garrison only a few groves away, not to mention Sabaody being at Marineford's doorstep, so that seemed odd. She would have expected them to be wary with all the high profile pirates gathering at the archipelago.

On her way back, she ran into Law, and assumed he had been doing the same as her. It was hard to stay cooped up in the submarine when they were in such a lively place, especially when they could run into their rivals anytime. All the crews arriving at the same time were aiming for the New World and One Piece. There was a special kind energy in the air that was difficult to ignore. Most pirates failed way before getting there. What was waiting for them beyond the Red Line?

She remembered when her biggest wish had been leaving her home island, and she was surprised by how big she was thinking. When had she started looking forward to the future like this?

"Seen anything interesting?" Saki asked the man at fault for everything.

He was relaxing against the wall of a hostel and doing some people-watching. "No, but I heard that someone's seen Mad Monk Urouge and Scratchmen Apoo near the shipyards."

"That makes five plus us," she commented, and Law waited for her to explain. "When we saw him earlier, Killer said Bonney and Hawkins were also here." And pouting, she added, "Hawkins got the jump on us."

He was from North Blue too. They had been, in a way, racing against each other to get to Sabaody. Law chuckled at that. "What's the hurry? The New World isn't going anywhere."

She regarded him with interest. "You don't want to head in straight away?"

"I'm thinking about it," he said, crossing his arms. His gaze was on a ship that had just set sail from the grove. "It's better to go prepared than to go on without a care."

"You don't think we can handle it yet?"

He gave a light knock to Saki's forehead, drawing a small complaint from her, and replied, "I did not say that."

"Okay, sorry I asked," she said, rubbing the spot where he had hit her. "Did Mack tell you anything else about what happened?"

His face was enough for Saki to know that Mack hadn't, and that Law now wanted to know. "Should he have?"

"Naaah," she said, waving the question away. But knowing it wouldn't fly, she added, "I think that Killer guy wants a tattoo."

For a moment that Saki would forever treasure in her memory, Law's face contorted into a wide-eyed, square-mouthed face of shock. "Please tell me you didn't try to sell it to him like you did with me."

"No, no, he was interested from the start," she said, putting her hands defensively in front of her. "I couldn't stop gawking at mine."

Law released a sigh of relief. "Are you sure he wasn't just staring at your legs?"

"They're way too short to take so much staring," she joked back. "It was pretty funny. And he
seemed like a personable guy."

"Yeah, I'm sure that Massacre Soldier epithet got slapped on him because he's charming."

"He's very polite," she insisted. "Also, mister 'Surgeon of Death,'" she continued sarcastically, "I still haven't seen you kill anybody you've operated on, so I'll take the names the Marines choose with a grain of salt."

Law had opened his mouth to reply when silence fell like a heavy curtain to their left, and when they looked in that direction, they saw the people that had been filling the center of the street had vacated it and were looking down, some even kneeling. Some sort of procession was advancing through the middle of the street, but before Saki could see it clearly, Law took her hand, pulling her quickly into an alley, and stood in front of her.

"What's that?" She whispered, leaning closer to him. They were both hidden from sight, but he was also blocking her view and could barely make out what was going on.

"Celestial Dragons. Better stay where they can't see us."

They waited in silence, unmoving, as the procession advanced. Saki couldn't see them until they were passing right in front of them, and at that moment she spotted a man dressed in strange white clothes and wearing a resin bubble like a helmet, two men that looked like bodyguards, and a man and a woman in chains trailing behind them.

She had heard about nobility and their slaves a few times in her life, but they had been so far removed from her life that it had never felt real. It was harder to ignore after seeing it with her own eyes.

She felt Law tense up, and she squeezed his arm with her free hand. He still hadn't let go of the other.

Saki thought the worst of it was over when a shot rang in the air and a kid started crying. Her first impulse was to lean forward to watch, but Law didn't let her.

"Don't," he said quietly.

She didn't know what he was seeing, but she could deduce it from the screams. A kid had been shot for moving. Someone had yelled for mercy, and that someone had also gotten shot. In a way, it felt worse to imagine the scene from the sounds alone than bearing witness to it, even if Law was shielding her for her sake.

She had to remind herself over and over that laying a hand on that sorry excuse of a human would bring an Admiral to the archipelago, but that only made her all the more furious.

Eventually, the street went back to its regular sounds, and she and Law were able to come out. There was no trace of what had happened.

"They've taken them away," Law said, noticing where she was looking. He still had her hand in his, and she didn't feel like pulling away.

"Is this supposed to be normal?" She asked. The people around had gone back to their business like nothing had happened.

"It's their everyday. People can get used to everything."
Suddenly Sabaody didn't seem as pretty as before. "I don't think I could live like this."

"You'd be surprised." He gave her hand a light squeeze, and they started walking down the street. "I wanted to tell you something," he said. "I've already talked to Bepo, Penguin and Shachi about it. There's somewhere I want to go tomorrow."

"And where's that somewhere?"

"Grove 1. Bepo and I were gathering some intel today, and we found out there will be a big slave auction tomorrow."

Saki didn't follow that leap of logic that brought Law to think he had any business in a place like that. "Why do you want to go there?"

"Because the owner of the auction house is Joker," he said, waiting for the words to sink in. "I thought you'd be interested."

She replied right away. "Count me in."

He smiled a little. "Promise not to do anything dangerous."

"I promise," Saki said tiredly.

"I mean it," he insisted. "Even if you can't stand what you see."

"Hey, I'm not going to do anything that can land us in trouble. I'm not complete idiot," she said, feeling like a little kid getting scolded.

"I know," he said in a casual tone. "I wouldn't keep you around if you were."

She couldn't reply seriously to the unexpected compliment. "That's not very convincing when you also keep Shachi."

"I don't hold hands with Shachi."

She held back a laugh, and it was useful to blame on that she fact that her cheeks had flushed a little at his comment. She poked him with an elbow. "Oh, so that's what sets us apart. I get handholding privileges."

"That's it," Law replied with a half-smile. "That's the only difference."

"I'll have to make sure to rub it in his face."

"I don't think he'd want it anyway."

"Are you kidding me?" She said, seeing her opportunity. "He loves you. Everybody loves you. You're like the most popular guy on this island. 'Captain, can I help? Captain, I fixed a leak, please give me validation. Captain, I just fluffed up your pillow so you can sleep more than two hours in a row.'"

"Stop that." It was his turn to look a little embarrassed, but he laughed anyway.

She wondered when that had become the best sound in her world and when the feeling of his fingers laced with hers had started to feel like a refuge. She wondered how she had let him get this close to her and why she didn't mind what had seemed like such a bad idea before.
She wondered why he didn't mind, but even if she could get a straight answer, she wouldn't ask the question. Sometimes, words weren't enough to convey the simplest things. Sometimes, some things were too fragile to be spoken without breaking them.

The brush of a hand. A whisper in the night. A smile meant for only one person.

There was no need to complicate anything. Everything was as it should be.

According to their information, the Human Auction House opened at 4, so their merry group of five left for Grove 1 with time to spare, in case something held them up.

They passed by a wood sign with the words 'No Marines Allowed' written and the remains of some poor sod that had been pinned to it. The only recognizable thing about it was the Marine's uniform cap.

"No wonder we haven't seen any around," Shachi commented.

"That's a lawless zone for you," Penguin replied, thoughtlessly, invitingly, unknowingly unleashing a new blight upon the world.

Because Saki was there, and she had seen that pun since they had arrived to the island, and she had to take the chance as soon as she saw it. "Not anymore."

There was a beat of silence in which Bepo seemed a little confused, Shachi, Penguin and Saki stared at each other with understanding, and pressed their mouths shut to keep in the silly giggles. Then Law sighed very loudly, and Shachi broke into a fit of contagious laughter.

The feared crew of the Surgeon of Death advanced through the most dangerous area of the archipelago laughing like the dumbasses they were while they received awed stares.

"I don't get it," Bepo said weakly, and making it even worse.

"That's because you aren't three," Law replied.

"Oh," Bepo said, and after some thought he said, "So should I get another two of the guys?"

Law stared dumbfounded at Bepo as his brain processed the confusion, at which point the other three were wiping tears from their faces.

"I can't take you anywhere," Law grumbled and marched on, pretending he didn't know them, which, considering they liked to plaster their Jolly Roger on everything they wore, wasn't very effective.

And through all this time, no bounty hunters attacked, perhaps because they didn't dare messing with so many of them together, or most likely because they didn't know what to make of the situation.

Things got a little more interesting when they got to grove 21, though.

There wasn't a commotion when they got there. Yet. But the whispers of the people passing by were enough to know where to go, and it only took a minute of looking around to find the source of the general agitation.

Saki knew then that she had been right gauging Killer's hostility levels the day before, because everything about his demeanor right then was screaming that he was going to murder the mountain of a man in front of him. She recognized him as Urouge, 100 million beli, and boy, did he have to
have trouble fitting through doors. He had tribal tattoos in the shape of flames peeking out from his sleeves, and Saki couldn't decide if she liked the aesthetic. It wasn't something she would have chosen, but maybe they were traditional where he was from.

He flung a pillar at Killer and missed, and it was then that Saki noticed he had wings, which could have been natural or a very strange fashion choice. She wasn't one to judge on that regard, though.

Law decided to sit down on a crate to enjoy the show, and the rest of them stood around him, staring at the two Supernovas that were just about to go to town on each other, standing perhaps more straight than usual and trying to look cool and all around impressive. She had the feeling that Penguin was still cracking up on the inside and she had to take a deep breath and concentrate to not join in.

Someone yelled, "There's a monster on the loose!" as soon as Urouge attacked, and Killer leaped at him to retaliate with his blades. The townspeople didn't even have time to vacate the street before someone else jumped in the fray, and she knew that face too.

Seeing X Drake in the flesh and not just his mugshot also prompted the question of why X and not XX. That was confusing. And again, she wasn't one to judge, considering one of her own friends was earnestly named Penguin, but she was finding it hard to believe that parents around the world were as tasteless to name let their kids carry the burden of things like X and Killer in their names. They could at least have dropped the surname, in Drake's case. Other kids must've picked on them like crazy, and that had consequences for a person. They were setting them up for disaster.

Or infamy, as it were.

Law's name was simply cosmic irony.

At any rate, what mattered was that Drake had, at some point of his life, taken the probably drunken decision to tattoo his rather strange surname on his torso, and was shamelessly showing it off as he cut the show short. Saki may have been in luck still, because Law’s hands weren't the most atrocious thing in town.

"If you want to do this, wait until you are in the New World!" Drake yelled.

If he was trying to avoid trouble for him, for them in general, or for civilians, Saki couldn't tell. The guy used to be a Marine before defecting, so he couldn't be completely rotten, right? Those who were always stayed. An alignment crisis was a sign of a working moral compass.

Urouge backed off with a condescending remark towards Killer, which already put him higher in the punchable face list because, if nothing else, Killer had good taste in tattoos and read the newspaper like a respectable person.

Drake walked away from those two, and whether he realized it or not, closer to the Heart Pirates, accompanied by some of his crew. Either he was trying to look cool, or he normally walked in an awfully strung up way.

"That was pretty good just now," Law said when he was close enough to hear. "But Drake… How many men have you killed?"

Saki supposed it was sort of hypocritical of him to stop the mass destruction that would have ensued from the fight when he had a good pile of crimes on his shoulders.

Drake stopped for a moment to look at Law with disdain. "That's none of your business, 'Surgeon of Death.'"
Penguin twitched, about to implode from cheesiness. He had gone from smug smile, to undisguised grin when Law talked, to outright shaking to keep it in. And it was contagious.

Thankfully, Drake walked away with his mean, and as soon as they were out of earshot Saki turned to say something to Penguin and didn't get the chance because Shachi smacked him upside the head and said, "You bastard!"

Saki snorted, Penguin laughed and Law looked at them with interest and sounding just a little bit weary. "What's the matter now?"

"Nothing," all three replied at once.

The rest of the way to the auction was only interrupted a couple times by bounty hunters who had misjudged their lucky day.

The Human Auctioning House was the biggest building Saki had seen yet in the lawless area, at least three stories high with, she guessed from what she could see from the outside, a windowless attic, a skylight, and the rest of the roof covered by moss and grass.

As for the people gathering around the venue, Saki had expected them to be seedy types, because of course no self-respecting person would be caught dead at a place like that, right?

It was a big surprise to see that most of them were perfectly normal looking people who had come to pass the time like someone would go to a theater on their free day. Fancy ladies and gentlemen congregated near the door, which had just been opened. There had to be some sort of security around, if they were hanging out there so nonchalantly. She assumed Marines couldn't be very far, since from what she had gathered their base was only a couple of groves away. That also meant that they were aware of what went on in the auction house and turned a blind eye to it. She wasn't as surprised by this as she should have.

Their group advanced towards the entrance, paying no mind to the murmurs and the glances sent their way, but taking full advantage of the fact that people were scrambling out of their way to get inside the auction house and find good seats.

They settled on the center section, somewhere towards the middle, to have the stage directly in front of them. Law and Penguin sat together, and Bepo, Shachi and Saki sat on the row directly above them.

The place from inside reminded Saki of an auditorium, and it could have perfectly passed for one had it not been for the sign outside that left no doubt as to what went on inside it. And when she paid attention to the far end wall behind the stage and saw the symbols on each side, her heart skipped a beat.

They were eerily similar to the Heart Pirates' Jolly Roger, but smiley flags weren't so uncommon those days. She could swear she'd seen that one somewhere, though not recently. She tried to remember for a while, as the auction house was gradually filled with people and the others made small talk.

She was fairly sure she'd seen it once or twice at the smuggler's hideout in Asteria, but that wasn't strange, since Joker had been behind that too. No, she had a feeling she had come across it somewhere else. And then it hit her that maybe it was a Jolly Roger, not just a creepy little symbol that Joker liked to slap on his stuff.

And when she ran through the database of pirate faces and Jolly Rogers she had in her memory, it
didn't take her much to realize who that one belonged to.

He knew. He had to have known from the start, and she had been too stupid to put together the pieces of the puzzle until that instant.

This was a terrible moment to have such a revelation, because she couldn't exactly take Law by the shoulders shake him silly for being an unrepentant fool. He'd probably taken that into account, too, when he had invited her to go.

