Finding Your Wings

by Blazonix

Summary

A man stands over him, calling him Kuina, and he's about to have a Bad Day. A good daughter stays in place to marry and have children – she’s the furthest thing from a good son, let alone a good daughter. With a sword on her hip, she sets out and is chained down to nothing.

(It’s a lie; there’s something that tethers her.

“I’m Zoro,” he tries again, “and I’m going to be the world’s greatest swordsman.”

“Kuina,” she says, and I am going to fly.)
His face is smooshed against something hard; he’s sort of in pain. He opens his eyes to an unfamiliar floor and a lot of confusion.

Picking himself up is a mistake. He falls back down immediately. Rolling over onto his back, he blinks up at the ceiling. He doesn’t remember a bar with such nice wooden floors and ceilings.

He must have drunk too much last night. He brings up his hand to his face and realizes something’s quite off. His hand’s not that tiny or smooth looking, he thinks.

The floor begins shaking. Startled, he looks up to find a man in a dress stomping towards him. The man opens his mouth,

“Kuina! What have I told you about playing on the stairs?”

Kuina?

He blinks up slowly at the man. The man exhales loudly and swiftly picks him up. It’s a shock to be lifted like he weighs nothing, and being cradled in the man’s arms brings up an important fact.

He is really, really small.

“It can’t be helped. Let’s get you dressed,” the man mutters.

He can only grab onto the man’s dress—robe maybe?—and hold on for dear life. He has no clue what’s going on.

When he’s taken to a child’s bedroom and shoved into a dress, he thinks, oh.

He still doesn’t really understand what’s going on, but he’s starting to piece it together. He tugs at his pink clothes and gives the man towering above him a long, searching look. He doesn’t like what he sees.

Suspicious, he tugs on the man’s long sleeve.

“What should I call you?”

“Hm? Are you feeling unwell, Kuina? I’m Father of course,” the man gently smiles down at him.

Yeah, okay, he thinks with a sigh.

The rest of his day is spent attached to the man’s leg as he learns to navigate his new house. “Father” assumes he's not feeling well and ends up teaching him everything he needs to know.

Like the fact his house sits right next to a dojo, or that his new parental figure apparently owns it. He watches the students swing around bamboo swords outside the dojo while his father pretends he no longer exists and thinks I’m getting out of here the first chance I get.

He can spot a shitty father a mile away, and this guy, no matter how pretty his smiles are, is hitting all the checkboxes on the list.
Of course, he’ll need a few years to grow up before he sets off, and it wouldn’t hurt to learn some self-defense since he has access to it. He’s got some time to plan his life out. He curls up on the wooden porch and dozes off as children scream out with each swing of the sword.

It’s the most uncomfortable nap he’s ever had.

Being a girl is, at first, a terrible experience. Mainly it involves panicking about going to the bathroom, developing breasts, and future periods.

(Social standards for women don’t factor in; he doesn’t realize that this is what he should be worrying about.)

After the initial excitement of having a different body part fades away, he finds it’s not so bad. There’s not much of a difference in how his body moves, and he’s got years to grow into his new developments.

In the end, there’s no identity crisis, no tears, and no wishing to be male.

While it would be nice to have his old body back, this female one works just fine. He decides he’s going to start calling himself “she” out of convenience. It doesn’t bother him.

(And if he neither corrects nor confirms when someone says “he” or “she,” well that’s for her to worry about.)

Her father allows her to learn swordsmanship from the dojo when she asks, and the years pass by without much incident.

There’s not much to say: she gets up, exercises, eats, trains, learns some miscellaneous thing that interests her, and trains some more.

It’s a pretty boring existence.

Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad if she made some friends, but there’s no one worthy of the title. On this tiny island, the only children her age are her father’s snobby students or girls being groomed into brides.

She slams the door on some auntie asking her to join a “Preparing for marriage” class. She thinks of the little girls arranging flowers with hearts in their eyes and snorts contemptuously.

(She shouldn’t be so hypocritical. She’s not inheriting the dojo, and since she’s not an official student of the dojo, her father is definitely grooming her to be the inheritor’s bride.)

The boys aren’t much better. Full of ideas of what makes a man, they sling slurs and curse words at her for being a girl even when she beats them into the ground. Her father simply laughs and tells her to go easy on them.

She redoubles her efforts of getting off this island.

There are apparently pirates and Marines—each equally evil—that make up this world of islands. Both groups have amazing martial prowess, and most common people are helpless to defend themselves from them.

“There’s no need to worry, Kuina.” The village librarian laughs at her frowning face. “Shimotsuki
is one of the safest places in East Blue.”

She rolls her eyes, and the librarian doesn’t take it to heart, too used to her usual grumpiness. Today’s reading material tells her one thing: she was right to throw herself into her training.

Shimotsuki may be one of the safest villages in East Blue, but she has no plans of staying here. Hell, she doesn’t even know if she wants to stay in East Blue, the weakest ocean in the world.

She just knows she can’t stay here in this stifling place where her future is made for her with a father who would probably stay smiling at her death.

The sword is her way out, so she begins practicing even more diligently after that day. She moves on from challenging petty boys, and the older students begin fearing the glint her eye.

She doesn’t have the desire to be a swordsman, doesn’t pick up a sword and think, *this is my life.*

She doesn’t love the sword, but she does love its effects. Each strike of her shinai is full of purpose, and everyone begins fearing her wrath. She’s left alone to train, and her days pass by even more peacefully than the last. Life is good.

(But it’s still boring.)

She doesn’t know the story, doesn’t even know she’s stuck in between the pages of a manga. So when a boy with bright, green hair barges into the dojo yelling about being the greatest swordsman, she simply grabs her shinai and puts him in his place.

The fact that the kid not only joins the dojo but keeps challenging her every single day frustrates her. Roronoa Zoro, the boy exclaims, will be the greatest swordsman in the world. No amount of rubbing his face into the ground stops him from saying it every. Damn. Day.

She admits; it’s kind of fun seeing him get back up from her strikes just to go down. Still, what possesses this kid to try to jump her when she’s trying to read during her break?

“Get off me!” The boy cries, gnashing his teeth.

“No until I’m done reading,” she says flatly.

The boy howls underneath her, and she keeps reading on through sheer willpower. Not even her squirming seat will keep her from her goal. It’s tough going, but she manages to make it a quarter of the way in before she realizes that the kid’s stopped struggling.

“Why are you reading?” The boy sneers.

She taps the page with a considering hum.

“Usually people ask ‘What are you reading?’ ” She says with humor.

“Books aren’t important! You can’t learn swordsmanship like that!” The boy shouts.

She closes the book with a snap and inhales deeply. Whatever higher deity is out there, grant her strength from murdering this poor, stupid child.

“Alright, be ready with your katana. We’re going to do a real sword duel tonight in the training yard.”
She gets off the boy who stares at her with a gaping expression. She narrows her eyes and the boy jumps up and runs off as if set on fire. Normally when she issues a challenge, her opponents run off in fear. That huge grin tells her he’s the furthest thing from scared.

Tucking the book under her arm, she heads off to grab a snack. Maybe after tonight, he’ll finally leave her alone. She doesn’t need anyone getting in her way.

(She doesn’t need anyone tying her down. It’s harder to leave if you have something holding you back.)

“You ready to lose?” The boy grins, duel katana flashing under the moonlight.

“Are you?” She asks flatly, holding her single katana steady.

There’s only one outcome of tonight’s duel, and she’s not about to break her eternal winning streak. The boy flashes her a determined look, and the air grows tense.

She inhales and then exhales. Their blades strike against each other, and then it’s over. His swords go flying, and then she kicks him into the dirt.

“My win,” she announces, chest heaving slightly.

She expects the kid to curse, to flail and scream. He doesn’t let her down, but she does get a shock when he stops pounding his fists against the ground.

“Why did you challenge me?” The kid asks. “When you still don’t care to know my name?”

It’s a dirty blow from behind, a strike from a defeated opponent. It’s not that she doesn’t know his name—he shouts it every day—it’s that she refuses to acknowledge him.

“You wanted to know why I was reading,” she says, falling to the ground in exhaustion. “This is my answer.”

“What the hell kind of answer is that?” The kid demands.

She should be in bed right now, sleeping so she can get up and work. She should be preparing herself for another dull day of training. So what is she even trying to do? She digs her sandals into the dirt and tries to figure out what she wants to say.

“You want to be the strongest swordsman in the world, right? What will happen when you can beat everyone on this island?” She asks.

“I’ll go to the next!” The kid declares.

She stares into his eyes and asks, “How?” She’s given the expected answer.

“By sailing!”

The kid plops next to her, and she can see the same determination from earlier burning away. It’s almost as if she never beat him down. She feels slightly envious.

“Do you know how to sail? Do you know what to pack? Where to go? How the trade systems work? You have to learn that stuff,” she says.

“I can just get someone to teach me,” the boy scoffs.
“And there it is. You can, but I can’t. No one will teach me, so I have to teach myself,” she smiles bitterly. “I have to learn any way I can. I refuse to be stuck here.”

The sentiment echoes in her sword training. No one wants to teach her or help her get stronger. She goes to the back of the class and learns even when her father has made it clear she’s not actually a student.

She expects some derisive comment, but instead the kid remains silent. Again, she has no idea what she’s trying to achieve here. She just wanted to be left alone, to have him understand that she isn’t going to stay.

“I’m Zoro,” the boy eventually says, holding out a hand, “and I’m going to be the world’s greatest swordsman.”

It’s not a wild declaration, and there are no bamboo swords being waved about. It’s a serious statement, and there’s a promise of something behind those piercing dark eyes.

“Kuina,” she replies, taking his hand.

It’s the start of something new and dangerous, but damn if it isn’t interesting.

Her world curves into a new direction. She’s still planning on leaving, still planning to sail off with a katana and a stolen boat. It’s just now she has something called a “friend.”

“Bullshit.”

“Watch your mouth,” one of her father’s adult students tells her.

“No,” she narrows her eyes, “you’re just mad that a girl’s showing you up. My muscles still haven’t finished growing. If I can take on adults now, why the hell will that change when I get stronger?”

“A man—”

“No,” she says harshly, “there’s more than just raw strength to swordsmanship. Not much a guy can do if there’s a sword sticking through his gut before he can even move.”

She sees the disapproving look from her father out of the corner of her eye and knows she’s lost the argument despite winning it. She’ll be told, once more, that the older she gets the weaker she is. It's bullshit.

She remembers a woman that could go toe to toe with any man while she, the supposed greater sex, would go and pass out on the bar floor. It’s not a stretch to say his previous mother was far greater than her current father in every way possible.

“Kuina will kick your ass even if she’s a grandma,” Zoro says from beside her and the dojo grows silent at his words.

No one knows what to make of Zoro’s new attitude towards her. He still challenges her to a duel every day, still claims his eventual victory over her, but now he’ll stick around and talk to her. He defends her now in a way that’s humbling.

“Of course Kuina beat you. Why are you still crying over it?” He’ll say to someone who thinks complaining against her will win back their pride.
It doesn’t stop there either. When she opens a book, Zoro sits down next to her and asks her to read out loud. When she decides to try baking, he’s there eating her food even when he really shouldn’t be.

(“It’s too dry,” Zoro tells her before shoving the rest of the pastry into his mouth.

“You little,” she makes a noise in the back of her throat, “that was mine!”

He demands she bake it again, and she throws a plate at his head. He ducks, and she shoves his head into the leftover flour.

“You’re helping me make another,” she orders.

She soon regrets that decision. Turns out he can’t bake.)

She doesn’t know how to repay him for being her friend, but she’s got an idea.

Wado Ichimonji, her family’s sword, she doesn’t dare touch it. Swordsmanship really isn’t her passion, and she feels the wielder of such a great blade needs to be amazing. She has full confidence that Zoro will be the wielder Wado Ichimonji needs, can see it in his eyes.

“Which is why I want to leave the sword to Zoro,” she tells her father one day.

After all these years she still doesn’t understand the man and can’t tell what he’s thinking. She’s not going to back down though; she has no intention of marrying in this life and of giving Wado Ichimonji to anyone else.

Ominously shining glasses glare down at her, and she blurts out the next line without thinking,

“As my dowry to him!”

The cup in her father’s hands crack, and she tries to backpedal immediately to no avail.

“More of a pre-marriage gift? Because I can only marry the world’s greatest swordsman?” Wait, wasn’t the current one still single. “Because I will marry the best swordsman that’s my age.” She settles on.

She packs her bags that night. Three days later, she watches through the window as her father hands Wado Ichimonji to a flabbergasted Zoro. She uses money stolen from her father’s students through rigged bets and pays her way onto a merchant ship that is conveniently sailing the next morning.

(Of course she timed it right. She’s been ready to leave for the last six months. It’s time to move on.)

“Are you going to be okay, little girl?” The captain asks her with a frown.

She shifts so the handle of her katana is visible from her outer kimono. It’s not the best grade, but it’ll serve her well. She gives the captain a bright smile.

“I’ll be just fine, sir. Though I’d like to learn some sailing tips from your crew if it doesn’t bother them.”

She sails off, leaving behind two letters: one to her father and one to her friend. A part of her feels regret for being so ungrateful to what is, in all truth, a great childhood. The other part of her that only remembers being loved from a past life squashes it down ruthlessly.
“I wonder if Zoro will take being my betrothed seriously?” She mutters to herself before shaking her head with a smile. “Nah, that idiot knows me better than that!”

Well, even if he does, it’s not like they’ll meet again. Nope, she’ll never hear from him again.

(“Kuina, dear, come look at the new bounty posters!” Her boss waves at her from beside the door.)

She grumbles but gets up since she’s contracted to follow her boss anyway. She’s got half a year before she can quit her bodyguard job, but she’s debating paying the fee and cutting out early. It’s not a bad job, just boring.

She follows behind her boss through the marketplace, lamenting the woman’s choice in dress. The big hoop skirt knocks into countless things, and she’s the one grabbing the items before they fall. It’s a relief to finally get to the bounty board.

“Oh, look, dear, aren’t they so handsome,” her boss coos.

She rolls her eyes. Pirates would make a meal out of this woman. It’s a good thing her boss is smart enough to know she needs a bodyguard.

She glances at the newest posters in disinterest before choking as familiar green hair catches her attention.

“60,000,000?” She almost shrieks. “What the hell!”

Chapter End Notes

For those who read my TttF series, this was a what if? I wrote a Bleach, One Piece, and Naruto self-insert/oc-insert drabble and then chose one to continue with. I extended the One Piece one and let it stand as a oneshot.

Naturally, I can never pick a main character for an insert!
Chapter 2

When he is just a brat, headstrong and foolish, he marches into the Isshin Dojo in Shimotsuki Village and declares,

“I am Roronoa Zoro, and I am the greatest swordsman!”

For all that he wishes it was true, he doesn’t actually believe his own words. He knows, however, that the dojo’s strongest swordsmen will flock to him immediately.

(One day his words will be truth, and for that to happen he will pick as many fights as he needs to.)

“Greatest, huh? Watch your mouth or that will get you killed, kid.”

A boy barely older than him—well, he assumes it’s a boy—points a shinai at him in challenge. He grins, anticipating another easy win. He’s strong enough to take down adults. What does he have to fear?

The match is over in a second. His opponent’s shinai moves quickly and efficiently, and he can’t even land a hit. His knees hit the floor, and he hears the boy say mockingly,

“Better luck next time.”

He doesn’t know that this is the first of many losses, or that his opponent is actually the dojo master’s daughter. What he does know is that this is his first real test. If he ever wants to accomplish his dream, he needs to win.

He bows to the man that’s been watching him since he charged into the building. He asks to join and gets a smile in return.

He can honestly say he hates Kuina. Hates how she rolls her eyes when she thinks she’s above something, and how she’s quick to cut people down with acidic words. She rebuffs advice given to her and trains by herself.

He can’t stand that he constantly loses against someone so awful.

“She’s a real bitch,” Takao, one of his classmates, says while nursing a bruised arm.

He nods, never questioning why Kuina felt the need to punish the boy through a spar. He just adds it to the mental list of reasons he needs to beat her. He grabs his bamboo swords and starts swinging with renewed determination, ignoring the rest of Takao’s complaints.

(He knows Kuina could have broken Takao’s arm if she wanted to; that she has her reasons. He’s more upset over the fact that she never issues a challenge to him.)

Kuina doesn’t know his name. He’s known that since day one, but it’s never really bothered him before. She’ll have to acknowledge him after he beats her. That’s what he tells himself.

The days go by, and he never defeats her. Not in a duel, a spar, or even with words. His dream has
never been farther and out of reach. He just doesn’t understand what he’s doing wrong.

“You’re putting too much energy into your swings and losing control,” Kuina tells him one day. “Your left hand is weaker than your right. You need to fix that.”

“Shut up,” he hisses as his strikes against the training dummy falter.

“What ever, kid,” Kuina says, walking off.

Embarrassed, he roars at her back. He doesn’t need her help, doesn’t want it. There’s nothing wrong with how he’s doing things. Come back and face him like a man!

(His name is Zoro. Not kid, not “You” or any variation of it, and it’s certainly not boy. Why won’t she say it?)

It gets to him, being so weak in the face of someone so strong. He takes every opportunity he sees to fight, to spar. The only one who gives him a challenge besides Kuina is her father. Since his sensei rarely spars with students, he’s left with one option.

“Come back later,” she says, burrowing her face into a book.

Blood rushes to his ears and he raises a single shinai without thinking. He refuses to let his dream come second to books of all things. Kuina leans back in time, and his shinai misses its mark. He’s left staring into furious eyes.

(In retrospect, yeah, he deserved the beating, but as a result, he got a duel with real swords. It was completely worth it.)

“I have to learn any way I can. I refuse to be stuck here.”

Kuina’s smiling face under the moonlight hardly looks happy. He thinks about what life would be like if no one was willing to help him—he has plenty of friends while she has none, it’s kind of sad—and knows he’d be grouchy too.

How many people have approached her just to tell her she can’t do something? Of course she doesn’t give anyone the time of day. She’s not training so hard to prove them wrong either; it’s so she can leave.

He hears her for the first time since he’s met her. He wonders if she’ll hear him too.

“I’m Zoro,” he tries again, “and I’m going to be the world’s greatest swordsman.”

He holds out a hand and wants to tell her that he’ll listen from now on, that she doesn’t have to keep him at a distance anymore.

“Kuina,” she says, and I am going to fly.

She takes his hand.

“There’s some good stuff in today,” Kuina tells him.

“No there isn’t.”

He looks over the merchant’s table with a critical eye. No swords or exotic food. Just a bunch of
junk. Ignoring his disdain, Kuina grabs his arm and pulls him over to the bolts of cloth.

Yeah, that’s not happening. His training gi is good enough until he outgrows it. He’s also not that good at sewing, so it’d be a waste of money and time.

“Not for you, for me,” Kuina says, exasperated.

He doesn’t know what’s wrong with her normal shirt and shorts, but he crosses his arms and waits as Kuina sifts through the fabric.

The merchant spies her interest and begins making his sale pitch,

“I’ve got a lovely pink floral one here for a very good price, or how about this blue one with seashells? It’s normally expensive, but luckily for you, I got a good deal on it.”

Ignoring the man, Kuina pulls out a dark purple bolt with minimal design. It’d make a nice yukata, he thinks. Shame it isn’t green.

“This one, please. I’ll need all of it.”


He reaches for his bamboo swords only to realize they’re at the dojo. He gives the merchant his best glower, but the man doesn’t even flinch. Just wait until he’s taller.

“I’ll take this one too,” Kuina says, picking up a bolt of lavender silk.

The merchant’s eyes light up and no more words are said. He scowls through the entire purchase, feeling personally wronged. Kuina hefts both bolts over her shoulder and tells him to lighten up.

“You didn’t have to buy it!” He growls.

“Why not? I like it. It is pretty. I think I’ll make a kimono out of it,” Kuina says, and that’s that.

He grabs at his hair in frustration. No matter how much he tries, he can never figure her out. He’ll never win against her at this rate.

He wants to say that he’s only sticking so close to her to find her weakness, or that he just wants to memorize her moves. Truth is hanging out with her is like a breath of fresh air after standing in a stuffy room.

It takes him a long time to figure out, but Kuina is special. It’s not because she beats him into the ground consistently, or because of the books she’s always carrying around.

Kuina defies everything around her. She doesn't behave like any girl or boy on the island, doesn’t care to try to fit in. She won't allow anyone to decide her fate.

Kuina would make a good pirate except for the fact that she’d defy even that. She can't be labeled which makes her interesting.

Speaking of labels, he still doesn't know why she doesn't want to be the greatest swordsman. She’s got the strength and the discipline. So he asks.

"I don't care that much. It's just a way out for me. When I leave, I'll probably become a waitress or something," Kuina says as if she's commenting on the weather.
It's a stab of betrayal, and he doesn't talk to her for the rest of the day.

When he looks up at the stars instead of sleeping—maybe looking for something or just being unable to sleep—he comes to a realization.

Kuina is lying. She just doesn't know it.

If it wasn't for Kuina's defiant nature, for her resentment in being forced to wield the sword, she'd be just as passionate as he is. It's in her eyes, in her movements, and in the way she hates to lose.

He'll just have to drag that passion out, he decides, even if it means gaining a rival for the world's greatest swordsman.

“You’re hanging out with that bitch all the time. You tryin’ to get on Sensei’s good side?”

He opens his eyes and considers today’s meditation exercise yet another failure. He barely understands it, but meditation is supposed to make him better at fighting.

“Hey!”

Really, how is clarity of mind supposed to do anything? Sensei keeps saying it’ll help with his temper and fighting techniques, but it feels an awful lot like napping to him.

“Don’t ignore me, Zoro!”

He grabs Takao by the ankle and pulls the boy down. He cracks his elbow against Takao’s shin, and slams a shinai into the boy’s throat to silence his scream.

“You want to try saying that again?” He asks calmly.

Hm, perhaps there is something to this meditation thing. He’ll have to experiment later. Right now, he needs to take out the trash.

“Zoro, if you were given an amazingly awesome sword, what would you do with your other katana?” Kuina asks him one day.

“I’ll wield three swords,” he replies immediately. “I have teeth.”

He keeps lifting weights as Kuina begins laughing so hard she pounds a fist against the ground. They ignore the other students giving them odd looks.

“Knew you’d say that,” she gasps, “you get so attached.”

He grunts something unflattering, and she pulls down an eyelid while sticking her tongue out.

Kuina keeps looking out to the sea, and he doesn’t like it. She laughs now when they spar, and he’s so close to getting her to admit she’s having fun.

He still hasn’t won against her even one time. She can’t leave until he’s beaten her, has made her say she wants to be the greatest swordsman too.

(He doesn’t want to go back to breathing in stuffy air. He’s too attached.)
The dojo master, Koshiro, asks to meet with him, and he ends up in Sensei’s house, kneeling on a tatami mat. He fidgets, not knowing what to expect. He hopes that Takao didn’t suddenly decide to snitch—Takao deserved the beat down.

Sensei sits across from him, smiling like always. Even so, the room feels heavy for some reason.

“My daughter has made a request,” Sensei says.

“A request?” He blinks.

“For the Wado Ichimonji to be given as her dowry to the world’s greatest swordsman.”

He doesn’t understand even as Sensei gets up to retrieve the sword. When the sword is presented to him, the only thing he can do is stare.

“She wants you to have it. She believes you have what it takes to wield Wado Ichimonji,” Sensei tells him gently.

A dowry is when girls marry, right? So then the significance of giving the sword to him means—

He feels his brain freeze even as Wado Ichimonji finds its way into his arms. He’s not entirely sure what marriage actually means, but he knows it’s a promise of forever. It’s Kuina’s promise.

“A marriage needs time, but women can’t wait forever. Twenty-five is a good age for them,” Sensei says breezily.

_I have until I’m twenty-five_, he thinks with a paralyzing fear.

If he doesn’t make it, Kuina will take back Wado Ichimonji and marry someone else. If she does that, doesn’t that mean she no longer believes in him? That he’ll never become the greatest?

“I will definitely become a husband that Kuina won’t regret!” He promises, gripping Wado Ichimonji tightly.

Sensei pats his head, and he never notices the satisfied eyes peeking through the bars of the window.

He waits for Kuina the next day. Waits and waits until he can’t stand it anymore. Charging into Sensei’s house, he’s prepared to yell his lungs out until the girl stomps down the stairs with her familiar scowl and seething, “What?”

Sensei’s serious face stops him in his tracks. The man stares him down without a hint of emotion, and the noise dies in his throat.

“There’s a letter for you from Kuina,” the man says, reaching into a sleeve.

Handing him an envelope, Sensei leaves. The soft click of the door leaves him with a bad feeling, and he opens the letter warily.

_Goodbye_, it says.

Goodbye means Kuina’s gone, leaving him with no answers to his many questions. He knows she’s been ready to leave for a while, but he didn’t think she’d leave like this. With the promise of a life together, yet no promise to see each other again.
It leaves him reeling like no punch to the gut has ever done. There’s not much to the letter, but he has to read it twice because his eyes start itching. Her penmanship sucks, he thinks with a sniff.

His fingers grip the paper so hard it leaves crinkles, and a sudden leak from the roof leaves wet spots. Part of him wants to hurry up and become the world’s greatest swordsman so she can come home; part of him wants to chase after her.

(By home, he means by his side. She hates this island and this dojo; he knows that.)

He folds the letter back into the envelope and carefully tucks it inside his belt. He’ll find a better place for it later, but for now, he should go train. He’s going to need every minute he can get.

(He attacks the training dummy so hard it breaks; he falls to the ground and shouts, “I still haven’t beaten you yet!”)

His calloused fingers smooth out the weathered paper, and he wonders if she’s seen his bounty poster. He hopes so. He wants her to know he’s one step closer to his dream.

“Hey, Zoro! What’s that?”

He doesn’t move, choosing to give his fiercest glare to the shadow above him.

“Don’t touch it.”

Luffy freezes even as rubber fingers wiggle, ready to swipe the letter from his hands. He glances to the straw hat resting on his captain’s head. Luffy nods slowly, and reels his arm back in.

“I have until I’m twenty-five to become the world’s greatest swordsman,” he says, tucking the letter back into a pocket inside his boot. “It’s a reminder.”

“Zoro can do it,” Luffy tells him seriously before whining, “but why do you have to? You’re always training. You don’t even have time to fish!”

His captain practically melts into a pouting puddle, ranting about food and playtime. Still, behind that grumbling he hears genuine concern over his zealous amount of training.

So he explains,

“My betrothed will marry Mihawk instead if I fail.”

“EH?!”

“I won’t let that guy touch Wado Ichimonji either.”

He leaves for a nap, ignoring the wide-eyed gaping expression of his captain. He decides to sleep outside today, weather’s nice enough.

The rest of the crew ignores Luffy’s howling theatrics, neither believing nor understanding the claims about Zoro being engaged to a sword that might marry Hawk-Eyes.

He smirks and runs a hand over Wado Ichimonji. Even if he can’t make the deadline, he’ll just have to defeat Mihawk and steal Kuina away later. He is a pirate after all.

(He’d rather be her first husband though.)
Zoro,

I’ve finally done it. I’m off to find my future. Take good care of Wado Ichimonji for me, or I’ll have to find someone who will!

I’m not good at goodbyes, but there’s nothing for it. Goodbye. You already knew I couldn’t stay, but it’s not like you can either. Stagnation kills dreams. If we want to grow we have to have the courage to find our wings and fly away.

We might not see each other for a long time, but we are both warriors out to achieve our goals. I look forward to seeing your face when you accomplish your dream only to realize you’ll have to make another one!

Who knows what the future holds? Maybe when you’ve become the world’s greatest swordsman you can pass on your skills to the future. Maybe when I’m finally satisfied I’ll come back to the dojo.

Keep looking to the future and don’t ever stop,

Kuina

Chapter End Notes

Gee, thanks guys for prodding me. I only lost a little bit of sleep. (I’m kidding, I love you guys.)
Sea breeze hits her face, and she leans over the railing to watch Shimotsuki Village disappear among the waves. It’s a pity, but it’s too dark to make out anything on the island.

Zoro should be up by now, she thinks, getting ready to start the day.

She pushes down the guilt of leaving just a letter. She’s not sure she would have left if he asked her to stay, and Zoro coming with her is out of the question since it would mess up his training. She refuses to be the reason he fails his dream.

She whispers a goodbye to the only person that could have stopped her and sets her sights on the future before her.

The ship takes her to Blueberry Island. It’s not called that because it’s known for its blueberries, but because the island is perfectly circular with blue sand. The villages that dot the island are well-developed and full of resources; she’s sure there are blueberry bushes somewhere.

The captain points her to a relatively cheap hotel, and she grabs her bags and starts her new beginning in Royal Village. The first thing she does is look for a job while letting her potential employers think she just needs pocket money.

“You’re very young,” a shop owner says with uncertainty.

“The perfect age to learn,” she smiles. “Hard work pays for beautiful clothes!”

Desperation leads to being taken advantage of. She's gone through that cycle before when she first left home in her previous life. Never again will she let some scumbag hold her paycheck over her head.

“And you are,” the shopkeeper struggles, “a swordsman?”

“Yes.”

It probably affects her chances, but she remains upfront about her katana. The last thing she needs is getting fired once they realize she’s not joking.

She finds work as a waitress in a seedy bar. It pays the most, and the only rule is to not touch the alcohol. She has the freedom to do as she pleases so long as she takes orders and delivers food.

"You better know how to use that thing," her balding boss nods as she flashes the hilt of her katana. "It gets rough around here."

"I can handle it," she says.

Her boss lets out a disbelieving snort, and she knows he doesn't believe her. Give her one night, and he'll be changing his tune.

“Those some fancy robes there, girly.”
She sets the plate down and moves backwards before the drunk patron can grab her sleeve. It’d be a shame if something nasty soiled the silk.

“How much it cost your parents?” The man spits at her.

Not much to be honest. Both the first layer and the second layer were relatively cheap, and she had sewn the thing together herself. Granted her stitches would make even a novice cry, and if the aunties ever knew of her modifications they’d probably faint in horror.

“Hey, I’m talking here!”

She ducks the grab for her head and throws a fist into the man’s solar plexus. The man hunches over, losing all breath, and his eyes look ready to pop out of his head. If she were merciful, she’d leave it there.

She’s not. There’s also the statement she needs to make to the rest of the bar patrons.

In quick succession she lands a palm strike against the side of the man’s head, sweeps his legs out from under him, and points her sword to his throat.

“You don’t have anything worth saying,” she utters.

The bar is entirely silent, and the man wets himself. She sheathes her sword and gets back to work. She makes sure to leave a boot print on the man’s face on her way to the kitchen.

(It’s a trick: her kimono only looks like one. She has full range of movement and many concealed weapons. The opponents that focus on her hidden katana will be blind to the throwing knife heading their way. This isn’t the dojo anymore; the only rule here is to survive.)

She keeps up her sword training in her free time. She tells herself it’s because she doesn’t want to get rusty, can’t afford to let her skills slip. She challenges the island’s strongest fighters and is left unsatisfied.

*I’m going to be the world’s greatest swordsman.*

Sometimes when she’s training by herself, she forgets and waits for a certain boy to come running up to challenge her. She looks forward to it even, and when she remembers it leaves a lonely feeling.

She still doesn’t regret taking off, but she misses that boy more than she thought she would. He made her laugh and her dull day a little brighter.

She hopes Wado Ichimonji is serving Zoro well, hopes it reminds him of her. That he doesn’t forget her belief in him. The idea of being forgotten by her only friend hurts.

(If she only knew.)

She stays in Royal Village longer than she intends to. With the busy port, she’s hardly bored and there’s a wealth of knowledge in every drunken sailor. Things like magic exist—her books mentioned Devil Fruit but it’s different seeing it for real—and the sheer amount of variety in sentient beings is staggering!

(Shesee someone walking around with the coolest horns ever and can only be envious. Why
couldn’t she be born with that?)

She eventually has to extend her kimono and tie her hair back. At first she keeps the growing hair in a ponytail because she can't afford regular haircuts and buying a ribbon is cheap. When she glances in the window and sees her father, she heads straight to the hairdresser.

"Cut it all off," she orders.

"But your hair is so beautiful, it'd be a shame!" The hairdresser says.

True, it would be a shame. She remembers when he wore shiny, black hair in a thin ponytail and feels nostalgic. She sighs and decides to compromise.

Her hair gets cut into a style reminiscent of her childhood while leaving just enough strands near the skull to place in a ponytail. She doesn't look like her father anymore, and her hair becomes manageable.

She takes it as a sign that it’s time to move on. She does one final shift in the morning before sailing off, and work is the same as always. No one tells her “Be safe” or “I’ll miss you.” The highlight of her day is kicking an actual clown in the balls.

Her ride is going to Loguetown. It sounds like an interesting place—there’s a famous sword shop there!—and she’s more than ready for a vacation. It’s a long voyage, and the ship will be making several stops along the way. She’ll have to pay an additional fee to get back on the ship after each island, but the low price makes it worth it.

She makes it to Maze Island, and she’s given a whole week before the ship departs. The island is known for its natural, extremely dangerous hedge maze, and she knows exactly what she’s going to be doing for a week.

She buys supplies from Maze Village, slings a rucksack over her shoulder, and sets out.

“It’s too dangerous for a girl like you,” the leader of the island stops her before she can step in. “There’s lava and spiders and all sorts of things in there.”

She glances around the woman and judges the distance. It should be doable against someone of that size, granted body shape here is not an indicator for muscles or lack of.

“I’m going to want that reward when I get out,” she says and runs.

She makes it into the maze and doesn’t stop running until she’s well and truly lost. A cat-like beast pounces from a branch overhead, and she smiles for the first time since she left Shimotsuki. This world is so different and so interesting. She’s having the time of her life.

It takes her four days to get through the maze. By the time she gets out, she is hungry and a bit singed. Still, her mood is high. There’s a promised free meal to anyone who makes it through. It comes with ice cream. She still has a few days to look around at the shops too.

Her good mood crashes when she spots a ship with a black flag.

“Goodbye ice cream,” she sighs.

While it’s true that some pirates don’t cause any trouble on land, she’s not holding her breath. Case in point, she walks into the town hall only to see a man in grimy clothes attempting to assault the island leader.
She grabs the man by the back of the shirt and slams him to the floor. Her sword is in her hands before she can even think, and she takes the man’s head. The woman stares at her in absolute horror.

“Where’s the rest of them?” She asks, flicking the blood off her blade the best she can.

She makes her first kill that day and doesn’t stop until she makes her thirteenth. She claims some of the pirates’ treasure for herself—a map, a few jewels, and a weird compass in a crystal—and leaves the rest for the locals to deal with.

She doesn’t make it to Loguetown. The crew she was sailing with acts too uncomfortable around her, so she parts ways with them on the next island. Maybe she deserves the looks and whispers. She feels no remorse or nausea over her actions.

The first pirate deserved his fate—went out painlessly even—and the others died fighting. She just doesn’t see the issue. Zoro would understand, she thinks with a scowl.

She’s more upset over the blood spots on her lavender kimono to be honest. She’ll have to make a new one. Maybe she should stick to red or brown this time.

(She ends up buying a light green silk to go over her dark purple kimono. It has little white birds on it, and she thinks it’s perfect.)

She eventually winds up on another well-to-do island and settles down for a bit. She could use some extra money, so she goes looking for a job. The island has a Marine outpost, but it has nothing to do with her.

She soon regrets that thought.

“What did you just say?” The man shouts into her face, his red cheeks contrasting against his white “MARINE” hat.

It’s not like she goes looking for trouble. If a grown man can’t handle a jab at his terrible sword techniques, he can hardly be considered grown. Infants shouldn’t be waving around swords so carelessly.

“You should think about getting a breath mint,” she says.

They’re in the middle of the street, so when he goes to hit her all she does is knock him out. She’d rather cut off his hand so he can’t ever hold a sword again, but she’s not suicidal. She leaves his ass in the dirt and goes looking for a ship to take her away.

This place is no good.

No ships are leaving today, so she sort of expects retribution. Waits eagerly for it in fact. She hasn’t had a good challenge for a while now. Which is faster her sword or their guns, she wonders.

(Shes too far gone to realize this way of thinking isn’t normal.)

No angry Marines show up at her hotel door. No one attempts to arrest her while she’s eating. She even sticks around the marketplace to make it easier on them. She just ends up getting politely chatted to. It’s a letdown.
She heads to the beach to jog. There’s not much else to do. Information is more unrestricted in busy ports with questionable patronage than in a Marine town.

“Rogue! Scoundrel! Pissant!”

The beach is far more active than she thought it would be. A finely-dressed lady struggles in the hold of a man in a long, white jacket while another man with oily, slicked back hair struggles to remain standing with a bleeding stomach.

“Hey,” she calls out to the man in the jacket, “aren’t you a Marine?”

A heavily scarred face whips around, and she stares up in fascination at the man’s messed up nose. She never knew it could bend that way.

“An associate then? I’ll be taking you too,” the Marine growls threateningly.

She’s not sure how the man’s muddled brain came up with that one, but she feels a flicker of excitement. Standing before her is a challenge, she can feel it.

“I am Madam Shilla. I am the one you want. Do not touch that girl,” the woman demands even as her fingers turn purple from the Marine’s grip on her hand.

“Swordsman, you will be well paid if you strike him down,” the man with the stomach wound says, looking her straight in the eye.

Well, how can she say no to that? It’s not like she has any intention of going along with this crooked nose bastard anyway. Being paid for what she already plans on doing sounds amazing.

“Keep your word,” she says, dashing forward.

The Marine has no choice but to let Madam Shilla go, and the woman rushes to the injured man. The Marine aims a pistol at her, but she gets in too close, too fast. He throws it away for a grossly huge scimitar.

She dodges the first swipe and barely scratches him on her retaliating swing. She aims a slash towards the man’s gut and underestimates his speed. She can’t dodge his next swing, and she braces herself.

The moment the Marine’s blade strikes hers, she has an epiphany. It’s a hell of a timing, but she realizes that she truly does love it. The rush of blades swinging, the stances denoting power and speed, the weight on her hip—she loves the sword.

*I’m going to be the world’s greatest swordsman.*

Her sword breaks. The man laughs at her, and she uses the remaining jagged metal to slit his throat. The man stops laughing after that. She moves in time to keep most of the blood off her clothes but a few spots land on her sleeve.

It’s not a big deal. She’s learned there’s a powder that can take the stains out. She has a slightly bigger concern at the moment. Her sword is broken. She looks at the shattered remains with wide eyes. Is this her fault? Did she mistreat the katana?

“Girl, you better clean up that mess,” the slick haired man tells her.

She nods and returns the broken sword to its scabbard. The loss of most of the blade makes its
weight disproportional, and it moves awkwardly against her hip.

She rolls up her sleeves and begins dragging the body to the sea. Maybe she should tie it down with some rocks? She admits she has no idea what she’s doing. Cleaning up a crime scene is a first for her.

“Not that,” the man sighs, “I’ll take care of that. Gather up the rest of your sword.”

How a man with a stomach wound is going to get rid of the body, she doesn’t know, but it’s better than trying to figure it out on her own. She drops the body and searches the sand for blade fragments. It’s the least she can do for the weapon that’s been with her for so long.

“Is she going to be okay?” Madam Shilla whispers. “She seemed so capable earlier.”

“She’s mourning the loss of her soul. Only another sword can heal the wound,” the man says quietly.

She can still hear them, she mentally grouches. No need to talk about her behind her back. Once she can no longer find any pieces, she attempts to collect her pay. She tenses as the woman grabs her hands.

“I am Madam Shilla, and this is my fiancé—”

“Bodyguard,” the man injects tersely.

“—Roberto.” Madam Shilla continues with a smile. “I may have been suspected of selling a few things to pirates, and I may have said a few things to set the good captain off. Thanks to you I will be able to leave this island immediately.”

She looks at the body still lying on the beach before glancing over at Roberto who’s wrapped his jacket around his stomach. She blinks at the woman.

“Don’t you worry. I have some help on the way to deal with that,” Madam Shilla says, “but I know exactly how to repay you!”

She’s unprepared for the bone breaking hug, and the squealing in her ear. No amount of struggling gets her out of the woman’s grip. The force of Madam Shilla is terrifying.

“Dear, you’re coming with me. Gold Rum Island has a good sword shop, and I know some ladies who would love to have such a cute bodyguard!”

The woman never lets go, so she has no choice except to board her ship, The Singing Viper. Roberto takes pity on her and manages to convince Madam Shilla to let her have some time to herself.

“You can run away if you want to,” Roberto whispers to her, “she’ll only cry a little bit.”

Well, it’s not like she has a reason to turn down the offer of a new sword and a ride to the next island. She also has a higher chance of being found out by the World Government for the death of a Marine captain if she sticks around.

“I’m good,” she says. “I want to see Gold Rum.”

If anyone starts any trouble, she’ll simply throw them all overboard and steal their ship. She’s not defenseless. She still has all the knives and shuriken inside her kimono.
In the end, it’s the remains of her sword that gets thrown overboard. Any other swordsman would probably be offended by the action, but it feels right to her. She can’t keep it with her, but she refuses to melt it down into something else.

The shine of the sword disappears beneath the waves, and she feels free.

Her katana started this journey with her. When she looks out to sea, perhaps its spirit will be there, watching as she continues finding her way in this world. It’s a romantic idea, but it makes her happy all the same.

Amber Light, Gold Rum’s major city, does in fact have a good sword shop. She drools over the higher quality swords before sadly making her way to the bargain bins. Unlike the expensive swords that get their own stands, the discounted ones are shoved into a barrel.

It can’t be helped. Madam Shilla underestimated the cost of swords, and considering what the lady’s gone through to get her settled into Amber Light, she’s not about to ask for more money. She’ll just have to save up for a better katana later.

The discount barrels earn their cheaper prices; she looks over crude handles with something close to despair. The blade’s the most important part, so there’s still a chance of a good one to be found here.

A pink handle catches her eye, and her hand automatically reaches for it. It’s unusual for such a color to be sold in a specialty shop. Picking up the sword gives another surprise: the scabbard is pink too, albeit a different shade.

Despite the color, both items are in good shape. How’s the blade—

She halts in the middle of drawing the sword and stares dumbfounded. The blade is pink. The scabbard, the hilt, the wrap, the blade—it’s all pink. Who the hell would give this to anyone? Unless made of precious materials, colored blades will get their wielders killed. No wonder it’s in the bargain bin.

She takes one last look at the pink metal before she drops it back into the barrel and freezes. She runs a finger over the blade and thinks, no way.

“Hey, who made this?” She asks, slowly examining the sword with wide eyes.

“Oh, that thing?” The shopkeeper looks up from his newspaper to give the katana a look of disgust. “Some noble had it made for his daughter. There’s no signature on it, so I don’t know much else, but I can’t get rid of it. I’ll let you have it for half the price on the barrel.”

Half off on top of the discount? Holy shit, that’s insane.

“I’ll take it,” she says fiercely.

The shopkeeper rings her up all while giving condescending looks towards her and her new katana. No doubt he thinks she’s an uneducated little girl playing at swords. She smiles brightly in reply. She’s not the stupid one.

She tests the sword on slabs of meat, and it practically sings in her hands. She moves on and tests it on thin metal sheets, and it’s as if she’s cutting through nothing. This katana, to be frank, is amazing.
Everyone who overlooked this sword for its appearance is a dumbass of the highest degree.

“It’s you and me now,” she tells the sword. “If you save my life ten times, I’ll name you.”

It might be her imagination, but she thinks she hears a silent *challenge accepted*. She pats the hilt and knows she’s found her One. At least until it breaks which won’t be for a very long time, not with that kind of quality.

(She wants to see Zoro again, wants to see his face when he sees her perfectly pink sword. It’d be even more hilarious if she beats him with it.)

Chapter End Notes

Gosh darn, don't you people know that leaving comments motivates me to write?! You guys have way too much power.
Her new sword is much longer than her old one, making it difficult to keep concealed. So she doesn’t. There are consequences to publicly wearing a sword of course; it denotes a willingness to fight.

There’s also the fact that her katana is bright, eye-searing pink. She doesn’t understand why a single color sets people off, but quite a few “real” swordsmen take issue with it. She doesn’t mind the duels, but the sheer amount of challengers makes her jaw drop.

“They don’t count,” she tells the katana. “You’ll have to really save my life to earn your name.”

Living in Amber Light is far more convenient and noisier than any previous village she’s stayed in. As her first real city in this world, Amber Light is in constant motion, and there’s always something new to look forward to.

Amber Light is not full of metal and glass buildings or cars, but it’s undoubtedly a city. She can’t walk two steps before she’s almost bumping into someone in a hurry. It’s more nerve-wracking than she cares to admit.

She moves into a small house in the red light district of which Madam Shilla owns. Rent is cheap considering. Her neighbors leave her alone, and the sword on her hip keeps her from being mistaken for a prostitute. It works for her.

“I met Roberto when he was down on his luck, and I needed a bodyguard. I started calling him my fiancé as a joke, but now I really wish he’d take me up on it,” Madam Shilla sighs to her one afternoon.

She takes a sip of the lemon tea bought for her and hides her grimace. Madam Shilla asked her to accompany her to a café for tea and a light snack. She doesn’t like fruit tea or talking about love life, yet here they are.

“You wouldn’t happen to know how to ensnare a man into the aisle, would you?” The woman asks teasingly.

She knows it’s a jest, knows Madam Shilla understands her better than that, but she can’t stop the smile from pulling at her lips. Memories of a child with green hair being handed a white sword come to mind.

“Give them something they can’t resist and then run away,” she says serenely.

Madam Shilla chokes on her tea, and she bites into her sandwich nonchalantly. Of course, said method doesn’t work if the groom doesn’t chase after the bride, and the boy she knew definitely doesn’t have the patience to wait for her return.

“Kuina, dear, when are you going to let someone hire you?” Madam Shilla asks, wiping her mouth.

She hides another grimace. Unsure of her desire to be a bodyguard, she’s put off screening clients. It’s the yearlong contracts that give her pause. She doesn’t want to be forced to stay here any longer than she wants to be.
Still, she can’t put off getting a job forever. She never wants to be too poor to eat, and Amber Light is a good opportunity to put away some savings. If only the taxes weren’t so high.

From what she can gather, the money from this island goes straight into the pockets of the World Nobles who view themselves as the supreme rulers of everything. The World Nobles remind her uncomfortably of the oppressors from his previous life but seem to be so much worse.

She wonders how many heads she can take before she’s brought down. Wonders if a World Noble bleeds any differently than a commoner. It’s a thought for later.

“I’ll start making appointments tomorrow,” she says. “I won’t work for idiots.”

Madam Shilla makes an approving hum, and they finish their tea with idle chatter. Well, Madam Shilla idly chatters; she tries to finish her tea without gagging.

“Come, let us go look at what the shops have today. I have it on good authority that some good items came in this morning,” Madam Shilla says, holding out a hand.

She offers her arm, and Madam Shilla navigates around her kimono sleeve to hold onto it. She keeps an even pace with the shorter Madam, and they take their time looking through shop windows.

It would be easy to learn to love this woman, she thinks, and stay here forever. The city is exciting, and both Madam Shilla and Roberto are good people. She could have an easy life, be well-paid, and have friends who care.

The rest of the world calls to her, and she knows it’s an impossible fantasy.

“Your little sash thing,” here Madam Shilla mimes wrapping a cloth around her stomach, “is getting a little frayed. I want to buy you a new one.”

“It’s an obi. You don’t have to.” But she doesn’t want to turn down free clothing either.

“Considering you’re guarding me free of charge, I’ll be grateful to only have to do this much. Now let’s go find one you like.”

Amber Light is big enough to have mass-produced clothes, but there’s not a kimono in sight. If she wants to keep her style—and her hidden weapons—she’ll have to sew her clothes herself. While the city has a fabric shop with a wide variety, it’s hell on the purse. She quite willingly lets Madam Shilla lead her into the shop.

“So many colors!” Madam Shilla says with an admiring gaze.

She nods and takes her time searching for material she likes. There’s a white one, but she doesn’t even want to think of trying to clean it. Green would be redundant. There’s an exquisite gold bolt of material at the back of the room, and she knows that it would look perfect on her.

Gold would clash with her pink sword though. She gives her katana a rueful smile. Now that she’s gotten into the habit, she likes looking nice.

“This one.” She holds up purple fabric that’s nearly blue instead.

She’ll need to modify it, but unlike her current obi, it should last longer due to the quality of the material. Her affection for Madam Shilla rises a little more as the woman takes it out her hands and buys the entire bolt. She hopes Roberto accepts the Madam’s marriage proposal one day; otherwise
she'd be tempted to try for her hand herself.

Two days later, she’s told by an excited Madam Shilla that the gold fabric she had been eyeing was discovered to be doused in poison. Everyone who handled it came down with a fever before becoming bedridden. The shop has no records of it, and no one knows where the dangerous fabric actually came from.

“Alright, sword, that’s one,” she says with a disbelieving huff. “I would have bought it if not for you. Let’s see you do it nine more times.”

*Just you wait*, her katana seems to say.

She keeps her word and begins meeting with potential clients to guard. With a list based on Madam Shilla’s contacts, she expects to be dealing with mature and business oriented people.

She expected too much. Her first potential client gets a strike off the list immediately.

An old woman with hair twisted into the ugliest knots she’s ever seen stares her down from an expensive sofa. She stares back from her uncomfortable plastic covered chair and debates grabbing a gelatin candy from the dish next to her.

“You walk like a man,” the old woman eventually says with a frown, “and you don’t keep your legs closed. I can’t be seen with you until we work on your manners, young lady.”

She takes all the candy from the dish and shoves them into her mouth. The woman lets out a scandalized gasp, and she makes sure to drop a few of the candies as she chews with her mouth wide open.

“I’m wearing men’s pants because they’re cheaper and more comfortable. I don’t always bathe, and I’m thinking of getting a tattoo,” she says after swallowing.

“My word!” The woman exclaims.

She leaves shortly after that.

Her next one is hardly better.

“Are you sure you’re not willing to wear it?” A sleazy man asks with a pout.

By it, the man means a so-called dress that barely covers her breasts and butt. She glares at the strips of cloth in disdain. There’s no way she can hide any weapons let alone fight in that.

“Just think,” the idiot continues, “no one would ever know you can take down gangs with your bare fists. It’s the perfect disguise!”

“Except my clothes are good enough, I’m already unassuming, and I am a *swordsman*,” she stresses.

There’s an awkward pause as the man attempts to understand her point. He gives her katana a patronizing look.

“You don’t have to carry that thing around all the time, do you?”

She grabs her hands to keep from running the sleaze ball through. She wants to—oh, how she
wants to—but she’s here on Madam Shilla’s recommendation. She likes the woman too much to ruin her name.

“We’re done here. Don’t contact me again,” she says firmly before pausing, “or any woman for that matter.”

She steals one of his expensive pens when he’s not looking, and the servant by the door politely looks away. She considers it payment for wasting her time.

She finally gets her client through sheer accident.

She’s grocery shopping when a runaway carriage appears. Two bizarre three-horned horses barrel down the street, foaming at the mouth, and she instinctively knows she won’t be able to step out of the way in time.

She drops the bags in her arms to draw her sword. A quick breath and a single strike end the crazed horses’ lives, and the carriage veers around her.

“Help me! Please!” A screaming plea comes from inside the carriage, and she chases after it.

The carriage continues on, dragging the dead bodies with it. The vehicle wobbles dangerously and will most likely tip over soon. With her speed training, she not only catches up to the carriage but is able to jump on.

Ignoring the screaming around her, she tears open the door to see a heavyset woman crying on the floor. She grabs the woman and jumps out, underestimating the sheer amount of dress the woman wears. She lands painfully while almost choking to death on lace.

“Are you alright?” She asks, setting the woman down.

The woman grabs her and attempts to suffocate her again. The woman bursts into a fresh set of tears, blubbery gratitude, and she pats her back. She sticks around long enough to calm the lady down and report her version of events. She heads back to the grocery store.

It dawns on her while she’s in the middle of shopping that this is the second time her sword has saved her life. She pats its hilt and resolves to do nothing but training for tomorrow.

She’s woken up in the middle of the night and asked to be a bodyguard for the heavyset lady. She squints her eyes, and—against her better judgement—says yes.

She might have some regrets about accepting her new job. It turns out her new boss, while a good person, is an idiot. No wonder the previous bodyguard retired. She puts up with it the best she can but decides to cut her losses and terminate the contract early.

“Kuina, dear, your friend is waiting for you in the parlor,” she hears through the door while she’s bathing on her boss’ orders. “He says he’s done cleaning your sword.”

She freezes. Say what now?

With something close to panic, she looks around the bathroom for her blindingly pink sword. All she sees is white tile. It’s gone. She remembers her boss coming in to drop off some towels.

Hastily wrapping a bathrobe around herself, she throws open the door, nearly hitting her boss.
“Why does he have my sword?” She demands.

“I gave it to him. He said he was a friend, and that you asked him to clean your sword. He had a cleaning kit,” her boss says uncertainly.

Pure blinding anger hits her, and she’s pretty sure she blacks out for a moment. She blinks back to awareness and gnashes her teeth.

“You did what.”

Her face must be truly terrible to make her boss tremble, but she finds she doesn’t care.

“He’s waiting you say? Go tell him I’ll be right there and then go lock yourself in your room,” she orders, exchanging her bathrobe for her kimono.

Her boss leaves, and she hurries to get herself together. She mentally pats herself on the back for her modifications. Actual kimonos take forever to put on, but hers can be slung on quickly. She almost runs to the parlor and is so out of it she forgets to hide a knife in her sleeve.

“You dumb bitch,” the man waiting for her sneers, pink katana held in his grip, “you humiliated my father with this stupid thing. I’ll watch the light in your eyes die with your own sword!”

She watches the man attempt to draw her sword, attempt to wield it. Her blinding rage from earlier returns with a vengeance. Anyone who dares touch her precious katana will find a swift death.

In one smooth motion, she throws a knife tucked away in her obi at the man’s fingers. She could have thrown it at his eye or his throat, but the only thought she has is to make him drop her sword.

The man screams and throws the katana upwards. She watches, stunned, as her sword twirls in the air only to fall on top of the guy’s head, hilt first. He falls over and doesn’t get back up. She glances to her pink katana lying innocently on the floor.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll count that. Three.”

The only reason she doesn’t walk out is that her boss actually apologizes on her knees. The dimwit offers a heirloom in recompense, and she politely rejects the gold pendent for a dagger instead. She’s had her eye on it for a while now, and she’s not above grabbing the opportunity.

“Unless my sword is falling off a cliff,” she says with narrow eyes, “don’t ever touch it again.”

She gets a high quality dagger that fits into her boot and a renegotiated contract. Her pay is enough to satisfy, and she gets vacation days which is ridiculous considering she’s supposed to be around her boss all day every day. She supposes one can say that she’s protecting the boss from being strangled by her own bodyguard.

She’s training on the beach, doing her sword katas when she’s forced to deflect a bullet. It ricochets off her blade, and she rolls to the side, ready to cut her unknown assailant down.

A little boy stares at her with a horrified expression and a shaking gun, and she debates the ethics of killing child assassins. She supposes an actual assassin wouldn’t piss his pants, so she stays her hands.

“Talk,” she says with a voice as frigid as ice.

Turns out the boy is playing with his father’s gun, trying to fire out at the ocean. She grabs the boy
by the ear and forces him to tell her where he lives. She’s going to nip this in the bud before someone gets hurt, and if the parents don’t discipline the kid suitably, she’s going to dole out punishment to both parents and child.

This is the fourth time her katana saves her, she thinks with a sigh.

She saves up and takes three weeks for a vacation. Her boss tearfully sees her off, and she pats her stand-in on the shoulder for good luck. She’s headed to an island resort close to the Grand Line, one known for a restaurant that tries and fails to compete with the nearby Baratie.

The main appeal of the island’s resort, Rosin, is that it’s far cheaper than the Baratie while still being tasty. They have good wine, she’s told, and a good sushi bar. While she abstains from alcohol, she’s looking forward to trying their lobster rolls.

She’s leaning on the railing, daydreaming about sushi when she spots a black object in the sky. The sailor from the crow’s nest begins shouting, and she jumps onto the railing.

Much like the bullet episode, she’s forced to use her sword to deflect another projectile. Unlike the last time, she sees this one coming and can dodge. Unfortunately, the ship can’t. She leaps from the railing to cleave the metal item in two to save the small vessel’s mast.

It’s a damn good thing she can swim despite the weight of her clothes.

“Where the hell did this cannonball come from?” She shouts as the crew throws her a rope.

The fifth time is still ridiculous no matter how many times she remembers it.

She makes it to Rosin and gets the nicest hotel room she can afford. The Rosin’s hotel is fish themed, and she makes a mental note to ask how much the koi pillow costs. She could probably drag it with her when she starts traveling again.

There is something distinctly off with the sushi bar though. It could be the fact that all the other guests have disappeared, or that the kitchen staff peek out of the kitchen door with pale faces.

“What is he doing in East Blue?”

“He seems to be in a good mood though. Keep it that way,” one of the waiters warns with a whisper.

A man in a black coat and hat is the only customer in the restaurant. Obviously this guy is a big deal, but he doesn’t seem openly hostile. She decides to poke the hornet’s nest.

Ignoring the gesturing motions of the staff, she grabs a plate and fills it with as much sushi as it can hold. She grabs a pair of disposable chopsticks and makes her way to man’s table. Unusual piercing yellow eyes flick from her face to the sword around her waist.

There is a very distinguishing sword leaning against the chair, and she knows exactly who she’s dealing with. She steels herself.

“Do you mind if I eat here?” She asks.

“You’re a swordsman.” It’s a statement, not a question.

“So are you,” she points out.
If he wants to state the obvious, so can she. Those unnerving eyes bore into hers, and she keeps her back straight. The man takes a long sip from his wineglass in clear dismissal.

“Do as you wish.”

