So I Could be the Snake

by ImperialMint

Summary

Whitebeard's first commander vanished years ago – so long ago in fact that his existence is just a myth nowadays. When Ace is handed a rare hybrid of a bird, he has no idea how much his life is about to change and how the world will respond, sparking the end to the war on Devil Fruit users.
The bird sat dispassionately in the cage as Ace bit his lip, waiting for the click on the other end of the line that would signal Luffy had finally paid attention to the ringing phone.

"Hello?" a familiar voice said around a mouthful of food as the phone picked up. "Who is it?"

Manners forever lost, something Ace would have to reprimand his brother for later, Luffy swallowed thickly and asked again.

"It's me Luffy," Ace muttered and Luffy instantly launched into hundreds of questions, from asking how he was to questioning if he should go buy more meat today or tomorrow morning.

"Luffy," Ace said tiredly, the bird's beady eyes settling on him as he began to pace. "I'm not calling to talk about meat. I have a problem."

Instantly, Luffy fell silent. For all his eccentricities and lack of focus, when there was a problem with anyone Luffy cared about, he was ready to fly into action on a moment's notice.

"An old collector or something died and they found something odd in his possession. They traced its ownership and, somehow, it was supposed to go to my dad when the collector died. Obviously my dad's dead and so it's mine." Ace shuffled away from the bird, already feeling irritated at its bored stare.

"What's bad about an old antique? Want me to ask Nami to value it or something?" Luffy had clearly relaxed when it was revealed Ace wasn't in any danger, a humorous tone in his voice.

"Luffy… it's… fuck." Ace sighed and ran a hand over his eyes. "It's some rare kind of bird or something – I don't know. They were talking about it being a hybrid and the only one of its kind and fuck."

Luffy fell silent again and Ace waited patiently.

"A bird?" he asked softly. Luffy knew better than anyone Ace's track record with living creatures. "I'll be over in ten minutes."

The phone call terminated and Ace looked at the bird in its cage. It was a good thing, really, hardly moving, except when to eat and drink. It looked utterly bored with the world, not that Ace could blame it. If he'd been shut behind a cage all of his life, he'd be bored with everything around him.

Ace tried to busy himself while waiting for Luffy to arrive. He tidied the kitchen a little, checking how much food he had before returning to the living room, avoiding looking at the bird as he picked up the sofa cushions.

A knock on the door came a moment later and Ace felt his heart beat calm a little, knowing that Luffy was here to help him. He opened the door and Luffy bounced in, all smiles and grabby hands.

"What do I do?" Ace asked, so different from how he usually behaved. Usually it was Luffy who was the one who came asking for help or needed Ace's support, but now Ace learnt how it was to need someone more than before.

"Can I see it?" Luffy asked, still smiling. He'd always loved animals and if anyone could coax the
bird out of its shell then it would be Luffy.

Ace led him into the lounge and as soon as Luffy saw the cage, he was off. Before Ace could warn him, the little door had been unbolted and Luffy stuck a hand in, wiggling his fingers to try and get the bird's attention.

"Hello," Luffy said quietly, moving slowly to the bird. It seemed to roll its eyes and then with precise accuracy, darted its neck out to peck Luffy's hand.

"Ace," Luffy whined, turning around. "It pecked me."

And therein lay the problem. Or part of the problem. It was the problem Ace had with every animal he'd ever come across. Seeming to read the expression on Ace's face correctly, Luffy extracted his hand and closed the cage, rubbing the back of his neck and humming to himself.

"It's your fire, isn't it?" Luffy asked quietly and Ace nodded at once.

"Some of the people who handed the bird over to me said they'll be back in a few weeks with a few places I could sell the bird. Private hands and all, ones who'd want their bird in top condition." Ace closed his eyes.

Luffy patted his arm gently before he moved to the kitchen. Ace let him go, knowing he'd be back with food for them to share.

Some would say that Ace was lucky. They were the ones who weren't 'gifted' by the Devil's Fruits, the ones who would always have a normal life. For those who did have the supernatural powers, however, life was far more sinister and secretive.

Devil's Fruit powers expressed themselves in anyone and in any way. Luffy had the power of being a rubber-man and it took every ounce of his concentration to hide the fact his skin couldn't feel pain and that he could stretch his body a thousand times longer than he stood. It wasn't easy for Luffy, but it was harder for Logia types, such as Ace.

While Ace had spent his entire life striving to control his powers, he was far from perfect. If this bird, like any of the other animals he'd met in his life, snuck up on him one day or accidentally hurt him, they'd be hurt. Ace could remember the first time he'd accidentally singed a cat's paw and how terrible he'd felt after. Since the cat, he'd never tried to have a pet, and yet here he was with a bird that would peck him and be hurt because his control was lacking.

Fire was not a gift that wanted to be forgotten. Ace knew that if he went to the underground and trained every day, the chances he'd accidentally hurt the bird would be lower, but there was another factor in this all.

Ace was being watched. Watched by people who wanted the bird (or, more correctly, the ones who wanted the money they'd get from the bird), and if they saw his fire then he'd be taken by the government and put to work, strapped in sea-stone cuffs.

That was the stark truth for those with Devil's Fruit abilities. If they found you, your life and freedom was gone. You were put to work under the government's watchful eye, chained up for the rest of your time, and yet that was only if they determined you weren't a threat.

Ace knew he didn't stand a chance. Not only was his power a destructive, dangerous, one, but his father had been a thorn in the government's side. His father had been a revolutionary of his time; one of the few non-Devil's Fruit users to go against the government, wanting freedom for all. He'd long since died, way before Ace had been born, yet his fight was far from over.
Tearing his mind away from the war the Whitebeard Pirates were waging against the government (because that brought forward thoughts on the small yet deadly gang that had risen to the front of the battle lines, in an amazing fashion, with their leader in a strikingly familiar straw hat), Ace looked over at the bird.

He couldn't keep it. Sooner or later he'd hurt it – like he'd always done – yet the stakes were too high this time. While he felt sorry for the bird that it would have to be shuffled off in captivity, Ace wanted to keep his own freedom. If those watching saw his body turn into fire at will – well, almost completely at will, Ace still had trouble with pain – then they would string him up as soon as they could.

Fear ruled all in the Grand Line and the ones watching him would sell him out sooner than he could pack up and run.

Luffy returned then with a plateful of meat and cheeses he'd grabbed from the fridge. There was also a hunk of break he'd ripped off of the loaf Ace had brought that very morning and Luffy set his spoils on the table proudly, sitting next to them on the floor.

"What are you going to do?" Luffy asked as he began shovelling the food down. Ace shrugged his shoulders. He had no idea, which was why asking Luffy had been his first course of action.

"I can't take it," Luffy said straight away and Ace nodded. While they didn't exactly talk of Luffy's activities against the government, they weren't exactly hidden. "I'll look around and find out if anyone wants a bird though. I know Whitebeard's looking for one."

Ace scoffed. "Luffy, Whitebeard lost his phoenix, not a weird hybrid bird. Everyone says the thing died anyway and yeah, it's unfortunate, but the bird was little more than a mascot."

Luffy pouted and shook his head. "I refuse to believe it," he muttered. "I wanted to see the phoenix."

Of course Luffy would want a mythical animal to belong to Whitebeard just so he could see it. And of course Luffy would try to say the hybrid bird was a phoenix of all things.

"How many times; they don't exist. A phoenix is just a mythical creature." Ace shook his head with a fond smile.

"But you said that dragons don't exist and there was definitely a dragon when we went-" Ace cut Luffy off with a hand over the mouth.

"I don't want to know about the places you've been," he said quickly, more for Luffy's benefit than his own. "What I want to do is find out how to solve my problem."

Even the bird was silent as Luffy contemplated Ace's predicament. Ace watched as Luffy looked at the bird, to Ace, back to the bird and then to Ace again.

"I think he likes you though," Luffy announced. Ace resisted the urge to groan and instead turned to the bird, looking it over with a critical eye. It was true that the bird hadn't bitten him when he'd put his hands inside, but he'd been giving it food and water then, not trying to make friends like Luffy had been.

"Watch," was all the warning Luffy gave before he tottered off to the cage and opened it – far too quickly for Ace to stop him. With a cry of alarm, Ace could only watch as the bird hopped to the cage door and spread its wings, taking off into the room a moment later.
"Fuck, Luffy! It'll shit everywhere," Ace said frantically, looking around for a towel to catch the bird with.

"He's a clever bird," Luffy said, uncaring of the even bigger problem he'd just created. Why had Ace asked him for help again? "I bet he only wants to stretch his wings and have a look at his new home."

"You don't seem to get the point," Ace hissed, finally having located a blanket that was small enough to catch the bird with. He was glad for the pile of blankets Luffy had insisted he keep by his sofas now. "I can't keep it! I don't care if it likes me, if it stays then I'm going to be found out!"

"You want to keep him though," Luffy said simply, as if that was all there was to it. "You've always been alone and there's always been this space that even I couldn't fill up."

For a moment, Ace's heart sank as Luffy paused, looking so downcast and hurt that all he wanted to do was hold his little brother. It passed though, and Luffy smiled again.

"See how you get on living with him until they tell you they've found new home for the bird. You'll have to be careful, but your control has gotten much better and you don't want to hurt him. He doesn't want to hurt you either, I can feel it, so there shouldn't be any problems." Oh how simple Luffy's world was, but he wasn't held down like Ace was. Luffy was captain of one of the pirate crews, the outlaws who were trying to take down the government and free those with Devil's Fruit powers and any other who had been oppressed.

Ace, on the other hand, had no such freedom. He worked for a large company, punching numbers for one cause or another. He did what he was told because he didn't want to be found out. Having Roger's blood and power over fire meant he had to keep down to survive, even if Luffy had tried countless times to get him to follow his dream for freedom, tried to make Ace join him and the scores of pirates.

Though he hated to admit it, Ace was afraid. It was easier to keep his head down and continue a mundane life than risk everything for freedom. His power was unlike any he'd seen before – what would happen if even his own kind rejected him? He'd be an outcast on both sides and that was the main reason he stayed hidden.

Well, that and the fact that Roger had died with a stain against his name and if that was discovered to link back to Ace then he'd have to run and never stop. The only reason the bird had been traced to him had been because of his mother's name, the name Roger must have used when signing the documents.

Why had Roger done it though? Why had he tried to buy this bird and accepted that it would fall to him when the owner died? What was he trying to tell Ace?

"Keep him," Luffy urged, watching the bird as it walked across the floor. It was roughly the size of a duck, though looked more like a magpie than anything with deep blue-black feathers over its body. Lighter patches streaked across its belly and down its tail, an off-white that looked so bright in contrast to the rest of the bird.

"It'll do you good," Luffy pressed again and Ace wondered when he had become so wise. This wasn't his little brother Luffy speaking, but the captain of pirates, the man who was after the title of king, fighting even the strongest on his quest to take down the government for freedom.

At the end of the day, wasn't freedom all they ever wanted? Ace watched the bird as it hopped over the floor, seemingly delighted at being out of the cage. Luffy really knew how to pull his punches
and must have known that freeing the bird would guarantee Ace keeping it. He was a cheeky, crafty bastard really.

"It does seem happy," Ace said uncertainly, watching as the bird crept closer to the table. It wasn't scared of humans, it seemed, and while Ace had never thought of birds as affectionate before, he wondered if he could pet this one as he would a cat or dog.

"So you'll keep him?" Luffy said, voice shining with delight, as if Ace had announced Luffy could move in and they'd feast every night.

There was no way Ace was going to get out of this without agreeing to keep the bird, but he could still lay down a few rules so Luffy wouldn't be surprised later on.

"Only until they find a new home for it. It'll be nice to have something to come home to I guess, but it can't stay forever." The answer seemed to satisfy Luffy, for he turned to the bird with a wide grin, breaking off some of his bread and throwing it to the bird.

"Did you hear that? You can stay!" The bird, unimpressed, snatched up the bread and wandered off, as if he owned the house. Luffy laughed in its wake and cleaned off his plate, standing up as soon as he was done.

"Sanji's coming over today," he offered as an explanation and Ace sighed. He could have done with joining in the Straw Hat party, but instead he'd have to stay at home with the bird.

"Enjoy yourself," Ace said, smiling as he led Luffy to the door. While the circumstances weren't ideal, there wasn't anything else Ace could do.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" Luffy said gently, touching Ace's forearm with a look of concern. "If you really don't want to then we could probably unload the bird on Jii-chan. He wouldn't be happy, but he'd get over it."

Ace shook his head. "I think I was meant to get the bird for a reason… as stupid as it sounds."

For some reason giving the bird up now he'd made his decision felt wrong. It had to be because he'd made the commitment now – to keep it until a better home was found. He couldn't afford to become attached to the bird, no matter what.

"I'll get Chopper to come over and have a look at it tomorrow if you want," Luffy offered and Ace nodded. It would be nice to have an expert opinion on whether the bird would survive without Ace burning it to pieces. Chopper, assumed by all to be an eccentric pet, was one of the best medics in the era and Ace knew looking a bird over would be easy work.

Plus Chopper would be able to talk to the bird, something that Ace would never hope to achieve.

Luffy left, hugging Ace tightly and allowing himself to be pecked by the bird a little more as he chased it with his hands. The bird let out a cry and took to the sofa, stomping on the cushions and fluffing itself up when Luffy decided it was best he left it alone.