Calmly, she leaned forward, rested an arm against the back of Law's seat, and still looking at Donquixote Doflamingo's smiling Jolly Roger whispered, "I'm going to murder you and I know where you sleep."

He gave her a half smile. He'd totally had seen it coming. "We can talk later."

"We will," she assured him.

"Look who showed up," Penguin said suddenly, gesturing at a group next to the entrance.

Saki gave up the threats to look up, and as it turned out, they hadn't been the only notorious pirates interested in the auction. Eustass Kid stood next to Killer and other two of his goons, who made Saki wonder if that crew's joining requirements involved a minimum height limit and looking like a freak of nature. Maybe the guy really cared about their general aesthetic.

Kid was staring at Law, saying something to Killer, and Law answered in kind by flipping him off. Saki hid her face behind a hand for a moment because she didn't know if she should cringe or laugh, and when she looked up again they were still staring, though Kid's grin had turned more threatening. It was hard to figure out what the others were thinking, but since none of them had moved from the spot or even said anything back, she guessed they were not so terribly offended. They must have gotten worse thrown their way on an hourly basis.

Just for kicks, Saki smiled directly at Killer and winked. Kid seemed mighty confused by that and turned to Killer, who shuffled awkwardly in the spot and looked away as his captain questioned him.

Saki laughed out loud, and Shachi, who had no clue what he had just seen, was outraged. "Did you just wink at Fistface?"

"Hell no!" She said, still laughing.

"I saw you wink!"

"I wasn't aiming at him."

He took one last weirded out look at the freakshow before telling Saki, "That's even worse."

"Why, Shachi, I never knew you felt so strongly for me."

He turned red and started spluttering when Bepo offered, "Do I need to kick someone?"

"All of you, stay on your seats," Law said in good humor.

They all replied 'Yes, Captain' with varying degrees of mirth and embarrassment.

The light mood vanished pretty fast when the speakers of the house blared with the voice of an announcer that had just stepped onto the stage, and who would have taken the first place on the competition from Kid if he had been a pirate worth the required amount of money.
The auction started with a young man, supposedly a West Blue pirate that Saki had never heard about, starting at 480 thousand beli. That was how much a life was worth according to these people.

Afterwards was the turn of an older pirate whose bounty she did remember, then two sisters, then a petty criminal, and by then Saki had slid down her seat with her hands together on her stomach and was staring at the ceiling in an attempt to block out what was going on. It didn't surprise her that Joker was behind human trafficking, it had been clear as day as far back as Asteria that he only gave a damn about getting money no matter the means, but, as was the case with the Celestial Dragons, there was a difference between knowing and seeing. Saki really could not fault Law for wanting the man dead. He didn't look comfortable either, even though he hadn't moved from his previous laid-back position, his shoulders were tense and his expression was deadly serious.

Next to her, Shachi looked thoroughly disgusted. "Why the hell are so many people bidding?"

No one replied, but they were equally appalled by the lows they were witnessing.

Saki's list of people who should be dropping dead right that instant had grown to 17 when whispers of a Celestial Dragon entering the venue caught her attention, and it was then that she also saw near the entrance a few Straw Hats.

No Monkey D. Luffy himself, and no Nico Robin in sight, either, but she hoped they weren't a bunch of jerks and she could catch them later to ask for her. Her afternoon may have yet had a silver lining.

Meanwhile, Kid glared at the noble like he thought he would catch fire if he stared enough. The Celestial Dragon didn't even notice it as he left a beaten up man in front of the door and advanced dragging behind him two chained women.

Then the general attention was pulled away from him again, because the pirate they were trying to sell on stage collapsed, and the same public that had been watching a human selling show like it was a perfectly acceptable pastime was now scandalized to see a half-dead man. She couldn't wait to get out of that place.

"What are they shouting for?" Shachi huffed, arms crossed and expression contorted into a sneer. "That's what you get when you sell people like cattle!"

"Shachi," Law said quietly, "keep it down."

The curtains closed, and Penguin muttered, darkly, "I hope he's done the job right, for his own good."

"He had the pride to go out the way he wanted," Law replied. "You've got to give him that."

Saki just thought it was a waste.

There wasn't time for any more conversation, because the auction house's management was in a hurry to sweep the incident under the rug, and the curtains opened once again. It looked like a container covered with a sheet, and the announcer pulled it away to reveal a fish tank with someone inside. A someone with a fish tail where legs should have been.

Saki leaned forward instinctively. "Is that a mermaid?"

And at the same time, the entire venue was filled with an uproar of excited conversation and bidders that was immediately silenced when a shout rang through the air.
"I'll bid five hundred million! Five hundred million beli!"

The tension in the air was palpable as everybody turned to stare at the Celestial Dragon who had yelled. The same man that had come into the auction house only a few minutes before.

Saki saw out of the corner of her eye that the Kid pirates began to move towards the door, and then the unexpected happened.

With a resounding crash and a shower of debris, Straw Hat Luffy and Pirate Hunter Zoro, riding some sort of fish, blew up the entrance and landed only a few rows above Saki and her comrades. That had the welcome side-effect of vacating most of the seats, which gave them a perfect view of what was about to transpire.

Before anybody could realize what was going on, Luffy shouted the mermaid's name, the mermaid shouted back, and he began to make a beeline towards the stage.

He was going on the rescue, and Saki's heart soared like when she read a particularly heroic passage in one of her favorite novels.

In the middle of this, people also noticed that the pirates had arrived in the company of an octopus fishman, and once again, Saki witnessed how the definition of what was acceptable and not was more than a little twisted in the archipelago. They ran away from him, scared, at the same time that a horde of men attempted to restrain Luffy, and the commotion came to a close when someone shot a gun and the fishman fell on the stairs.

Silence fell like a load of bricks as Straw Hat Luffy turned to stare at the Celestial Dragon, who had a gun in his hand. And while the utter psychopath sang and danced because he had taken down the fishman, who would no doubt have been able to snap him in half if he had tried, and relief spread through the audience, Saki didn't lose sight of Luffy. Not one pirate in the room did.

They knew the rumors. They knew that bounty couldn't be for show. They knew that expression on his face, because there wasn't a single one of them that hadn't worn it at some point during their travels, when someone had crossed a red line and turning away was no longer an option.

He walked to his friend and kneeled beside him. They exchanged words that Saki couldn't hear, and the Celestial Dragon made his last mistake when he aimed with his gun again.

He shot.

Luffy lunged at him and smashed in the Celestial Dragon's face, who was sent flying with so much strength that he broke several rows of seat on landing.

The regular people were stunned into terrified silence, but all the pirates present were either unfazed or grinning like maniacs.

Luffy apologized to his crewmates for the incoming Admiral.

Saki laughed. The rumors had been right about someone, for a change.

And then the father of that Celestial Dragon tried to shoot Luffy, and all hell broke loose. The rest of Straw Hats joined the fight, and soon there was an all-out brawl between the Straw Hats, the Celestial Dragon group and the auction house's private security.

Both Heart and Kid pirates stayed where they were, watching the proceedings, which were infinitely more interesting than the show they'd been initially promised.
Saki’s silver lining had outright turned into one of the best days ever, and it only got better when Nico Robin entered flying through the ceiling like an angel with wings made of hands, and another guy fell on top on one of the Celestial Dragons, popped the bubble around his head and slammed him unconscious against the floor.

The entire crew was pure, unadulterated nonsense. She might have become a fan right then and there.

There were tears in the corners of her eyes from so much contained laughter when she heard Shachi say, completely fascinated, "It's like a circus show, but pettier."

Truer words had never been spoken.
"The Marines are already here, Straw Hat-ya."

At Law's prompting, Luffy turned towards the Heart Pirates for the first time. Saki was surprised to see that he was pretty much a kid, and the straw hat on his head added to the child-like effect. She didn't know what she had been expecting, but a scrawny, wide-eyed boy had not been it. Still, appearances didn't mean a thing; he and his crew had come this far, he had wrecked the government's judicial island and he had just punched a Celestial Asswipe in the face, so Luffy was one of her favorite persons in the world at the moment.

He was a ball of chaotic energy, and his focus was immediately stolen by Bepo. She assumed that Law just kept telling him about the Marines nearby because he'd had enough practice reining in his own crew to get sidetracked that easily.

"I don't know who it is they're after, but I doubt they expected anybody to start attacking the Celestial Dragons."

Saki had thought there had to be vigilance around the auction house for security reasons, but she hadn't thought about the possibility that they might be specifically after someone. If anything, what made most sense was that they were on the lookout for pirates, but the Marines would have to be extraordinarily dumb to attack a venue full of civilians when there were five Supernovas inside, not to mention the rest of crew members. So what was going on?

Luffy, who didn't seem to care a lot about Marine presence and less about Law, even when Nico Robin explained to him who he was, kept asking about Bepo, and Saki took the chance to scuttle her
but closer to the stairs to talk to her.

"Are you Nico Robin?" She asked cautiously to catch her attention, though she had it as soon as she had started approaching. That woman was picking up on every movement near her. Saki sadly knew how it felt living in that state of alert. "I wanted to talk to you."

"You're a Heart Pirate too," she said. She didn't sound hostile, but it was obvious that she didn't trust her. "What business do you have with me?"

Saki guessed she didn't have the time to beat around the bush. "It's about Ohara," She said, and Robin's face changed as soon as she uttered that word. "I wanted to show you something, so could we—?"

Saki didn't have time to request a meeting later, because one of the Celestial Dragons, the woman, had gone up to the fish tank where the mermaid was being kept and started screaming like a maniac, threatening to kill her. But before she could, titanic hands ripped the back of the stage, revealing a giant and an elderly man that stepped forward at the same time the Celestial Dragon dropped to the floor, unharmed but unconscious.

Saki's eyes were fixed on the man's figure, nonchalantly walking onto the stage as he drank from a hip flask. She couldn't look away. She didn't know why, but she felt like – no, she knew that that man was the most dangerous person in the auction house at the moment.

According to the guards inside the action house, whose presence she had mostly forgotten as the current spectacle had begun, he was an escaped slave, and if his enthusiasm when he saw the wounded fishman was any indication, they were friends. Rayleigh, the octopus called him, and the name sounded familiar, but she couldn't quite place it at first. He talked like he didn't care about being surrounded by armed guards at all, and Saki couldn't fathom how he had ended up in that situation if he had been the one to drop the crazy lady without touching her.

Rayleigh. Rayleigh… Where had she heard that name before…?

And then it happened.

Like a sudden, silent gust of wind, a rush of something indescribable washed over Saki; a blow to the head that made her vision blurry and her body weak for a second before it was over and everything was back to normal. The guards went down immediately, and the only people left conscious in the auction house were the pirates, the mermaid, and the giant behind the man that had been the source of the blast.

Shachi, next to her, was holding his head and looking fairly pale, but he was okay enough to grumble about it. Other than the surprise, nobody else in their group had been noticeably affected. Penguin had stood up and had his arms crossed in a defensive stance. Law's stare was about to bore a hole in the man's skull, and he had a look on his face that she didn't see very often.

Rayleigh. The name wasn't terribly uncommon, she supposed, but if she tried to remember remarkable people called like that… Oh.

Oh.

Saki's attention was fully captured by Rayleigh again, who was about to remove the collar around the mermaid's neck and making the Straw Hats panic.

She had seen his picture before, when the Roger Pirates had been everywhere in the news, but that had been over twenty years ago, when it hadn't mattered at all to her, and she had always assumed
that the important names of Gold Roger's crew had been captured. Why would the World Government allow his right-hand man to run free?

On the other hand, she couldn't figure out why they wouldn't have announced his execution very loudly, if they had gotten his hands on him. It wasn't like he could do more damage than Roger already had.

If she needed any extra confirmation about his identity, he tore the collar away from the mermaid with his bare hands and threw it away before it could explode.

It was weird enough to randomly cross paths with a living legend to also have him address her and her friends with a backhanded compliment. "So you're pirates hanging around to watch, eh…?" His eyes roamed the hall, taking note of their group and the Kid Pirates. "And if you just took that blast without any trouble, I guess you're not just amateurs, either."

"To think we'd run into a man like him in a place like this…" Law murmured.

Kid was way louder about asking what a man like him was doing there, which, granted, Saki wanted to know too, but you don't talk out loud about someone like he's not right in front of you. Courtesy was lost on that man. She wondered how Killer coped.

After replying that he went by Ray now and he was just a coating engineer, which was about the last answer Saki expected, Rayleigh returned to his business with the Straw Hats, and now that the moment had passed, it was time to think about getting out of the auction house.

"So that just happened," Penguin declared. "What now?"

"We shouldn't have any trouble if we go out now," Law told them. "And I don't think anybody wants to sit back and wait for an Admiral."

Meanwhile, the Marines were blaring through speakers on the outside that they better release the Celestial Dragons, like they actually had any intentions of keeping them around for whatever purpose. It was frankly insulting. They government could handle their garbage on their own.

"Looks like we're involved in this whether we like it or not…” Law commented. "They're acting as though we're his accomplices."

Shachi chuckled at that. "What's new?"

"And who can blame them, really?" Saki said, looking at the entrance and seeing the Kid Pirates making their way towards it.

Penguin, ever the optimist, asked, "Do you think it'll add to our bounties?"

"Let's get—" Law started, but the most obnoxious person in the vicinity had to raise his voice to be heard by everybody.

"We'll be heading on ahead, if you don't mind," said Kid, grinning and then turning his back on everybody. "Oh, and while we're at it, we'll do you guys a favor! We'll take out the guys hanging around out front, so don't you worry about your little selves."

Law and Luffy didn't take that well.

Without uttering a single word, Law stood up, gestured at Bepo to pass him Kikoku and began to walk towards the stairs, strategic retreat forgotten.
"Are you really taking the bait?" Saki asked, as he passed next to her.

"That asshole's not telling me what to do."

And it seemed like Straw Hat was thinking along the same lines, because they both left the auction house side by side.

"Do we need to have a pissing contest right now?" Saki asked to nobody in particular. She knew it wasn't going to stop anything, so why try? "With an Admiral on the way?"

"It's a guy thing," Shachi replied.

Penguin agreed. "You wouldn't understand. Right, Bepo?"

"Yeah."

Outnumbered and feeling like the only sensible person in the group, which didn't happen often, she decided to drop the subject and got up. "Okay then, I'm going to see what they do. Offer moral support or something."