She sits down and digs into her long awaited sushi. The silence should be unnerving, but she thinks it’s one of the most pleasant meals she’s had in a long time. Of course, that might simply be because she gets to enjoy her lobster rolls in peace.

After the meal is another thing entirely. When she’s getting up to pay, trying to hunt down the waiter for her check, he’s right there behind her, looming over her shoulder. Undoubtedly, it’s time for her to get stung for her recklessness.

“You know who I am.”

Well, yes, it’s quite obvious. She looks at the cross-shaped sword on the man’s back and gives him a flat look.


“Why do you wield a sword?” Mihawk asks, ignoring her jab.

She could say she wants to be as safe as possible, or that she simply grew up with it. That would be a lie though. She looks at her katana and ponders. It’s not a love for the sword either as much as she wants to claim so.

The reason she wields a blade isn’t for anyone else but herself.

She has no love for the pirate life. She doesn’t care for the Marines, and she loathes the World Nobles. She doesn’t feel the need to fight the system—has no reason to—and doesn’t understand the appeal of living out a quiet existence on a tiny island. She only wants to keep flying, to see the whole world.

She wants true freedom, tied down to nothing. Not to an organization, not to ideals, and certainly not to people.

(She lost the moment she took his hand.)

“I will be strong enough that no one can keep me down. Strong enough I have no equal and can go where I please. *I will not bow my head to anyone ever again.*”

His unnerving eyes pierce into her, and she wonders what they see. If whether or not he can see that she can’t be shaken no matter how many time she’s tested.

“I will give you the honor of testing your resolve.”

Something in the air crackles, and her hand moves on its own to draw her katana. She has no idea of why she’s doing it, but she brings her sword up in a defensive stance. When a black strike, perfect and powerful, pushes against her blade, she’s thrown into the wall behind her.

Fire goes through her back and her arms, and her head cracks against the wall. In her whole life, she’s never felt as powerless as she does now. She thinks she’s bleeding.

“Impressive,” is all Mihawk says.
It feels like she’s moving through syrup, but she manages to grab the handle of her sword. She grits her teeth and lifts the blade. It feels heavier than anything she’s ever held. The guard’s broken, but to her astonishment, there are no nicks on the blade.

*I’ll count that as an additional five*, she thinks dazedly.

She opens her mouth and blurs out, “You asshole.”

Her vision blurs, and she thinks she has a head injury. It’s the only explanation she has for her lack of fear. She looks up into way too many yellow eyes, and thinks with a laugh, *this is the man Zoro will defeat.*

“You know,” she says pleasantly as if she isn’t seeing double, “I promised to marry the world’s greatest swordsman. I hope you die.”

Both Mihawks throw back their heads and laugh.

“Wahhahahha!”

She tells Mikawk to buy her a bottle of wine before he leaves, and he does. If there’s any time to break her abstinence, it’s now. She pulls herself into a chair and watches his black coat disappear out the door. She pulls down an eyelid and sticks her tongue out at his back.

The waiters bring her the wine and a box of bandages with shaking hands. She forgets to ask them about the pillow.

She examines where her back hit the wall, puts the bottle to her lips, and chugs. Two diagonal slashes go up from the dent she made, giving a parody of wings.

She knows without a doubt that if it wasn’t for her sword she would have died.

“Your name is Tsubasa de Tobu,” she says.

It is both a humorous take on her meeting with the world’s strongest swordsman, and a name that can keep up with her. She can think of nothing better than *Take Flight with Wings.*

Chapter End Notes

Dedicated to everyone who's left a comment and kept this story going. Dedicated to my lost sleep.
Her week of vacation quickly turns into a week of recovery. She has no regrets of pulling Mihawk’s metaphorical pigtails, but the resort ends up being far more boring than she thought it’d be. All she can do is sit in a pool chair and sew.

She wears a spare set of underclothing while repairing her kimono, and she can’t stop rubbing her bare arms in discomfort. There’s no place in her t-shirt for knives and shuriken, and with her katana needing repairs as well, she has to rely on the dagger in her boot for emergencies.

There’s no training to break up the monotony either. The stitches that run from her collarbone to her shoulder blades are made by an inexperienced resort clerk. She’s not about to test them by doing pushups.

She’ll end up with a good amount of scarring, but the way the wounds fan out to her back will give a unique appearance. Quite frankly, she thinks it’ll be neat. It doesn’t stop her from wanting to track down Dracule Mihawk and leaving a scar of her own.

“You orders have been processed. We’ll bring out your purchases to you. Please don’t get up. Please, don’t,” the staff member assigned to take care of her begs.

She slouches in the chair with a pout. *You bleed on the carpet once.* The staff work hard to be pleasant and non-confrontational, but she’s been treated like a bomb ever since she left an indent in their restaurant wall.

The staff member hands her a bag, and she pulls out souvenir shirts and a cheap, cotton-stuffed pillow. *It’ll do,* she thinks while examining a black t-shirt. There’s also a peach shirt; its yellow logo will work for what she has planned.

Grabbing her scissors, she carefully follows the patterns created with napkins. She gets several nosy people breathing down her neck, but a quick jab with a needle ensures she’s left alone.

“He’s looking good, right?” She asks her assigned staff member while holding up her creation.

It’s been literally a lifetime since she made one, but she doesn’t think it looks half bad. She could be biased though.

“W-Wonderful,” the staff member choked.

She wonders what it says about her that she’s bored enough to make a doll of Mihawk. He’s still missing his sword, and his hat isn’t finished; even so, there’s no mistaking who the doll represents. She dubs it Mini-Mihawk.

She continues working on the doll until it’s time to leave. Stuck in her chair, the only thing of interest besides her project is gossip. The other customers say nothing of merit, and most of the juicy bits come from the staff.

“The Baratie has been attacked,” one whispers to another. “Pirates that Hawk-Eyes was chasing after.”
“Did anyone die?”

“Sadly, no.”

She practically jumps on the ship to take her back to Gold Rum Island, needing a vacation from her vacation. She still forgets to ask about the koi fish pillow.

The first goal once back in Amber Light is to fix her sword. Sadly, there are no pink guards for sale—there probably isn’t one anywhere really—so she ends up buying a silver one.

“I’ll get you a custom one later,” she tells Tsubasa de Tobu. “I’ll see about having it decorated with wings.”

The new guard shines in the light, and she takes it as Tsubasa de Tobu’s acquiesce. Her sword might be a bit vain, but if it can take a strike from the best sword in the world without a scratch? It’s earned some entitlement.

She goes back to her bodyguard job without complaint, but her shoulder blades begin to itch terribly. At first, she thinks it’s just her new scars healing. When it continues on for too long, she realizes it’s not a physical itch.

_I’m going to be the world’s greatest swordsman._

There’s a new desire burning inside her, a need to look Mihawk in the eyes again and challenge him. She wants to have the strength to actually see the sword coming at her. She wants to win.

“I just renewed the contract for another year,” she groans.

The sea beckons, and she’s not sure she can stay the full year. She tries to fill in the time by making an exact replica of Mihawk’s legendary sword, Yoru, for Mini-Mihawk. It takes up more of her free time than she thought it would, but it’s not quite enough.

Her boredom wouldn’t be so bad if her boss actually needed guarding. The lady’s only enemy seems to be her own stupidity, and there’s only so many times she can make catching a runaway carriage exciting.

“Kuina, dear, come look at the new bounty posters!” Her boss waves at her from beside the door.

She grumbles but gets up.

60,000,000.

Dead or Alive: Roronoa Zoro.

Staring at the poster of a scuffed up man with green hair, she thinks, _when did he grow up?_ When did he have the chance to earn this kind of infamy? She can’t look away from that familiar scowl, and the scars on her shoulders begin itching.

“Kuina, dear, are you alright?” Her boss asks before noticing the poster that’s caught her attention. “Oh, my, have you finally fallen?” Her boss winks at her knowingly.

She reaches out to trace Zoro’s facial features with her finger and knows that he’s one step closer to his dream, knows he’s surpassing her stagnating self.
“I need a copy of this bounty,” she says.

Both Mihawk and Zoro are signs; she’s sure of it. The cage door is shutting, and she needs to leave. Her bosses inane teasing over the bounty poster she stores in her kimono gives her an idea.

“Don’t you see,” she widens her eyes just so, “that he’s my destiny. I need to see his face in person. I need to—I need to know.” She glances to the side and sighs.

Lucky for her that her boss is an idiot. Bursting into tears, the lady waves her contract termination fees and all but shoves her out the door. She actually feels a little bad when the woman hands her an expensive hairpin.

“You’ve got to look nice, dear. Follow your love, Kuina, and don’t take no for an answer!” Her ex-boss cries.

She randomly chooses a ship that leaves soon and buys passage. It’s headed to Dawn Island, wherever that is. She tucks Mini-Mihawk away inside her kimono and throws a bag together.

She leaves letters for Madam Shilla and Roberto, unwilling to say goodbye to their faces. It stings, but she’ll never be back. There’s no need for anything more.

The ship sets sail, and her shoulders feel fine.

She never makes it to Dawn Island. The ship gets attacked by pirates while she’s sleeping. She can’t say for sure why no one breaks down the door to her cabin, but the result is that she never wakes up.

It’s an awkward moment when she goes out and sees everything gone: the crew, the other passengers, and, more importantly, the sail. She stares around blankly, having absolutely no idea on what to do.

Eventually she realizes there is a nearly hidden lifeboat still attached to the ship and an island in the distance. She grabs her bag, rolls up her sleeves, and rows like she never has before.

A ship with a black flag comes into view the closer she gets to the island. She grits her teeth and rows faster. She’s going to kill all but two of these bastards. She’ll need them to sail the ship.

She meets her first fishman while scouting the island. It doesn’t go as well as she’d like. Ideally, she’d see the fishman, marvel at this world’s oddness, and then ignore the fishman’s existence all together.

“Stay still, I can’t wrap your legs if you keep moving,” she chides.

“You’re the reason they’re bleeding!” The grey fishman howls.

She tightens the bandages harder than she should which makes the fishman squirm even more. He’s damn lucky considering she had been attempting to cut off his legs. There is no mercy to those who attack her.

Her initial reason for keeping Tsubasa de Tobu from taking a life is simple. She had been planning to interrogate the fishman on the pirates that stranded her in the middle of the ocean. Strategy can make up for loss of numbers, and there must be quite a bit of pirates to capture a whole ship.
When she held the fishman to sword point, she noticed three things: his skin looked brittle, he was far too thin, and there was an explosive collar around his neck.

“You try to take it off, and we both go boom. Only the key from my master,” here the fishman spat, “will get it off.”

Her opponents are slavers. Big enough they can afford the trip to the Grand Line and back; strong enough to get away with enslaving fearsome fishmen. The pirates are using this island as a slave hold in East Blue, and everyone on the ship has been put into pens to be processed.

Well, it makes things simple for her. She can free the original sailing crew and ensure no pirate gets left alive.

“I’ll throw the key your way if I find it,” she promises.

“Of course you will. Slit your throat here, little girl. Faine is worse than death,” the fishman sneers at her. “You won’t last long against his Devil Fruit.”

So the pirate captain, Faine, has a Devil Fruit. Good to know. She asks for more details and gets no answers. The fishman becomes increasingly uncooperative, and she leaves him alone.

She settles down with the plan to strike at the pirates in the middle of the night. It’s an eye for an eye, and she hopes to catch a few pirates unaware. The fishman’s jaw drops as she takes out some jerky and lies back.

“You idiot,” the fishman hisses. “You risk being caught so close to their camp.”

“I need to keep your bandages clean. I didn’t just waste most of my water on you for nothing,” she says.

She keeps some emergency supplies in her bag, and to her dismay, has just used up most of them. She hopes the pirates have some she can steal. She needs to be careful with her money now that she no longer has a steady paycheck.

Perhaps killing this man would be easier—a mercy even—but she finds it distasteful to take the easy way out. She won’t kill herself trying to help, but there’s no reason not to try.

“Since you won’t tell me your name, I can only call you fishman. It’s a terrible name. What’s your people actually called?” She asks quietly.

She’s always wondered about it since she first read about their race. To her, it seems derogatory in a way to utter “fishman.”

No one would look at their skin and go, I must be a fish man. Even if her current companion does look remarkably like a catfish, there’s no one who happily claims themselves to be more than an animal but less than a man.

“I don’t,” the fishman sputters as if blindsided, “I don’t know. It’s just fishmen.”

She understands though she wished she didn’t. They must have lost their name when the World Government took over. It strikes a familiar cord with her.

“Once, there were people who lived life as free as they liked. They carried their homes on their backs and went where the land took them,” she hums.
“Invaders wanting their land tricked, enslaved, and killed them. Defeated, they were forced onto little pockets of land and told this was their new home. This land was barren, and half of it was toxic.”

She remembers a land of the past, remembers the wound in his heart that never fully healed. He remembers a broken home and a bottle of whiskey.

“The people survived through it all, but in the end, could only bow their heads to the invaders. The men lost their life to alcohol, and the women were burdened with survival.”

“What’s your point?” The fishman growls once she grows quiet.

“The invaders won. The people survived but became their own worst enemy,” she pauses before shrugging. “As for a point, I don’t really have one.”

She’s just nostalgic in all, finds it a shame such magnificent people has been brought down on merit of being different. Maybe she’s just projecting, trying to fit this man into a mold she knows.

(She doesn’t know the word she’s looking for is “empathy.”)

She says no more. Ignoring the sunlight while taking in deep breaths, she falls into a light sleep.

She wakes up to change the fishman’s bandages. She’s not too sure if it’s thanks to genetics that the wounds are already closing, but she’s glad to see it. She doesn’t have many bandages left.

Lying back onto the hard ground, she ignores her temporary patient and attempts to doze off again. It’s getting closer to night, and the excitement is making it hard to fall asleep however.

Surprising her, the fishman speaks, voice gravelly and hesitant,

“Those people of yours, did they know their name?”

“Some did, some didn’t. Most never knew their new name meant Little Snakes. A way to make them something lesser, I suppose,” she answers.

The fishman says nothing after that, and she scraps sleeping for meditation.

Night comes soon enough, and she steps silently through the shrubbery to the pirate’s encampment. The slave pens as well as the main base of operations lie in an enormous cave near the shoreline. She’ll need to take down the guards by the entrance before making her way in.

The fishman doesn’t follow after, and she marks him as a potential danger. The man seemed to have a bit of spirit left in him, but that doesn’t mean he’s able to resist the one holding the key.

“Be swift Tsubasa de Tobu,” she quietly commands.

She aims for their heads while their backs are turned, and each of the four guards leave this world silently. Any other swordsman would be aghast, would try to shame her, but she’s here on a rescue mission. These people can’t afford her honor.

“Be swift Tsubasa de Tobu,” she quietly commands.

She makes it into the cave, running into two more pirates before getting to the main area. She makes good use of her shuriken to divert their attention, leaving their necks open to her.

The main area is a cavern with lights strung up everywhere. Pens stuffed full of crying people line
the wall, and there is nowhere to hide.

She throws her shoulders back, holds her head high, and stomps into the middle of it all, drawing incredulous looks from the group of slavers. She stops in front of a heavily-muscled man in a flashy hat; this combined with the spectacular gold jewelry he wears causes her to assume this is the captain.

She expects many things: a boast, a monologue, or even a sneer. She doesn’t know what to make of the pointing.

“What’s she doing here? I thought you left her on the ship!” Faine roars.

“I did, boss!” A scrawny guy next to him yelps.

“Do you know what that guy will do to us if he finds out we killed his girlfriend?” Faine asks, pulling at his beard.

“Who’s a girlfriend?” She asks, thoroughly confused.

Surely they’re not talking about her. The lie she told her boss couldn’t have spread that fast. She strains her brain for any scary boyfriend she supposedly has and comes up blank.

“Maybe he won’t know if we kill her quickly since she’s alone,” another pirate suggests.

“I have people,” she says firmly.

Faine’s eyes circle the cavern wildly before landing back onto her with a glower. His subordinates, seven other pirates, begin spreading out to encircle her.

“Oh, and where are they?” Faine asks with a sneer.

“Right here. This is Tsubasa de Tobu,” she pats her sword before reaching into her kimono, “and this is Mini-Mihawk.”

The pirates stare at the doll in something close to horror. She manages to keep a straight face even through the ridiculous gestures they’re making. She feels a bit wronged though; her Mini-Mihawk is adorable.

“You’re crazy,” one of the subordinates says.

“I’m mad,” she corrects, putting Mini-Mihawk back into its place. “I’m also incredibly furious, and I’m going to kick your ass.”

Her words spark them into action, and she ducks a metal claw aimed for her head. Two of the eight slavers are taken out near instantaneously; she runs one pirate through before using them as a shield to stab another.

Six left. Tsubasa de Tobu snaps up to deflect a bullet, and she takes out a third. She dodges the knives aimed for her ankles, and removes the head of a fourth. Four left.

An exploding needle catches her off balance, and she nearly loses her arm. She ignores the scratch on her arm to focus on the captain.

“Your Devil Fruit is spitting out needle bombs?” She asks, incredulous.

“Gwahuahua! No one can defeat my power!” Faine boasts.
If this guy’s power was only creating needles that explode, there’s no way he’d be able capture this many people. Not with the careless way he throws them. She narrows her eyes and tries to think it through.

_The only way I’d be that thoughtless of my movements is if it doesn’t matter_, she thinks. The needles already exploded, so there’s no later detonation to trick her into. Which means it lies in the already exploded part.

A shine catches her attention, and she rushes towards Faine, katana aimed towards his neck. He leans back with a laugh, spitting out more needles, and she dodges one aimed for her eye.

She hides the stolen key in her left hand, and dodges the attacks from the other pirates. She deflects another wave of knives aimed at her, and tosses the key over her shoulder.

Upon entering the cavern, she’d noticed the fishman standing in the shadows and had assumed he was going to fight her. The fishman never moved, so she has no problem upholding her promise. If the fishman doesn’t take the opportunity before him then that’s his problem.

“Feeling dizzy now, ain’t you?” Faine grins.

“It was the smoke, wasn’t it,” she says with a sigh.

The needles and explosions don’t matter; it’s the aftereffect of the toxic smoke that’s dangerous. She can already feel herself slowing down; no doubt this is how the pirates managed to operate on such a large scale.

She quickly cuts down two more pirates, leaving only the captain and one subordinate. Her vision begins blurring, and she knows she needs to end this before it’s too late. Turns out she doesn’t have to.

“I am the Great Faine, Master of All, and I—_hurk_!”

She blinks as the fishman somehow sneaks up behind both pirates and lifts them up by their necks. Sharp teeth grin at her, and she can hear the slavers' necks slowly crack. It’s a morbid sight, but a far more fitting death than what she could give.

“I am Tairona, and I am something more than just a fishman!” Tairona roars.

“I am Kuina, and I won’t be tied down,” she answers back.

Tairona takes off to kill the rest of the pirates still on the island, and she frees the prisoners with her katana. There’s more than her ship’s people imprisoned here, and the crew of her ship begin discussing what to do. She leaves them to it, grabbing a torch on the way out.

No one stops her, and she makes her way to the beach. Tairona meets her on the way to the pirate ship.

“I’m taking the best stuff in payment,” Tairona warns her, whiskers twitching.

“I’m grabbing whatever I like,” she replies.

She’ll give pirates credit; pillaging is a lot of fun. She finds a few small, unremarkable jewels she can sell and a beautiful fan. She’s not sure how much it can sell for, but she likes the phoenix drawn on it.
“You need more than that,” Tairona says in disbelief.

It’s the only warning she gets before he begins loading her arms up with more stuff. The fishman doesn’t listen to her whining and only stops when she can’t hold a beli more.

She can’t stuff her bag with all her new loot either. She’s left waiting with her pile on the shore while her original ship’s crew appropriates the pirate’s much larger ship. The passengers wait on the shore as well, though they give her and the fishman quite a bit of space to talk privately.


She blinks up at the fishman, not understanding what “Haki” is. Tairona gives her a wide, pointy grin before slinging an enormous bag over his shoulder.

“I am going back to Ryugu Kingdom, and I am going to find out what my peoples’ name is. When I find it, I’ll tell you. When I do, tell me the name of yours,” Tairona tells her.

“Count on it,” she smiles.

“And make sure you keep showing your enemies the doll with the creepy eyes. It’s hilarious,” the fishman says.

She kicks him in the leg.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When he is a boy, he receives a sword and a promise. He doesn’t understand what marriage actually means; only that it’s a life together, and if he can become the world’s greatest swordsman by twenty-five, he can keep both Wado Ichimonji and Kuina by his side forever.

He eventually leaves Shimotsuki Village in search of a certain man. Challenging anyone calling themselves swordsmen and hunting down pirates, he never loses a fight, gaining a fearsome reputation for it. Cocky and sure of himself, he believes his journey near complete.

When he is a man, tied to a post in a Marine base, and staring down a firing squad, he realizes he still has a long way to go before he’s strong enough to keep ahold of anything. He sees Kuina’s teasing smile in his mind, and thinks, I can’t die like this.

“I am the one who will become the Pirate King!”

A child of the Devil stands before him with a grin that speaks of promise. If he takes the hand being offered here, he can continue his journey to be the world greatest swordsman. He can bring Kuina home.

He accepts his new life as a pirate and comrade to the future Pirate King. He doesn’t look back.

His new captain is a troublesome guy. Still, he sees the potential rolling off of Luffy in waves, knows that the Pirate King title isn’t out of reach. For his new comrades, on the other hand, the only thing he sees is…idiocy.

“I, the Great Usopp, will take down anything that dares come our way! Fear not, for I—”

“Hey, there’s a cockroach!” Luffy laughs, holding up a squirming black bug.

The screaming and flailing is funny in a sad way. He doesn’t pause in his kata, but he does move out of the way for Usopp who trips and falls. Turning towards their navigator, Luffy’s grin grows wider.

“Don’t you dare come near me with that! I will charge you!” Nami shrieks before making a run for it.

He’s not impressed to be honest. It hardly matters though; as long as they don’t get in the way, he can more than make up for their lack of strength. Maybe he can introduce them to Kuina; she’d find them hilarious.

(It’s a thought that doesn’t leave him. Introducing Kuina to this ragtag crew; it feels oddly right.)

Dracule Mihawk stands before him, and he knows this is his chance. With one duel, he can become the world’s greatest swordsman.

*His shinai lies beside him in the dirt, and he bites back the urge to cry. Why can’t he beat her? Why isn’t he good enough?*
“It’s too early, you moron,” Kuina sighs while rubbing her eyes. “Both figuratively and literally. You can’t beat me yet, so just enjoy the morning. I’ll make some tea.”

It’s a memory of the past, an omen perhaps. Even so, he can’t back down, not now. His dream stands before him, and the only thing he can do is raise his swords to the challenge.

“I will defeat you for my ambition and for my promise,” he says.

His opponent unsheathes a pendent knife instead of a sword, and he bristles at the insult.

“You may be strong in East Blue, but you are still weak. You are but a frog in a well, and this world is bigger than you know.” Yellow eyes look at him in contempt, and he feels hate like he never has before.

Every sword strike is blocked by the small knife, and no matter how hard he tries, he can’t gain any ground. He pulls out all the stops, uses his strongest moves to no avail. He winds up stabbed in the chest, and he refuses to flinch away from the pain.

“What burdens you? Why do you continue to fight?” Mihawk asks, making no move to dig the knife in deeper.

“I exchanged a promise!” He shouts around the sword clenched in his teeth. “I can’t face her until I’ve become the world’s strongest. I’d rather die than say I ran.”

He thinks of the girl that never said goodbye, the girl he never won a single match against. Wado Ichimonji is his physical proof of her belief in him, and he refuses to falter before it.

“If I can’t beat you, I can’t beat her,” he continues to say quietly. “I won’t be able to stop her from flying away.”

Mihawk steps back, taking the knife out of his chest. The swordsman demands his name, and he readies his swords for one last attack.

“Roronoa Zoro,” he answers, looking straight into those piercing eyes.

“I shall remember it,” Mihawk says, drawing the sword from his back.

He loses in the face of overwhelming strength, and two of his swords break against the legendary Yoru’s blade. He wonders if Kuina will forgive him for letting her down. He sheathes Wado Ichimonji and faces his destiny.

“Strike me down here. I’ll die saying I faced you to the last,” he says and throws out his arms.

“Truly splendid,” Mihawk smiles.

The strike doesn’t kill him and neither does the ocean. Every word given by his friends and his opponent tears at his heart, and he makes a new vow. He will not embarrass his captain again. He refuses to let Kuina regret giving him Wado Ichimonji.

_Until the day I fight him again and win, I will never lose again._

Kuina will not be meeting the Straw Hat Pirates if he has any say in it. He’ll chew off his arm before he lets that shitty cook near her. Never mind that Nami is thief of questionable morals or that Usopp may accidentally shoot her in the eye, Sanji is everything that is wrong with this world.
“Lovely Nami, my lovely Nami,” Sanji sings with that ridiculous look on his face.

“Disgusting,” he grimaces.

How such a talented fighter and chef can be such a waste of space, he doesn’t know. Any time he imagines the cook turning that perverted gaze on Kuina, he gets a stomach ache.

“What was that? You want to go?” Sanji roars.

“With most of the blood in your pants, I’m surprised you heard me,” he deadpans, dodging the kick aimed at his head.

(Though he won’t admit it, Sanji is the one he needs to protect should they ever meet. Kuina will break this man, and then he’ll be the one Luffy goes to with a pout and a, “Fix him, Zoro.”)

He damn near gets a heart attack when they stop in Loguetown on their way to the Grand Line. While he’s attempting to find the famous arms shop, he runs into a woman facing down a gang of thugs.

He’s about to interfere until the woman unwraps a hidden katana and takes them all down with some of the most graceful moves he’s ever seen. Well, graceful until she trips on her own feet, landing facedown and losing her glasses. No matter which way one views it, it was certainly spectacular.

He picks up the glasses, takes one look at the woman’s face, and freezes.

“Sorry for the trouble. Thank you very much,” the woman smiles up at him, grabbing the glasses out of his hands.

His heart stops in his throat. Kuina, he thinks. This woman is—

No, he examines her closer. While they look ungodly alike, their eyes are different. Kuina has a look in her eyes that sets her apart from everyone else, the kind of look that sees past the world. There’s also the fact that this woman holds a sword differently.

Even more importantly, there’s no way Kuina would be so clumsy. That girl used to literally beat him with her eyes closed.

“No problem,” he utters before running away.

He tries to settle his nerves, tells himself that once he gets out of Loguetown, there’s no way he’ll see this spitting image of Kuina again.

He doesn’t know why he’s surprised when that woman finds him while he’s sword shopping. The only comfort he gets is that he’s completely sure that this isn’t Kuina. Not when she declares that she wants to retrieve all master grade swords from the hands of criminals.

“So you want to take Wado Ichimonji from me?” He asks in amusement.

The woman stutters out a denial before grabbing a sword out of a barrel.

“You should definitely buy this sword, Sandai Kitetsu!” She exclaims after flipping through a book filled with details on swords.
A dark presence alerts him to the sword’s curse, and he grins even as the shopkeeper falls apart behind him. He unsheathes it from its red scabbard to examine it.

_Blood_, the sword seems to cry, _give me blood._

He can sense a childish, bloodthirsty spirit radiating off this sword and feels a part of him fall in love. This will be the one to help him become the world’s greatest swordsman; he can feel it.

“If I lose, it just means I wasn’t going to amount to anything,” he says before throwing the sword up.

Though he declares it a test against his luck, it’s more a battle of wills, and he’s not about to lose to this problem child when he still has to defeat Mihawk. The sword misses his arm and cuts into the floor. It almost feels like its sulking, the brat.

The shopkeeper hands him another sword, Yubashiri, and he has what he needs to pursue his dream. He heads back to the ship with a spring in his step; there’s no way the woman can follow him there.

“Roronoa Zoro!” Tashigi screams. “I will take back Wado Ichimonji!”

He doesn’t account for his stupid captain or the woman being a Marine. The pouring rain digs into his eyes, and he gives her the honor of using Wado Ichimonji and Yubashiri. He doesn’t yet trust Sandai Kitetsu not to take her life.

“Just try it,” he smirks.

The fight is over in seconds and familiar eyes glare into his when he steps away. He loses his breath when he sees his best friend looking back at him.

“Why didn’t you cut me down? Is it because I’m a woman?” Tashigi demands. “You dare go easy on me because women aren’t as powerful as men? How shameful! I shouldn’t expect _you_ to know what wishing to be born as man feels like.”

The illusion is ruthlessly ripped away, and he’s left feeling insulted. Kuina would never utter such garbage about men being better, would never care what anyone thought of her. How dare this woman say such a thing with Kuina’s face?

“It’s your damn face! It’s exactly like my betrothed’s! You should go change it so no one thinks I could ever be associated with you!” He shouts while pointing at this warped version of Kuina.

“How is that my fault? Maybe your betrothed should change _her_ face!” Tashigi yells back.

“What did you just say?” Forgetting about everything else, he draws a sword and Tashigi meets it with her own.

It’s probably a good thing a strong gust of wind breaks up their fight. He was about to use Sandai Kitetsu to carve up her face. He’s going to need a long talk with that sword about egging him on.

(“Is,” Nami stares at the man holding up a red katana, “is he having a conversation with his sword?”)

Even through everything that comes their way through the Grand Line, she has never once seen Zoro do anything of the sort.
“How else is he supposed to tell it to behave?” Luffy asks with a finger up his nose.

Once they gain a doctor, he starts thinking about letting Kuina meet the crew again. With Tony Tony Chopper on board, it won’t matter if Sanji physically or mentally breaks as he won’t be responsible for putting the man back together.

Now he just has to figure out a way to bait her into wanting to meet them. This is the important thing about Kuina everyone forgets. The only reason she ever accepted his duels was because she wanted to kick him into the dirt.

Well, Kuina does have a strange fondness for ugly dolls. Not badly made ones but things no one would find cute such as a tree with glaring eyes. He examines Chopper critically.

“Won’t work. You’re too cute,” he grumbles.

“C-Cute? Well, I’m not happy about that, not at all!” Chopper replies, wriggling.

He does end up shelving the “Have Kuina meet the Straw Hat Pirates” idea once more. It’s not due to any of the rampant idiocy the crew tends to get themselves involved in, or the high bounties that make them infamous.

“Is there something you need, Mr. Swordsman?” Robin asks without looking up from her book.

“Nothing,” he says with a frown.

Looking at Robin is like looking at yet another version of his best friend. Thankfully, unlike Tashigi, they look nothing alike. The similarity lies in the books and the way they hold themselves. Kuina never hid her emotions and thoughts though, not like this woman.

He doesn’t trust Robin and won’t allow himself to like her until he can. He doesn’t doubt Luffy’s judgement, but his captain can be tricked. Kuina can’t join until he knows this ship won’t go down from slitting its own throat.

(Nico Robin wants to be free; he wants to know: free from what.)

The Grand Line takes a lot out of them, and they have to take every opportunity to stock up on supplies. After one disastrous attempt, he’s exempt from helping. Nami tells him to stay with the ship to minimize damage during their shopping time, and he’s only able to last for an hour.

“I’m going for a drink,” he says, rolling his neck in irritation.

“Uh, is that wise?” Usopp asks in alarm.

“Probably not,” he replies.

He takes off well aware that there’s no way Usopp can stop him. Usopp’s aware of it too, if the tears are anything to go by.

It’s an unremarkable town on an unremarkable island. He didn’t think the Grand Line had such places, but he’s here in the only tavern, drinking unremarkable beer. He downs the tasteless alcohol without complaint.

While he likes beer as much as the next guy, he has a reason to visit any bars or taverns he comes across. At these places, he gets to hear any rumors floating around by loose-lipped drunkards.
Rumors are everything to constantly traveling pirates.

And sometimes he hears something about a traveling woman in a kimono that bears a sword. He doesn’t want to hope, hasn’t ever heard a name attached to the figure, but it made his bounty hunter days that much brighter.

“Have you heard? Dracule’s got himself a pretty thing. Wields a sword too.”

He snorts into his drink. There’s no way a cold guy like that could ever woo a woman, whether she’s a swordsman or not. This “pretty thing” is probably out for Mihawk’s blood more than anything else.

“I did hear about that! She’s got a pink sword. Can you believe it, pink.” “It’s not just the appearance, the blade’s pink too!” “You for real?”

He raises an eyebrow at that. Customizing a sword can get expensive; it must have cost the woman a fortune. Assuming these gossips are correct and the sword’s worth a damn.

“Anyone got a name for this lover?”

“It’s Kayla or Kiva or something. She’s got a pink sword and wears a kimono. Ain’t hard to miss, man.”

Kuina, his mind supplies. He chokes on the beer in his mouth. They were talking about Kuina? With Mihawk?

“Son of a bitch!” He yells, slamming down his mug. “I’ll kill him!”

His words spark a fight, and he’s pissed off enough to slam each person through a chair or a table. The rest of the town’s inhabitants grow actual fangs and claws in response to him harming their guests, and the crew has to run to the ship.

“What is your problem?” Nami screams at him.

He is far too angry to reply.

Chapter End Notes

I give up. You guys win, I'll keep writing til' I finish.
“Haki is the life of everything, and those who can wield it gain an advantage. You’ll need it if you want to stay free. We will meet again.” These are Tairona’s last words to her.

She watches as the fishman slings his bag into the lifeboat she arrived in and pulls the boat behind him into the ocean. Tairona disappears beneath the waves even as the boat continues to move onwards. Fishmen are truly a marvel.

She considers this thing called “Haki.” Is it possible to feel it? She breathes in time with the crash of the waves but can find no sense of life in it. Tairona could have been speaking of spirits, but she’s never heard of wielding them.

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“Um, Miss? We’re boarding,” one of the freed prisoners tells her with a nervous glance to her pile of expensive junk.

She hauls her supposed treasure to the ship with a groan. She thinks about giving most of it away to the other passengers, but one theft attempt too many puts an end to that idea. Spite means she’s left carrying this junk even when both pirate and original ship land on the nearest island.

She buys two more bags to haul around and buys passage on the first ship leaving. Unlike before though, she has a clear destination in mind, and she’ll need to do a bit of ship jumping. She’s going back to the beginning, to the island she first chose all those years ago.

Loguetown.

Originally, the town was just a neat place to see. Now though, she has another reason to go there. She’s going to make it to the Grand Line and see what lies beyond it. She wants to get strong enough to challenge Mihawk. She wants to hear the original name of the fishmen.

(She wants to see Zoro again.)

Loguetown is as big of a tourist spot as she thought it’d be. It’s filled to the brim with shops and overpriced restaurants. She reluctantly pays for a nice room with a giant safe and attempts to figure out her next move.

She rolls out Zoro’s bounty poster and stares at it. She has no idea what she’s doing. The Grand Line lies just beyond the island, but the only ones willing to make the trip are pirates. Every part of her rejects the idea of joining a pirate crew which leaves her stuck.

“Is this why you became a Straw Hat, Zoro?” She wonders. “You saw the only way forward from here?”

She doubts Zoro grew up to be the kind of man that threatens innocents out of their possessions, but if the only way to get stronger was to become a pirate…

There’s his captain to consider as well. She’s seen the poster of the boy with the wide eyes and even wider smile. What kind of person is Monkey D. Luffy, and how did he convince Zoro to follow him? She wishes she could ask Zoro, wishes she could see just what kind of trouble he’s dragged Wado Ichimonji into.

Blowing out a sigh, she falls back onto the bed and decides she’ll think about what to do later. She
needs to see about getting a custom-made guard for Tsubasa de Tobu and maybe something to eat.

Her attempt to hunt down the famous sword shop gets delayed.

“Sargent! I mean Ensign Tashigi, you’re back!” A Marine shouts, jumping in front of her with a salute.

She uncurls her fingers from around her sword hilt, and the young man in a white hat practically sparkles up at her. The Marine’s face slowly twists in one of disgust as he takes her figure in. She debates slapping him as his eyes rove her body.

“Ensign, what happened to you?” The Marine asks, voice full of dismay.

“Are you talking to me?” She narrows her eyes in confusion.

“Oh, no! You lost your glasses again? Don’t worry, there’s a spare at base!” The Marine says instead of answering her question.

“I’m not—”

“Captain Danno will be super happy to see you!”

The Marine drowns out her denials with speculation over her “new” appearance, and she attempts to run away. This young, puppy-eyed Marine is much quicker than she gives him credit for.

“For me, Ensign! You can’t see! Allow me to help you,” the Marine says before grabbing her shoulders.

Sighing, she allows herself to be steered all the way to the Marine base. Getting on the Marines’ bad side is not on her to-do list, and surely someone will put this guy in his place for bringing in a stranger.

To her consternation, the Marines salute her, and she’s shoved into a room with a stern-faced officer glaring up from a desk. Wrinkled eyes stare her down, and she keeps her back straight and head up. She swears; if they attempt to arrest her over this, she’s going to slaughter everyone in this room.

“Ensign, you are—I see, yes. I understand,” the Captain says solemnly.

Well, at least someone’s realized. How could anyone mistake her for a Marine?

“You’re undercover. Pretending to be Hawk-Eyes’ girlfriend to get an ‘in’ with those damn pirates. Absolutely amazing!” Captain Danno exclaims, breaking the stoic impression immediately.

Hawk-Eyes’—what? Her brain breaks as she takes in the sparkling eyes of an old man, and she tries to form some kind of coherent thought.

“Excuse me—”

“I’m sure this is another ingenious ploy from Captain, I mean, Commodore Smoker. Don’t worry, Ensign, we will be discreet enough not to blow your cover!”

“Wait a minute—”

Once more, she’s ignored, and she catches a pair of glasses thrown at her face. She stares at the red
frames blankly. Just what is going on? She’s given no time to think as the Captain takes out a map of the island.

“Those filthy, no-good pirates have started to flock here ever since the Commodore left. We’re doing our best, but we simply can’t contain them like before. This will be to your advantage, Ensign,” Captain Danno tells her seriously.

“Here. This is where the Dusk Rats gather,” the man says, pointing to two locations.

“Dust Rats?” She repeats uncertainly.

“*Dusk* Rats. They’re planning to go to the Grand Line, and they’ve managed it successfully twice now. You won’t have a better chance to catch up to those Straw Hats.”

The Straw Hat pirates—Zoro. Whoever they have her confused with, they’re after Zoro who’s on the Grand Line. The answer she’s been looking for is literally staring her in the face. A shame then that she must decline.

“I refuse. I won’t get on a ship with pirates,” she declares coldly.

“Spoken like a true Marine!” Captain Danno pounds the desk with a nod. “However, you can’t afford to let the good Commodore down, and that means making concessions.”

“When you say concessions?” She narrows her eyes.

“Remember what you’ve learned, Ensign. Not every person on a pirate ship is a pirate.”

She has no clue what’s in the Marine handbook, but she can make a guess. She couldn’t jump on as a passenger; that’s still technically being affiliated with pirates. She has no idea if slaves count or not, and she doubts she’ll go far as a stowaway.

Which leaves one option.

“Oh,” she says before frowning. “Just how am I supposed to get kidnapped?”

“You’ll figure it out, Ensign,” Captain Danno assures.

She puts the glasses on and the world blurs away. The glasses do her the favor of erasing the saluting figures of the Marines, and she manages to get out of the building through careful movement. She actually forgets to take them off until she realizes she can’t read the shop signs.

Putting the glasses away with a thoughtful hum, the beginnings of a plan begin stirring in her mind. She’ll have to wing part of it, but perhaps the Marines’ idea has some merit. These Dust Rats might be her best way into the Grand Line.

She’s still left with some questions though. Why was she confused with a Marine, who is Tashigi, and—

“Why is she your girlfriend?” She asks Mini-Mihawk.

The doll’s soulless eyes stare back at her, and she can’t help but feel she’s missing something important. Even if Tashigi is pretending to be Mihawk’s girlfriend, it would take immense strength and mental fortitude to put up with Mr. Doom and Gloom.

(Overwhelmed by the whole affair, she mishears and doesn’t realize that the Marine thinks she, Kuina, is the girlfriend in question.)
She does wind up finding that famous sword shop. She makes the mistake of allowing the shopkeeper to hold her katana and ends up having to pry Tsubasa de Tobu out of the man’s hands.

“This is amazing!” The man worships.

It’s both a relief and grating that someone else realizes Tsubasa de Tobu’s grade. The sword deserves to be highly sought after, but she’d rather not be assassinated for her katana.

“I need a better guard. A custom one if anyone here makes them,” she says.

“I know someone who will do it, but it is going to take a week,” the shopkeeper informs her.

She’s not sure if she’ll be here for that long, but she goes ahead and pays for a custom-made pink guard. Tsubasa de Tobu shimmers while its measurements are being taken, and she knows the sword appreciates the effort.

“There’s no signature, but I have no doubt the maker lies beyond the Grand Line,” the shopkeeper says, still examining her sword with adoring eyes.

The lack of a signature has never really bothered her; Tsubasa de Tobu is hers now, and there will never be another like it. Still, it would certainly be an interesting quest to find the creator. It’s not like she has anything better to do after she gets to the Grand Line either.

“Do you think they’ll sign it if they’re still alive?” She asks.

She can almost hear a whisper from her sword, a vain of course, who wouldn’t want to claim me?

She pats the hilt in reply.

She waits a day before going after the Dust Rats. Captain Danno showed her the tavern they keep to and the location of their ship. Without her sword, she might could have gone to the tavern and spun a story about making a good hostage while acting like a naïve woman.

Since she can’t give up her sword at any cost, she decides to go directly to their ship with one of her bags of priceless junk. She decides to be straightforward.

“You want us to what?” The pirate asks while staring at her with a blank face.

“Pretend to kidnap me,” she repeats. “Go get your captain so I can discuss it with them.”

“You’re crazy,” the pirate tells her with horrified amazement.

“I’m rich and in need of a ride,” she corrects.

Well, she might be rich, or she might not be. She doesn’t actually know how much her loot comes out to. It should be enough to satisfy in any case.

She’s eventually led to a backroom of a tavern—the same one she knows they hang out in—and she orders a glass of juice to sip on. Perhaps alcohol would make a better showing, but she’s still hesitant to drink too much.

(She also finds she likes expensive wine over cheap beer. What a difference it makes in drinking for pleasure versus drinking to get drunk.)

“ Heard ya were looking for me.”
She leans back in her wobbly chair to give the man a look over. No wonder these pirates call themselves the Dust Rats; their captain is grey from his hair to his beard to his clothes, and the ragged clothing gives the appearance of a giant dust ball.

“I need to get to the Grand Line, and I heard the Dust Rats were experts,” she tells him.

“It’s Dusk Rats, lass. And why should I listen to ya?” The Captain sneers at her.

Leaning down, she grabs the bag by her feet and hauls it to the table. Opening the bag, she shows the Captain exactly what he’s set to gain.

“And what stops me from taking it,” the Captain grins, reaching out for the bag.

She throws the rest of her juice into the man’s eyes and kicks the table over while grabbing her bag. Howling, the Captain moves for the pistol on his hip, and she uses her bag to knock it out of his hands before he can fully draw it.

The door breaks as the pirate crew waiting outside rush in, and she throws the bag behind her to twist the Captain’s wrist behind him. Drawing her sword, she keeps it at the Captain’s throat while carefully keeping the man between her and the furious pirates.

“That,” she answers belatedly.

There’s a beat of silence as the rest of the Dusk Rats try to figure out what to do. She hears mutters of a Devil Fruit and counts herself lucky that this man either can’t or won’t use it.

“Why the fuck do ya need to be kidnapped?” The Captain asks in confusion.

“I will not have the pirate name attached to mine,” she says. “I need to go the Grand Line, but I also need the Marines to think I’m being held against my will.”

She releases the Captain from her hold and gets ready to deflect anything aimed her way. The Captain holds up a hand to his men before rubbing his wrist.

“I want more than that, lass,” the Captain says while glancing to her bag.

“I want a comfortable stay in my cell. You also can’t touch my sword,” she tells him.

The Captain scowls at her, and she meets his glare with one of her own. The man bares crooked teeth at her, and she sneers in disgust. She can tell the minute he accepts her conditions.

“Deal,” the Captain says as she sheathes her sword. “We’re leaving out in a week and traveling through the Calm Belt. Ya have that long to convince me not to put ya on the pedalers.”

She has no idea what he means by “pedalers,” but her other bag of goodies should be enough to ensure a boring stay in the brig. She doesn’t bother offering her name, and the Captain doesn’t tell her his. They make an agreement to meet up at the tavern in a week, and she’s off to find something to eat.

“Captain, you could have taken her!” She hears on her way out.

“Ya see that sword? That lass is—”

The door closes behind her before she can hear the rest. Oh well, it’s not like it matters. She’s probably killed enough people to warrant the fame by now anyway.
She barely manages to dodge Marines and pirates alike over the next week. It’s downright bizarre to tour the island while being stalked, and she has to cut her sightseeing short whenever a fight breaks out behind her.

She can’t even admire the new decorative guard for Tsubasa de Tobu before she hears shouting outside the sword shop.

When the week is up, she stalks over to the Captain drinking down some awful smelling ale. She throws three bags into a nearby crate, and tying a rope around herself, she throws herself in with them.

“Get me on that ship. If I stay here any longer, I’m going to start stabbing,” she demands.

Tsubasa de Tobu remains on her back, hidden by a hurriedly-made haori, and the lavender coat just barely covers the pink katana. It’s necessary as kidnappers would never leave their prisoners a weapon.

“Keep ya face down, lass. Last thing I need is a certain someone getting wind of this,” the Captain grumbles before motioning to some heavy muscled pirates to grab her crate.

They tie a blindfold on her and carry her out. It’s a bumpy ride, but she gets to the ship without incident. The pirates shove her crate into the ship’s brig and leave without saying a word.

She waits a while before hopping out and throwing herself onto the vastly more comfortable bedding in the cell. She undoes the rope and blindfold, stuffing both into the crate. She looks around at her grimy new bedroom and lets out a gusty sigh.

“You better still be on the Grand Line, Zoro,” she says.

She lets her head bang against the iron bars and wonders if it’s possible to go into a meditation coma. She brought books and a few scraps of cloth to make a better coat for Mini-Mihawk, but this will probably be the most boring ride of her life.

(She has no idea what she’s in for.)
The first day on the Calm Belt is a tense and worried affair. She knows this because the pirate that brings her the daily meal has loose lips when stressed.

“We took it from the Marines, we did. Seastone on the bottom of the ship to keep those blasted Sea Kings away, and half the crew on the pedalers to keep us moving,” the pirate tells her while handing her a bowl of food.

From what she gathers, the pedalers refer to a massive amount of connected pedals that keep the ship propelled—essentially turning the sailing vessel into a paddle boat. She tries volunteering once she learns about the whole process since it’d be good exercise for her legs but gets denied for reasons no one sees fit to tell her.

She settles in and starts on Mini-Mihawk’s new coat. It keeps her occupied through the creaking and groaning of the ship around her, and the Dusk Rats make it safely past the Calm Belt. She almost thinks the tales of the Grand Line are over exaggerated; she expected a bit more than a normal amount of rocking.

(Be careful what you wish for.)

Her first clue that something is amiss is when she’s suddenly flung into the bars of her cell. Her second is the sound of the ship being impacted, and the third is the angry screaming. The ship shows no sign of taking on water, so she’s not in immediate danger. What to do, she thinks while rubbing the back of her head.

“Should we take a look?” She asks Mini-Mihawk before stuffing the doll back into her kimono.

She packs up her strewn things, puts Tsubasa de Tobu and the haori on, and digs around the crate for a key. She hesitates once she’s found it, but when she’s tossed about by another impact, she wastes no time reaching through the bars and unlocking the door to her cell.

If it’s the Marines, she’ll cower and say she needs rescuing. Otherwise, she’ll figure something out once she sees what’s going on.

From the brig, past the cargo hold, and up the ladders, she doesn’t see anyone, but the sounds of fighting get louder. Opening the door to the main deck for a peek, she’s forced to slam it shut when she sees a body flying her way. A loud thud comes from the other side. She slowly opens the door, and a dead man coated in lollipops falls at her feet.

Definitely not the Marines then.

She toes the body. The Dusk Rats tend to dress in drab colors, not in red and white candy. The scabbard on the body says this man was ready for a fight, and she knows she’s currently the only prisoner on board.

So it must be attacking pirates. Now what to do about it? She hums in thought. She could turn around and go back to her rather comfortable cell, or she can do what she does best. Fighting would risk being associated with pirates though.
“Captain Dusty! Save me!” One of the pirates cry before being silenced.

She can hardly find Zoro or her sword’s creator if everyone sailing the ship dies. Decision made, she unfastens her coat and slings Tsubasa de Tobu back in to its rightful place. Bursting out onto the main desk, she starts slicing at anything covered in bright colored candy.

“Lass, the hell ya doing out of the brig?” The Captain—Dusky?—shouts at her.

“Trying to make it to shore,” she says as bizarre looking guns are aimed at her.

If she were a lesser person, she’d probably be traumatized over nearly getting shot by bubblegum of all things. As it is, getting the crap off her blade just makes her vengeful. She grabs the shooter by his hair and attempts to wipe the bubblegum off with his face.

The colorful ship that floats next to the Dusk Rats’ own remains attached by cables, and she severs the remaining lines between the two. Two pirates fall into the ocean, and she continues slicing at anything that dares look like candy.

She finally gets to know what Captain Dusky’s Devil Fruit is. The Captain blows up like a balloon only to deflate while releasing dust into the faces of the unwitting. She jumps onto the rigging to avoid it herself. Whatever the dust actually does, the pirates who get hit with it tend to fall over and stay down.

“You tried to pull one over on Mama! This is your just desserts!” A woman dressed like a cake laughs.

The woman’s confidence confuses her. No matter how she looks at it, Captain Dusky and her are slowly but surely winning. For every Dusk Rat that falls, three more enemy pirates go down.

“Sea King!” Someone shouts. “Sea King!”

Getting a bad feeling, she faces the bow of the ship. Something big and red shoots out of the sea, covered in an impossible amount of spikes. A large spike on two sides of the creature spear into both ships. She tries to get her footing as the ginormous serpentine creature roars and begins rocking back and forth.

“We left the Calm Belt just fine! How is this possible with the seastone?” One of the Dusk Rats asks while flailing.

“It must of been these morons who caught its attention!” Captain Dusky spits.

Sounds of the ship breaking apart reach her ears, and she knows it’s over. Even though the woman will die with them, Cake Lady gets the desired result. Even if everyone finds a way to swim safely, the Sea King can swallow them whole effortlessly.

She lets out a breath and steadies Tsubasa de Tobu towards the creature. She’s never been a graceful loser. She narrows her focus to the Sea King and runs.

Everything blurs away, and she’s suddenly on top of the spike sunken into the ship. She jumps to the spike above her without thinking about it, and she continues to climb; each jump echoes the pounding of her heartbeat. She makes it to the head and stabs downwards when she feels her feet slip.

The roar she receives is deafening, and Tsubasa de Tobu feels warm beneath her hands. She manages to slide the sword out despite the shaking beneath her, and she continues burying the
katana into its head over and over.

“I made a promise,” she says mindlessly with each thrust. “I made a promise. And I want to see him again. To tell him I was joking. To tell him I believe in him. To challenge him.”

(The pirates watch the spectacle with wide eyes and slack jaws. Not just because this unassuming woman ran up a Sea King, but because she’s actually making it bleed. The humorous pink sword glows red in the dimming light, and they all understand why Hawk-Eyes chose this one.

She is indeed a fearsome lass for the Sea King remains upright and frozen instead of falling back into the ocean. The creature stops its accursed twisting, and the time to take advantage is now.

“Get that spike out of the ship!” Captain Dusty orders, after choking out the cake-clothed woman who caused this mess. “Get ready to take on water and repair what you can!”

She slips, dragging the sword through scales and skin. Sliding to just above the Sea King’s eye, she keeps hold of Tsubasa de Tobu and gives the quivering pupil her best glare.

“I will not show mercy. I will not die alone. You chose your fate, now fall,” she commands.

The light leaves its eye, and gravity brings the Sea King down. For a moment she wonders if this is what flying feels like. The Sea King’s body takes the brunt of the impact, and she gets to see her death as water fills her ears.

Forgive me, she thinks. To whom she speaks, not even she knows.

When she comes to, she is inexplicably warm. For a moment, he considers everything a dream. Perhaps he made it back home from the bar after all? The thought pains him for some reason, and he struggles to open his eyes.

White walls and a giant penguin head is the first thing he sees. He blinks and upon looking around, understands she’s definitely not dreaming. There’s only one world that has such a unique feeling to it. Well, that and she’s currently lying on top of a giant, blue penguin with a mustache.

The penguin’s real; its breathing is moving her up and down. Warm to the touch, a blanket thrown over her keeps in the heat radiating from the penguin’s stomach. She feels a little too warm actually, but upon throwing the blanket off, she nearly shrieks from the cold air hitting her skin.

Curling up and ignoring the now yawning penguin, she eyes the white walls with distaste. She knew the texture looked familiar. It’s snow. The wall, ceiling, and floor are all made of snow. There’s nothing else in this snow hell to break up the whiteness either.

“I don’t suppose you can answer questions?” She asks the penguin ruefully.

She gets a deep, booming chirp in reply. She takes it as a “No.” The penguin’s eyes close, and she decides to do the same. Someone had to put the blanket on her; might as well wait and see if they come back.

(Someone saved her. She doesn’t actually believe in repaying this so-called debt—she never asked to be saved—but if this person turns out to be a decent sort, she might just feel the tiniest bit obliged to them. Maybe.)

She senses someone standing on the other side of the snow wall and turns towards them
expectantly. The place she stares at lights up and melts away with a sizzle. Another penguin stares at her from the newly made hole in the wall.

“Hello?” She offers hesitantly.

“Ah, you’re awake! Good!” The other penguin says, flippers clapping together joyously.

She watches in shock as the penguin waddles in and proceeds to remove its head—no wait, it’s actually just a hood with a helmet. Unlike the creature below her, this is just a person wearing a penguin suit. She has so many questions.

The person beams at her with tiny dots for eyes, crazy orange hair, and a gap tooth grin. She moves to get up, and a cloth flipper motions her to remain lying there. She snuggles back into the warmth of the stomach below her, fully aware of the new breeze coming in.

“Now, I know you’re not from around here, but to let you in on a secret,” the person leans in, “it’s cold.”

She gives them a dull look. She’s pretty sure she has that figured out.

“You should stay with Belko for now. He’s plenty warm. Got a lot of fire in that old stomach,” the false penguin chirps.

The person wiggles out a hand from their fake flipper, and she watches as they dig around in a rucksack for what looks like bandages. This must be the one taking care of her; with the exception of a weird miniskirt, she’s missing her clothes, and there are bandages around her chest.

“Were you the one who rescued me? Saved me from the ocean?” She asks, voice gravelly and sore.

“I’m the one who found you, yes. I dare say you saved yourself,” they tell her before coming up to her with the bandages.

“Selko, get the door will you?”

Another deep chirp comes from outside, and a flipper packs snow into the hole quickly. There must be more of those penguin creatures outside. At least she now knows they’re intelligent.

“I’m Luza, and I will be taking care of you today,” Luza says before spewing fire into the air.

Belko, the penguin beneath her, joins in the spewing of fire, and she suddenly wonders if she’s actually hallucinating. Or dead. The two breaths of fire combine into an orb that floats to the ceiling. She pinches herself, but no, there’s still a ball of flame floating above her head.

“That’ll keep things nice and toasty. Hop up and let me see how those ribs are doing. What a doozy they were! Can’t wrap ‘em tightly, but can’t let you bleed out from that spike going through your chest either!” Luza chuckles.

She can honestly say the more she hears the more confused she gets. She stands up, wincing from anticipation of the cold ground, but the she barely feels the cold on the soles of her feet. Whatever that odd flame bouncing on the ceiling is, it really is warming the inside of the snow hut.

Luza keeps it professional, and she watches in interest as they poke at a small scar on the right side of her chest. It’s barely noticeable. Luza pulls out a cream to dab on her chest and back, and her nose wrinkles from the smell.
“I remember going down with a Sea King into the ocean. How did you find me?” She asks once she’s bandaged back up.

“It’s better to show you, I think. More shocking, but more believable,” Luza tells her. “Wait here. I’ll go get you your clothes.”

Luza puts their helmet back on, spews fire through it onto a patch of snow, and steps out. The wall gets patched again with another deep chirp, and she lets herself fall back onto Belko. Her day has gone from bad to incredibly weird. Belko lets out an annoyed sound with a twitch of his mustache, and she pats his stomach.

“Sorry. I’m a bit overwhelmed right now. What with the living and all that,” she says.

Luza eventually comes back with both pieces of her kimono, her pants, and her boots. She’s thrilled to find both her hidden weapons and Mini-Mihawk still in their places. Zoro’s bounty poster is gone, but she can always grab another one.

She’s given her pink scabbard, but there’s no Tsubasa de Tobu.

“You didn’t happen to see a pink sword, did you?” She asks with a trembling lip.

She’s not going to cry. She’s not going to cry. She’s not going to—

“I don’t know what a sword is, but I saw a pink thing. You were holding onto it. It’s where we’re going,” Luza informs her.

“Oh, thank goodness,” she says, sagging in relief.

Luza gives her a penguin suit and shows her how to put it on over her clothes. After making sure the hood’s on correctly and the helmet clicks in place—it’s both goggles to protect her eyes and a facemask to keep warm—Luza ushers her out into the cold.

White. Everything is white and the only thing that breaks it up is the giant, blue penguins dotting the landscape. The first step she takes is a failure. She falls flat on her face.

“You got to—got to,” Luza attempts to say through their laughter, “walk like a Rooz.”

“The hell’s a Rooz?” She spits out, flailing dangerously with her new, stupid flippers.

“Belko, Selko, Delko,” Luza points to three similar looking penguins who begin stroking their mustaches, “that’s a Rooz.”