The front door shut with a bang and Ace returned to his home, unsure how to proceed now the bird was free and looking comfortable with itself. He did a quick scout for poo, surprised when he couldn't see any. He'd seen how much the pigeons in the park crapped over everything and was shocked that this odd bird seemed quite clean.

"What the hell do I do now?" Ace asked his empty flat, running a hand through his hair.
It was the weekend and Ace wasn't sure whether that was specifically a good thing or not. It was good for he could keep an eye on the bird, but it was also bad for that very same reason.

Especially when the bird decided the crack of dawn was a brilliant time to shout out to the world. When Ace had dragged himself out of bed, he could have sworn the bird had smirked, no matter how biologically impossible that was. Still, he'd given the bird fresh food (and who knew birds were picky about what they ate!) and even thrown in a few dried mealworms he'd been tipped to get. The bird had swallowed them down merrily, returning to its cage to preen the morning away.

Ace had, understandably, returned to bed for a few more hours.

He'd woken feeling worse than before and groaned aloud, wondering how he'd survive the day with the bird. True, he could keep it in its cage and refuse to go near it, but that would never really work, even if Luffy hadn't given the bird its freedom the day before.

For one thing, Ace would have had to stick his hands in the cage anyway. He'd managed not to be bitten by the bird when he'd first given it food and water, but only narrowly. It had been after that that he'd phoned Luffy and asked for his help. If he'd kept it inside then it would simply have been a matter of time before the bid had bitten him and then been burnt by Ace's powers.

The other deciding factor was freedom. Ace was caged inside his banal life – with good reason – but it didn't mean the bid had to be. Even if it was just a few rooms, Ace could let it stretch its wings and enjoy its time. He had no idea what its life had been like before here, but if this bird was a rare specimen, he bet it was more to be looked at than allowed to live.

That didn't even take into account that the bird had made itself at home already. Ace stood by his sofa, staring down at the blue and white bird, eyes narrowed as it peered up at him. It had gathered a few of Ace's cushions (ones that Makino had bought, Ace would have been content with a ratty old sofa if she hadn't stepped in a sorted his flat out) and built a poor attempt of a nest. It was nested in the centre of the cushions, staring out at the world with a bored look on his face.

Before this bird, Ace had never thought birds were capable of emotions. Now, though, he knew this bird was judging him for whatever reason.

"You can have the sofa," Ace muttered. Though the bird had selected the larger of the two sofas he owned, the other one was comfortable enough. Not his favourite, but Ace didn't really want to stoop to the level of fighting a bird.

The bird shuffled, feet scratching the fabric of the sofa loudly, and it fluffed its feathers up. It chirruped, shook itself off and then settled down again, drawing a smile from Ace.

"You're not so bad, are you?" he questioned as he moved behind the sofa, making as if to stroke the bird's back. It opened and eyes and clacked its beak in warning, so Ace backed off sharply, heading to the kitchen to throw some food together instead.

Cereal and tea were gathered before Ace returned to his sofa, flicking the TV on and opening the news channel. It was part of his morning routine and Ace let images of bombings and full out war wash over him. This, supposedly, was the damage caused by Devil Fruit users, but Ace knew another story. Yes, Luffy and his crew were dangerous, but not to the point where they'd bomb civilians just to make a point.

"Corrupt," Ace muttered, flicking the channel until he saw something less depressing. As least
there had been no record of the Straw hat crew or Whitebeard's men being taken down; there was some small sliver of hope that the government would be outmatched.

Ace ran a free hand over his hair as he shovelled cereal into his mouth. It was a miserable time to think about such things, but Ace worked better when he'd just woken up. He hadn't been out in a society that hated his kind yet and hadn't had to see destruction the TV couldn't even be bothered to show anymore.

A small chirrup, so quiet Ace had to strain his ears to hear, came from the bird as he looked over at Ace, eyes surprisingly intelligent and sympathetic. He ruffled his feathers and closed his eyes again, but Ace felt remarkably moved by what he'd seen in the bird's eyes.

And if he hadn't already known it, Ace knew now without doubt that this bird was unusual.

Saturday and Sunday passed, like they always do, far too quickly. Ace stood in the shower on Monday morning, wondering when the last time had been that he'd spent all weekend at his own house, rather than travelling over to Luffy's or going out with work colleagues.

Something tapped against the door of the bathroom and Ace turned the shower off, squeezing the water from his hair and stepping out. He wrapped a towel over his shoulders (again, Makino had made sure he had giant towels as well as tiny ones) and opened the door to look at the bird standing there.

While it had freaked him out yesterday, Ace only watched in amusement as the bird jumped up onto the bath ledge (no easy feat, but somehow the bird managed it with graceful ease) and then down into the lingering water that was beginning to drain.

It was a bit disgusting to think the bird enjoyed having a bath in his dirty water, but then Ace had realised the bird was a bird and probably didn't give a shit about whether water was dirty or not. Besides, Ace himself was pretty clean and the water left at the end was probably the cleanest throughout the shower…

"I'll give you a bath in the sink tonight if you want," Ace offered, even though the bird wouldn't be able to understand him. "Do shops sell bird shampoo?"

Ace shook his head. He was getting too attached if he was thinking about bird shampoo. Trying to clean a bird like that would be practically inviting it to barbeque and while he needed it to be clean when its new owners came to pick it up, Ace doubted they'd agree that a clean bird was worth the price of a dead one.

He dried himself off and walked to his room, changing into work clothes. Ace worked as a shop assistant, something low-key, fairly decent in pay (or rather, enough so that he didn't have to tap into the money his father had left him upon his death that much) and, most importantly, it was a job where he was easily forgotten. No one paid heed to him and it was perfect for him to pass through life unknown.

By the time he was changed, the bird was back to wandering around the house, looking for more things to gather for his nest. He snagged a few socks from the fresh laundry pile Ace had left out on the landing, running off quickly and jumping back on the sofa. Ace smiled and shook his head, allowing the bird to go to such lengths. As long as Ace kept the kitchen and his bedroom sealed off, the bird would be fine.
The bird seemed to always return to his cage to shit – something Ace could hardly believe and had rung Luffy up about – and didn't seem to drop any feathers. Maybe he had been bred to be that way, but Ace liked to think the bird a special one, one that had been taught to do these things.

"I'll be back later," Ace said with a wave of his hand. It was nice to say goodbye to something, even if Ace knew the bird couldn't stay.

His journey to work was grim, though thankfully short. Posters lined the street buildings urging neighbours to report any Devil Fruit users they suspected. Ace turned away from them as he waited for a green walk light, biting the inside of his cheek to keep his anger down.

It wasn't fair that they were seen as lesser human beings. Ace crossed the road and another set of posters greeted him, the face of government spokes bodies printed on them, the men smiling as if a flash of their teeth was all it took to bring peace to this place.

A crock of shit. There was no such thing as peace.

The days passed and Ace had almost forgotten that someone would be in contact with the bird until the man – one with a lion's mane of blond hair and a toothy grin – knocked on his door on a Thursday evening.

"Can I help you?" Ace asked, looking the man up and down. He didn't look like a government agent sent to take him away, but then again, Ace had only formed ideas in his mind, nightmares of being dragged from his bed kicking and screaming.

"Forgive my forwardness, but I was in the area and thought to drop by," the man said, not comforting Ace in the least. "I was contacted a few days ago about a bird. I've been looking for it for years and it is, at the moment, an unnamed hybrid."

The man took a piece of paper from his jacket pocket, showing a crude drawing of the bird on his sofa. While it was a far cry from a decent picture, it was still unmistakably the bird Ace had been given.

"I came to look at the bird, just to make sure it was the one I've been searching for." The man smiled, but there was distrust in the corner of his eyes and Ace knew he had to be wary of this man.

"How do you know about the bird?" Ace said, voice polite yet with an undertone, warning the man that he wasn't to be messed with.

The man laughed. "As I said, forgive me I must seem so rude. The bird was stolen from me, long ago. While I didn't breed or raise it, I was the first true owner of the bird and I've been searching everywhere to find it."

Ace raised an eyebrow, still not impressed.

"My name is Shiki, I'm the head of a scientific research company. The bird is vital to unlocking a few of nature's secrets, as well as being a dear pet to me." Shiki shifted his weight.

Knowing the man wouldn't leave until Ace let him see the bird, Ace nodded and stepped aside. Tomorrow he'd be making a few calls to the people who were supposed to be checking up on the bird and then a few more to find out information on this Shiki. There was something about him that rubbed Ace the wrong way, but he couldn't put his finger on it.
"I wasn't expecting guests so the place is a bit messy," Ace said, letting Shiki pass him. "Do you want anything to drink?" he offered, glad when Shiki shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'll only have time to stay for a short while," he said, looking disappointed. Ace hummed as if he was equally put out and moved into the living room, frowning when he saw the next the bird had made was empty.

"He's around here somewhere," Ace said, but he could feel Shiki staring at him.

"You let the bird loose?" he said, in a tone of a man trying to keep a secret yet failing. "Why would you…"

A heavy clap of wings announced the arrival of the bird as he flew up to perch on Ace's shoulder. For Shiki, it must have looked impressive – large blue and white bird with a long, sweeping tail sitting on the shoulder of a man who hadn't command it to – but for Ace, it was nothing short of torture. If the bird dug its claws in a little bit more, Ace wasn't sure he'd be able to control his power. He was unsettled as it was with Shiki showing up out of the blue and needed to focus on keeping calm, keeping his power hidden.

Ace watched as the bird seemed to size Shiki up, completely silent in a way Ace hadn't known before. It was an analytical silence, one that spoke of an intelligent mind taking in Shiki and warning him.

Ace didn't know when he'd begun thinking of the bird as a creature of high intelligence capable of judging a human, but he was glad the bird felt the same way as he did.

"Remarkable," Shiki muttered, stepping forwards and stretching a hand out to the bird. "He's been tamed."

As if to counter the statement, the bird gave an angry caw, launching itself from Ace's shoulder. He winced as his skin began to prickle with heat, but he thankfully controlled the flames before they grew from sparks. It was unnoticed by Shiki, who was more preoccupied by the bird hurling itself at his face, but there was a slight stiffening of the bird's body and Ace knew it had felt the change in Ace's body.

The bird was still flying towards Shiki though, talons outstretched and wings folding to swoop down. It seemed like such an extravagant move for the bird – who had only shown how peaceful and amiable it was. This behaviour was unexpected and Shiki ducked to the side, the bird landing neatly on the floor instead.

It had been only a warning shot, Ace realised.

"It's the very same bird," Shiki muttered. "I'd very much like to take it back, through the correct routes of course, I know how it feels to have such a magnificent creature stolen from you after all, if you're in agreement?"

Ace hesitated, but had to nod, if only to get rid of Shiki. He couldn't keep the bird, after all, but he didn't want Shiki to have it. If he could get in touch with those in charge of the legal side to owning the bird then maybe he could bullshit his way into our-reasoning Shiki and being able to get the bird to a nice home rather than it becoming a research tool.

"It's something to look into," Ace said softly, looking at the bird on the floor. It was staring at Shiki, one foot held off the ground with its toes curled up. On that foot lay the bird's metal tag, a round band of silver that glinted when the bid moved its leg back down.
"I shall see about arranging things then," Shiki muttered, stepping around the bird and heading to the door. "It's been good to see you, I wondered what kind of a man you were since it was Gold Roger himself who left the bird to you."

Ace stiffened and forced a nod, following Shiki with his heart beating loudly in his ears. He wondered if Shiki was able to hear it, but he didn't seem to act any differently, placing a hand on the front door handle and nodding to Ace.

"Thank you," he said and Ace smiled, though it was forced and uncomfortable. "I'll be in touch."

Ace shut the door behind him and looked through the peep-hole until Shiki was out of sight. As soon as he had, Ace bolted the door and put the chain on, leaning against the door with his back when he was done and sinking to the door.

"Shit," he breathed out, shaking his head. "Shit, shit, shit."

There was a problem. Shiki had referred to his father as Gold Roger. While that had been his name, it wasn't the name he had used in public, the name he had used in ordinary life away from his relentless campaign for freedom. If Shiki used the name Gold Roger rather than Gol D. Roger – and though they were similar, the two were very distinct on their own – then he was a dangerous man, even more dangerous than Ace had first thought.

The tip-tapping of clawed feet sounded across the floor and the bird came to stand before him, staring blandly at Ace. Ace let his legs loose from his body, stretching them out with a sigh.

At least Shiki didn't know of Ace's connection to Roger. Only a handful of people did and Ace wanted to keep it that way, especially in his life now. He didn't need to be associated with anyone like that when all he wanted was peace.

"I won't let him have you, even if I can't keep you," Ace said suddenly, stroking the bird's breast. He was allowed one stroke of the silky feathers before he felt the bird bulk up, a sure sign it was about to peck him.

"Shiki wants you for something. He's willing to risk using the name Gold Roger to get you. He knows that name could put him to death by the government and yet he still used it." Ace bit his lip, closing his eyes. "You can't stay here, but you can't go to him."

Saying it was so, so easy, Ace thought. He had to prove it though, but he had no idea how to on his own.