"We're coming too," Shachi said, filing out of the seats right behind her. The Straw Hats had begun to move as well, but everybody seemed committed to stand back and let the captains wreck shit. Kid Pirates included, as she saw when she was by the door.

"Should've brought pom-poms," Penguin whispered at his friends.

The Auction House had been completely surrounded by Marines, and Law, Luffy and Kid were just standing in front of them bickering like children to see who went first. There wasn't much reason for concern at the moment, but Saki didn't think it was so wise to waste time bickering when they were at Marineford's doorstep.

She eyed Robin coming out of the building as well and left the guys for a moment to speak to her. In the background, the Marines had started screaming, and she glanced at the pirate captains to see Straw Hat stretching his fingers to make a net and Kid levitating cannonballs and weapons around. Law was doing his thing too, it just wasn't news for her.

"What do you know about Ohara?" Robin asked before she could speak.

"Does the name Clover Dubia ring a bell?" Saki tried.

The suspicion in her eyes vanished as they widened. "Clover? Professor Clover's daughter?"

At Robin's question, the other Straw Hat girl turned to look at them. What was her name? 'Cat Burglar' Nami. Right. The rest were too busy staring at the captains.

Saki hesitated. It felt weird to speak of her family to a complete stranger. "That was my mom."

"That can't be," Robin replied. "She was on the expedition, and the only person who survived was..." She trailed off.

"She left the expedition before the World Government found them. Moved to North Blue, married, and vanished sixteen years ago."

Robin was speechless for a moment. "I see. So she's also...?"

"Probably," Saki said. She didn't want to talk about it, but she supposed she had to be honest with
Robin if she was going to ask something of her. "We never knew for sure, since there wasn't any trace, and we assumed it had been the criminals in my hometown, but…"

"That sounds a lot like what almost happened to you," said Nami to Robin. Her voice was friendly, and she didn't seem to regard Saki as a threat.

"What do you mean?" Saki asked, curious.

"Cipher Pol caught up to me a while ago," Robin explained. "I was headed for Impel Down, but my friends helped me." She smiled. Nami, behind her, grinned with a slight blush.

"That's what the Enies Lobby business was about?!" Saki exclaimed. "So you can really read them? Those giant blocks of stone my mom was studying?"

"You mean the Poneglyphs? I can."

Saki felt like she had won the lottery. "I've got something for you! Can I see you later?"

The captains had already taken out the Marines circling the auction house and the remaining soldiers were threatening them with reinforcements. It would be a good idea to scatter and lay low until the impending threat of an admiral wasn't hovering over them.

"There's a bar on Grove 13. Do you think you can meet me there in three days?"

"I'll definitely try," Saki said. She supposed it would be enough time for the situation to calm down. "Thank you!"

Robin chuckled at her enthusiastic reply, and Saki was making her way to her friends humming a butchered tune when someone interrupted her as she passed near Kid's group.

Killer was rubbing the chin of his mask as he spoke to her. "May I ask you a question?"

"I had definitely try," Saki said. She supposed it would be enough time for the situation to calm down. "Thank you!"

Saki's face brightened with the prospect of a sale. "Sure! Is it about what we talked about?"

"The tattoos on your captain's hands, did you…?"

Saki's cheer disappeared instantly and she felt a swirl of negative emotions build up inside her. "Hell no," she said, stressing both syllables. "Screw the One Piece, I'm going to kill him after today," she said to herself as she ran her hands over her face, and since she had no more fucks to give, she said to Killer, pointing violently at Law. "Do you know how long I've been trying to get him to let me fix them? A year. One. Whole. Year. And he doesn't give a damn that it makes me look bad!"

"Oh." He made a thoughtful pause. "So he's like that too."

It was one of those rare and valuable moments were a deep connection between two strangers, based solely on unspoken understanding and shared experiences, took place.

"I have a feeling that you and I could get along," she commented. "Shame we're enemies. Anyway, think about the tattoo?"

He nodded at her as he crossed his arms, and when he looked back at his captain, Kid was about to be attacked by a Marine and too busy metaphorically drilling a hole into Luffy's head to care, so Killer jumped into the fray and Saki rejoined her crew.

"You're doing a lot of fraternizing with the enemy," Shachi said accusingly.
"I'm a busy woman, Shachi," she said, and they were about to start a sarcastic back and forth when the rest of Kid Pirates joined the fight and Law called for Bepo, who immediately ran to take care of a Marine attacking him.

"Time to go," Penguin said, stretching his arms, but then saw Law walking towards the bottom of the stairs, where a large man sat, watching the chaos unfold with an unreadable expression.

There was something familiar about his face, but judging by the collar around his neck, if she had seen a bounty with his face, it must have been a while ago.

Using his Room and Shambles, Law removed the collar and let it explode away from them.

"Will you come with me, pirate captain Jean Bart?"

Ooh. She remembered now. Saki didn't know what to think about the flame tattoos on his forehead, but they weren't the worst in the vicinity by far.

"It's been a while since I've been called that," he replied with a gruff voice, and then got up and effortlessly swatted away two Marines about to attack them. "If you'll free me from the Celestial Dragons, I'll gladly serve under you."

Saki didn't think anybody in their crew had ever thought about their status as serving under Law after ten minutes of knowing him.

She started descending the stairs with Shachi and Penguin to join the brawl, and as she passed Law, she heard him chuckle and comment, "Well, half the credit should go to Straw Hat-ya."

They cleared the remaining Marines on their way quickly and ran away from the Auction House before reinforcements could come, and while the Straw Hats and Rayleigh split away from the main group, the Heart Pirates had the dubious luck of heading in the same general direction as Kid's.

The new addition to the crew was at the back of the group, and as they stepped on the next grove, he smashed the bridge connecting them with a single punch to keep the Marines from giving them chase, with Bepo close by, trying to establish from the beginning who was boss.

Poor darling got too much crap from the others on a daily basis, Saki thought, but Jean Bart seemed to be fine with Bepo's demands. She wasn't sure what to think, given that the guy had been a pirate captain and was used to be the one giving orders, but she supposed everything beat being a Celestial Dragon's slave.

Shachi, who was ahead of everybody else, suddenly shouted, "Captain! That's…"

The incomplete sentence sounded more ominous than a full one would have. Saki stopped on her tracks to look where Shachi was pointing at, and she was able to make out two silhouettes in the middle of a cloud of dust.

It seemed that Kid was fighting someone much bigger than him, and as the air cleared, Saki's blood turned ice cold and she looked around to see in her friends' faces the expression universally known as 'oh, shit.'

"What's a Shichibukai doing here?" Law said, putting in words what everybody was thinking.

Because the big man in front of them either was Bartholomew Kuma or his identical, equally unfashionable twin brother. Law wore the spotted look better.
The man saw them and spoke. "Trafalgar Law…"

Law's smirk was all edges. He was getting nervous. "So you know my name, do you…?"

Saki didn't have time to reflect on how frightening it was to have such tangible proof that they were on the government's radar, because Law had barely finished his sentence when Kuma shot a beam from his mouth that turned the root where Law had been standing to splinters. Saki had no idea what that was, since light wasn't supposed to make things go boom.

"Captain!" Bepo shouted, panicky, but Law had landed safely next to Kid.

Jean Bart, on the other hand was rather calm, considering the situation. "We're right by Marine Headquarters and Mary Geoise, so it shouldn't be surprising no matter who we run into…"

So much for not having a lot of surveillance on the island, despite the concentration of notorious pirates.

"The Marines are closing in from behind!" Penguin warned.

Saki glanced at the destroyed bridge and the soldiers climbing through the remains, then at Law. "Captain, we really need to hurry!" It was nice that the two figurative monsters in front of Kuma were impervious to bullets and cannon fire, but the rest of them were significantly squishier and she'd rather not get shot at by so many people at once, because someone was bound to hit by random luck.

And Law was busy arguing with Kid, apparently. Penguin and Shachi were getting fidgety, and Saki was about to start nagging Law when he decided that he was done trying to look cool in front of a rival crew and it was time to go in search of greener pastures.

"We've come across a lot of unexpected big shots today, and I sure as hell don't want to meet an admiral after this, so we'll be taking our leave," he said as the first signs of a Room swirled around his left hand, "Bartholomew Kuma!"

Saki guessed that not acknowledging Kid's presence during the farewell was his way to say fuck you too, and then the Room stretched out enough to swallow all their crewmates and a few Kid Pirates. The Kuma in front of them took off a glove and shot another beam from the palm of his hand at the same time that Saki got a sinking feeling in her stomach and stumbled forward onto Jean Bart.

"Sorry," she said, thinking that it was a fantastic way to introduce herself to a new crew member. At least she consoled herself when she saw that he and Law had been the only two to land gracefully when they were swapped by a handful of rocks that had been behind Kuma.

"Let's go!" Law said, and on cue, they started to run after him.

The path was clear for a while, since the fight had done a great job of driving everybody away. Even after they left that grove they didn't see many people, likely because the kind of folks to be found in the lawless areas were the most interested in not running into an Admiral, and while they encountered some sort of resistance in the form of a group of Marines, they made quick work of them.

The hotel area was already in sight when they were faced a slightly bigger problem.

"It can't be," Penguin said, staring, once again at Kuma's towering figure right in front of them.

"No way." Shachi looked behind them for a second. "There's no way he got ahead of us."
Saki noticed that he looked different than before. "He has both gloves and no scratches."

"It has to be another," Law replied, slightly out of breath from all the running and unsheathing Kikoku.

Kuma was blocking the way, so there was no way to go but through him.

"You mean there's more than one?!" Bepo exclaimed.

Nobody replied, because they were too busy getting out of the way as soon as they saw Kuma open his mouth, and after a very brief warning of light building up, another beam of made a smoking hole in the ground where they had stood.

Bepo, who was closest to Kuma, jumped at him with a battle cry and a flying kick, then a punch charged with electricity.

It was the first time Saki had seen it, even though she'd heard Bepo comment sometime that all people of his race could do that, but she didn't think he had used it any of the times they'd fought together, at least not while she was looking. She wondered if Law had learned that from him.

In any case, the sparks surrounding his paw passed onto Kuma as he tried to swat Bepo away, and the limb that received the impact seemed to be stuck of a moment.

Law took the chance to swap Bepo out of the way and place Jean Bart in the front line, who was the same size as Kuma and was able to stop him with both hands.

"You okay, Bepo?" Shachi shouted.

"He's tough!" He was flexing his paw. The hit he had landed must have hurt.

"He's a Shichibukai, he's supposed to be!"

"I mean his body!"

"Really," Saki muttered, unsheathing her own sword and running at Kuma while he was distracted with Jean Bart.

Penguin had had the same idea, and as she tried to slice at one of Kuma's legs, only to cringe inside when her shiny new sword clashed against him with a metallic sound rebounded, he attacked Kuma from the other side, with Shachi assisting him.

She fell back as she saw them kicking him to no avail. "That's not flesh!" She yelled at them. "I think he's a robot!"

"Let's find out," Law said, and with a sweeping motion with Kikoku, he sliced both of Kuma's arms, which Jean Bart then tossed away. The clean cuts on his arms revealed tissue, metal and wires.

Bepo took the chance to leap at him once more, kicking and punching the open wound directly with electricity. Kuma's movement seemed to falter, and as he opened his mouth, Law cut his neck and flung the head away. The beam came out, but it impacted on a building, and the neck opening showed more of the same that was in the arms.

"Interesting," Law said, picking up one of the cut forearms. "It looks like a cyborg," he said. But he wasn't expecting the beam that came out of the palm of the hand, ripping the glove and nearly hitting him in the process, because this time he did land on his butt when he swapped himself with the other
arm.

That stray beam passed by Kuma's body and made a scratch on it, so Bepo gave it another kick there for good measure, and then Law, with one last attack, jumped and drove Kikoku through its center.

The cyborg Kuma stopped, smoking and sparking, and Law's right arm looked kind of stiff when he removed the sword from the body.

"You're telling us there are more of these running around the island?" Shachi said incredulously.

"I've heard the Celestial Dragons talk about experiments," Jean Bart commented. "Half human and half machine. They're called Pacifistas."

"Since when does the government have these?" Law asked.

"I have no idea."

"But why Kuma?" Saki said. "It's weird to make copies of a Shichibukai when you've got the original."

"Dude's big and imposing," Penguin suggested. "It does the job of scaring people."

"I guess," she said, not entirely convinced, but thinking his reasoning made a lot of sense.

Meanwhile, Bepo was sniffing the air, and when Law saw it, he asked, "Any news?"

"A group's approaching. We should go."

"He's right," Jean Bart said. "We're too close to the Marine base."

Law nodded, and they resumed their escape towards the Polar Tang, keeping an eye out for any crewmates that could be on the street. Until the dust settled, Sabaody wasn't safe anymore for them.

Saki ran downstairs to round up everybody, splitting from Shachi and Penguin as they went further down to the boiler room, and she saw Mack coming out of the men's quarters with the World Economic Journal in hand.

"Mack, we need to leave. Is everybody on board?"

"Hm? Yeah, Uni's in the bathroom and the others are in bed. Why?"

"What... It's six! They're still hungover?!"

"Don't shoot the messenger," he replied with a shrug.

Saki took a deep breath and summarized the situation as best as she could. "Straw Hat Luffy punched a Celestial Dragon, an Admiral's on the way, and there are a handful of cyborgs in the shape of a Shichibukai running around the archipelago."

Mack stared at her silently for a beat. "Got it." And throwing the newspaper at her, he turned around, saying, "You should read that," and then kicked the door of the men's quarter's open and yelled, "Everybody up or I'm bringing the pans and pots!"

Saki heard the weak groans and protests, but stopped paying attention the moment she saw the headline of the newspaper's extra issue, and her jaw went slack as the news sunk in.
"Captain!" She yelled immediately, turning around the way she had come and skipping stairs, "Captain!" There's something you should—"

She bumped into Law at the top of the stairs, and since apparently everybody around her had a body built with the consistency of rocks, she just shoved the paper at him as she took a moment to recover from the impact.

"What's going…?" He had begun to say as she handed him the newspaper, and then his eyes set on the headline.

Saki was starting to get used to the square-mouth look.

"HQ wants all available units stationed at Marineford in a week. You shouldn't miss it, Marina. For several reasons."