Okay, so she needs to walk like a penguin while dressed like one. Go figure. She leans hesitantly on her right leg before leaning to her left. She moves forward slowly but steadily. It works.

“That’s the way! Now follow me to the shore.”

She would just like to say that waddling long distances through a deep amount of snow is on the top of her “Let’s never do that again” list. She’ll take another Sea King over this kind of hell. Luza remains silent through the whole journey, leaving her to herself.

At least her legs are finally getting that workout she wanted.

When she heard the word “shore,” she assumed they were going to the place where ocean meets land. Once her eyes land on broken pieces of ice in place of the sea, she realizes she needs to reevaluate. Icebergs dot the distance and hunger gnaws at her. She must have died and went to hell.
We’ll be taking a ride on the Rooz from here. The ice is too perilous,” Luza says, finally taking pity on her. “You’ll ride with Belko since you know him.”

Luza helps her onto Belko’s stomach, and the warmth seeps through the suit. She didn’t realize how cold she’d gotten. Luza gets on another—Delko, she thinks—and the Rooz use their flippers to slide themselves backwards down the ice.

She forgets to ask about steering, but Belko follows after Luza flawlessly somehow. She concentrates on holding on, but it turns out this is the most fun she’s had since she left Gold Rum Island. It feels like she’s flying down the ice, and she can’t hold in the laughter as the Rooz jumps over broken parts of the ice while gaining an insane amount of air.

It’s a shame almost that her exciting ride stops all too soon. She spots a huge, red body made of spikes floating in-between the ice, and she feels a chill that has nothing to do with the cold. There’s no mistaking the giant form: it’s the Sea King she fought.

Belko takes her in close, and she reaches for the scabbard wrapped around her waist. Flippers pat an empty holder, and she grimaces. Wait for me Tsubasa de Tobu. Once the Rooz slides to a stop near the Sea King’s head, she feels her heart skip a beat.

Her proud, pink sword remains where she left it, right above the Sea King’s eye. The creature’s head is tilted so that the katana hangs above the ice. She carefully gets off Belko and reaches for the sword. Her flipper barely misses it.

“Yes, I had a hard time getting you down myself,” Luza says, stepping up beside her. “Considering you wouldn’t let go and you were impaled on that spike there.”

Luza points to a small spike under the eye, and she stares in astonishment. That thing went through her chest? How did she survive? She looks into the Sea King’s glassy eye before looking behind it to where they must have floated in from.

Nope, she has no clue.

“How did you get me down?” She asks, getting ready to climb up the Sea King’s head for her sword.

“Like this,” Luza says, motioning with a flipper.

Belko hits the back of her legs, forcing her to fall onto his head. Flailing, she finds herself in front of Tsubasa de Tobu once the Rooz stands. She can’t get her hands out of the flipper sleeves fast enough.

“Welcome back, partner,” she says, pulling on the hilt with all her might.

Tsubasa de Tobu slides out, and a feeling of rightness fills her. That she falls off Belko and onto the ice is par the course.

“Welcome to Blue Rooz Island,” Luza says cheerfully while leaning over her prone form.

Chapter End Notes

Just a reminder that I love you guys, and you are my valentine.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Sea King’s body is well preserved in the ice, well enough to eat. Luza had waited for her to wake up so she could grant permission to drag it to shore. The body is hers to claim apparently.

“It’s a miracle though. Thought you were dead when I found you since nothing comes through the Ice Barrier,” Luza says, looking out towards the icebergs in the distance.

She stares up at the massive body and can’t even imagine the effort it’d take to lug that monstrosity to shore. Even hacking it into pieces would take forever. Selko, who had followed after them, pokes the head with a booming chirp while Belko and Delko nod seriously.

“The Rooz will drag it to the Lodge so long as they get a bite,” Luza informs her. “Let’s go on ahead and set up.”

The image of a bunch of penguins waddling away with a snake monster hefted over their heads like some weird festival comes to mind. She hops on Belko and decides she doesn’t care enough to ask. Some things are just too weird.

Luza, on Delko again, leads her back to snow-covered land. Selko follows them for a short ways before splitting off, and Belko gains enough speed to keep sliding on the snow. She clings to the Rooz with all her might while praying that they can make it to their destination without having to walk. There’s nothing worse than waddling through deep, cold snow.

Belko crests a hill, and Luza’s Lodge comes into view. With steep roofs and painted a dull orange, the building is large enough to hold at least five small houses and boasts three remarkable chimneys.

She comes to a stop at a pair of wide, short doors, and she taps them uncertainly. This whole island looks like it’s made entirely out of snow. Where in the world did anyone get enough material to build a mansion?

“Come, come! Oh, it’s been so long since this place has seen anyone else. How exciting!” Luza says, pushing the doors open.

With those ominous words, she follows Luza into a small room where she hangs up the penguin suit on a hook. Other suits are hanging up, but there’s a layer of dust on them. Luza strips to reveal either a tunic or a dress, and she remains undecided on their gender. It’d probably be rude at this point, but—

“Are you a he, a she, or something else?” She asks bluntly.

“Oh, a he if you don’t mind. I try to be a son my father could be proud of,” Luza replies with a smile before pausing. “What about you then?”

She opens her mouth to say “she” but hesitates. Eyebrows furrowing, she takes her time to truly consider her answer. She doesn’t take issue with being known as a woman, but it has been truly a long time since anyone looked at her and saw a man. It’d be nice, she thinks, just this once.

“I’d like for you to consider me male,” she settles on. “Though, I’m female as well.”
Luza nods with a puzzled expression, and neither of them say anymore on the subject. It doesn’t bother her that Luza doesn’t quite understand her predicament, but a small part of her wonders if Zoro would get it. The child she knew wouldn’t, but then again, he’s no longer a child.

(She doesn’t know why she thinks about Zoro so often. It’s not like he changed her life or anything.)

“How can you stand there without shoes?” She asks sourly, rubbing her arms.

Though the cold is muted in this small undressing room, she can feel her fingers stiffening. Luza quickly ushers her through another set of doors, and she follows him into what can only be described as a living room area.

Blankets and pillows of unique design surround a large fireplace, and the size of the room makes her feel like there should be dozens of people lounging around. Luza gestures for her to take a seat on a circular pillow only to mummify her with a fur blanket when she does.

Luza lights up the fireplace with a quick breath, and she struggles to adjust Tsubasa de Tobu until it isn’t trying to stab her with its scabbard. She notices that no Rooz has fur like this blanket currently attempting to smother her. There are far too many questions for her liking.

“How are we cooking the Sea King?” She chooses to ask first, attempting to scoot closer to the fireplace and failing.

“The Rooz will bring it to the kitchen’s outer door. Oh, that reminds me! I need to go light the ovens up. You stay here and stay warm. I’ll be right back,” Luza says, paying no mind to his bare feet moving against cold stone flooring.

Even though there’s plenty of heat being generated, the room seems to get colder once Luza leaves. She stares into the fire with a frown. To think she used to be able to run around in the snow in a t-shirt. Back then, even when the power would cut out in the coldest of nights, he wasn’t nearly as uncomfortable as he is now. Different body, different life, he supposes.

(She hates the cold. She wants off this frozen hell, wants to forget what being stuck in a house as snow piles up outside feels like.)

The kitchen is large and spacious; there are fifteen stoves and ten ovens. Her suspicions of this being a community house are all but confirmed. Now why the two of them are the only ones here, she’s still hesitant to ask.

“It’s been a while since all the fires were lit! But we’re going to need them. Boy, oh boy, are we eating good tonight!” Luza exclaims, handing her an apron.

The kitchen is sweltering; that is until the Rooz begin bringing in the Sea King piece by piece. With the outer doors open to the cold, she sticks as close to the flames as possible.

“I don’t see knife marks on these,” she notes as she throws pieces of meat onto dishware. “They look torn?”

“The Rooz have a strong grip,” Luza says, and one of the Rooz begins flexing its flippers.

“Right. Well, I don’t actually have a lot of experience cooking, but I’ll do my best,” she says staring at a frying pan with anticipation.
She can bake just fine. Boiling is nothing, and grilling is easy enough. His attempts at frying give him many bad memories, but he has better coordination and knowledge this time around; there’s no way she can mess this up.

“Let’s get to making dinner!” Luza chirps.

“I can’t believe you managed to cover yourself head to toe in blood,” Luza says, checking the temperature on the bath water.

“If Selko hadn’t pushed me into the meat pile, I wouldn’t be covered in blood,” she says through gritted teeth.

She scrubs her kimono in a basin of cold water and treats it the best she can with salt. It’s a damn shame all her stuff went down with the ship including her cleaning supplies. Luza has a mixture to clean clothes soaked in salt water but nothing for blood.

“I do believe it was your fault. You burned yourself on the pan and jumped back. You bounced off of Selko and—”

“Yes, thank you. I can recall,” she interrupts dryly.

She keeps scrubbing vigorously, and Luza begins pouring in more hot water into the tub. Much like the rest of the Lodge, the bath tub is meant for multiple people. If filled all the way, she could probably use it as a swimming pool.

“I’m going to rinse off first. Here’s some hot water! It’ll be warm once you’re done with that,” Luza says, placing a bucket near her.

She chokes back an expletive as Luza begins stripping. She can put two and two together, and her skin crawls at the thought.

“We’re bathing together?” She asks, averting her eyes.

“Something wrong?” The concern in Luza’s voice is genuine and innocent.

She’s not unaware of the male gaze concerning her body; she’s had to knock out more than one irritating customer when waitressing. Luza doesn’t strike her as one of those perverts, and well, she did ask to be viewed as a fellow man.

“No, I suppose not,” she says.

If worse comes to worse, she can probably drown him in the bathwater. She concentrates on her clothing while Luza gets into the tub. Once her kimono’s hanging to dry, she takes her time to rinse off and joins him. She leaves Tsubasa de Tobu near the edge of the tub just in case.

The shared bath turns out to be not as awkward as she assumed. Perhaps it’s because Luza’s already seen her naked, or perhaps it’s because the tub is as big as a small swimming pool. Either way the hot water feels amazing and shame? What’s that?

“Why didn’t you bring me here when you found me?” She asks, already making plans to never leave this tub.

“I tried! Got as far as I did and then had a near miss! I didn’t want to risk breaking you any more than that,” Luza replies defensively.
“Breaking?” She repeats stupidly.

“You were frozen completely solid, and when I managed to thaw you out, it turns out you were drowned! I barely remember how my parents saved me from drowning you know,” Luza sighs, flopping backwards onto the edge of the tub.

She grabs a few strands of her hair and analyzes the crooked ends critically. She thought she was missing some. The first thing she’s going to do when she gets off this snow rock is find a hairdresser. Well, after she re-stuffs Mini-Mihawk. Sadly, a chunk of his stuffing dissolved from the seawater, and he needs the upkeep more urgently.

“This is a pretty big place. I don’t see anyone else here. What happened?” She asks once the silence settles around them.

“They went to the Beyond a long time ago. They all watch over me from above,” Luza replies sorrowfully.

“Oh,” and because that doesn’t seem enough, she adds, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You get used to living among the Rooz,” Luza says before shaking his head. “I mean the Rooz really are amazing! When they were still here, the families used them to stay warm and go sledding, and!”

She waits for the rest of the ramble, but Luza sinks into the water with a longing expression. Though she wants to ask how that many people can just suddenly die, she decides to quit poking the wound for a different question.

“You say they used the Rooz to stay warm. Not everyone could breathe fire then?”

“No, they didn’t have the fire. I learned how to when I was a child,” Luza says.

“You didn’t eat a Devil Fruit?” She shakes her head at Luza’s confused stare. “Never mind. How’d you learn?”

“From watching the Rooz, of course! Fire is life here. Once I was on my own, I learnt it to survive.”

_Haki is the life of everything._ If the ability is not Devil Fruit related, then could this be Haki? Admittedly, breathing out fire was not what she had in mind, but it would certainly fulfill her childhood fantasies of being a fire breathing dragon.

“Can you teach me?” She asks.

“Sure thing!” Luza instantly agrees.

They stay in the bath for an absurdly long time. Whatever the tub is made of, it keeps the heat going for a long time. Only once she’s ready to pass out do they eat dinner, and the living room area doubles as their dining room and bedroom.

(It turns out Sea King is _delicious_. She now knows what she must do: get strong enough to kill another, so she can eat it again.)

Training is something she’s used to. It’s not just her daily ritual, but her way of life. Training her body and mind—it’s just another day for her. This though, this is certainly new.
“You’ve got to feel it in your gut,” Luza tells her, “and then bring it to your throat.”

She observes Luza spew fire, completely focusing on his motions. The only thing she feels in her stomach is nausea from eating a raw root. Luza forced her to eat it—the root is vital apparently—and now she regrets everything.

“No, no, let’s go outside and watch how the Rooz do it,” Luza says after she fails one too many times.

She puts the penguin suit on with a grimace. She vastly prefers a hot bath to waddling in the cold. The only good thing is that she’s getting faster at it; after a few days on Blue Rooz Island, her leg muscles are amazing.

“Let’s see—ah! Della, come over here! Her stomach is white enough to see through. With her, you can see how they build and store fire in their stomachs,” Luza says, waving over the Rooz in question.

A massive blue penguin creature with a goatee waddles over with a booming chirp, and she steps closer to observe as the Rooz begins building up flames inside the stomach. It’s almost as if the organs are supplying the energy.

“Now you try!” Luza motions to her.

Energy from the organs, draw energy from the organs, she tells herself. She breathes in and out, attempting to bring life to the concept. There’s a burning in her throat, and she’s hit by a wave of excitement. She throws up in her helmet.

“Hey, Luza. There’s nothing on this island. I’ve been around it to know. Where did this Lodge come from?” She asks, leaning back in the hot water to stare up at a beautifully tiled ceiling.

Having lied and told Luza she requires a bath every night, it becomes their ritual before dinner. According to him, Luza never took so many baths before she came along.

“Oh, the families were from somewhere else and brought the supplies to build it. I don’t remember where, but my parents were always trying to make their way back home,” Luza says. “All this stuff was from before I was born. I just use what’s left.”

That’s probably the saddest thing she’s learned about Luza; his lack of knowledge. Since Luza’s education is spotty, for everything he teaches her, she teaches him something in return. There’s only so much she can do however. Not even she knows how to create materials from thin air.

The medicine room is well-stocked, but Luza doesn’t know what to do when it runs out. She can show him how to make use of the supplies he doesn’t know about—he never knew what the Lodge’s tanning room was for—but there’s nothing she can do about the dwindling supplies.

“I can send you shipments of stuff after I leave. Maybe I can find some picture books,” she says.

“I’d like that,” Luza tells her.

It’s the least she can do for the man who saved her, who feeds her, and who’s currently teaching her how to be a fire spewing penguin. She won’t let a little thing like not knowing where the island actually is or the Ice Barrier bring her down.

“Is there anything you’d like in particular?” She asks.
“A red sled,” Luza says after some thought, “I used to have a red sled. My father and I used to have fun with it until the day it broke.”

“I can do that,” she promises.

“I think I felt something from you that time!” Luza claps her on the back.

“Really? I thought I was throwing up again,” she says in disbelief.

Belko slaps her on the back as well, and she winds up face first in the snow. As much as she hates the cold, the training is useless if she’s warm. It makes it hard to feel internal heat if the body is hot externally.

The Rooz chirps at her in what she’s learned is encouragement, and she slaps Belko’s feet with her cloth flipper. Even with her newfound arm strength from spearfishing in this awful suit, she knows the Rooz barely feels it.

“Well, I suppose that’s it then,” Luza says as she struggles to get up.

“It?” She prods as she gets her feet under her.

“You don’t need my teaching anymore. It’s time for you to move on,” Luza says quietly.

The silence never seemed so loud. Luza’s well aware of the fact that she won’t stay, that she needs to keep moving on. As much as she wants to deny it—to tell him that she still needs to learn from him—the longer she stays, the further Zoro gets.

“Well, I still haven’t actually figured a way off the island,” she says, attempting to put off the inevitable.

“That’s easy enough. Follow me,” Luza tells her.

Confused, she follows Luza back to the Lodge. Instead of going in, Luza walks in circles behind it, melting away the snow every so often. She looks at Belko who gives her a shrug in reply.

“It’s here somewhere—aha! Found it!”

At Luza’s shout, she hurries over to see past the man’s shoulder. Luza scrapes away the snow to reveal a…giant seashell? She squints. Yes, that is a giant, blue seashell no matter how many times she looks at it.

“This is the only way I know of off this island,” Luza says. “Get in.”

“What,” she says flatly.

“Stand here,” Luza points to an opening in the shell, “and you’ll take off.”

Take off? As in flying? She’s going to use this seashell as some sort of airplane? Most of this world makes no sense to her, but this island takes the cake.

“Wait just a minute, aren’t you stuck here?” She asks with narrow eyes.

“Yes and no. You’ll be joining the families in the Beyond, but I can’t go,” Luza tells her.

She runs that through her head multiple times and comes up with nothing but errors. Flying in a
seashell from hell to...even more real hell. No, it still doesn’t make sense.

“Isn’t the Beyond death? You’re trying to kill me?” She reaches for Tsubasa de Tobu.

“No, no! The Beyond is the place beyond the island. Everyone used this device to leave,” Luza waves his flippers frantically.

“Why didn’t you go with them?” She asks, dropping her arm.

“I made a promise to my father to take care of the Rooz in his place. He would have stayed, but he didn’t have long to live, so I,” Luza trails off.

Indignation fills her. What a father to make his young child remain alone in these conditions. Familial obligations truly are the worst burden; there’s a reason she cast it off the first chance she got.

“If I see anyone you knew, is there a message you want me to deliver?” She asks, letting her anger go.

“No, we said our goodbyes long ago,” Luza says. “Our goodbye is what’s important now.”

Even with his face covered, she can practically see the sad smile aimed her way. She glances towards Belko in an attempt to avert her attention and regrets it. Belko’s eyes and mustache are quivering in sorrow. She can’t catch a break.

She’s always hated goodbyes, always ran away before she could say them. This still hurts much more than she thought it would.

“I won’t just send supplies. I’ll come back and visit. I’ll finish telling you about my travels, and I’ll bring some more Sea King,” she vows before she can think it through.

“And I’ll be waiting. Belko too,” Luza adds when the Rooz makes a booming chirp.

She steps into the opening of the shell, heart beating fast. She needs to ask how to fly this thing. Before she can say anything, Luza slams a flipper against the side of it, and she has a moment of terrible realization when she feels air pushing beneath her feet.

She’s shot out of the seashell like a bullet, and she goes straight up into the sky. Air streams past her helmet, deafening her, and the only thing she can see is clouds.

“Son of a bitch!” She screams, unable to hear it.

(“There he goes,” Luza says, head tilted back and watching until he can no longer see the speck of a person.

Belko lets out a sad chirp, and Luza pats the Rooz in sympathy. It’s been fun; a bright spot amongst the blinding white snow.

“Too bad we never found that weird swirly root for him to eat,” Luza comments to Belko.)

Chapter End Notes
Every child's dream was to be a fire breathing dragon...right??
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once, in his previous life, he attempted to fly on cloth wings. He only flew for a few seconds and gained a back injury from it. Though he didn’t die, he realized how painful the ground could be. He learned to fear heights, and his knees shook any time he peered over a ledge.

Then one day he looked up at the sky, sneered, and put the cloth wings back on. He nearly passed out in terror, but he did it. He flew. There is, he learned, nothing better than soaring above the land and nothing more frightening.

It’s a secret, but he’s still afraid of heights. She’s just gotten better at ignoring it. It’s a juxtaposition of sorts that she continues to put herself in a position to plummet despite his fear of falling. Admittedly, being slung through the sky while dressed like a penguin had not been her choice of going out.

She continues through the clouds never losing momentum, and the instinctive terror slowly loses its sway. Her temporary flight is made easier by her tinted goggles, and she finds herself enjoying the view. This whole experience is incredible enough that she has no regrets.

*The silence is beautiful,* she thinks as she passes through the clouds and further up beyond.

It’s sudden when gravity takes hold, and she doesn’t realize she’s falling until a few moments in. It’s only then that she realizes the ground is far too close. She had went straight up long enough for her to accept her inevitable death, but the dark speck beneath her is about to greet her face faster that she can say—

“Don’t let me—” *wake up as someone else.*

Her unsaid words are less of a plea and more of a threat. Should she wind up in another body not of her choosing, she’s going to become a dark lord or the equivalent of. It’s only fair.

Perhaps some higher force hears her promise because she’s caught in a net made of vines that slows her descent. The vines toss her back into the air and into another net that springs her into yet another. It’s a repeated process that eventually leaves her hanging an arm’s length from the ground.

Her flippers hang loosely through the netting, and she catches her breath. Blinking dazedly at the ground, she attempts to figure her life out.

“What the fu—”

“Dad! Dad! There’s someone in the Catch U!” A childish shout cuts her curse short.

“So there is! Oh, that suit, I wonder if? Mella, stay there, okay?” It’s a deeper, more lyrical voice; a male one if she has to guess.

Her attempts to pull her arms free fail, and she senses something moving above her. The netting goes lax, and she hits the ground face first. *I’m definitely alive,* she thinks as her helmet digs into her forehead. No dark lord shenanigans for her then.

“Are you okay?”
Large hands lift her up by the armpits, and she hangs loose in the grip of a tall man with long, black hair and beady eyes. Behind him are white wings that nearly touch the ground. She blinks a few times, but the feathered wings don’t disappear. She doesn’t believe in angels, but this is a convincing argument.

“No, I was just shot out of a seashell from an island made of ice,” she says honestly.

“You came from Blue Rooz Island then,” the man nods knowingly.

She waits for him to say something, but the man seems content to continue holding her like a small child. His face looks oddly familiar. Before she can ponder on it, an actual small child bursts from the strangely fluffy bushes.

“Dad, are they alive?” The small child asks while biting their lip.

“They are, but I need just a moment, Mella,” the man says patiently.

Mella, the child, shifts with a pout while their wings remain motionless. There’s a harness wrapped around Mella’s upper body, but the more important thing she notices is that the tunic the child wears is of a familiar design.

“Are you Luza’s people?” She asks.

She’s dropped immediately, and she lands on her feet with a wince. The man leans into her personal space with wide eyes, and she reaches for Tsubasa de Tobu’s hilt instinctively.

“How do you know that name?” He demands.

She keeps a light touch when it becomes clear the man isn’t actively hostile. He seems more surprised and worried than anything. Keeping a wary eye on parent and child, she backs up a step so he’s not fogging up her goggles.

“He saved me. He’s also the one who put me in the seashell, so he almost killed me too,” she answers, muttering that last bit.

“Impossible. Luza’s dead. He was dying when we left,” the man denies with a paling face.

“I assure you, he’s in very good, fire-breathing health. Lonely though and the supplies you left won’t last forever,” she says pointedly.

She’s a little bitter that a whole people would abandon a child to such a place. Perhaps there’s something more to the situation though; the horrified face looking at her gives her cause to think so.

“Who are you?” The man demands.

“Kuina. And you?” She asks.

“Lushu, Luza’s uncle,” the man says, holding a hand to his forehead theatrically. “This is my daughter, Mella.”

The child waves at her shyly, and she waves a flipper back in reply. The beaming smile she receives leaves her with mixed feelings. Little children always leave her at a loss on how to interact with them.

“Clearly we have much to discuss. Please follow me to the village,” Lushu requests with a frown.
She considers her surroundings. Fuzzy trees tower above her and green grass lies beneath her feet. She doubts this place is in the middle of winter even with the clouds hovering overhead like a mist.

“There’s no snow here, right?” She waits for Lushu’s negative answer before gesturing to her outfit, “Let me get out of this stupid thing first.”

She hates this Rooz suit with all her heart and getting out of it by herself is a headache and a half. To her surprise, Lushu helps once she’s stuck attempting to untie the back of the suit. Practiced hands help her out of the rest of the suit, and she’s soon free to breathe in terribly dry air.

“I remember having to wear these awful things. Everyone else will, I’m sure,” Lushu says wistfully, rolling up the suit and carrying it off.

Mella grabs her by the hand, tugging her after the man. She freezes for a second before loosening her body and following after the child with small steps. She carefully keeps her hand away from her sword. She has no doubt Lushu is watching her intensely.

“The village is really neat. You’ll like it there. There’s a huge tree that grows lots of Bimser apples in the center! It’s got lots of stones around it, and Mom drew a flower on one. She draws lots of flowers even on our house and—”

Mella rambles on, and she absorbs as much of it as she can. It’s useful information if nothing else. She makes an agreeing sound and nods every now and then. It seems to be enough for Mella who is determined to tell her as much about the island in the shortest amount of time as possible.

She’s currently on a piece of land called Cherub Island. It floats in the sky. Dials—the seashell that carried her here—are used to get around. Mella’s not allowed to use them to fly alone just yet, but it’s a lot of fun, she’s told. The girl is still getting used to the weight of her wings, and hey, where are hers?

“I don’t have wings,” she says flatly.

It’s an obvious statement, but for whatever reason the girl lets out a shocked gasp. Wings must be an important facet of life here then.

“You don’t?” Mella asks with wide eyes.

“No,” she says solemnly.

“Dad, she doesn’t have wings!” Mella cries.

“I’m sure if she really wants them, Shoka can make her a pair,” Lushu says soothingly.

She has no doubt Lushu only says as much to quiet Mella. Still, examining the unnatural stillness of their wings and Mella’s harness, she comes to the conclusion that the wings must be artificial. If this man really is Luza’s uncle, then it makes sense.

What doesn’t make sense is why there’s a floating island, why Luza’s family abandoned him, and why there’s currently a small child attached to her hand. Mella swings their linked hands, and she considers that the child simply likes watching her long sleeve move.

“I never knew there were islands in the sky,” she comments.

“Cherub is a sky island. Supposedly our people came from one, but we lost our wings and our way home. But our new home is just as good as we hoped for. It’s better than endless snow,” Lushu
She can agree with that sentiment. Even if the rolling clouds make her ache for the blue sky, the temperature is neither too hot nor too cold, and there’s lush greenery everywhere. It’s a far cry from Blue Rooz Island.

Small houses that look more like grand tents come into view, and large, ornate Dials litter the area. She cranes her neck to watch winged figures flying overhead. A person lands safely into a net made of vines, and she counts her blessings for her own safe landing.

“This is—,” Lushu gestures in front of him.

“Seraph Village!” Mella intercedes with a shout.

Not angels indeed, she thinks with a grimace. She rather hopes the names are simply a coincidence. Religion crossing worlds isn’t a can of worms she’s willing to deal with.

Lushu leads her to a house with realistic flowers painted down the sides of it. She’s ushered inside to a lovely room filled with blankets and pillows. It’s small compared to Luza’s Lodge, but it has an airy, lived-in feel to it.

“Go find your mom and tell her we have guests,” Lushu orders, ruffling Mella’s hair affectionately.

“Fine,” Mella pouts before disappearing further into the house.

She takes a seat on a cushion and crosses her arms. Next to her, Lushu sits down and folds his hands over his face. In the ensuing silence, she admires the flower decorations plastered all over the room. Flowers made of strings hang up, and she assumes the badly made ones must have been made by Mella. How different this small house feels compared to Luza’s lonely large one.

“Tell me everything. Is my nephew truly alive?” Lushu finally asks.

She doesn’t hold back. She starts from the moment she woke up on top of Belko to the moment she left by way of Dial. A chubby woman with dark, curly hair interrupts to hand her a cup of juice but remains silent while she recounts her brief stay in ice hell.

“He said his father was dying?” Lushu asks with a frown.

“Yes, he said he promised to look after the Rooz in his place,” she nods.

Lushu’s face grows dark, and she takes a long sip of her juice. It’s an unusual taste; the plants growing here must be completely different from the islands down below. The woman hands her a pastry, and she bites into it without hesitation.

“There is nothing wrong with my brother. He lives happily on the Northside as their tribe leader. He told me Luza was dying and wanted to stay with Rooz in his final moments,” Lushu tells her. “Please give me a moment. I need to think on a few things.”

“Dear, don’t do anything reckless,” the woman warns sternly.

“I’m just going for a flight over the gardens, don’t fret. This is my wife, Melnia,” Lushu introduces before leaving.

She’s not going to say she’s jealous that anyone here can “just go for a flight,” but she glances at Melnia’s wings with longing. She wants to know how their travel method differs from falling,
wants to know what their wings are made of.

“Mella’s waiting for you outside. She wants to show you around,” Melnia says, taking the now empty cup from her.

“You shouldn’t trust your daughter with a stranger. Especially one with a sword,” she says.

“But you’re not a stranger, are you? You’ve eaten my food, sat in my house, and befriended my nephew. It makes you family, dear. Now go on and play,” Melnia laughs before throwing her out the door.

Lushu and Melnia are so welcoming, it’s jarring. This must be where Luza gets it from. She knows how to deal with weary, broken people, knows how to interact with self-entitled idiots. Nice people always leave her baffled, never mind the children who aren’t trying to knock her unconscious.

“Kuina, over here!” Mella waves from a nearby fountain.

She reluctantly moves towards the girl while sending out a prayer: dear Whoever, please keep her from traumatizing this little girl. She has no hope her prayers will be answered, but at least she tried. Mella grabs her by the hand and yanks her past the houses, mouth going at supersonic speeds.

“That’s where we make the jam for our apple toasties, and over there is where Mr. Shono makes the dye for our clothes. That’s dye, D-Y-E, not die. And Mom helps makes baskets with Ms. Kika over there—”

Her nod and hum method hasn’t failed her yet, and Mella accepts her responses as devoted interest. The little girl distracts her from the unnerving stares aimed at her back if nothing else. Mella swings their hands, and the impression that the girl likes her sleeves gets stronger.

She has no idea how long she’ll be stuck here, or if she can even leave. An ocean she can deal with; an island way up in the sky, not so much. Offering her services as a seamstress might be a good idea for the moment.

“Your father said something about your uncle being on the Northside as a leader?” She prods once Mella goes quiet.

“Uncle Luku lives on the Northside as the leader!” Mella nods as if she hadn’t just said as much.

“What is the Northside?” She asks more directly.

Mella brightens up before going into lecture mode. Apparently the island is divided into sections, a North, a South, an East, and a West. Each section has a different height level, main village, and leader. Lushu is the current leader of Seraph Village which is located on the Westside and is the second highest section.

“Let me guess. The Northside is the highest section?” She asks.

“Yep! Uncle Luku rules over Erel Village! Except I’m not supposed to say ‘rules over.’ ” Mella says conspiringly.

Well that bodes well. Her Shitty Father alarm already went off once Luza mentioned promising to take care of a strong, independent species as a helpless child. She adds “possible megalomaniac” to her mental notes.
She knows how cruel people can be in their desire to dominate others. She can only guess what it must feel like to be on the highest level, overlooking the other villages below. If she adds in the clues from Blue Rooz Island—an entire people forced into close quarters to depend on each other to now where they’re spread apart—she doesn’t like the figures adding up.

“Mella, does anyone fight here?” She asks.

“Not really. Oh! Some guy from the Eastside tried to punch Dad one time, but Dad is the strongest! So Dad threw him back down where he belongs!” Mella laughs obnoxiously.

*Where he belongs,* she grimaces. Well, maybe she won’t be here too long. If these people found a way up to this island, then they must be able to figure a way down from it.

Mella continues the tour, and after chasing off other curious children with an indignant huff, takes her to a garden to make flower crowns. She’s never made a flower crown, and Mella takes it as a personal offense.

“No, no, *no.* Like this!” Mella scowls, twisting stems together effortlessly.

“Forgive me for my sins,” she utters flatly.

It takes her a few times to get it right—the fuzzy flowers feel like fur and it keeps making her lose focus—but she ends up with a wonky flower crown; it’s a mess compared to Mella’s perfect white and pink one.

“Put it on!” Mella tells her with giddiness, perfect flower crown in place.

She does, and the band of flowers snaps apart instantly. Howling with laughter, Mella steps in to remake the flower crown, and she finds herself with a band of purple, pink, and yellow on her head. The girl claps in delight as she adjusts it out of her eyes.

“Kuina, I’d like for—oh, Mella, that’s a great job!” Lushu gushes from behind her.

“I’m going to make one for Mom too!” Mella says, already picking flowers.

“Don’t pick too many. You know your mother likes looking at the flowers. Kuina and I are going to visit your uncle Luku for a while. Tell your mom for me,” Lushu says, rubbing Mella’s head affectionately.

The girl pouts but sees them off with a wave, and Lushu’s friendly façade slowly breaks away into a glower. As the hostility doesn’t seem aimed her way, she maintains a relaxed pace with the man. They stop in front of a Dial larger than the others, and she waits patiently.

“I took some time to think it through,” Lushu says, “and I’ve decided I’m going to punch my brother in the face.”

“Sounds good,” she nods.

Lushu looks up to the rolling clouds above them and sneers. She has no doubt that is where Luku must be. She tries to imagine that kind of man related to good people like Luza and Lushu and fails.

“No matter how I look at it, he lied to me. He lied to my nephew. I’m going to hit him so hard his teeth break, and then I’m going to ask him to explain,” Lushu scowls.
“I warn you now. If his explanation has no defense, I’m tossing him off the island,” she says frostily.

She’s going to break his wings first though. She’s not merciful enough to give people like Luku a second chance.

“If it comes down to that, I won’t stop you,” Lushu says with a tight smile.

She has no wings to control her landing, so Lushu will carry her. She puts Tsubasa de Tobu on her back, and adjusts the flower crown tighter on her head.

Holding her to his hip like a small child, Lushu steps into the dial and slams a palm against the side. She experiences a second of “oh shit, here we go again” before she’s thrown forward into the sky. She closes her eyes and digs her fingers into Lushu’s shirt. The man briefly tightens his arms around her.

The sound of wooden clacking grabs her attention, and she takes a peek. Lushu’s wings shift against an air current, and it hits her that she is actually flying. Looking around with wide eyes, she feels Lushu’s laughter rumbling against her.

(She doesn’t know how, but she’s going to get her a pair. She needs them.)

Chapter End Notes

If you ever doubt the craziness of my SI, here’s a tidbit for you: I once took the chance to do paragliding despite having a phobia of heights. My line snapped. What did I do once I was rescued? I had the broken line tied back together and went back up. I said, "Either I fly or God kills me."

Disclaimer: Do Not Do This.
The Northside is the highest point of Cherub Island. She can already see a geographical difference from the section she came from; there are waterfalls, mountains, and caves in Northside to Westside’s forest and fields. Looking to the rest of the island, the lower parts steadily lose obvious signs of natural resources with the lowest, Southside, being on the barren side.

More resources may be why Erel Village looks to be far more impressive than Seraph Village. She can’t make out everything from the air, but she can see two-story houses to Lushu’s more humble tent.

“They’ve taken down all the Catch U! I see only one! What’s he thinking?” Lushu shouts in her ear.

She looks around, and sure enough, there’s only one vine net in the center of the village. It’s a bad sign considering how much the people here rely on the Catch U to get around.

“We’re going down,” Lushu warns her before he flips them down headfirst.

The sudden rush of speed nearly makes her scream. She trusts Lushu, but she’s probably leaving bruises where her fingertips grip his shirt. Lushu pulls up, and his wings flare out. It’s a relaxing glide to the net, and she uses that time to calm her beating heart.

“Lushu, I wasn’t expecting you,” a man holding a spear greets them once they land safely in the net.

Men and women begin slowly surrounding them with weapons in hand; none of them look like warriors. Lushu stiffens, and she keeps her hand near Tsubasa de Tobu. She has the urge to hold onto the hilt, but there’s no taste of bloodthirst floating in the air.

“We must speak to Luku. It is urgent,” Lushu says calmly.

“The king is busy. I will take a message,” the spear wielder tells them.

“King?” Lushu chokes.

She notices the eyes first. Luza and everyone in Seraph Village had warm eyes filled with emotions. The people here have—there’s no other way to put it—crazy eyes. Small, beady eyes that seem to reflect a mad light. She senses no hostility, but she has no doubt there’s a knife pointed at her back if she missteps.

The second thing she notices is that Erel Village’s people have silver wings and metal weapons. Seraph Village has wood and stone tools because their people haven’t had enough time to figure out the mining process.

“Is there somewhere we can wait until we can be granted an audience?” She asks politely, tugging on Lushu’s shirt subtly.

“You must be from the lower sections,” the man says, eyeing her clothes in disgust. “Broke your wings like a child, no doubt. Fine, you may wait in that house over there, but don’t try anything,
lower.”

She drags a sputtering Lushu to the indicated house, pinching him any time it looks like the man wants to say something. She’s here on a mission. She’d rather get the jump on Luku than give him time to defend himself.

The inside of the house is completely different from Lushu’s tent or Luza’s Lodge. Hard metal furniture and decorations litter the place. Everything is perfectly displayed, and the furniture is far apart. Hurried steps from the staircase echo in the room.

“I’m sorry, but his majesty is not here at the moment—oh. Lushu?” A woman stops with a gasp.

“Diana? What is this? What do you mean by his majesty?” Lushu demands furiously.

“Erel Village came to an agreement. We are now Erel Kingdom. You should return to Seraph Village, Lushu,” Diana says without looking either of them in the eye.

The woman wears a magnificent dress but no wings. Orange frizzy hair is tucked away in a bun, and there’s a sorrowful droop to the woman’s eyes. Diana fiddles with a ring on her finger while keeping her head bowed slightly.

“Your son lives. Luza still draws breath,” Lushu suddenly states.

It’s like a punch to the gut, and she gives the woman a more critical look.

“This is his mother?” She asks in disbelief while stepping closer to Diana. “Did you know that your husband told your son that it was his father that was dying? That he’s completely isolated with only the Rooz for company?”

She assumed Luza’s mother had died horrifically at some point. There had been no mention of her, only reminiscences over a father thought dead. Any time she asked, Luza went quiet.

She may not have had a mother in this life, but he remembers one that he had loved with all his heart. He doesn’t want to imagine being left by both parents to die. Knowing Luza, the boy had waved goodbye to them with a smile on his face.

“Lies! You lie. My poor boy, my greatest achievement, is dead,” Diana hisses.

“Your son is alive! Or do you think a stranger can somehow figure out the Rooz’s names? Or know about Luza’s red sled that we used as firewood when it broke?” Lushu roars.

“No, he’s dead. Luku wouldn’t lie about that. He wouldn’t. Why must you continue throwing my failure into my face?” The woman shouts hysterically while backing away from Lushu.

She grabs Lushu’s arm and squeezes it before he can move towards Diana. Sighing deeply, Lushu rubs his forehead and pleads.

“What’s going on, Diana? Why do you cower away from me?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Please, just leave. Leave!” Diana cries, twisting her hands.

She glances towards the door; Lushu nods and backs away. There are no words that will calm Diana down, and hysterical people can be a danger to both themselves and others. She’d rather not run Luza’s mother through accidentally because the lady tried to attack them with a vase.
“Well, this is pleasant,” Lushu says brightly.

“Shut up. Did we lose them or not?” She asks, peering around the rock carefully.

No knives or javelins are thrown at her face, so perhaps they managed it. Lushu grabs her and leaps down from the mountainside to the cave entrance below. It’s not a perfect ambush, but most people wouldn’t assume their quarry to hide above the cave.

“Forgive me. I had no idea Diana would tell them to arrest us for perjury,” Lushu says quietly.

“It’s fine. I have no problem stabbing people. You’re probably feeling a hundred times worse,” she tells him.

Considering Lushu should know them intimately—having ate, slept beside, and bathed with these people—it has to be heartbreaking to be chased with the intent to kill for simply announcing his nephew to be alive.

“How did you not know things got this bad?” She asks.

She doesn’t mean it as an accusation. There’s no real reason for Lushu to leave Westside, and she understands how breaking contact with family happens. Lushu winces despite the lack of bite in her words.

“I blamed my brother for leaving his child and felt guilty for it ever since. Who was I to hold it against him for granting the wish of a dying child?”

“Someone who actually liked the child,” she answers flatly.

“And my misplaced sense of guilt led to me never visiting unless Luku called for me. ‘Called for me’ that should have been my first clue,” Lushu sighs.

“Well, that and the houses made from something other than stone or wood,” an unknown voice says.

They whirl around, and a heavily tattooed young woman with braided hair holds up empty hands in a placating gesture. She only relaxes when Lushu does but stays one step behind him. If he judges wrong, then he’ll have to pay the price of being a meat shield.

“Shoya! Why are you out here so far away from the village? Where’s your father?”

“The waves don’t reach out here, so I live here now. I was just trying to get a nap when you two showed up and started making a racket,” Shoya says irritably, silver wings shifting slightly.

“Waves? Shoya, what has happened here?” Lushu asks desperately.

“Come inside. Clearly it’s too risky for you two to be seen. You, girl, I don’t know you. What’s your name?” Shoya asks while beckoning them into the cave.

“Kuina. I came from Blue Rooz Island,” she answers.

Shoya nods and leads them through a narrow passage at the back of the cave. The small cave opens to a larger space. Shoya points at the blankets and cushions that make a mockery of a bed, and she sits down. The hard ground remains uncomfortable even through the padding.

“You want to know what happened?” Shoya seethes with no sign of discomfort from the cold ground. “Luku and hypnosis. Everyone’s being held under the influence of a machine. Though it’s
subtle, it requires long-term exposure. It should have never been a problem! I told my father not to tell Luku about it, but did he listen?"

She looks at Lushu to see if he feels as lost as she does, but he simply nods with a pinched expression. She has no idea what’s going on. Hasn’t since she got here really. Even with her knowledge of Devil Fruit, hypnosis seems like a stretch.

“Outsider here. What do you mean by machines?” She asks.

Shoya looks to Lushu for approval before answering her.

“The ancients were said to come before our people. They created wonders and weapons lost to time through machines. Our people who came from the sky learned from the ancients, but lost the knowledge when they lost their wings,” Shoya tells her. “We returned to the sky and found the machines told in legend. It was a mistake.”

Wonders and weapons, exactly what Luku is making here then. Judging from the state of the other villages, not everyone is able to do so which gives Luku the power to declare a kingdom. No doubt the king will want to expand his domain to the rest of the island.

“Now, Luku is holding my father hostage. Making him work with the ancient machines to create whatever his majesty desires. He assumed I was getting in the way and kicked me out.”

Shoya begins digging through a satchel, and she squeezes Lushu’s shoulder to grab his attention. The man blinks, unclenching his fists, and blood drips from his palms. She hopes Lushu isn’t attached to the idea of Luku living; she aims to kill.

Plopping down a map, Shoya points to a circle above Erel Village. It’s labeled “Erel’s Forge.” From what she can gather, the forge is on top of a mountain. Lushu leans over and begins measuring distances with his fingernail.

“What that idiot didn’t know is that I am the one who taught my father how to use these machines. If you can sneak me into the forge, I can turn the hypnosis off. The effects won’t reverse immediately, but the others should break free if given enough motive.”

She thinks about dragging Luku in front of his people for his crimes. Thinks about proclaiming Luza’s existence at the top of her lungs. She imagines breaking every single bone in that man’s body while telling them of the Lodge and what was left behind.

“I’ll give them a motive,” she says darkly.

“That’s what I like to hear!” Shoya claps in delight.

Erel’s Forge is easy to get to. They leave under the cover of darkness, and both Lushu and Shoya take their wings off to better slink past security. The ancient machines lie near the top of the mountain overlooking the village, and for all their advancement, the villagers don’t have night vision or a defense against Shoya’s knowledge of the Northside terrain.

What she hadn’t counted on is that neither Lushu nor Shoya actually know how to climb. The two aren’t lacking for muscles, but it’s as if they’ve instinctively forgotten how to go up without flying there. She ends up piggybacking them up, and it takes far longer than it should in her humble opinion.

As there are only two people who can use the ancient machines, there aren’t any guards blocking their way. Which is good considering she lets out a long, loud curse when she realizes they left
their only lantern at the base of the mountain, and she has to go get it.

The forge ends up being more spectacular than she thought possible. Inside the mountain lies something straight out of a science fiction novel. When Shoya said machines, she didn’t think she meant actual machines. She marvels over the metal tubes running throughout the hollowed out mountain and the valves attached to sleek, black metal boxes.

She has no idea how to operate any of it, so she stays near the entrance as a lookout. Lushu hovers with the lantern while Shoya messes with various controls; the blank look on his face suggests that he doesn’t know either.

“Picked on my whole life for having my father’s name. Useless as a woman, they told me. Now here I am, reading the ancient tongue and breathing wonders into life. Who’s useless now?” Shoya mutters while fiddling with a valve on a machine.

“Why would your father’s name cause bullying?” She asks quietly.

“Ah, yes, you’re an outsider. You must not have the same naming conventions. I am Shoya, daughter of my father, Shoka. I should have taken the name of Kei as my mother’s name is Keilia, but she died giving birth to me,” Shoya says.

She waits for the rest of the explanation, but it never comes.

“That’s it? That’s the dumbest thing I’ve heard yet. That’s not a reason to be shunned,” she says in disbelief. “I hope you found a way to sabotage the wings on the worst of the idiots.”

She would if she were in Shoya’s place. She wouldn’t kill all of her tormentors though; it would be too suspicious. Accidents that could be blamed on the victim though? She’d definitely go for it.

“I like her. Are you adopting her? Can I marry her?” Shoya asks Lushu. “I prefer redheads, but I’ll make an exception!”

“I’m sure her father would have something to say against that, and no, you may not,” Lushu says with exasperation.

“I don’t think he’d care. I’m a little too old to be adopted though,” she says wryly.

She hasn’t thought of her father in a long time, neither one of them to be honest. He’d given up chasing after a father who only had room in his heart for alcohol, and she didn’t even bother with her new, dismissive one.

Honestly, she doubts her father ever saw her more than a way to get grandchildren. That man had been so emotionless with her; any time she injured herself he never even reacted. She doesn’t think that makes him like Luza’s though. Lost in her thoughts, she misses the glance Lushu and Shoya share.

“It’s done. Now what’s the plan?” Shoya asks.

“We had a plan?” She blinks.

“Break Luku’s teeth,” Lushu smiles.

They look at either while making funny faces. Clearly none of them has any idea on what to do from here. Plan A is to simply toss Luku off the island. Plan B is to torture Luku in front of an angry mob, and then toss Luku off the island.
“Where does our wonderful king preside at first thing in the morning?” She asks Shoya.

“He will be warming up Keiku’s bed right now. He gives a daily speech soon after. Yes, my cousin, that Keiku,” Shoya snaps at Lushu’s affronted expression. “It’s been too long Lushu. You don’t know how everything has spiraled out of control. He even made Father give him gold wings as a sign of his right to rule! Worse, they believe it.”

Lushu rocks on the balls of his feet and gives her a considering expression. The bright light of the lantern doesn’t stop the creepy shadows from appearing under his eyes. Lushu’s gaze moves to the machines and then back to her. She begins edging towards the exit. She has a bad feeling.

“Kuina, how do you feel about becoming king of Erel Kingdom?” Lushu purrs.

“Very badly,” she says immediately.

Shoya rubs her hands together and cackles before firing up another machine.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to finish the arc up this chapter, but it got too long. You get one more chapter of the Angel Arc! Once more, thanks for every comment.

And yes, Kuina still has her flower crown. She's actually forgotten she's wearing it.
“Do I have to?” She asks desperately.

“Yes,” Lushu and Shoya answer firmly.

She wilts as the harness is clicked into place; Shoya fiddles with the complicated straps until she barely feels them. Lushu holds the lantern up, and the light shining in her eyes keeps her from seeing what Shoya’s doing. She regrets letting these two come up with a plan, regrets not just killing everything in sight.

“Every king needs a crown. I’m glad you came with one,” Shoya jokes.

“That’s my dear Mella’s work. She’s been making them for as long as she could walk,” Lushu gushes.

That thing is still on her head? She moves to touch it and gets slapped on the arm for her trouble. She heaves a heavy sigh. It feels like forever, but Shoya doesn’t take much longer on the device attached to shoulders.

“Let’s make you presentable, your highness,” Shoya smirks and moves to mess with band around her head. “What,” Shoya’s smirk fades in surprise, “did she use glue? What’s this thing made of?”

She remembers twisting and fuzzy flowers but not much else. She’d been completely out of her depth and had simply nodded her head to everything. Had the girl used an adhesive?

“She could have,” she says with uncertainty.

“Mella is amazing,” Lusu nods vigorously.

The plan is simple: launch an assault during the morning speech. Luku stands on a special platform where he repeats the same speech every day in an effort to keep the hypnosis strong. The forge lies above it and will be her ambush point.

Lushu and Shoya will be going to the ground for a special task; once it’s complete they’ll signal her through the use of smoke signals before slipping away.

“My own creation. You can make anything in the forge if you know the basics,” Shoya says, holding up a small metal ball. “I made the smoke pink because why not.”

“Didn’t your father attempt to create those and lost his eyebrows?” Lushu asks.

Shoya merely smiles, and Lushu backs away with small steps. It’s a marvelous idea. She decides to remain close to the exit out of precaution. Thankfully the rest of their preparations go off without any explosions, but time soon runs out. They have no choice but to get into position before someone notices them.

“Hypnosis or not, I value my life more than theirs. Do the same for yourselves and no heroics,” she orders.

Lushu and Shoya salute her with solemn expressions, and she nods with a sigh. At no point in time
did she want to be a king, not even as a fantasy. *Dragons don’t have to deal with people*, she thinks with despair, *just eat them.*

“We are the few, chosen by God to lead the ones beneath us! We must rise to further heights and further ourselves before Him! To that end, I have been given the task to lead the way. It is a burden I shoulder for you. With your support behind me, our prayers will surely be heard!”

She feels her eye twitch. Up on the side of the mountain, hidden in the shade of a fluffy tree, she feels a headache coming on from the shouting below her. Perhaps it’s her imagination, but Tsubasa de Tobu’s hilt feels warm against her hand. *Let’s shut him up,* the sword seems to say.

“Not yet,” she whispers to the katana.

Grand, gold wings shine from the platform along with long, black hair like Lushu’s. She can’t see his face from here, but she’s sure Luku looks identical to Luza. The thought alone makes her grit her teeth. If she falters raising her blade, she’ll just have to remember this annoying speech.

“Erel Kingdom will be prosperous! It will be magnificent! I will lead the way and—”

“Wrong! You aren’t the one meant to be king!” Shoya yells.

Even way up here, she can feel the sudden, shocked silence. She can make out Shoya’s furious gesturing, and Lushu’s black hair next to her. They stand out among silver wings without any of their own. She waits patiently for another shout.

“I AM THE KING!” Luku’s annoying voice is loud enough to be heard throughout Cherub Island.

“You’ve fallen and a new king rises!” Lushu roars.

A screaming match ensues, and she can’t understand any of it. The crowd around the platform is clearly aggravated, but no weapons rise. Shoya had theorized that with the machine turned off, the repeated words being thrown around by someone other than Luku could confuse them. It appears to be true.

“If God is behind our king, then the king will be the victorious one today!” Shoya shouts before pink smoke envelops her.

“I have no need for such a wicked brother!” Lushu cries before disappearing in a cloud of pink as well.

It’s time. She moves her foot only to freeze. The ground is an awfully long way down. No, she needs to go now. She takes a deep breath, unsheathes her sword, and leaps.

“Strike true, Tsubasa de Tobu!” She cries as her wings snap out behind her.

The wings on her back are light and shine with metallic feathers. She had feared them too fragile, feared she would be jumping to her death. She’s never been happier to be wrong. The wings are far more responsive than Lushu’s had been and move in a way that seem to respond to her very mind.

Her wings flare out farther, and she aims for the shine of gold below her. She grins as the world itself seems to rise to meet her, and she readies Tsubasa de Tobu who sings for blood. She folds her wings in and thrusts downward with all her strength. Luku moves out of the way in time, and her sword slides into the platform instead.
She didn’t think her initial attack would work—had counted on it not working in fact—but if Luku was stupid enough to just stand there then he’d deserve a blade to the head.

“Who dares? What worthless bitch dares?” Luku spits while his lip trembles.

“I dare, and I’m the furthest thing from worthless,” she says, pulling her sword free to point at Luku.

She sneers and lifts her head haughtily. She usually hates theatrics—she especially finds it distasteful to use Tsusaba de Tobu’s blade as a tool instead of a weapon—but there’s a certain satisfaction to be had from waving her katana at this man’s face.

“Followers, arrest her! I order you as your king!” Luku calls while backing up.

The purple and gold robes do nothing to hide the man’s shaking. Luku nearly trips on his white cape, and she almost breaks character to smile. It would have been hilarious to watch him tumble off the stage. She catches movement in the corner of her eye and continues the act.

“You’re not the king. *I am.* Back off all of you,” she orders while flaring her wings, “or do you not believe that your God-approved king can win?”

The crowd around the platform stops at her words to glance at each other uncertainly. Weapons lower and small, crazed eyes watch the platform silently. Luku gapes at the disobedience.

“I was given golden wings as a sign!” Luku tries to appeal desperately.

“Rainbow wings, plebeian,” she smiles, and her feathers shimmer tauntingly. Granted, it’s more of a silver-white that shines rainbow along the edges of the feathers. But why argue semantics? She’s just glad Shoya had listened to her. The initial idea had been to fight gold with gold, but upon seeing her disgruntled expression over the suggestion, Lushu and Shoya had put their heads together to think of a different color.

“You know you look like a friend of mine,” she says casually. “He has redder hair though. Name’s Luza. Ever heard of him?”

Luku aims a knife at her, and she uses Tusaba de Tobu to knock it out of his hands. She keeps the tip of the blade in his face. She’s tempted to drag it across his nose.

“Why’d you do it? Why did you leave Luza to die? He was your son!” She demands.

She doesn’t get an answer, but the glance to a woman wearing very little says everything. How many times had she’d seen children born out of duty and social pressure? She had almost done same before he ran away from home.

“How long have you resented him for being born?” she demands when Luku remains silent.

“How long have you resented him for being born?” She asks, moving her blade closer to flesh. “*Speak,*” she demands when Luku remains silent.

“The moment it came out of that woman, and I had to spend every moment of my life with it,” Luku replies stiffly, eyes full of resentment.

“You tried to kill him before then, haven’t you?” She questions with narrow eyes.

Luza had painted a loving father, but Lushu had indicated a lack of closeness despite the Lodge’s design. There’s no evidence to suggest attempted murder, but she knows it to be true, feels it in her
“No matter what I did, it never died. The accident with the sled didn’t kill it and neither did drowning it,” Luku says spitefully.

“Luku, what are you saying?” A mess of orange hair rushes the platform. “What have you done to him to make him lie, you monster?”

It’s a momentary distraction, and Luku takes the chance to pull out another knife and a seashell—no, a Dial. She backs off, and keeps Diana and Luku in front of her. Tsubasa de Tobu stays pointed at Luku.

“Luku, punish them for making you lie! Luza is dead, and they spit on his memory,” Diana says, attempting to climb up the platform. “You would never hurt our son! You only ever wanted what was right!”

Diana looks to Luku pleadingly. She doesn’t know what happens to make Diana freeze, to look at Luku with such wounded eyes, but the woman backs away from the platform while shaking her head. Diana’s eyes never leave Luku’s even as her face twists in despair.

“You told me he was my greatest achievement. You told me he died because I was a failure of a mother. You told me I didn’t deserve wings to gather his body,” Diana whispers.

“You deserve nothing,” Luku says coldly, “including that damn child of yours.”

Diana falls to the ground with a sob as Luku rears back to throw the knife at her. She steps forward to deflect it but is left open to the Dial in Luku’s hand. She gets knocked into the air by an impossibly strong wind, and her wings spring open to stop her fall. She shakes her head dazedly.

Luku took a gamble that pays off; there’s no way he knew for certain she would have stepped in to save that woman. Her hand grips empty air, and she suddenly realizes Tsubasa de Tobu is gone.

“Diana!” Lushu rushes to the woman from his hiding place among the crowd only to look up at her with wide eyes. “Kuina, watch out!”

Too busy looking for her missing sword, she fails to see Luku grabbing a spear from one of the villagers and using the Dial to rush towards her. He pierces her wing with the spear before blasting her with the Dial again. She manages to grab Luku’s arm before it hits her, and they both soar into the clouds beyond the island.

Luku attempts to pry her off of him, and she bashes her head against his nose. The man begins flailing in panic once they begin descending at a rapid pace. She head-butts Luku again, hard enough that she begins seeing stars, and Luku goes limp.

I’m taking you with me, she thinks as the ground greets her.

(When she thinks of her father, she thinks of a man with a smiling face and an uncaring gaze. When he thinks of his father, he thinks of a man passed out on the ground, surrounded by beer cans. He doesn’t remember his last words to his father, but she holds a brush to write hers.

Kneeling on the ground and with careful strokes, it takes her three tries to get the letter right, and she doesn’t understand. She should have needed only one piece of paper. Why does it take such a long time to properly convey her goodbye?

Father,
When you get this, I will have sailed away.)

Her eyes snap open, and she rolls to avoid the spear aimed at her face. A wing folded against her back pops open and slaps Luku away from her. She rubs her face tiredly. Can this day end yet?

“Why do you get in the way of my people?” Luku yells, waving the spear like a buffoon.

“I’m only getting in the way of you,” she says flatly, “and it brings me great joy to make shitty fathers suffer.”

She gets to her feet, wincing at the pain in her back. Her head hurts too. She looks around and sees nothing but sand and a few dead-looking trees. This must be Southside, the lowest section of the island. It had looked barren from the air, but this is just ridiculous. She expects tumbleweed to fly by at any moment.

Luku rushes her with a scream, and she punches him in the jaw. He goes down immediately. She looks at the man with a thoughtful hum. She has her knives and shuriken, but it would be much more satisfying to use her fists.

(I’m taking the sword you gifted me a few weeks ago. It should suffice. You should have seen this coming. I will not let anyone decide my fate.

I am truly grateful to you for feeding me, teaching me, clothing me. For listening to my most important request though I know you only did so because you see Zoro’s potential as I do.)