Despite the risks, despite how he desperately wanted to stay unknown and away from the world, Ace knew he was going to have to involve Luffy and his crew more than he'd like. He also knew that this bird would change everything, though Ace couldn't say why or to how much of a degree.

He left the bird and returned to bed, lying awake until the early hours of the morning, only trying to truly sleep when he remembered he had work in a few hours.

Friday was miserable and grey. Ace walked home with his head low, ignoring the throbbing headache he felt (that's what he got for only getting two hours sleep and then working a full day). Rain began to fall and Ace's mood dipped even further, a tribute to his Devil Fruit powers. He was fire, after all, and he'd never liked rain.

As the rain thickened, he darted under the cover of a nearby building. A few other people had
stopped too, but they were looking off to the side, to what looked like a family-run shop where a sleek car was parked and a group had gathered.

"What's going on?" he asked one of the nearby people, a man who was shaking his head with a worried look.

The man looked at him and then quickly back at the unfolding scene. "They've come to collect him," was all he said, and all he needed to.

Ace felt ice burn down his throat and fill his stomach. There was no need to explain why they were collecting this man or what would happen to him. They had reason to believe this man had the power of the Devil Fruits and that made him inferior, even if he had saved hundreds of people that same day.

"Can't we…" Ace began, wincing at his own words, "do something to help him?"

The man he's spoken to looked at Ace as if he was stupid.

"You want to be tortured and sliced up too?" he said and Ace stilled, looking away. He shook his head and was about to continue walking – heavy rain or not – when a wail sounded from the shop they'd been watching.

"Please!" a woman shouted. "I'm begging you!"

Ace felt sick and he knew the people around him shared the feeling. He saw someone rub their eyes – perhaps they'd known someone who had been carted off or perhaps they openly admitted how terrible their world was – and heard a woman sniff before she walked off, vanishing into the rain.

"Unless you want to find yourself and the rest of your family under suspicion, we suggest you let go of the User and let us do our jobs," said one of the uniformed men, black cloth covering him from head to toe in the form of a sharp suit, printed with the government logo.

The woman sagged until she fell to her knees, uncaring that the rain was soaking down to her bones or that her skirt was muddied by the ground.

"I can't," she began, breaking off into a wail as the men wrestled someone between them – the User.

He was an ordinary man, though defeated, but he was cuffed with heavy chains and Ace saw one of the uniformed men push him with excessive force. He noticed that a few others saw it too, but no one moved or dared speak out, for fear of being accused themselves.

That was how their government worked. No one argued against them unless they wanted to be accused of being a Devil Fruit User or wanted to join the outlawed pirates. Life wasn't easy when he entire nation was in the grip of fear, but usually people could put it out of mind… until it was happening on your road, right before your eyes.

The woman was still sobbing and the man stumbled, a kick to the shin making him fall in a puddle. His hands, behind his back as they were, were useless and he fell flat on the ground, much to the amusement of the men taking him away.

For the first time in his life, Ace wanted to run to the men and rip them away from the User. He wanted to reveal himself to the world and stop these monsters, tell them that the blood of a demon ran in him too and they were to fear him. Fear him like the people feared them.
He didn't, though. The woman ran forwards and the crack of bone on pavement was all Ace heard as he turned away, the woman pushed to the ground in a barbaric attack. Instead, Ace turned his head and walked away, fists clenched tightly and breathing strained. Every muscle was ready to propel him into the fight, but it would be useless. Him revealing his powers wouldn't help anyone, not even the people he'd be trying to protect.

Fire was destructive.

And it was why Ace had to be alone.

He rushed home in the rain, almost running at points, and unlocked the door in a hurry. On the way from the terrible scene he'd thought of something, something he wondered why he'd never done it before. It was so simple, Ace thought, and yet he'd been so stupid.

"I'm home!" he shouted out, toeing off his wet shoes and rushing to the living room. The bird was on the sofa, deeply settled in his nest of clothes and oddities it had collected. Ace rushed over to it and smiled down, squatting until he was eye-level.

"Shiki can't have you if you're free," Ace said with a grin. It was the best solution – the bird would be free of him, but he wouldn't fall into Shiki's hands. "I'll do it right now, come to the window."

The bird jumped down from its nest and followed him curiously, steps slow and measured as if he didn't trust Ace entirely.

Ace, on the other hand, felt giddy with elation. He couldn't help the people he'd walked past before, but he could do this. The bird was smart, smarter than many people, and Ace knew it would be able to survive.

The bird hopped up onto the window ledge as Ace opened it. He beamed at the bird, gesturing at the window.

"Go on," he urged, yet, to his dismay, the bird merely blinked at him. It had only been a week – surely the bird wasn't attached to him? "You can go."

The bird raised its leg, looking at Ace as if he was an idiot. Ace looked down in confusion, wondering if the bird had hurt himself, yet when his eyes saw the metal band, he understood.

"They'd be able to find you with that?" he asked softly, bending down to have a look at the ring before moving off to get a small screwdriver.

It was strange that it was screwed together, but perhaps it had been put on a long time ago, or perhaps it was a one-of-a-kind tracking band or something. Ace didn't know, nor did he particularly care. The band was open now and he felt a little light headed as he slipped it from the bird's leg, but that didn't make sense.

Why would the bird have a sea-stone band? Ace was about to brush it off and say he was tired when the bird in front of him literally exploded into light, bright blue and yellow shining through the room.

With a curse, Ace pulled the curtains quickly, though he doubted they would do anything to block the miniature sun that the bird had turned into. He backed away, feeling his fire burn under his skin, ready to leap to save him, but then the light began to fade, though the colour didn't become any less brilliant.

When the light had receded, Ace could only stare, open-mouthed, at the aqua-blue and golden bird
before him. It was the same bird, same size and stature, but the colours…

Was there a Devil Fruit that gave you the ability to practically shine? He hadn't known that animals could have Devil Fruit powers, but there wasn't any reason for them not to, Ace supposed.

The bird looked down at itself and cawed out. It was a far more melodious tune than before – a song, Ace would go so far to say – before it flapped its wings, launching its body through a small gap in the curtains and out through the window.

After ten minutes, Ace realised that the bird had gone and he suddenly felt empty, something he'd never truly experience before.

It had only been a week. How had he grown so used to the bird, a freaky, mysterious bird (as Luffy would say) in such a small space of time?

When he went to bed, Ace left the window open.

Just in case.
Chapter 2

Ace was sitting with a mug of tea when the doorbell rang. He got up, dusted some crumbs from his shorts and headed to the door, taking a quick glance through the peep-hole before opening it with a smile.

"Come in," he said quickly and the dark haired woman smiled, leading through a small deer. As soon as the door shut, she removed her hat and glasses and slipped the bridle from her companion's head, letting the deer shift smoothly back into his preferred form.

"Ace!" the little deer said, launching himself at Ace's leg. Ace bent down to hug Chopper in return, running his fingers over soft, velvety hair before he told Chopper there were some sweets in the kitchen.

As Chopper ran off to find the sweets, Ace led Robin to the sofa, evacuating the smaller one so that she didn't have to sit beside the nest that Ace hadn't had the heart to move just yet. She smiled at it knowingly, turning to Ace as she tucked her legs neatly to the side.

"Luffy sent us," she said without a pause. "He said he thought it best I come with Chopper as I might be able to help."

Ace raised an eyebrow, sinking back against the thick cushions of his sofa. A small cushion dug into his back and he removed it, hurling in a graceful arc over the floor. It landed with a plunk, at Chopper's feet as he entered the room.

"I can't hear your pet anywhere," Chopper said worriedly, throwing a glance to the still-open window. Ace didn't reply, but he did shrug instead. Chopper didn't ask again, warm, brown eyes looking at Ace in concern.

"You know how I asked you guys to do some snooping on Shiki?" he asked and Robin nodded, resting a hand on her chin as she leant forwards.

"On the surface he's a multi-billionaire who's a supporter of the government and very prolific. They fund a lot of his research, as long as he provides them with weaponry it seems." Robin paused, considering her words carefully.

"To us though," she said, referring to the pirates, "he's known as the Gold Lion. A notorious criminal who will stoop to any length to get what he wants."

Her dark eyes focused on him and Ace wondered how many people had seen that stare in their final moments. Nico Robin wasn't a woman Ace ever wanted on his enemies' side, that was for sure (and not just because he'd heard how Robin had persuaded Franky to join Luffy's crew).

"His company tests suppression instruments on Users and the government turn a blind eye to his experiments, most likely glad of them," Robin said, voice tight and unhappy. She'd spent time with one of the government 'labour camps', programmes set up to test how far they could stretch Devil Fruit users whose powers were useless to the government. Shiki was clearly contributing to the disgusting trade.

"To make things worse," Robin added, voice lowering ever so slightly. "He has the powers of the Fuwa Fuwa no Mi," she said and Ace looked at her sharply, shaking his head in disbelief.

"The government knows," Robin added, answering his question before Ace could even formulate
it. "The government knows everything about Shiki, yet because he's valuable to them, they turn a blind eye."

Ace clenched his fist tightly and closed his eyes. He only opened them when Chopper let out a squeak, shielding himself by the sofa (though the wrong side, as per usual), eyes fixed on Ace's bright red hands.

"Which brings me to another reason why I didn't mind coming to visit you," Robin said calmly, crossing her arms. A glass of water was fetched from the kitchen via a procession of arms as Ace tried to relax, wondering how he'd let his control slip so much that his hands had burst into flame, singing his short slightly. Robin handed him the water and he tipped it over the smouldering hole in his shorts, annoyed that he'd have to buy another pair.

He'd liked these shorts.

"Here," Robin said, taking a card from her pocket. Ace took it with a frown, looking at the simple black background and the silver mask engraved onto the card.

"What is it?" he said, looking at her.

Robin smiled. "It will grant you access to San Faldo, one of the best underground training facilities. The only rule is that everyone is masked; no one will ever know who you are."

Ace's heart sped up and he looked back down at the card in amazement, flipping it over to see the specialised barcode.

"It's on the Puffing Tom line, though it's not worth getting the train." Robin leant back in her seat as Chopper finally sat down, letting him press against her side a little. "It looks like an abandoned set of warehouses, though that's just the cover really. Underneath them lay the San Faldo arenas, or the Carnival as it's known to insiders."

"How did you…" Ace began, breaking off and looking at Robin. She'd understand his question, probably knew what he wanted to ask from the beginning of the conversation. That was one of the skills that had enabled Robin to keep on the run from the government since she was a child.

"Franky introduced us to it actually," she said. "He's never been personally, but he knows the man who helps run it and it's a valuable space for a lot of high profile Users, as well as unknowns."

Ace considered the words and nodded, tucking the card away in his shorts. If this place was capable of taking in anyone – regardless of whether they were known or not – without the world knowing the name San Faldo, then it was a place Ace could trust.

Well, perhaps not trust. He doubted he could really trust anyone, aside from Luffy and his crew.

"Ace," Chopper said slowly, a little sadly even. "Is your bird… I mean…" Chopper cut himself short, looking at Robin with worried eyes.

"It's okay Chopper," Ace replied, smiling. "I set him free. I figured that Shiki wouldn't rest until he had the bird and it seemed smarter to let him be free."

Chopper's little mouth fell open and he slid off the sofa, padding towards Ace with a worried look on his face.

"Are you okay with that?" he asked quietly. Robin was looking at Ace with equal worry, the two knowing how hard it was to be alone and having to hide who you were
"It's a bit lonely," Ace admitted, though that was an understatement. He'd missed the bird a lot, which should be ridiculous for he'd only had it for a week or so. Telling himself that his feelings were wrong, though, was a stupid thing to do and had only ended in frustration last night – and a few pillows being thrown around in anger.

"But it's what's best for the bird," Ace continued, the sentiment genuine. It wasn't right to keep the bird here, not when it would be perfectly capable – and free from scientific government dogs – in the wild.

"Even so," Chopper protested, resting his arms on Ace's legs and looking up at him. "I wish you didn't have to be so alone."

"Ace has his reasons," Robin said, with a hint of sadness, as if she too wished that Ace would join them.

He couldn't though. Not when it meant risking so, so much and when Ace was so, so scared.

With a slight sigh, Robin stood and looked at Chopper.

"We need to go now," she said, waiting for Chopper to shift into his deer-form. While a reindeer wasn't exactly a conventional pet and drew a lot of looks, it could be explained, unlike Chopper's other forms which were too different to explain away and would be instantly linked to being the power of a Devil Fruit.

Chopper shifted and looked at Ace sorrowfully. Ace knew they both would have liked to stay (or, failing that, kidnapped him and taken him back to Sunny), but being pirates was a demanding job, especially for the prolific Straw Hats.

"Rumour has it that Whitebeard has something up his sleeve," Robin said suddenly. Ace didn't want to know, but there was a sharp look in her eyes that made Ace listen. "Whatever's about to happen, know that we'll try to protect you as best as we can."

"There will always be a place on Sunny for you," Chopper added, nuzzling Ace's face gently before he let Robin slip the bridle on again. She in turn slipped her glasses back on and smiled, leading Chopper gently through the door and away, leaving Ace alone, again.

Sighing, Ace flicked on the TV, the news channel already on. He watched for a while, looking for any signs of what Whitebeard was up to, but there didn't seem to be anything to even suggest something would take place soon. Herubbed his forehead and turned the TV off, walking to the window.