"I know. We're close enough, there shouldn't be a problem to get there in time. I just…” She let the sentence die in her lips, but Curtiss wanted to hear it anyway.

"What is it?"

Her free hand absentmindedly fidgeted with her shirt over the spot where her heart should have been. A nervous habit that she was picking up and should get under control before it was too late. "How are the Enies Lobby survivors dealing with… everything?"

The man grumbled. "Badly. Buster Calls aren't designed for people to 'deal' with."

"We just lost our judicial island to a pirate attack, and with all those men on leave, they're deciding to start a war now? I don't get it."

"We don't need to get it." His reply didn't leave any room for debate. "Orders are orders, and we—"

"—need to trust them to be for the greater good." Curtiss had told her this many times, in and outside of the naval academy. She understood the message, even if she didn't like it. "I know."

"See you in a few days. Take care, Mari."

Marina's guilty thoughts returned to the empty space on her chest. "You too, Rear Admiral."

Saki would never be entirely sure of how Jean Bart managed to pass through the door of the Polar Tang. Any of the doors, in fact. The anticipation of him getting stuck in one or bonking his head against the doorframe would never completely go away, even after years of knowing him.

And, seeing as they had only met a few hours ago, the feeling was at full throttle at the moment.

While they made their getaway from Sabaody for the time being, Law took Jean Bart to the sickbay, Mack shut himself in the galley as soon as he was told of the situation, and Saki took his clothes to wash while they tried to find him something else to wear, which didn't look like it was going to happen, since the man was way bigger than Bepo and they didn't have anything that would fit.

While they tumbled in the dryer, she also went on a hunt for the largest clean towels they had so he could at least take a good deserved shower when Law was done with the check up.

When she was done, she took everything upstairs and knocked on the sickbay's door as well as she could with full hands and a pile of fabric obstructing her line of sight. "It's me!" She said.
It was Law who replied. "Come in."

He was checking Jean Bart's blood pressure, who was sitting on a cot, wearing a makeshift hospital gown made with bedsheets.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't find any other clothes that would fit, but here's the ones you were wearing and some fresh towels. I would have left them in the bathroom, but Penguin and Shachi are still hogging the showers."

"You can go now," Law told Jean Bart, and Saki offered the man the clothes and towels when he got up. "The bathroom is downstairs, you can't miss it."

"Not with the two idiots bickering inside," Saki added.

"Thank you," Jean Bart said, and he left the sickbay walking with a little bit of difficulty. Saki assumed he must have been exhausted after all he'd been through.

"No problem!" She replied, her attention fixed on a mark on his back that peeked out from the top of the gown. "Does he have a burn?" She asked Law when Jean Bart was out of sight.

"It's the so-called 'Hoof of the Soaring Dragon,'" he said as he reached into a cabinet and took out a medicine box, checking what was inside. "Can you get the vitamin and iron supplements?"

"Sure," Saki, who had helped tidy up the sickbay more times than she could count, didn't need to be told where to look to find them right away. She went to give them to Law, but he didn't take them, and instead gestured with his head towards the door. "What's that thing?" She asked, waiting near the door for him.

"Celestial Dragons mark their slaves like cattle," he said as he walked out.

Saki followed him on his way to the galley. "What the fuck," she muttered, and then much louder. "What's wrong with them? Who do they think they are?"

"Gods."

"Snot-nosed bastards who run crying to mommy Admiral when someone's mean to them."

"That's what everybody else thinks they are," Law said with a wry smile.

She huffed, but she couldn't deny that the aroma seeping into the mess hall from the galley improved her mood. "How's your arm, by the way?"

He glanced at her. "Hm?"

"You got shocked when you stabbed that fake Kuma, didn't you?"

He paused for a moment mid-step to look at her, but whatever he thought in that fleeting moment, she couldn't tell. "I'm fine. It was only numb for a while."

"Well, you only have one right arm, so take better care of it," she joked.

Saki was then struck by a sudden palm on her back, and so was Law. "Real good advice," Shachi said behind them. "Nights at sea are cold and lonely."

Saki snorted as she held in a bout of laughter and Law drove an elbow back to hit Shachi, though he was smiling anyway, "Shut up."
"Done frolicking in the water?" Saki asked, looking at Shachi and seeing Penguin was there too, grinning.

"We smelled the food," Penguin replied. "Ran into the big guy on the way up. We don't have a bed that size, do we?"

"What do I pay you for?" Law said. "Cobble something together."

Penguin laughed. "At your orders, Captain."

They stopped right at the edge between the galley and the mess hall, because Mack didn't like so many people inside his kitchen and they valued their lives, so Law then took the bottles from Saki and approached Mack to show him something.

"So… what's the plan?" Shachi asked. "We can't go to Fishman Island."

"We'll have to hang near the archipelago until the dust settles," Law replied. "Besides, the newspaper said the execution next week will be broadcasted there. I want to see how it goes."

"…Underwater?" Penguin asked, clearly asking the important questions and hoping for a negative answer.

"We'll be sitting ducks if we stay on the—"

Law's reply was received by a chorus of groans. Even Mack let out a tired breath.

Law opened his mouth to say something, had second thoughts, and just replied, "Yeah, I know, but it will only be a few days, and with the execution coming up, I don't think Marines are going to have a lot of time for us."

"They're really doing it, huh," Mack commented.

"If they're looking for a war, they're gonna have one," Shachi said.

A contemplative silence descended on them, no one quite sure what to say, until Penguin suddenly said, "So. The Auction House."

Saki's and Shachi's eyes glinted, Law couldn't hold back a smirk, and Mack, who hadn't been at the scene but had absolute confidence in everybody's abilities to cook up a disaster, said, "What did you do this time?"

Saki had been worried at first that she wouldn't be able to make it to the meeting place to see Nico Robin, but then the newspaper came announcing that the Straw Hats had been given a good beating by Batholomew Kuma and were nowhere to be found, and she traded worry for sulkiness. It didn't say they had been captured, though, so she held onto that. After seeing them in action, she found it hard to believe that they could be removed out of the picture so easily. They would show up again. They had to, because if not, she was going to be very pissed off. What was she supposed to do with the inscription on that rock, should they not? She wasn't a scholar and had no intentions of becoming one.

Aside from the Nico Robin situation, she read that Admiral Kizaru had captured five hundred pirates during his incursion in Sabaody and counted herself lucky to not have run into him, the civilians living in Marineford were getting evacuated to Sabaody, and Shichibukai Jinbei had apparently refused to fight in the coming war and had been sent to Impel Down, though strangely enough, his
title hadn't been revoked. Perhaps they were hoping for him to change his mind.

At least Law's prediction about the Marines not paying them attention had become true, and they truly must have had a lot of work, between preparations, all the recently captured pirates and the sunken ships that had been tailing Whitebeard. She had to wonder if any of the other Supernovas had tried to go to Fishman Island right after fleeing the archipelago or if, knowing that a fleet was going through in a matter of days, they had decided to hang back and wait. As for them, they remained at sea for a handful of days, but decided to set course to Sabaody once again a couple days before the execution.

By then, Jean Bart had had some time to get settled in, and while he still was in dire need of new clothes, he looked more relaxed and energetic than when he had joined. He'd been talking to Bepo and Law, since he had navigation skills, and now Bepo could split the shifts at the helm between both of them and Sturgeon. Their furry navigator looked happier and better rested.

Saki was sitting on the lower deck, unwilling to miss the chance of breathing fresh air for the first time in days, and finishing a Sabaody landscape on her sketchbook when Jean Bart showed up. They hadn't seen much in the way of sun in the last few days, and most of the crew was outside, on the main deck.

He sat not too far away from her, silently staring at the sea and the sky for a few minutes, until his gaze fell on Saki.

"Are you drawing?" He asked, and she looked up from her work with a smile and showed him the sketchbook. "Shachi told me you're a tattoo artist."

"Yup. And since I don't have many customers nowadays, I need to practice however I can."

"He said you're from North Blue, too," he continued. "You've come a long way with this crew."

"It'll soon be a year," she commented, and asked, "You want to ask me about the captain of the ship?"

Jean Bart's brow furrowed. "How did you know?"

"Because if I was in your place, I'd like to know more." She spoke from experience.

A few quiet seconds went by as Jean Bart thought his next words. "I thought it'd be best to ask you. You can learn a lot from a captain from how he treats the women on board."

It was Saki's turn to be surprised at his insight. "I hadn't thought about that," she admitted. "Well, it's not like I've been on any other ships, but…" She ran a hand through her hair, trying to remember how it was when she had joined the crew. It felt like a lifetime ago. "Yeah, I wasn't too sold on the idea of being the only woman in the submarine at first. Law's always been fine, though. Everybody, really. I've never had any problems with them. They're good people."

He nodded slowly. "I can tell. I didn't know what to think at first, but…"

Saki hummed. "I don't think Law freed you to make you join the crew. It was probably the other way around," she said, and kept on explaining as she saw Jean Bart's confused expression. "You know, like, asking you to join was the excuse he used to help you out. Don't tell him, but he's kind of a bleeding heart. I think he just didn't want to leave you there." She shrugged, smiling. "And I don't think he'll be against it if you don't want to stay with us. He's not like that."

"It's good to know."
"Are you thinking about leaving?"

He shook his head. "I have nowhere to go. I lost my crew, my ship, and I'm a wanted man. I'd like to repay my debt with the captain."

She smiled. "You're giving me flashbacks from a year ago."

"What do you mean?"

She smiled a little, deciding to keep that to herself. "Things will work out, you'll see. We're an idiot family."

Days went by slowly until they were able to head back to Sabaody.

As soon as they docked, this time in the tourist area, some of the guys accompanied Jean Bart to get new clothes, but Penguin and Shachi, specifically, went off on their own, not before telling Saki that they were going to get something and she was going to love it. She was invaded by a mild feeling of dread as they rode away on those rented bubble bike thingies.

"Scary," she whispered. She was holding a cardboard file filled with papers and wondering if it was the right thing to bring them out at all.

Law, who was still hanging around, asked, "What are they up to?"

"No idea," she said, glanced around to make sure nobody was listening, and said, "I need to go to Grove 13. Nico Robin told me to meet her there a few days ago, and I don't think she made it either, but, you know… I'd like to check."

Law noticed the file in her hands. "Is that what you got from the cave?"

She nodded. Bepo and Mack were chatting as they came closer, and she directed a fleeting, uncomfortable glance at them. She didn't mind if they found out what she wanted to do, but she did not want to talk about her parents at the moment. It had been a good day so far, and she wasn't in the mood to recount sad stories.

Law picked up on her discomfort, because he looked at them and said, "Bepo, you go without me today. We need to go somewhere."

"Oh, okay!" He replied, surprised but otherwise looking perfectly fine with it. "Is it alright if I go ask for coating engineers' prices?"

"You'd be doing us a favor."

Bepo beamed at him and told Mack to follow him. Mack just waved at them before going.

"Grove 13, you said?" Law asked.

"Hm-hm. That should be…" She tried to recall the groves' layout. "We're on the opposite side of the archipelago now, right?"

"Yeah. I think it's that way," Law said, pointing deeper into the mangrove forest.

"Not like we can get lost with those numbers painted on the trees," Saki commented happily, and they started to walk to the meeting place.
After a few minutes in companionable silence, simply watching the island as it had gone back to normal, she said. "Thanks for coming with me. I know you have things to do."

He dismissed it. "I don't want anybody going out alone here."

"Well then, thank you for making room in your busy schedule for me."

"That's not what I—I had nothing else going on." He sighed, and she knew that wasn't entirely true, since he still needed to find a coating engineer, so that was probably what made him shift the subject. "You haven't told anybody else yet, have you?"

Her sigh was deeper and way more tired. "It's not the sort of topic you can bring up over coffee, you know? Besides, what am I supposed to say? My dead mom's related to other dead people that were doing things the government didn't like and I found an inscription I can't read?"

Law deadpanned. "Point taken," he conceded, and then saw something unfamiliar from the corner of his eye. "What's that?"

Saki looked in that direction too and saw a few men hammering wooden posts into the ground. "New signposts?"

"I don't think so, they're in the way. Maybe they're for—?"

Saki located the closest vendor, a young woman with pink hair in a ponytail, and went to the stall. It was full of overpriced New World merchandise and, in the deepest recesses of her heart, wanted one of each.

"Excuse me," she asked in a cheery tone. "Do you know what they're building up there?"

"Screens," said the vendor. "They're for the execution's broadcast tomorrow."

Saki's smile froze, and the girl likely thought she didn't know what she meant, because she insisted. "You know Portgas D. Ace was captured, right? It was announced a few days ago."

Law approached them at that moment, and Saki was waiting for him to complain about her skipping off while they were talking, but something on the stall had caught his attention.

"Oh, yes," Saki said, laughing it off with a humorless laughter. "I just thought it may have been something else."

"I guess the Marines are making an example of him," she commented. "Kind of a shame, if you ask me. He's cute, don't you think?"

Saki didn't know what to say, because she had only seen pictures of the man and she wasn't exactly looking for marriage prospects when she went through the bounties of the day. Law's eyes flicked to her briefly, and she was about to agree with the vendor out of politeness when she was interrupted.

"Oh, what am I thinking!" The girl said, hiding a laugh behind a dainty hand. "Don't worry, you don't have to answer. I didn't mean to make things awkward." She said that last line to Law, and while Saki had been a millisecond away from telling her that she had it all wrong, she refrained from doing so when Law was caught completely off guard by the assumption. It had been a while. "Are you interested in anything?" The vendor asked him. "I see you staring at our Red Line coins."

Saki observed the exchange curiously. She saw a range of subtle emotion pass through Law's face, from the initial confusion, to surprise, to… mild embarrassment?
He cleared his throat. "Um, yes. How much are they?"

Saki would swear he was feeling physical pain asking for the price. Which she didn't get.

"Just two thousand belis! They're from a limited series printed earlier this year to commemorate the construction of the Marine base in the archipelago." She smiled brightly at Law. "Do you want one?"

He thought about it for far too long for something he obviously wanted. "...Yes, please."

Saki watched the rest of the transaction quietly, and when they left the stall she had to say something, firstly because she really wanted to, and secondly because Law was expecting a comment and he looked like he was going to explode with pent up tension if she didn't do something soon.

"I don't know what happened there, but it was fascinating," she said, smiling at him.