“You left him to die. You never cared about him or the Rooz. It was only a promise made to kill him,” she says coolly, grabbing Luku by the front of the shirt. “Why are you such a shitty parent? What makes people like you? Answer me.”

“My son is supposed to obey me!” Luku grits out with quivering pupils.

“Your son doesn’t have to do shit,” she says punching him in the gut. “He never chose to be your kid, but you chose to have him whether you like it or not. The one with the obligation is you!”

(Still, I cannot forgive you. You were a constant in my life, yet you were never there for me. You never cared. Everything I learned has been through my own efforts.

The greatest thing you did was not stopping me from learning. We do not love each other, so this shouldn’t be a painful parting.)

“I am the rightful king. I am—” Luku gasps.

She silences him with a punch to the teeth; she thinks a few breaks beneath her fist. She could do this all day, but she’s so tired and hungry. Staying up through the night is bad enough without starving, and she had to listen to that damn speech too. It’s time to take out the trash and go to bed.

Bringing Luku’s face closer to her own, she sees no resemblance to her cheerful friend. Good, it’ll make this easier then. She didn’t pick this fight to become a king or to overthrow a mad one. She only wanted justice for Luza, for herself.

Looking at this broken form of a man, she feels nothing but contempt. She will have justice. She feels it in her gut and in her throat.

“I will tell you a secret. I am no king,” she hisses in his ear. “I am a dragon.”
She lets go of the man and breathes. Though it feels like smoke to her, it is flames that pour out of her mouth. Golden wings catch fire, and Luku wails out in panic. She holds down a flailing arm and spits out more fire, only stopping once there are no more feathers to burn.

Grabbing the slightly crispy Luku, she drags him all the way to the edge of the island. It’s not too long of a walk fortunately. Having already said everything she wanted to, she tosses the man over the edge and watches the body disappear into the clouds. She smiles grimly. It’s over.

(I will not be back. Let Zoro’s children inherit the dojo.

Kuina)

“Thanks for coming to get me,” she says, biting into a hastily made pie, “and for finding Tsubasa de Tobu.”

Bless Melnia with all her soul; she’s never tasted anything better in her life. All Lushu had to say was that their guest was hungry and hurt, and the lady had rallied Seraph Village for food and medicine.

“No problem! We’ll have your wings repaired in no time, and you’ll be able to move through the island freely,” Shoya says. “Though I’m still amazed at that sword of yours.”

Shoya doesn’t mean by the color. Upon being rescued, her first demand had been retrieving Tsubasa de Tobu. They found the sword after noticing the villagers crowding around a destroyed portrait of Luku; apparently Tsubasa de Tobu was sticking straight through his head. Erel Kingdom had accepted her right to rule after that.

“My king,” Shoya purrs, “why don’t you stay here? I would make a great queen.”

“You would,” she acknowledges, “but I have to give the queen’s crown to a princess with the greenest hair in the land.”

It’d be a great prank in her opinion. She plans to bring up her childhood promise to Zoro to watch his face fall. Telling him he’d be a queen would be even funnier. It’ll be something to laugh over later once they part ways.

Once her wounds have been taken care of, the worst part of their assault on tyranny comes to pass: cleanup. She nods her head to Shoya and Lushu’s suggestions concerning Erel Kingdom under the pretense of being a ruler. Mella runs off to make her a new “better and totally royal” flower crown.

“I don’t know how, but Keiku apparently kept Luku company for years. Blue Rooz Island years. Since she didn’t get Diana’s permission, she’s broken the law. As Keiku is my cousin, she is my responsibility. I will oversee her punishment,” Shoya says.

The twinkle in Shoya’s eyes makes her think of a child getting something new to play with. She doesn’t have much sympathy for a woman who would cheat with Luku of all people, but she can’t help but think, good luck, Keiku.

Shoya reunites with her father with a slap on the arm and a, “What have we learned about not listening to me?” while dragging Keiku behind her. All three disappear, and she pretends she doesn’t hear Keiku’s screaming over being shaved bald in the distance.

Lushu gives up leadership of Westside temporarily to his wife, Melnia, while he attempts to help her settle Erel Kingdom. To be honest, he does most of the work. If it weren’t for the fact that her
wings still needed to be fixed, she would have jumped off the island already.

“What are you going to do about Diana and Luza?” She asks, resting her head on Luku’s desk.

“I will either take Diana into my home as my sister or my second wife depending on what Melnia and Diana want to do. I will be taking in Luza as my own,” Lushu says firmly from a chair next to her.

There’s a moment of hesitation on Lushu’s end, and she tries not to fall asleep. It’s hard considering at this point even the ground looks inviting.

“I will tell Luza that his father died regretting leaving him there, and that I promised to go get Luza in his place. As for how long it took,” Lushu hums, “I will say it took your unique intervention to find a way back down safely.”

“Is that wise?” She picks up her head to squint at Lushu.

Lies have a way of coming up sooner or later. Luza will be devastated when that happens even if not telling him that she murdered his father is rather appealing.

“Probably not, but I do not have the heart nor the strength to tell the truth,” Lushu smiles sadly.

She doesn’t either; she ends up requesting Lushu delay getting Luza until she leaves.

It’ll take some time to gather the correct materials for repairs as the creation of her wings had taken the remaining stockpile, so she’s stuck on Cherub Island for a while. As a late “coronation gift,” Shoya invites her to the forge to send out messages. She’s not quite sure what the woman means until she sees what looks like a printing press attached to three different roller-coaster tracks.

“I’ve never used this one, and my translation might not be perfect, but this should be able to send out a message to anyone, anywhere,” Shoya says.

She watches the woman walk back and forth while muttering. Shoya pokes a few things before grabbing up a handful of metal plates.

“Alright, I’ve got it. Write the names of the receivers on these plates with these cables attached to your head. Think of the receiver while you write the name,” Shoya says, holding up cables coming from the machine. “The plates with the messages need to be on the same track as the names.”

She can’t even begin to know how Shoya can figure any of this out. All the tubes, tracks, and shifting plates look like a jumbled mess. She doesn’t understand the mailing process, not really.

“Your messages are going to be tiny, only as much as can fit on here,” Shoya holds up a plate as big as her hand. “There’s five here, so you can make multiple messages if you want.”

She thinks long and hard. Five messages—does she even know that many people? With a start, she realizes she does. She actually has friends to send mail to; though it’s taken this long for her to admit it.

Each plate is onetime use since the sending process destroys it. She writes her messages out carefully and with much thought. Shoya helps her send them out as soon as she finishes writing it, and she’s soon left with her fifth blank plate.

“Oops,” Shoya lets out.
“What is ‘Oops?’ ” She asks with trepidation.

“I mixed up the plates from your first two messages. I’m so sorry,” Shoya apologizes with a facepalm.

Her first two are—ah. Oops, indeed. She looks down at the last plate with a frown. She could use this to correct the mistake, but there was a special message she’d been saving for last. Oh well, she’ll just have to clear the air in person.

(The first message:

_I hope you’ve gotten stronger. I’ll be coming to challenge you. That sword you have is special, and only the best can wield it. Prove to me that I shouldn’t take it._

_Wait for me,_

_Kuina_

There’s a slight widening of unusual yellow eyes and an amused twist of the lips. A humandrill that had bravely wandered close to the castle retreats with a scream as loud, booming laughter echoes into the surrounding area.

The second message:

A strangely shaped cylinder rockets towards his head, and he cuts it in half without hesitation. Upon inspection, a tiny piece of paper rests inside one of the sliced halves. If it’s a trap, better to spring it before the captain does.

“’I hope you die,’” he reads.

“What the hell?” He asks, eyebrows twitching.

The third message:

_I gained wings. I’ll be looking for a pair of fins soon. You better step up your game._

_Kuina_

His sharp tooth grin leaves his current companions wary. He slings a bag over his shoulder and sinks back into the ocean. He’s got a race to win.

The fourth message:

“Madam Shilla, Roberto, I hope you are well. I made it to the Grand Line, and each day is a new surprise. I still have Tsubasa de Tobu. Thinking of you, Kuina. P.S. Get married already,” she reads tearfully.

“Still a child, I see,” Roberto says gruffly.
She taps her painted nails against the piece of paper with a thoughtful frown. Her dear Kuina must be so lonely on the Grand Line. Is she getting enough to eat? Enough sleep?

“No, absolutely not,” Roberto says with alarm.

She smiles sweetly in reply.

The fifth message:

Father,

I am sorry for how I left, but I am not sorry for leaving. I have much to tell you about my adventures. I will return one day, so let’s have tea.

Love,

Kuina)

Chapter End Notes

Angel Arc complete! Whether she likes it or not, Kuina's now the Dragon King.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For all that she rejects it, Erel Kingdom heeds her every word. The brainwashing done to its citizen is truly magnificent in the worst of ways; the people fully retain their sense of self but consider her orders to be absolute. She abuses it to rewrite the events of her ascension before Luza arrives.

“Luku was affected by the machines and went insane. He threw himself over the edge in a moment of sanity. Even Shoya’s agreed to go with it, but there’s one thing that can destroy the fairytale,” she says.

“You mean Diana.” Lushu shifts uncomfortably.

She makes an agreeing hum, leaning over her desk with needle and thread. Now that things have calmed down, she’s focusing on repairing Mini-Mihawk. Re-stuffing with cotton imitation, replacing damaged material, redoing some of the stitching—by the end of it, she’s basically sewing a new doll entirely, but too much effort went into Mini-Mihawk’s sword to chuck it off the island.

“We can say she was affected by the machines too. Considering her current,” Lushu hesitates, “hysterics, it will be a believable lie.”

What Lushu means is that Diana goes from rage, to crying, to bizarrely normal at the drop of a hat. She’s dodged a vase to the head only for the woman to break down in tears while apologizing. There’s no accounting for Diana’s unpredictability when it comes to Luza.

“Should Luza learn the truth from Diana, I will shoulder the burden for lying. It is only right,” Lushu says before waving a hand as if to clear the air, “but no more of that. What are your plans before leaving?”

It’s a good question. Even when she soars away, her rulership will continue on without her. By Shoya’s estimate, it’ll take close to a lifetime to completely rid the citizens of their forced loyalty. Her decisions are probably permanent.

“I will leave everything to my two very capable stewards,” Shoya and Lushu will soon regret making her king, she’s sure, “but I want to expand Erel Kingdom and conquer the rest of the island.” She smiles at Lushu’s flabbergasted expression.

“What,” Lushu says blankly.

“Luku had the right idea but went about it the wrong way. What the people need is unity and sharing resources. By the end of the day, living at a different height shouldn’t make a difference to people who can fly,” she explains while carefully examining Mini-Mihawk.

Her doll is looking better than ever. She’s doesn’t know what the material she’s working with is, but it has a luxurious quality. She can’t wait to show her creation off to Zoro.

“Westside is yours, but how exactly do you plan on conquering?” Lushu asks cautiously.

She’s not the most diplomatic person, and Southside’s Eloh Village is home to the most unfriendly people she’s ever met. She’ll try negotiating before breaking their arms, but there’s no doubt some blood will be shed in the name of Erel Kingdom. Perhaps it’ll go more peacefully if she took some
“Whichever way works,” she answers with a shrug before lifting up Mini-Mihawk. “How’s he looking?”

“The eyes are even creepier now. Mella would cry,” Lushu says immediately.

She sticks out her tongue and puts Mini-Mihawk back inside her kimono. Clearly Lushu needs to have his eyes checked. She throws a stack of papers at Lushu for the slight. She smirks at the defeated expression she receives. No matter how primitive the system, paperwork is still awful.

“Are you sure you want to do this? It’s the same as shooting you off like a piece of mail, and I can’t guarantee I’m using this machine correctly,” Shoya asks while turning several valves.

She glances at the machine with a wary eye. She still can’t make heads or tails of how anything inside the forge works, but she can hazard a guess that she’ll be launched from the large set of tracks like a missile. Shoya’s apprehension is making her worried, but the idea of staying to rule over this bunch of morons is too horrifying to consider.

“I made a promise to myself that I would go see a very dear friend of mine. I have to go,” she says resolutely. “You also went through the trouble of repairing my wings, cutting my hair, and doing my nails. I’m more than ready for my date,” she jokes.

As a last night with her friend and steward, Shoya had done a “girl’s night” which turned into a “steward’s night” when Lushu remarked on being left out. She didn’t know girl’s night entailed getting drunk and painting graffiti on people’s stuff with super moisturized skin, but it was a lot of fun. She’ll treasure Lushu’s traumatized face forever.

Shoya smiles mysteriously before turning another valve that makes a clicking noise. Most of Shoya’s preparation work has been finding and translating the machine that would send her off safely. It almost feels like a miracle to finally be standing here, ready to go.

“I can throw you from the island and wish you luck, or I can point you towards an island,” Shoya says with furrowed brows. “But there’s another effect if you do that.”

“And that is?” She prompts.

“Well, I can’t make out some of the words, but I’m guessing it says it’ll cost you some time from your life. Judging by the amount of moon cycles—a few months, I think. That or it’ll send you back in time, but that’s just ridiculous,” Shoya snorts.

“That’s fine. I don’t think it’ll matter in the long run,” she says, stepping onto a small platform attached to the tracks. “Point me towards an island.”

Shoya does one last check on her wings and harness, and she twists the flower crown tighter on her head. Mella had made another one for her in farewell, and it’d be a shame to lose it on the takeoff.

“I’ll see you later,” Shoya says with a wink.

Before she can say her own goodbye, the platform makes a hissing sound, and she scrambles to latch onto the attached handlebar. She barely grabs it before the platform speeds off.

Like the world’s most extreme rollercoaster, she zooms through the mountain, hopping different tracks until she’s taken to the top of the mountain and out of it. She’s thrown off once the platform
hits the end of the track, and something like an electric current runs through her body. Before she begins falling, her wings pop open.

The thrilling ride leaves her stunned until she gets a mouthful of cloud. She blinks her blurry vision away. Her wings remain steady, and she slowly relaxes. She doesn’t look back to see if Cherub Island is still visible.

Flying unhindered is amazing—until it’s not. It turns out gliding through the sky for hours on end gets boring real fast. There’s nothing she can do about it either. Until she hits land, she can only dangle helplessly in the silence.

She passes most of the time by composing letters she’ll never write inside her head. She thinks about what Zoro might be like, or his crew, the Straw Hat pirates. She even imagines what Mihawk’s house must be like—it has to be as gloomy as the man is.

She entertains herself with her thoughts until an island appears. When she gets closer, she can make out buildings and paved roads. Signs of development give her relief; she’d been unsure if the island she’d been thrown to would even have vegetation.

It feels like eternity when she gets close enough to begin descending. She folds her wings in and aims for a lake. It’ll be a wet landing, but if she slows down enough, it shouldn’t hurt too much. She messes up the trajectory and flies past the lake.

Well, shit, she thinks.

She moves her wings desperately in an attempt to slow down, and she manages to crash into a large bush. Her face and arms get scratched, but the surprisingly springy bush takes most of her momentum. She’s unharmed, but it’s a fight to get out. Still, she calls the landing a success; Tsubasa de Tobu’s fine as is her wings—everything looks to be in place.

“My word! What have we here?”

She looks up—and up. A man towers above her, eyes shadowed by a top hat, and she takes in the old-fashioned tailcoat suit with wide eyes. White gloves crinkle against a simple, black cane with a tip that rests near polished high-heeled shoes. *Death comes for you as a seven-foot tall Victorian Englishman*, he remembers hearing.

“Away from me, Tall Man! You won’t get my soul today!” She snaps, unsheathing Tsubasa de Tobu.

“I beg your pardon?” The man asks.

“I still have to meet him! If I have to strike down a spirit, I—oh,” she blinks. “You’re human.”

The man stares at her in bewilderment, and she slowly puts her sword away while her face grows warm. She let an old tale that his mother and brothers had claimed get the best of her. That’s just embarrassing.

“Sorry, I mistook you for someone else,” she says, trying not to hide her face behind a sleeve.

Awkward silence ensues as the man continues staring. The man’s attire leaves her feeling uneasy, and she glances at her hands to make sure she’s still in the body of a pale-skinned woman. Stupid brothers and their cruel teasing about Grim Reaper knockoffs.
“Could you be an angel? You look remarkably like a woman instead of a child. Perhaps this is due to the situation?” The man mutters to himself.

“I’m not an—” She tries to correct while subtly stepping around him.

“Oh, heavens! You have been sent to us in our hour of need! What a great honor to be the one to escort you,” the man cries.

“I said I’m not—” is all she manages to say before she finds her arm wrapped around his and dragged away.

The man’s quick, large steps ensure she barely touches the ground, and she gets the distinct impression of being flown like a flag. Still in need of proper information, she refrains from slicing the man to pieces. That and she can hardly acquire a ship if she ends up killing everyone in sight.

The lake is attached to a city—she saw the sprawling buildings and carriages from the air—and she finds herself paraded down a cobblestone street with giants stopping to gape at her. Large, fancy dresses and sleek, spiffy suits make her think of the Victorian era.

For a moment, she feels like he’s gone back in time. Then she sees the carriages being pulled by crocodile-like creatures and makes a face. Nope, still in this absurd world it seems.

“Apologies, my dear fellow! I am in great haste!” The man shouts to anyone who tries to stop them.

Her kidnapper brings her to a brick building. She gets shoved into a small living room crammed full of expensive decorations and luxurious furniture. With the couch and chairs surrounded by ceramics and knickknacks, she doubts she can sit down without breaking everything in sight. Not with her wings and Tsubasa de Tobu.

She stands in the middle of the room uncomfortably while the man runs off shouting,

“Sister, come quickly! God has delivered to us salvation! On my afternoon stroll, what should appear before me but an angel?”

“And angel? Truly? Surely you jest. Is it not some hedge-creeper that approached you—”

A woman with an elaborate dress stops short, and the kidnapper nearly runs into her. She doesn’t get to say anything before the woman covers her mouth with a gasp. The man helps the frozen lady into a chair, and she tries not to stare. Twisted into knots with lace weaved through it—the woman’s hair looks ridiculous.

“Who are you people?” She asks when the man takes a seat as well.

“Brother mine, did you not introduce yourself? Are your manners that of a pig?” The woman goes from petrified to snarling immediately.

“I did not think I had to! Should heaven not know my own name? Yet it seems that even the stars must bow down to propriety. I beg your forgiveness for my trespass.” The man takes his hat off hurriedly as his sister looks ready to lunge for his throat.

“It’s fine,” she says while wondering: what weird island did she land on this time?

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Wigram Ferdinand, and this is my sister, Wigram Edna,” Ferdinand says with a tilt of the head.
“I am Kuina. Assume I know nothing about your island. Tell me everything,” she says, withholding the urge to sigh.

She doesn’t bother correcting the Wigrams’ mistake about her identity. She has a feeling that it’s better to get hailed as a divine foreigner than an unwanted one, at least until she gets her bearings.

Angle Island is the apt name of the land mass. Two strips of land connect together at an angle, and at the joint of the island is the City of Rondinium. While the poor live on one strip and the rich on another, people from both sides of the island live in the massive city.

Rondinium has its fair share of messy conflicts between the different classes, but nothing to cause mass panic. The Wigrams’ live in the upper part of the city and rarely run into anyone from the lower part. From what they say, the classes barely interact.

Lately, women from the poor side have been terrorized by a malevolent devil spewing fire. Anytime the devil gets caught, he flees by jumping over buildings. No one’s been seriously hurt yet, and with the victims being women of poverty attacked while alone at night—no one cared.

“But now even fine, upstanding women find themselves frightened to walk outdoors even escorted! Imagine that! Even with an escort it remains unsafe,” Edna says.

“My name will be besmirched should anything happen to the sister under my care! Angel, what can we do to aid you?” Ferdinand asks.

Of course the Wigrams care now. She realizes she’s clenching her teeth and tries to loosen her jaw. She has every right to walk out the door and leave these people to their own mess. She has plenty of gems that can be sold—she wasn’t stupid enough to leave Cherub Island empty-handed—and there’s nothing stopping her from finding a ship.

“I’m going to need stilts, a suitable dress, and your courage,” she says, nodding towards the siblings. “Do exactly as I tell you to.”

For all those poor women that were ignored, she’s going to put an end to this. Hopefully before anyone actually gets hurt.

(Perhaps her Kingly duties have messed with her head. She should be looking for a hotel room, not devils. She’ll have to remember to demand payment later.)

“Truly you are so beautiful that stars pale in comparison. Surely any heart will beat faster upon sight! Sister, I commend your efforts,” Ferdinand utters once she successfully makes it down the stairs.

She flutters a fan in front of her face in an effort to cool down while taking careful steps with her makeshift stilts. If she steps on any part of her skirts even once, she’ll probably break her neck. Should the devil show she plans to rip up most of the dress and the large overcoat which makes her arms look longer and hides Tsubasa de Tobu. She pointedly doesn’t tell Edna this.

“Like this, I could believe you to be a lovely, virtuous woman! My heart hurts that you must remain unescorted! Oh, my brother, must we leave this angel to the wicked?” Enda cries.

She continues fanning herself with silent contempt. These two dramatic idiots are giving her a headache. Well, either it’s them or all the pins stabbing her head to keep her awful hat in place. On the plus side, those pins are sharp enough to work as makeshift weapons.
“Let’s go. I’ll follow behind you. Oh, and if anything happens to those wings, God will punish you,” she says darkly.

She makes sure to tilt her head in a way to shadow out her eyes. She’s leaving both her kimono and wings in Edna’s bedroom. She keeps Mini-Mihawk and a few knives on her just in case, but she remains anxious all the same. The siblings reassure her hastily with a bow and a curtsey.

“Wigram, my dear man, what was that commotion earlier?”

The man asking has a booming voice, and she remains out of earshot of Ferdinand’s reply. She keeps the siblings in the corner of eye while covering the lower part of her face with the fan. She eyes the bench next to her enviously. She can’t afford to sit down; by the time she actually manages it, the Wigrams will have already left.

She scans her surroundings for any sign of unusual activity but finds nothing. Men and women alike send her scathing looks for not being attached to a man at this late hour, and she does her best to ignore it. So long as no one begins hurling slurs, she can keep a level head.

Her temper isn’t the best, but she needs to remain calm. Her opponent might be a Devil Fruit user or a Haki wielder. She can’t afford to mess up.

“Hey, love. How much for a wagtail like you?” A man lands next to her from the rooftop above.

The man smirks at her beneath a tilted hat. She considers his freshly-pressed, ragged clothes, and healthy face smeared with dirt. He’s probably a rich man pretending to be poor. She closes her fan with a snap and decks him in the mouth.

“Since you asked nicely,” she says, cracking her knuckles, “I’ll only charge you with a broken nose.”

Chapter End Notes

I personally grew up with the Tall Man being a seven-foot tall Victorian Englishman appearing to collect your soul, but it's an urban myth that changes from person to person!

Also, just so you know, some of what you say influences my remarkably flexible outline, and some things you guys just guess and I have to play dumb.
Chapter 14

Rondinium is clearly a city full of intricate and pointless social customs. The amount of time the Wigrams spend on taking a walk “the right way”—stopping to greet everyone, never walking over anything less than pristine sidewalks, slow and unhurried steps—means that dusk falls before they make it anywhere. She’s tempted to throw a rock at the next person that wants to stop for a chat about the weather.

“Go away,” she snaps for the fifth time.

“How could I possibly leave such a lovely lady such as yourself to the cold night air?” Her annoying companion smiles while dabbing at his bleeding nose.

She grips the fan in her hand hard enough to hear a worrying crack. No one would know if she got rid of the man permanently, but as alluring as the idea is, she isn’t a murderer. She can’t kill people for annoying her. She’s already hit the man three times for calling her a whore; any more than that is probably crossing a line somewhere.

“Why are you following me?” She asks with a huff.

“You have my interest,” the man answers honestly. “Why are you following those two gulpies around?” He asks in turn while pointing to the Wigram siblings.

“They’re my bait,” she answers simply.

The man raises an eyebrow but says nothing more. She and her unwanted companion continue tailing the Wigrams into a less busy part of the city, and the searing looks aimed her way lessen. Carriages stop rolling by, and the streets get darker. If there’s ever a better time to jump someone, she doesn’t know it.

“I never introduced myself. I am Bean,” the man says, jabbing a thumb towards himself.

Deciding to imitate a woman she saw earlier, she raises her nose and huffs. The man makes a face at her clear dismissal.

“Blast it all, the name is Clarence, but my friends call me ‘Bean,’ ” the man admits.

“Well, I’m not your friend, Clarence,” she says.

A scream interrupts their banter. She locates the source; it’s Edna. A horned shadow cackles as the woman falls to the ground next to a groaning Ferdinand, and fire starts flying over their heads. Damn it, she thinks, I was distracted.

Letting out a curse, she kicks off her stilts with haste. Tossing her coat and fan to the gaping Clarence, she rips off the heaviest parts of her skirts and rushes towards the shadow. There’s no chance to draw Tsubasa de Tobu before the devil figure flees, and she gives chase.

She’s never been more thankful for her boots; the shadow’s high heels click loudly against the cobblestone, and she can’t fathom how they’re running so smoothly. Her target jumps onto the roof of a nearby building, and she takes a running leap after. She manages to grab the edge and has to
heave herself up. By the time she gets her footing, the devil figure is already on a different roof. Judging from the gaps between buildings, following will be difficult but doable. She takes a leap onto the next roof.

For some reason, every house has a lit chimney, and smoke covers the brick rooftops in a haze. She has trouble keeping up, and her opponent might as well be a giant flea with how they jump. She grits her teeth as it begins to take longer to figure out which direction to go in. She stumbles on an uneven brick, and the chase ends in her loss.

Despite her best efforts, she loses her quarry against the night sky and the smoke that covers the rooftops. Leaning against a chimney, she wipes the sweat out her eyes wearily. Her glove which is filthy smudges her face with dirt. This is not her best moment by far.

“There you are! Golly, you can move for someone so small.”

Tsubasa de Tobu is halfway out of its scabbard before she realizes the one sneaking up on her is Clarence. The man raises both hands in surrender and gives her a winning smile. She narrows her eyes as she realizes the one sneaking up on her is Clarence.

“You have thirty seconds to explain how you followed me,” she says, sword still partially drawn.

A normal, average person of Angle Island means, from what she can see, to be utterly useless. Her target is supposedly a devil, and her own superhuman abilities are thanks to training and technique. No normal person could have kept up with her.

“I’ve got ways,” Clarence tells her with a cheeky smile.

“And I’ve got ways to make you talk,” she utters while drawing more of her sword pointedly.

“My lovely lady, there’s no need to get violent. If you really desire to know then follow me,” Clarence says before jumping to the next roof.

The way the man’s feet move while leaping is exactly like the devil that got away. She follows after, irritated at how much easier it must be for someone with long legs. She refrains from punching Clarence in the stomach whenever he waits for her to catch up but only just.

They stop before a suspicious-looking hatch on the roof of a rundown building. Opening it, Clarence gestures her inside. She allows herself a moment to ponder how foolish she is before jumping down. She shouldn’t invite trouble so obviously.

(In Clarence’s opinion, he’s the one inviting trouble; she has a sword.)

Whatever she was expecting, an attic with old-fashioned tools and materials cluttering around shabby furniture is not it. She inspects a box full of metal springs before looking at something resembling a modified blowtorch. The place looks like a workshop of some sort.

“Welcome to the Hideout!” Clarence exclaims dramatically.

Ignoring him, she pokes around the attic some more. There’s a box of ruined shoes, various saws, and many cans of black paint. Black horned masks of varying style—finished and unfinished—lie in every nook and cranny.

She drops into a patchwork chair with her arms crossed and waits. Clarence sits across from her in a chair of a completely different style, and she notices his shoes look like the ruined ones in the box once he crosses his legs.
“I knew there was something off about you, but I never imagined you were a foreign midget! An indecent one at that!” Clarence nods towards her uncovered legs.

“I’m currently thinking about kicking your ass,” she says warily.

“Calm my lovely lady, I am simply jesting,” Clarence smiles before getting serious. “You are not the first foreigner I have had the pleasure of meeting. Indeed, one can’t miss them at the docks, but this is the first time I have seen a foreigner impersonate one of us.”

“It was this or go around as an ‘angel,’ ” she says wryly.

“Angel? Now this sounds like an interesting tale. Let us exchange stories. Confide in me about the disguise, and I will tell you everything about the devil, Springy Jack,” Clarence says.

Information for information, she tells herself. With a sigh, she gives an abridged and somewhat edited explanation. Clarence doesn’t need to know where or why she fell from the sky, but there’s a reason the Wigrams mistook her for something other than human.


“And now I’m trying to stop the attacks before someone gets hurt. A deal’s a deal, tell me why you’ve brought me to the devil’s hideout,” she says.

It’s a guess, but it’s a good one. She would have assumed Clarence to be the devil in question if it wasn’t for the fact that both were in her sight at the same time. Clarence covers his mouth to hide his grimace, and she makes a show of cracking her knuckles.

“No need for uncouth behavior. I would have never brought you here if I had no intention of telling you,” Clarence says with a sigh. “Truth be told, you are the only one who kept up so well with Jackie. I wanted to ask—wanted to hope you can stop her without resorting to violence.”

“Her?” She prods.

Clarence fumbles inside his ragged coat to bring out a small framed picture of a woman. She leans forward to get a better look. Brown hair tied into a loose ponytail and a beautiful face marred with sun damage and scars—there’s no way this is a rich woman.

“I met her when I was in disguise in the slums. I went looking for a good place to get drunk,” Clarence admits. “God save you if you try to save yourself from getting dry around these fine, top-lofty gentlemen around here.”

Clarence had been wandering around when he saw a woman getting publicly humiliated by the men and women in the street. The woman, Jackie, was in desperate straits, and her first attempt at prostitution didn’t go over well. He had been intrigued by the way the woman remained standing tall in a ripped up dress while everyone demonized her.

“I offered my arm, and she kept me company while I was powdering my hair. Once the drinks knocked me out, she stole my wallet and my heart,” Clarence says.

It was a slow process, but Clarence kept going back to Jackie, kept bothering her until she stopped running away. He helped her find income in making shoes, and she stopped trying to sell her body. According to Clarence, he’d fallen hard enough for the strong-willed woman that he’d been prepared to marry her despite the class difference.

“But she desired revenge on those that wronged her. The more money she started earning, the more
those same people that wronged her held their hands out, and the more she planned to hurt them,” Clarence says before admitting, “and I helped her do it. I believed it was only right for me to do so.”

The creation of Springy Jack was a joint project between the two; it was supposed to only be a prank—at least on Clarence’s part. They took turns being “Jack” and spooking the wrongdoers. Then Jackie slowly began upping the viciousness of the “prank” before setting her sights on the wealthy.

“But why only women? Men had to have hurt her too,” she asks.

“For all her bravery over the rooftops, Jackie is too afraid of men to target them. Of course, I am not. There are several fine gentlemen that drank themselves stupid because of me. They are just too proud to admit it,” Clarence brags before covering his mouth. “But this has gone too far. She targets more than the guilty. This is no longer justice.”

“Vengeance can never be justice. Justice requires an emotional distance, and those feelings can’t factor in,” she says. “I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with revenge though.”

The desire to hurt those that cause pain, to hurt those same people who turn around and demand—she understands it. She understands the resentment towards those in better positions in life. He’s been there before in another life. Jackie undoubtedly feels like this is her chance to drag everyone down with her instead of raising herself up.

“When I saw you by yourself, I thought she was going to target you. It was my hope that I would scare you off,” Clarence says wryly while poking at his swollen nose.

She snorts. It would take more than a sleazy, overbearing man to scare her. Of course, that’s probably because Clarence wasn’t wearing a top hat. Ferdinand’s appearance had frightened her when she thought he was a supernatural being—oh, that’s an idea.

“How fast can you make a mask?” She asks suddenly.

“I am quite good at it now. It should only be a couple of hours. Why?” Clarence asks.

She adjusts the black mask over her face while staring at the shoe shop below. The rubbery texture is both form fitting and surprisingly breathable. The mask itself looks like a man’s face that’s slightly off, and she tries not to bump the horns into her top hat.

Playing with the mask keeps her from pulling at the vest and coat over her bound chest. Honestly, while she thought women’s dresses here were uncomfortable, she never imagined the tight-fitting men suits to be just as bad. Admittedly, her black cape is awesome and jumping with pants is easier.

The sound of a bell chime from the shop alerts her. She holds absolutely still as a brown-haired woman with a scarred face leaves only to suddenly stop in the street. She keeps from staring directly at Jackie, and the woman looks around before moving at a brisk pace. She takes a running leap onto another roof and follows.

*Let the act begin,* she thinks.

With it being dusk, plenty of people are leaving work and milling about. She’d be worried about being found out, but almost everyone keeps to a brisk pace with their heads down. No one looks up, and she hides behind chimneys or moves to different roofs whenever it looks her target is about
It’s strangely exciting to stalk Jackie who keeps looking over her shoulder, and she wonders if enjoying the thrill of the chase makes her a creep. Well, she supposes it doesn’t matter when her mission is to be as creepy as possible.

Jackie walks around in circles before making for the Hideout. People begin thinning out, and the sky grows darker. Chimneys begin pouring out smoke, and she takes it as a sign to act. If she lets Jackie make it to the Hideout, she’ll have to do this again, and she’s not sure her lungs can handle another round.

Her target makes the mistake of taking a shortcut through an alleyway, and she jumps off the roof to the dirty cobblestone below. Landing behind the woman, she sweeps Jackie’s legs from under her before she can turn around. She covers the woman’s mouth before she can scream.

“Did you think you could use the devil’s image and not suffer the consequences?” She purrs lowly into Jackie’s ears.

She’s thankful for her black, leather gloves. Jackie’s attempts to bite through her fingers fail. She presses on a point on the woman’s neck with her other hand, and Jackie goes rigid.

“You made me. Your hate. Your envy. They created the devil, and the more fear you spread, the stronger I become,” she whispers with her best gravelly voice.

She lets go of Jackie’s neck to drag a thumb down her spine, careful to keep her touch from being sexual. Let the woman think otherwise, but she wants it on record that she didn’t actually go there. Though from what Clarence told her, Jackie’s victims would want her to suffer in that way.

Moving her hand from Jackie’s mouth to her jaw, she moves the woman’s face towards her and whispers,

“Look at me. Look at what awaits you in the dark.”

She breathes fire and hisses words of dark promise. She throws the woman down and jumps to the roof directly above them when it looks like Jackie’s about to faint. Tall buildings are made for tall people, and if she actually takes an extra step or two to get to the roof, well, the cape hides it.

She lets out one last blast of fire that lights up the street like the sun and cackles before booking it. Shouts and alarm bells ring out, and she doesn’t slow down for anything. The smoke covering the rooftop obscures her figure, and she fades away into the night.

“Bean boy, you really should try my pa’s remedy. It’ll cure it right quick!” A man says to the groaning Clarence on the ground.

“It’ll cure you alright. You’ll be dead before noon,” another man scoffs while dragging an unmoving man out the bar’s door.

“Give me the remedy then,” Clarence moans. “Let me die.”

“Don’t you do it! That’s my best paying customer! He pays his tabs unlike some of you bastards,” the barkeeper yells from inside.

As one, the men still conscious rub their heads and complain about unpleasant voices. Passersby hold their noses up at the drunkards stumbling out of the bar first thing in the morning, and the
men that still hold a shred of dignity left sneer back with rude gestures.

“You.”

A voice full of venom spits out, causing every man outside the bar to flinch. One reflexively raises his arms to cover his face. A woman with puffy, red eyes stomps over to Clarence who remains lying on the ground and looms.

“It was you,” Jackie cries, pointing viciously. “You did it! You fucking piece of shit.”

“Oh come now, my dear. No need for such talk,” Clarence says mildly with a wince.

“This man is Springy Jack! He attacked me last night!” Jackie shrieks causing everyone to clap their hands over their ears.

“Jackie, whatcha talking about? Bean was drinking with us last night. He passed right out on the bar table. Barkeep actually let him sleep there all night. Wonder if he’s sweet on him or his money?” One of the men informs her before rubbing his face in speculation.

“Then you must have gotten someone else to do it! Where are the shoes?” Jackie hisses.

“You mean these? I had ‘em on all last night. Ask anyone,” Clarence lifts a foot before shrugging as the other men make sounds of agreement.

“The torch—” Jackie tries.

“We’re down to one and you have it, remember? Mine broke,” Clarence says cheerfully before groaning.

“Bean, what’s she spouting off?” One of the men asks before slumping against the brick wall.

“Pay her no mind. She’s had a fright. Or maybe she’s frightened herself? Cause Springy Jack ain’t real,” Clarence says, waving a hand.

The men make dismissive sounds, and Jackie leaves in a huff. There’s a scared look to the woman’s eyes though. Jackie stops suddenly and rubs her arms as if cold. The woman looks behind her, and upon seeing nothing out of the ordinary, nearly runs back to Clarence in tears.

She eyes the couple over her fan as a tearful Jackie clings to the groaning Clarence. Clarence will have his hands full for the next day or so, and Jackie will be too scared to hang out of rooftops. She smirks; these two morons deserve everything they get.

She wobbles off on her stilts, taking care not to step on her new dress. She’s got a mask to bloody up and show the Wigrams. If she can get her hand on a pig or something, perhaps she can gore it up and claim she slew the devil. Even better, she can set the evidence on fire when they’re not looking and—hm, maybe she’s gotten a taste for being a creep after all.

Oh well, she’ll hold off on demanding payment as long as she gets proper reactions.

“How’s the girlfriend treating you?” She asks, watching the duck-like creatures waddle by.

She’s never seen a duck with a turtle shell before, but it’s cute. Maybe she can take one with her when she leaves. The tiny animals hop into the lake and swim off.

“Hah, getting her to go to work was an event I would like to forget. She is completely and utterly
terrified. I will be escorting her home from now on,” Clarence says, pretending to read the newspaper beside her.

With the two of them sitting on the same park bench, it would apparently be scandalous if Clarence looked anything more than uninterested in her. She can’t even attempt to understand this society’s rules. If it wasn’t for the Wigrams’ insistence in housing her, she’d already be back in her kimono, sleeping in a hotel, and walking around like a barbarian.

Bored out of her mind, she attempts to read the front of the newspaper out of the corner of her eye. She freezes when she notices something out of place. She cranes her neck for a better view.

“Wait. Give me that,” she demands before snatching the newspaper from Clarence’s hands.

“How rude,” the man pouts.

She ignores him, looking at the date printed on the newspaper. She stares, blinks, and then stares some more. The date never changes.

“Is this really today’s date?” She asks to make sure.

“Yes?” Clarence answers with bewilderment.

No matter which way she looks at it, today’s date is the day she set sail for the Grand Line. She reads through the entire newspaper and realizes that everything looks eerily familiar. She’s read this same global newspaper, she’s sure of it. She wracks her brain on how that could be.

That or it’ll send you back in time, Shoya had said before launching her off Cherub Island.

“I’ve gone back in time,” she says dazedly.

This world is just crazy enough to do that to her. She stares up at the sky in wonderment and attempts to think things through. Time travel is a serious idea—so many things need to be accounted for. There are paradoxes to think about, and the fact that two of her currently exist…

“I can still stop that letter to Mihawk!” She slams a fist against the park bench in realization.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, guys, guys, go check out this incredible fanart of Kuina & Zoro (and Mini-Mihawk)!

Also, I think I didn’t mention it because I assumed everyone read it, but in chapter 5 Gerbilfriend made an awesome short story in the comments!
https://archiveofourown.org/comments/207361964

Thanks so much for all the love. You guys are incredible.
“Clarence, if you suddenly went back in time and realized you could fix a mistake, but you had no clue how to fix it, what would you do?” She asks while drumming her fingers against the bench armrest.

“Give up,” her companion says immediately.

“And that is why you’re Clarence,” she says dryly, and the man huffs behind his newspaper.

While she has no doubt time travel is possible in this weird world, she goes from shop to shop to be absolutely certain she isn’t imagining things. She’ll never be completely certain unless she catches sight of herself, but the date never changes. She needs to assume she’s in the past and plan accordingly.

When her letter to Zoro went to Mihawk instead, she tried not to think about it. She’s fully aware that her misplaced words could be taken as challenge to the world’s greatest swordsman, but there just wasn’t anything she could do. Now though, now there is a chance.

Obviously she can’t stop the letter from being written. It’s not even an idea she wants to touch. She can’t grab the letter’s tube when it launches either; she has no idea where Cherub Island is even at. There’s one option left. If she can’t get to the letter then—

She’ll just have to get to Mihawk before it arrives.

Dracule Mihawk is a Warlord, a pirate that works with the World Government, and as such has a known static location. Granted, she has no idea where, but by her calculations, she has a few months to find him. If everything works out, she can keep Mihawk from opening the letter, and deliver it to Zoro herself.

“The Lord hath called me to travel as man does and prevent a new devil from rising,” she says gravely to the Wigram siblings while keeping her eyes to the ceiling. “Would blessed and God-fearing souls such as yourselves contribute to the worthy cause?”

She’s had to put up with their stupidity for days, had to put up with countless lessons on not clinking silverware too loud and changing speech patterns. She’s not sure she’ll ever look at a teapot without traumatic memories weighing her down. There is no regret for taking them for the fools they are.

“Oh, dear brother! How can we possibly deny the angel who slew the devil that attacked us? My soul cries that you must bear the burden of walking among lesser men!” Edna bemoans.

“Do not show such sorrow, sister. We are Wigram! We must always keep our chin up. Surely you do not wish for our special guest to remember your tears?” Ferdinand speaks while stroking his chin. “With our own hands, the angel will continue her fight in good fortune, and the heavens will know of our good deed today.”

Money, she reminds herself while smiling sweetly. She needs to take as much beli from these two as possible. Her supplies went down with the Dusk Rats’ ship, and Cherub Island used trading instead of currency. She makes sure to hit up Clarence as well.
“Care to make a donation?” She asks, eyeing the ragged vest that stores Clarence’s purse.

The man leans his elbows onto the bar table to shuffle his playing card deck. His game buddies haven’t shown up yet, and she’s using this chance to strike. Not that it matters since everyone knows Clarence is loaded with beli. Why he continues the charade of being “Bean” despite the fact everyone knows who he is, she doesn’t know.

“Those wings suit you, midget,” Clarence says with a tilt of his tattered hat, “but I see you’re still quite the devil.”

“I can arm-wrestle you, if you feel like losing it to a bet instead,” she says, rolling up a kimono sleeve pointedly.

Clarence eyes glint, and she knows she has him. She doesn’t doubt that Clarence would have reluctantly given her some money, but this way there won’t be any hard feelings.

With the Wigrams and Clarence’s “gifts,” as well as a few jewels sold, she has just enough money to get herself onto a ship. She lets out a sigh of relief that she doesn’t have to sell her knives to cover costs. Her precious weapons are safe another day.

She looks up at the black flag flapping in the breeze and tries not to make a face at the Jolly Roger’s black teeth. She knew what she was getting into when she paid her way on board, but she hadn’t known every single Black Tooth pirate had a black tooth. It makes her feel like she’s surrounded by people with rotting teeth.

“You’re in the way. Move!” One of the pirates barks at her while hauling a barrel past, and she steps away from the gangplank.

Her wings pull in tighter to her back, and she shuffles towards her room. A secret hatch hidden on deck, her so-called room has only enough space for her and a small bag of necessities. She won’t complain considering she had to practically beg her way onto the ship. Getting a ride on the Grand Line is far harder than she imagined.

“Don’t get in the way. Don’t take what we don’t give you. And for heaven’s sake, don’t start screaming. Nothing worse than a woman’s wailing! Follow the rules and you’ll be fine,” the captain tells her before shouting to cast off.

She folds her arms into her sleeves and keeps to the quietest part of the ship. She’s not optimistic about this crew—the pirates eye her with dark intention—but there’s literally no other option. Log Poses are hit and miss, and she could end up waiting for years to get off Angle Island. She’d rather put together a raft and chance it than stay in that place for that long.

“Hey-hoy, missy! Care to have a drink with some old men past their prime?” An old, wrinkled man calls out to her once the island disappears from the horizon.

The man waves a bottle at her, and a ragged, frilly ruffle waves from beneath a plaid suit sleeve. Across from him is an equally wrinkled man in an orange tuxedo who winks at her while juggling cups. The third and last man in a stained, dark blue suit drags a stool into their circle before she can refuse. As her only options are standing on deck quietly and out of the way or sitting in her room, she takes the offered seat.

“Isn’t it too early to be resenting life?” She asks, catching the cup thrown to her from the juggling man.
“Not resenting, celebrating! It’s never too early to enjoy a drink among such lovely people,” the man in the plaid suit tells her.

“You mean you get to enjoy our faces, you bent clarinet,” the man in the blue suit snorts. “I have to get drunk to forget your ugly mug.”

“We just wanted to empty the bottle before someone else got to it,” the man with the orange tuxedo tells her conspiringly.

She runs a thumb over the chipped cup while observing this small group of washed-out old men. She could reject them politely but firmly—it’s how she’s always handled these type of situations—but there’s a comfortable atmosphere surrounding them unlike the rest of the crew. And, well, she has no idea how long she’ll be on this ship with nothing to do.

“I’m Cadence,” the man in the plaid suit leans over to pour her a drink before pointing the bottle at the man in blue, “he’s Octave, and he’s—”

“I can tell her my name, myself!” The man in the orange tuxedo huffs before smiling at her, “I’m Anacrusis. Who might you be?”

“Kuina,” she says.

The three take turns telling her that she has a lovely name in ever increasing fervor, and she sips on what turns out to be quite fine wine. Their bickering is lighthearted, and they take turns telling her stories about the Grand Line, never prodding her for one of her own. Every now and then someone gives their little group a nasty look, but the men have no problem ignoring it.

“Wonder what the next island’s like? We’ve got two more stops before the Log Pose resets,” Anacrusis ponders. “Maybe it’ll be a swamp? Haven’t been to one of those yet.”

“Don’t say that! I still have nightmares about those damn bugs from that flower island. What do you think will be in a swamp?” Octave grumbles before pouring himself another cup.

“Dog people. The next island will have dog people,” Cadence says with certainty. “What about you, Missy? What are you thinking?”

Before she can answer, umbrellas pop open, and there’s a sudden downpour of rain. She blinks upon noticing she’s still dry because there is an umbrella in her hand. It’s pink with little pandas on it.

“Marines hopefully,” she ends up saying somewhat distractedly.

How did they sneak it into her hand? No, where did the umbrellas even come from, and why did they have four to begin with?

“Not a pirate fan?” Cadence asks from beneath a plaid patterned umbrella.

“Hoping to get some information from them actually,” she says. “I’m looking for someone.”

“Marines don’t just give information away,” Octave snorts while shaking his plain, black umbrella.

“I’ll make them talk,” she says.

If anyone knows how to get to Mihawk’s residence, it should be the Marines. That lady that looks like her, Tashigi, wasn’t she his girlfriend or something? The memory’s a bit of a blur, but she
remembers that the Marines mistook her for one of them. If worse comes to worse, she still has that pair of glasses tucked away in her kimono.

“It’s not a runaway husband is it?” Anacrusis asks gently, yellow sunflower patterned umbrella drooping slightly.

Just the idea of the intimidating, stoic Mihawk running away in his coffin boat to flee a church causes her to choke on her wine. The next mental image she gets is Mihawk in an apron packing his bags.

“No,” she says unevenly, trying not to laugh.

The rain stops, but the glare from the sun is bright; she leans back and enjoys the shade of the umbrella. She has no idea why these three men welcome her into their circle or why they’re not running around like the others to keep the ship sailing straight, but it’s kind of nice.

(The men give her pitying stares when she’s not looking and begin whispering conspiringly about irresponsible husbands once she leaves to get some sleep.)

Sailing with the Black Tooth pirates is long and boring. There is literally nothing for her to do except talk with Cadence, Octave, and Anacrusis. She never gets around to asking why these old men get so many dirty looks, but she does find out what they actually do on the ship.

“Your A is out of tune again,” Octave tells Cadence before blowing on a trumpet in short bursts.

“This is why you don’t put a damn E string in its place,” Cadence snarls while fiddling with a violin. “I have to tune it every. Single. Time.”

“Buy your own strings next time,” Anacrusis says before beating out a rhythm on a drum.

These three are musicians, and watching them prepare to play is a fascinating process. She’s never played a musical instrument before. The aunties in Shimotsuki would have taught her to play on something traditional, but she refused to give up sword practice for it. Before that, his family couldn’t afford an instrument.

“I don’t even know why we’re doing this. It’s not like sea madness is taking hold. We can see the island in the distance!” Cadence nearly screams as the strings on his violin’s bow break.

“You have one job,” Octave says before throwing a kit to Cadence, “now get to it.”

“Don’t you want to show your good side to our lovely audience?” Anacrusis says while gesturing to her.

“What good side?” Octave says, ducking the violin bow aimed for his head.

Despite their scowling, the three are good at what they do. Music fills the air for hours on end, and with it, the attitude of the crew completely changes. Gone are the looks of disgust, and a more cheerful crew brings them to port onto the island. Only the captain remains unmoved from the trio’s masterful art of sound.

“We’ll be staying until the Log Pose resets. No clue when that is. Check in with the first mate every night, or I’m leaving you here to rot,” the captain tells her before barking orders to the crew.

“He’s happy on the inside,” Anacrusis winks at her before wrapping his arms around Cadence and Octave. “We’re going to pack up before finding a room. Come find us by dinner time!”
“Don’t eat or drink anything a stranger hands you before you’ve made someone else try it,” Cadence warns.

“And be careful of pickpockets. They’ll be looking at where you put your money once you buy something,” Octave says with a frown.

Blinking, she promises to be careful before heading out. The three see her off with waving hands and more warnings that fade out behind her. Their worry causes her to double-check that Tsubasa de Tobu is still attached to her.

The island appears normal at a glance, but a second look shows that each building has been built by different people with different tastes. One building is sleek and painted in nothing but pastels; the building next to it looks a like a castle out of an old horror movie.

The people are the same: not one person looks alike. She spots someone dressed in a toga, and another dressed in a monk’s robe. They stop to stare at her, and she stares back. These people have slightly longer faces than what she’s used to, but no clown noses or towering statures.

A tavern with a roof covered in Chinese dragons faces the docks, and she goes in to get a room and information. She’s asked which aesthetic she’d like her room to be, and she lets the clerk choose. She ends up with a rainforest themed room. Looking at the fake toucan hanging from the ceiling, she can already tell this will be an interesting stay.

Pigment Ville is the name of the place they’ve ended up at. Visitors aren’t unheard of, but the Black Tooth pirates are the only ones here at the moment. Marines haven’t been spotted recently, and she’s told she should stop by the Marketplace before it closes for the evening.

She uses the remaining daylight to explore. The culture here is heavily skewed towards art. Lanterns, wind chimes, and paper decorations of all kinds hang between the buildings and on trees. Children aren’t running around screaming and hitting each other with sticks; they’re doing arts and crafts. She has to step out of the way to avoid getting paint accidentally dumped on her twice.

It’s a beautiful place, almost dreamlike. She keeps a wary eye out for the darker parts of Pigment Ville but finds nothing. It disturbs her that she can’t even see the drug users or the thieves. Well, hopefully she won’t be staying here long enough to find this island’s slave pens or whatever it is.

She eventually stumbles upon the Marketplace; it’s a long strip of tables and booths filled to the brim with art pieces. She has no intention of buying anything—she has no way of replenishing her money—but it shouldn’t hurt to look.

“I made some beautiful crystal necklaces today! I’ve got pink and blue—oh! We’ve got visitors! With gorgeous wings no less!” A woman calls out, face twisting in surprise.

Being the first one from the ship to step into the Marketplace becomes a mistake. Many sellers attempt to grab her attention and drag her into conversation. She hums and tunes them out. Eventually a few members of the crew appear, shifting the majority of the attention away from her and letting her browse in peace.

Everything from paintings to glasswork is on display, and it’s all gorgeous. Lack of space and lack of funds keep her from purchasing anything. The only thing that truly tempts her is a decorative knife which, on close examination, will break easily.

She makes it to the last table which looks horribly out of place, being shabby with a noticeable gap between it and the last table. The woman running it has a terrible burn on her face, and the scar
tissue runs from her cheeks, over her nose, and to her ears.

“Hello,” the woman says before waving awkwardly to her wares.

She tries not to grimace. The artwork is ugly; there’s no getting around it. The paintings are unpleasing to the eye with clashing colors and shaky lines, and the chipped, beaded jewelry look ready to come apart at any moment.

The artwork resembles its owner whose clothes are worn and threadbare. The woman keeps her head down, covering her face with grimy, short hair.

She squints at a bracelet and remembers when his mother was forced to sell jewelry by the side of the road on summer days, remembers that the money earned barely covered the cost of gas to cook. Those purchases kept his family from starving.

“I’ll take this painting, and these two bracelets,” she says while pointing to the best of the lot.

“Really?” The woman squeaks. “Okay, that’ll be, um.”

The woman hesitates on giving her an actual price, and she talks her up to the price she saw the other sellers using. She’ll need to skip a few meals—she can always fall back on identifying edible foods from the market and go scavenging—but the way the woman’s eyes light up make the purchases worth it.

She slides the bracelets on, places the poorly drawn painting of a bird under her arm, and continues her walk to the other side of the island. She still has some time to kill until dinner, and she’s suddenly found it important to see what wild vegetation grows here.

Away from the town, the rest of the island looks like an ordinary tropical one. She’s in the middle of poking a plant that resembles a banana tree when she senses movement behind her. She turns to see a boy dressed like he’s prepared to hand her a newspaper from the 1950’s.

“Stick ‘em up! This is a robbery!” The boy shouts while pointing a tanning knife at her.

She looks from his trembling arm, to the poor grip the boy has on the knife, to the tears in his eyes. She slides a finger over the frame of the painting still tucked under her arm. Cheap wood, but it should be good enough.

“Okay,” she sighs before throwing the painting at his head.

Chapter End Notes

I forgot to mention it, but should this fic make it to next April Fools day (which I hope not), I will be making an alternate ending where Kuina takes over the world and gets into a polyamorous relationship with Zoro and Mihawk. And I will come back and delete this note, replacing it with lines from Bink's Sake.

I meant to do it this time...but it fell through sadly.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Stop crying,” she demands as the boy’s sobbing begins giving her a headache.

She doubts he has anything more than a bruised forehead, but the boy wails loud enough to wake the dead. The painting, despite being turned into a projectile weapon, lies on the ground without so much as a scratch; pity then, that she has no excuse to get rid of it.

“What made you think this was a good idea? Where did you even get this knife from?” She asks, holding the tool up to examine it.

It’s a small knife meant to clean the hide of small animals, but she’s seen no evidence of such creatures existing on the island. The knife probably came from somewhere else, but the signs of it being used recently give her a bad feeling.

“I, I—that’s Mona’s!” The child gasps in shock at the painting, hands clutched to his forehead.

“Mona?”

The boy darts away before she can question him further, and she’s left holding the knife and an uneasy curiosity. Clearly this island has its secrets, but the Black Tooth pirates aren’t likely to view her causing trouble warmly. She should leave it alone and wait for the Log Pose to reset.

She tucks the knife into a pocket inside her kimono and heads back to town. There is absolutely no reason to get involved in whatever island drama is happening. She does her best to ignore the fact that the scars on her shoulders itch.

(She’s never needed a reason to poke at dangerous things. She’s proud of her foolishly gained scars, proud of her accomplishments.)

The tavern with its hanging lanterns and gilded decorations is beautiful and completely undeserving of the belching, cursing pirates draped over every chair in sight; though there’s a noticeable distance between the table the musicians sit at and the others. There’s enough room to keep drunken men from throwing up in her lap for one thing.

Beautifully decorated taverns aren’t good for people with giant wings however. On her way over to the musicians’ table, she smacks a few unwitting pirates in the face and knocks over a plain, blue bowl in her attempt to get seated.

“Whoops,” Cadence saves the bowl before it can make it to the floor, “I’ve got it!”

“Would be a shame to break such a beautiful bowl that sparkles like the sea,” Anacrusis comments.

She tucks her wings in as far as they can go before picking up a menu to hide behind. It’s not her fault the establishment isn’t built for winged humans. Humans in this world can grow to be larger than her person and wings combined, so it’s obviously the tavern’s fault.

“You should get their crustacean soup. I stole some from a guy that passed out. It’s pretty good. The rest of their food, not so much,” Octave tells her.
There’s a growing feeling that something isn’t right, but she senses no immediate danger. She lets it go and orders the cheapest, decent-looking thing on the menu. The harried waitress nearly trips over her wings and spills a pitcher of juice on a red, silk dress. She rests her arms on the table and thinks, *not her fault.*

The rest of her dinner proceeds without incident…relatively.

“Figures you’d want to sit amongst your own kind,” the captain sneers before downing a giant glass of beer. “Women,” he mutters before slamming the glass on their table.

The captain, despite talking fairly normal, is far drunker than he appears to be. The fact is that the captain blatantly hates everyone at her table and only talks to them under duress. She slowly chews on her grilled fish as the man begins pointing between all of them.

“Ain’t nothing good about you lot. Shouldn’t even be on my ship! Contaminating it with your,” the captain drunkenly teeters back and forth in an effort to find the correct word, “*strangeness.*”

The man utters a few more unkind words that she has trouble hearing before stealing the drink from a pirate a table over. The captain with his uneven beard and giant gut is certainly far from attractive, but the guzzling of alcohol and accompanying retching is obscene.

“What did he mean by ‘strangeness?’” She asks while eyeing some of the decorations with a frown; is it her or is some of them not as shiny as she remembers them to be?

“He means,” Anacrusis winks before throwing his arms out, “we’re the biggest queens in the big, blue sea.”

“Ah,” she says, unsure of how to respond to that. “I’m a king, so I guess that makes this a royal exchange?” She offers.