The sky was grey, though it wasn't raining. Everything looked miserable and Ace hoped that the bird had managed to find somewhere safe.

After it had gone, Ace had rethought everything that happened. He'd been wrong when he'd remembered that Chopper was an animal; animals could have Devil Fruit powers. Perhaps the bird had powers, though Ace had never heard of anything that would give off such a bright colour for a power. Maybe there was more to the bird's power, though Ace couldn't think of anything that it could be.

Ace took out the card that he'd tucked away in his pocket. There was no doubt that Shiki would keep coming around after the bird and what could Ace do if he got violent when he realised Ace had let the bird go? Shiki worked for the government and the government offered him freedom even knowing Shiki was a User. There wasn't anything that was off-limits to Shiki and Ace needed to be
careful, lest he end up the next scientific experiment.

He was distracted from his thoughts by the den-den mushi ringing and he picked it up, only to be greeted by silence on the other end.

"Hello?" he repeated through the den-den mushi. The snail blinked slowly, but there was still no sound on the other end.

Thinking it a prank call or someone who hadn't realised they were calling him, Ace was about to hang up when he heard a muttered voice, as if someone was speaking in the background.

"For fuck's sake, get over him! Oyaji's going to go insane when he finds out you used the den-den mushi to-" Ace slammed the communicator back down with a roll of the eyes. Evidently someone was pining for an ex-lover and they'd called Ace thinking he was them. Annoying, but he hoped the person got back in contact if they were still pining over them. Would save a lot of money on the den-den mushi bill at least.

There was nothing to do and Ace didn't particularly want to head outside, so he selected an old film from his collection and sat down on the sofa to watch, choosing the smaller one yet again.

At some point, he dozed off, legs dangling off of the end of the sofa and neck twisted uncomfortably. The nest was still intact though, two days after the bird had left.

It was only a day before Ace dug out a mask from the back of his cupboard – left over from a fancy dress party Luffy had held one evening – and picked up the black and silver card. Upon Robin's advice, he walked the distance, keeping a change of clothes and his mask in his bag, changing in a dark alley close to the warehouses.

As he neared, Ace saw a subtle mask printed on one of the warehouses. The doors were unchained, unlike the other warehouses, and Ace stepped inside, glad for his elaborate red and gold mask when he was stopped by a large man.

"Can I help you?" he asked, eyes narrowed behind his own mask – a simple, black thing that reached down to the side of his mouth. It couldn't have been comfortable, but it did the job of hiding the man's identity well.

Knowing what was expected of him, Ace dug the card out and the man scanned it with something he drew from his pocket. It was accepted and the man nodded.

"First time?" he asked and Ace balked slightly.

"No need to panic mate," the man said quickly. "Just I haven't seen that mask before. We're all anonymous, but we do get to know each other by masks or trademark moves."

The bouncer gave a rough chuckle. "If you're new, a User and unknown, I'd say it'd be good to compete in the Fruit contests. No point hiding whatever power you have when you can use it! Fuck knows it'll be the only time you can unless you run off and join the pirates."

The bouncer sighed and Ace nodded uncertainly. He'd never been spoken to so openly with a stranger before, even a stranger who knew of his powers.

"Not everyone can jump town and leave though," he continued and Ace found himself nodding. "I have a kid at home. My wife would survive without me – stronger than me, that's why I love her so
much – but my kid? I couldn't do that to him."

"And it's so hard," Ace said simply, drawing a curious look from the bouncer.

"It sure is," he agreed, eyes falling out into the gloom. "I'm taking up all your time though; you should go enjoy yourself. I'll probably catch you on your way out," he added with a wink, directing Ace to the stairs that would lead him underground.

He moved on, adjusting the fire-themed mask on his face a little self-consciously as he continued down. After what felt like tens of minutes – yet was probably closer to one or two – Ace came to a door, where another bouncer asked for his card and scanned it, nodding when a green light showed on the scanner.

"Welcome to San Faldo," the man said. "Please enjoy yourself."

With that, the heavy door was pushed open and Ace entered a world unlike any he'd ever experience before. Masks of all sorts lay on all sorts of faces, tall, short, men, women, people who could Ace might have met and some he may never have even passed in the street. The sense of anonymity was freedom Ace had never felt before and he relished in it, taking in the entire space, or as much of it as he could.

This room seemed to be a relaxing room. A bar lined a large part of one wall and a few tables were set up, people gathered. Perhaps some had come together and perhaps they met here instead, but being able to talk to someone without fear was something Ace couldn't wait for.

Off of this room were two doors, indicated with large, glowing signs. One seemed to be for those who wanted to use their Devil Fruit powers to fight and the other led to where people would fight without them. It was a set up that worked for everyone; some people were known for their powers and they'd reveal themselves easily if they used them. Likewise, some powers weren't designed to fight with. There were options for everyone, as well as maintaining the anonymity needed to run a place like this.

Passing the bar, Ace picked up a glass of water, wanting to keep a clear head. Curiosity got the best of him and he moved through the door of the Devil Fruit power fights, meeting a bored-looking woman on the way in.

"Card?" she said, her voice even sounding bored. She was dressed in what looked like PVC and her mask attached to her hat, covering the upper part of her face completely. She took the card Ace offered and looked at him, smile on her face.

"VIP eh?" she said, flipping the card over. "Lucky for some."

Ace nodded, unsure what to say. He didn't know the card was for VIP access and didn't really know what that would entail, but the woman before him apparently did and she ushered him to the side.

"You look new," she commented. "The VIP pass will let you fight in the upper leagues, where the big shots play, without having to stick your mask on the waiting list. Whitebeard and Akagami's men have been rumoured to play there too, hence the amount of competition just to get in and see the fights."

The woman sighed, passing Ace his card back.

"You want to walk straight through this room. At the back there's a door that takes you into another room – yeah I know, tonnes of rooms under here, and these are just the ones open to the public –
where both Devil Fruit fighting and normal are held together." The woman smiled, creeping a little closer to him.

"Enjoy your time," she practically purred and Ace slid out from where she'd trapped him against the wall, glad that she hadn't been even a little more forceful. Still, she'd been helpful, and Ace made his way to the VIP area, showing his card again to be let in.

The atmosphere when Ace entered was completely different to that of the previous area. People had been milling around the last one, but in here there were stands for seating and warming up in the arena going on. Despite it clearly being practice, a small crowd had gathered, men and women already cheering for one side or another, and Ace joined them, perching on one of the end seats.

"Excuse me," a voice said and Ace looked up, ignoring the mud that suddenly erupted from one of the competitor's body below.

Ace stood, letting the man pass and was about to sit down when the man turned to him.

"You can't see anything from here," he said and Ace felt as though the voice was familiar for some reason. "You should come join me."

Looking down at the arena and noticing that it had largely cleared of people now – only two were left, the two who would be fighting – Ace shrugged his shoulders. It was true that sitting on the end wasn't the best view. The atmosphere was thickening too and Ace knew he'd regret it if he passed down the chance of better seats.

The man clapped him on the back when he nodded.

"You can call me T," he said and Ace grinned, taking in the man's thick, brown hair and dog-shaped mask. He seemed nice, someone Ace wouldn't have minded knowing in real life.

"You seem pretty new," T said and Ace couldn't help but laugh.

"You're not the first to say that," he said, grinning. "Do I have a stamp on my cheek or something?" he said humorously and T laughed in return.

"Nah," he said, nodding to the seats they'd arrived at. They were in the centre of the arena, able to see everything very clearly and Ace was very glad he'd taken T up on his offer. "Just that you're very quiet, taking everything in. So either you're a shifty one or a newbie."

"You're taking a chance on me," Ace said and T chuckled again, shifting the dog mask so that Ace could see his eyes a little better. They were dark and friendly, a few lines around them revealing a little more about the man Ace had made friends with.

"Indeed I am," T said, nodding his head to the taller of the two competitors. "See that one there? That's who I like to call the Old Timer. Been around a few, took a while off and now he's back."

T grinned as he turned, mask slipping slightly to reveal a curved scar by his eye. Though Ace knew he shouldn't, he filed away that piece of information, wondering if he'd ever see T out in real life.

"Is he any good?" Ace asked and T seemed to consider his words, drumming his fingers on his knee.

"He was," he began. "But as I said, he had to take some time off from the scene and such. He's a top-notch fighter, but I think he's frustrated that he has to come back here as no one else will spar
with him."

T laughed, caught up in his own memories. "You should have seen the look on his face though. I couldn't tell if he was more furious or confused that no one wanted to fight someone who'd been out of the game for so long."

Ace smiled and turned back to the arena. For some reason, he felt as if he already knew these men – T and the one fighting, as well as whoever else T was talking about. He wondered what they did and how they all connected, even though he knew he shouldn't. He wasn't exactly here to make friends, though it was nice to have someone to talk to.

"They're about to start," T said suddenly and Ace watched as a referee – decked in a black and white mask to match his clothing – stepped between the two people on the floor.

"Round one! Anything goes." The referee then blew sharply on a whistle and evacuated the ring, standing on a small platform by the side.

"Anything goes means they can use their powers and normal fighting," T explained as Ace leant forwards, watching as the two men below began to circle each other. "The Old Timer will stick to basic combat though. His powers are useless."

The last sentence felt too weak to be true, but Ace didn't push it. If this 'Old Timer' had powers that would give him away, well. Ace wasn't one to push.

The fight continued and Ace watched in fascination. The opponent – a stubby man with a Logia power that seemed to enable his body to turn into mud – was largely unmoving, shooting out thick lumps of sticky mud in all directions, trying to trap the Old Timer's legs. The Old Timer (and Ace really had to get a better name for the guy) was untouchable though, pulling off ridiculous movements and jumps that Ace thought belonged to pirates and circus performers.

The fight ended simply; the Old Timer slammed the back of his heel down onto the User's head and that was that. The referee came out, whistle blowing and announcing a clean knock out. There would be no round two and T shook his head, slapping his thigh as he laughed.

"Damn I owe him some money now," he said, clapping Ace on the back as if they were old friends. "How did you enjoy that though?"

"It was…" Ace paused, searching for words as people around them began to filter out. From what he gathered, there was a pause between each fight to allow people to get drinks and also for the fighters to cool off a little.

"It was amazing," Ace finished. "I've never seen anything like it. Especially for someone to use their powers so openly."

He bit his lip, afraid that he'd said a little too much, but T merely hummed in agreement.

"It's why, no matter what, I'll never be able to give this place up. I love the freedom here," T said and sighed. "I'm not a User myself, but I know plenty of them. I'm good friends with them all and it's ridiculous that people, good people, have to hide and scurry just because they have some freaky power."

T's eyes slid over Ace and he stared back, for once unafraid to say that he was a User – that he was a good person too.

"You don't have to answer, but it's not like I'm going to pry or anything." T paused, smiling again.
"You a User?" he said and Ace looked at him sharply, forcing himself to relax.

"Yeah," Ace replied. "First time I've admitted it aloud to a stranger, but yeah I have a Devil Fruit power."

T grinned. "Good on you for admitting it. It's not a disease or something bad… hey, is it something you can fight with?" There was a gleam in T's eye that Ace wasn't too fond of, but he wanted to test his power, wanted to be able to use it without having to practice alone in an abandoned, underground facility miles away.

"Logia type," he said and T gave a low whistle.

"Let me see what I can do," he said, about to move off and take Ace with him when the 'Old Timer' stepped up beside them. He wore a blue, feathered mask rimmed with bright yellow, something that reminded Ace of the bird, the first reminder he'd had since he'd come to San Faldo.

"Old Timer!" T greeted. "I found us a new friend."

Ace smiled at the newcomer. "The match was pretty good," he said and the man laughed, shaking his head.

"I'm out of shape," he said, "but it was fun nonetheless and I'm glad you enjoyed it. First time here?"

Ace nodded. "T picked me up, pretty much, which I'm grateful for. I'd just be sitting at the side in awe if it wasn't for him."

The man grinned and looked at T. "He likes to call me Old Timer, but I despise the name. Just call me Em instead."

Ace nodded, once again not bothering to give his own name. Giving out even a letter felt like he'd be revealing too much and it was only his first time here. He had plenty more time to grow and discover who he was underneath the persona he'd developed for 'real' life.

"I'll book you in," T said suddenly and Ace turned to him, about to ask what that meant. T had already vanished through, pushing through the crowd that had begun to flock back in, two fighters warming up once more.

"He's gone to put you in the books," Em explained. "Which means you'll be fighting tonight."

Ah. So that was it. Not that Ace particularly minded – he wanted to fight after all – but he somehow felt a little self-conscious and inadequate. He'd had no formal training to fight and his powers had only been honed by his own thoughts… plus his power was destructive and he'd be watched by so many people.

"Don't over think it," Em said, voice low. He was close to Ace now, close enough that Ace could feel heat radiating from him. He was extraordinarily hot and Ace wondered if that was his power.

"Whatever power you have or whatever level of skill, you'll be fine. No one's going to kill you here and no one's really going to care who wins and who loses. It's all a bit of fun." Em's voice was low and Ace found himself relaxing almost unconsciously, reacting to his tone instantly. He felt a closeness with Em, a strange connection, though he supposed that was what happened when he
watched the fighting and befriended one of the teams.