"Shut up."

"I didn't know you liked coins."

"I don't l..." He sighed. "Don't tell anybody."

Her smile grew. "Do you have a collection? Can I see it?"

"No."

"I'll keep your secret!"

Law, getting redder with every comment, started walking faster because he knew Saki would have to run to keep the pace, and she didn't mind because it had been worth it.

The banter lasted until they reached Grove 13 and they found nothing save a run-down building with a sign that said Shakky's Ripoff Bar.

"That doesn't inspire a lot of confidence," Saki said.

He was looking around, in case they had missed something, to no avail. "Are you sure this is the place?"

"It has to be. There's nowhere else."

The door creaked like the hinges hadn't been oiled in a decade and they entered the bar. It was as empty as the area outside, save for a tall, dark-haired woman behind the counter, who was cleaning a glass while she smoked.

She put the glass down as soon as she saw them and picked up the cigarette between two long, delicate fingers. "Well, look what the cat dragged in." There was a knowing smile on her face. "Robin told me you might show up," she said to Saki.

"Was she here? I couldn't make it after what happened at the Auction House, but—"

The woman raised a hand to make her stop, and Saki's renewed hope fizzled out. "She didn't make it, either. Do you follow the news?"

"Yeah," Saki said, letting the disappointment show. "I figured as much."
"I'm sure she'll be back," the bartender comforted her. "Do you want to leave her a message?"

"Sure." Saki hadn't thought of that, so it took her a bit to come up with something. "Tell her Professor Clover's granddaughter has something for her, no matter when we run into each other."

The last part of the message was the important one. She didn't want Robin to think that she wasn't going to show her what she had because they hadn't been able to meet this once.

"I'll pass it on," she replied with a kind smile. "And by the way," she nodded at Law. "Good job at the Auction House."

"That was mostly Straw Hat-ya."

"Don't be so modest. I'm rooting for the new generation." She chuckled. "Though Luffy comes first, of course."

Saki couldn't blame her, after the show he had put up the other day. "Well, thank you, miss…?"

"Shakky. And I guess it's missus, too."

"I'll remember that," Saki said, nodding. "We'll be going now."

She waved at them. "Safe travels."

They left the bar, and Saki waited for the door to close behind them to let out a long sigh.

"Disappointed?" Law asked.

"But not surprised," she replied.

"There'll be other chances."

"Yeah," she agreed, trying to convince herself. "Sorry to make you come here for nothing."

He knocked on her head and she winced in reflex. "Don't be silly. I wouldn't have if I minded."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Now that's not true."

"Prove it," he said with a smirk.

"I don't need to. You know, I know, that's enough for me."

They didn't pass through Grove 1 on the way back, but the remains of the Auction House were visible from one of the bridges they crossed, and Saki stopped for a moment to look at it.

Same as with the topic of her mother and the others, she hadn't found the moment in the last few days to bring up the subject of Joker. Everybody was in such a good mood with all that was happening and the new addition to the crew that she didn't want to be a downer. But she had to say something, sooner or later, and she figured there was no point on waiting any longer.

"How long have you known?" She asked, eyeing the half-destroyed walls.

"About Joker?"

"Yeah."

"Always," he admitted, and she had expected that answer. She didn't expect what came after,
though. "I used to work for him before he was a Shichibukai."

"You..." She saw Law's gaze lost somewhere between the trees. It was clear that he was more inside his thoughts than in the real world, at present. "That was like ten years ago. You had to be a kid."

While she was surprised by it, it was also reassuring that it had been so long ago. She would have felt more conflicted about it if he had been working for the man until recently, and it was a possibility that she had considered with anxiety before. She knew it was selfish, but she didn't want the way she saw him to change. Something in the foundations of the world she had been constructing since she left her home island would crack.

"I joined the Donquixote Family after I escaped Flevance. He was building his empire in North Blue by then. Then something happened and I split from them."

She took it that he meant that someone he had spoken of before. "Was it that person?"

"Hm?"

"The one you want to repay."

"Yeah." The confirmation weighed like a ton of bricks.

"By going against a crime lord endorsed by the World Government," she said.

"And a king," he added.

"A what?" She asked, perplexed.

"Doflamingo's king of a country called Dressrosa."

She hid her face behind both hands. "Where's that even? New World?"

"New World," he confirmed.

She exhaled loudly through her nose. "What a mess."

"It doesn't concern you, anyway," he said, trying to take importance off it. "It's my personal problem, so don't—"

She smacked him on the right arm he should have been more careful with. "How can you be so dense? Of course it concerns me, what happens to you concerns me! Are you aware of how many people care about you, Law?"

He blanked out for a few seconds. "I—I don't know." He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. "In any case, I don't know if I should've told you sooner, but you were already dealing with..." He trailed off when he saw her glaring at him with puffed out her cheeks.

"I don't want your excuses," she retorted. "Liar."

"I didn't lie."

"Lies by omission are still lies," she said, poking his chest with an accusing finger, fully aware that she was a hypocrite and not caring about it. Part of it was childish annoyance that he knew everything about her while he still kept things hidden from her, but also worry that he was going to get in over his head and no one would be able to help if he kept being so secretive. "I know I told you that you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, but... don't you think this was
relevant?"

"I didn't want to worry you unnecessarily."

"It's for me to decide if it's necessary or not."

"It's always necessary for you."

"You!" She exclaimed, indignant. "You're getting on my case for being a worrier?"

They stared at each other for a few seconds, both thinking of a way to keep bickering and realizing at the same time this was a very stupid argument not worth having.

"Gah." Saki shook her head slowly, and then she dove in for a quick, unsolicited hug because she wanted one and felt that the selfishness was justified, given the circumstances. "Why do you have to be so complicated?" She said against his chest.

She felt him freeze up under the touch and was already releasing him, feeling just slightly guilty for making him uncomfortable, when one of his arms wrapped around her back.

"I don't think you have any right to complain on that front," he said, rubbing his thumb on her back in a soothing motion. She wasn't sure who it was meant for.

"We'll find a way. We killed a Shichibukai cyborg the other day, how hard can it be to take down the real deal?" She laughed insincerely.

His chest rumbled with a chuckle, and Saki was torn between melting into the hug and punching him in the solar plexus.

"I'm sure it will go down smoothly." And as he let her go, he said. "By the way, I was thinking…"

She raised a pair of questioning eyebrows at him.

"…Maybe it's about time to fix these," he said, lifting a hand casually.

And even though she should have wanted to punch him even harder, she couldn't help the rush of euphoria that coursed through her body at that simple comment.

Saki was back in front of the Polar Tang with Law when she was suddenly ambushed from behind.

"Sorry, Captain!" Shachi said, hooking an arm through hers as Penguin did the same on the other side. "We're stealing her!"

"It won't take long!" Penguin added, and the two dragged her up the gangplank and into the submarine, leaving a very confused Law behind.

"Why am I getting kidnapped?" She asked, agitated and looking back and forth from both guys.

"There's something you've got to see," Penguin said.

They took her to her room, made her sit on the bed as they did the same on each side, and only then they let her go to reach into their boiler suits for something and show it to Saki.

They were two 'Home, sweet home' style ceramic tiles, only they said something else.
The one Shachi was holding had a cute yellow submarine drawn on and said, 'Not a lawless zone.' The other one had a drawing of a frying pan and read, 'Lawless zone.'

Saki was in stitches. "This," she said with wonder, "is art."

"Right?" Penguin said with a grin that went from ear to ear. "This one's for the galley. Do you think Mack will like it?"

"I'm sure he'll love it," she said, wiping tears from her eyes.

"I'm going to install them," Shachi said, picking up Penguin's. "You two, keep him busy, or take him out for a walk or something."

"Leave that to me," Saki replied. "I think I can buy you an hour."

"That's more than enough."

They gave each other a thumbs up and the guys vacated the room, leaving her to wonder as she picked up her supplies how she was going to move every letter one finger without it looking as disastrous as what he already had on them, but Saki loved a good challenge.

She was mid-sentence, telling Law in the sickbay her ideas to reshape the letters on his fingers so they could properly spell the word 'DEATH' when he activated his Devil Fruit power and the offending ink… just… floated away with a hand motion, leaving five perfectly clean, if still scarred fingers, to draw on.

The last ten months flashed before eyes in a silent outrage as the ink levitated, taunting, tempting her to stab him in the throat with the needle and leave him there for dead. The first and last images were those of Killer asking if that crime had been perpetrated by her. Somehow, she managed to keep a straight face through the rush of emotion.

Saki didn't have to stare at his face, and didn't want to, to know that he had been looking forward to her reaction for months. Talk about delayed gratification.

"I hope karma gets you one day," she said, deciding that keeping her eyes on his fingers was the best course of action, because if she even saw the slightest ghost of a smirk on his face, she might accidentally drive the needle to the bone.

Her mood got better, though, when a rumble louder than that of her machine and coming from outside made Law ask, "What's that?"

"Oh. Shachi mentioned he wanted to make a couple small repairs while we were here," she said, freehanding the first letter on a thumb and glad that cosmic justice was indeed doing its job. "Don't move, I don't want to botch this."

Law noticed the tile at the entrance of the sub as soon as he had to go out. It was on the wall right next to the door, so that had been expected.

He didn't ask who was responsible for it. He had a pretty clear idea who was to blame. Shachi, Penguin and Saki passed the next few hours expecting some kind of retaliation and not getting it, so they stopped coming up with perfectly valid reasons to keep the tile there ('it's true' being one, 'it improves morale', being another) and let their guards down.
Law hadn’t seen the one in the galley, though, because as it very accurately said, it was a lawless zone and he didn’t have many reasons to go in there. Mack's eyes, however, glinted with deep-seated amusement every time the thing was in his field of vision. He didn't laugh, but the fact he had let Shachi stick the tile on his wall spoke miles about his thoughts on the subject.

Little did they know that Law was waiting to catch the three of them together to act, and that happened some time before they were heading out to watch Ace's execution.

There was no warning as a blue dome swallowed them and Bepo, and after the word 'Shambles,' Saki knew something was terribly wrong for three reasons.

One, she was in a different spot without having moved.

Two, she felt much, much taller.

And three, she was looking at herself with a very confused expression right in front of herself.

Penguin screeched to her side.

"Sorry, Bepo, collateral damage," Law said. "It's temporary."

"Why?!" Penguin yelled in anguish, only he didn't sound like Penguin at all.

Saki looked at her hands and to be faced with two white paws, and her jaw dropped as she turned to Law. "What have you done?"

She immediately covered her mouth, because the sound she made was not her voice. It reverberated like it came from the deepest pits of hell.

"Payback," he said with a smug smirk.

Penguin was the most calm of the four, because he had just taken off Shachi's sunglasses and was looking around him, awed. "Wow, Shachi, you really can't see shit."

Meanwhile, Shachi, who was currently occupying Saki's body, was having a lot of trouble keeping his balance. "Holy shit, how do you walk in these? No wonder you're always tripping!"

"Do I sound like that?" Saki gasped, horrified. "That's not my voice. I can't sound like that."

"Captain, it's just a well-meaning joke, honest!" Shachi said.

"Oh, don't take this the wrong way," Law said, oozing satisfaction from every pore. "I needed someone to try this technique on, and you looked like volunteers."

"You could've asked!"

"Why bother? I was going to do it anyway."

Bepo was paralyzed, looking at Penguin's body in horror.

"It wasn't even my idea," Saki said, mumbling to herself, and the sound was so foreign that it did nothing to help. "I didn't know what they wanted to do." And she dropped on the floor, curled into a ball and hid her face with her paws.

"That'll teach you to watch your mouth." He shrugged. "You'll have to bear with it for a while. I'll be back."
Four glares were directed at Law as he made his way back inside.

"Did you just—?"

He didn't reply, but nevertheless, four very clumsy pirates rushed after him, but when they managed to squeezed through the door he had vanished and only a book remained in the middle of the hallway.

The tile hung on the wall to their side, overlooking the scene it had inadvertently caused.

"Wait until he finds out about the one in the galley," Penguin said.

"I can't believe he'd do this to me," Bepo said with a cracking voice, and headed down with decisiveness and also very wobbly steps. "This is all your fault!" He cried out at them before disappearing downstairs.

The other three looked at each other in a panic and ran after him, crying out for forgiveness, and Saki picked up Shachi and carried him under her arm, just in case he twisted an ankle while he was in her body.

The ruckus drew the attention of the rest of the crew, and not a minute had passed by the time the four of them were knocking on Law's door and pleading while the rest of the crew laughed at them. Saki knew her dignity was dead, buried and irretrievable when she caught Mack wiping a tear off the corner of his eye.
Legends never die

Chapter Notes

Whew. War of the Best. I still don't believe we're here. Get used to me saying this from now on to the end of the fic. I talked about the plan going forward a couple of chapters ago, but to get into some more detail: there's going to be an arc after Marineford, and then we're going to do a timeskip.

Now, I need to apologize in advance, because as of the moment I'm writing this note, there's a copy of Fire Emblem: Three Houses waiting for me two days from now and it's going to consume most of the waking hours work doesn't take up. I want to plan the next arc as well as I can, too, because something important has to happen and I don't want to screw it up. For about half a year I've managed to post a new chapter once a month, but I'm afraid the next one's going to take longer. Maybe I'll update the BNHA one to make up for the extra wait, since it's easier to write and chapters are shorter.

(Welcome to the new age)

Despite having arrived early, if someone had told Saki that the entire archipelago was already in the grove where the broadcast was set to take place, she would have believed it.

The overcrowding was to be expected, since in addition to the citizens of Sabaody and the travelers that were passing through, evacuated civilians from Marineford were packed in front of the screens in wait for the execution to begin. She saw other pirates, too, some of them familiar faces, but nobody was interested in causing a ruckus that day. The anxious anticipation among all, the awareness that the events of the day could have consequences for the world at large, guaranteed that the collective attention was somewhere else, because nobody in their right mind would want to miss an event with so much significance.

The Heart Pirates found a spot near a speaker towards the back of the crowd. They could have forced their way closer to the screens, but they were large enough that it wasn't necessary, and Saki was grateful for it, because large gatherings of people where she couldn't tell where the shots were coming from made her twitchy, and she didn't want to be caught in the middle of hundreds of people if for some reason they needed to make a run for it.