The old men crack up in laughter, and she decides she doesn’t need to bother asking about it further. With the cheery atmosphere, there’s a call for alcohol. She refrains from ordering a glass of wine, but Octave orders one for her while Cadence waves away any offer of payment. While alcohol with meals is a staple, it’s not one she’s used to participating in. She’ll have to be careful to keep it in moderation.

“Here’s to us, royals!” Anacrusis proclaims while holding up a glass of beer.

She takes a sip of her wine and tries not to make a face. It’s sour. How long has it been sitting here? Granted, this tavern probably has to hold onto any alcohol for a long time unless there’s something—no, there’s no need to think about it.

*Enjoy your meal and rest peacefully until the Log Pose resets or the Marines come,* she tells herself.

Her curiosity is a damning thing however. Perhaps she should get some perspective on it. Before, the wisdom of his Elders was something he could rely on, so maybe the wisdom of age in this world works similar. She decides to ask.

“If a kid on this island might be in trouble—if there’s something strange going on, but messing with it all could end up being,” she pauses, “really troublesome, would you bother?”

Not her best phrased “hypothetical” question, but it should suffice. She runs a finger over the rim of the blue bowl she nearly broke earlier and waits.
“No,” Anacrusis replies with a shake of the head, “I’d leave it alone.”

“So long as it doesn’t affect you, you should let people solve their own problems. It’s nothing but a headache with these ‘woe is me’ islanders,” Cadence nods.

“The world is filled with tragic stories. You can’t help everyone who needs it. And when you do the right thing at the wrong time? You’ll only end up stranded on an island eating raw crabs,” Octave says.

There’s a story there, she can tell by the way all three men grimace and take long sips of their beers. Wisdom says to leave the boy and this growing sense of wrongness alone. She stares into her wine and frowns. She slides the glass away from her. He was never good at following the words of his Elders anyway.

“What color did you say this was again?” She asks, holding up the blue bowl.

“It’s a sparkly, light blue. Like the sky. Can you not see it?” Cadence looks at her in concern.

“No,” she says, staring at the flat, dull blue bowl.

It doesn’t have to mean anything. Her companions are old men who are probably losing their eyesight. She could be colorblind and not know it. There’s a logical explanation that doesn’t involve dark secrets, she’s sure, but that doesn’t mean she’s going to leave it alone.

“What color was our waitress’ dress?” She asks, eyes narrowing.

“Pink, wasn’t it?” Anacrusis replies uncertainly.

“I thought it was orange,” Cadence says, frowning.

“Definitely purple,” Octave nods.

She hums as the three men begin arguing over who’s wrong and who’s right. The waitress is conveniently nowhere to be seen. By the time she leaves, the decorations around the room look old and unpolished. When she gets to her room, even the toucan hanging from the ceiling looks older and dustier than she remembers.

(If helping others out of kindness is wrong, then helping others to sate her curiosity should be fine, right?)

She buys the cheapest pastry for breakfast and enjoys the quiet atmosphere of the tavern. The few pirates up and awake come from the ship and bring news in whispers.

“An empty ship hit the docks last night. It’s clearly seen battle. Definitely belonged to pirates,” she overhears one pirate say.

“But there was no one onboard?” Another pirate asks with squinted eyes.

“No. Nothing but wood.”

She heads for the Marketplace first. There’s something she wants to confirm. Traveling the long way around, she stops at the first and only table to hold ugly artwork. The woman with the burn scar attempts something of a wave before shyly clasping her hands together.

“Hi, Mona was it?” She greets.
“How did you,” the woman sputters.

“A boy about this high,” she holds her hand about the same height as his head, “noticed my painting and said it was Mona’s work. He dropped something, and I’d like to give it back.”

“Ah, Pablo, he must have been worried,” Mona blinks as her eyes become suspiciously shiny. “I can give whatever it is to him.”

“I’d like to hand it to him myself, but if I need to leave, I’ll swing by,” she promises before picking up a bracelet. “I really liked this one but had to think about it. I’ll take it.”

She slips the bracelet onto her wrist; there are some nice beads in it. Assuming everything won’t crumble into dust, she plans to take all three bracelets apart to make something new. Once she leaves of course, she’s not that coldhearted.

In the area where the boy attempted to rob her, she finds the tallest tree and climbs. She noticed when she was poking around yesterday that the trees here are unusually sturdy, and sure enough, they don’t even bend under her weight.

From her vantage point, one thing about the island becomes apparent: there aren’t enough houses for all the people. The population here is rather large—she doesn’t doubt they use the taverns and shops for themselves—but there simply isn’t enough space dedicated to housing and trades other than art.

She spots a familiar boy darting from a nearby large rock and makes the split decision to jump. Her wings control her rapid descent, and she tackles the kid from behind.

“Get off me!” The boy flails, and she grabs him by the back of the coat.

“I’ve got some questions for you, Pablo,” she says before getting a grip on his wrist. “Mona already gave you up.”

The boy attempts to bite her arm but stop shorts once he notices her new bracelet. She yanks him into the sand beside her, and Tsubasa de Tobu shows its discomfort by digging itself into her hip. She ignores the sword, but makes a silent promise to clean it well later.

“Why does everything look shiny at first, but then turns old-looking when stared at,” she asks bluntly.

“You can see through the shimmer?” Pablo gapes.

“Shimmer?”

“No one knows what causes it. Mama thinks it’s the plants, but the shimmer makes everything look better than it is,” Pablo explains.

“Like a new sparkly bowl instead of a stained and worn one,” she realizes.

“Yeah, like that. I used to see the shimmer, but now I just see how ugly everything is,” Pablo says, head hung low.

No doubt all the wonderful artwork in the Marketplace also benefit from this strange glamour. How many buyers noticed their works of art turning into tattered drawings once out at sea? She stares at the bracelet on her arm, but the beads’ color never seems to fade.
“You dropped this,” she says, handing back the tanning knife, “and I still have questions.”

Pablo, perhaps due to her purchases from Mona’s table, tells her everything. Pigment Ville is nothing but a sham on the surface. Most people here don’t have an ounce of artistic talent and depend on selling their illusion-filled artwork for beli. Once the children reach majority they have three chances to sell something to outsiders or be sent to the “Line.”

“It’s awful. You have to stay underground and make leather or mine for rocks to make beads. No sun. No splashing in puddles. Just work till you die,” Pablo sits with his chin resting on his knees. “I don’t want to go on the Line.”

From what Pablo says Mona had been the rising star of the island. Her artwork had been admired and loved by all the children still able to see with the shimmer. Mona would be racking in the beli—if she hadn’t woken up one day with her face burned and unable to hide behind the shimmer.

“She was set to go on the Line if you hadn’t come along. They’re still talking about putting her on it anyways,” Pablo says while hiding his face against his knees.

She leans back against a tree and digs her boots into the sand. Honestly, now that she knows, there’s no reason to get involved further. The shimmer seems to be harmless, and it’s not like she can change the structure of an entire society. The smart thing to do would be to leave it as is.

“What were you hoping to do by robbing me?” She asks.

“I was going to buy Mona’s stuff, and tell everyone an outsider bought it. And then they wouldn’t put her on the Line,” Pablo says.

There are so many ways that wouldn’t have worked, and Pablo’s lucky he tried that on her instead of one of the pirates. It’s a foolish plan from a foolish kid.

“You’re an idiot,” she says flatly before tugging gently at his hat, “but a kind one. What can I do to help?”

If anyone asks, she’s not going out of her way to make trouble; she’s simply satiating her curiosity.

She rejects Pablo’s first ideas—“Burn the money!” “No.” “Kill the bullies!” “No.” “Let’s run away!” “Try again.”—but he finally admits that she should talk to Mona first. As an Adult, Mona is probably smarter and knows more. She’ll need to catch her once the Marketplace closes for the day which is shortly after dinner.

“I’ll be late tonight. Don’t wait on me,” she tells the musicians who give her knowing looks.

Even laid out on beach towels, these old men sigh at her as if she’s the one responsible for making them tired. Cadence lifts a pair of zebra-striped sunglasses to glare at her.

“We’ll come looking if you’re not here by midnight,” Cadence warns.

“You need help,” Anacrusis says from beneath a large umbrella.

“Make sure you’re the one coming out on top. Don’t hesitate to take their heads,” Octave tells her with a nod towards her sword.

She waits for Mona on an empty pier. She leans against a post and watches the sun set against the waves. Does the shimmer work on this view as well, she wonders, or does it only work on what the
“Excuse me,” a weak voice calls out to her once the moon rises, “Pablo said you wanted to talk to me?”

“Yes. Pablo told me everything. About the shimmer and the Line,” she says once Mona is close enough. “I was wondering if you wanted to talk about it?”

She keeps her tone gentle and her body relaxed; Mona looks easily frightened. She stares up at the moon while Mona fiddles with her hands. She’s not entirely sure how, but she can feel every shift the woman makes. She feels it when Mona straightens her back.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Mona says.

“Then could you tell me why you try so hard when your art can’t compare to false beauty?” She asks, turning to look the woman in the eye.

The question must feel like a hard slap with the way Mona flinches. She doesn’t say anything, choosing to wait. She can only reach her hand out so far; if this woman desires help, she’ll need to meet her halfway.

“I,” Mona starts before faltering, “I love art. Love drawing and making. But I’m no good! I’m no good! It was all a dream!”

The tears come quickly, and Mona doubles over, hands over her mouth to stifle her cries. She remains quiet and patient as moonlight shines brightly against scars, worn clothing, and tears; as it shines against someone real.

“Ever since my face became like this, ever since,” Mona hiccups, “the shimmer stopped working for me. I can no longer hide how ugly I really am.”

“I don’t think you’re ugly. I’m honored to have something you made with your own hands,” she finally says.

No matter how terrible the artwork is, she can always appreciate the time and effort that went into it. More than that, if this woman keeps that passion and never gives up, there’s no telling how beautiful the future will be. Any skill can only get better in time with experience.

“I want to come back and buy your artwork in a few years,” she says, unsure of how to get the message across. “Please keep trying.”

She pats Mona gingerly on the back when the woman forces her into a hug. Snot and tears make her grimace, but there’s no helping it. A lone child is this woman’s emotional support on an island full of people. Mona probably never had a chance to cry before now.

“I want to try! I want to keep, to keep,” Mona wails into her kimono.

Mona’s words dissolve into gibberish. She adjusts her legs as the woman begins to lean all her weight onto her. After a long moment of silence, it becomes apparent that Mona fell asleep even in this weird position. Stress can do that to a person, she supposes.

“Pablo, plan AB,” she calls out to the hidden child. “I need you to show me where the suspects sleep.”

She gently lowers Mona onto the pier as Pablo takes off his coat to serve as a makeshift pillow.
The people here sleep in communal housing but more as a dorm than a den. With six girls to a room, there’s no way Mona’s roommates could have missed someone burning her face.

Plan AB isn’t much of a plan. It goes as follows: wait until everyone’s asleep, break into the dorm room by way of window, kidnap women to the most isolated part of island, and figure it out from there. If everything works out well, she’ll have them either too terrified to tell on her or have them convinced it was all a nightmare.

She expects something to go wrong—for someone to wake, to get caught, *something*—but it all goes as planned. She even has time to stop in to report to Cadence so he doesn’t come looking for her. That she’s going to slip out from the tavern again to do some questionable acts isn’t something she tells him as the man pats her on the head.

She sits down on a rock, crosses her legs, and waits as the five tied up women slowly come to. Perhaps knocking them out while they were sleeping is overkill, but she still wants a peaceful stay on the island. There’s no telling what the captain will say if she starts cutting off everyone’s head left and right.

When it looks like every woman is conscious and alert, she claps her hands together to get their attention. All five, speaking to each other and clearly terrified out of their minds, whip their heads in her direction. Her black clothes hid her amongst the dark night but movement breaks the illusion.

“All awake finally?” She asks lowly, pulling at a glove.

“Monster!” One of the women shriek while wriggling in the sand like a worm.

All five are tied up from their arms to their legs; there’s nothing they can do but wriggle. She looks down at them dispassionately. If there are any innocent parties here, then she will find out. If there are any here that are guilty, then she will find out.

“I’m Jack,” she introduces herself politely. “Let’s talk about Mona and the burn on her face.”

Two of the women start shrieking immediately, and she silences them with a breath of flame. She laughs low and throaty.

“I know one of you did it, and I know all of you know who. If you don’t give them up, I will burn each and every single one of your faces. Let’s see if the shimmer stops working for everyone,” she says with a cruel smile hidden by her mask.

The women shake and whimper in fear. Four of them, their eyes dart to a particular woman who stares at her with trembling lips. Interesting, are they giving her up inadvertently or on purpose?

“I’ll start with you,” she says, reaching for one of the four women. “Let us begin.”

Putting the women back is easy enough. She does almost get caught from someone needing to pee, but her cape manages to hide her and her unwanted luggage against a dark corner. With this, hopefully Mona will have some reluctant allies in her corner to keep her from going to the Line.

She can’t save everyone, it’s true, but she can try to help someone who needs it. It’s her life, and she can do what she wants, bad decisions and all.

Placing the cape, mask, and top hat in a bag that gets slung over her shoulder, she goes back to the tavern. She’s ready to call it a night and plans to sleep in as late as possible. She probably won’t
even fold up her suit properly. Just lock the door and—

She almost bumps into the captain who stands outside the tavern door with a serious expression on his face. Having never seen the captain up so late, not even on the ship, she checks the sky to make sure it’s still night. She attempts to move around him to get to the door, but he steps her way.

The captain stares her down in the dim torch light by the tavern entrance, and she grits her teeth. She expects a comment on her lack of wings, or a wisecrack about dressing like a man. She does not expect the captain to lean over and whisper in excitement,

“Are you okama?”

Chapter End Notes

And now on FYW, the author decides to tackle *spins wheel*...offensive Japanese stereotypes. Here we go.

Hope you guys have a good Easter holiday! Try not to stain your clothes if dying eggs or overeat on candy...or steal other peoples eggs. I'm looking at you, the one with the shifty eyes.
“Okama,” she sounds out the word awkwardly while taking a wary step backwards, “what is ‘okama?’ ”

The word sounds familiar, like something thrown around in the bars she used to work in. It sounds like an insult, but with the way the captain leers over her with a crooked smile, she’s not so sure.

“Less than a man, less than a woman, but perfectly human,” the captain’s mouth clacks in excitement, black teeth striking against white. “Okama.”

That still tells her nothing. Is the captain calling her a prostitute, a freak of nature, or a different species of human entirely? A wave of fatigue hits her, and she decides she doesn’t want to try figuring it out.

“I am not less than anything,” she says. “I am simply me whether the world acknowledges it or not.”

She shoulders past him into the tavern. She doesn’t quite run to her room, but it’s a near thing. She’s still relying on the captain’s good will to find Mihawk and Zoro. There’s no telling what will happen if she opens her mouth, tired as she is.

(She doesn’t see the captain’s stunned expression, or the thoughtful face he makes at her back.)

It’s midday before she feels up to leaving her room to eat. She only just slumps into a dining room chair before her vision gets swarmed by old-fashioned suits. The empty chairs around her table fill up immediately.

“You’re up pretty late,” Cadence notes with a frown.

“Long night?” Octave asks with a quirked eyebrow.

Anacrusis says nothing but pats her on the shoulder before waving the waitress over. Her attempts to eat as little and cheaply as possible get overridden for a small feast. She gets nothing but smiles when she tries to complain about it.

“Eat up. The Log Pose reset last night. This is the last time we’ll be able to eat this food,” Cadence tells her. “We’re paying, our treat.”

“It reset last night?” She asks, startled.

“That’s what the captain said. Something wrong?” Anacrusis’ cheerful face morphs into one of concern.

Could the Log Pose resetting last night be why the captain was up? Perhaps their new destination put the captain into a strange mood. Still, something doesn’t feel right.

“No, it’s nothing,” she says while shaking her head.

Feelings aren’t much to go on, and she’s probably still out of it from last night. She’s getting better at theatrical performances, but they still take their toll on her. She attempts to put it out of her mind.
once plates appear on their table.

“Hey, lady!”

“Kuina,” she corrects automatically before turning to the familiar voice.

Pablo waves at her from the doorway before pulling on the arm behind him. Mona peeks at her from beneath grimy bangs. The woman doesn’t resist Pablo’s tugging towards their table.

“May we sit here,” Mona asks shyly before glancing towards her companions uncertainly, “Kuina?”

“I’ll pull up some chairs. There’s enough room for all us,” Cadence announces before she can say anything.

She nods to Mona anyways. Pablo shoves the woman into a seat next to her before stuffing a bread roll into his mouth. She shrugs and slides a plate over to Mona in silent invitation. No one bothers saying anything, and the atmosphere turns awkward.

“I’m sorry about last night,” Mona finally whispers to her. “I’ve just been so tired lately. If your clothes need washing, I can do it.”

It’s meant for her ears only, but with the way the old men not so subtly lean in, she knows it’s being broadcasted to the whole room. Pablo fidgets in his seat, eyes darting between Mona and her, and she gets the feeling he wants to say something.

“It’s no problem. I’ve already taken care of it. I know what it’s like to be that tired,” she says, taking a sip from her cup only to make a face.

“Oh, well, I’m still sorry,” Mona says.

“That’s fine.” She swishes her sour wine with a sigh.

“But I’m ever so grateful—”

“All the girls in Mona’s room woke up with burn marks on their hands and say the devil did it!” Pablo blurts out.

The awkward silence returns. She tries to look something other than pleased. She stuffs a bread roll in her mouth to keep from saying anything incriminating.

“Did they now?” Octave raises an eyebrow.

“Pablo, stop,” Mona hisses.

“Yes! They all have a small circle burned onto their hands,” Pablo mimes the size against his palm, “and they said they were responsible for burning Mona’s face! But now they’re so scared they keep wetting themselves.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry about him,” Mona says, hiding her face with her hands.

“It’s been decided that those girls will have to pay recon—reconpan—”

“Recompense?” Cadence offers.

“Yeah, that! To Mona. Part of their profits will go to her, so she doesn’t have to go on the Line,”
Pablo says, hands moving about in excitement.

She takes a sip of her terrible tasting drink to hide her satisfied smile. Even though Mona keeps her face hidden behind her hands, she thinks there’s a smile hidden there as well.

“So, this Line—” Octave begins.

“What kind of artwork are you thinking of next, Mona?” She asks loudly.

“Yes, dear, tell us some of the things you make,” Anacrusis says while flicking a fishbone into Octave’s face.

Mona, though stuttering and haltingly at first, quickly launches into spiel over paints and canvases. Pablo interjects every so often to complain about making pieces involving leather, and the table is soon enveloped in a warm atmosphere as each person begins to talk about their passions.

“Do you do anything outside swordsmanship, Kuina?” Mona asks, gaze lingering on her kimono.

“I sew,” she hesitates in her answer, “and just make whatever comes to mind.”

She’s not an artist, but she can’t say she doesn’t create on a whim. Case in point, she plans to break apart Mona’s bracelets to make a beaded ring. Mona’s blank stare causes her to reach for her best example.

“I made this as a way to cope,” she says, pulling out Mini-Mihawk. “It’s really cute, right?”

Mona gasps and leans in to get a better look. Pablo shudders at the doll’s eyes before poking at the sword attached to Mini-Mihawk in amazement. Cadence, Octave, and Anacrusis stare at the doll in something close to horror, enough to dampen her pride. Ignoring them to answer Mona’s questions about the materials used, she rubs an affectionate finger over Mini-Mihawk’s hat.

Some people just don’t know good art when they see it.

Mona and Pablo see her off the next morning with a hug and a gift. They give her a small leather pouch filled with sewing supplies and wave off her attempts to pay them for it.

“Pablo can’t keep a secret from me,” Mona tells her with a knowing glint in her eyes. “I always knew they were the ones responsible. This is the least I can do for my devil.”

“Eheh, sorry Kuina. She was ruthless. But I’m going to make small swords too, so come back and see them,” Pablo tells her.

She leans against the railing and watches Pigment Ville disappear in the distance while the wind ruffles her metallic feathers. She doesn’t feel like staying cooped up in her tiny room, but the musicians have been behaving around her strangely ever since she showed off Mini-Mihawk. Perhaps her craftsmanship offended them somehow?

“Friends are the bonds that give us strength, and sorrowful partings are the best partings. Don’t let it get you down.”

Her ear catches an unfamiliar voice, and she twists around to search for the owner. The only thing she sees is the captain’s back as he issues orders to the pirates with harsh words and foul gestures. She frowns, and the uneasy feeling she’s had since yesterday grows.

She grips the railing tightly and waits to see if the voice comes back. It never does, and eventually
Octave waves her over to sit with them. The three musicians share glances with each other before Cadence nods with a sharp inhale.

“We’ve been talking. Is it possible, I mean, surely—” Cadence gulps.

“What he’s trying to say,” Octave interjects with a scowl towards Cadence, “is that a doll of the person you’re looking for?”

The three old men stare her down with a strange intensity, and she feels like she’s being held on trial. For what, she doesn’t know.

“Yes, I’m trying to find him before he gets a letter I wrote,” she nods warily.

“Oh, boy,” Anacrusis mutters while covering his mouth, “what a tragedy.”

All three of them send her looks of pity and shake their heads. Irritated, she bites her lip to keep from saying something unpleasant. Tracking down Mihawk before the letter arrives is a terrible waste of time, but she thinks their reactions are overdoing it. Perhaps they sense her temper rising as they quickly move on to giving her music lessons as a distraction.

She gives credit where credit is due; attempting to follow their explanations on music takes up the rest of the day. She never knew musical theory was a thing, or that each instrument has its own language that still follows a universal language. There’s even an attempt to see which instrument she’s more naturally inclined to. It’s, well, an attempt.

“After careful consideration and much deliberation, we have decided that the best instrument for you is this,” Cadence hands her a small instrument that fits in the palm of her hand. “Anacrusis will teach you how to play.”

“What is it?” She asks, holding it up against the dying light of the sky.

“A kazoo.”

Two days go by before she decides to bring up the source of her bad feeling to her companions. She waits until there’s no chance to be overheard. Considering how everyone treats the ship’s musicians like they have the plague, it’s easier than it should be on a ship with this many people.

“Does the captain seem strange to you?” She asks.

“Strange how?” Cadence asks.

“Do you even have to ask that? That man actually smiled at our performance last night,” Octave snorts.

“He is indeed strange. Enough so, I’d think he was an imposter if it wasn’t for the fact everything else about him is the exact same,” Anacrusis remarks.

He’s not wrong; nothing about the captain is different. The man still has the same scars, the same walking gait, and the same tells. She folds her arms into her sleeves and ponders. The captain could be suffering from hypnosis or from someone else’s Devil Fruit power. A yell goes out over the ship, interrupting her train of thought.

“Marines!”

The deck is swarmed by frenzied pirates in seconds, and the musicians clear their area in record
speed. She’s pulled up by the arm before she can figure out how to get her information from attacking Marines.

“Time for you to go back to your room, dear,” Anacrusis says.

“But I need—” them to find Mihawk, she tries to say.

“No need to shake down the Marines for help. We know where Hawk-Eyes is. Just stay in your room until the fight’s over,” Cadence tells her while Anacrusis pulls her over to the small hatch that serves as her living quarters.

“Go, or you’ll be spotted and considered a pirate,” Octave says while taking a pistol out of his suit.

It rankles, but she lets them close the hatch over her head. She stares upwards for a long time despite being unable to see anything. Her shoulders itch.

Reaching for her things by memory, she manages to light a lantern and takes Tsubasa de Tobu out of its sheathe for a quick cleaning. The ship suddenly rocks, and the jolt causes her blade to nearly nick her hand.

“I hate pirates,” she tells the blade that somehow shines even in the dark. “Just the idea of being labeled one makes me angry.”

Screams and gunshots resonate into the very walls around her. She moves on to sharpening the blade, well aware that it’s stupid to do in the dark on a shuddering ship. She has faith in Tsubasa de Tobu however.

“I hate the Marines. Just the idea of someone walking around with my face as one of them makes me angry,” she continues. “I don’t care for settling down, and I don’t want to be some hero that makes the world better.”

But cowering here in the dark isn’t something she cares for either. Here, on the Grand Line, there are prices to be paid and unwanted fame to be had. If she wanted to avoid being mislabeled, well, her katana is an eye-catching pink. Being subtle was never option.

“I only want to do what I want to do. And right now, I want to hurry up and find Zoro. Let’s go, Tsubasa de Tobu,” she says, holding the sword up.

The blade hums approvingly in her hands, and she pushes up on the hatch with all her strength. The heavy wood eventually gives way, and she climbs out. Two Marine ships hold the Black Tooth pirate’s ship in-between them, but neither seem to have many Marines running around on deck. She focuses on the one to her right; it has fewer visible people.

“I will remove anything that gets in my way,” she says before throwing herself over the side of the railing.

She lands onto the Marine’s ship without trouble, but she doesn’t make it five steps before there is yelling and pointing to her location. She strikes down man after man while slowly heading towards the helm. She clears enough of the Marines on deck that it becomes something of a gruesome game to strike at anyone who pops up suddenly.

Three Marines await her inside the helm’s portion of the ship, but she takes care of them quickly. The lack of challenge makes her feel uneasy. She heads for the steering wheel, unsure of what she’s looking for. Her gut tells her if there’s anything she needs to see, she’ll find it there.
“Hold your positions,” a grey snail says with a stern, feminine voice from next to the steering wheel. “Reinforcements are on the way.”

She looks down at the map the Den Den Mushi sits on and lets out a curse. Of course the island they’re headed to is a major Marine outpost. She leafs through the papers under the map, stomach sinking as she learns more and more. This Marine outpost seems to be a stop before Impel Down, the Marine’s prison on the Grand Line. The sheer amount of ships at their command from this island will swallow a lone pirate ship effortlessly.

The captain needs to know. There’s still a chance of getting away before reinforcements come. Taking a deep breath, she reaches inwards before breathing out flame. She sets fire to the helm, throws the Den Den Mushi outside, and jumps onto the railing.

She’s shot in the leg before she can make the leap back to the pirate ship. She stumbles off the railing, and her wings pop open to control her descent. She manages to grab on to a rope hanging on the side of ship before she hits the water, but it leaves her completely open to the one who shot her.

A gunshot goes off, and there’s a sound of a body hitting the water. She cranes her neck to see the white uniform of a Marine being swept away by the waves. Her left leg takes this moment to make its displeasure known, and she nearly lets go of the rope.

“Alright there, my good okama?”

The uneven beard of the captain never looked so good. A rope gets thrown to her, and she wraps it around her wrists the best she can with one hand. The captain pulls her up in one heave, and she falls face first onto the deck.

“No, an okama,” she says into the wood.

Her leg throbs something fierce. She hopes the ship’s doctor isn’t dead. That would suck.

“Captain, we need to leave. Reinforcements will be here very soon. The island we were heading to is a Marine outpost,” she says, attempting to get up and failing.

“If you go back to your room, I’m sure the Marines will think you’re a hostage,” the captain suddenly says.

It’s an odd thing to say at a time like this. She glares up at the captain and finds his face suspiciously blank. Her bad feeling reaches a crescendo, and she undoes her kimono to tear a strip off her t-shirt to wrap around her leg.

“You knew we were headed to a Marine outpost this whole time,” she throws out, aiming for a reaction.

“I’m sorry, but I must rescue a friend,” the captain says with a bowed head.

The quick agreement to her wild accusation takes her by surprise. She hisses as she accidentally tightens the cloth around her leg too much. Tsubasa de Tobu digs into her hip as if to remind her to stay focused. Remove anything that gets in your way, the sword seems to say.

“Those men are counting on you,” she spits, tying her kimono back into place.

“It is a sad thing, but my friend faces the wrath of Hina. And I must go to her no matter what,” the captain says, eyes distant.
“I hate pirates,” she says with a sigh.

She could go to her room and make up a tearful story for the Marines, it’s true. She even planned one out on her first journey into the Grand Line. There’s nothing stopping her from avoiding the repercussions. Except for the fact that she has friends now. It’s not just Cadence, Octave, and Anacrusis who will suffer if she does nothing.

Leaning on her leg gingerly, she finds the pain tolerable in face of her overwhelming fury. She wants to curse the very name of the captain, but finds herself unable to remember it.

“You’re not the only one who needs to rescue their friends. Tell me your name before I strike you down,” she demands, drawing Tsubasa de Tobu.

“Hah, friends. How beautiful,” the captain mumbles before clutching his face.

“I may be a failure of a man, and a failure of a woman! But I am utterly human!” The captain shouts while twirling in place.

Before her eyes, the fat, bearded man that was the captain of the Black Tooth pirates transforms into a taller, well-built one with an ungodly amount of makeup. Dazzling teeth click at her, and she narrows her eyes. She’s going to ruin that black suit of his.

“I am Bon Clay, the beautiful swan that practices the Okama Way! Though it tears at my heart to fight against my fellow okama, I must save her!” The man says before moving into a fighter’s stance.

“Not an okama. I’m only me,” she says before rushing forward.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the wait, I needed a longer recovery from my anime convention than I thought.

Also, check out this amazing fanart by The_White_Camilla! Ah, it's so lovely!

https://cdn.discordapp.com/attachments/524098420496138255/586032646447169576/20190605_2:
Whoever this man actually is, he dodges each swing of her sword with astounding elegance only to parry with strong blows in return. His punches and kicks seem to come straight from a martial arts film; if that film was about a ballet dancer gone rogue, that is. The strikes come fast and precise with a flourish, and naturally, he keeps aiming for her injured leg.

If he expects her to buckle from the pain, then he’s picked the wrong fight. Sheer anger keeps her from feeling much of anything. She starts altering her sword swings to cover her injury. She stabs him when he aims another kick to her leg, and blood flows. Bon Clay’s injury mirrors her own, and she feels nothing but satisfaction.

“Swan Arabesque!” Bon Clay shouts, leg going up impossibly high.

She ducks the high kick aimed to her face and slashes at the man’s stomach. Bon Clay pushes her away before she can do much more than a thin cut, and she loses her balance.

Face slamming against the wood of the deck, her leg takes this moment to tell her that it can’t take much more. The attempt to get to her feet comes with trembles and beads of sweat. She levels Tsubasa de Tobu at Bon Clay and grits her teeth.

“I won’t give up. I can’t. Not until I see Zoro again,” she says to herself.

If she dies here, her friends will hang, and she’ll never get to accomplish her one true wish. She takes a deep breath, and the trembling stops.


“What of it?” She asks with narrow eyes.

Bon Clay touches his face with his right hand and disappears immediately. She takes a step back, knees locking in place to keep upright. A face she’s only seen from bounty posters smirks at her.

“It’s been a while,” Zoro says.

His voice is so much deeper than she remembers. In her memories, Zoro was nothing more than a pipsqueak, a child who cried and pouted a lot. Standing before her is no child, but a man. There’s so much she wants to tell him, so much she never said.

Zoro crosses his arms, black suit sleeves tight against muscular arms, and she closes her eyes with a sigh. She has a lot of things to say to Zoro, but this man isn’t him. No matter how many years have passed, Zoro would never wear a suit that would hamper his ability to fight. Zoro would never appear before her without Wado Ichimonji.

“I’m going to kick your ass,” she says before sheathing Tsubasa de Tobu.

Bon Clay probably has a Devil Fruit ability that allows him to shapeshift. There’s no doubt the man replaced the captain before they left Pigment Ville. Bon Clay must have met Zoro at some point then. If the Devil Fruit relies on sacrificing the target—no, Zoro wouldn’t have died in such a way. Her letter—the one switched with Mihawk’s—was still successfully delivered. Zoro’s alive,
but this man somehow stole his face.

“I’m going to kick your ass,” she repeats as the world blurs away, and the only thing she sees is the imposter. “I’m going to make it so you can never wear his face again!”

Bon Clay may be a master martial artist, may be someone who towers far above her, but that doesn’t mean anything to her. She tackles him with a fist aimed for his stomach. When there’s movement to counterattack, she smashes her head under his chin. Stunned, Bon Clay can do nothing as she slams them into the railing again and again.

The railing breaks, and they fall into the ocean. Only one of them floats.

There are times when even she can’t explain her actions, when what she does follows no logical sense. She likes to blame those times on trauma. Of course, Zoro being replaced by a tearful man crying out apologies to “Miss Valentine” as he sank probably had something to do with it.

“I hate this suit myself, but did you really have to poke so many holes into it?” Bon Clay asks with a pout.

The man lies on the deck, rope still tied around his waist, and unable to move. She’s heard that water was a Devil Fruit user’s weakness, but she’s never seen it for herself. She wonders if she needs to grab a towel. Does being wet hurt, or is that only for being emerged in it?

“Shut up. You would have drowned if I didn’t pin you to the ship with Tsubasa de Tobu. You should thank my sword,” she retorts from where she’s sprawled out next to him.

Wringing water out of her sleeves, she tries to figure out when her life went so wrong. It was probably when she decided that friends were nice to have, or perhaps when she decided to go to the Grand Line.

“What were you even trying to do? What was the plan?” She asks as yells of another Marine ship erupt.

“I was going to fake my death as the captain of this ship before slipping in as one of Hina’s Marines,” he tells her. “I could rescue Miss Valentine from within, you see!”

“Couldn’t you have just replaced yourself with one of the Marines attacking us?” She asks.

“Oh, I guess I could!” Bon Clay laughs.

She reaches over to slam his head into the floor. The captain could have easily issued orders to escape before trading places with a Marine still manning one of the ships. She finds herself far too tired to become enraged again.

“How do you know Zoro?” She asks over shouts of “we surrender!”

“Monkey D. Luffy is a good friend of mine! I know the Straw Hats well.” Bon Clay smiles.

“Zoro,” she begins uncertainly, “is a childhood friend of mine? I’m chasing a letter for him anyway.”

Once she gets it back from Mihawk, she’ll either burn it or throw it at Zoro’s head. She hasn’t decided. Enough time has gone by that she second guesses what she wrote, wonders if it is much too embarrassing to hand over directly.
Bon Clay recovers his strength slowly, and both of them listen as Marines comb the ship, closing in on their position. The battle has been lost, and her friends are either dead or captured. She used her remaining strength to climb up, grab some rope, and fish Bon Clay out of the water. Her leg is numb.

“You never really answered my question. What is an okama? It sounds like a slur,” she asks as she waits.

“Okama is someone who is both man and woman! Someone who doesn’t fit as either one! Okama is a way of life that follows who you are! It’s men wearing dresses, and women wearing suits. It’s knowing who you are and flaunting it!” Bon Clay shouts, body spasming as if wanting to dance.

The sounds of the Marines are getting louder. They must have heard Bon Clay’s shouting. Both man and woman, she thinks with a tilt of the head. It’s a good description of her in any case. The man loses his smile for a brief moment as he stares up at the clouds hanging overhead.

“Yes, you’re right. Okama. People still say it with disgust in their eyes,” Bon Clay tells her before holding a hand up, as if to grasp the sky. “But just imagine! A day when being an okama is normal! When people are so used to the fantastical, no one questions when someone like you slips in. The Okama Way! If I spread it, surely one day no one will bat an eye if you ask to be called differently. What a day that would be!”

She looks down at the man who smiles up at her with dazzling teeth, who smiles through the bruises and smeared blood she left on his face. She hears the stomping of the Marines coming around the corner. She thinks over Bon Clay’s ability, and what she’s guessed about it. She thinks about that friend he’s trying to save.

She reaches over and grabs his hand.

When he first ran away from home, he had ended up sleeping outside on the remains of a burned down house. The old flooring had been solid enough, and he had assumed it was better than sleeping on the ground. It had been so uncomfortable; he never got any sleep that night. The floor had been far too hard, and the sounds of animals had left him feeling vulnerable. How funny it is to be reminded of that night.

“Hey, wake up! Pirates like you don’t get to sleep,” someone growls above her.

She peels her eyes open to shoot the Marine a glare. She’s only conserving her strength; there’s no way in hell she can sleep on the cold floor of this cell with this guy banging on the bars. She keeps her arms crossed to help ward off the chill of being only in her t-shirt and pants. It doesn’t help.

“You’re still bothering her? I thought you were told to leave her alone,” another Marine speaks up from a desk in the corner.

Didn’t Luza and the Rooz keep themselves warm by keeping fire in their bellies? It’s worth a shot. She breathes deeply and attempts to connect to her Haki. She ignores the bickering of the two Marines as she attempts to fall into a meditative trance. Unlike Zoro, she never took to meditation.

“I just got the call from someone in Command. The prisoner is to go into surgery immediately for treatment,” the Marine from the corner says, holding up a Den Den Mushi.

“That’s bullshit!” Her tormenter seethes.

“Don’t question it. It already speaks volumes that she’s here in this cell,” the other Marine points
She doesn’t move when they unlock the door to her cell, or when they haul her up by her arms. She focuses on breathing deeply even as they drag her from the room that contains her lone cell and down the hallway.

“She should be in there with the other shitheads,” the Marine holding her left arm grumbles and nods to a door they pass.

“Don’t question Command,” the Marine on her right warns.

She stays quiet and focused on breathing even as they force her onto a bed and wheel her into the medical wing. She tries to meditate even as a doctor pokes at her wounds and writes something down on a chart.

“Hot to the touch. Seems to be coming down with a fever. Doesn’t warrant postponement of operation, not with how that leg’s looking. Alright, get her prepped!” The doctor shouts.

They put something over her face, and she breathes until the world fades away.

(“Where have you been? What happened to your leg?”

“I tripped on some old boards. They had nails sticking up,” he says, trying to shoulder past his older brother and into the trailer.

“What do you mean you tripped? You were gone all night! You got drunk and fell, didn’t you? Mom was up worrying about you all night! And this is what you do? She doesn’t have the gas to take you to the hospital you piece of—”

He regrets coming back home just as much as he regrets thinking he could leave. He tears up one of his t-shirts to wrap around his leg before following the road to the hospital. It’s a two hour trip by car, and he has no idea how long it’ll take to walk. He lucks out and someone picks him up fifteen minutes in.

He ends falling asleep as the nurses give him a shot.)

When he wakes up, it’s to bright, shiny teeth clicking at him. He sighs once she realizes she’s still in Marine custody. She looks from the IV drip in her arm to the flimsy cuffs that tie her wrists to the bed.

“Your doing, I take it?” She asks tiredly.

Bon Clay beams at her from a Marine uniform, and she debates the merits of going back to sleep. It’s not like she can escape as she is. Mercifully, Bon Clay keeps from twirling and shouting, choosing to throw a thumbs up and a wink.

“Thanks to Kui’s plan, I was able to convince Hina of who I was!”

“My name’s not—no, never mind. You figure out where they’re keeping your friend?” She asks even as a pair of red glasses is placed onto her face.

“Worry not! Miss Valentine is unharmed, and Zero and the others are already here. We’ll have her rescued in no time!” Bon Clay tells her.

She has no idea who any of these people are, but Bon Clay seems to be vibrating in excitement.
She can only assume it’s his other friends. She jerks her head so the glasses move down her nose. The lenses really are unbearable to look through.

“I’ve been wondering. When exactly did you replace the captain of the Black Tooth pirates?” She asks.

Bon Clay opens his mouth only to freeze.

“I don’t remember,” he says.

Whether due to a short attention span, or if there’s simply too much going on in that head of his, Bon Clay stutters for a moment before counting out the events leading up to his disguise on his fingers.

“Well, let’s see, after we accidentally ran into Hina at that resort, Miss Valentine got caught, we freed her and the other agents, but then that fishman got Miss Valentine re-caught, we chased after her, but then that storm hit! Aha!” Bon Clay poses with his hands above his head. “Do you remember when that broken ship floated in on that charming island? That was me!”

“Oh,” is all she says to that.

She’s not too sure she has the whole picture, but she thinks she has the gist of it. Bon Clay and friends were chasing after Hina and the captive Miss Valentine before Bon Clay washed up on Pigment Ville.

“Isn’t this a trap then? Isn’t Hina baiting you here?” She asks.

“Oh, yes, but she’s not prepared for the counter trap!” Bon Clay cackles before changing his face into one of a simple Marine.

Captain Hina is imposing enough that she wonders how Bon Clay kept a straight face long enough to convince her of the cover story. The moment the woman enters the room, her hand attempts a salute on reflex only to be stopped by the cuffs on her wrist.

Red lips scowl at her, and Captain Hina adjusts sunglasses against long, pink hair while assessing her. She maneuvers her head so she’s looking at the captain through the lenses of the glasses. The threatening figure of the captain blurs away, and she finds it easier to deal with.

“I see you are recovering,” Captain Hina pauses before saying sharply, “Ensign Tashigi.”

Time to find out if Bon Clay’s acting holds up. She lets out a “Yes, Captain,” and waits. Captain Hina moves closer while tugging on a glove pointedly.

“Under a special mission to infiltrate the Straw Hats, I believe you said. I contacted Smoker. Do you know what he said to that?” Captain Hina asks, voice low and dangerous.

“I cannot speak for a superior, Captain,” she speaks with as much confidence as possible. “I can only continue my mission.”

She has no idea who Smoker is though the name sounds familiar. Captain Hina stares her down, and she can see the chilling eyes through the glasses. She keeps herself from tensing up.

“He didn’t answer, that man. I have no idea what’s going through that small brain of his,” Captain Hina admits. “Good to see your leg is no longer bleeding all over the place, Ensign.”
“I cannot fault a Marine going after someone they think is a pirate. It’s only a shame I couldn’t bring that man down myself,” she says, trying to keep the relief out of her voice.

“Mr. 2, Bon Clay,” Captain Hina says. “If it weren’t for your efforts, we never would have gotten him.”

(A Marine stomps around the corner, and she throws a knife into his eye. The Marine falls over, and she notes that he looks a lot like Bon Clay. The body type is only slightly off, but it’s something a suit could hide.

“Do you have any makeup on you?” She asks, eyeing the body critically while something of a plan forms.

“But of course I do! Did you want to try some?” Bon Clay says excitedly with her face.

She tries not grimace at her own face grinning in delight. Her face is not meant to move in such ways.

“No. I need you to strip. I have something of an idea,” she says.)

Captain Hina undoes the restraints on her wrists and motions to the Marines behind her to come forward. A large chest is placed in front of her bed, but more importantly, a Marine steps forward with Tsubasa de Tobu. She takes it and hugs it to her chest. She’s felt nothing but unbalanced since the sword was taken from her.

“Still, posing as Hawk-Eyes’ girlfriend? That’s crazy even for Smoker,” Captain Hina says while glancing at the pink katana.

No doubt the captain is saying rude things about Tsubasa de Tobu inside her head. She’s had to hear it from that one Marine during a long “fake girl pirates” rant. If she gets the chance, she plans to take his head. Escape comes first though.

“It’ll be enticing to the Straw Hats,” she says with some humor. “They won’t be able to resist someone with such a claim.”

Honestly, it’s the Marines who gave her this disguise to begin with. If Bon Clay did his job, then Captain Hina contacted Loguetown when she couldn’t get the real Tashigi. How Bon Clay kept the captain from getting ahold of the ensign, she has no idea, but the man had assured her it was possible.

“Especially Zoro,” she says, glasses glinting, “I’ll challenge him for the right to Wado Ichimonji yet.”

Chapter End Notes

The_White_Camilla drew another picture, this time of Mini-Mihawk!
https://cdn.discordapp.com/attachments/524098420496138255/586748661023899648/20190607_2:
It's thanks to you, my dear readers, that I've been enslaved inspired to write this fic.
Thanks to either this world’s weird physics or the Marines’ modern medicine, she’s able to get up and move in only a few hours. A crisp, white uniform waits on the foot of the bed for Ensign Tashigi. Grabbing the undershirt, she ignores the rest of the uniform for her neatly folded kimono in the chest by the bed. Tsubasa de Tobu hangs around her waist, and her wings go from resting against the wall to her shoulders.

She’s as ready as she’ll ever be to make her escape. There’s only one thing left to do: find her friends. The door to her room opens suddenly, and a heavy-set Marine with scars running down his face steps in.

“Kui, are you ready, my dear?” The Marine asks.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she pauses before saying through gritted teeth, “Bonnie.”

The bastardization of her name makes her want to break things. No amount of cutting remarks gets this through to Bon Clay, and she decides to make a mockery of his own name. Her vengeful attempt at an equally terrible nickname falls flat.

“Bonnie? You mean me? Oh, Kui, I knew we were friends!” Bon Clay gasps while grabbing his face and tearing up.

She considers denying the statement before letting it go with a sigh. In likelihood, she’ll never see Bon Clay again once their final plan is set in motion. She’s put up with him for this long; a few hours won’t make much of a difference.

“Let’s just get this over with,” she says.

Captain Hina fully intended for Ensign Tashigi to parade around as a Marine, but thanks to Bon Clay’s efforts, the grunts believe her to be a valuable hostage that doesn’t realize she’s gone from being the pirates’ prisoner to the Marines’.

She pokes the gelatin on her plate with trepidation while ignoring the impolite murmurs surrounding her. For now, she needs to remain out of the way in the outpost’s galley. It was a reasonable idea to grab some food while she waits, but the mess on her plate could hardly be called “food.”

“Hawk-Eyes’ girlfriend? You sure?”

“Yeah, she’s known for the pink sword.”

The plastic spoon she holds makes a sharp crack, and she loosens her grip. She doesn’t know why Tashigi is pretending to be Mihawk’s significant other, but “pink sword” is now associated with the cover story. No doubt she, herself, caused that part of the rumor with the mix up from Loguetown, but Tsubasa de Tobu deserves better.

She’ll be meeting Mihawk soon enough for that letter. Perhaps she can bribe him to make an official statement that his girlfriend doesn’t have a pink sword. What could persuade an immovable
man like that? Good wine, an offer to look at Tsubasa de Tobu, a coffin table?

The alarms blare to life, sending the Marines around her into a blur of motion and yelling. She takes a bite out of the gelatin and gags. It’s as nasty as it looked. The room clears, and she hesitates before chomping through the rest of the gross food. She’s going to need the energy.

An explosion rocks the building, and she pulls out a small sack from the inside of her kimono. She fills it with as much food as it can reasonably hold and slings it over her shoulder. She finds a full water jug to carry and heads towards her next destination.

“Baroque Works! Baroque Works is here!”

The Marines pass her with guns and grim faces. She keeps out of their way, and only one Marine ever looks back at her. Her unhurried steps mean that the people running around her quickly disappear from sight.

The medical wing is mostly empty, and the few people scampering around pay her no mind. She follows the route she barely remembers only to realize that she must have made a wrong turn. She has no idea where she is. She takes in the uncomfortable looking chairs and couches, the table filled with magazines and propaganda pamphlets, and assumes this to be a waiting room of sorts.

There’s a map bolted to the wall at the end of the room, but she remains rooted in place. A tall man leans against the wall next to the map smoking a cigar. The fur lined coat hanging from his shoulders and the shiny, gold hook in place of a left hand tell her this is not a Marine.

Dangerous. This man is very dangerous.

She keeps an eye on him even as she places her food and water slowly onto the table. The man hasn’t once looked her way, but she knows he’s watching her, can feel it. She opens the sack and grabs the first thing her hand touches.

*Appeasement for the restless spirit*, she thinks and throws the apple at the man. The man catches it without looking, and the apple withers in his hand. With her silent payment received, she steps in front the map and traces the path to the nearest holding cells. There’s a straight shot to the docks from the medical center’s main doors too.

She steps back from the map, and upon looking next to her, the man is gone. A few grains of sand shimmer in the light from under the closest window.

The holding cells for the pirates are much dirtier than the one she ended up in. She supposes she should be thankful for small mercies. There are no keys for a quick escape unfortunately, but there’s a desk she can put her stuff down on.

“Kuina, oh my dear, what are you doing here?” Cadence gapes at her through iron bars.

Octave and Anacrusis join him though Anacrusis struggles to stand on bandaged ankles. Behind them, pirates, whose names she never bothered to learn, jeer at her with black teeth.

“Oh good, you’re all here. Now stand back. It’s about to get hot,” she says.

Cadence, Anacrusis, and Octave scramble backwards as she puts a hand on her katana’s hilt. The three musicians, while bruised and battered, seem to be in one piece. She’s extremely pleased, wants to sag in relief, but there’s no time to be emotional. Not when they’re racing against time.
“And just what are ya gonna do without the keys?” One of the nameless Black Tooth pirates spits.

She offers no reply and takes a deep breath. The holding cell is small and crude with classic iron bars. The smarter pirates back away from where she stands in front of the lock; the stupid ones pay the price as flames roll from her tongue. There are screams, but she ignores it and only concentrates on getting the lock so hot it glows.

With a swift strike from Tsubasa de Tobu, the lock breaks and she pulls the door open. There’s a moment of silence along with a sea of blank stares. One of the pirates rushes past her to newfound freedom and leads the rest to swarm around her like a broken dam. She doesn’t stop them, and the only ones remaining in the cell are three old men staring at her with sharp eyes.

“We don’t have long until our ride leaves. Can someone carry him?” She looks towards Anacrusic who stands on wobbly legs.

“I got him,” Octave says before leaning down to allow for a piggyback ride.

“I told you I’d get to ride you one of these days,” Anacrusic remarks, laughing over Octave’s sputters.

“I don’t suppose you know where they took our weapons?” Cadence asks.

“No. I doubt they’re stupid enough to leave them near their prisoners. Don’t worry, I’ll protect you,” she promises.

Killing Marines is the fastest way to mess up her life, to always be on the run. Thing is, if she wanted a peaceful life, she would have stayed off the Grand Line. She wouldn’t have even left Shimotsuki. If in the end, “the woman with the pink sword” gets known as an enemy of the Marines, then so be it.

“You shouldn’t have to. You’re no pirate,” Octave tells her with unusual gentleness.

“I do what I want. What I want is for all of us to get out of here. Try and stop me,” she dares.

They don’t say anything more and follow her back to the medical wing. Cadence carries the small sack of food and jug of water in order to keep her hands free, and she takes point. The doors leading out of the medical center are a welcome sight.

“When did you eat a Devil Fruit?” Octave asks, letting out a small “oof” as Anacrusic elbows him.

“I didn’t,” she answers, poking her head out the doors.

“You spat out fire. It doesn’t quite look like Fire Fist’s, but that’s not exactly normal,” Cadence points out.

She motions them to follow her out, and they dash for the docks. She doesn’t bother keeping to the side and out of the way this time. They run down the street at full speed as the ship really is set to leave at any moment.

“It’s Haki,” she eventually says.

“That is not how Haki works,” Anacrusic replies, and his stare digs into her back.

She doesn’t bother to correct him as a Marine up ahead targets them with a gun. She removes the obstacle, moving too fast for the blood to land on her clothes, and continues on. More Marines fall
one after the other on her way to the docks, and Tsubasa de Tobu turns red.

The ship is in sight, but the amount of Marines only grows thicker. It’s one thing to move on reflex against threats, but guarding three other people takes its toll. A large group of Marines aim weapons to her group, and she falters.

“Kyahahaha, how do you like 10,000 kilograms?” The group of Marines gets bowled over by woman falling from the sky.

She doesn’t question it, grabbing Octave and Cadence by the arms and shoving them forward. The ship manned by Bon Clay’s friends is right there in front of them. It would be so easy to just jump on and set sail.

“The one with the orange stripe on its sail. Get on. That’s our ride,” she orders before turning away.

“And where are you going?” Cadence asks.

“I’ve got another friend to pick up. I’ll be right back,” she lies without remorse.

There’s a last part to the plan; one she can easily forgo, but after everything Bon Clay risked for her, it’s the least she could do. She won’t be going with her friends, but hopefully the food and water will make them not too angry with her. Something must show on her face because the musicians smile sadly at her.

“We’ll see each other again. Don’t do anything to get yourself deserted on an island,” Octave tells her gravely.

“Don’t worry, we know someone who can give that man of yours a talking to,” Anacrusis winks at her.

“If you ever get stopped by anyone under Whitebeard, just ask for us,” Cadence says, giving a brief bow.

She’s left staring at their backs until someone tries to stab her. She cuts the Marine down and steels herself for the real fight. She can think about things later.

Captain Hina stands surrounded by pirates restrained in iron. Not a single hair is out of place, and she wonders what it would take for the woman to break a sweat. Standing next to Captain Hina is Ensign Tashigi, and she narrows her eyes at her doppelganger.

“You thought you could fool me. I won’t forgive you,” Hina says, pulling at a glove.

“I can’t believe a dirty pirate would use my name,” Tashigi mutters while glaring over red glasses.

She takes a deep breath to center herself. It’s time to see how her skills stack up against a Marine captain. If it comes down to it, she’ll surrender, but she has no plans on losing. There’s too much she has to do, and rotting away in a prison isn’t one of them. She won’t be caged.

Hina takes a step towards her, and she unsheathes Tsubasa de Tobu. Before the captain can take another step, she’s blocking a kick aimed at her head. Her own face grins at her, and she has to drop her blade before she’s slammed into the ground.

“Captain, that’s not me! It has to be someone using a Devil Fruit!” Tashigi yells in her face.
With the way Tashigi is straddling her, there’s no way for Hina to know who actually said it. She grabs Tashigi by the hair and head-butts her.

“What are you doing? This isn’t the plan,” she hisses.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come back for me, but now I know we really are friends,” Tashigi’s teeth clack together into a smile. “Don’t worry about me. I’m the beautiful Bon Clay.”

Bon Clay moves off and tosses her away in one swift motion. Her hand barely misses Tsubasa de Tobu, and she’s left swordless and staring up at the disgruntled Captain Hina. Tashigi moves into a familiar martial arts pose, and she’s left with no choice but to roll with it.

“Some okama,” she puts as much disgust into the word as possible, “stole my glasses!”

“What?” Hina asks.

“How’s it feel being fooled by this okama a second time, Hina?” Bon Clay jeers before changing his face back to his own; the white Marine uniform is tight against his muscular frame.

The sheer rage being emitted by the woman above her could fuel a miniature sun. She blinks and Captain Hina is already aiming a punch at Bon Clay, who twirls out of the way. Bon Clay lets out a taunt before somehow dancing off the battleground.

“Ensign, with me!” Captain Hina barks.

She shouts out a “Yes, Captain!” before tripping on her own feet. She falls and doesn’t move. Captain Hina lets out an aggravated sigh before leaving her there to chase after Bon Clay. She only sits up once she’s sure the captain is out of sight.

The last part of the plan was to fight Hina while Bon Clay slipped away. It was agreed that she would attempt to persuade Captain Hina that she was under the control of Miss Goldenweek—a Devil Fruit user and one of Bon Clay’s friends—but she has no faith in her acting skills. Bon Clay didn’t either if the current events are anything to go by.

“Stay safe, Bonnie,” she mutters before sliding Tsubasa de Tobu back into its scabbard.

If their roles are reversed then she needs to make for Bon Clay’s getaway boat. It’s directly opposite of the ship that the Baroque Works crew left in and is probably tied up behind a rock or something. She scours the shoreline, striking down anyone who notices her, and finally finds the boat. It actually is hidden behind a large, jagged rock.

A small sailing vessel made for one or two people; she’d be lying if she said she wasn’t concerned that the boat could take on the open sea. The sail is massive, as is the railing around the sides, so perhaps she’s worried for nothing. She opens the compartment to take stock and finds a good amount of food and medicine.

She also finds all her items she left on the Black Tooth pirates’ ship. She holds up her leather sewing pouch in shock. This is, without a doubt, the work of Bon Clay. So he had always planned for her to be the one to use the boat then.

She closes the storage compartment, and unties the boat from the metal stick that is speared into the rock. Holding onto the railing, she kicks away from the rock before taking a seat near the rudder. She comes to a swift realization.

“I have no idea how to sail,” she says, blinking.
The smart thing to do would be to grab her things and crawl back to Hina, to play pretend. It’d be a risk, but less so than sailing with no experience. However, she has too much Marine blood on her hands for her to look the woman in the eye, and she would side with Bonnie if it came down to it.

“Let’s see how much I remember from all those books,” she says, holding up a sleeve to see which way the wind is blowing.

She never claimed to be smart.

Chapter End Notes

Kui can mean regret, remorse, or sorrow. It can also mean a rock pile. Fun things, nicknames. This was all based on Miss Goldenweek's "Operation: Meet Baroque Works" that went wrong thanks to a certain fishman friend of Kuina's.

I'd also like to clarify pronouns because I do get asked more than once: Bon Clay uses a weird pronoun in Japanese that not even the English "they" compares to. I'm sticking with "he" simply because the English dub does, but "they" is right too! Kuina doesn't care about pronouns used and anything is okay. I stick with "she" in the comments simply because that's what I mostly write in the story, for convenience's sake basically.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She never wanted to sail, never wanted to feel the salty breeze on her face or for the world to rock as waves slam into the side of the ship. Sailing was only a necessity, a way to get to the next island. If she could get someone else to do the hard part for her, then all the better.

She’s paying for that thought now.

Iron bars stretch and connect until the Marine outpost resembles a cage with no door, keeping everyone in and her out. Hina’s Devil Fruit ensures there is no other choice: she must take to the sea. She looks down at the bauble in her hands—a Log Pose Bon Clay left for her—and feels slightly unwell. She has no idea how to read it; her best guess is to follow the Log Pose like a compass.

She takes in a deep breath, squares her shoulders, and reaches for a rope. The knowledge of sailing is there in the books she’s read and the observations she’s made, but that can’t compare to practical experience. Still, she chose this course of action, and she’ll see it through even if she winds up as just another skeleton at the bottom of the sea.

“Let’s do this,” she says firmly before getting smacked in the face by the pole attached to the sail.

Despite her fears, she only nearly capsizes twice. Both times she’s able to recover quickly enough to avoid tipping over into the water. By the time the sun sets, she makes the foolish mistake of thinking, this is easy enough.

The Grand Line is merciless to the unskilled and the unprepared. The first warning she gets is the gust of wind that rips her sail clean off. The second warning is sudden blinding light and a deafening boom. She doesn’t get a third warning before the boat starts rising, and her wings catch a draft that causes her to float up.