"Thanks," Ace said quietly, smiling to himself. "Not that I have a choice either way," he added and Em rolled his eyes.

"When you get that one started, anything could happen," he said, just as the person in question returned, sighing when he reached them.

"Two more matches than yours," T said. "No one's marked down to fight you yet, which makes it more exciting really."

They returned to their seats to watch the fight as the whistle blew. It was a boring match, according to T, but Ace still marvelled at the skill level shown. It was unlike the things he'd seen on the television. It was real, electrifying and, dare he say it, frightening. At any moment, either of the people down there could be hurt beyond repair and it added to the excitement building in Ace's gut.

"Oi, oi," Em said suddenly, peering over the crowd and nodding to T. "He's not… is he?"

For a moment, Ace thought he was referring to the crowd, until he followed their line of sight and saw the area designated to signing up for the fights. A bulky man in a grey jacket stood there, smoke curling around him as he puffed on two cigars, scrawling something in the book.

"Tha-" Em cut himself off. "He can't fight if he's against Smoker."

Ace looked between them, zoning out the end of round two of the match now that he knew Em was talking about his fight.

"At least Smoker will fight fair," T said in return, though Ace didn't think he sounded very confident with what he was saying.

"Who is this Smoker and why should I not fight him?" he said instead, cutting for the direct approach. Luffy would have been so proud.

Both T and Em looked at each other, clearly uncomfortable with the subject. Instead of T explaining, as Ace had expected, it was Em who spoke.

"He's ruthless. We know him from outside and the man's like a dog with a bone." Em looked away, back to Smoker. "A good man, deep down, but ruthless."

"That doesn't explain why I shouldn't fight him," Ace pointed out and T couldn't hold back a smile.

"He's one hell of an opponent," Em finished up. "I won't stop you if you think you can take him, but he's someone who can keep up with the top levels."

For a moment, Ace considered walking away and looking for an opponent who wasn't as well-known. It would be okay, just to do that, for he did it in his normal day-to-day life all the time, didn't he? Walked away from the difficult things and turned a blind eye.

But not this time. Ace couldn't do it now, not when this was the most truthful to himself he'd ever been, despite the anonymity and secrets. He had friends here who knew more about him than the colleagues he'd spent years with in the outside world. These people understood him and didn't care that he had a power. And, for the first time, Ace felt that it didn't matter what his power was, that they'd still like him even though he was fire.

"I won't back down," he said with a grin and T laughed aloud, clapping his back for the umpteenth
time that night.

"That's the spirit!" he said happily and Em joined the smiles, eyes lingering on Ace a little longer than strictly necessary, as if he was trying to tell Ace something.

The match they'd been watching finished and the referees were quick to get the next pair on, cutting down the break time. Ace watched with a sense of detachment, running through every way he'd used his fire before, every attack that would force Smoker to submit. And even if he lost, Ace knew he'd be so glad that he went out there and did this.

"You're up." Em's voice said, right by Ace's ear. He came out of his reverie and thanked Em, leaving the pair behind despite their questions, asking if he wanted them there. This was something he had to do alone and he did so with squared shoulders and excitement trembling through his body.

While he usually went topless when practicing, Ace couldn't do that here. The only con to his tattoo; his anonymity would be shattered. Still, it wouldn't be too bad. The fire never managed to burn his clothes if he paid enough attention to it and he'd be focusing his entire efforts on control tonight.

"Flame-mask," the referee said as Ace approached him. "You're against Smoker. He's already in the ring warming up; you have five more minutes."

With that, Ace was allowed into the ring and he looked around, trying to locate T and Em, completely ignoring Smoker. For his part, Smoker didn't even look up from where he was warming up, back completely turned to Ace.

Unable to pick anyone out from the crowd, Ace turned and began stretching. He wasn't about to reveal anything on his fighting style and was going to try and hold back his fire for as long as possible. He didn't want this to be easy and Smoker had a lot of experience against him already.

"Warm up over!" came the ref's shout and Ace rose slowly from his stretch, walking to the centre of the arena and facing Smoker.

"When the whistle blows, anything goes," the referee said blankly and Ace had to hold in a brief laugh of hysteria, wondering how many times the referee had had to say that and how much he loathed it. Smoker caught the look and Ace saw him grin too, though he turned away and his face became blank once more.

And then the whistle sounded and the entire world for Ace changed.

How he had never fought before was beyond him. There was a freedom in the dance he was performing with Smoker, a dance of missed kicks and punches, of tight turns and sprints and of thoughtful planning and ruthless tactics.

As Smoker tried to take Ace down by tripping his feet up, Ace jumped high and curled into a flip. His legs were about to finish the circle he'd made when he felt something surround them and looked to see grey smoke surrounding him, Smoker's arms outstretched some way away.

The Moku-Moku no mi then, was the power that Smoker had. Appropriate, considering his name, though that didn't help Ace in his new predicament. The smoke began to tighten around him (and it was smoke- how the hell did it tighten?) and Ace knew he had to use his powers now.

Despite knowing he could use them without consequence, it still felt wrong to begin gathering the power, to begin commanding the fire to his will. As it always did, the fire burnt inside of him more
than willingly and a thin coat of heat was enough to break Smoker's hold on him, for he hadn't been expecting Ace to do such a thing.

Now that he'd displayed a little of his talent to Smoker, his opponent was looking at him with narrowed eyes behind his basic, grey mask. It was a look of a hunter, of someone who was used to taking down his opponents and yet now was faced with something unknown, something dangerous.

Ace relished the thought and moved forwards, fire curling in his belly.

Smoker moved forwards, but Ace was quicker and he jumped upwards, pushing off of Smoker to get behind him. Smoke followed him, but he pushed it back with a column of flames, noticing that the smoke was weak and most likely sent to confirm his powers.

He grinned as he sent fire across the floor, startling the referee as it passed him. He paid no attention to the referee though, focusing instead on trying to drive Smoker into a corner. He didn't expect it to work and Ace was proved right; Smoker's powers enabled him to evade the flames easily, though he didn't counter right away.

Again and again they clashed, testing each other and trying to make the other trip up and admit defeat. They were evenly matched, though Ace knew if they were fighting for their lives then Smoker's skill and experience would almost definitely outmatch his efforts.

A whistle blew and they both paused, fire and smoke licking their hands. The referee stepped into the ring with an odd look on his face, as if he wanted to be anywhere but the ring.

"It's a draw," he called, blowing the whistle sharply. "Due to matched skill levels, the fight has been called and it's a draw."

Ace's mouth dropped open and he saw Smoker's reaction was no better than his own. Smoker rounded on the referee, cigar spewing out more and more spoke as he cursed the referee out, asking him how they'd ever thought calling a match off would be a good idea.

"S-sir," the referee began, voice shaking as he stared up at Smoker. "Usually we wouldn't interrupt, but... but there are more fights to get through and the boss said-"

Smoker growled and turned away, stalking off to pace the arena for a moment. He turned back to consider Ace, who had shut his mouth and was simply watching Smoker's actions with curiosity. The guy was like an angered tiger in a cage, waiting to lash out.

"Hiken!" Smoker shouted and it took a moment for Ace to realise he was calling him. "These shits think it's over, but one day we'll have a proper rematch."

There was a competitive grin under Smoker's mask and Ace grinned, clasping the hand Smoker held out.

"Don't be sad when you lose, old man," he said and Smoker blew out a puff of smoke.

"Not many people would be able to hold their own against me with that level of inexperience. You have something, something you should develop." Smoker tightened his grip for a moment and Ace thought that he was being told something, entrusted with a secret that he would eventually be unable to contain. All he could do was nod and watch as Smoker and his ever-present cloud of cigar smoke swept from the arena, the referee breathing a sigh of relief.

As he left the arena, Ace thought about what he'd just done. He'd used his powers, held his own,
against someone strong, someone who did this a lot. He'd held his own against someone and been given a name out of it – Hiken.

"Move aside please," a warm voice said as Ace began to push past the gathered crowd. Women were trying to press against him and men were clamouring for his attention too and Ace was bemused by their actions. The crowd parted slightly to reveal T and Em, T's grin bigger than Ace had seen it that evening.

"Hiken eh?" he asked, patting Ace on the back and planting him in the middle, keeping him safe from the people still trying to get his attention. "That was some pretty amazing stuff out there. I've seen Smoker take down Users like they're flies and yet you! You who says he has no proper training! You kept up with him, got Smoker to even name you!"

T seemed delighted and Ace looked to Em, wondering if this was his normal behaviour. Em's eyes were wide though and he was just as impressed as his friend, though not as obvious in that fact.

"It's nothing," Ace said, embarrassed for a moment. "And I really don't have any training."

"No shit," T said, whistling under his breath. "Hey Em," he began, but stopped, shaking his head as if thinking better of it.

"Let us buy you a beer and we'll watch the rest of the matches," Em said smoothly, smiling. "They won't be anywhere near as exciting as your fight with Smoker, but still something worth watching."

They walked to the bar in the corner of the room, Ace feeling content with himself for the first time in years. His smile didn't slip once, only widening when he thought of how no one had shunned him when they'd seen his fire.

He'd been accepted.

And perhaps he needed to rethink his goals in life.

Ace returned to San Faldo twice that week. It cost him at work, but he never needed to use many brain cells when working so it was more a case of making sure that he stayed awake. The benefits were amazing though and Ace had never felt so happy with himself. He'd felt close to this with Luffy, but even then he had to be so careful not to expose his brother or bring him down. At the Carnival though, Ace didn't have to worry he'd be a burden and he could enjoy himself, the name Hiken resounding through the club whenever he fought, even though he was a rookie, so to speak.

Fire was a power that wanted attention and he certainly drew the attention. Ace revelled in it, revelled in what he could do and who he was becoming. T and Em were with him every step of the way too, T with his half-hugs and deep laughs and Em with his pensive look and soft smile.

"Hiken!" a voice greeted and Ace turned, adjusting his flame-mask slightly, as T came to stand beside him. He seemed a little agitated and Ace was about to ask what was up when T pulled out a phone.

It was a Friday night and Ace had expected it to be busier than it was. It was his fourth time at San Faldo, in his second week of knowing about the club.

"Look, I know the whole anonymous deal and that, but Em and I won't be around for a while. My phone's broken and the new one hasn't arrived yet, but could you trade numbers with Em's?" T shuffled nervously on his feet, looking over his shoulder. "Trust me, we have better things to do
than track you down via your number and all that. Plus you'd have Em's and the Old Timer is shit with technology. Couldn't find even the most obvious loophole, so you'd easily find out who he was if you put your mind to it."

T looked over his shoulder again and Ace considered the proposal.

"Why?" he asked and T looked at him in slight surprise.

"To coordinate when we're here. Plus you're a cool guy and it would be nice to be able to contact you in normal daytime hours. Em's pretty bored at the moment, stuck on basic job duty to make up the time he took off, and I think chatting to you would be good for him." T bit his lip. "No need to reveal anything personal; I get the anonymous thing." He chuckled and made to tuck the phone away.

"I'll do it," Ace said, words rushed slightly. He enjoyed the thought that he might be able to keep Em company when no one else could. It would be something to look forward to in his own mundane life too, especially as the bird still hadn't returned.

"Here," he said, taking Em's phone and punching in hi number. It was a generic, cheap phone, something that wouldn't be missed and the owner didn't get attached to. Ace stored it under the name Hiken and rang his own number, saving the call under Em and handing the phone back.

"Thank you," T said, completely and bewilderingly heartfelt. "And I hate to run on you, but I have to be somewhere right now. Text Em over the weekend and we'll see what days we can all meet up here next week."

It was strangely casual and yet it was such a big thing, Ace thought. T excused himself and Ace watched a few more fights, not bothering to sign his name down this time. He was tired and enjoyed watching, though he fancied he saw Smoker on the other side of the room, stalking through the scores of masked people as if he was searching for someone.

That night, Ace returned home and patted his phone in his pocket. He pulled it out and threw it on his bed, not expecting Em to have texted yet. Whatever was going on, Em and T were busy and he didn't want to bother them.

Ace walked into the living room and stood for a while by the window, looking out at the city around him. The sound of human life – cars, people talking on the street, the wind, the people in the flats around him – surrounded Ace's senses and he closed his eyes for a moment, completely relaxed.

The shrill ring of his den-den mushi broke the atmosphere and Ace jumped, moving to the phone and picking it up with a frown.

"Hello?" he said, wondering if some little shits were prank calling the block again.

"Is this Portgas D. Ace?" a stern voice said and Ace replied with a yes. "Shiki knows you don't have the bird anymore."

There was another pause and then, "Be careful."

The den-den mushi closed its eyes as the person on the other end of the line clicked off. Ace was shaking now, unsure whether this was some sick joke or whether someone was genuinely watching out for him. With unsettled movements, Ace grabbed his mobile phone and called Luffy's number, pacing by the window as he waited for the call to connect.
"For fuck's sake Luffy, if you're going to pass the phone then don't pick it up until you've given it to someone- oh hey, Ace?" Ace recognised Sanji's voice and he swallowed thickly.

"Luffy's about to destroy something so he passed the phone to me…" Sanji paused and his voice carried a worried tone. "Is everything okay?"

"I-yeah," Ace said, his voice embarrassingly wobbly. "I just got a call."