"How long until the hour?" Shachi asked, surveying the area. "I lost track of time during the… uh…"

"Kerfuffle," Penguin said quickly, before he could bring up the last shameful incident at the sub and trigger a chain reaction. "It starts in three—"

A deafening sound of static ran through the area and the screens came to life, displaying images of a plaza, and Fire Fist Ace being brought to a scaffold.

"They've advanced the execution?" Saki said as the camera panned the area before setting back on the men at the scaffold.
Hundreds of Marines, along with the Admirals and the five remaining Shichibukai filled the plaza, ready for battle. Seeing all that manpower meant solely to stop one pirate's crew really put in perspective for Saki the difference in orders of magnitude between a Yonkou and them, or the other Supernova crews.

"Either the government's scared of Whitebeard and want to hurry up, or they want to intimidate the world by showing the preparations," Law said, drawing the attention of his crewmates. "I wouldn't be surprised if they tried to get it over with before he arrives."

The unexpected schedule somehow managed to add to the gravity of the situation. Saki didn't think Law's first suggestion sounded right. Surely the Marines couldn't believe that they could avoid the battle if Fire Fist Ace was executed before Whitebeard's fleet reached Marineford. Did they want him dead so badly that they couldn't wait a few hours? She didn't think Marine HQ would have risked war if they weren't confident in their chances to win.

That only left the propagandistic option.

Fleet Admiral Sengoku walked up to the scaffold with a Den Den Mushi, began his speech, and things began to make a little more sense.

"Men, I have something crucial to tell you all," he started, supposedly talking to the soldiers gathered at Marineford, and cynical enough to be doing so while putting on a show in front of a camera. "Something about the true meaning of Portgas D. Ace meeting his end here today."

The crowd on Sabaody went silent, everybody was hanging onto the words of Sengoku.

"Ace," he said to the prisoner beside him, "tell me the name of your father!"

Ace mumbled something to himself, but what the Den Den Mushi picked up were his next words. "My father is Whitebeard!"

"He is not!" Sengoku retorted.

"Yes, he is! Whitebeard is my only father! I have no other!"

Sengoku sent a long look at Ace and afterwards continued as if that outburst hadn't happened, and he hadn't just sounded incredibly petulant. "Back then, we searched as though our lives depended on it… Searching for the possibility that there existed on that island a child of that man. Based on nothing but the tiniest of leads from Cipher Pol, we investigated all newborn children, all children who were yet to be born, and all of their mothers, but ultimately found nothing."

Saki had no idea where Sengoku was going with his story. He spoke about a mother and a trick that she played on the Marines.

"In the South Blue, there lies an island by the name of Baterilla. Your mother's name was…" He looked again at Ace. "Portgas D. Rouge!"

So Fire Fist Ace he hadn't taken his father's surname…?

"She performed a feat that we could never have hoped to imagine, and out of devotion to her child, bore him in her womb for a full twenty months!"

The crowd was beginning to whisper incredulously, and Saki snuck a glance at Law to see that his only reaction had been a slight lift of eyebrows.
"And when the birth finally came, her strength all but spent, she left this world as you entered it. One year and three months from the father's death, a child was born bearing the most accursed blood to be found in this world. That child is you." And he snapped at Ace. "Do not claim you are not aware… your father is no other than Pirate King, Gold Roger!"

The crowd stopped holding back and excited discussion broke out, the loudest being the reporters yelling through their own Den Den Mushi to get the news to their offices as soon as possible.

Saki saw shock and horror in the faces of many people around her, aghast at the revelation, but as a pirate, she was feeling markedly different. Had the World Government really sought out a war, had it had to reveal a man's most personal secret in front of the world, at his weakest moment, just because of a father that was dead even before he was born? And a father he seemed to reject, at that.

She was disgusted. "They want to turn him into a symbol," she said, and the words had a bitter tang as she spoke them. "They want to end the era the way it started."

Sengoku went on about Ace's pirate career, but the rapt attention he'd had from the audience at Sabaody was gone and replaced with nonstop speculation as he continued. To Saki, nothing he could say mattered anymore. She had never held much respect for the Navy as an institution, but whatever shred of it had been left vanished then. It was their job to protect, and they had demonstrated they didn't mind hurting and causing pointless deaths just to make an example of a pirate.

As if that would stop anybody determined enough to follow in the footsteps of the great pirates of the previous generations. As if it wouldn't spur more people to take to the seas. If Saki had learned something since she joined the Heart Pirates, was that some people's rightful place was out in the sea, for better or worse, and no amount of threats could dissuade a determined soul from searching for a way to feel alive.

"It is absolutely imperative that we take your head here today," she heard Sengoku say, though she wasn't staring at the screen anymore. She was looking at her friends and the other people around, and for the briefest of moments, her eyes met Jean Bart's, who wore a grave expression and seemed to be enjoying the show as much as Saki. "Even if that means going to war with Whitebeard himself!"

And Saki had to return her attention immediately to what was going on in Marineford, because as soon as Sengoku stopped talking, something happened.

A fleet surrounded Marineford's plaza, and though she couldn't see Whitebeard anywhere, she recognized many of the Jolly Rogers on those sails from the endless news reports from the New World, many of which she had been seeing since she was a little kid reading everything that fell in her hands back in Asteria. Crews affiliated with Whitebeard that had come to help, and that meant that the man himself was on the way.

The pirates didn't attack immediately, and the first line of defense of Marineford, the Shichibukai, started to shuffle in their positions, expectant.

After a tense silence, the Moby Dick emerged from the bay, along with several ships from Whitebeard's fleet, leaving the rest of the crews as a support line in the back.

Whitebeard's thunderous voice resounded through the speakers set up in Sabaody, accompanied by a strange, rumbling laughter that felt like it made the ground itself tremble. "How many decades has it been, Sengoku?"

Once again, the journalists in Sabaody went crazy trying to report the new development to their main
offices, and the rest of the audience seemed to have switched anticipation and uncertainty for plain worry. The war was certain now, and everybody in the archipelago had first-row seats to it, and not solely because they were getting a broadcast of the events. Marineford was a stone's throw away, and it was only a matter of time for the storm to reach them.

Whitebeard punched the air with both fists and it cracked.

The ensuing explosion had many of the people watching gasping and covering their faces, and Saki could have sworn she hadn't only heard the sound through the speakers.

Bepo had winced at the noise and was looking around, uneasy.

"What's wrong?" Saki asked him.

"The ground's shaking."

"I don't feel anything," Penguin said.

"It's the power of Whitebeard's fruit," Law told them. "He can create earthquakes."

"I can feel it," Bepo said. "I don't like it, Captain. We're too close to Marineford, there may…"

The sentence died in his mouth as the cameras in Marineford picked up two gargantuan waves about to crash on Marineford's plaza, and as soon as they appeared, Admiral Aokiji froze them in place, along with the bay where Whitebeard's fleet had appeared, trapping them there and also creating a larger battlefield.

If the situation had made Saki feel small before, it was time to take conscience of how microscopic she and the crew were in the grand scheme of things.

The pirates leaped to action immediately, and so did the Marines, with the Vice Admirals taking the lead.

Saki tried to keep straight what was going on, but it soon proved to be impossible between all the cannon fire, Mihawk's slashes and the Devil Fruit powers making an indiscernible mess on the screen, particularly Kizaru's, Akainu's and Marco's, that were so bright and eye-catching that they obscured everything else.

Before long, incandescent rocks were falling from the sky and ships were sinking, but the pirates didn't back down for a second and a creature much larger than a battleship stepped forward to join the fight. Kuma, the real one, Saki assumed, released something that stopped the giant in its tracks, like a shockwave, and then the giant, with a strained effort, tried to land a hit on Doflamingo.

Saki had honestly forgotten for a moment that he was there, because even someone of his infamy didn't look all that impressive surrounded by those people, but then she saw him cut one of the creature's legs like it was nothing as he laughed like a maniac, and it made her skin crawl. She tried not to think that that was what Law was dealing with, and that sooner or later he'd become the Heart Pirates' problem.

She had to look away for a moment when the ground shook again, and this time all of them felt it.

And when she looked up again, alerted by some cries in the audience, she saw a warship and… people falling from the sky into the plaza.

And one straw hat drawing the spotlight to its owner.
"Is that…?" Saki whispered without thinking.

Shachi was gaping. "Are those Crocodile and Jinbei?"

"They were in Impel Down," Law said with disbelief. "How…?"

They had broken out. They had broken out and somehow Straw Hat Luffy was with them, along with a lot of men dressed in prison uniforms.

As everybody was distracted by the entrance and Jinbei yelling at Sengoku that he resigned his position as a Shichibukai, Crocodile tried to stab Whitebeard in the back, only to be defended by Luffy.

Saki's grip on the situation was completely gone and, if what had happened at the human auction was a good indicator, she wasn't going grasp it soon. "I'm lost."

"Me too," Shachi said.

"Me three," added Penguin.

When Luffy yelled at Whitebeard that he was going to be Pirate King, Saki couldn't take it anymore, covered her face, and started cracking up. The images of what was going on mixed with those of the auction incident to create a glorious resume for Straw Hat. You had to love the guy.

"I think she broke," Shachi commented.

"I don't blame her," Penguin replied.

And if Luffy was in one piece, it reassured Saki that Nico Robin would be, too, and she'd have another chance to find her in the future.

She looked up at the screen again as soon as she could stop, and the battle was raging once again, now with Kuma himself shooting light beams at the pirates, like the Pacifista they had encountered.

All the while, Sengoku kept speaking through the Den Den Mushi. "This man is another danger for the future. Not only was he raised together with Ace, but he is also the son of Revolutionary Dragon!"

It was Shachi's and Penguin's turn to snicker incredulously while Saki just stared, telling herself that at this point she was beyond surprise. It was okay. She could take everything thrown at her in stride. What was that tiny little detail on top of everything that was coming out in the open that afternoon?

The reporters in Sabaody just went crazy at the revelation, and she pitied the people at the home office who would be trying to put out an extra issue just to be bombarded with more outlandish discoveries.

The battle raged on, and Saki wasn't sure where to look at: the Shichibukai, the Impel Down prisoners, Whitebeard, the waves crashing against the plaza and the iceberg falling down on the battlefield… It was impossible to keep track of what was happening.

She didn't understand what was the point of broadcasting that. Just people killing each other over a man that, if the Marines were so bent on executing, they could have done it without publicizing it until the fact was done, instead of encouraging senseless carnage. It wasn't even as if they had provoked the war to trap the pirates and crush them. Both sides were equal in strength, and losses on the Marine's side had to be heavy too. It wasn't a good look.
It was then, for the first time, that Saki realized that there was a chance that Mack's sister was somewhere in that battlefield, too. But when she looked at him, he was merely watching the screen intently with his usual laconic expression. Then again, he was as good at keeping his face blank as keeping kitchen invaders in check.

There was movement on the scaffold, and conversation was reignited again in the audience. More and more people in the grove became aware that something was going on, and comments that the Marines were going ahead of schedule began to circulate.

For one hour and a half, the pirates and Marines had been equally matched, but then, a ship full of Pacifistas arrived at the bay, flanking the pirates in the plaza from behind.

The people of Sabaody recognized them, too – as it appeared, many of them had been let lose the day of the auction house incident and the civilians had had to put up with the destruction left by their attacks.

All of a sudden, two of the screens died, and only the middle one remained, showing the image of a former member of Gold Roger's crew that Saki had never heard about, and that would have looked less out of place in a circus than in Marineford.

"That's not the Marines broadcasting…" Commented Jean Bart.

"That's it," Law said, eyes fixed on the last functioning screen, "the Marines cut the official transmission, but someone else must have gotten a hold of a Den Den Mushi."

"Cut the transmission?" Shachi repeated. "What for? They were the ones who set this up!"

The grove was filled with the indignant yells of people demanding to see the battlefield.

"There must be something they don't want to show to the audience," Saki suggested.

And then, the stolen camera captured something that would remain in the memory of the world for ages.

On of Whitebeard's men suddenly turned on him and stabbed him in the abdomen.

But contrary to expectations, Whitebeard didn't fight back. He just listened.

"Stop this stupidity, Whitebeard!" Said the man. "I have talked to the Marines! I know that they promised to spare the lives of you, your crew, and even Ace!"

The man rambled on about losing his former crew to Gold Roger and feeling betrayed that Whitebeard had taken his son under his wing, hiding it from his subordinates.

The words 'you sold us out', 'you made a deal with Sengoku' resounded in the archipelago among the stunned silence of the audience.

And with a blink, the last screen went black.

The audience was about to riot, and the handful of Marines that had been appointed as security were spouting excuses to stop the mob closing in on them.

"We're setting sail, Bepo!" Law said, already turning away from the screens.

"Aye, aye, Captain!" He replied immediately, and for good measure, he reasserted his dominance. "Follow me, Jean Bart!"
Jean Bart didn't seem to mind at all, and the rest of them followed suit behind him, thankful that he was opening the way so they didn't have to make their way through the crowd shoving people.

As soon as they were away from the thick of people, Penguin asked, "Where are we going?"

"Marineford," Law replied without stopping to look at him.

"W-what?"

Bepo was the only person in the group who didn't seem surprised by it, so they had probably talked about it beforehand.

"Why?" Shachi asked.

"And how are we even getting there?"

"Like Whitebeard did."

"The world's gone off the rails," Saki muttered under her breath, keeping the pace with the others. Screw it, if Law wanted to go to Marineford, she wasn't going to complain. Bad ideas had a tendency to turn out surprisingly well where he was concerned.

"Seriously, Captain, why?" Shachi insisted.

He glanced at Shachi and smirked. "Don't you want to see the end of the battle that will change the world?"

The entire battlefield seemed to hold its breath when Whitebeard leaped to action after having been stabbed, encouraging his men to fight with renewed energy.

Marina was holding up against those who came her way, but she was concerned about her men, so many of which had never met enemies of this caliber and had no means to defend against haki users, and she tried not to think that allowing them to follow her was the same as sending them to their death, because there was no time to think.

Dodging, running, parrying, throwing her chisels at the enemies hoping that, if they couldn't do the job, they would at least help another companion not get hurt.

The pirate she was fighting against at the moment coated his chest in armament haki, but her chisel sank in all the same, and she pulled it out as the man fell and hurried to one of her men, who was getting overpowered by several enemies.