She grabs onto the mast with all her strength. She looks down. Her boat is far above the waves; a pillar of water presses against the underside and continues to push the boat further up. No matter how many meditation techniques she uses, no matter how many times she’s sent into the atmosphere, she is still afraid of heights.

“Son of bitch,” she swears. “Do you hear me, spirit of the sea? You’re a son of a bitch!”

As if to spite her, the boat suddenly shoots up higher and faster, and she hurls more curses at the sea. Pieces of wood flake by her face, and she’s twisted around like a macabre wind-up music box. By the time the boat actually stops, she’s holding onto the end of the mast by three fingers. The wind suddenly changes direction, and she’s slammed back into the boat.

She must have passed out by that point because when she opens her eyes, she’s on a beach with the remnants of the boat lying next to her. She stares up at the large, green leaf that protects her from the morning sun and digs her fingers into the sand. Wherever she landed, it’s hot. The sand nearly burns her fingers. Unfortunately, it’s also humid; her clothes are still wet, and she feels like she’s inhaling heavy mist.

Getting up, she checks herself—everything’s fine and nothing’s missing—before poking at the remains of her boat. Miraculously, the storage compartment is in one piece, but everything that had
been outside of it is long gone, which had been the Log Pose and a handful of food. She crosses her arms and tries to think.

It’d be very tiring to haul all her items with her as she explores, but she doesn’t like the idea of leaving her stuff for either the tide or someone else. Near her are beautiful, towering trees with thick leaves and brightly colored flowers. She’d rather not mess with them until she gets a better idea of the wildlife, so a rock it is.

Marking a large, oddly smooth rock with a slash from Tsubasa de Tobu, she hides what she can behind it and buries the rest. A tree with large leaves hovers over the rock, and she marks that too. Satisfied, she makes her way down the shoreline. If there are people here, then she’ll find them close to the sea. No matter which island she goes to, fish is the one thing everyone eats.

Upon circling back to the rock and tree she marked, she frowns. The island is big, no doubt about it. The sun is already well overhead, and she’s gone beyond hunger. That she found no sign of people traversing the coast is a bad sign. She wipes the sweat from her face and rations out her small food supply.

Her next step is to go deeper into the island. The thick greenery that obscures everything from the shore gives her an ominous feeling. Even if there aren’t people, there’s definitely something that lives in there. If she closes her eyes, she can almost feel the movement.

“If we come across trouble, you’ll be by my side, right?” She asks Tsubasa de Tobu.

The sword seems to scoff at her, and she pats it with a sigh. She should have just jumped on the ship with her friends. She could be sailing towards Mihawk’s abode right now. Considering that Bon Clay undid his disguise in front of Hina, there had been no point in even trying to save him in the end. She supposes there’s no point in wallowing now. Her first priority is finding shelter and food.

The foliage is thick and she has to keep a sleeve up to prevent being slapped in the face. When it gets to be too much, she slices plant after plant. She freezes mid-motion as her sword hits air. Yellow eyes glare up at her over the pink tip.

A canine with fur that resembles peacock feathers bares it teeth at her. It doesn’t move, and she looks down at its paws. Either mud or marsh traps the creature, and she toes the ground in front of her. Her boot sinks farther than it should, and she pulls away carefully.

She lucked out, finding this creature that warns her of the hidden dangers. The hazardous ground is only slightly discolored from the solid grass she’d been walking on. There’s no telling when she’d notice herself sinking. She sheathes her katana and the creature stops growling, choosing to struggle while keeping a wary eye on her.

She watches the creature attempt to free itself from the ground that swallows its paws, watches as thick saliva drips from its mouth. Fierce eyes glare at everything—her, the ground, a nearby plant—despite being sunken in. She wonders why it doesn’t just give up.

Time passes, and she remains in place watching it continue to struggle against its fate. She could probably throw a knife into its eye and put it out of its misery. Her hand doesn’t move. The canine bites at the ground around its feet before pausing and going back to yanking its legs.

She takes a dagger out of her boot, ignores the growls aimed her way, and pushes it into the ground before her. The dirt is soft enough that it goes all the way to the hilt, and pulling on the dagger, it takes most of her strength to get it out. Definitely no walking, she thinks as she wipes the blade on a
nearby leaf.

She tests a leaf, an entire plant, and strips of tree bark next. It is the tree bark that surprises her; it seems to float against whatever the ground is, and her boot doesn’t sink when she presses down on it. Working quickly, she soon has a bridge to the canine creature who watches her silently.

“Don’t bite me, or you’ll become my lunch,” she warns the beast.

She doesn’t know if it understands or not, but she grabs a paw and pulls. The creature grunts but makes no move to attack her. Once the paw is free, she places a piece of bark under its foot before moving to the next one. It’s backbreaking work, but one after the other, all paws become free. Evidently the creature isn’t dumb because it follows her off the bridge, never touching the ground once.

“Try not to get stuck again. I can’t promise I’ll be around for another rescue,” she says.

Picking another direction, she moves through the thicket, being far more careful about where she steps. She doesn’t make it very far before a blue and green blur rushes past her to stop in the way. The canine stares up at her with a wagging tail.

“What?” She asks.

Letting out a small yip, the creature moves to her left through two large, spiky plants. She gets the feeling it wants her to follow, so she does. Protecting her face, she crawls through and suddenly finds herself in a small cave. The creature laps at running water trickling through the rock, and she supposes this is its way of saying thanks.

The heat must have worn on her; once she takes a drink of the surprisingly cold water, she ends up leaning against cool rock and falls asleep. When she wakes up, it’s to a loud clap of thunder and the creature resting against her. Pointed ears tipped with wispy feathers perk up, but the creature doesn’t stir. Hard rain pelts the plants hiding the entrance to the cave, and she thinks about her stuff still on the beach.

“Shit,” she sighs.

The canine lifts its head at that, and without thinking, she strokes its head reassuringly. Her hand freezes, but the creature does nothing except stare at her. He used to have a dog, one that would snuggle against him like this. After a moment of hesitation, she pets it again. She’s not sure that what her hand touches is fur; it doesn’t just look like feathers, it feels like it too.

“Just thinking about things,” she tells it. “I’m a bit in over my head.”

That’s putting it lightly. She hasn’t had time to process anything since the Marines attacked, but sitting here in a cave while waiting for the rain to stop doesn’t allow for much other than contemplation. If her goal is to meet Zoro again, she’s doing her absolute best to not get there. Losing her supplies, giving up opportunities and putting her life on the line for others—she’ll never get to see him at this rate.

If there are no people on this island, she’ll have a hell of a time surviving before she even tries leaving. With how buoyant the wood is, she’s sure she can make it off the island, but surviving in whatever kind of a raft she makes is a whole different matter. Considering how she landed here in the first place, well, in the end, she’s quite a helpless person after all.

“What a king I am,” she mutters before smirking mirthlessly. “How about you be king? You’d make a better one, I’m sure.”
The creature blinks tired eyes at her, and she lets out a quiet giggle at the idea of presenting this dog-like beast to Lushu as Cherub Island’s new king.

“It’s a bad idea, but I’m going to call you, ‘Rex.’ You’ll probably try to eat me later which will make me kill you. And then I’ll be the one crying,” she says, stroking the creature’s neck.

Rex lets out a small huff and flops its head onto her lap. She continues petting it while listening to the rain. Thunder rumbles continuously, and she wonders if Thunder Beings exist here as well. If any of the spirits from his previous life exist in this world. How curious that she suddenly wants to know after all these years.

*How curious,* she thinks with a tilt of her head, *that I don’t really regret anything at all.*

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Three days on this island, and she gains an appreciation for her new canine companion. Rex shows her how to hunt, where to drink water, and most importantly, when to take cover. While the wild animals here are vicious and large, it is the thunderstorms that are the most dangerous. The storms come quick and vary in intensity; at least five trees have attempted to murder her so far.

Of course, she can’t be too mad; it’s thanks to the trees her food supply on the beach was saved. Still, the worst of the storms seem to come from the center of the island, so she sets up camp in a cave by the beach. She keeps a piece of wood from the boat over the entrance in the hope that it’ll keep the animals and the rain out.

She carries her sewing bag with her as she explores the island. When she’s forced to take cover from the storms, she uses the beads from Mona’s bracelets to craft a beaded ring. She also patches up her pants.

Quite frankly, for someone stranded on a deserted island, she has far too much free time. It’s unsettling.

On the fourth day, she realizes getting off the island is far more dangerous than she’d initially thought. Numerous waterspouts dot the waters around the island as lightning crackles overhead, and she thinks there are just as many whirlpools. In an instant, the lightning stops and the sea calms to nothing. She digs her feet into the sand with a frown. Rex pants beside her, ears twitching. It appears violent storms happen offshore too.

“If anyone knows about this island, they’ll steer clear of it. There goes hope of rescue,” she mutters.

She’s not fond of the heat and humidity, but it’s not a bad place to live out the end of her days if it comes down to it. There’s plenty of game and fish, and pelts can go a long way to make her cave nice and comfortable.

Just thinking about staying here makes her blanch. She’d rather attempt to sail through the waterspouts and whirlpools.

“Sorry, Rex, but I’ve got a promise to keep. I can’t stay,” she says, patting the canine on the head.

It is on the fifth day that she makes up her mind to journey to the center of the island where the worst of the storms lie. She needs to learn everything this island has to offer in order to make use of it. She’s going to find Zoro or die trying; giving up here is not an option.

The center of the island is perilous. The closer she gets the more safe ground she runs out of. She starts making bridges when there’s no other choice. Rex whines at her, but follows along. She
continues forward even as she begins to feel the familiar prickling sensation on her skin, continues
on even as Rex tugs on her kimono desperately. Lightning crackles overhead, and the wind whips
her hair around.

There’s something here that she needs to see, something that’s been in the center of the storms. She
feels it even now. The foliage clears away, and she drops the bark in her arms. There, in the center
of the clearing, is a lone, tall rock jutting out, surrounded by many smaller jagged, spiraling ones.
On top of that lone rock is a bird so massive it could swallow her whole.

The bird’s feathers are as dark as the night sky with white spots that shine like stars. It flaps its
wings and thunder booms. The wind and rain howl behind her, but there is only stillness from
where she stands. A glowing white eye stares at her, and she loses all breath.

“Thunderbird,” she whispers reverently.

Perhaps it is simply a local animal that ate a Devil Fruit instead of a spirit who controls the
weather, but she finds herself wanting to believe.

“Please help me. I need to find my friend. He was the first person to make me feel like this life was
worth living,” she tells the Thunderbird.

The bird makes a deep rumbling sound, and it takes a moment for her to realize it’s singing. The
notes it sings repeat, and she finds herself humming it. The Thunderbird flares its wings and takes
flight, shooting straight up through the trees. She needs to follow it. Turning around, she nearly
trips on Rex who’s shaking like a leaf.

“You’re still here?” She asks in disbelief. “Don’t you have any sense of danger?” She bends down
to give the creature a quick hug before dashing back down her shoddily made bridge.

“Follow then. You might as well see what happens next!” She shouts over her shoulder.

With Rex at her heels, she dodges the branches flying towards her face. Something screaming flies
past her, but she continues on. The wind gets so intense that she loses her footing a few times as her
wings cause her to float. Rex tugs her down each time, and she makes it to the beach with a
minimal amount of scratches.

The Thunderbird circles high above, lightning crackling at the tips of its wings. She can hear the
low notes of its song. It’s the same sound she’s mistaken as thunder this whole time. She tries to
hum back to it, to see if the Thunderbird will react again, but it continues circling above her.

Perhaps the bird can’t hear her or wants her to do it differently. The idea is a long shot—this whole
thing is—but she can’t help but feel it’s waiting for her to do something. She digs through her
kimono for anything that can help and pulls out a tiny instrument given to her by Cadence. It’s a
kazoo.

“Why the hell not,” she says before putting the instrument to her lips and humming.

The high-pitched, buzzing noise causes Rex to begin howling. She soon realizes that Rex is
attempting to howl along with the song and tries to hum together with him. The storm halts as the
Thunderbird stops to stare at them. A low rumbling noise mixes with their awful combination of
howling and buzzing, and when the bird lands on the beach and tucks in its wings, she puts the
kazoo away.

Honestly, she has no clue what she’s doing, or what’s happening. This whole bizarre experience
has just been her relying on a gut feeling. It is that same instinct that tells her that the bird is far
more intelligent than any animal and could understand her plea. That when she approaches the Thunderbird, it’ll take her away. Or it’ll eat her.

“Thanks for everything. If I have the chance I’ll come back and take you to my kingdom,” she says, patting Rex on the head. “I’ll make you the crown prince.”

Rex lets out a whine as she goes to her cave, grabs her things, and marches up to the Thunderbird. If she does get eaten, hopefully all her sewing needles will make the beast regret it. She stares up into glowing white eyes and waits. Large, black talons grab her gently, and her ears pop as she undergoes a rapid ascent.

Her arms begin prickling, and the scent of burning metal attacks her nose. Blinding light fills her vision, and then she feels herself falling. She clutches her bags tightly; everything happens too quickly to scream. Like an umbrella catching a gust of wind, her wings jerk her upwards, and then she’s suddenly flying. Blinking, she looks down only to see what looks like a cyclone directly below her.

“Son of a bitch’s bastard!” She screams.

(She doesn’t know that she’s on the edge near the Calm Belt, doesn’t know that the storm below her keeps her flying towards an island in the opposite direction. What she does know is that she fucking hates heights.)

Chapter End Notes

I promise nothing and everything.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first time she sailed through the sky, it had been a dull, peaceful flight. Hours of fierce wind currents, avoiding hail, and passing through lightning makes her wish for that boring time again. She nearly cries when the storms clear away to show an island on the horizon; she’s tired, and her arms are growing numb from holding onto the luggage.

The island is definitely not deserted: buildings stack on top of each other as water gushes around them. Sailing vessels from large ships to tiny fishing boats surround the island, and the closer she gets to it, the more she thinks the island resembles a water fountain. Squinting, she thinks the tiny specks are people swimming through the waterways to move between buildings.

Hope builds in her chest. If there is a comfortable, dry bed down there, she’ll pay whatever it takes. If she can get a hot bath and a warm, fluffy towel, she will pay whatever it takes. She descends slowly and gently towards a large pier.

“Hey! You up there! You a pirate?”

Surprised, she looks down to a man waving at her from a boat. Other people move to look at her with hands over their eyes, but soon go back to whatever they were doing.

“No!” She yells back.

“Hotel’s that way then!” The man gestures.

Nodding her head, she adjusts her flight to move in that direction. She folds her wings up and in, aiming for a smooth descent to a building with a large neon sign. Water surrounds her, but she’s determined to have a safe, dry landing.

“Hey, watch out!”

Something shiny rockets towards her, and she swivels out of the way. Her wings fold in against the wind wrong, and she falls. She tries to turn so her wings will slow her down, but no matter how hard she twists, she can’t seem to face the ground. Strong arms catch her, and one of her wings accidentally slaps her rescuer in the face.

“Got you! Are you okay, uh,” the person asks before trailing off once she pulls her wing back.

Neat, blond hair falls over one eye, causing the lone black, curly eyebrow to stand out on an otherwise normal, handsome face. An unlit cigarette manages to stay in the gaping man’s mouth.

“An angel? Forgive me for touching you like that!” The man says, setting her down quickly but gently.

“I’m told I’m more of a devil,” she says, shifting the bag containing her Springy Jack outfit over her shoulder.

She scans the buildings around her but finds no sign for a hotel. She takes a deep breath. Five days on a hot, muggy wet island with everything trying to kill her before spending half a day in perilous flight—all she wants to do is sleep. She might start screaming if she doesn’t get it soon.
“Thanks for the catch. Do you know where the hotel is?” She asks, trying not to sound desperate.

“There is one over there,” the man nods across the waterway, “but it’s currently, ah, undergoing repair from the misplacement of an enthusiastic gorilla.”

The way the man’s face grimaces as if remembering something unpleasant tells her there’s a story behind that. She knows better than to question it. Her only goal is a comfy bed and a hot bath; no need to get sidetracked now.

“Is there another one then?” If there isn’t, she really will scream.

“I can show you to the one my crew and I are staying in. It’s clean, cheap, and has quite a lovely sight. Though none quite as lovely as you,” the man croons.

She takes a step back as the man gushes at her with a wide smile. She can practically see a heart beating in his eye. The last time a man looked at her like that she broke his arm. She debates the merit of walking away before remembering that a comfy bed awaits her.

“Fine,” she nods reluctantly, “lead the way.”

“Lovely lady, how can I simply watch you struggle with those bags all by yourself? Allow me to carry them for you,” the man offers.

She doesn’t care for the insinuation that she’s not strong enough to carry her own luggage—which she hauled through numerous storms in the sky even—but she can acknowledge that most who make such comments rarely offer aid. She ends up handing the heaviest bag to the man at his insistence. She’s content with the decision. If he takes off with it, then she’ll have an excellent excuse to kick his ass.

The man never makes a move to run away with her bag or takes a malicious step towards her. The leisurely walk past beautiful buildings with the sound of running water sets her at ease. The man attempts to point out places of interest, but it soon becomes a comprehensive list of places to eat that turns into a long rant about how no one knows how to cook.

“Of course there’s no way anyone here can make food good enough for such a pretty lady such as yourself,” the man remarks.

Ignoring the stupid comments, there is still some useful information to be had. The island she landed on is Water 7. It’s slowly sinking, so the people have started placing buildings on top of old ones that have gone underwater. The best, and sometimes only, way to travel around is by using a Bull; a horse-like fish that transports people around.

“We’ll have to go onto the waterway to reach the hotel. There’s room, so you can use mine for now.” The man stops by a Bull leaning against the side of the canal.

The Bull makes a “ni” sound as the man places her luggage onto its back. She supposes if her mother was alive, this would be the part where she’d be warned about the dangers of leaving with strange men. The man holds out a hand to help her into the seat on the animal’s back, and she thinks, it’s a good thing I don’t have one.

“I’m Kuina,” she says, taking the hand offered.

“Such a lovely name for a lovely lady. You can call me Sanji,” the man beams at her.

She settles into the lone seat in the front and keeps her wings tucked in. Sanji sits behind her with
the luggage, and she’s not petty enough to slap him in the face. Even if his random gushing about her looks is getting on her nerves.

The Bull is smart enough to take them straight to the hotel without guidance, and she spends the slow ride taking in the sights. While many of the people walking and riding their own Bulls look like tourists, there are more than a few people walking around with building materials and tools.

“This is it. Ladies first,” Sanji says, putting one leg on the sidewalk and holding a hand out for her.

She debates shoving him in the water before thinking better of it. She just needs to hang on for a few more minutes. Her warm bed is right there, and Sanji probably hasn’t deserved her ire yet. If she lets Tsubasa de Tobu’s scabbard hit his face on her way up, well that’s just an accident.

“I’ve got it from here,” she says, trying to get her bags back from Sanji.

“No, no, women should be waited on like the gems they are,” Sanji tells her, holding the bags tightly and moving past her.

Helping me, he’s helping me, she chants to herself. Patronizing help is better than no help. It was a lesson he’d learn in the last life, but she finds that it’s getting harder to remember. Pushing down feelings of resentment, she allows Sanji to help her get a room set up. When he tries to pay for her lodging, she slaps his hand.

“No. You’re sweet, Sanji, and far too kind. But you’re also going too far. I want to pay for myself, and if you trample on that, I will kick your ass into the canal,” she says, ignoring the clerk looking between the two of them excitedly.

“Forgive me. Even lovely ladies have their pride,” Sanji says, rubbing his hand with a wince.

“They do,” she nods before leaning in to whisper, “but I think you’re missing something. I am a man.”

A cigarette falls to floor. Sanji, pale and stricken, does nothing but stare at her. She savors the expression of one who’s had the rug pulled from under him. Handing the money to the grinning clerk, she takes her key, grabs her bags, and leaves Sanji standing still as a statue in the lobby.

Her room is small, but there’s a bath that runs hot water and a soft bed. It’s all she needs. When she gets enough rest, her stomach tells her it’s time to find a hot meal that isn’t roasted meat. She debates wearing her suit instead of her kimono on the chance she runs into Sanji but decides against it. Perhaps another time when she’s gotten a better feel for the city.

The hotel lobby is empty, and she ends up questioning the clerk about places to eat. Only some of the restaurants are open this time of night, and she’ll need to use the waterway to get to them. She gets pointed to the nearest Bull rental shop which keeps long hours.

A bright green Bull, her horse-looking fish lets out a “ni” and she pets the hair-like fin on its head. The man had told her the animals were both extremely intelligent and fond of petting, so she doesn’t hold back.

“I’m looking for a good place to eat that’s cheap. I’ll leave it to you,” she tells the creature.

Her Bull jets away much faster than when she rode with Sanji, and itstartles a laugh out of her. The Bull races around other people in the waterway, water parting for it like a motor boat, and she grins as her hair gets blown back. The Bull stops in front of a small section of land where people
point at her wings from dining chairs.

“That was awesome,” she says, patting the proud Bull on the head. “We’ll have to do it again.”

She ends up buying some kind of toasted meat sandwich and finds an empty spot on the dock to sit. Stars twinkle above her as the city’s lights bounce off of the water. It’s a beautiful sight, and she takes it in as the voices of the other diners blend together into background noise.

She never thought she’d see such an island on the Grand Line, but considering this is a famous place for ship repairs, it makes since. With how busy it is, there may be a chance to find some work here. It’d be a good idea to build up her funds. There’s also the chance she can figure out where Mihawk is from here.

She wants to find Zoro more than anything else. That hasn’t changed, but she wants her letter back. Those words were meant for her friend. She also doesn’t want Mihawk to get the wrong idea; Yoru is amazing, but Tsubasa de Tobu is better in every possible way.

Her musings get cut off as something small, furry, and screaming falls into her lap. Her hand automatically reaches to break its neck, and she has to stop her reflex at the last moment. Grabbing the collar of the t-shirt the creature wears, she lifts it up and stares.

“Don’t eat me!” Black eyes tear up as snot runs from a small blue nose.

She takes in the hooves and the antlers sticking out of a hat and blurts out,

“An elk?”

“I’m a reindeer!” The creature cries, struggling in her grip.

She sets the reindeer down and looks up. The only thing above her is a street, but it’s a fair ways from here. She could ask it where it came from, or ask about its ability for speech. That would mean ruining her peaceful night. She goes back to staring out at the water, trying to block out the sound of hooves tapping against wood.

She’s a little thirsty. Perhaps there’s a place that sells fruit juice around here. Lemonade sounds good.

She gives up once she hears muffled sniffles. Sighing, she turns to look. The reindeer twists its head around, staring at the water surrounding them while clapping its hooves. If she were to hazard a guess, the creature doesn’t have a ride out of here.

“Hey, do you know if anyone’s selling fruit juice this late?” She asks.

The reindeer jumps. She raises an eyebrow at its wide-eye stare and keeps herself as relaxed as possible. Slowly, one little hoof raises in a direction, and the reindeer never breaks eye contact with her.

“Thanks. In payment for letting me know, you can ride with me if you want,” she says.

Offer made, she moves to her Bull to give it an affection pat on the head. If the reindeer turns down the ride, then that’s its own fault. The clicking of hooves keeps her from jumping in and taking off.

“Hello,” the reindeer says to her Bull, “is she a good rider? Oh, really? I don’t like going that fast. I came from up there, do you know how to get there? I’ll ask her, thanks!”
Having apparently had an entire conversation with her boat, the reindeer relaxes to smile shyly at her. It’d be endearing, if the creature wasn’t so ugly.

“He wants your permission to take me back to where I came from,” the reindeer tells her.

“Yeah, we can take him—you are a him, right?—back,” she nods to the Bull.

The reindeer gets into the seat behind her, and the Bull pulls away from the strip. The ride is slower than before, and she assumes it’s the Bull showing care for their tiny passenger.

“Um, over there,” the reindeer falters as she turns to look at him. “That place sells juice. It’s good.”

Humanoid animal or not, the reindeer reminds her of the little girl from Cherub Island. It feels like she’s being forced to interact with a child. She doesn’t know what to do other than nod her head.

“Thank you, I’ll go there then,” she says, trying to smile without teeth.

It must work because the reindeer smiles back. For most of the ride, the reindeer only makes small talk with the Bull, so she’s taken off guard at a sudden barrage of questions.

“Are you a pirate? Are those wings real? Are you a Sky Person? Are you a swordsman? Or is it swordswoman? It’s very pink!” The reindeer asks with shiny eyes.

“No, I’m just a traveler. No, they’re not. Technically no.” She wasn’t born in the sky, but then neither was Lushu. “I am a swordsman, yes. This is Tsubasa de Tobu. It likes being pink.”

She’s run into the swordswoman label before, back when she had challengers looking to take her down for owning a pink sword. She could say something about how she hates being labeled differently due to gender or that there’s no reason for it when the word “woman” ends in man. Truth be told, it’s just a hassle to add in another syllable.

“I have to tell him about you! I don’t know if he’s ever seen a pink sword before,” the reindeer says.

“Him?” She tilts her head.

“Yeah, Z—” The Bull stops suddenly, jerking its passengers.

“Oh, we’re here. Thanks for the ride!” The reindeer hops out and waves at both the Bull and her.

Sitting on a wide, stone railing, she takes a sip of lemonade. Surprisingly, the juice stand had been open; it’s popular among the builders working into the night apparently. From her position, the sea looks like one black mass, but that won’t be true in another hour. Her sleep schedule will be completely messed up, but she’s decided to watch the sunrise.

Strange how long those five days seemed to be; on that island, storms kept the sky cloudy, and the sun remained hidden during sunrise and sunset. It had been impossibly hot too, so she wouldn’t have been able to enjoy the view like this anyway.

She clears her mind and breathes in the cool air. An hour goes by faster than it ever has before, and dawn breaks over the water. As the sky lightens, more people begin to bustle around her. She
ignores them to watch as the sun rises to glow over the water. How beautiful the simple things that people take for granted are.

“Kuina?”

A voice altogether familiar and strange calls out to her. Twisting so that her wings won’t get in the way, she looks behind her for the caller.

“Zoro.” She smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Because I love you, and who needs sleep?
She’s not sure what to feel at having found her dearest friend—him finding her, really—and finally accomplishing her purpose for being on the Grand Line. She should be shocked, but somehow she’s not. Their meeting feels like fate.

When Bon Clay transformed into Zoro, she thought she knew what to expect, yet somehow Zoro seems so unlike that mimicry. Not in the appearance—granted there may be more scars on his arms—but in the way he stands, in the way he radiates power. He’s so different from the runt she used to know.

Standing before Zoro, she wonders what he sees when he looks at her. Is she any different from that time so long ago or has she barely grown? Zoro scans her from head to toe, and she thinks the lighting makes his face appear red.

“You grew,” Zoro finally says with a voice full of wonder.

“As did you,” she points out awkwardly.

There’s so much she wants to say that it jumbles up and twists, robbing her of her words. She doesn’t know where to begin. Zoro suffers from the same problem if the way his mouth opens and closes is any indication.

“I can’t believe you show up now of all times,” Zoro tells her, rubbing his face in aggravation.

If it were anyone else, she’d be insulted, but she’s reminded of the times when she’d show up just as Zoro was in the middle of making a mistake. He always hated her being there to witness his moments of stupidity.

“Meaning?” She tilts her head.

“One of my swords broke,” Zoro explains.

Two swords hang at his hip which means he must have successfully completed the three swords style, Santoryu. Mercifully, Wado Ichimonji’s presence means he didn’t break her heirloom. Considering that Zoro’s disgruntled at meeting her while not being at full strength—

“Do you want to challenge me later?” She asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Not on your life,” Zoro answers, eyes glinting.

Her spot to enjoy the sunrise is spacious and out the way; it would have been good enough if they were still children playing with shinai. They aren’t children, and undoubtedly wherever they fight will end up needing repair. She has no plans to hold back, and she doubts Zoro will either.

“There’s a good spot they use to test canons. Follow me.”

Zoro keeps a brisk pace in front of her, and she tries to keep her stare from digging into his back. They say nothing to each other, and she supposes that it’s for the best. The long walk gives her time to put her thoughts in order.
(She doesn’t realize that they pass the testing area twice, or that Zoro keeps looking at her out of the corner of his eye.)

They stop in the middle of a wide area; scorch marks and scratches line the discolored and uneven stone beneath her feet. When Zoro moves to face her with a wild look on his face, she feels her own excitement rising.

“I’ll be using Nitoryu, just like old times,” Zoro declares.

“And like old times, I’m going to kick you into the dirt,” she smirks.

She had wanted to be the one issuing the challenge, wanted to show Zoro that she acknowledges him as a swordsman. Still, this is good in its own way, to know how much Zoro still wants to fight her.

“Sandai Kitetsu and Wado Ichimonji,” Zoro introduces while pulling each sword out of its scabbard.

“Tsubasa de Tobu,” she says, holding up the pink blade.

Her blade vibrates in her hands, and she’s unsure if the cause is from its excitement or her own. This will be its second test against high grade swords, and its first real fight. She knows Wado Ichimonji, knows its strength, but the bloodlust coming from Sandai Kitetsu is unexpected and would leave lesser swordsmen reeling. She grits her teeth in an effort to keep from grinning.

Just as always, words are pointless between them. She kicks off and aims for Zoro’s heart. A sword catches hers, and she evades the other one aimed for her neck. A stinging pain follows the missed swing at her neck, and she knows that Zoro doesn’t need to land a blow for it to actually hit her. Good thing she’s too fast to let him continue then.

Tsubasa de Tobu goes on the offensive, and Zoro ends up losing Sandai Kitetsu first. The sword’s blade sinks into the ground with a loud screech. Zoro falls into a different stance and comes at her with everything he has.

The ground trembles as the blades of Wado Ichimonji and Tsubasa de Tobu meet. Zoro’s strength is immense, and she can feel her arms going numb as their swords continue to ring against each other.

“Women will never be as strong as men. It’s just a fact of life.” “Zoro will be a great swordsman. One day, he will surpass you.” “You won’t be able to beat him as an adult. It’s just nature.”

These are the words her father told her often. She never doubts herself for a second. Zoro’s blade hits hers, and she uses Tsubasa de Tobu to wrench the opposing blade to face the ground. In one quick motion, she steps onto Wado Ichimonji’s blade, slaps Zoro’s hands with the flat of her sword, and twists to knock him away with her wing.

Chest heaving, it takes her a moment to realize the duel’s over. Zoro lies on his back, staring up at the sky, and she holds Tsubasa de Tobu up to examine its blade. The metal shines back at her victoriously. It might just be her, but she thinks the sword has a smug feeling to it.

Sheathing her katana, she moves past Wado Ichimonji to stand above her fallen opponent. As much as she feels tied to it, Wado Ichimonji is Zoro’s sword. She knows better than to touch it.

“So I lost,” Zoro says, slinging an arm over his eyes.
“Are you going to cry?” She asks, squatting to get a better look at his face

“No.”

It’s said with such disdain that she laughs. She didn’t think he’d stay a crybaby, but she’s not sure lying there in a silent pout is much better. It’s probably better that she doesn’t mention she held back in the duel.

She had wanted to fight using swords only, and she doesn’t think shouting, “Hey, I usually kick and hit more, use knives, and oh, I can breathe fire. I do that too,” will do her any favors.

“I made a promise that I would never lose again,” Zoro finally utters.

“Oh. Sorry. I can call it a draw?” She offers.

“Does this look like a draw?” Zoro demands, moving his arm to glare at her.

She looks around and notices both the damage done to the area and the workers exchanging beli from next to a canon on wheels. She considers things.

“It does if you buy me something sweet to eat,” she tries.

All she has to do is make a surprised exclamation that Zoro got her and pretend to faint. She’s not above putting away her pride for free food. Shaking his head with a wry smile, Zoro closes his eyes in defeat.

“No, I lost. If it’s you, it’s okay.”

“Buy me something sweet to eat anyway,” she demands, dropping to sit on his stomach.

“Fine! Just get off!” Zoro shouts breathlessly and squirms beneath her.

(In some ways, they’re strangers to each other. In others, they’re still the same children squabbling with swords.)

They walk until they find a place that looks interesting to eat. It takes a while to find something open so early in the morning. Most of their idle chitchat goes to their swords, the duel, or their training techniques. Nothing important gets said, but somehow it doesn’t seem to matter. She finds that simply being next to Zoro is good enough.

“So, wings. Chopper said you told him they were fake, but they moved like they were real. Can you fly?” Zoro asks as she digs into a slice of slightly stale cake.

“They’re metal, but I can move them and use them to glide,” she says, wings shifting as much as they can in a dining chair. “Who’s Chopper?”

“This big. Antlers and hooves. You probably think he’s ugly;” Zoro deadpans while miming the height of a small reindeer.

“I wouldn’t say it to his face,” she all but admits.

“Good. He’s part of my crew. I don’t want to deal with the crying.”

Part of his crew. It’s a sharp reminder that the man sitting across the table with his arms crossed is a pirate. She wants to ask, but at the same time it’d be pointless since she knows the answer. Zoro only ever did anything that would let him follow his dream. Crossing blades with him showed her
that hasn’t changed.

“Have you found your freedom?” Zoro suddenly asks.

It’s a question that makes her fork freeze, and she has to give it careful thought. There are things still weighing her down; things that cause her to keep running. For a long time, she tried to sever all ties that would drag her below the water until she lost sight of the world above.

It’s still difficult to accept, but things are different now. She has friends and homes waiting for her to go back to. She’s strong enough now that those are her bonds and not her chains.

“Yes, I have,” she says with a smile.

Zoro’s eyes widen before darting to look at something over her shoulder. He frowns and rubs his neck irritably. She wonders if her words make him feel frustrated somehow.

“It might be better if you stay away from me until I get stronger,” Zoro says.

“Explain.” It’s not a request.

“My captain,” Zoro pauses before glancing at her with steely eyes, “I just declared war on the World Government. You’ll be caught up in that if you’re associated with me.”

The statement catches her by surprise. A pirate is wanted by the government no matter what, but to declare war—the entire world will be out for the Straw Hats’ blood. There’s a high chance that anyone linked to them will get dragged into their messy fight as well.

The old her would have ran the moment she found out, would have said, “It’s been nice seeing you, Zoro. Farewell.” She finds herself growing angry at Zoro, at herself.

“Just who do you think I am?” She slams her hands onto the table and leans forward.

“I’ve grown a lot, Zoro. I made so many friends and learned so many things. Through it all, I learned that if I follow my heart, I have no regrets. What I want is to be here for you, and if that means declaring war on the world? Then so be it. I’m not afraid anymore.”

Zoro gapes at her, and she flicks him on the forehead.

“You worry about taking as many heads as you can, and I’ll do whatever the hell I want like I always do. Got it?”

Baring her teeth in a semblance of a smile, she sits back down and waves to get the server’s attention. Just for Zoro’s utterly stupid suggestion, she’ll make him pay for another meal. She’s thinking of getting biscotti this time.

“I can never win against you,” Zoro groans before letting his head hit the table.

“Remember that,” she says.

Things should be awkward between them. They’ve already done their duel, already had a bite to eat; if they were to go by their old interactions, there’d be nothing left for them to do but to train together. Going on a slow walk around the island and taking a gentle ride down the waterways just so they can keep talking is a novel experience.

“I can introduce you to the crew. You’ll like them,” Zoro says before pausing, “except for the cook.”
“Why, what’s wrong with them?” She asks, leaning over the railing to watch Bulls swim by.


All those fit a certain man she bumped into yesterday. It’d be too much of a coincidence, but she’s starting to think there’s no such thing.

“Is his name Sanji?”

“No. No, you did not meet him before me,” Zoro says in horrified disbelief.

“I told him I’m a man,” she grins at him.

Zoro’s lips twitch, and she goes back to watching the people ride their Bulls on the canal below them. No matter how hard she tries, she really can’t picture the Zoro standing next to her getting along with Sanji.

“Do you want me to call you a ‘he?’ ” Zoro asks her seriously.

“No, I want you to call me what you’ve always have,” she says before blurting out something that’s been on her mind for years. “Would it bother you if I said I was both a man and a woman?”

“Not really. Just don’t call yourself an okama.”

Zoro makes the face of one who’s been deeply traumatized, and she nods. He’s definitely met Bon Clay then. A feeling of happiness hits her swiftly and violently, and she doesn’t quite know what to make of it.

“I am simply me and nothing else,” she says with a smile.

She thinks he has the same problem she does; that he also has so much he wants to say but can’t find where to begin. They begin trading stories though they’re told haphazardly and randomly. He does get around to telling her how he ended up on a pirate crew, and she tells him how she’s managed to get to the Grand Line without one.

Once more, she wonders what kind of captain Monkey D. Luffy is. With the way Zoro switches between beaming and grimacing when describing him, she’s not sure she wants to know. His descriptions of his other crewmates are short and to the point, and she tells him about the people she’s met in fuller detail.

Then the topic of Dracule Mihawk comes up.

“Kuina, what is your relationship with that man?” Zoro asks her with a tight expression.

No doubt the rumors of Tashigi going around with a pink sword have already spread. She’ll give it credit; the rumor mill works incredibly fast. Zoro must be concerned about the mix up considering Mihawk is the man he must defeat.

“He kicked my ass into a wall. That’s it,” wait a moment, she’s forgetting a few things, “well, that and we ate dinner together. And he bought me some wine. I also need to find where he lives to get something back.”

She’s too embarrassed to mention her letters and the switch up. She doesn’t want Zoro asking for it, or heaven forbid, sailing off to grab it himself. She’s going to find Mihawk and burn the paper the moment she gets her hands on it.
“So it’s because he beat you,” Zoro says, suddenly leaning forward to grab the railing; it cracks under the pressure. “Was that something important to you?”

“Yes and no,” she answers with a shrug. “I just don’t want him to have it.”

Speaking of Mihawk, she does have something she wants to show off. She remembers when Zoro would patch up his clothes wrong, and she had to fix it for him. Tiny Zoro would get frustrated because she was always better at sewing. It took a while, but his old sewing skills have transferred to her new hands.

“Behold, when I was recovering from being slammed into a wall, I made this,” she says, shoving Mini-Mihawk into his face.

The face Zoro makes is one she’ll remember forever. It’s the way his eyes bulge out of his head, the silent scream he makes, and the veins popping out of his face. Zoro makes a garbled noise, and the railing under him breaks.

Before she can understand what’s happening, Zoro disappears with a splash, and she’s left staring at the new hole in the railing. Vicious cursing wakes her from her stupor, and she hurries to carefully lean over the hole.

Scowling, Zoro furiously swims in place from the canal beneath her. She’s never seen someone swim angrily, but she supposes there’s a first time for everything. She examines Mini-Mihawk for anything that could make someone react like that, but finds nothing. Zoro’s just stupid, it seems.

“You know that’s an overreaction, and you’re hurting my feelings, right?” She yells down to him.

“I’ll tear its head from its body!” Zoro shouts back.

“Okay, that’s just uncalled for!”

The Bulls give Zoro a wide berth while their riders shoot him looks. She leans against the railing with a sigh as Zoro pulls himself out of the water and onto the sidewalk. He had her fooled, but he really is the same boy she knew.

As Zoro attempts to squeeze out his shirt, he glances her way and catches sight of the doll she’s still holding. Zoro starts another string of curses, and she’s reminded vividly of the face he made before tumbling into the water. She laughs so hard that she finds herself on the ground, pounding a fist against it.

Same old Zoro.

Chapter End Notes

I figured you guys would prefer the next chapter over me answering comments this time. Everyone, thank you so much for telling me what you liked or just mindlessly screaming.

I'mma go sleep now.
“Zoro, you will surpass everyone here.”

Those were the words spoken to him by his teacher, and to him, they were words of truth. No matter how many times he lost against Kuina, he knew he would beat her one day. Then she disappeared, leaving behind a sword, a letter, and the memory of being undefeatable.

He’s been chasing after that memory for a long time.

“Don’t you think you’re overdoing it? I’m not a doctor, but there’s no way you should be training that much,” Nami tells him as he moves from pushups to katas.

“I am a doctor! And you’re completely overdoing, Zoro!” Chopper screams at him.

“Annoying,” he remarks.

Ignoring them, he tries to fall into a meditative state. His muscles remember the correct way to move; there’s no need for him to be critical of his movements.

“This thickheaded idiot will continue to swing a sword even if his brain collapsed. Wait, maybe it’s already collapsed, and that’s why,” Sanji says.

A spike of irritation shoots through him, and he gives up as three unimpressed stares dig into him. He falls out of the kata to hit Sanji with the flat of his blade, and a well-polished shoe meets it. There’s no way he can meditate with the grumbling around him. He might as well make the best of things and get some practical experience in.

“Oh, did I hit a nerve?” Sanji sneers at him.

“I only thought I heard a rat scurrying around. Turns out it was you,” he says through gritted teeth.

Sometimes he can’t quite remember why he entrusts his life to these people. Sometimes he takes a nap to get away from them and their constant screaming, their nagging for him to quit training…

...he still remembers the time he collapsed from exhaustion and woke up with Chopper nested into his side, Luffy lying on his legs, and Nami’s blanket covering him. She shrieked about charging him for dirtying it with sweat, but Nami never actually added that to his tab.

His crew is weak in some ways but strong in others. They all cover for each other’s weakness, and he supposes he’ll have to have to be content with them.

(He’ll never say it, but he loves them. He loves this crew, this ship, this captain—they make chasing after his dream fun.)

However, the Grand Line has a way of testing limits. It was only a matter of time until the Straw Hats had to remove their impurities to strengthen themselves, like a blade being forged. Robin disappears like he thought she would, but conflict soon arises from a different corner. When Usopp takes issue with Luffy’s decision to buy a new ship, the only thing he can do is watch in silence.

“I can’t believe you would just give up on the Going Merry! We don’t share the same goals! We
should just go our separate ways!”

Even as the crew’s pleas fail to stop Usopp from stomping away, he watches on without a word. He remembers his own declaration, that he wouldn’t let Luffy compromise his dream. If it came down to playing pirate or giving up on being the greatest swordsman, the younger him would have walked away just like Usopp.

He’s not the younger him and neither is Usopp.

The Going Merry was an important part of their crew, but ultimately it is the captain’s decision to abandon it. Their job as the crew is to support their captain at all costs. Luffy’s decisions involving them are never made lightly; it makes this situation all the more baffling.

They have all chosen to follow the future Pirate King. After everything they’ve been through together—the fights, the laughs, the tears—how can it be so easy to walk away from them?

(So long as they have each other, home is more than a ship. He’ll miss the Going Merry, but it can be replaced; his crewmates cannot.)

It takes being framed as assassins to find out what Nico Robin runs from: the World Government itself, which kills everything in its wake to sate its own greed.

He still doesn’t view Robin as one of them, but he goes after her without hesitation. That is what it means to be part of the crew, to follow the captain. Even if Usopp showing up in that ridiculous mask is a welcome help, the man is no longer one of them.

“I want to live. Take me with you!” Robin screams.

That’ll do, he thinks. With that, Robin becomes part of the crew. With that, they declare war on the World Government. The future Pirate King bows to no one, and the future world’s greatest swordsman fears nothing. So long as the Straw Hat Pirates forge themselves into an unbreakable blade, not even the world can stop them.

(It’d be great if Usopp takes inspiration from this to come crawling back, but he won’t hold his breath.)

Water 7 welcomes them to spend their time recovering in the shipwright’s home base, Galley-La, or to take in the sights around the city. Franky gets to work on building their new ship, and the Log Pose resets. It’s boring, and he spends most of his time brooding over the loss of his sword, Yubashiri.

The sword served him well and died for a worthy cause, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel the gaping wound its departure causes. He also feels like he let the shopkeeper down by breaking the man’s family sword which was entrusted to him.

“Stay by my side, Wado Ichimonji. If you break, I’ll never be able to face her again,” he tells the white sword.

The wind ruffles his hair gently, and he leans back to watch the clouds drift on a blue sky. It’s silent on the roof of this tall building, and it gives him time to think. Which is more important, his dream or his captain’s orders? Becoming the world’s greatest swordsman and bringing Kuina to his side or giving up his life for his crew?

He believes with every fiber of his being that Kuina can live a fulfilling life without him, so then it comes down to Luffy or himself. He recalls Usopp walking away, and how he couldn’t understand
it. He tries to imagine doing the same, being the reason Luffy loses his smile, and can’t fathom it.

He supposes if it comes down to his captain’s dream or his own, he’d probably choose Luffy.

“But if I die, make sure you find your way back to her. I don’t need her finding a way to kill me once I’m dead,” he says, brushing a finger against Wado Ichimonji’s hilt.

When the ship is almost ready, Nami makes the crew gather the supplies they’ll need. He doesn’t have a problem with helping, but he does take issue with the fact that she’s sending him out with Sanji.

“Why the hell are you here? I can move these barrels on my own,” he gripes.

“Clearly it’s because you’d get lost and lose everything,” Sanji shoots back.

“Please be careful! We need those medicines,” Chopper says from somewhere below them with flapping arms.

The suppliers somehow manage to lose track of the shipments set aside for the Straw Hats, and it becomes a hunt to find all the barrels scattered around the city. He’s more than sure the runaround is a prank by the Franky Family. He’ll bust their asses the moment he sees them again.

By the time they finish getting everything, they’re hauling barrels to Galley-La in the early morning. Tired as he is, his temper becomes shorter and the fights with Sanji more frequent. He doesn’t even notice Chopper’s absence until they’re setting the barrels down. He looks around, but there’s no reindeer.

Sharing an alarmed glance with the cook, they hurry to retrace their steps. A sharp feeling of relief coincides with the appearance of his angry crewmate.

“Where have you been?” Sanji demands.

“I got knocked onto the lower level when you started kicking each other! Stupid Zoro! Stupid Sanji!” Chopper shouts, stomping towards them.

“You didn’t fall into the water, did you?” He examines the reindeer, but finds no evidence of near drowning.

“No, but I thought I was done for when I landed in this scary lady’s lap! She was actually really nice though. She gave me a ride back,” Chopper says, calming down. “Oh, Zoro, she had a pink sword! Isn’t that weird?”

Thoughts of berating himself over nearly losing Chopper screeches to a halt. Chopper blinks up at him, and he runs those words back through his head. Pink sword? There has always been a rumor about a lady with a pink sword in East Blue. Could it be?

“Was she wearing a kimono?” He asks, trying to remain breathing evenly.

“Yeah! Oh, and she had these huge, really, really shiny wings. She said they weren’t real, but they moved!”

It’s like a punch to the gut. Sanji pales next to him, and Chopper begins miming the size of the wings. He runs before he can hear anything else.

_We might not see each other for a long time, but we are both warriors out to achieve our goals._
look forward to seeing your face when you accomplish your dream only to realize you’ll have to make another one!

He doesn’t care that he hasn’t fulfilled his dream, doesn’t care that Kuina might not want to see him until then. She left him a sword, a letter, and a memory of being undefeatable—he didn’t leave her anything in return. This is his chance to show her how far he’s come and remind her that he’s the one she agreed to marry.

(He just wants to see her. Badly.)

Water 7 is huge, and that ends up working against him. It’s like the city moves to spite him, and he never makes it to the lower level where Chopper ran into Kuina. The city is well lit; it makes searching for kimono-pink sword-wings in the main areas easier. He searches the dark spots anyway. He figures that Kuina would try to make things difficult for him.

The sky lightens, and he finds a pair of oddly shining wings sitting on a stone fence. He hesitates. Clearly the wings are attached to someone, but he can’t make out anything else from this angle.

“Kuina?” He tries.

The wings shift. It’s a familiar face, but the eyes are different from Tashigi. Against the sunrise behind her, Kuina’s expression softens into a smile. He finds himself completely breathless.

“Zoro.”

The image of Kuina—a girl running around in shirts and shorts who scowls at him more often than not—breaks. Before him is a grown woman who looks to have come out of one of sensei’s paintings.

He expected many things upon meeting Kuina. The blushing, the painful stabbing in his chest, and his tongue twisting itself into knots was not part of it. It’s a foreign feeling, and he tries to focus on what he wants to say to her. Years he’s waited to see her, to challenge her again.

“I can’t believe you show up now of all times,” he says.

Crap. That’s not it. Thankfully Kuina doesn’t take offense and waits for a follow-up.

“One of my swords broke.”

Of course she’d show up just as he’s down to two. There’s no way he can fight Kuina at full strength without Yubashiri. He’ll just have to give it everything he’s got; he’s waited too long to run away now.

(It never crosses his mind that he wouldn’t need to use his best techniques against Kuina.)

“Tsubasa de Tobu,” Kuina says.

He doesn’t know what kind of precious mineral was used to make the pink blade, but the desire to see how well it stands up to his swords is strong. Sandai Kitetsu calls for blood, and Wado Ichimonji is resolute in his hands.

*Show me, Kuina. Show me that you’re better than a memory.*

As children, Kuina’s strikes were fast and precise. That hasn’t changed, only now the power that goes with each movement of her sword is staggering. He doesn’t know if she does it on purpose,
but she keeps deflecting his blows into the air. He has no doubt the two of them would destroy the very ground beneath their feet otherwise.

He loses Sandai Kitetsu first. He can hear the furious screaming of the sword, but he gives it no notice, focusing on wielding Wado Ichimonji. The clash between their blades causes shockwaves, and he knows this is it. The match will be decided by endurance between them.

He’s wrong of course. Kuina never did what anyone wanted her to. She catches his sword, pulls it down, and steps on the flat of the blade. Before he can understand what she’s doing, he’s forced to let go and is sent flying.

Hard stone meets his back, and staring up at the sky, he suddenly understands. He’s been disarmed; he lost. It’s over. When they were children, she’d have him on the ground in a second. At least it took longer this time.

Until the day I fight him again and win, I will never lose again.

“Are you going to cry?” Kuina asks, looking to be one moment away from poking him.

Hell no. He’s just resting, damn it.

“No, I lost. If it’s you, it’s okay.”

It’s surprising, but he means those words. For someone who came in and crushed his promise so casually, he can’t find it in himself to be angry. It’s possible that beating Kuina will be a bigger task than beating Mihawk. The thought only makes his heart race.

Kuina, in general, seems to make his heart race. She’s the same as he remembers, and yet, she seems so much more. Those eyes of hers still seem to look past the world, but they don’t seem so distant anymore.

“I only came to the Grand Line to find you. I wanted to see you,” Kuina says before nonchalantly taking a bite out of her dessert.

Now if she would stop saying such sappy things, he could calm himself down. How’s he supposed to react to such brutal words?

“I suppose I have a few other things to do while I’m here. There’s no signature on Tsubasa de Tobu. Yeah, isn’t it weird for such a well-made one?” Kuina remarks, noticing his look of disbelief. “I suppose now that I’ve found you, I’ll go looking for the maker.”

He tries not to let his disappointment show. He would never ask Kuina to abandon her newfound freedom, but the thought of them parting is unpleasant. He focuses on getting his brain to work, on getting to know this newer, happier Kuina.

Kuina had always been expressive with him, yet the girl he knew wore a frown as if it was her default expression. She smiles more now. He wonders if that’s what her freedom looks like.

(He never considers that she smiles because of him.)

He’s not much of a storyteller. While he’s used to swapping stories over sake or beer, embellishing with the arrogance of most sailors, he doesn’t feel like doing the same to Kuina. Most of his recounts come out stilted, short, and brutally honest.

“We defeated some nobodies, and got a ship, the Going Merry,” he says before pausing.
Usopp’s name is on the tip of his tongue. So many times he halts in the middle of regaling a story only to realize he’s about to mention his former crewmate. He works around it the best he can. Until they leave the island, he’ll give the idiot the benefit of not openly declaring desertion.

“I got these from an island in the sky,” Kuina says, wiggling her wings with a smile, “and from a friend, Shoya. They were a gift for helping solve some political problems.”

They walk around and keep talking. He’s not the talkative type, but he finds he doesn’t want to let her go. Part of him is afraid she’ll leave immediately; the other part just doesn’t want to deal with his crew and their annoying questions.

“Zoro, you still need to defeat him, don’t you? The world’s greatest swordsman,” Kuina says, leaning over the railing to watch people swim by.

He makes a noise of affirmation and feels something cold shoot through him. He remembers those rumors vividly.

“I met him. I hate to say it, but you’ll need to get much stronger to defeat him.”

It’s galling to hear that from Kuina who says it with such a tender expression.

“Kuina, what is your relationship with that man?” He finally asks.

“He kicked my ass into a wall. That’s it. Well, that and we ate dinner together. And he bought me some wine. I also need to find where he lives to get something back,” she answers.

He nods at the first part of the explanation only to freeze at her add-ons. With how strong Kuina is—and how strong her blade is—he has no doubt Mihawk saw how amazing Kuina is. Anyone would want to test their blade against her. That, and she probably said something scathing.

But wine and dinner? What? No, what the hell?

(“Zoro, you’re way too young to be drinking,” Kuina says, looking at his swiped goods in shock.

“The best fighters drink,” he says in return.

It took him time to stockpile, to swipe an extra bottle of sake from anyone dumb enough to leave it lying around. He’d been planning to gather enough to slowly build his tolerance, but he hadn’t planned on anyone finding out. He never expected that Kuina would barge into the room the moment he went to open a bottle.

“I hate it. Alcohol. It scares me, makes me feel like it’ll consume me,” Kuina admits before grabbing the sake out of his hands.

She dodges his attempts to get it back, and he can feel himself about to explode. Only the threat of being found out keeps him quiet.

“Let’s see what happens,” Kuina says and lifts the bottle up with a grim smile.

Twisting off the cap, she puts the bottle to her lips and drinks it all. Kuina doesn’t stop there, going through the rest of the bottles as if possessed. In the end, he doesn’t even get a sip.

She cries and throws up until there’s nothing left. He has to go get her father once she passes out, has to tell the man what he did. Kuina doesn’t get into trouble, but she does swear off alcohol for the rest of her life.)
If she kept her word like he knows she did, Kuina has a very low tolerance for alcohol. If Mihawk drank with Kuina, there’s no telling what happened. She doesn’t seem upset though. Is it possible Kuina admires the one who beat her? Does that mean she won’t look at him until he can best her?

“Was that something important to you?” He asks, not noticing how the railing cracks under his hands.

“Yes and no,” she shrugs. “I just don’t want him to have it.”

Something that is, but isn’t important. Something she doesn’t want Mihawk to have and isn’t willing to give it a name.

The first thing that pops into his head is some bastard in a bar bragging to his friends, “I grabbed her panties afterwards!” Pure rage fills him. He’ll kill Mihawk. He’ll kill him, he’ll kill him, he’ll kill—

“Behold, when I was recovering from being slammed into a wall, I made this.”

The most horrific thing in the world gets shoved in his face, and he doesn’t have time to curse before the world tries to drown him. Disturbing bright, yellow eyes sear themselves into his mind even as he fights to get back onto dry land.

They both flee the scene of the accident in case anyone comes demanding payment. He scowls once he sees that she’s still clutching the doll tightly to her chest. Why the hell did she make such a thing?

“I know the man’s an asshole, but you have problems,” Kuina says, rubbing a finger over the thing’s hat.

“Why did you even make it?” He growls, shooting the doll his best glare.

The worst part is that once he gets past the creepy, horrifying gaze, the doll is actually cute and well-made. He has no doubt Kuina poured an unreasonable amount of time into the thing. Even the small sword attached looks exactly like the one that tried to slice him open.

“Well, I was pissed off, bored, and unable to move. My original plan was to use it for target practice,” Kuina admits.

“There aren’t any holes in it,” he accuses.

“I didn’t have the heart to. Look into its eyes and tell me it’s not the most adorable thing ever,” Kuina says, holding up the doll so its eyes line up with his.

*Of course*, he thinks with something close to horror, *the eyes*. He knew Kuina had a fondness for unique looking ones. He can already see how she must have grown fond of the legendary Hawk-Eyes as she crafted the doll, kept him on her mind for so long. Those damn eyes.

“I will strike Dracule Mihawk down and wipe his existence from this world,” he hisses.

“I know you will,” Kuina says before patting him on the arm patronizingly.
Fight on, Zoro!
“Don’t you need to go back to your crew?”

She regrets the words as soon as they leave her mouth. She shouldn’t though. Zoro has people he travels with; they might need to know where is.

“Yeah, eventually,” Zoro says before flopping backwards and closing his eyes.

She shrugs and lies back too. With shade being cast from the building above them, the rooftop they ended up on is pretty nice. It’s peaceful, and lying here brings back memories of resting between training sessions.

“Our Log Pose already reset. Fish-Man Island,” Zoro grunts.

Fish-Man Island? Why does that strike a chord with her? She closes her eyes and breathes in time with her heartbeat. There was a promise she made—ah, the fishman.

“Isn’t that in Ryugu Kingdom? I need to go there,” she realizes.

It feels like a lifetime ago since she made that promise, but it really hasn’t been that long. Not with the damn time travel setting her back. She wonders if Tairona has even made it to the kingdom yet.

“You could come with us,” Zoro says.

The tenseness in his voice makes her wary. She’d be more than happy to catch a ride with pirates she can reasonably trust, but something in her gut tells her to consider the offer carefully.

“I’ll think about it,” she ends up saying. “You’ll need to ask your captain about it anyway.”

“I only need to point at you and say, ‘She’s coming with us,’ ” Zoro says flatly.

That makes her pause. From what she’s learned, pirate captains don’t take kindly to any of the crew making such decisions. Either Zoro overestimates his importance, or the Straw Hat pirates are a strange one.

“That would work? Really?” She asks in disbelief.

“Really. Wouldn’t hurt for you to meet him. He already knows about you,” Zoro tells her.

It seems her impression of Zoro being tight-lipped is wrong. She speculates on what he’s said about her. Only good things, she hopes. If not, she’ll have to dump him back into the canal.

“Alright, take me to see your captain,” she says, making her decision.

Perhaps she’ll get an answer to her question, the one she asked so long ago in Loguetown. What kind of captain is Monkey D. Luffy?