Sanji waited patiently, though Ace knew he was beginning to get frustrated. Who could blame the guy though? Ace would have hung up if he'd been about to leap into whatever fight the Straw Hats were part of right now. Ace would have to check the news for any information when he got off of the phone.

"They gave me a warning about Shiki," Ace managed and Sanji hummed.

"One of us will come over with Luffy tomorrow," he said and Ace nodded. It wasn't that he couldn't protect himself, but he couldn't dare to reveal his powers, especially not to someone like Shiki. Ace wanted freedom, yeah, but he didn't want to reveal himself at the cost of human experimentation.

"Shiki's out playing right now," Sanji said conversationally. "I don't think even Luffy will manage to take him down tonight though."

Ace thanked Sanji and hung up the phone, going to his front door and locking it firmly. As he sat, back against the door, he wondered when he'd decided to be a coward. His mother and father had been the farthest things from cowards so he couldn't have inherited it. Garp might not have been a loving guardian – dumping him and Luffy off with a band of illegal traders down in a crappy district of the city – but none of them had been cowards either.

Had he learnt to become a coward?

There was surely enough reason for him to be a coward in this world, but it was hard to admit. His entire life, Ace had been hiding away, too ashamed to join a cause that would help thousands of people because he'd thought he would be rejected.

After only one fight, he'd been named Hiken. After only a week, people still smiled and cheered for him. His fears had been baseless and childish and Ace had spent so much of his life running and hiding. While it was hard to let go of habits, Ace knew that things were spiralling out of his grasp and he needed to do something.

Luffy was coming over in the morning, though. Ace smiled as he stood, collecting tiny flames on the tips of his fingers. Luffy was coming over and Ace would finally take up the offer to join him. He'd finally do something he enjoyed, do something for himself and do something meaningful.

At least, that had been the plan. Until Ace had been woken in the middle of the night to a loud thump and run into the living room, prepared to fight whoever Shiki had sent, only to be greeted by a bright aqua and yellow bird, slumped unconscious on the floor by the window.
Chapter 3

The bird let off a little light in the room as its breast rose and fell. Ace picked it up from the floor carefully and placed it in the nest he hadn't had the heart to destroy, heart beating wildly. While it was dangerous – especially after that call he'd received earlier – Ace was glad to see the bird back.

Blue-rimmed eyes opened slowly as Ace's hands left the bird and he froze, the bird blinking and suddenly alert, hunkering down in preparation to fly away.

"Wait, wait!" Ace said, reaching his hands out in attempt to catch the bird should it try to fly. "It's me. It's Ace, you came back here, you're not in any harm."

The bird couldn't have understood him, but after Ace's words, it peered at him through the gloom and flicked its wings into a more relaxed position, looking down and noticing the nest. It seemed taken aback for a moment, but then dipped its neck, adjusting the clothes and oddities that it had collected in the week it had lived with Ace.

With a sigh of relief, Ace turned and sat down, back resting against the sofa. He looked to the side and met the bird's eye. It looked as though it was trying to understand him, trying to take him in, and Ace wondered if his power enabled him to think more like a human.

"I have no idea what you're doing here at some ridiculous time in the morning, but I'm glad you came back." Ace paused, bringing his knees up to his chest and resting his chin on them. "Even if it's selfish of me."

A little chirrup was his reply and Ace smiled to himself.

"It's nice," he commented. "To have someone here, even if you can't talk or understand me."

The bird cooed, as if it could understand Ace after all, and his smile widened.

"If you have to go in the morning," he said as he rose, feeling overwhelmingly tired all of a sudden, "then at least wake me to say goodbye."

The bird was silent and, when Ace looked, he saw its eyes were shut. Its feathers were still gleaming and Ace moved to fix the curtains from where they'd been pushed open upon the bird's entry. He held the fabric for a moment more before he grinned at the upholstery. Even if it was for a short time, his bird had come back.

Sleep came and went quickly, though Ace woke refreshed. He sat up slowly, slipped some pyjama trousers on in case whoever Luffy sent over was coming early, and headed into the lounge, pausing at the door. Cool morning air hit his bare torso, but the cold wasn't the reason why he'd stopped.

Ace had almost forgotten the bird had returned and yet there he was, still resting in his nest. It opened its eyes when Ace stepped forward, stretching its wings up and neck out a second later, hopping down from the sofa.

"I still have some food if you want it," Ace offered, walking to the kitchen and looking in the end cupboard. "I also still have your former cage, if you want to shit anywhere."

Ace stretched his arms out and put some bread in the toaster. As if lured by the smell of the toast, someone knocked on the door and called out his name, earning a thump on the door and then a whine.
It was unmistakably Luffy at the threshold and he rolled in when Ace opened the door, beaming as he dragged Sanji behind him.

"I brought provisions," Sanji said and Ace waved him through to the kitchen, not about to deny himself a meal cooked by Sanji. Luffy gave a war cry, chanting for meat (and both Sanji and Ace denied him, Ace trapping Luffy in a headlock and letting Sanji time to get to the kitchen before the food was swallowed in one go), but settled down when Sanji left, turning to scan the room.

Just as Ace had predicted, Luffy's eyes shone brightly when he took notice of the bird. It ruffled its feathers as Luffy stalked closer, fingers out and ready to trap the bird to his chest.

"Let him be, Luffy," Ace said and Luffy froze, lips caught in a pout as he sat on the ground and shuffled closer to the sofa. He stopped before the bird, blinking at it slowly.

"Chopper said you'd let him go," Luffy said quietly, almost accusingly.

"I did," Ace said and his eyes darted to the kitchen as he heard the sizzle of a pan and Sanji's deep hum. "But he came back last night."

While the information was inconsequential to Ace, it apparently meant something to Luffy, for he sat upright and whipped around to face Ace.

"Have you watched the news yet?" came the question and Ace shook his head, a little perplexed by the sudden change of topic.

"No," he replied. "I haven't been up that long and then you came over."

Ace thought back to his conversation with Sanji over the den-den mushi last night and realised that something big must have been happening.

"What happened?" he asked and Luffy shook his head.

"I can't tell you," he said and turned his attention back to the bird. Luffy trailed his finger softly over a long wing feather and got away with it, the bird simply blinking slowly as it watched Luffy.

"Especially now that Shiki's after you," Luffy continued, shaking his head. He turned away from the bird and the sadness and conflict in his eyes wounded Ace.

"Shiki's testing the boarders for something. No one has any idea what, but he had both us and Whitebeard's men out last night." Luffy looked sharply at the bird before returning to Ace. "He's dangerous at the moment because he's doing something none of us understands. He's threatened you and because of that, we won't rest until he pays."

The words were said with such conviction, Ace wondered why he'd never joined Luffy and his pirates before. Deep down, he knew the answer, but Luffy was strong and brave, everything Ace had thought he would never be able to be.

While their brother's – Sabo's – death had shaped Luffy into someone ready to take on the world, Ace had shied away, content to tell himself that the world was alright, that he didn't need to fight to survive if he just kept his head down.

Yet with the Carnival, T, Em and Ace's experience with the bird, he knew that now, now he can't just be content. He couldn't just stay inside and ignore the Admirals on the posters across the city. The city died a long, long time ago and yet no one cared enough to shout it from the roof. No one cared enough to say that Devil Fruit users weren't witches or demons and that they were normal
people, people who had lives and didn't deserve the prosecution subjected to them and-

"Ace," a warm voice called his name and Ace realised he'd been clenching his fists tightly. His skin felt a little warmer than usual, especially on his palms, but his sessions at the Carnival had helped his control extraordinarily so. There was no fire and Ace smiled slightly.

"Just thinking," he said to Sanji, who nodded, shoving a plate at him and then one to Luffy. Ace didn't think much about what he was about to shove into his mouth – Sanji would be able to make shit itself taste delicious.

"And for the bird," Sanji said, offering a bowl of seed he'd evidently found in the kitchen. The bird, however, gave a deep noise from its throat and puffed itself up, looking far larger than Ace would have ever expected it to look.

"Whoa," Sanji said, backing away and giving Ace the bowl instead. "I don't think he likes me, maybe you should give him the food."

Ace complied and the bird settled down, much to Luffy's amusement.

"What if he's a phoenix?" came from Luffy's mouth and Ace laughed.

"I keep telling you, those kinds of creatures aren't real." Ace shook his head. He looked at Sanji, next to him on the sofa, expecting back up of some kind, but Sanji just looks thoughtful.

"The dragons were real at-" he began, but Ace stood up, refusing to believe that the dragons weren't just an over exaggerated story on Luffy's behalf.

"Look, believe what you want, but phoenixes don't exist. And even if they did, do you think it would come here when I'd given it its freedom?" Ace put his empty plate on the coffee table.

"Whitebeard and Shiki were out with us last night," Luffy felt the need to say, though Ace didn't really know why. "Perhaps the bird wanted somewhere safe to go home to? Maybe it got lost or something."

Ace rolled his eyes. "Why though? Why bother coming back to me?"

Luffy looked at him with wide eyes, as if it was so, so simple.

"Because he loves you," Luffy said and Sanji muttered something by his side, patting his jacket for a cigarette. Ace would usually offer to light it for him, but right now he was too taken aback by the words that slipped seamlessly from his brother's mouth.

"What do you mean?" Ace asked, though it's obvious what love means and what Luffy said. What he didn't understand, though, was why this bird would feel like that and why Luffy would choose to say it.

"You can see it in his eyes," Luffy continued, oblivious to the effect his words were having. "Animal emotions are a lot more… primitive so there's no like or dislike, just hate or love. You showed kindness to him and provided him safety and, and then let him go." Luffy's smile was wide and his eyes darting excitedly between the bird and Ace.

"He came back because he can trust and love you," he finished simply and Ace shook his head, unable to accept that something other than Luffy would be able to love him so simply. He was a coward, refused to show what he could do to the world and-
"I'm not sure about the whole love thing," Sanji said and Ace was about to thank him when he continued. "But that bird trusts you. Whatever happened to him, he came back here and only took food from you."

Ace sighed. It was the truth and perhaps Luffy's view of it all was very over-simplistic, but the bird certainly had to feel something if it had returned here and clearly accepted Ace into its life.

"So what do we do about Shiki?" Ace said instead, returning the conversation to what he'd originally intended. The atmosphere tensed for a fraction of a second and then everything returned to normal, the bird pecking at its food and Sanji clearing the empty plates up.

"You can't fight for us," Luffy said. Ace nodded dejectedly; he'd already figured out that much. Ace couldn't put the Straw Hats in that amount of danger and restrict them.

"But it doesn't mean you can't fight," Luffy continued, tough he looked a little pained. "I've thought about it a lot."

Sanji politely excused himself, looking at the bird as if he was contemplating taking it with him. The bird stared back at him, let out a ribbit call and Sanji shook his head, the cause lost.

"You can't join us, not realistically." Luffy's smile was sad, as if this was something he'd been debating on saying for a long time. "You have your own life and I can't take your freedom away from you by making you join us."

Deep down, Ace knew they'd always come to this. Perhaps it was one of the contributing factors as to why he had never stepped out from the world he was so comfortably settled into, but he couldn't be sure.

"I know," he said and Luffy looks even sadder at that. "Realistically I know I can't join you. I have to find my own way and... I can't do that with you."

The words, though they hurt, were only the truth. Ace knew that he could comfortably follow Luffy and do what needed to be done. He would protect Luffy with everything he had and die for him if need be... but their paths were never meant to be so tightly tied.

Just as they lived now, Ace needed his own space. Luffy did too; they both had skeletons in their pasts (though Ace was sure Luffy's musician would make a joke out of that one with ease) and they were far too bone headed to be able to work together all the time.

Ace sighed and moved until he was hugging Luffy.

"I love you," he said, smiling against Luffy's neck as Luffy encircled his arms around his back. "And I understand why we can't set sail together."

Luffy's hands clutched at his shoulder blades, skin a little springy and grip almost crushing. He didn't say anything, but then again, Luffy never needed to. Ace knew him like the back of his hand and could tell by fingerprints on his warm skin that Luffy was pledging his love, his allegiance and his life to Ace, regardless of whether they were beside each other for eternity or there was a battlefield between them.

"You're going to fight though?" Luffy asked, releasing Ace from his tight grip. Ace nodded in return and Luffy hummed to himself, only looking up when Sanji re-entered.

"Yeah," Ace began, letting his arms fall from Luffy as he took a deep breath. "I can't live like this anymore. Even if it's small... I have to do something."
Luffy looked… proud. He was wearing a grin wider than any Ace had seen before (and that was saying something, Luffy liked to flash his pearly whites) and he stood up with a bounce.

"We don't need to worry about you then," he announced and Sanji raised his visible eyebrow.

"I suppose," he commented, though Sanji looked a little unsettled that they were going to leave with having done nothing when he'd promised they would do something. "If it's what the captain says," he added, gaining a nod from Luffy that seemed to relax him a little.

"We'll be able to at least keep an eye on Shiki though," Sanji said and Luffy nodded enthusiastically. "I hate the idea that the bastard is still free even after what he did to Nami-san."

Ace looked over in interest, but he could tell it wasn't a conversation to be taken lightly.

"He thought he'd be able to get away with stealing her," Sanji clarified, pointing his cigarette at Ace with a shake of his head. "We managed to bring down his main scientific site, mainly thanks to Nami-san and Robin-chan's quick thinking and Luffy's brute strength."