She couldn't help but doubt the fairness of what her side was doing. Marina had never hesitated in pursuing pirates in order to protect the innocent, but this didn't feel right. Wouldn't she, too, have gone to help a friend in need?

She couldn't be sure, because Marina did not really have friends, only superiors and subordinates, but she wanted to think that she would have.

Still, orders were orders. Even if what had prompted the war in the first place was a situation she didn't want to think about, someone who understood better than her had decided that it would be the best for the world in the long run. It had to be. She had trust in their judgement, or the life she had worked so hard for since she'd turned the minimum required age to enlist would lose all meaning.

She fought for what felt like an eternity, not paying any mind to the wounds she was receiving,
trying not to get disoriented in the melee, and doing her best to overcome the terror that assaulted her each time Akainu launched his lava, or Whitebeard created an earthquake and the ground and the sea and land tilted.

A blast that swept over the plaza made everybody stop for a moment, and Marina saw several Marines and pirates alike drop to the ground, its source being Straw Hat Luffy, who at the last moment had knocked out the men at the scaffold.

It seemed to revitalize the pirates, and the battle resumed with more force than ever.

Marina was barely aware of Vice Admiral Garp getting knocked out, or Fire Fist Ace being freed, or the state Whitebeard was in, because the only thing in her mind was her survival and that of her subordinates.

What she heard, however, loud and clear, was Whitebeard's last order to his men. He wanted them to go, and he planned to die there fighting.

"I'm a remnant of my era… There ain't no ship that's going to carry me out to the new one…!"

The island shook uncontrollably and buildings started to break down and fall as the attack on Whitebeard intensified. And in the middle of that confusion, one of Akainu's punches landed on Fire Fist Ace and killed him.

Whitebeard's retaliation was immediate, and their headquarters broke in two from the force of the impact, but that wasn't the only thing that happened.

The island split in two, and Marina realized with horror that the only reason they were all still alive was because Whitebeard had been holding back that whole time. He could have sunk them from the beginning. He could have sunk them at that moment, too, but he wasn't doing it, even though most of his men were safe on the other side of the breach, and she didn't understand why he wasn't going to those lengths, when it was crystal clear that they would have been used against him, if it had been in the government's hands.

In the midst of that chaos, the Blackbeard pirates appeared, accompanied by more Impel Down escapees. Before anybody could realize what was happening, they landed the killing blow on Whitebeard, who parted from this world with one last resounding declaration.

*The One Piece exists.*

And then…

…Then the earth shook again.

It couldn't be.

Blackbeard was going on a rampage, using Whitebeard's power, and the confusion at what he had just done didn't stop the battle for a second, even though the pirates had lost everything, even though Marineford was about to be wiped out from the face of the planet. It was senseless, and nothing could stop it now.

Those were Marina's thoughts when something happened in the bay.

A yellow submarine she knew very well surfaced between the stationed ships, and she watched with disbelief the people filing out of it to stand on the deck.
The strength of her arms drained with one since glance at them. "Mack…?"

Marineford was less than an hour away from the archipelago, and the Heart Pirates got there even faster thanks to the engine of the submarine. Nobody was questioning the decision to go there, but the tension in the air was, nonetheless, palpable. Depending on how the battle had gone while they weren't watching, their escape could be very difficult.

Was Law driven only by curiosity about what might happen? Saki doubted that it was the whole reason for diving headfirst into danger when he was usually the cautious one of the bunch, but she didn't have any better ideas of what he might have been after.

He wasn't the only one, though. On the way there, they passed by what Saki could only imagine were onlooker ships, all of them anchored at a safe distance from the island, watching the war unfold.

Too fast for Shachi's and Penguin's liking, they got to their destination, and she felt sort of scared, too. Mack hadn't said anything yet, and Saki wanted to ask if he was okay, but he didn't look in the mood to talk, and she couldn't blame him.

The sub emerged as Buggy the Clown flew over the bay with Jinbei and Luffy on tow. The Polar Tang was surrounded by the pirate fleet and Marine warships, and up ahead the battlefield was pure chaos, the island was split in two, with most pirates on the beach section, and standing and unmoving on the other side was Whitebeard.

"Is he dead?" Shachi said near Saki, echoing her thoughts. "And where's Fire Fist?"

"It looks like the pirates are retreating. Did they…?"

"They lost?!"

Meanwhile, Law had stepped ahead and was yelling at Buggy. "Bring Straw Hat-ya over here!"

Several pairs of eyes landed on Law, but nobody spoke up as they waited for Buggy's reaction.

"Huh?! Who the hell are you, kid?"

While Law tried to convince him to drop Luffy on the sub, Saki watched the people Buggy was carrying. Luffy was clearly unconscious and he seemed to be on the verge of death, but Jinbei, who was holding him, didn't look much better, and she wondered which one of the beasts present had been able to take down a Shichibukai so thoroughly, because from what she had seen so far, they deserved their fame as frightening warriors.

"It'll be a shame if he ends up dying here!" Law insisted at Buggy. "I'm going to make sure he escapes! Entrust him to me for the time being! I'm a doctor!"

"Like I said, who the hell are you?!"

Honestly, if that man kept hesitating, he'd have two corpses in his hands and possibly an entire submarine weighing on his conscience, the existence of which, granted, was up in the air. None of the ships were attacking them, but it was a matter of time – a very short span of time – that someone on the shore tried to go after them.

Law was well aware of the double urgency. "Hurry! Get those two on board!"
"Captain!" Sturgeon yelled. "A Marine ship is cutting around from the coast!"

Right then, the world below them shifted. It was the closest sensation to waking up in your bed with the worst of hangovers as you realized that the world was still spinning from the night before and there was nothing you could do to stop it except wait it out and try not to fall, only it was actually happening outside of Saki's head. With the center located in the plaza, the ocean split into concentric rings of water that swiveled left and right, threatening to capsize the submarine and toss them overboard.

Jean Bart stopped Sturgeon and Shachi from falling against the railings, and Bepo caught Law by the arm before he could get too close to them. For once, Saki kept her balance, and it was a shame, because the situation was too dire to rub it in their faces.

"It's Kizaru!" Law suddenly yelled at Buggy.

Sure enough, behind him the Admiral had showed up and was heading straight to them. If Buggy stalled any longer and Law kept being stubborn, they were all going down.

"Alright!" Buggy said at last, throwing both pirates at the deck. "He's all yours, 'people I don't know!' Give it your best shot!"

Jean Bart was ready to catch them before Bepo could tell him to do so, and when they were secured in his arms he got a thumbs up from the mink.

Thankfully, Law didn't waste a second after that, motioning everybody to the door. "We're diving!"

With Luffy in Bepo's hands and Jinbei in Jean Bart's, Saki waited until the four of them were inside, along with most of her crewmates, trying to keep her eyes on the figure approaching them.

Kizaru was gone in less than the blink of an eye, and she couldn't tell where he had gone. Shit.

Bepo let a horrified cry out as he passed her. "These wounds are horrible! Is he still alive!? Gotta hurr—"

She found him again when there was a flash of light above the Polar Tang, coming from the mast of a nearby ship.

The Polar Tang was done for, too big of a target to get out of the way in time.

Saki believed a little bit in miracles when a pained cry coming from the island stopped everybody on the battlefield in their tracks, and the beam of light that had to sink them never came as Kizaru turned around to the source of the disturbance.

Someone was yelling at them to stop the fight. It was a young voice, and it took Saki a few seconds to make out a man in a Marine uniform, who stood in front of Akainu to obstruct his path.

"Let's stop this already! No more fighting! Let's end this! This is a waste of lives!"

The anguish of his voice rang in Saki's ears and made her shudder, and it dawned on her that the bravery of that boy had saved the lives of everybody in the submarine, and that he was going to die because of that, and she foolishly wished she was closer to help him get away, because nobody capable of doing that deserved to die in a war.

But she didn't have time to dwell on that, because a newly arrived ship sailed past them and the men inside promptly disembarked on the island, before any of the people in the plaza could realize what
Saki herself could scarcely believe what was happening when she saw the billowing Jolly Roger with three scars and a pair of cutlasses instead of bones.

"Holy shit," she muttered.

A man whose bounty she had seen countless times since she was a kid stepped between the young boy and the Admiral, and stopped the latter's punch just with a sword.

"Hurry!" Penguin yelled.

She wanted to. She knew she had to. But she was rooted to the spot with the unmistakable sensation that they were bearing witness to something that would go down in history.

Shachi was by the door, ready to shut it. "Hurry inside!"

At last, Saki headed inside, but stood on one of the first steps as she realized that what had been keeping Kizaru from sinking their ship had been none but Red Hair Shanks' first mate. He was threatening the Admiral with a pistol, and said man wasn't moving an inch.

He was threatening with a gun a man who moved at the speed of light, and it worked.

The submarine began to dive, and Saki stood by the door until the last moment, fully expecting to be scolded for that, but Law happened to be of the same mind, and gestured at Shachi, who was looking ready to punch Law and drag him in if he didn't close the door already, to go in.

And then, at the last second, Buggy tossed something their way.

"Captain!" Bepo said, panicked and not caring to hide it. "I know it's one of the Yonkou, but hurry up and close the door!"

"Yeah…" Law acknowledged him. "Hold on, something's flying towards us."

He caught it mid-air.

"Straw Hat's…?" Saki said, perplexed, and looked again at the battlefield. "Who—"

Law shut the door.

"We need to go," he said, and pushed the hat against Saki as he ran towards the operating room.

She let out a huff and felt some of the tension of the day leave her shoulders as she stared at the way Law had left with Bepo. She glanced at the Straw Hat she had against her chest and held it in one hand. It was beat up, frayed and repaired over and over. She had assumed before that Luffy wore a random hat, but it was clear that what she had in her hands was an old, cherished item. Important enough that somebody on the island made sure to get it back to him.

It was a mystery to be solved at another time.

Saki ran to the bridge, where she figured she could be more useful than in the middle of an operating theatre already occupied by several conscious people. Jean Bart was at the helm, and Sturgeon was yelling instructions at the top of his lungs.

Loud cracking sounds began to fill the sub and Jean Bart seemed to have difficulty steering the ship. For a moment, Saki thought they might have been hit and the structure was breaking down, but she
couldn't see any damage, so she ran to one of the portholes and saw the ocean freezing behind them, ice surges covering the surface of the ocean and spiking towards them in pursue.

"It's Aokiji! He's freezing the sea!"

Between sudden the temperature changes and the earthquakes, the currents were completely out of whack.

"It'll take more than that to get us!" Jean Bart replied.

"Should I go get Bepo?"

"Don't worry, I can deal with this!"

Sturgeon kept yelling through a tube instructions at the guys downstairs. "Full speed! I don't care if the engine dies after this, but we need to go faster!"

As soon as he said that, a downpour of rays of light pierced the ice and rained all around them, and Saki had to hope for a second miracle, because no matter how good Jean Bart was, they didn't have the speed to dodge.

"It's gonna hit! Full speed ahead, to the sea floor!"

Maybe it counted as a wish upon a million shooting stars, because it worked, and they were able to leave Marineford unscathed and with two unforeseen passengers on board.

She placed the straw hat on Bepo's desk, only vaguely aware that she had been clasping it all along, and thinking with amusement that maybe it was the source of Luffy's unbelievable luck and it had seen fit to spread some of it to the Polar Tang in order to get its owner to safety.

There was only so much luck could do, though. What happened from then on was solely in Law's hands.

Marina couldn't believe her eyes.

Not because a young officer had tried to stand up to Akainu.

Not because Red Hair Shanks had stopped him with just one arm and no apparent effort.

It was because Akainu had been ready to execute one of his own subordinates. A boy who had had the courage to say what so many of them were thinking.

Marina was embarrassed to her core on behalf of the entire Navy, and the cracks that doubt had created the last time she had spoken to her brother only grew larger.

She could feel Phillip's eyes on her as she said, "What are we doing…?"

The arm grasping her chisels dropped to her side, and she saw the entire plaza, pirates and Marines alike, watching Shanks' next move.

"I've come to end this war!" Shanks declared, and he picked up Straw Hat Luffy's discarded hat and tossed it at Buggy the Clown.

Something caught in Marina's throat when she saw the ocean turn to ice and the shower of light beams piercing its surface where the Heart Pirates' submarine had been just a moment ago.
"Captain?" Phillip asked timidly, and her face returned to an impassible mask as she steeled herself to look ahead, at the Yonkou in the middle of the plaza and not at the place where her brother could have just died.

Nothing felt real anymore. Red Hair's intervention, one Shichibukai after another stepping away from the fight, and the Yonkou's challenge to fight him and his men at anybody who wished to continue fighting.

If pirates were truly a blight upon civilization, if the Marines and their justice was the last line of defense against the great evil that roamed the seas, the moment Marina saw Sengoku bend to Shanks' demands and let the pirate fleet retreat with their injured and fallen comrades, she knew the battle had been won, but the war had been lost.

It had taken the whole force of the World Government to stop one Yonkou and the losses had been so great that it would take them years to rebuild. Fighting another one would have meant their annihilation, and there were two more of them.

The world was theirs, and for the first time in her life, she couldn't bring herself to see it as a bad thing.

She noticed pirates and Marines crying alike. She saw Howe, a few steps ahead of her, trying to keep a straight face and failing, pressing his eyes and mouth tightly shut so the tears wouldn't slip through, and Phillip walking next to him to pat his back.

Marina thought that a handful of tears were the least disgraceful thing they had done that day.

She lifted a hand to her chest and grasped her shirt at the empty spot, unable to feel anything beneath, but taking comfort in the knowledge that it was sailing away safely, somewhere, with her brother. Perhaps in more ways than one.

As long as her heart kept beating, she knew he'd be fine.

When Bepo joined them on the bridge very soon after their escape, he stood in front of the sonar and stared at the sonar as if he could force the display to change by force of will.

"Are they still behind us?" Jean Bart asked. He was still steering the ship, heading to nowhere in particular. They only had the Log Pose pointing to Fishman Island and the Eternal Pose to Niva in their possession, so following either of them was out of the question.

"Yeah," Bepo said. "I don't know what to do or how they're keeping track of us. They're on the surface!"

"Let's shoot the torpedoes at them," Sturgeon suggested, looking at the sonar next to Bepo.

"Not without Captain's authorization."