Zoro takes her to the Galley-La where his crew mostly hangs out. She doesn’t point it out when they pass the building at least three times. The fact that he can’t see the sign when it’s staring him in the face is hilarious.
“Hey, where have you been? Chopper’s been worried sick!” A woman with orange hair demands the moment they walk in.

“Harpy,” Zoro mutters to her.

This must be Nami then. Playing cards lie stacked on a table in a lone game, and she remembers Zoro saying that their navigator was the one most likely to find a non-destructive hobby during downtime. The woman glares at Zoro before taking notice of her.

“Oh, who’s this?” Nami asks, staring at her wings before moving to her pink sword.

“A friend of mine. She flew in,” Zoro says.

“Not by choice,” she reminds him before nodding in greeting. “I’m Kuina. Tell me if he’s said anything bad about me.”

He certainly didn’t say anything nice about Nami. Any compliments towards the woman came out begrudgingly and irritably. She wouldn’t be surprised if Zoro acted the same way about the girl that used to consistently beat him up.

“He hasn’t mentioned you at all. You’re not a Sky Person, are you?” Nami asks.

Nami leans an elbow against the table casually only to mess up a stack of cards. With the way the woman is eyeing her wings, she’s reminded of the fact that Nami is also an expert thief; she’s probably weighing the risks and payoffs of selling them. She tucks her wings in at the thought.

“Not technically,” she answers.

“So you and Zoro—” Nami looks between the two of them with raised eyebrows.

“Luffy’s not here. Let’s go,” Zoro says, making for the exit.

“Hey, wait a moment! Your bounty came in while you were out!” Nami waves to Zoro.

Pulling out a poster from a rucksack, Nami spreads it over the playing cards. Zoro’s leaning over the table in a flash, and she hesitates before stepping up beside him. It’s a close-up of Zoro’s bleeding face while an explosion goes off behind him. It makes for a cool poster, but the bounty underneath it—

120,000,000 beli. Damn.

“We all got bounties,” Nami says before laying out her own on top of Zoro’s. “Even Chopper. At least mine looks good.”

The poster’s picture might as well have been taken at a model shooting. Underneath Nami’s epithet of “Cat Burglar” is a price of 16,000,000. It’s incredibly high for someone who’s only a navigator. These Straw Hats really aren’t playing around.

Zoro hurries her out the door before she can do anything other than make eye contact with Nami. She gets the feeling that there’s a worry about something getting said, but she’s not sure what. She puts it to the back of her mind and continues to help look for Zoro’s wayward captain.

“I never understood why they called you ‘Pirate Hunter,’ ” she remarks, scanning the area for signs of a straw hat or an impossibly wide grin.

“It’s because I earned that name before I became a pirate. When I did the bounties.”
“I think your title should be something that suits you. Perhaps Crybaby Zoro? Or Not So Bright Zoro?” She teases.

“Your sense of humor still sucks,” Zoro notes dryly.

She sees a flash of what could be a straw hat in the corner of her eye, and it makes her grab the back of Zoro’s shirt. He must not feel the tugging because he doesn’t stop, causing her to trip into his back. He goes rigid, and she glances down at the scabbard that hits her leg.

“Is that a scuff on Wado Ichimonji? I’ll need to make an inspection.” She pushes herself off of Zoro and attempts to find the source of the flash.

She was joking, but when she looks back, Zoro is in the middle of taking Wado Ichimonji off. She can only look on, dumbfounded, as he presents it to her. His face is completely serious as he holds up the katana for her.

“Don’t do that. The sword is yours. It belongs to the greatest swordsman of the future,” she tells him.

She knows by their duel how seriously Zoro treats the blade. Wado Ichimonji is better off in his hands than hers. She holds too many bad feelings towards it, so there’s no need for Zoro to act otherwise.

“Zorooo, where’ve you been?”

It’s the only warning they get before something slams into Zoro’s back. She moves quickly. Wado Ichimonji lands into her arms, and she steps out of the way of Zoro’s fall into the stone pavement.

“We got our bounties but you weren’t there! You should totally see Sanji’s! Shishishishi, his face is funny.”

Monkey D. Luffy, she thinks, is just as loud as she thought he’d be. Arms stretching impossibly, Luffy laughs at Zoro’s attempts to stand and shake him off. The scene looks absurdly like a monkey holding onto a moss-covered rock.

This is your master and his master, she thinks while petting the white katana with sympathy.

“Get off, Luffy!” Zoro shouts, trying to dislodge the rubbery arms strangling him.

“Hey, who are you?” Luffy asks, only now noticing her.

The Straw Hat captain lets go of Zoro and falls to the ground. Wide eyes and a dopey grin make him look a foolish boy, but she notices that his grin grows a little sharper and his eyes a little colder upon seeing Wado Ichimonji in her hold.

Not completely stupid then. She tilts her head and examines the man. She’s not impressed, but there has to be a reason that Zoro’s so enthralled with him.

“This is my betrothed,” Zoro declares, nodding at her.

His what?

“Oh! You’re Zoro’s sword!” Luffy says, slamming a fist against his hand in realization.

His what?
“No wonder you’re holding that. Zoro, we’re going to see our new ship tomorrow! Don’t forget to bring Wado with you,” Luffy points at her.

“It’s Wado Ichimonji.” Both Zoro and she say immediately.

“You should really think about changing your name. It’s way too long,” Luffy says, getting up to lean into her personal space.

“I’m Kuina,” she says, feeling something of a headache coming on.

“Great, that’ll be easier to say! Chopper’s buying me some ice-cream. I better go before he eats it all,” Luffy says before grabbing the ground and walking backwards. “Don’t marry Hawk-Eyes!”

Luffy shoots off like a rubber band, and she feels something in her brain break. Betrothed—Hawk-eyes—sword—what?

“That,” she tries and fails to say. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“No one ever does,” Zoro says solemnly.

Zoro and she look for something to eat, and they end up at a table for two outside by the water. She traces the rim of her wine glass and tries to put her thoughts in order. She’s been silent so far, unable to question anything. The fact that Zoro orders wine for her escapes her.

“Did your captain just call me a sword?” She starts with.

“I think he called you Wado Ichimonji,” Zoro smirks, “but he’s already accepted your presence aboard our ship. We never had to say anything.”

It’s said knowingly, like of course the captain would somehow already know what they wanted to ask. Belatedly, she realizes she never actually got an answer to her question: what kind of captain is Monkey D. Luffy?

“Zoro, when you said I was your betrothed—” She begins before the words die in her throat.

“That was the agreement for Wado Ichimonji,” Zoro says.

She can already see it; see a tiny, stupid Zoro taking the so-called engagement seriously. When she left all those years ago, she had forgotten to mention it in her letter, had thought Zoro would know she wasn’t being serious. Worst case, she had arrogantly thought, she’d never see Zoro again, and he’d give up and move on.

“Oh,” she says into her wine.

She really was something, wasn’t she? How long did she keep Zoro chained down to a contract made as a child?

“Zoro, what did my father say to you regarding me and Wado Ichimonji?” She asks tentatively.

“I have until I’m twenty-five to become the world’s greatest swordsman, or you’ll marry Mihawk,” he says bluntly.

She nearly falls out of her chair at that. What the hell, father. Wasn’t the agreement of marrying the greatest swordsman near her age? When did Mihawk factor in, and how come she never knew about it?
“Zoro, you’re misunderstanding,” she says, hiding her face behind a sleeve. “I don’t have anything going on with Mihawk, but I don’t have anything going on with you either. Wado Ichimonji is my gift to you, but you don’t have to do anything in return.”

“We made a promise,” Zoro eventually says. “I’ll convince you of it.”

“What, are you going to seduce me?” She asks mockingly.

The damning silence gives her a small heart attack. She takes a peek at Zoro only to move her eyes to her wine glass. That serious expression of his is making her want to run away.

“Come with us to Fish-Man Island,” Zoro says with an intensity she can’t ignore. “I can prove to you that there’s a home waiting for you with me.”

“A home sounds nice,” she whispers, “but I’m not sure you’ll find one with me. I’m not very lovable.”

“You don’t have to be, to still be loved,” Zoro points out.

Her brain sputters to a halt. Really, how is she supposed to deal with all this? What is she supposed to say? As if understanding her dilemma, Zoro excuses himself to check up on his captain.

“If you don’t want to come, you can wait for them to fix the sea train. It won’t take long, and this isn’t a bad place to stay,” Zoro throws over his shoulder.

She continues staring into her wine blankly as she runs everything through her head. To still be loved, he said.

…love? What does she know about romantic love? She doesn’t experience sexual attraction; it’s impossible for her. But there had been exceptions in the last life.

There was his best friend, the man with the beautiful smile. Pursuit of that romance had been nigh impossible, and he gave up quietly, miserably. The second was a woman who was deemed more acceptable by society and his mother. Then she broke him in a way no one else had.

She’s not sure she can stomach the pain of love again. She’s not sure she can put Zoro through being in a relationship with someone so bad at it. Zoro deserves better than that, than her.

Downing the wine in one go, she ends up ordering an entire bottle to guzzle down. The terrible part of this whole mess is that she’s honestly not that opposed to the idea. If she was, it would have been an easy rejection on her part.

She ends up walking to the train station. Looking up at the sign declaring it to be “Down for Maintenance,” she wonders how long it would take. It’d be nice to travel by train for once instead of sailing. That might take the fun out of exploring though.

If she goes with the Straw Hats, with Zoro, wouldn’t that make it harder to sort out her thoughts? Could she stay on the same ship with him and not get muddled further?

She could stay here until the train is repaired or until another pirate ship comes through. She could even stay in her hotel room until Zoro leaves if she wanted to. She doesn’t though.

She doesn’t want to say goodbye to Zoro. She wants to stay by his side and laugh at his stupid stunts and watch the clouds together. She wants to keep seeing new things, wants to turn to Zoro and say, “Did you see that?”
But she doesn’t want to give him false hope if her feelings don’t work out, if she wants to only be friends.

(She doesn’t want Zoro to see the real her and say, “Ew.” Her heart can’t take that again.)

Her thoughts take her in circles and night falls before she realizes it. The noise around her seems amplified for some reason, and she ends up on the same building from earlier. The lights all around the city give the place a dim glow.

“I just don’t know!” She yells before collapsing against the roof.

There’s no one to get advice from. She’s only met the Straw Hat pirates since she got here, and whatever they have to say will be heavily biased in Zoro’s favor.

Staring up at the sky in defeat, an idea hits her. No matter how she feels like it, she isn’t alone. Her hand moves to Tsubasa de Tobu’s hilt, and she removes the katana from her hip, scabbard and all.

“Wherever your blade lands is where I’ll go. Strike true, Tsubasa de Tobu,” she says before tossing the sword up.

The sword spins in the air, and she holds her breath. Her fate rests on the katana’s decision. It lands with a loud clack, and she follows the direction of the scabbard with her eyes.

“So there then? I see. Thank you,” she tells the sword.

Tsubasa de Tobu has never led her wrong yet. Even if she has misgivings about where it points her to, she goes to tell Zoro the results the following morning.

“I’ve made up my mind. I’m not a pirate,” she says, bursting through Galley-La’s doors.

The Straw Hats all have bags in hand, and she examines the entirety of the crew. Luffy stands frozen in the middle of waving his arms and shouting something, and Nami blinks at her from a chair. Sanji gapes at her next to Chopper whose bag droops to the floor. The woman leaning against the wall must be Robin, who stares at her silently.

“Which means I’ll be paying my way on board as a passenger. Please take care of me,” she says with a small bow.

Zoro smiles at her, and she smiles back.

Chapter End Notes

It's thanks to your nagging lovely comments that this fic made it past chapter 1. Pat yourselves on the back! Now pat yourselves on your back again. This chapter was the planned ending after that, but now it's just the end of Season 1.

I'll be taking a small break, but I doubt it'll even take a month. Please don't let me choke on my words.
The Straw Hats are certainly different from any other crew she’s met. She knew they would be just from having met most of them one-on-one, but it’s different to see them all together. Their gushing over their new ship makes her smile unconsciously.

“It’s a lawn! Our deck has grass!” Luffy shouts, rolling around with a laugh.

“We have a slide!” Chopper yells, going down the aforementioned slide.

She leans over the railing from the upper part of the deck to watch as these fearsome pirates run around like children. Nami converses with the shipwrights from the dock—there’s a lot of gesturing and excited pointing towards the sails—and Robin sits down on the deck’s tree swing with a small smile. Sanji vanishes after muttering something about a kitchen, and happy shrieks begin coming from the floor beneath her.

“It’s so much bigger than our last ship,” Zoro mentions, leaning against the railing next to her.

There’s an awed tone in his voice as he takes in the sight. It really is impressive; the ship is a luxury cruise compared to every other ship she’s been on. She can only be envious of how grand Zoro’s new home is.

“Hey, where’s Franky? I need to thank him!” Luffy scrambles to the railing and calls down to the shipwrights.

Franky is the one responsible for building such a magnificent, three-story ship. The only things she knows about him is that he’s a cyborg that helped rescue Robin from the World Government, he wears nothing but swim briefs, and he runs on cola of all things. Zoro wasn’t keen to say much more than that.

“Franky didn’t come because he was sure you’d ask him to join you. He’s afraid he wouldn’t be able to turn you down. You’ll need to take him by force,” one of the shipwrights says.

“Can we?” Luffy asks excitedly.

As only a guest, she can’t do much more than watch as the Straw Hats put their heads together to come up with a plan. The places their minds go to are certainly far from the norm.

“We just need to knock him out,” Zoro says bluntly.

“We need him to agree, idiot!” Nami growls.

“Bribe him with cola!” Chopper suggests next.

“He has plenty of cola,” Sanji points out.

There’s a pause as the group continues thinking of ways to get the man to join.

“What is something that is important to him?” Robin’s question is more in line with the normal way pirates do things; the answer is anything but.
“Alright! We’ll take his briefs and tell him he has to join to get them back!” Luffy announces.

Monkey D. Luffy is a pirate captain with a bounty of 300,000,000 beli. She tells herself that even as the rest of the Straw Hats begin figuring out how to steal the man’s swim briefs. They talk about shoving Franky into a cannon and aiming it at the ship.

“It might work, knowing that guy,” Zoro says at her blank stare.

She will say it again: the Straw Hats are different compared to any other pirates she’s ever met.

When the plan goes into action, she’s given front row seats to one of the most absurd schemes to obtain a master ship builder. Through a convoluted game of keep away, the Straw Hats lure Franky to the ship. When the pantless man arrives, she gets a good look at everything. Everything.

“Give me back my briefs!” A tall blue-haired man with a silver nose and grossly oversized forearms shouts.

“Join my crew!” Luffy waves the briefs.

“Don’t assume you can make me join for that reason alone!”

“A man among men!” Luffy says in awe as Franky poses with everything flapping in the wind.

She doesn’t think his admiration will have much sway in getting the man to join. If anything this whole scenario is making her reconsider traveling with Zoro’s crew. Her sanity might not survive until Fish-Man Island.

“If you’ll allow me to be a little violent,” Robin says, crossing her arms, “I can help you out.”

What happens next is so brutal that her wings move to protect her crotch on reflex. Arms grow out from Franky’s thighs—Robin’s Devil Fruit ability, she remembers—and grab hold. The screams that Franky makes are loud and high-pitched.

“She’s pulling them off like oranges!” Someone shouts.

What follows after is a lot of crying about following one’s dream and not letting the past consume, but it doesn’t mean much to her. She has no idea what’s going on other than the fact there is a man wearing only an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, sobbing on the ground as hands remain wrapped around his testicles.

She does understand one thing though: do not anger Nico Robin.

“Your Grandpa’s come back, Luffy! He’s looking for us!” Zoro announces, appearing behind Franky.

“Prepare to set sail!” Sanji orders before getting an eyeful of Franky. “You haven’t gotten your briefs back yet?”

“Whoops, here you go, Franky!” Luffy says, throwing the clothing to Franky. “Now get on my ship!”

“Yes! I, Franky, will be the Straw Hats’ shipwright!” The cyborg declares proudly.

“Great! Now hurry and put your briefs back on.”

While Franky finishes his goodbyes in dramatic nudity, she catches Zoro’s attention to ask,
“Luffy’s Grandpa?”

“Vice Admiral Marine. Monkey D. Garp,” Zoro answers with a grimace.

The name certainly rings a bell. It comes up time from time in history books and newspapers. Monkey D. Garp, legendary Hero of the Marines and Luffy’s grandfather. Who’s currently heading their way. Lovely. She did say she’d stay by Zoro’s side even against the world, but she wasn’t expecting this kind of fight the very next day.

“Let’s go,” Luffy orders.

“You sure? What about Usopp?” Franky asks.

“I waited but he didn’t show. This is what he’s decided. We’ll see him again, I know it,” Luffy says.

The Straw Hats seem downcast at the news, and she stares at the grass deck awkwardly. She has no idea who they’re talking about, but it’d be a terrible time to ask.

“Luffy, this is your Grandpa!” A loud voice screeches from a Marine ship that appears suddenly from around the island.

“I thought you weren’t going to arrest us!” Luffy howls back.

“Sorry, command didn’t like that! I’m going to need you to die now!”

A cannonball destroys the wreckage next to them faster than a blink of the eye, and she stares at the smoking remains in bafflement. That wasn’t shot from a canon. It was thrown.

(If that’s Haki, her throwing knives could become weapons of mass destruction. It’s a thought for later.)

The ship leaves port, but cannonballs fly towards them like a rapid-fire machine gun. She takes position at the stern while the Straw Hats deflect and destroy the rest. Someone screams at them from the dock they just left, but she’s too busy slicing the projectiles in half to pay it much mind. She does notice that these cannonballs aren’t coming at them nearly as fast as the first one though.

“I’M SORRY! I’m sorry for being stubborn! I was wrong!”

She nearly trips at the sudden, heart-rending plea. There’s a pause in the barrage of cannonballs as if the Vice Admiral is also taken by surprise.

“PLEASE MAKE ME YOUR CREW ONE MORE TIME!”

The sheer tears in that scream could make even the hardest of hearts quake. She keeps a watchful eye, but nothing flies towards the ship even as Luffy stretches an arm impossibly long back to the island behind them.

“You idiot! Hurry and grab my hand!” The pirate captain cries.

“You’re the idiot,” Zoro smirks.

“So lame,” Nami laughs with tears in her eyes.

Once the person—Usopp, she supposes—is onboard by way of Luffy snapping his arm back, the firing resumes. Franky reveals he built a secret weapon that can outrun the Marines; it requires
Taking in the sails, but—

“We got to name the ship before we can leave!” Franky says as if that’s obvious.

They are literally being bombarded by cannonballs. She continues covering for these idiots while they discuss names. She learns that none of them are allowed to name anything, ever.

“The ship that’s destined to be sailed by the future Pirate King! A ship that crosses thousands of cruel seas as a cheerful sun! Thousand Sunny! That’s what Iceberg came up with while I was building it. Personally I prefer—”

“Thousand Sunny is great!” The Straw Hats agree, overruling Franky.

She helps Zoro take in the sail, and Franky disappears below. Vice Admiral Garp sends an iron ball larger than the ship at them—how, seriously how?—and there are shouts for Franky to hurry the hell up.

Vibrations shoot through her legs, and she has no warning as she’s thrown back. Thousand Sunny’s secret weapon to outrun the Marines attacking them is apparently a rocket engine attached to the ship. The Thousand Sunny takes to the sky, and she learns the reason Franky ordered the sails up.

Her attempts to fold in her wings fail against the sudden force, and she holds on to the railing for dear life. Considering the Straw Hats seem to be able to stand around relatively unaffected while she’s flapping like a flag in the wind, she calls bullshit.

“Hold on, Kuina!” Zoro moves to grab her wrist.

“I’m holding,” she says through gritted teeth.

Zoro yanks her down and throws her into the nearby cabin. She stares up at the dining hall’s ceiling and wonders how many times this crew is going to try to kill her unintentionally. They haven’t even made it out to sea yet. She takes a seat at the table and waits until the ship descends into the ocean before coming out.

Luffy wastes no time in demanding alcohol be brought out for a celebration.

“I’ll make something to go with it. Perhaps some tempura,” Sanji mutters.

She decides to explore the ship while the Straw Hats scatter to set up on deck. The ship is absolutely massive, and with such a small crew, she should be able to find somewhere to enjoy the solitude.

“You know there’s a ladder in the kitchen to get up there?” Zoro calls up to her once she’s halfway up the rigging to the crow’s nest.

“No, I just enjoy the workout!” She replies back with a scowl.

She rolls her eyes when it sounds like Zoro takes her words seriously—he’s muttering something about climbing with weights on—and continues on. The crow’s nest is actually an enclosed observation room, and outside of it is a garden.

It’s probably a good place to meditate. She goes down the ladder and finds herself in a library. There are chairs and a table, and for a single moment, she’s a small kid taking a break from endless training. Her hand reaches for the shelves, but she manages to stop herself.
The Straw Hats may place an unusual amount of trust in her due to Zoro, but she doesn’t belong here. These books aren’t hers to read, and she’ll need to take care about using up resources on limited funds. She leaves and keeps exploring until it’s time to break open the cask of beer.

“Now then, to Robin and Usopp who came back! To our new crew, Franky and Thousand Sunny!” Luffy grins, one long, rubber arm wiggling in excitement and threatening to spill his drink.

“To old friends.” Zoro nods in her direction.

“CHEERS!”

She lifts her mug with theirs and tries not to look like she’d rather be anywhere else. Socialization was never her strong point, but for Zoro, she’ll try. It helps that these people are quite friendly for pirates.

“Sorry, about you almost flying off from the Coup de Burst! Didn’t realize you can’t put the wings away. They looked like they have a fold in function. Hey, if you want I can take a look at them and —” Franky’s eyes glitter with a joy only found in children with new toys.

“No. Thank you. They are a gift, and I like them as they are,” she says immediately.

The man is tall, loud, and intimidating, but at Franky’s sullen “Okay,” she can only see a disappointed little boy. She won’t have anyone messing with her wings, but perhaps the engineer can work it out of his system by making blueprints.

“I wouldn’t mind if you designed a backup pair,” she says.

“I can do that! They’ll be super! Great!” Franky eyes light up fiercely, and she knows she’s made a mistake.

She puts some distance from Franky once he takes out a sketch pad, and she nearly bumps into Usopp. The curly-haired, long-nosed man is not someone Zoro ever mentioned to her, and she can’t help but wonder why.

“Hello,” she says in an attempt to be friendly.

“Uh, hi? You’re Zoro’s friend, right?” Usopp says, eyeing her with apprehension.

“Yes.”

“So, you’re a swordsman too?”

“Yes.”

She gets the feeling that things are not progressing smoothly in the conversation when nothing is said next. She falls back on the only speech tactic she knows. Asking questions and making the other person talk about themselves.

“So what do you do with the Straw Hats?”

This too, is a mistake once Usopp launches into a fantastical tale about being a former captain of a world-class pirate crew that rivaled the Pirate King of legend before a mermaid lured away his crew. When she looks to her left, Luffy and Chopper are there beside her, listening in with rapt attention.

The moment Usopp turns around dramatically to continue his passionate story, she slides away and
finds Zoro leaning against a cabin wall. She looks at Usopp before looking back at him.

“He’s a good shot. He shoots things and keeps those two entertained,” Zoro says.

“And you didn’t tell me about him?”

“I would have if he hadn’t gotten on the ship.”

A sore point then. After the dramatic way Usopp came onto the ship, she can fill in the blanks. She hopes she’s not responsible for causing any abandonment issues.

“You haven’t touched your drink,” Zoro notes.

She looks down at her mug of beer and frowns. She took a sip when she was sure everyone was watching, but it’s most definitely not her alcohol of choice. She looks around to make sure no one’s paying them any attention and pours most of her beer into Zoro’s nearly empty mug. He raises an eyebrow at the action.

“I’m very picky,” she says.

Once the celebrations wind down, the next thing is to sort the room situation out. Franky built two quarters: the men’s and the women’s. There are no guest quarters, so she’ll need to either stay in one or have something set up for her in another place.

“Just room with us!” Nami tells her.

“Absolutely not! That person cannot stay there at any costs!” Sanji roars.

The other Straw Hats blink at Sanji with confusion. Zoro snorts softly into his mug, and she does her best to keep a straight face.

“What seems to be the problem?” Robin asks.

Sanji’s been pretending she doesn’t exist ever since she paid Nami for passage. He never once mentioned what she told him, but the amusement in the woman’s eyes makes her wonder if Robin already knows.

“That’s a man!” Sanji yells while pointing at her.

Everyone turns to look at her, and she takes a sip of her mug to avoid saying anything. She replaced the terrible tasting beer with some grape juice. It’s very nice.

“Eh? Are you?” Chopper asks with wide eyes.

“For you, I’m a woman,” she tells the reindeer serenely.

“Hey, aren’t you a sword?” Luffy asks with a tilt of his head.

“Yes.” Why the hell not.

Unsure of anything, Sanji turns to Zoro and gestures towards her with two hands. If he expects either Zoro or her to say it’s all one big joke, the cook has another thing coming to him. The swordsman smirks at Sanji and declares,

“Kuina is Kuina.”
In the end, she bunks with Nami and Robin. There’s simply more room in the women’s quarters. She does take out her suit to iron later which makes Nami stare. Franky assured her there’s a laundry room here with all the conveniences, and she wants to look her best. Perhaps she’ll borrow a dress later out of spite.

Sanji, unable to make up his mind about her, serves her breakfast without the fanfare that he gives Nami and Robin. Her food is still noticeably better prepared than any of the men; a fact that Zoro is quick to point out.

“Maybe if you suddenly become visually pleasing,” Sanji scoffs. “Of course, not even a Devil Fruit will make that happen.”

“At least I don’t have curly eyebrows,” Zoro replies with a scowl.

She leans an elbow against the table and watches the ensuing scuffle with interest. Zoro gives off a mature appearance, but whenever Sanji speaks, it’s like he reverts to a child. It sort of makes her want to push his face into the dirt.

As if sensing her increasing desire to hit him, Zoro aborts his kick at Sanji to turn to her. A spike of sudden bloodlust fills the dining room, and she smiles. Sanji and the ones remaining at the table, Usopp and Chopper, back away silently.

“I challenge you,” Zoro says with narrow eyes.

“You’re going to lose,” she laughs.

They begin their duel outside on the lawn. Both of them swear to reign in the worst of their techniques and to not damage the ship before crossing blades. It is a lot harder to remember that oath once they begin dancing around the deck, up the stairs, and even onto the figurehead’s spikes.

This isn’t like the old days; Zoro’s able to take her hits and keep going. It makes her blood sing, and Tsubasa de Tobu shrieks in delight. She wins once she sends Zoro flying into the mast.

Even though their sudden audience claps politely while she struggles to get her breath back, their fight ends up destroying part of the ship. Franky rushes to fix it immediately, but it’s Nami who starts screaming.

“No more! No more fighting! I’m charging you both!” The harpy screeches.

She trades glances with Zoro who makes a face. It really is difficult to spar on the ship while holding back. Perhaps on Fish-Man Island then.

To calm herself from the rush, she meditates in the garden outside the observation room. She’s able to ignore the ruckus below her until a bright light flashes through her eyelids. She moves and opens her eyes just in time to see the sky completely lit up.

“What trouble are they getting into this time?” She rubs her eyes with a sigh.

The sky goes back to normal, and she soon learns the morons set off a flare from a barrel labeled treasure that was floating in the sea.

“It was a trap!”

“Did we alert anyone?”
“Hey, up there! Do you see anyone anywhere?"

She’s starting to suspect stupidly poking things is the Straw Hat pirates’ mode of operation.

(He’s not one to talk; quite a few people would say if they ever heard her thoughts.)

Chapter End Notes

Aaand we're back! Welcome to Season 2. I promise it won't all be a rehash, but right now Kuina is essentially that kid having a sleepover at their friend's house for the first time.

Also, check out this fanart! It's StardustClearwater's view on what Tsubasa de Tobu's spirit looks like! It's amazing!

https://imgur.com/gallery/yJm1jzv
Whether the flare the Straw Hats set off signaled someone to their position or not is irrelevant because a raging storm approaches immediately.

“Everyone to your positions! It’ll be here in five minutes,” Nami warns.

She’s been given some instructions on what to do in case there’s a need for her help, but the only thing the Straw Hats want from her is to stay inside so she doesn’t go flying off again. While she is merely a guest, she doesn’t care for sitting at the dining room table with nothing to do either.

When the rough weather sends her crashing to the floor one too many times, she debates the merit of staying on a ship manned by eight people. Zoro opens the cabin door just as she’s decided against getting up.

“Why are you lying on the floor?” He asks.

“I’m contemplating life,” she replies dully.

“Well, do that some other time. Fog’s come in, and there might be something in it.”

There’s a wariness in the way Zoro looks over his shoulder, and she’s out the door without a word. Thick fog rolls around the ship, giving an unsettling feeling to everything it touches, and the only thing she can see is the Straw Hats making fools of themselves.

“Seems we’re in the famous Florian Triangle where everything disappears mysteriously,” Franky smirks.

“And monsters show up here!” Luffy grins. “Old Lady Kokoro told us there’re living skeletons here.”

Usopp begins screaming at that, but judging from the evil smiles on everyone’s faces, this is nothing more than a myth. The Florian Triangle sounds a lot like the Bermuda Triangle actually. She can’t remember if the disappearances there were just a myth or not.

“Every year, over a hundred ships vanish mysteriously,” Sanji says, lighting a match to hold under his face, “but ghost ships carrying corpses wander these waters, so they say.”

Chopper begins screaming with Usopp. Before she can make up her mind about saying something herself, there’s a prickling sensation on the back of her neck. She looks around at the fog with unease.

“Yo hohoho,” a faint voice sings through the fog, “Yo hohoho.”

She whirls around, one hand on her sword, only to be met with a large, dilapidated ship. The fog swirls around the haunting figure with its shredded sails, missing chunks, and rotted wood. The ship swerves around theirs at the last possible moment, and the singing grows in volume.

“GHOST SHIP!” All of the Straw Hats yell at once.

She clutches her ears at the sudden noise. Usopp begins screeching about curses, Chopper cries
about being dragged into the sea, and Luffy bounces towards the railing to get a better look. The more reasonable part of the crew notices the same thing she does.

“There’s someone on the ship,” Robin says.

“Definitely,” Sanji agrees.

“If it’s an enemy, I’ll just cut him down.” Zoro’s words match her own thoughts.

As the so-called ghost ship passes the Thousand Sunny, she can make out a figure looking at them from the railing. It makes her heart stop for a moment. There, staring at them through empty eye sockets, is a skeleton in a fancy suit, wearing a top hat over bushy hair. It is drinking out of a teacup.

“It's time to ship out Binks' brew,” the skeleton sings hauntingly.

She draws Tsubasa de Tobu, and it's only because Zoro grabs her arm that she doesn’t jump onto the ghost ship. She watches it move away with narrow eyes.

“That has to be the treasure from the barrel! Let’s go after it!” Luffy says.

“Are you crazy?” Nami shouts.

She gives Zoro an unimpressed stare as she sheaths her katana.

“Don’t look at me like that. We would have had to go get you,” he points out.

He looks distinctly uncomfortable at her sullen silence, so she decides to let it go. With the Thousand Sunny catching up to the drifting ship in no time, she’ll have another chance. She’s going to grind it into dust before setting the ashes on fire.

“Luffy, please don’t,” Chopper pleads through teary eyes as their ship nears the dilapidated one.

“I can go by myself, but I’m going,” Luffy announces.

The captain jumps onto the railing, and Franky keeps the Thousand Sunny moving at the same slow speed as the larger ship. She moves forward, craning her neck to get a better look. Honestly, though the vessel is run down, it doesn’t seem unnaturally so.

“You can’t be thinking of going up there too!” Usopp tells her.

She’s impressed he can see her intentions clearly through the tears in his eyes. Usopp’s trembling hands are quickly twisting paper together in the shape of a cross. She doubts it will ward off evil, but she sort of wants to know where he learned it from.

“Stay here,” Zoro demands when she grabs the railing to heft herself up. “I don’t want to come get you.”

“Are they afraid of ghosts as well?” Robin asks

The woman glances at Chopper who cries so hard there’s now a puddle by his hooves. Usopp keeps working on his paper cross behind the reindeer. Zoro snorts at the two of them before looking at her with exasperation.

“No,” she answers from the railing.
“Not afraid, vengeful. Kuina once thought a woman came back as a zombie and set her house on fire,” Zoro says.

Ah, yes, the makeup lady who died from lead poisoning. Her son wanted to keep the body untouched in the house until he could get his siblings. She’d been one of the unfortunate tasked with bringing in the ice to keep the body cool. While Zoro called her crazy afterwards, she knows she saw that woman’s body move.

The blame went to a kid who always tried to bully her; she’d convinced everyone—kid included—that he knocked over a prayer candle on his way out. She’d only meant to set the body on fire, she had whispered to Zoro later.

(It’s a lie; they both know it, but she’ll never say otherwise.)

“Ghosts are fine. Undead are an abomination,” she states firmly.

There’s fallen rigging hanging off the ship’s side, and before anyone can stop her, she jumps onto it and climbs. Luffy, as if feeling challenged, begins clambering up the rigging beside her, quickly surpassing her.

“Why are we doing this?” Nami screeches below them.

“I told you I can do this by myself. Go back to the ship,” Luffy says.

“No way, we’ll get cursed if it's just you!”

“Don’t worry, my lovely Nami, I’ll protect you,” Sanji croons from next to Nami.

Before the bickering can start in earnest, a skull appears above them. Nami and Sanji both scream, and she narrows her eyes. With her heart beating in her ears, she climbs faster.

Luffy beats her to the top only by a moment. She takes one look at the towering skeleton with its old-fashioned suit—in one bony hand is an old, chipped teacup, and there’s a cane which hangs over an arm—and draws her sword.

“You won’t be getting anymore souls, Tall Man!” She declares, pointing Tsubasa de Tobu at its target.

“Hold on, I’m not the one stealing shadows!” The skeleton man begins waving a hand frantically.

“Wait, Wado! It’s a talking skeleton with an afro! I need to ask it something important!” Luffy says.

Nami and Sanji, having caught up with them, make something of a garbled noise at the moving skeleton in front of them. She glares at Luffy before taking a step back. The pirate captain looks up at the skeleton and asks in all seriousness,

“Do you poop?”

“Indeed, I do,” the skeleton answers.

“There are better questions to ask!” Sanji howls.

If it can take a shit, it’s physical and can be killed. Good enough for her. As if sensing her mood, Luffy steps right in front of her blade and faces the skeleton with his hands on his hips.
“Hey, join my crew!” Luffy demands.

“Okay,” the skeleton agrees instantly.

“Now you can’t kill him! Zoro won’t allow it.” Luffy turns around to grin at her.

She debates the merits of trying to go around the pirate captain anyway. It’s true she’s surrounded, but she might be quick enough to finish off the skeleton before she can be stopped. It’d make Zoro come at her with the intent to kill though. Damn Luffy and his logic. It’s actually correct.

“Fine. Bring the abomination to your ship,” she says, trying not to look upset.

She doesn’t sheathe her sword until she’s gliding back to the Thousand Sunny. When she touches down on the grass, she’s immediately surrounded by concerned faces.

“The ship hasn’t been destroyed,” Zoro says in wonder.

“Are they okay?” Chopper asks, fiddling with his own paper cross in worry.

“Thank your captain,” she says to Zoro somewhat tetchily before turning to Chopper. “They’re fine. Hope you know how to treat living skeletons.”

She doesn’t say any more than that, choosing to keep her focus on the ship where the creature is. She folds her arms into her kimono sleeves and waits.

When the missing Straw Hats jump down with their new member, she stays behind Zoro. Not out of fear, but a reminder what will happen if she gives in to her instincts.

“Yohohoho, how do you do? I’m ‘Dead-Bones’ Brook. Nice to meet you!” The skeleton, Brook, says with a tip of his hat.

“What the hell?” is the reaction from the rest of the Straw Hats.

Unsurprisingly, no one takes the talking skeleton well. Usopp and Chopper immediately offer their crosses and prayers, Robin cuts her eyes sharply when Brook asks to see her panties, and Zoro demands an explanation.

“He’s funny, so I made him part of our crew,” Luffy laughs.

“Like hell! I won’t accept that! You two,” Zoro turns to Nami and Sanji angrily, “you were supposed to stop him from doing anything stupid!”

“Sorry.” Nami and Sanji look down immediately.

“Well, it’s not getting any warmer out! Let’s go inside and have dinner,” Brook says jovially.

Luffy is the sole person happy to be sitting at the table with the abomination. She, herself, refuses to sit with it and chooses to watch from the bar with Franky. The skeleton bangs on the table, demanding food while Sanji curses from the kitchen.

“By the way, Koropokkuru—” Luffy begins.

“It’s Brook,” the skeleton says before pausing. “Excuse me, I don’t know your name.”

“I’m Luffy. By the way, what the hell are you?”
“You two don’t even know each other’s names?” A vein in Zoro’s forehead pops out from sheer anger.

A plate of stir-fry is placed behind her on the bar counter, and Sanji moves quickly to give the Straw Hats their meal. She ends up juggling the plate in her lap in order to keep an eye on Brook.

“It’s time to eat. We’ll postpone kicking the skeleton out until afterwards,” Sanji says, sitting down at the bar with Franky and her.

Neither Franky nor Sanji are uncomfortable enough to eat with their back against the counter, but she notices they aren’t fully relaxed either. Focusing on keeping her desire to kill under wraps, she barely tastes the food.

“The Yomi Yomi no Mi,” the skeleton finally says once the plates are empty. “A Devil Fruit with the power of revival. I was promised a second chance as a revived human. How wonderful, I thought!”

Here the skeleton picks its teeth as if reminiscing before making a loud series of burps. Sanji’s eye starts twitching, and Brook continues its tale before the cook can start kicking.

“I was a pirate back in the old days. On that ship you saw earlier, I arrived to this sea along with my crew. We were engaged with quite the fearsome foes! That was when I died.”

“The Devil Fruit, when I was alive, only gave me the inability to swim. But then, that day, at last the fruit’s ability activated. My soul returned from the underworld!”

“If I had returned immediately, I would have been resurrected as I was. But, as you’ve noticed, there’s a thick fog on this sea, and I got lost.”

“My soul wandered around this fog for a whole year! When I found my body, it was only bones. I was utterly surprised that I didn’t even have my eyeballs! Yohohoho!”

“You’re as stupid as Zoro, huh?” Luffy comments.

“Hey!” Zoro scowls.

Brook’s story goes a long way in easing the Straw Hats hostility. She supposes it makes sense; Devil Fruits, while strange and magical, are a natural part of the world. It doesn’t lessen Brook’s feeling of unnaturalness to her senses though.

“So you still can’t swim, right?” Franky asks but receives no answer.

“When a body rots away, so does the hair. But you have an afro,” Zoro notes.

“The roots of my hair are strong,” Brook says glibly.

“Are you a ghost or not?” Usopp demands while both Chopper and he hold up crosses.

“Oh, I strongly dislike ghosts! If I see one, I’ll scream!” Brook says.

“Have you checked a mirror?” Nami asks flatly, holding up a hand mirror.

Brook, Usopp, and Chopper begin screaming immediately. Her feeling about something still being off about Brook is spot on—the skeleton has no reflection in the mirror. He also, it turns out, is casting no shadow.
“Vampire!” The Straw Hats cry.

“Is that part of your Devil Fruit?” She asks with narrow eyes.

Perhaps she’s not reigning in her impulse to destroy very well. Brook seems to be considering her with wariness. Franky’s also leaning away from her now that she’s thinking about it.

“No, being a skeleton and not having a shadow are completely different things. Some years ago, a man snatched away my shadow. Not having a shadow means that I cannot exist in a world with light,” Brook says before his skull moves downward.

“Those without shadows disappear in the sunlight.”

*I’m not the one stealing shadows*, Brook had claimed. No wonder Brook feels so wrong to her; a shadow, in this case, is more than an absence of light. He’s lost half his spirit. To have such a thing stolen away, to be forced into the darkness all alone instead of just outright killed…

How awful, *how terrible*. She’d rather die than be cast into such dark chains, she thinks with a frown.

“My existence is rejected by light! My crew were all annihilated! I’m ‘Dead-Bones’ Brook, nice to meet you!” Brook suddenly laughs cheerfully.

“What are you saying? Your life sucks,” Sanji says.

“Today is a wonderful day! I got to meet all of you. On that ship, drifting through the fog, never knowing how much time passed,” Brook pauses, “I was so lonely. I was all by myself, and so afraid, I felt I could die!”

It hurts to imagine it.

“To think I could be here with you. It’s been a delight,” Brook says, turning to Luffy. “You invited me to your crew, but I’m afraid I must decline. Without my shadow, I will eventually disappear outside this sea.”

“Then I’ll get your shadow back! Tell me who stole it!” Luffy exclaims.

“You’re a good person. Even so, I cannot tell you. No, I especially cannot tell you. We’ve only just met. You shouldn’t say you’ll die for me.”

Brook’s words cause a heavy moment of silence, and she thinks she understands where the skeleton is coming from. Whatever can steal a part of someone’s spirit is incredibly dangerous. If they get involved, the same horrible thing could happen to them.

“I was a musician once. How about we sing to celebrate our meeting?” Brook offers.

“Well now I have to have you on our crew,” Luffy says with finality.

Before the skeleton can begin singing, her instincts suddenly scream at her. She’s up and slicing through the air by the cabin door before she even understands what’s happening. Her eyes widen when Tsubasa de Tobu goes through a white, translucent thing.

“Ghost!” Someone screams

Black eyes and wide lips give the white figure a human shape, but it’s nothing more than a mockery. She jumps back, and the thing disappears soon after. The feeling of danger remains.
“Is the ship under surveillance already?” Brook looks around with worry as the ship begins vibrating.

Rushing out of the cabin with the Straw Hats, she’s soon looking over the railing at what looks like a giant mouth. She squints. Yes, that’s right; in front of the Thousand Sunny are large teeth surrounded by lips, and the fog around them has darkened, somehow.

“It’s the forward gate! It just closed, and this is the inside of it. That means,” Brook quickly runs to the back of the ship. “Look over here!”

Visible through the dark fog is an island; in the center is a large castle, surrounded by a forest. A broken wall lines the shore of the island, giving the eerie island an old feeling. Everything about the island seems dreary, and if her instincts weren’t already screaming at her, this alone would alarm her.

“Did you happen to pick up a floating barrel on the sea?” Brook asks.

“They did,” she replies flatly.

“It was a trap. You’ve been targeted ever since then,” Brook tells them. “This is the ghost island that wanders through the sea, Thriller Bark.”

“A wandering island? And the Log Pose isn’t responding,” Nami taps the Log Pose in disbelief.

“That’s right, because this island came from far away in West Blue,” Brook says.

The ghost island doesn’t look intangible, which means it has to float on top of something. Maybe there’s an anchor that keeps it in place as well. Perhaps there lies the answer in getting the Thousand Sunny out of the pen it’s found itself in. She puts the thought away for later.

“Today, I was so fortunate! I met some people who were so kind and lively!” The skeleton jumps onto the Thousand Sunny’s figurehead in a single leap. “Yohohoho! I’m as light as dead bones! Please, try to break through the back of the gate and escape! Do not even think about lowering the anchor at this island!”

“I’m so glad I met you and was able to eat your delicious food! I’ll never forget you! If it is fated, we’ll meet again on some other sea!”

The skeleton gives them a single bow before jumping off the figurehead.

“Hey, hey, you’re a Devil Fruit user too!” Luffy scrambles to look over the railing.

She leans over the railing and watches in disbelief as Brook runs on the water. His legs are a blur, and the sea foams up behind him like a motorboat. Light as dead bones indeed.

Brook bypasses his ship completely, heading for the island. If it’s as dangerous as he says it is, why run to it? Then again, being stuck on that ship might be a worse fate than whatever lies on the island.

Still, the ghostly creature from earlier comes to mind. If the one who steals shadows lied before her, she’d never pass up the chance to reclaim her spirit no matter the danger. Could they be there on Thriller Bark?

“Let’s do as he told us, Luffy! We don’t know what will happen, but this island is definitely dangerous!” Usopp cries.
“Did you say something?” Luffy asks with the widest grin.

It’s clear with the way the captain’s eyes sparkle that running is the furthest thing from his mind.

“Think! We have a passenger on board! Who paid! What do you think she’ll say about going to a ghost island?” Nami shouts, pointing at her.

Everyone turns to her as if waiting for her to speak. She looks from Zoro’s frowning face to Chopper’s tearful one. If she said she wanted to leave, she has no doubt the rest of the Straw Hats would side with her. However, would that be enough to sway their captain? Would Luffy demand them to go anyway, would he threaten the crew for it?

What kind of man is Monkey D. Luffy?

In the end, she doesn’t get to know what the captain would have done, because—

“I want to go,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise, Kuina is the last person you want on your zombie survival team. Surviving isn't her priority.
“Can you just tell me how to operate this thing?” She asks, eyeing the shark-like submarine dubiously.

Usopp sheds tears over a paddle boat resembling the Straw Hat’s former ship as betrayed stares from Nami and Chopper dig into her back. She glares at the huge manual shoved into her face.

Franky’s Soldier Dock System, residing on the lowest level of the Thousand Sunny, is essentially a system of small boats that can be detached. Mini Merry II, the paddle boat, has room for four people; she’d ask them to drop her off if it weren’t for the man currently standing over her shoulder with a scowl.

“Well, first you’ve got to activate the hinge, go into lock down, get the radar system online, switch the air tanks over, activate the buoyancy tanks, use the gear shift—” Franky begins.

Her eyes glaze over as the explanation continues on, unending. There’s absolutely no way she can drive something like this; she’d probably end up crashing before the submarine even left the Thousand Sunny.

“Kuina, why don’t you just wait until they come back with the boat?” Zoro asks.

Nami, Usopp, and Chopper are taking the Mini Merry II on a test drive; they shouldn’t be gone long, but she won’t get a head start that way.

“Why don’t you just stay here?” She turns the question around bitterly.

“Because you’ll get into trouble,” Zoro says bluntly.

Okay, she’ll give him that one. If her suspicions about the island are true, then the shadow stealer is there. She wants to get there before the Straw Hats in case she needs to set the island on fire, in case there’s no hope for anyone coming back alive.

She doesn’t know them well, but Brook clearly indicated the island to be dangerous. For Zoro and his crew, she’s willing to risk her life if it means they can keep theirs. She hadn’t counted on Zoro wanting to follow her though.

“I have a bad feeling, and I’d rather confront it head on then wait,” she chooses to say.

“Well, I’m not getting into that thing with you when you clearly haven’t been listening,” Zoro deadpans.

Not realizing his audience has tuned him out, Franky throws them a thumbs up and asks,

“Any questions?”

She briefly considers knocking out Zoro and Franky to take the Mini Merry II by force. It might work if Zoro has no idea what she’s thinking. She glances over her shoulder only to be met by a wary stare and a hand hovering over the hilt of a sword. Damn, there goes that idea.

Looking from Franky’s beaming face to his thumb still pointing out, her eyes linger on his grossly,
oversized arms. She’s struck by another idea; one that is possibly more foolish than the last.

“Franky, how far can you throw people?”

“I’m not doing it,” Zoro growls.

“I have it on good authority that it’ll be fine with two people,” she says as Nami steers the paddle boat out onto the water.

The navigator’s having a blast by the sounds of it. Luffy’s draped over the railing, pouting as he watches his crew enjoy the Mini Merry II without him. Sanji takes in the scene with a cigarette and a smile while Robin glances between the paddle boat and Franky, who is cracking his hands.

“Not. Doing it.” Zoro crosses his arms and turns his back to her; it’s a mistake.

“Too late,” she says, scooping up Zoro into a bridal carry. “Franky, do the thing!”

Zoro squirms in her arms with violent curses, and she tightens her grip to keep from dropping him. Franky grabs her by the waist and begins spinning so fast that she loses her breath. Zoro’s head bumps into her chin, and it’s all she can do not to let go.

“Cola-light Toss!” Franky yells before throwing them towards the island.

He had to have made that move up on the spot, she thinks dizzily.

Her wings pop up, and air catches beneath them. She has to blink a few times, but she manages to catch her breath. The Straw Hats yell from below, and she glances at Zoro. She laughs immediately at his pouting expression.

“It’s not funny,” he snaps, crossing his arms once more.

It is too. Zoro only seems to pout harder at her smile, but she notices he keeps glancing down in something close to wonder. There’s nothing like being here high above the sea, gently gliding even if all that can be seen is fog.

Of course, that’s when things take a turn for the worst. Not for her and Zoro, but for the little paddle boat below. The sea suddenly goes from a normal, even wave pattern to a large, angry one. More importantly, the sea reverses direction, causing every vessel there to suddenly begin moving to the island.

“What the hell,” Zoro says in alarm as Nami lets out a scream.

She nearly drops him when he tenses up like he’s prepared to jump out of her arms. The large waves crash against the little boat, but Nami isn’t a navigator for nothing; the two of them watch in tense silence as the Mini Merry II makes it to the island shore.

“Hold on tight,” she says before pulling her wings in, “and do not scream in my ear.”

Zoro scrambles to grab her shoulders as she goes into a steep dive. She pulls up every few seconds to ensure that they’ll make it to the island, but their speed is no longer a gentle glide.

She’s acutely aware that she still doesn’t know how to land properly, but she plans to land in the ocean close to shore. The violent waves will push them to land in seconds.

Naturally, an unexpected draft catches her and sends her past the shoreline. She suddenly has to
avoid treetops hidden in the fog. Her passenger does nothing to make the situation better.

“You missed the beach!” Zoro yells as if she doesn’t know that.

“If we land on the other side of the island, it’d still be the beach!”

“Don’t be an idiot!”

“You don’t be an idiot! I’m trying not to kill us, okay?” She shouts.

In the end, it’s teamwork that gets them safely on the ground. When the trees get too thick and the chances of hitting one becomes inevitable, she aims for a leafless tree that looks capable of holding their weight.

Without her prompting, Zoro grabs her wrist and jumps out of her arms, landing on a thick branch. He swings her so her wings snap in before dropping her; she glides gently to the ground, taking Zoro with her.

“That wasn’t too bad,” Zoro says as if she hadn’t nearly killed them several times.

“Still bad,” she says and looks around their surroundings cautiously.

She can barely see anything, and there’s a feeling of being watched prickling the back of her neck. Zoro feels it too by the sharp look in his eyes.

“We should go find your crew and make sure they’re okay,” she says.

She resists the urge to reach for Zoro’s shoulder. The fog is so thick that she fears losing him if she takes her eyes off him. If what the Straw Hats imply is true, it’s a real possibility.

“Those three will want to stay on shore where the others can get to them. So that means they’ll probably head for that mansion.” Zoro concludes.

Well, he knows them best which means they should head for the large building in the middle of island.

“Mansion? It’s more of a castle,” she says.

Zoro moves in the direction they flew in from, and she gives in and wraps her arm around his. She lets go when he freezes and turns to her with a wide-eyed stare.

Oh, right. The thing. The thing between them.

Not the time, she thinks with a glare. Zoro seems to get the message and begins walking, if a bit slowly.

“We’re lost.”

“No, we’re not,” Zoro says irritably.

“Does this look like a castle?” She demands, motioning to the forest around them.

Thick fog rolls through the bushes and over the ground while tall trees bend inward, obscuring the sky to loom menacingly. There’s no light except for odd lanterns attached to the branches overhead, and they can’t see where they’re stepping.
“No, but then we’re looking for a mansion,” Zoro scowls.

“It’s a castle—” Her argument is cut off by the sound of crunching leaves behind them.

Zoro and her whirl around, swords drawn. A woman with spiky red hair and dirty, torn clothing runs to them while waving her arms wildly. There’s no hostility coming from the woman, only panic.

“Hey! Show me ya know how to use those things and take care of that, will ya?” The woman hollers, running past them.

An unsettling feeling hits her, and out of the fog, a figure clad in black armor clanks towards them slowly. It’s twice as tall as them, and its helmet is deformed, as if squished beneath the large metal plume on top.

The knight-looking creature points its oversized double headed axe at them, and she gets the distinct feeling that it’s challenging them. There is something very wrong with this knight; she’s sure of it.

“Think you can keep up?” She asks Zoro.

“I’ll have it on the ground before you can hit it,” he boasts.

They kick off at the same time: she goes right, and Zoro takes left. The knight is fast for its size, and it dodges her swing and blocks Zoro’s. Tsubasa de Tobu screeches when she goes low and stabs the knight through the leg. No blood comes out.

Zoro grabs her before she can hit by a spiked gauntlet and throws her up. She deflects the axe aimed for his back and takes a swipe at the knight’s head. Her sword is met with no resistance, and the helmet goes flying.

She lands on the ground, and Zoro plays distraction while she gets her bearings. She eyes the monstrosity that is somehow still functioning without a head. She considers it with a frown; Zoro’s strikes break its armor, but it’s doing nothing to slow the creature down.

No blood gushes out despite the fact she clearly beheaded their opponent, and through the breaks in the armor, she can see bones and rotted flesh. She puts it together and thinks, abomination.

“Get back, Zoro. I’m going to purify this thing,” she says faintly as everything but the creature seems to blur away.

The feeling of smoke rises to the back of her throat, and she pours as much loathing as she can into her very being. There are things in this world that aren’t meant to be here, that shouldn’t exist even in passing thought. She’ll cleanse them with fire.

Dashing forward, ducking under a swing of the large axe, she jumps up to stab the creature’s chest. Using her sword to leverage herself up, she looks into where its head used to be. She breathes out.

The abomination isn’t prepared for such an act, and it screeches—from its metal armor, from the helmet over on the ground, from its very being—and attempts to dislodge her with jerky movements.

Zoro hits the back of its legs, knocking it over, and he pins its hands to the ground with both his swords. She never stops her flames, taking short breaths to continue her onslaught. The creature burns from the inside of its armor.
When its body turns to ashes, she gets off, grabs the helmet, and breathes her flames inside it. When the abomination finally stops its screaming, black ink oozes out of its armor. Before she can figure out what it is, the black ink streaks off into the forest, nothing more than a blur and blending into the shadows.

Zoro and she look to where the black thing went before standing over the charred armor lying on the ground.

“Since when could you breathe fire?” Zoro asks with an accusatory frown.

“Did I forget to mention that? I learned it from friend. It’s Haki. The energy thing that powers everything,” she says.

Clearly Zoro isn’t satisfied with that explanation because he opens his mouth to say something. A familiar voice interrupts him, and Tsubasa de Tobu is in her hand in the blink of an eye.

“Woowee, that was amazing. Knew ya’d pull through!” The woman from earlier appears from the bushes. “Can’t believe ya killed one of the big ones like that!”

She takes in the colorful lips wrapped around grinning bucked teeth, the scarf draped against normal-looking skin, and the green eyes that shine from the lanterns hanging above. She comes to the conclusion that this is a breathing, living person.

“Who are you?” Zoro demands.

“Chilla! And I see both of ya still have your shadows,” Chilla says, glancing below them.

It’s faint, but they do indeed cast shadows onto the fog around them. Chilla, she notices, does not.

“So the shadow stealer is here,” she says grimly.

“That’s the reason you wanted to come here so badly,” Zoro realizes; he looks like he wants to say something more, but he turns to Chilla instead. “Why was that thing after you?”

Zoro’s swords remain in their scabbards, but it’s not a sign of trust. It just means he’s not actively engaged in combat. She has Tsubasa de Tobu out, but the sword is silent. She keeps it lowered.

“Not me. It was after you,” Chilla refutes, enunciating with a sour expression.

“No, him. Specifically him,” Chilla says, nodding her head towards Zoro.

She shares a glance with Zoro. Chilla toes the armor on the ground as if expecting it to begin moving, and they demand answers.

“I’ll lay it out for ya, this floating piece of garbage is ran by a Warlord, Gecko Moria. He steals shadows and puts ‘em in dead bodies to make his army,” Chilla tells them. “I was gathering intel when they decided to launch an attack on ya. You’re in deep shit.”

Of course the scary shadow stealer is a Warlord and is after the Straw Hat pirates. Of course such a foul creature is sanctioned by the World Government and is after its enemies.

“Where can we find Gecko Moria?” She asks.

“At the back of the mansion—”
“Hah!” Zoro huffs at her triumphantly.

She rolls her eyes and gestures for Chilla to carry on. The woman gives them a strange look before continuing.

“At the back of the mansion is the main mast, you’ll find the bastard there.”

“Main mast?”

“Didn’t ya know?” Chilla blinks. “Thriller Bark is the largest pirate ship to sail the sea!”

This island is a ship? That would explain the way the waves managed to reverse themselves; the sea here is nothing more than a large pool. Which means this island does indeed float on something. It would also have an anchor too.

“Kuina, no,” Zoro says immediately.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says blandly.

“No sinking the ship until we’re all off it,” Zoro tells her.

“Hey, hey, don’t sink it at all! There’s a whole bunch of us in these woods trying to get our shadows back, ya hear?” Chilla shouts in her ear.

That certainly puts a damper on the idea forming in her head, but it doesn’t disqualify it just yet. She’ll just have to think a little longer, that’s all.

“I’m not planning anything. Really. Either way, we need to get to that mansion,” she says.

Chilla, after they walk away in the wrong direction twice, grabs them by the arms and leads them to the edge of the forest. In front of them is the large building they’ve been trying to find. It’s also raining.

“Good luck. I ain’t going any farther than this.” Chilla waves and disappears into the fog of the forest.

The two of them look up at the mansion. The rain clears up some of the fog, but in the darkness, it’s hard to see much of anything except for the building’s lit windows.

“Don’t cry if I set everything on fire,” she tells Zoro.

“Don’t set anything on fire! At least wait until we get the crew out,” Zoro says in exasperation.

If Gecko Moria is there, then there’s no doubt that’s where the Straw Hats will go. She supposes she can wait before she turns to setting things on fire. Still, everything about the place gives her similar feelings to Brook, to the knight. She won’t be leaving until it all burns to ashes.