Luffy gave a snort of laughter at that, nodding his head with closed eyes, evidently lost in the memory of havoc he'd wrought. It was a story Ace would never have wanted to hear before today, but he allowed Luffy to tell him, Sanji translating various points when Luffy's speech descended into excited babble and sound effects.

They, and the bird, stayed for lunch before Luffy regrettably said they had to go. His hands reached behind his neck before Luffy pouted, feeling air instead of his trademark hat.

"Nami's looking after it," he partially whined, clinging to Ace's arm. "She said I couldn't come see you so obviously and that she'd take care of my hat."

Ace laughed at Luffy's petulant behaviour, patting him on the head and allowing one bone-crushing hug before he pushed him out of the door. He nodded to Sanji, thanked him for the meals, and watched as the two vanished down the hallway before closing his door.

He sighed and rested his head against his door. It was a little painful to realise that he could never truly be happy if he'd join Luffy's crew and aside from the nervousness of setting out in his own way, Ace was glad. He'd be closer to Luffy and yet be able to live his life his way, without regret or punishment.

The first thing he had to do, though, was take the first step. There weren't many options open and Ace was almost at a loss when he remembered Em's number in his phone. It was fairly obvious that T and Em weren't exactly your average workmen and Ace was confident they worked with pirates, if not pirates themselves. T had known something was happening the night before and only someone with inside information would have been privy to that.

He grabbed his phone from where it had been sitting beside his pillow and returned to the lounge, flopping on the sofa and peering at his companion. The bird appeared to be sleeping, beak tucked under a wing and eyes tightly shut, so Ace let it be with a soft smile, unlocking his phone and preparing to punch out a text.

It was hard, Ace realised, to find the right words. He couldn't come out and ask or else risk being accused of working for the government. He had to start slow, perhaps just develop a friendship, even though the waiting would kill him.

Still, Ace had ignored the world crumbling around him. A few more weeks wouldn't do too much harm, not now he had the Carnival and had finally committed himself to follow in his parents' and
Luffy's footsteps. He had things he wanted to treasure and protect, fragile, bird-bone friendships that were setting him straight and to who he should have always been.

Perhaps that was why he'd received the bird. Roger had been a clever man, a clean judge of character, able to predict the ebb and flow of the government's tyranny. Ace wasn't ashamed of how long it had taken him to step out onto the path his father had tended for him, but he felt somewhat liberated now he had begun to walk the path to sea.

He typed in a text and then back-buttoned his name, almost cursing himself for his stupidity. He replaced 'Ace' with 'Hiken' and send, laying his phone on his stomach a moment later. It had been a simple text, just asking how T and Em were, but Ace's heart was beating as if he'd sent a confession of love.

There was a huge boom outside and Ace frowned, wondering who was stupid enough to crash their car so early in the morning. He moved over to the window and his eyes widened as he saw a plume of smoke rising to the sky, off in the direction of the docks.

Knowing it would be futile, Ace switched the news on in hopes they would be reporting whatever was going on. All that was showing, however, was a pristine man and woman reading generic headlines that spoke praise to the government and glossed over most of the important things.

Surprisingly, the television flickered and the news presenters froze, looking to the side as if seeking guidance. Ace watched it curiosity as a show runner came onto shot, paper clutched in his hands, and he passed the sheet to the female presenter.

"We've just received breaking news," she said in a steady voice, abandoning the paper and looking up at the auto-cue. "Devil Fruit activity has been spotted down by the dockyard where it appears one of the warehouses has literally been overturned."

Ace's blood chilled as the camera shot panned to the scene. The area was in chaos, rubble everywhere and people gathering to see what had happened. A reporter was speaking, but Ace had no idea what he was saying, too taken in by the scene before his eyes.

It wasn't the Carnival, but it as damned close, almost a warning shot. There was only one person who would have been able to do such damage- to make something rip up from the earth and turn itself over, someone who would be angry from their skirmish last night and someone with a motive – and Ace shook his head.

This was what he was up against and he couldn't afford to be weak. He was fire, demanding, enchanting and so, so powerful. He was primal and mystical and he could take down his enemies, even when they could rip up the ground and throw things around as if it were a thistle seed on the wind.

A deep coo sounded by his elbow and Ace looked down to see dark eyes peering up at him curiously. The bird touched its beak to his arm before it jumped off, hopping over to the window.

All thoughts of the warehouse out aside, Ace followed the bird, sad smile on his face.

"Time to go," he said, almost questioningly. The bird didn't answer, instead flapped its wings and landed on the window ledge, peering back at Ace curiously for a moment.

"It's okay," Ace said, stroking a long, yellow rimmed feather, getting away with it before the bird flicked its tail. "I have people you might call friends now. I'll be alright."

The bird seemed to accept that answer and Ace felt a little weight lift from his chest as the bird
vanished into the sky, flying so high it looked only like a star.

He remained at the window for a while, watching the smoke join the sky and the bright star-bird as it flew out towards the sea. Ace wondered what it was like to have such freedom, to be able to take to the sky and fly in a world that no one on the land could ever touch.

Sure, there were aeroplanes and other crafts that could take you through the skies, but those on them simply cut through that world. Unlike the birds and other animals that had the freedom to fly, people could never truly be part of the world above.

Eventually Ace turned away, when his phone beeped, informing him of a new message. He opened it, smiling at the simple reply. It was Em, just asking how he was and if he'd seen the news, to which Ace responded that he had – how could he have missed it?

The conversation continued throughout the day and Ace fell asleep with a promise to meet them at the Carnival on Monday evening.

For the first time, as he lay his head on his pillow, Ace suddenly thought that everything was going right for once.

Monday passed in a blur of strangers and silence. Ace's co-workers made a show of inviting him out for drinks, but none of them looked as though they particularly wanted him to join, or even to go themselves. Politely, Ace said he'd already made plans and the group nodded soundlessly, leaving him alone.

For some reason, Ace was nervous about tonight. He'd been texting Em on and off through the weekend and it wasn't meeting up with him or T that was bothering him, but the general atmosphere in the air. Something was going to happen tonight, but Ace had no idea what.

He took the Puffing Tom for once, getting out three stations before and catching a bus a little closer before dropping all public transport and walking. While the area had been cordoned off for the weekend, the entrance to Carnival was still open and functioning, if a little more secretively.

Ace breezed through security and greeted a few people whose masks he recognised. Many more greeted him and offered him drinks, but Ace wasn't an idiot and darted to the relative safety of the VIP section, well aware that there were some who slipped drugs into drinks regardless of the place. At least in the VIP section he could escape to a little bubble with T and Em rather than putting up with polite yet slightly awkward conversation with unknown people.

Which was ironic when one considered the point of the Carnival was to meet unknown people, but Ace felt differently about T and Em than he did with anyone else.

White smoke filled the arena as Ace entered and he watched as Smoker dispatched a worthless opponent. Ace raised an eyebrow in slight alarm as he noticed Smoker take off his mask completely, pushing back his hair.

"Hiken!" a familiar voice called and Ace turned to T with a frown on his face.

"He took his mask off?" came out before any greeting and T clapped him on the back with a hum.

"Smoker's Smoker. No one even bothers trying to call him by his epithet 'the White Hunter' anymore. Yes, he works for the government, but that's only through the influence of his friends." T grinned and began leading Ace towards their seats. "He's a bit of a rogue and comes here to let off
the steam the government force him to hold back in his job. Amazing sense of justice, except he hates the fact he can't go vigilante."

"Why do they keep him?" Ace asked, unsure he really wanted to chip away at the hypocrisy that lay at the heart of the government.

"Because he's amazing at his job," T said simply. "They can't find a proper reason to fire him with the record he has, especially as his powers are useful for them and by keeping him in check, they don't have to worry about fighting him at a later date."

The world was utterly and truly fucked up. Ace said as much to T and instead of a nod and grin like he'd expected, Ace was greeted with a bitter laugh and a shake of the head.

"Too true," T muttered, taking his seat.

Em was already there, nursing a beer in his hands and looking quite miserable. Ace was about to ask what was wrong when Em looked up, smiling widely and greeting Ace as if nothing had ever been wrong.

"Glad you could make it," he said and they began talking about the on-going fight, watching as Smoker took out another opponent before the referee could wrestle him away.

The night passed in good company. Ace didn't get up to fight and neither T nor Em had signed themselves up either, so the night was full of conversation and camaraderie, something Ace had always lacked in life. The hole as filling now though and Ace knew soon he'd be able to ask them to take him out to sea.

At some point during the evening, T's phone rang and he swore, picking it up and moving away. Em didn't seem too concerned, though Ace noticed there was a frown behind his elaborate blue, purple and gold mask and a downturn to his lips. When T returned, the dour look on Em's face only intensified, fuelled by the fact T didn't sit.

"I have to run," T said. "Oyaji needs me for something."

Em sighed and pushed his beer away, making to stand when T shook his head.

"You're not needed. In fact he told me to tell you to enjoy your evening as tomorrow's the only day off you'll get in a while." T smiled somewhat roguishly and Ace narrows his eyes, almost as if there's some secret innuendo between them. Not that he'd blame Em to go and pick someone up, but he wasn't ready to head home just yet.

The referee announced the final set of matches as T turned, leaving them with a wave. Ace licked his lips, wondering how long they'd be able to stay comfortable alone. It wasn't that he didn't like Em or vice versa, but T smoothed over conversations and filled any amount of silence. Ace wasn't sure he'd be able to do that, not when something seemed to be hanging over Em's shoulders.

"You know," Ace began, biting the bullet. "If you want to talk about whatever's getting you down then I don't mind listening." He smiled as Em looked at him, hoping to seem approachable. He'd never helped a friend before, discounting Luffy and his crew, and wanted to help now.

Em looked at his hands before he sighed and shifted so he was facing Ace on the bench.

"It's hard getting back into the flow of... work," he began, not meeting Ace's eyes. "I can't do everything I did before, mainly because of other people placing limits on me, and it just gets a little frustrating."
Em downed the rest of his drink and then leant back, tilting his head up.

"I'm just so glad to be home, you know? I just happened to return at a bad time where everyone has to juggle everything with every hand and there's no time to just sit and think about anything." Em sighed and Ace wanted to reach out and assure him everything was alright.

"I was distracted the other night and let my friends down," Em said, eyes flicking to meet Ace's. "I can't help who I am, but sometimes... sometimes I wish I'd done things a little differently."

"Don't well all?" Ace said softly, pushing his half-empty glass away. "It's just part of who we are though, as people."

Em seemed consider the words before they drew out a reluctant nod.

"T's been great," he said suddenly and Ace looked at him again. "He's always been my best friend, but there are some places even the best of friends can't reach."

Em laughed and shook his head. "I'm on my way to getting completely drunk if I'm already spouting about this." He paused and then, "sorry, you don't want to hear it. About as interesting as watching paint dry."

Frowning, Ace wondered if his initial judgement of Em had been all wrong. He thought he'd seen a reflective man, someone who was calm and sometimes quiet, though could be cocky and daring when needed to be. The Em he saw now was far from it, ever so slightly worn down and Ace sighed heavily.

"You can trust me," he said and Em looked at him sharply. "I mean you don't know anything about me, but you can trust me. I don't care if you're some admiral or Whitebeard himself; you've seen how I can handle myself and I reckon I'd be match enough if you wanted to try and take me down."

Ace took a breath. "So just as I know I can trust you, you can trust me."

Em was silent for a moment before he grinned wryly and stood.

"They're about to shut the place down for the night," he said. "Closing time is a lot earlier than usual due to Shiki's temper tantrum at the weekend."

Ace looked at him carefully, noticing the sly shine in Em's eyes and the extra tilt in his grin with reference to Shiki. So Ace had been right on mark when he'd thought Em and T had something to do with pirates and he now knew that they were directly involved. The possibility of them being actual pirates had sky-rocketed with Em's wry grin.

They moved out into the general admissions and someone knocked into Ace, knocking him off course. He bumped into Em, surprised at how solid and warm he was as Em wrapped an arm around his shoulders, supporting him as he turned to roll his eyes at the person who had crashed into them.

It was cool outside and Ace nodded to the bouncer as they left with a few others. They all separated out, some slipping masks off already and others hanging around in the shadows. The darkness stole identities away and Ace was almost tempted to slip his own mask off, free himself from anonymity and allow Em to steal him off into the waves.

He didn't, though. Eventually Ace knew he would show himself to both Em and T, but he wasn't going to do it so obviously and not when Shiki could easily be observing him. He no doubt suspected Ace frequented the Carnival and Ace didn't need Shiki of all people to connect his Hiken
persona with his real life.

Ace looked at Em, who was looking up at the sky. Moonlight bathed Em's features in soft light, revealing a sliver of a smile. Ace watched Em's lips as they moved slightly, as if he was speaking to the sky herself, and he felt a pang of jealousy in his gut, though why he should be jealous of such vastness was beyond Ace's comprehension. Perhaps it was the look in Em's eyes, the tender love he clearly held for the night sky, that made Ace uncomfortable.

No, not uncomfortable. Jealousy was too strong and yet it was verging on Ace being jealous. It was ridiculous, he could never compare to a still, silent night after all, but he wanted to mean something to Em, for whatever reason.