"Man, he's busy and you're second in command."

"You don't know how Shachi and Penguin get when they have to build new ones and reload them."

"I can vouch for that." Saki piped up, keeping an eye on the porthole at the back in case it was the pursuers who shot at them. "Last time we…" She trailed off as she noticed something undulating close by. "What the hell?"
"What's going on?" Sturgeon asked, running next to Saki. He smelled like tobacco and too much body spray, and she inched away from him in reflex.

"That's what I want to know. Is that a snake?"

He squinted. "I think so."

"Is it smiling?"

"Yeah?"

"And wearing a skull and pointing up with its tail?"

"You think it's telling us to emerge?"

"I think I'm gonna ask Mack what he put in the brownies."

"Let me see!" Bepo said, barging in between the two. "She wants us to surface."

"She," Sturgeon repeated.

"Of course," Bepo replied, perplexed. "Can't you see it?"

Saki patted Bepo on the arm, hoping to avoid a silly argument. "Should we?"

Bepo turned towards the porthole again, and whatever transpired between he and the snake must have reassured him. "We're emerging!"

Saki and Sturgeon just sort of shrugged at each other behind his back.

It took only a moment to warn everybody, and Saki was ready to barge onto the deck with Penguin, Shachi and Bepo to toss overboard anybody who dared attack them as soon as they were out on the surface of the sea.

They opened the door to a Marine warship towering over the submarine, but contrary to what they had been expecting, there weren't any signs of an incoming attack. Also, the snake was on the deck, having surfaced along with the ship, smiling and hanging out at a safe distance from them.

Before they could decide what to do next with the reptilian stowaway, someone jumped out of the Marine ship and onto the main deck.

Saki knew they had lost half their manpower willing to toss the invader to the water the moment Shichibukai Boa Hancock landed in front of them. Admittedly, even she would have had second thoughts about it, but the heart eyes Penguin and Shachi were making at her were a bit too much.

"What is Luffy's condition?!" She asked.

Bepo was the one who answered. "Man, good job figuring out that we were emerging here… I thought the Marines were still tracking us or something. Is this some kind of sick joke?"

"I had Salome trace you on the ocean floor," she replied as the snake slithered up her way next to her. "And how dare you try and change the subject like that, you mere beast?"

All right, that put Hancock at the top of Saki's shit list at the moment. How dare she?

"Sorry…"
They couldn't harp on Bepo's defeatism for long, because the door opened again, and out came Law, still wiping the blood from his hands with a towel. Saki was fairly sure he had done it for effect, because he was very strict about cleanliness in the operating room and sickbay. She wouldn't put it past him to have used food coloring.

"I did all that I could," he told Boa. "He's still alive after the operation, but he's sustained an unbelievable amount of damage. There's no guarantee that he'll regain consciousness."

Ah, that was the captain they all knew and loved, handing out bad news with the utmost tact at a woman who could probably sink them in a matter of seconds if she felt like it.

After the way she had snapped at Bepo, Saki had expected a much different reaction than her silence and a worried expression. She felt bad for her, though not enough to let the insult towards Bepo slide. She also wondered how the coconuts had Luffy managed to befriend the captain of the Kuja Pirates.

Saki noticed that she had become gradually desensitized to meeting extraordinary people, starting from the moment they had started running into big names in Sabaody. After sailing into Marineford and back, seeing two Yonkou in the flesh and having a Shichibukai standing on their deck and another unconscious in the sickbay, being surprised by the humungous head of revolutionary Emporio Ivankov popping out of the warship didn't faze her half as much as it should have.

Shachi, however, yelled out at the top of his lungs, "What in the blazes of hell is that!?"

Ivankov, likely used to prompting that sort of reaction, ignored him completely. "Straw Hat gave it his best! Thanks to him, we managed to escape!"

The escaped prisoners from Impel Down were celebrating their freedom around Ivankov.

"They snuck onto the Marine's ship!" Hancock explained. "It seems like they are on Luffy's side."

"And what happened to the original crew?" Saki asked her.

"I took care of them."

Saki nodded slowly as Ivankov jumped onto the Polar Tang too, and her eyes went wide when she realized he was a big as Jean Bart. From what miraculous Grand Line place did these people sprout from?

Ivankov gave them the rundown of what had happened to Luffy and Ace while the prisoners cheered him on and Hancock was on the verge of tears.

"By the way, are you a friend of Strawboy's or something, sweetie?"

There was a small pause before Law spoke. He was either processing the 'sweetie' or waiting for a smart comment, and he was lucky that Shachi and Penguin were too busy staring at Hancock and that Saki had more interest in where the conversation was going than interrupting it.

"…No. I had no reason to save him either, but if kindness makes you uncomfortable, should I make up one?"
"No, thank you!" He said, gesturing wildly. "There are times when instinct moves our bodies, after all!"

Saki wasn't convinced, but she kept quiet. She wasn't so sure about Law claiming to have no particular reason to help Luffy. He wasn't the kind of person to put the crew in danger for a whim.

The door opened once again and Jinbei appeared. "Trafalgar Law from North Blue… I thank you!" He said solemnly. "You saved my life!"

Law was not having it. "Sleep. You'll die."

A hilariously cranky Law meant that he was probably very tired, and he wasn't taking kindly to the possibility of Jinbei undoing his work because he couldn't stay still. Saki was about to get annoyed at him and then it dawned on her that she was the type to do exactly the same, so she became discreetly embarrassed instead as Jinbei lamented his perceived failures.

"Beast!" Hancock suddenly called out, and Saki had to make an effort not to snap when she noticed she was speaking to Bepo. "Do you have a Den Den Mushi or something?"

"Yeah. Ah… Yes, we do, ma'am! Sorry!"

"Aw, that's not fair…" Penguin said quietly. "You're like the empress' slave or something!"

"Penguin," Saki said, staring at him with a concerned expression, "you need to get your head checked or a girlfriend."

"Why not both?"

"Talk to a doctor."

"If we call the Kuja fleet, this submarine will be able to cross the Calm Belt," she explained as if she hadn't taken to routinely insulting the second most important person in the submarine and there weren't two horny idiots a swift kick away from her. "If Luffy's survival is made known to the government, they'll surely send pursuers. We must hide in Amazon Lily. As long as I am still a Shichibukai, we will be able to treat him in safety."

Bepo, thoroughly whipped, ran into the sub to get the Den Den Mushi.

"Jinbei, you really should go rest," Saki told him. He looked like he was making an effort to stand, and he had just gone through surgery. "If you want to thank our captain for his help, you shouldn't let his effort go to waste."

Jinbei looked at her a little surprised. "You're right. I don't want to become a burden for you."

"She's absolutely right," Ivankov said, waving him away. "You need to be a good boy and lay down." And then he looked at the escaped prisoners in the Marine ship, and said, "Well then, my mission to protect Strawboy ends here! I'm going to leave everything to ya'll here, is that alright, Jinbei?"

"Yes. I still can't swim freely, either. I'll ascertain Luffy's recovery with my own eyes… I don't know what I'll be able to do, though."

Saki was convinced that the answer to that question was nothing, and that if there had been something Law himself couldn't do, Jinbei would certainly not be the one to come up with anything better. She got that he was affected by what had happened, but she it was grating on her that every
new party at the scene wasn't showing the respect they ought to the people who had saved Luffy's ass.

Jinbei started to make his way to the door and Saki held it open for him. She was curious about Luffy's state, but nevertheless she decided to stay outside with the group, with the small confirmation that he was still holding on through the beeping of the machines he was connected to.

The Kuja were…

Well.

They were a special kind of people. Saki wouldn't say anything else because they were going out of their way to accommodate them and she acknowledged their helpful disposition, and even though she hadn't gotten the best first impression from their ruler, she didn't have anything against the other women she had met so far.

She hadn't expected it after seeing Hancock and her crew on the way to Amazon Lily, but the women that hadn't been out there in the world had very strange views on men.

And apparently they considered Saki an oddity, since she was travelling in a ship full of men out of her own free will.

She had never wished harder that they had kidnapped Felicia from the coconut underworld and brought her along, if only to divert their attention and not be the only exception.

Some of the blame fell on her, though. She had thought it would be interesting to talk to the women who came to bring them food to the beach, and though they had been skittish at first, as days went by and they seemed to trust Saki more, the conversations became progressively longer, and Saki's perplexity grew.

She didn't understand how their society survived, either. Did they leave the island to procreate? Did they need to become pirates to get permission to travel? How conducive was joining a pirate crew and then getting pregnant? In case that wasn't one of their goals, how did they maintain a stable population? There were a lot of them. What did they do with babies assigned male at birth? Was there an island of men somewhere out there that nobody had ever heard about, because of course most sailors weren't interested and it made for a worse legend?

These were the exact kind of questions she really wanted to ask and could not bring herself to because she possessed a quality called tact, the existence of which some of the guys clearly ignored and in her case denied, because they kept nagging her to find out, please, she was their only hope, and rightfully so, because Saki wouldn't wish any of those louts on an unsuspecting lady. The women barely looked in their general direction when the men were aware of their presence. As far as she was concerned, the only people in the crew who had proved to have an ounce of decency were the giant guy, the bear, the captain and the gay man, and she thanked her lucky stars for their presence every day they had to spend on that beach.

After several days like that, she couldn't wait for Luffy to wake up so they could leave, and the guys stopped being weird about the locals. She was also getting a little claustrophobic on that beach. It was a small strip of land with nothing but rocks, and the women had cordoned off the area with curtains so the guys couldn't look into the island. She supposed she would be allowed to go farther inland if she asked nicely, and though she honestly thought it would be amazing to see a town and get an idea of how they lived, she didn't want to be trapped in a social situation with a bunch of oddly socialized strangers for hours in the case they said yes, so she let that once in a lifetime
opportunity escape without regrets.

Law, on the other hand, had been very quiet for a few days, as if trying to balance out the rest of the crew. Not in one of his moods, not really, just most distant and pensive than usual. Every now and then, he sat on the beach with the straw hat in his hand, staring thoughtfully at it. Luffy’s condition had stabilized, but he wasn't waking up. Jinbei, on the other hand, was moving around from the moment they arrived to the island. She still didn't understand what had made Law want to rescue them.

"Do you think he's okay?" She asked Bepo one day, sitting with her knees to her chest on a mossy rock that overlooked the Polar Tang while he fished. He already had a few catches in a bucket.

Law was talking to Jinbei at that moment. Saki had grown past her initial annoyance at him as soon as he’d agreed to keep still, but he was still a stranger, and given their odd circumstances, she'd rather keep to herself and her friends.

"He hasn't told me anything," he replied, "but I don't think he's in a bad mood. I think he's sorting out his thoughts."

"Nobody has this many thoughts to sort through," she rebutted childishly, leaning her head on her knees. "Do you have any clue why he saved them?"

The sea looked so inviting that she was tempted to jump down swim to the nearest island just to have something to do.

"A doctor is a doctor." Bepo looked at her with amusement. "But why don't you ask him?"

"Because if it's important, he's not going to tell."

Bepo smiled a little and returned his attention to the line. "You may distract him."

"I'll pass."

"You wouldn't bother him, you know."

"I didn't say that," she replied, feeling attacked because he had read her mind.

"Uh-huh," he replied nonchalantly. "I'm watching."

"What?"

"I'm always watching."

Resisting the urge to grab a fish from the bucket and slap him on the head with it, she started to say, flustered, "What are you imp—"

But then the door of the submarine literally burst open, Saki jumped on the spot, Bepo dropped the fishing rod, and Luffy launched himself onto the beach and into the island, disappearing behind the separation marked with the Kuja Pirates' flag, and Jinbei took off after him.

The crew gathered in the middle of the beach, looking in the direction where Luffy had gone off, and fretting about what to do, but mostly about what were the chances of having their nether regions chopped off if one of the Kujas caught them trespassing.

"Screw it," she said, frustrated, and pulled one of the curtains apart to see what was going on on the other side. At least be able to warn the others if Law's unexpected surge of goodwill had gone to
It was all tropical forest as far as the eye could see, but Luffy had left a straight path of destruction in his wake that Jinbei, she assume, had followed. She could hear the ruckus from far ahead, so she decided to stay put on that side of the curtain, waiting to see what would happen.

The warnings from her friends that she was going to get herself killed if she didn't go back were kind of grating, but their concern was touching, even if they had apparently forgotten that she happened to be a woman and she technically wasn't doing anything wrong.

When it became clear that Luffy wasn't dying and that the entire island was probably hearing his anguished screams anyway, she crossed the curtain again and was immediately ambushed.

"How was it?"

"Are there any girls?"

"Did you see any female bears?"

"For fuck's— What's your problem?!" She snapped. "It's just a forest, there isn't anybody else there!"

She huffed, walked a bit to the side of the group and stood there waiting for developments, like she'd basically been doing all those days, when a huge splash coming from the ocean made her turn around and Penguin pulled out a pair of binoculars to see.

"Take a look at that, it's a gigantic sea king!"

"What's going on?" Shachi asked. "Is it fighting with something?"

"It's dead!" He exclaimed. "Something just killed that thing!"

They guys huddled closer to Penguin to comment on what was going on and try to get the binoculars from him, and Saki kept staring in the direction of the splash. What she figured was the sea king floated in the water, but something else was moving in their direction at high speed, and she hoped whatever it was would stay away from the sub. Law was still sitting on his spot from before, but watching intently.

Soon enough, they saw who was the culprit of the sea king's demise when Dark King Rayleigh climbed onto the rocks while holding his shirt and coat under one arm.

For some reason, Saki got more fixated on that little, absurd detail than the whole story of him punching the daylights out of a sea king, or his boat sinking outside the Calm Belt and him thinking it was a perfectly acceptable alternative to swim all the way to Amazon Lily anyway. She also noticed that Law was silent and sweating bullets, and she would have paid good money to know what was going through his head at the moment.

They eventually pointed him to the way Luffy had gone and, to the indignation of many, he crossed the designated perimeter and went to find him.

In the end, she sat down more or less near Law while she watched the proceedings, and he tossed at her the straw hat he had been spinning on one finger.

She caught it, and glanced at him. "You're a weirdo."

He looked at her in confusion, but she didn't elaborate, and it didn't matter, because at the end of the
day he was *their* weirdo, and she had yet to meet a Heart Pirate who wasn't okay with it.

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