“Let’s go.” She steps out from under a thick branch and into the rain.

Zoro is beside her immediately, and she marvels at how reassured she feels. It truly does feel like the two of them can take on anything.

“Oh, you’re coming too? I was talking to Tsubasa de Tobu,” she says with a smirk.

“You’re not funny.” Zoro scowls at her.
“I’m hilarious.”

Chapter End Notes

If you are a OP story purist, you may want to sit this one out. On the bright side, it won't take me 2 years to get through Thriller Bark.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Warning: heavy and detailed talk of depression and suicide.

If you ever need to skip for any reason but still want to read the chapter, just reach out to me on tumblr (same username) or ff.net, and I’ll get you a lightly edited version.

The rain pours on them in the dark, and despite the hairs on the back of her neck sticking straight up, nothing steps into the light emanating from the mansion’s windows. Having no desire to look for a door, Zoro breaks the nearest window while she keeps an eye on their backs.

“Did you fail breaking and entering class?” She asks, taking in the jagged glass sticking up through the window frame.

The window is large enough for her wings, but she won’t be able to go through without bleeding. If Zoro thinks she’s going in like that, he has another thing coming to him.

“I didn’t go to those lessons. You did,” Zoro snaps back as she knocks out the remaining glass.

“You’re the pirate,” she reminds him.

“Says the person who kills Marines and sets things on fire.”

He’s got her there. With everything she’s done, there are definitely grounds for her being an outlaw. The only reason she’s not is because she hasn’t been caught yet. Keeping her head low has done wonders until now.

Crawling through the window, they land into what looks like a bedroom from an ancient castle. Hard stone covers everything from the floors to the ceiling, keeping the room cool; she almost shivers in her wet clothes. There’s a thick layer of dust over everything, even the rug by the bed.

Oil lamps, one on the nightstand and one on the dresser, keep the room dimly lit. There’s not enough oil in each lamp to last more than a day or two. Someone must be keeping them lit, someone whose light steps don’t disturb the dust.

“I can’t hear anyone screaming,” Zoro notes with a frown.

“Screaming?”


Ah, yeah, those four would be screaming about something, wouldn’t they? There’s nothing but the sound of rain hitting the roof. She flicks a wet strand of hair out of her eyes and tries to shake off the unsettling feeling in her chest.

Her instincts say to leave and burn the building down. She’d love to follow them, but Zoro’s crew is definitely here. She can feel it in her gut.
Outside the bedroom is a long hallway, lit by torches on the walls. The silence seems loud as they walk towards what is hopefully the back of the mansion. If she strains her hearing, she thinks she can hear the faint sound of movement on the other side of the wall.

Lining this extraordinarily long hallway are suits of medieval armor. A shared glance with Zoro tells her that he also senses what she does. One of these suits doesn’t belong. Since every armor piece looks the same, the only thing they can do is wait for it to show itself.

When they reach what looks like a game room—there’s a faded chess set in the corner, a run-down pool table in the center, and an area for darts—the last suit of armor in the lineup moves behind them; its metal footsteps are eerily quiet.

Zoro moves, and Sandai Kitetsu goes up through the bottom of its helmet. At the same time, she slices an arm off, and the limb clanks against the floor still clutching a sword. She begins breathing fire into its wound, and Zoro keeps the creature in place.

Her ears fill with metal screeching as the creature flails, and the abomination turns to ashes with a low, echoing cry. Something resembling black ink oozes out of the remains before darting away into the darkness of the room.

Chilla said that Gecko Moria stole shadows and placed them in dead bodies to create an army. Perhaps that is what the ooze is. She hopes the shadow has somewhere to go back to.

“Those guys wouldn’t have problems with these things,” Zoro says, staring down at the charred metal armor.

“You’re correct. They didn’t.”

Her sword is already moving, but there’s no resistance of her blade going through skin and bone. Big, round eyes stare at her in amusement while red lips twist into a taunting smile.

“Horohorohoro, that won’t work on me. I’m invincible,” the young woman laughs even as Zoro attempts to cut her down.

With a large crown plopped over pink pigtails, and a miniature red cape slung over a t-shirt, the woman looks like a teenager playing dress up. Silly appearance or not, if this person is incorporeal, then there’s no way of hitting her.

“What are you?” Zoro growls as the woman keeps laughing obnoxiously.

“Your nightmare,” the woman sneers.

With a wave of the hand, creatures identical to the one that appeared on the Thousand Sunny rise through the floor. The cartoon-looking ghosts lunge at them, and she sidesteps. Zoro isn’t as lucky. One of the creatures goes through him, and his swords fall to the floor immediately.

“I should just die,” Zoro says with blank eyes before falling to the floor.

What did he just say?

A cold feeling goes through her at the sudden display of despondence. She never expected to hear him say those words, never wanted to see his eyes like that. No, not him, not her dearest friend—

She reaches out to Zoro, and thoroughly distracted, she doesn’t see the ghost circling back. The creature goes straight through her, and her heart is doused in murky water.
Suddenly Zoro’s existence doesn’t matter. Nothing does.

She falls to her knees, and Tsubasa de Tobu rolls out of her hand. She stares at it. The pink blade is sharp. There’s a vein under her wrist. She could cut it all right now and be free of everything.

No one could stop her. No one would mourn her. She’s unlovable after all.

It would be better wouldn’t it, to never have to feel this way ever again. To be eternally free.

She shuts her eyes as she touches the hilt of her katana. She’d forgotten, in this new life, the feeling of drowning in darkness. Of sinking beneath the water. She’d forgotten the desire to die. The hopelessness. The despair. The self-hatred.

But…

But he hadn’t made that noose even as his classmates had, didn’t use that knife even as he held it to his wrist. Even in his darkest hour, when he’d forgotten the way his mother’s tearful face looked, he’d held on the only way he knew how. With cold, hard logic.

His life sucks? Try and change it. People are awful? Yes, but there are good people too. He’s a shit person? Well, that’s fine, so is everyone else. No one can love him? He’ll learn to love himself. It will be enough.

The world wants him dead? Live out of spite.

*There’s no such thing as freedom if one isn’t willing to fight for it.*

“I’m going to hurt you,” she says, opening her eyes. “You’re going to regret everything.”

She’ll make this bitch understand the true meaning of pain. The hollow feeling in her chest remains; she’s not actually angry, but cold, hard logic tells her that she’ll really enjoy torturing this woman—no girl—once the haze of despair leaves. She holds onto that thought with everything she has.

“What the fuck are you?” The girl curses through clenched teeth.

Wide eyes stare at her with something close to horror as she gets to her feet. She moves in front of Zoro, keeping Tsubasa de Tobu between her and the ghost girl.

“Your nightmare,” she echoes back.

She doesn’t know how to fight a spirit without incense, but she’ll find a way. She still has her mind and her flames after all. Flickering light from the room’s oil lamps bounce against glass windows, giving her an idea.

She turns her head and sets the curtains on fire. Then the pool table, then the rug.

“Gah, what the hell are you doing, dumbass?” The girl screeches, waving at the flames as if trying to put them out.

“Ghosts need something to haunt. I wonder what will happen if it all burns down?” She muses out loud before aiming at the girl’s face.

Fire does nothing to the incorporeal girl, but there’s a muffled feeling of satisfaction at the endless amount of cursing that follows. The girl flies off through the wall, calling for reinforcements and aid.
“Someone put out that fire! Even if you have to use your butt to do it! I SAID MOVE IT!” Is the girl’s faint shout.

She sheaths Zoro’s swords and slings him over her shoulder. Her feet struggle to obey, but she grits her teeth and follows the rough direction the girl went in.

Her chest still feels cold even as sweat drips down her temples. The whispers in the back of her mind try to convince her to stay in the burning room, but she continues on with the knowledge that she’s going to live out of sheer spite.

If the ghost girl is calling for reinforcements, then she has some control over the abominations attacking them. The girl must work with Gecko Moria, which means she’s probably not actually a ghost. A Devil Fruit user perhaps?

The girl must have had a body to eat with, and for the fruit to still work, she must still have some sort of corporal form. And Devil Fruit users are weak to the sea. Yes, she can work with that.

“No sinking the ship,” Zoro reminds her sluggishly.

“Are you a psychic?”

Did he eat a Devil Fruit without telling her? It would explain a lot.

“You don’t have a good poker face.”

Zoro gets to his feet while rubbing his chest with a disturbed look. How odd. The hollow feeling left her, but she hadn’t noticed. She’s been too busy plotting revenge to realize she’s actually angry now.

“How did you keep moving?” Zoro asks lowly as they hide in a room to avoid a group of undead in firefighter outfits carrying a large hose.

They could stop the abominations—it wouldn’t be hard—but it’s probably better to stay out of the way. She’d rather search for Zoro’s crew in the cold than in an actual furnace.

“I kept telling myself to.” She falters at the face Zoro makes, something resembling humiliation and self-loathing. “Don’t look like that. It’s not. It’s—I’ve had experience,” she reluctantly admits.

“It’s not something to feel bad about. To not be able to keep going while feeling that way,” she ends up saying.

So many of his classmates hadn’t been able to keep going on in a world that wanted them dead. She’d been the lucky one that held on with his fingertips. She’s so relieved that Zoro has never known what that felt like until now.

“No. Not since I met you.” She settles on.

The relieved nod Zoro gives makes her feel better. If nothing else, she can honestly say that it’s all in the past.
They continue on deeper into the mansion. She keeps an eye out for cartoon ghosts or the girl, but the next rooms and hallways are empty. Is the girl laying a trap, busy with something else, or too unnerved to try again?

Her musings are cut short by the sudden realization that Zoro is no longer by her side. She looks behind her and in the room next to her, but there’s no green-haired swordsman. She taps on the floors and walls with Tsubasa de Tobu and finds a fake wall.

Seems they’ve been forcibly separated the moment they stepped too far apart from each other.

She lets out a breath and steadies Tsubasa de Tobu. If Zoro can slice a train in half, a stone wall has no chance of stopping her. In one swift motion, the fake wall falls away, making a loud noise.

“Stop destroying everything, you bitch!”

“I wouldn’t have to if you’d stop getting in my way,” she says bluntly.

Behind her, the ghost girl scowls with hands on her hips and pink pigtails that disappear into the wall. She takes a step through the hole in the wall, choosing to ignore the girl. She needs to find Zoro.

“Oh, wait a minute! Don’t walk away from me!” The girl screeches.

She glances to her right, then her left. It’s a hallway identical to the one she was just walking down. Which direction would Zoro go in? Probably back the way they came. Right it is.

“I can’t believe Master Moria wants to meet with someone like you,” the girl huffs.

She aborts her motions to whirl around and loom over the girl with bared teeth. It might be her imagination, but the girl seems to shrink under her gaze.

“Say that again,” she orders.

“Hearing problems? You’ve been invited to meet with Master Moria. I don’t know why he’d have an interest in you,” the girl sneers at her. “Especially with that stupid looking sword of yours.”

When she doesn’t say anything, the girl continues with a rant about how ugly kimonos are, but she tunes it out to focus on the message. Why does the Warlord want to meet her? Brook mentioned something about surveillance; Gecko Moria must know who she stands with.

She might not have a bounty over her head, but this invitation is undoubtedly a trap. Does she want to spring it, or does she want to find Zoro?

“And your hair! Ugh, do you whack it with a sword or something? I mean—” the girl continues rambling.

“Take me to him,” she finally says. “Take me to Gecko Moria.”

The girl sniffs at her, but guides her through the mansion. She goes down many staircases but never up, opposite to where Chilla said Moria would be. She knows it’s a trap, but there’s a sneaking suspicion that the girl is simply playing her for a fool.

Her fears of being tricked turn out to be unnecessary. The girl does lead her to Gecko Moria who waits for her in a darkened room on a rather extravagant chair. She knows it’s Gecko Moria because he radiates danger in way that the creatures surrounding him do not.
“So you are the girl?” Sharp teeth grin at her against purple lips.

Not only does the Warlord give off a strong feeling of power; he’s incredibly tall. When he stands, she doesn’t even come up to his belt buckle. She has to crane her neck to take in the paper white skin, the stitches that run down it, and the horns sticking out of a small head.

The most eye catching thing about Gecko Moria is that he’s shaped like vase that’s skinny at the top and big at the bottom. She sort of wants to ask how he’s able to walk down all those stairs, but there are more important questions that need answering.

“I don’t have a bounty if that’s what you’re hoping for,” she says, refusing to take a step back when Moria towers over her.

“Oh, yes. The boyfriend. Bet you just love the benefits of that relationship,” Moria hisses down at her.

“Boyfriend?” She asks in puzzlement.

“Don’t play coy. Dracule Mihawk. Thinks he’s a god, the bastard. Always looking down on me with those eyes of his.”

She blinks and then blinks again. He must have her confused with the Marine. Before she can correct him, Moria is leaning over her with an alarming leer.

“Your shadow will make a magnificent warrior. At the same time, I want that bastard to see what became of his toy that he let loose from his grasp!” Moria holds up a hand dramatically before laughing. “Better still, I want you tell him that it was your own choice. I want you to tell him about that ‘special friend’ of yours.”

Moria gestures behind him to a corner of the dark room, and one of his minions shines a spotlight there. A horribly familiar body lies there against the wall. There is no shadow cast from the spotlight.

“Zoro!”

Moria moves in front of her before she can take more than step. She glares up at the foul man, her katana already in her hands. Sharp teeth give her a mockery of a smile.

“He’s still alive, but for how long, I wonder? Your shadow, his life. Kishishishi, what will you do?”

Gecko Moria is demanding a part of her soul in exchange for keeping Zoro alive. She could attempt to take on the Warlord herself, but if she fails, then they’ll both die. Either option is a gamble, but there’s a high risk of Zoro being in the crossfire to consider as well.

“The first chance I get, I’m going to kill you,” she says, sheathing Tsubasa de Tobu.

The blade, unlike every time before, doesn’t go into the scabbard perfectly. She thinks the katana is angry at her choice, but she can do nothing with Zoro’s life hanging in the balance. If Moria wants her to talk to Mihawk, then this option might buy her time to figure a way out of this mess.

Though it doesn’t sound like the Warlord wants to kill her. Too bad for him, she’s going to find a way to kill Moria no matter what.

“You’d better do it quick before I change my mind,” she says darkly.
Last I checked, the suicide rate for teens for my specific reservation was at 150% more than the US (more than double). It’s usually a matter of looking around your classroom and wondering how many will die.

You know, if Kuina had a rage meter, I'm sure it would be close to bursting right about now.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She doesn’t know how she expected Gecko Moria to steal shadows but using a pair of scissors that are half his height is not quite what she had in mind. She stares up at the blades held in the grip of the grinning bastard. Those things are so much taller than her.

“This will hurt a lot,” Moria says with absolute joy.

The spotlight shines on her, causing her shadow to extend towards the Warlord. There’s a morbid fascination in watching Moria reach down to grab it off the ground. That fascination turns into panic as what feels like fingers dig into her heart the moment he grips her shadow.

Moria lifts the inky mess off the floor, and she chokes as the hand around her heart tightens. It feels like he’s cutting off her air. There’s a moment of sheer terror as her shadow—her soul—is laid between the blades of the scissors.

She blacks out the moment she hears the snip.

When she comes to, there’s a gaping wound in her chest and she’s choking on blood. She can’t breathe and everything is completely wrong. A part of her is missing, torn away. Her eyes open just enough to look at her chest. There’s nothing there, and she’s still breathing.

The feeling of phantom wounds remains, but it seems her injuries are all her in mind. Not everything appears to be psychological though. She’s slumped over against a hard surface, and no amount of effort makes her body respond. She’s not even able to twitch her fingers.

“Greatest swordsman can’t even pick up the Den Den Mushi,” the rasping sound of an abomination mutters. “Now we got to ship her.”

“You think the master will be okay if that guy sees his girlfriend as a block of ice?”

There’s a long pause.

“We’ll send detailed thawing instructions.”

She’s still too far out of it to put the pieces together. To realize what these words mean for her. Hands suddenly grab her, and she’s dragged towards a box with a see-through lid. It looks remarkably like a freezer.

It’s not until she’s being shoved in that she realizes the box is indeed a freezer, and she’s being put into it.

Her wings flare out to keep the door from closing on her, but all that happens is the abominations grumble, drag her out, and place a rubber band around her wings.

“Man, even unconscious, she’s a pain. Never seen a zombie come to life, call itself an abomination, and try to set itself on fire.”

“Master Moria wasn’t pleased.” Is the agreeing hum.

She’s placed into the freezer, and no matter how hard she tries to move, the door closes on her. A
blanket is thrown over the glass door, and there’s nothing but the sound of mechanical whirring in her ears.

The cold seeps through her kimono painfully, and her sluggish mind begins waking up; it’s just in time to realize she can’t move and her heart seems to be slowing down. The thought of asphyxiation and being frozen has her thoughts racing all over the place in a frenzy.

No, calm down. There’s still time before she falls unconscious. What can she do, and what does she still have?

She still can’t move, which makes the sword at her side useless. Her wings are bound; she doesn’t know if they would have been strong enough to pry open the door anyway. That leaves her mind, which is slowing down rapidly, and her flames.

She might be able to move her jaw just enough, but all she would be doing is turning her icy coffin into a fiery one. With the numbing cold seeping into her bones, the idea of setting herself on fire certainly appeals.

But Luza hadn’t needed to set himself on fire to keep warm. Neither did the Rooz. She had tried to mimic that technique when she was imprisoned by the Marines, but she has no idea if it worked or not.

Still, warming herself internally then externally is her only option right now. If she wants to save Zoro and the Straw Hats, if she wants her revenge, then that is what she must do.

She breathes in and out. Attempts to hold the flame in the pit of her stomach before reaching out carefully to the rest of her organs. It takes a while. She takes the time to do some deep thinking.

If Haki is the life of everything, does that mean anyone could do anything once they learn to wield it? Zoro told her he can cut steel trains in half now—which is not actually normal, weird physics aside—so what are the limits?

What will happen if she does end up in Mihawk’s hands? Well, okay, he’d probably drop her freezer into the ocean with her still in it. He strikes her as a man who kicks puppies.

What really is an okama? If it’s less than a man and less than a woman, does that mean they’re the complete opposite of her? She’s been thinking that okama is more like her, but perhaps she should be referring to Bonnie as “they.” She’ll have to apologize to Bonnie later.

She regains the use of her fingers before she can start musing on the social systems of snails. It’s probably a good thing. She inhales deeply and exhales a warm breath.

Reaching into her obi, she takes out a knife and holds it to the glass in front of her. She slams her palm into the bottom of the knife’s handle with her other hand. The glass cracks before breaking outward into the blanket covering the freezer.

(No, calm down! Rub it in Zoro’s face later.) A quick slash of the knife takes care of anything in her way, and she steps out of the freezer. No one appears despite the sound of breaking glass, and she examines the large room around her. It’s a storage room, one full of freezers with dead bodies.

Tsubasa de Tobu cuts her wings free, and the sword practically vibrates in her hands in a demand for violence. She rubs her chest which aches and promises the sword that it will get what it wants. They both will.
Gekko Moria will die this day, and that girl will taste pain beyond measure. And if anything happens to Zoro? Then she’ll burn this entire ship down no matter who is on it.

While not the best at directions—though definitely better than Zoro if not by much—she remembers only going down. The room of freezers might be somewhere in the basement. If she wants to find someone, anyone, they’ll probably be upstairs.

So she goes up. She continues going up staircase after staircase, destroying three more abominations that jump out of paintings, before finding herself in a forest. Grass lies beneath her feet, and trees tower above her while a gloomy mist rolls over it all in the darkness.

She’s pretty sure she’s supposed to be above ground level. A quick throw of a potted plant over the railing into the darkness below only gives a faint sound after a long moment. It appears that the forest rests far above the ground.

Of course, this forest also turns out to be filled to the brim with abominations, ones that look like different animals sewn together or trees with human faces. She purifies each and every one. Many get impaled onto tree limbs before she sets the entire tree on fire. There is a lot of screaming, and the somewhat creepy forest turns into a horrific one.

At least the burning forest gives much needed light to the darkness. Beyond the long strip of forest is a door leading into another building; she’s willing to bet it goes to the mast at the back of the mansion.

She doesn’t get far before a familiar annoyance pops up through the ground.

“My garden! My beautiful garden! You,” the ghost girl snarls. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” she says lowly.

At this point, any blood will do.

The girl suddenly grows larger, standing even taller than Moria, and hunches over to sneer at her, eyes narrowing menacingly. She spits at the girl before walking through her.

“You rotten bitch! Don’t you ignore me! I’m the Ghost Princess Perona!” The girl howls.

Before she can reach the door at the end of garden, the air shifts, and instinct tells her to step to the left. Something white sails past her ear and explodes. She turns around to come face to face with a smaller Perona, who holds a tiny ghost in the palm of her hands.

“Your shadow was useless. Master Moria won’t mind if you disappear,” Perona says.

She ducks, and the tiny ghost sails overhead, exploding against the stone wall behind her. As Perona creates another ghostly bomb to throw, she decides to do the sensible thing. She runs for the door, throws it open, and keeps running.

“Come back here!” Perona demands.

She sprints down a long, winding hallway, dodging the ghosts thrown at her. The Ghost Princess can’t keep up with her and begins falling behind. As physical speed shouldn’t matter to spirits, this girl must truly be a Devil Fruit user.

When the attacks get more vicious and desperate—she narrowly avoids a wall of those nasty,
depressing ghosts—she assumes she’s getting closer to somewhere the girl doesn’t want her to be. She begins kicking down each door she passes.

Most rooms are nothing special, but when Perona lets out an enraged, ear-splitting shriek, she knows she’s found the right one.

She steps into a luxurious bedroom designed for royalty. Mauled and macabre stuffed animals line the walls, and a grassy carpet is spread onto the floor. In the back of the enormous room is a bed draped with silk curtains; a familiar pink-haired girl rests on it. This Perona appears to be asleep, chest moving with deep breaths.

She has no doubt that this is the original body of the girl that is quite literally haunting her, a body of flesh and blood. Tsubasa de Tobu is heavy in its scabbard.

“Ack, oh no!”

Perona rushes past her, and the one on the bed awakes with a fierce glare. She doesn’t give the girl even a second before she’s next to the bed, sword raised. Turning her wrist, she slams the hilt of her katana against Perona’s temple, forcing the girl back into unconsciousness.

She takes a quick look around. A few of the stuffed animals attack, but it’s nothing to carve them up. She finds an expensively furnished bathroom hidden behind a dresser. The bathtub is large, luxurious, and solidly made. She turns the faucet on full blast and runs cold water for the bathtub.

She goes back for Perona, dragging the unconscious girl into the bathroom.

“Drown,” she says, throwing the girl into the bath face first.

These people have taken something precious from her, from Zoro. She has no mercy for anyone allied with Gecko Moria, no mercy for someone who relishes in cruelty.

She had promised to give pain beyond measure, but while death from drowning is indeed painful, it’d be over too soon.

She lifts Perona by the hair and water runs out like snot from the girl’s mouth and nose. She’s tempted to slam the girl’s head against the bathtub until the water turns red. There’s too high of chance of killing her, so she discards the idea.

For someone who dislikes cruelty, she can be just as cruel, just as vicious as the ones who revel in it. She is certainly no angel.

“I knew you would be here. Too lucky and too smart by half.”

Though the voice is unfamiliar, she knows exactly who it is that stands behind her. She felt them coming before they even entered this area of the mansion.

To be honest, she’s somewhat relieved that her time here has been cut short. She knows how to be cruel, but that doesn’t mean she cares to be. It’s not in her nature. She chooses to slice Perona’s pigtails off with a knife before turning around.

“Of course you did. You’re me,” she says.

Standing before her is an abomination, one that has cloth patches sewn over missing parts of skin. She takes in the dark red dress, the black spiky hair, and the sword resting on its hip, and knows there’s something wrong.
The dress was pretty in its day, but most of the sequins attached to it have been ripped off. One bony finger scratches at a remaining sequin and another picks at the brightly-colored wrap around a katana hilt. Her spirit calls to her from the dead body, but there’s something else lurking behind those empty eye sockets.

“Mostly me,” she amends.

“You’ve already figured out the tragedy of it all, haven’t you? Things are not right, not how they should be. The natural cycle of this world has been disturbed, torn asunder! But it’s from a natural disturbance. An impossibility from the world whence you came.” The abomination tilts its head. “You tried so hard to die. To drown yourself with alcohol and melancholy. Is this the afterlife? If so, what happens if you die here?”

“I am not this longwinded,” she says flatly before dashing forward with Tsubasa de Tobu.

While she’s not nearly as wordy, she knows she’s the type to dig under people’s skin to get an advantage, often throwing out guesses to see if it’ll catch her opponent off-guard. It rankles to have that thrown back at her successfully.

Her shadow is fast. It jumps back from each of her swings, and she grows frustrated as her blade misses each time. The abomination begins throwing things to stop her when she considers using her flames and counters every move she makes with the same one.

Even when she does something unusual such as using the bed’s curtains to hide her movements, her shadow matches it every time.

“How can you be free from your chains if you’ve already lost yourself like this?” The abomination spits, kicking a ball at her head; she ducks and the ball breaks an expensive mirror. “You’re finally rid of family, and you replace them with yet more people. More people to hurt and to be hurt from. Perhaps you are exactly what everyone thought you were. Stupid. Lazy. No-good. Self-absorbed. Unlovable.”

This is definitely her own spirit talking. Only she could pick at her own insecurities like this. Only she could make her sword waver from just a speech.

Even so, her shadow makes a mistake. If there’s one thing she’s learned from this world, it’s that she’s not stupid. She may never flourish with academia, but there’s no need to meet anyone’s expectations but her own.

Without the pressure of conforming, it turns out her mind is far more dangerous than a scholar can ever hope to have. If her shadow counters everything with a similar move, then she should do the same. The only difference is that there’s someone else she can speak to.

“Your sword is pink. You know, I thought I was the only one with a pink sword,” she says nonchalantly.

It’s not like Tsubasa de Tobu. The creature’s sword has a white scabbard, a grey guard, and a normal blade. Only the wrap is pink, but it’s pristine and spotless. It’s obvious that the wrap is newly placed when compared to the rest of the sword.

“It was black. It is supposed to be black,” the abomination rasps out.

She smiles in grim satisfaction. That’s not her spirit talking. Those picking motions towards the dress and sword aren’t her habits. There’s something about them that the original owner of that body takes issue with.
“I’m sure it matched your beautiful dress,” she says.

The creature spasms at her words before picking at a strap that keeps the dress over bony shoulders.

“Wrong, wrong, it is wrong,” the abomination mumbles.

“What is?” She tilts her head.

“They buried me in this dress! They desecrated my sword and damaged my dignity! It is an insult beyond the grave!” The creature roars at her. “I am no woman!”

She truly has managed to piss off her opponent because they come at her with a wild swing. She chooses to bring up her sword to defend herself instead of dodge; she’s thrown out the door by the force.

“They called me by her name. They called me Madoka until my last breaths,” the abomination says with more wild swings.

She’s forced back down the hall and out to Perona’s burning garden. Whoever this person was, they were far faster than her. The only reason she’s able to remain unharmed is that her opponent is sloppy in their fury, and she’s able to dance around their swings.

“So who are you?” She asks as sweat falls down her face in the heat.

The world around her is nothing but flames, but her opponent shows no fear. She wonders if it’s her lack of fear or the other spirit’s bravery that comes through.

“My name is Kaito. I was a swordsman in life, strong yet ridiculed. They envied my Shadow Stab technique, but sneered at my efforts to be taken seriously. I will kill you for Master Moria. I will kill you because I am a man, not a woman,” the abomination says.

Gecko Moria is the main reason this creature points a sword at her, but it’s not the only one. Kaito has a personal reason to defeat her.

“We were a bad match,” she says with understanding.

She is a man, but she is a woman too. Before her is a man that was mistaken for a woman in life and death. Their spirits do not line up.

“We both fall here.”

Kaito disappears like a faded image, and a fierce prickling on the back of her neck is the only reason she turns and brings her sword up in time. Tsubasa de Tobu screams and pieces of steel fly around her face like small flower petals.

There’s a surprised expression on his gruesome face before Kaito pushes away from her to fade away once more. A prickling sensation comes from her right. She brings up her katana, and this time the clash between their swords ends with Kaito’s blade shattering. Tsubasa de Tobu screeches victoriously.

“My best technique cannot win against you and your sword,” Kaito says, throwing down his broken katana. “I used to hate the color pink. I saw it as weak, but I see nothing weak here.”

There’s a faint rumbling under her feet, and she belatedly realizes that this fiery garden actually
hangs in the air between two buildings. Their battle and the uncontrolled flames around them may have destroyed some of the support.

“Sometimes, holding onto others’ expectations only weighs us down. We take on their views without realizing it. We can only be who we are whether they see us or not,” she says to herself, to Kaito.

She sheathes her katana.

“I hope you can find peace with yourself,” she says as the ground beneath her finally gives way.

Her vision of Kaito is swallowed by a sea of flames as she falls. She moves, and her wings pop out to slow her descent. She concentrates on landing into the darkness below, never looking back. She ends up smacking into a gravestone.

It’s when she’s rubbing her face dazedly that she hears faint screaming coming from above her. She looks up, ready to fight or run, before scrambling to hold her arms out. Nami, in a white wedding dress and veil, lands in her arms.

She only has enough time to blink at Nami’s terrified expression—the woman is practically frothing at the mouth—before something large with bat-like wings appears from the sky above. A bony ribcage shows from beneath grey scales, and teeth glint in the moonlight.

“Found you swordswoman,” the dragon rumbles.

The creature’s deep voice echoes in the empty graveyard, and she places Nami on the ground before standing in front of her. Before her is a giant dragon whose talons could carry multiple people, and riding on its neck is an equally large knight with a bow.

“I believe Absalom will not be happy when he realizes his bride is missing,” the knight says.

“Absalom can go choke. Master’s words are law,” the dragon snorts before glaring at her, “and you, swordswoman, are to come with me.”

Chapter End Notes

*suddenly wakes up at 3 am* I invalidated the dub the moment I brought in the word okama and I should have referred to Bon-chan as They or maybe Ze. Luckily, this is a SI and Kuina can change her mind. *goes back to sleep immediately*

All I can say is that Perona lucked out when Kuina managed to stop herself in time. Eheh.
“Watch out!”

She ducks behind a tombstone as arrows fly overhead. More follow after, but she’s able to deflect the arrows that the tombstone can’t shield her from. Nami sags in relief from beneath an overturned obelisk monument.

“You will see the Master, but he never specified about bringing you in one piece.”

The knight riding the dragon notches another arrow, and she’s forced to move to another tombstone once her current cover explodes into dust. The dragon remains content to hover in the air as the knight pulls its bow back once more.

The next tombstone is smaller and takes a bit more maneuvering to hide behind. When the next wave of arrows rain down, she accidentally scrapes Tsubasa de Tobu against stone while moving to defend herself. The sword makes an ugly screech.

Tsubasa de Tobu is right, of course. Hiding until her cover is blown to pieces won’t solve a thing, but she doesn’t exactly have a plan of action. The few times she’s leapt towards the dragon were useless. The beast is quick enough to fly out of reach, and she’s left open to being shot at.

“Any ideas?” She asks loudly.

“I might could have grounded it, but I dropped my Clima-Tact when that thing grabbed me. Without it, I’m useless,” Nami snaps out, white gloved fingers curling against dirt irritably.

There are no words of comfort to offer. Nami is many things—a thief, a treasurer, a sailor, a shrewd businessman—but a true-born fighter isn’t one of them. That doesn’t make her useless however.

“When I give the signal, give me a boost,” she says as an idea hits her.

“What?”

Nami looks thin and delicate, but body size is not an indicator of muscles or lack of. She has it on good authority that the navigator is strong. Zoro likes to gripe about the strength of Nami’s hits enough.

She moves out of cover, wings coming down to shield her arms and legs as arrows attempt to pierce them. She’s unable to move, but the absurdly strong wings make the projectiles bounce off harmlessly.

In the seconds it takes for the knight to notch another arrow, she pulls her wings back and moves. Slicing a nearby tombstone into chunks, she kicks each piece up towards the dragon.

“Do you think such a tactic will work?” The dragon rumbles out with a deep laugh.

She doesn’t bother answering, doing her best to dodge arrows while continuing her returning fire. She finally gets the result she aimed for when a rock nearly knocks the quiver off the knight.
“Enough of this,” the knight says, holding a hand protectively over its remaining arrows. “The fool used up all her remaining cover for such an asinine tactic. There’s nowhere for her to hide now.”

The abomination speaks the truth; the only cover left is the obelisk monument that Nami hides under. Squaring her shoulders, she looks the dragon in the eye defiantly. She’s not about to run for it either.

“Your defiance was entertaining, but the game is set. You will come with me to the Master,” the dragon says before descending towards her with talons wide open.

“Now!” She shouts with a sprint.

Nami climbs on top of the overturned obelisk. Her white wedding dress is marred with dirt and grass stains while the bottom of the skirt has been ripped off, but it only makes the determination in Nami’s eyes that much clearer.

Sprinting, she makes it to Nami’s outstretched hands; she’s careful to keep her sword still as her boot steps onto Nami’s fingers. Thin arms throw her with all their strength as she pushes back against the hands serving as a platform.

The dragon does not expect her to jump so high that she soars above it; it certainly doesn’t expect her to snap her wings shut so she lands onto its back with her blade held out and down, but that is exactly what she does.

Her sword sinks into decayed hide, and her boots land a moment later. It is only because abominations do not feel pain that she isn’t bucked off immediately.

The draw of a bow has her wings snapping around her defensively. The knight has turned the top portion of its body around to inhuman degree to continue its assault at close range. The dragon attempts to shake her off while flying around in circles.

“Do not kill her,” the dragon reminds the knight. “Remember what Master decrees.”


She clings to Tsubasa de Tobu’s hilt as the dragon begins rolling. She can only deflect arrows with her wings, but the fact that the dragon keeps circling the graveyard makes her raise an eyebrow. If these brainless morons were only focused on the objective, they’d attempt to carry her off just like this.

Not even the undead is above pride. Perhaps they want to take her to Moria with her head bowed in defeat. Could that be a remnant of their old selves underneath Moria’s control?

“Your spirits are unyielding, but I’m very stubborn,” she says before letting the familiar sensation of smoke build up in her throat.

She’s close enough to the knight that her flames reach, but the dragon jerks immediately, causing her to breathe out into the sky. Both abominations begin screaming and moving around wildly in fright, and she’s forced to cling to Tsubasa de Tobu with both hands.

She frowns and tries again. And again and again.

One useless attempt after another leaves her chest heaving and throat sore. With the way she’s being twisted and jolted, the only place she’s able to burn is the body directly beneath her feet. As
she doesn’t want to set herself on fire, she needs a new plan. She tries to come up with one and finds nothing.

If only she had more control over her flames than aiming in a direction and spewing. It was different for Luza; his flames had a weird sticking power, only disappearing when he wanted them to. It’s probably similar to the way Zoro uses Haki to power up his blade.

She looks down at the sword in her hand and blinks. Later, she’ll blame the lack of oxygen for the idea that comes to her.

Carefully steadying her boot against the flat of Tsubasa de Tobu’s blade, she reaches down and manages to slide a knife out. Holding the knife’s blade to her lips, she breathes. Stay, she thinks as flames roll onto the blade like smoke, stay until I release you.

Stay and burn only what this blade touches, she whispers through the fire.

Even after she stops her breath, even after the flames stop pouring out, the knife’s blade remains bright against the night sky. There are no signs of melting even as fire snaps warningly along the blade. This, she knows, is the power of Haki.

She takes the knife and plunges it into the dragon’s hide beneath her. The ensuing screams are so loud that she’s deafened to anything else.

No matter, she doesn’t need her hearing for the rest of it. Keeping an iron grip around the still burning knife, she slowly lifts Tsubasa de Tobu up. Her wings deflect the multitude of arrows shot at her while the blade protects her face.

She sets Tsubasa de Tobu ablaze.

The pink blade glows, unable to choose between the color of blood and the sun. She can’t but think that the low sound in her ears resembles a chuckle.

“Fly true,” she tells the katana before throwing it.

Tsubasa de Tobu goes straight through the knight’s armor before moving downward to spear the dragon scales under it. Fire consumes the abominations at a fast rate, and sweat rolls down her forehead at the immense heat surrounding her.

She waits until the last moment possible to let go and jump. She expects her glide to end the same way it did when she jumped off Perona’s burning garden—a painful landing face first—but the white fabric hastily tied around broken fence posts is a welcome surprise.

“Why?” She bounces from the fabric onto the ground.

“I figured you had trouble landing when you missed the beach, so I came up with this. I had to move a few times because of the changing height and wind, but you know,” Nami says, waving a hand as if to say “no big deal.”

The white fabric acting as a trampoline must be the ripped material from Nami’s dress. The veil from earlier is also missing.

“Thank you,” she says with sincere gratitude.

She imagines Nami with those determined eyes scrambling to put down the fence posts only to look up and let out a stream of curses before hurrying to move yet again. Something like fondness
creeps up on her at the image.

Tsubasa de Tobu’s missing weight beckons her to fetch her sword. She wastes no time going to the fallen dragon which landed outside the graveyard. Nami stays one step behind her, eyes shifting around nervously.

The dragon isn’t hard to miss as its huge mass currently resembles a house on fire. There’s no movement amongst the flames, but she’s unable reclaim her sword and knife until the flames die down. She crosses her arms and waits.

There’s no need to fear being jumped. She still has many weapons hidden up her sleeves—in her obi too—but Nami looks at her sword gleaming proudly through the flames with worry.

“You wouldn’t happen to have salt hidden inside that kimono, would you?” Nami asks.

“No. Why?” She tilts her head.

“Brook’s been here before, and he figured out that salt will purify the zombie creeps. I mean, so will fire—wherever you got that from—but salt’s a little less,” Nami pauses before offering up, “self-dangerous?”

Nami waits for a reply but lets out a gusty sigh when she doesn’t offer either a miraculous bag of salt or an explanation on Haki. She decides to forestall the awkward silence by prodding the woman for news on the others.

“Last I knew, everyone’s okay, well, for a definition of okay. We’ve even made allies with the pirates hiding in the forest. That said.” Nami’s words have a hopeful edge to them which makes the sudden wailing jarring.

“Everyone lost their shadows and they’re going to die by sunup, Luffy’s shadow is currently inside this really huge giant ogre who’s slowly destroying the island and screaming for meat and no one can stop it, I couldn’t find any treasure, and some freaky lion-man-zombie-thing keeps trying to make me marry him!”

When Nami continues on about pig women and mad scientists, she considers how best to comfort her. Thinking better of patting the woman on the arm, she digs through her kimono before Nami works herself into an anxiety attack.

“You can hold him if you like,” she says, thrusting her hand out.

“What the hell is that?” Is the insulting reply.

“Mini-Mihawk,” she tells Nami, holding the doll defensively. “Much better than the real thing, I assure you.”

Nami looks from the doll to her, to Tsubasa de Tobu still on fire, to back to the doll before looking up at the sky and taking two steps away from her. She feels mildly offended at the action.

“They’re all idiots. I am no one’s girlfriend nor am I a swordsman,” she says flatly.
“So the doll?”

“Is just something I made because I was bored,” she says, sliding a finger over a tiny hat. “That Marine, Tashigi, is the one pretending to be Mihawk’s girlfriend.”


Her personal space is suddenly invaded, and she’s the one taking a step back. Nami’s face is far too close and keeps getting closer as she unconsciously leans further in. She takes another step back.

“Chasing after Zoro?” She repeats slowly.

Ensign Tashigi is only after the Straw Hat pirates because she’s a Marine, right?

“Oh, not that they have anything going on,” Nami’s eyes gleam unholy against the fire, “but she fixates and talks about him a lot. I thought she had something for Zoro, but to think she’d go so far as going to his nemesis to make him jealous.”

There is a mix-up in the language they speak somewhere. She doesn’t recall ever saying Tashigi is pretending to be Mihawk’s girlfriend out of petty spite. Against her wishes, the thought of it being true takes root in her brain.

“But Zoro only gets mad at her. It’s very different to how he acts around you. What’s the deal with you two?” Nami says about as casually as a shark smelling blood.

She considers her answer carefully.

“I made a contract with him when we children. I sort of forced it on him so I could protect him,” she answers vaguely.

It’s not that she doesn’t say “betrothal” or “marriage” because she wants to keep it a secret. She’s simply not ready to talk about it. When it comes down to it, their agreement truly is a contract, so it’s not a lie either.

“He intends to keep it even though I told him the contract was a farce to begin with,” she says with a sigh.

“Wait, does that mean—”

As if doused by the will of the divine, the fire dies at this very moment. She strides to the now empty patch of burnt ground even as the smallest of flames attempt to keep going. Her knife is too hot to pick up with anything but kimono sleeves, but Tsubasa de Tobu remains stubbornly cool.

She sheathes the sword and gives its scabbard a fond pat. It’s completely spotless; not even the wrap around the hilt is burnt off.

“I’ll escort you to your crew, and then I’m going after Moria,” she says.

Nami gives her a hesitating look, and she wonders if her anger is seeping out again. Just the thought of Gecko Moria makes her blood boil. She counts backwards from ten and attempts to be more approachable.

“Don’t worry. You are important to Zoro, so I will protect you with my life,” she states.

Her try at being reassuring falls flat as Nami makes no move other than to stare at her. She folds
her arms in her kimono sleeves and tries not to fidget.

“A sword, huh?” Nami mumbles to herself nodding. “Right, follow me.”

That determination from earlier is back, and Nami doesn’t hesitate to take the lead. That courage lasts only until an abomination pops out of the ground in front of them. Admittedly, it had taken her by surprise as well; she had beheaded the abomination on reflex, but Nami screaming in her ear hardly made things better.

“You really seem to hate zombies,” Nami notes.

The woman looks on with a morbid fascination as she tests her new fiery blade technique on each abomination they come across. She’s currently cutting off an undead spider’s legs to test how fast the flames burn, and if there’s a difference between using a sword and a knife.

“Of course I do. They’re abominations.”

“Even Brook?”

She holds up the knife with a grimace. It burns at a weaker rate than the sword. Does that mean the technique relies on the amount of metal or the grade?

“When people die, their bodies are supposed to return to the earth while their spirit moves on,” she answers absently. “If they want another chance at life, they reincarnate. For the body to continue moving without the spirit, or for the spirit to return to the body is unnatural and should be cleansed.”

His people had never buried their dead until they’d been forced to, choosing to return their loved ones to nature. The idea of the body continuing on after death was unthinkable, wrong in so many ways.

“But he ate a Devil Fruit,” Nami points out.

She has nothing to say to that.

When they are close to the forest, a shiver goes down her spine. She looks up at the moon hanging low in the sky. Time is running out, and she doesn’t have long to save the others.

“You should be fine from here. I’ll give you a knife. I need to go to Moria now,” she says, reaching into her boot for her best knife.

Nami takes the weapon with some confusion but nods at the seriousness written on her face. They’re so close to the pirates that use the forest as a base, it’d be an insult to believe Nami wouldn’t be able to make such a short journey.

She looks at the woman holding her knife in a way that speaks of some skill and finds herself hesitating. There’s one more thing that needs to be done, but she can’t do it. She needs help.

She’s not used to relying on others, and the words are heavy on her tongue.

“Nami, I need you to go back to the ship and do something really important for me. You’ll need to do exactly as I say,” she says before bowing deeply to beg. “Please.”

Despite some reluctance, Nami agrees and runs off into the darkness under her watchful eye. She waits until she’s sure Nami’s gone before glancing somewhere to her left.
“I don’t know why you’re watching us, but make a move towards any of them, and I’ll kill you.”

Whatever the presence may be, it doesn’t move. Nothing about it feels hostile, but it’s been following the two of them for a while. Warning given, she squares her shoulders and heads for the mansion.

She has several promises to keep and no time to lose.

Chapter End Notes

Almost done with Thriller Bark...!
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The ticking of an imaginary clock echoes in the back of her mind as she sprints towards the mansion. The sun will be up soon; she’ll be lucky to have an hour. Maybe the Straw Hats will get to Gecko Moria before her, but if neither of them make it in time—

Images of the cheerful pirate crew crumbling into dust hit her swiftly and painfully. No, she won’t allow it. Her legs burn as she pushes herself to move faster, to run harder.

The pounding of her heart in her ears deafens her to anything else; the earth beneath her feet moves oddly, but she puts it out of her mind for the moment. She only has one goal: get to the center of the island.

So focused on moving forward, she ends up running past a familiar face.

“Hey! Will ya stop for a sec?”

Her legs lock into place so suddenly that she has to lean back to keep from tripping. She whirls around, taking in messy red hair and ragged clothing.

“Chilla?”

“Good to see ya haven’t forgotten me!”

Chilla sends her a bucktoothed grin, but it can’t hide the singed scarf and disheveled hair, can’t hide how a hand hovers over a stomach wound or the way the woman curls in on herself subconsciously. The comically large cannon sitting on Chilla’s shoulder tells her everything she needs to know.

“Where’s Moria?” She asks.

“Last I saw, fightin’ your captain with that over-sized ogre of his. Hear all that racket? That’s them,” Chilla says, pointedly staying silent as the earth shakes with a roar.

It’s a ghastly sound, one that reminds her oddly of Luffy, and it turns her attention to the mansion still out of reach. Though the noise and shaking comes from the mansion, if that ogre is the same one that Nami mentioned, then it’s far too big to fit inside.

“I can’t fight anymore. I’m heading back and gettin’ the medical supplies ready,” Chilla says before throwing a thumb over her shoulder. “But if ya want to try taking down a 500 year old super zombie, be my guest.”

“I’m going,” she says firmly.

Running away isn’t an option. She brushes past Chilla who begins waving an arm frantically.

“Hold on to ya britches for a second! I got a message I want ya to deliver to Moria,” Chilla says with a glint in her eyes. “Those wings work, right?”

“Yes, why?” She asks slowly.
On a list of things she never thought she’d be stupid enough to do, this has to be somewhere at the top of the list.

“Ya holdin’ on nice and tight?” Chilla adjusts the cannon on her shoulder with a hum. “Don’t let go ‘til the arc of the shot, got it?”

“Got it,” she says, gripping the chain in her hands tightly.

As a backup gunner for her crew, the Rolling Pirates, Chilla’s preferred ammunition are chain shots. With little effort, Chilla attaches an extra-long chain to a cannonball.

“Hey, don’t forget my message, kay?” Chilla reminds her before striking a match.

If she was anyone else, the sheer force of the cannonball would not only have ripped her arm clean off, but the chain probably would have sliced the rest of her into pieces. As it is, she’s shot into the sky effortlessly.

Pressure against her chest keeps the scream in her throat, and the world becomes a blur. The chain bites into her fingers, but she grits her teeth and remains holding tight. Only when the weight of the cannonball begins tugging her down does she let go.

Her wings spread open, but she’s sent into a fast flight rather than a glide. The pressure against her chest disappears, and the world comes back into focus.

It becomes near impossible to miss the giant, red abomination roaring down at the ground. Everything from the horns and the underbite to the long, flowing hair and oversized arms makes the enormous creature resemble an ogre.

The Straw Hats have the ogre surrounded in what looks like a courtyard, and behind them are malnourished people armed to the teeth. The rest of the Rolling Pirates, she guesses. The skeletal form that could only be Brook stands protectively someone on the ground.

She only has eyes for one person.

Searching for her target, she finds the ghastly vase-shaped body lying on the ground away from the battle. Gecko Moria doesn’t move, and no one seems to be paying attention to him. Pure rage overtakes her. Such a monster deserves a worse fate than to be simply slain in the midst of battle.

For the one who has torn so many people’s very souls in half, Gecko Moria deserves to burn for all that he’s done.

She unsheathes her sword midflight and holds the blade to her lips.

“Burn it all, Tsubasa de Tobu. Alight and Purify!” She whispers to the blade before turning it towards the ground.

She dives towards the giant ogre, folding in her wings until they snap shut, and allows herself to fall.

Whatever the Straw Hats had planned is a moot point: her fiery blade stabs into the ogre’s head. Tsubasa de Tobu sinks into the skull easily, and gravity keeps her falling. The flesh beneath her blade becomes consumed by flame, and she tears through skin, bone, and machinery on her way down.

The moment her boots hit the ground, she’s moving towards Moria, katana glowing fiercely in her
hands. She doesn’t stop even as the corpse behind her, wailing and as tall as the mansion, falls and begins burning like a miniature sun. Zoro calls her name, but she doesn’t acknowledge it.

Moria is already sitting up, hands stretched out against the ground. He glares at her, and she returns it with as much venom as possible. He mouths something at her, but it’s too low for her to hear.

“All the shadows to me!” Moria suddenly screams.

For a moment, it’s as if night itself reverses. The sky grows darker, and a deeply unsettling feeling causes bile to rise up the back of her throat.

Unnatural, something inside of her screams.

The false night breaks as hundreds of shadows streak towards Moria. The Warlord cackles as shadows fade into him, growing steadily larger with each one. She spits out fire towards the black inky mess above her, but only a few of the shadows fall back towards the walls.

“My crew was killed because they could be! If they had been zombies from the start, I wouldn’t have lost them!” Moria screeches. “Zombies are invincible and so long as I have the power of shadows nothing can stop me!”

She backs up as Moria continues to grow; he ends up taller than even the red ogre she just put down. Moria’s body can’t seem to keep up with the rapid growth, and he ends up grinning down at them with a bloated body that needs to be supported by both arms and legs.

“I am the one who will be the Pirate King! I am the only one strong enough!” Moria laughs.

The Rolling Pirates run away screaming as Moria takes out a chunk of the mansion with only one movement. The Straw Hats step back but ready their weapons. She glares up at the now giant Warlord with gritted teeth.

“Girl, you may have cost me a few shadows, but even now, I am still more powerful than you!” Moria turns his attention towards her, hand hovering over her dangerously.

The hand comes down, moving slow enough she could dodge, but the clock inside her head tells her she’s out of time. Desperate times mean desperate measures. She raises her sword as fire cackles down its blade. If Moria thinks this wasp sting will only be a nuisance, then he has another thing coming.

Before the tip of her blade can pierce skin, a muscled arm grabs her around the middle, and she’s thrown over a shoulder. She has to stretch her arm out to keep Tsubasa de Tobu from setting her “savior” on fire.

“This is bullshit,” she hisses before slapping the shoulder digging into her stomach. “Put me down, Zoro. I’m going to send him to hell.”

“Getting squashed is not a tactic,” Zoro says through gritted teeth.

The ground shakes from Moria’s rampage, and when she’s finally set down, she finds herself surrounded by grim-faced Straw Hats. Sunlight begins pouring into the ruined courtyard, and she knows they have no intention of running like the other pirates cowering in the shade of the walls.

“We’re out of time. Stay back. I’m going to kick his ass,” Luffy declares as his crew lifts their weapons. “You guys take care of the rest.”
Luffy doesn’t look much better than his crew or the Rolling Pirates, but there’s an anger burning in his eyes that resembles her own.

“I’m going to kick his ass. Don’t get in my way,” she says striding forward.

Luffy is not her captain; his selfish words mean little to her. She has made the vow to end Moria’s life, and she will not be stopped. She’s surprised when he steps up beside her instead of throwing a tantrum.

“We’re going to beat the shadows out of him,” Luffy states grimly while cracking his knuckles.

“Understood.” With pleasure, she doesn’t say.

She doesn’t wait a moment longer, dashing towards Moria with Tsubasa de Tobu in her hands. The flame along the blade is now extinguished, but she doesn’t need fire to do what she wants.

Standing before the very same hand that tried to squash her, she lets out a flurry of swipes—each strike shallow but quick—and ink oozes out with each cut. Shadows streak past her, and she’s moving back as Luffy slams the hand with an oversized fist.

“Luffy, don’t overuse your Gear ability!” Chopper cries somewhere behind her.

Fighting together with Luffy is chaotic and messy. If she had to be more descriptive, she’d say it’s like running an obstacle course while trying to knock out the other guy running it with her.

When long, rubbery legs swing out to kick Moria, she has to dodge it too. Twice, Luffy gets in the way of her thrusts, and she has to correct herself before she beheads Zoro’s captain.

Still, Moria, for all his strength, is an easy punching bag. Their strategy of hitting him as many times in the smallest amount of time works. Moria shrinks as each and every single hit causes a shadow to leave him.

The Rolling Pirates let out a cheer behind her once it becomes clear that all the shadows have returned to their owners. She loses feeling in her hand and throws Tsubasa de Tobu at Moria’s head before it goes completely numb. She misses, and the sword sails past Moria and towards a broken wall.

“Where is it? Give it up!”

Luffy, whose shadow now resides safely at his feet, holds Moria up by the neck and is still beating his face in.

“I don’t have her shadow!” Moria screams as Luffy continues hitting him. “Girl, you’ll be gone soon. The sun will turn you to dust!”

Such gleeful words from a dead man. She glances down at her feet where nothing lies, not even her boots. Particles of dust break away from the remaining portions of her arms, swirling up to the sky.

Behind her, she thinks she can hear multiple people call her name. Some of the voices are ones she hasn’t heard in a lifetime, calling him by a different name.

How odd that the sun feels good on her face even as it’s turning into dust. Memories of lying down on grass in the sun while a cool breeze hits his skin come to mind. The tantalizing smell of sweet grass is just out of reach.
It’s a good dream, but she’s not finished here, not yet. She glances over Moria’s shoulder.

“I have a message for you,” she says.

Moria’s face is messed up so badly, it’s almost a shame she can’t make out the expression he makes when a pink blade suddenly pokes out of his stomach. Luffy drops Moria with a surprised screech—bending backwards dramatically despite the fact the blade is nowhere near his skin—causing Moria to sink deeper onto the sword going through his back.

“You’re late,” she says to the one standing behind Moria.

“A good swordsman makes a good entry,” Kaito tells her with a chuckle.

Gone is the red dress with its pulled off sequins; instead a well-cared for black suit has been carefully buttoned over patch worked skin. In the breast pocket is a fresh cut flower from Nami’s garden, and spiky hair has been combed back into a proper hairstyle.

“That said,” Kaito continues over Moria’s choking sounds, “sinking a boat this large took quite a bit of effort. We don’t do anything by halves, do we?”

“No,” she smiles even though her mouth has already disappeared.

“Call it. Your shadow,” Kaito says. “Call it, and it will go to you.”

Come back to me, she thinks as she reaches out her hand. It’s not time for us to depart yet. We still have a world to see, so much to do.

She closes her eyes and tilts her head up towards the sun. No cool breeze hits her. The only thing she smells is smoke, sweat, and blood. She curls her fingers and feels the ache in them. She feels whole.

When she opens her eyes, Kaito is pulling Tsubasa de Tobu out of Moria and holding the hilt out to her. Luffy is giving him a blank eyed stare.


“It’s always been zombies!” Zoro shouts angrily somewhere behind them.

“I will drag Moria and Thriller Bark to hell with me. I will not let them rest, even for a moment,” Kaito promises as she takes back her sword. “Worry not for his Devil Fruit, for I will take that to hell with me as well.”

She doesn’t know how Kaito plans to do that, but she has no desire to ask. Kaito bends down, grabs the now lifeless Moria by the back of the collar, and begins dragging the body towards the shadows. She knows, instinctively, that they will both disappear.

“Could you pass on a message to Moria for me?” She speaks up before Kaito can go too far.

“Was a blade through the lungs not it?” Kaito asks.

“No, but I didn’t have any hands left to pass on Chilla’s message,” she says.

Kaito understands from the way he laughs, and she knows that Moria will receive the message somehow. When the two bodies disappear from sight, she turns around only to be met with Luffy, Chopper, Brook, and Usopp huddled together and crying.
“He,” Usopp warbles, “he dragged him to hell!”

“AHHH!” Chopper, Brook, and Luffy scream.

A sharp feeling a vindication hits her, but it’s not from the thought of Moria going to hell.

“Is it because they used the right pronouns?” She whispers to herself.

“Kuina,” Zoro calls for her.

*Kaito.*

Ah, so it’s like that then.

“Stop giving me heart attacks,” Zoro grouches at her, arms crossed.

“Only when you do,” she replies immediately before pausing. “Zoro, do you feel any different after getting your shadow back?”

“No, do you?”

She waves off Zoro’s concerned look with a flick of her sleeve. Perhaps her soul is different, and that’s why it came back to her a little fuller than when it left.

Zoro doesn’t bother pressing her for more information, but the frown he wears tells her he’s not going to overlook this. She shrugs at him. When she finds out the full effects of being an abomination for a night, she’ll let him know.

“Do you know where Nami is?” Robin asks as Sanji begins wailing about losing his beloved Nami.

“Shes back on the ship,” she says, and the certainty of it makes her eyes narrow.

Perhaps it’d be best to have Chopper look at her later. She doesn’t feel like she’s any different; rather, it feels like she’s learned some new things and just hasn’t put them into practice yet.

Though she does feel like she’s forgotten something important.

“The way you took out Oars was SUPER!” Franky suddenly shouts, giving her a thumbs up.

“Oars?” She blinks.

Zoro nods towards the abomination still burning. If she squints, she can still make out red skin. Even 500 year old zombies need names, she supposes.

“Burying these guys will take forever,” Sanji grouches, pulling out a cigarette.

It’d be the right thing to do for these people and their desecrated bodies, but isn’t—ah. That’s what she forgot.

“Oh, right. We might want to get to the ship. Thriller Bark is sinking,” she says in sudden realization.

The sheer amount of “WHAT?” she receives deafens her.
Chapter End Notes

Say goodbye to Thriller Bark! See? It didn't take 2 years. but it took a month... sorry

Dedicated to a very specific person who gave up on One Piece solely due to Oars. (and now harbors extreme hatred towards the zombie)

Happy Holidays~

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