Ace shifted uncomfortably, dragging one of his feet. It attracted Em's attention and he smiled, blinking as if he'd been deep in his own thoughts.

"Sorry, I'm just following you," he said, excusing himself. "I don't fancy going back home yet, mind if I wander with you through the warehouses?"

Ace didn't mind at all and made that much clear. Ever since they'd met, Ace had been somewhat draw to Em, feeling familiarity and comfort on a basic level, but also something primitive inside of him, causing his fire to burn in his belly and lick against his blood.

And Ace knew it would be so easy to ask Em tonight. It was a typical romance setting, though what Ace wanted to do and have done to him was hardly conventional romance. He wondered if Em could feel the bond between them and it was for that reason alone (well, aside from the anonymity factor) that Ace hadn't already dipped his toe in and asked Em what he wanted.

They arrived at a disused part of the Puffing Tom line. Ace only needed to cross it and then he could head alone the line until he met the nearest station, but he paused, Em's hand on his arm. While a jacket stood between Em's hand and Ace's skin, he was still warm and grip firm.

A little unsure, Ace looked at Em, trying to figure him out. Em was letting nothing slip though, an unhappy tilt to his lips and jaw stiffened; the exact picture of a man fighting with himself.

So Ace made the decision for him, letting his instincts flood him. He moved forward, tilting his head ever so slightly to press a chaste kiss at the corner of Em's mouth. It was the kind of kiss a maiden would have given a knight or perhaps a child would give to a relative, but Ace pulled back coyly, looking up with a grin and turning away. He'd set the track up, but it didn't mean he was about to give up. If Em wanted this then he'd have to prove it and Ace waited a second before stepping over the first railway sleeper, shoes knocking on the wood.

He stumbled on a rock and Em caught him, surging forward like a sturdy war horse and pressing against Ace with such intensity the air was knocked from his lungs. Ace took a deep breath in, looking at Em as he realised their position, pressed tightly together with Em's leg between his own. It was a provocative position and Ace desperately hoped it wasn't a mistake or simple misarrangement.

And then Em kissed him. It was, unlike Ace's, a full kiss, a tongue sweeping at his lips before Ace jolted into action, kissing back and wrapping his arms around Em's neck. The masks made it harder, the inside of his own poking into his eye, but for the life of him, he wasn't about to stop kissing Em.

How long had it been since he'd last had sex? Well, decent sex at that. It had to be months now and aside from the connection he felt with Em, Em was hot. Whatever he looked like under that mask,
Ace knew he would like and so there was never really an option in his mind to refuse Em.

"Not here," Em whispered as he pulled back reluctantly. "Can we... shit I don't know."

"I don't mind if you want to come back to mine," Ace said huskily, kissing the shell of Em's ear. He didn't care about anonymity anymore and said as much to Em, drawing a surprised look from him.

"You're sure?" Em said, taking the smallest step possible back, but keeping his hands linked behind Ace's neck.

"If I said no now, I'd regret it for the rest of my life," he said, almost wincing at how pathetic he sounded. Em didn't seem to think so though, for he kissed him again, fingers working at the tie of Ace's mask.

He pulled back, eyes curious as he moved the mask away from Ace's face, no doubt the moon revealing the spattering of freckles across his face. He smiled a little shakily, unnerved by Em's silence.

"Look at you," Em said softly, calloused thumb rubbing the corner of Ace's lips before he moved it up his jawline tenderly.

"I'm Marco by the way," Em – Marco – said and he reached for Ace's hands, raising them to his own mask.

There was no hesitation and while Ace took care not to damage the elaborate mask, he wanted to look at the face of the man he'd chosen. The mask came away and Ace drank in Em's... Marco's features hungrily. He was perhaps a little older than Ace had expected, but he was better than anything his mind had conjured up. He looked wise and strong, proud and handsome and Ace wasted no time in connecting their mouths again, pressing against Marco as if he could fill every gap between them, slip into his ribcage and sit beside Marco's heart.

"My name's Ace," Ace said quietly, reaching for Marco's hand as he pulled away. "It's not that far from my flat."

Though they tried, they could hardly keep their hands to themselves on the journey home. Luckily they shared their train carriage with a drunken man, one who paid them no heed whatsoever. Looking back, Ace would wonder how they managed to get into his flat still fully clothed, but they had and Ace had locked the door without a second thought.

Courtesy was forgotten as Ace dragged Marco to his room, ignoring the clean washing he'd left out on the bed and pushing it onto the floor. Marco hovered over him for a moment, taking in his surroundings, before he gave a wolfish smile and dove down, claiming Ace's lips as his prize.

Gently, and with searing kisses, Marco lay Ace down, settling on his side and using his free arm to unbuckle Ace's trousers. When he was done, they separated for the barest of moments to free themselves of clothing, Ace latching onto Marco's neck and sucking the skin, licking the taste of salt and the sea away.

His hands ran down Marco's arms, just as Marco's touch covered him. Little warm patches flared up all over Ace's body and he sighed at the feeling, unlike any he'd ever experienced before. This wasn't just meaningless sex; sex with Marco meant something.

Emboldened, he left Marco's collar and pushed him back, rolling over him and smiling as he surveyed what he had to work with. Marco was muscular –not overly so, but enough to show that he worked hard at what he did and could hold more than his own in a fight. Ace kissed the line of
hard muscle, letting his chest fall over Marco's pants, smiling against warm skin as he felt the unmistakably hard cock.

He moved down, barely skimming over Marco's cock, before working his way against Marco's thighs. He spread his legs slightly, hips thrusting under the tender kisses and bites Ace was placing, before Ace took the plunge and ran his nose against the hard line of his cock through cloth.

Marco relaxed before he propped himself up on his elbows, a worried look on his face as Ace took his cock out.

"You don't have to-" he began, but Ace simply took in the head of his cock with a grin, looking up innocently as he did so. The pose undid Marco's politeness and he threw his head back, smiling as a hand looked for pillows to support him. Ace knew Marco would want to watch him give head and the thought sent a thrill through his body, right down until it throbbed through his stomach and down to his groin.

He ran his tongue down the underside of Marco's cock, kissing the balls and sucking them gently. Marco twitched a little at that and Ace returned to his cock, palming the base with his hand while he took as much as he could in his mouth.

A partner had once commented Ace moved too much in bed, but it seemed to be working wonders for Marco. He took more cock into his throat, thanking his Logia powers and biting the true flames back. He'd tried it once before, with the same partner who had commented on his movement, and it had received good reception, though it required every inch of concentration Ace had.

The result was amazing though and Ace allowed himself a smile as Marco clutched at his shoulder, moaning deeply. The heat would have intensified the feeling and Ace shifted against the bed, so close to just dry humping the mattress through the noises Marco was making, regardless of how embarrassing that would be when he was done.

"Ace," Marco said, voce thick and heavy. Ace responded instantly, rising from where he'd been laying and moving forward. He kissed Marco deeply, running his hands over every inch of skin he could, trying not to think of how close his cock was to Marco's in effort not to come like a teenager again. It was remarkable how good he felt and how secure Marco made him feel.

"Kneel up," Marco commanded and Ace obliged. Marco's hand cupped his arse, smoothing over the skin tenderly as he brought Ace closer, trapping a leg between his own and close enough so that he could press a wet kiss to the head of Ace's cock.

"Fuck," Ace swore, resting his head against Marco's. It didn't stop there though and Ace could only cling tighter as Marco took him in slowly.

He was utterly helpless and could do nothing but moan as Marco sucked the tip of his cock, playing with the foreskin a little with his tongue. He didn't slow at Ace's moans and Ace didn't stop him, only clutching tighter at his skin and rutting his leg against the erection he could feel against his thigh.

Ace could feel himself spiralling out of control and he whispered Marco's name, pulling him away from his cock. Sweat slipped down his back and he took both of their cocks in his hands, hoping he could last just a little longer to give Marco even the slightest bit of pleasure he was feeling right now.

Ace felt his breaths coming more and more regularly and quicker as he came closer to coming and
he kissed Marco desperately, as if hoping to sear their lips together. He moaned against Marco’s mouth, drawing sloppy kisses, noisy, desperate and heart-wrenching kisses, as he came, utterly losing control and closing his eyes tightly.

"Ace," he heard Marco say softly. "Ace," he said again, before his breath became a little stifled and Ace felt come land across his belly. It wasn't uncomfortable and he leant against Marco, kissing him slowly and deeply, wanting him to know that it was just a quick fuck he wanted, but somehow more.

"Ace," Marco said softly as they broke apart. "Ace," he repeated, looking at Ace as if he meant everything in the world. It took Ace aback and he gave a shaky smile, falling to his side as Marco leant over him.

"I want more than just this," Marco said softly, covering Ace with his entire body, trapping him in place. Ace wrapped his arms around Marco, nuzzling his neck, hardly able to believe what he was hearing.

"Usually I wouldn't move so quickly with someone I liked as much as I like you," he continued, voice barely more than a whisper, "but there's an attraction between us, something raw and…"

"Let's get some sleep," Ace replied simply, reaching for Marco's hand to make sure he didn't misinterpret the meaning of his words. It took a moment, but then Marco fully relaxed, rolling to the side and resting his head beside Ace's. He was so close that Ace could count his eyelashes by starlight and he smiled, jumping a little when Marco kissed him gently.

"I'll make you breakfast in the morning," Marco said softly, already fading into sleep's embrace.

"You won't have the faintest idea where anything is," Ace replied, hooking a leg over Marco's and pressing his body closer. While it was hot, the temperature was comforting rather than unbearable and he felt Marco shift ever so slightly closer, evidently feeling the same.

As he faded into sleep, Ace couldn't keep the smile off of his face. His life was on the right track now and there was nothing that would be able to hold him back.
Chapter 4

Back at the beginning, Marco could remember a grinning man with a thick moustache and sea-salt encrusted coat. Each stride across the deck of his ship, the Oro Jackson, boomed like waves at sea, his steps even and boots heavy.

"You asked for an audience," Marco said, raising an eyebrow as the infamous Gold Roger laughed, shaking his head.

"I did, but not with you Marco," he said, sighing as he came to a standstill. In response, the sea around them stilled a little, gripping the Oro Jackson in her hold, calming her and waiting for the Captain to speak.

"Times are changing," Roger said and Marco looked over to the side, to the stern grimace of the Dark King. Rayleigh had never looked so serious and there was a sadness in his eyes, telling the truth that the world was about to turn upside down.

"If Newgate won't come here himself then take that warning to him. He's a wise one, someone I'm happy to call a friend, even when true friends are scarcer than gold dust." Roger let out another booming laugh and a gull overhead called back, circling the ship as if watching the proceedings.

Marco nodded, reaching out his hand. Roger looked at it with a raised brow before he smiled, taking the hand in his own and shaking it. His grip was firm, reassuring, and it was easy to see how he'd become a man worthy of respect, a man destined to stand before the oppressed and lead them through troubled waters.

Yet it felt as if that time was setting, the light Roger had provided dimming as he prepared for his last stand. Marco desperately hoped that he was wrong, but his instincts were rarely wrong.

"A word of advice for yourself," Roger said, letting Marco's hand fall from his grip. His eyes were sharp, making sure that Marco was listening for whatever he was about to say was something life-changing.

"Word on the wing has it that Shiki's looking for Zoan types, a particular creature in fact." Roger didn't say it, but Marco knew what he was getting at and swallowed thickly, nodding his head in thanks. Shiki was a slippery one, one who had been sniffing around under the guise of an alliance for a while, despite them all knowing he was the government's lap dog through and through.

The wind began to howl as Marco turned away, shaking out his arms as his wings elongated them, feet becoming talons and body erupting into eternal, blue fire. He pushed off into the air, letting the wind embrace him as he soared above the wave. He was huge, had no need to change his size when he was at sea, and he heard the cheer of voices rise as he left, from both the Oro Jackson bidding him a farewell and those on the Moby Dick welcoming him back home, anchored some way away. Roger had never been a threat, but the atmosphere around them all had changed recently and even Whitebeard had been cautious.

"What did Roger want?" Whitebeard asked, a knowing look in his eye.

"Advice," was all Marco said, smiling as Whitebeard took a gulp from the sake bottle in his hand, humming to himself.

"Advice eh," he commented and Marco left, shaking his head as he went to find his crew mates, ignoring Thatch's loud laugh and heading to take a nap.
An execution date had been announced to the world. Gold Roger was to be executed in the town he'd been born, a small port town on the eastern side of the land. Outrage spread through their community – as it had when Roger had vanished and his crew disbanded – but this time it was far worse.

"Back off!" someone shouted and Marco wrinkled his nose as the warning came too late, a government agent shooting his gun at the pirate who'd called out.

The sky was pouring, mourning for Roger perhaps, and it did nothing to ease visibility. Even in his phoenix-shape, the light he was emitting hardly broke through the downpour and Marco was tempted to call their defence off and risk the sea just to get away from the madness plaguing the land.

Someone else made the call for him and Marco nodded at Thatch's decision. He was the only one who held a den-den mushi connected to Whitebeard and if their Oyaji was calling for them to pull back, nothing on earth would stop them returning to their home.

Marco turned and flung his body into the air, only returning to the ground to help the stragglers and the injured get to ship mates and return to the small ships they'd embarked up on the ground with. He cast a sad look for the dead, on both sides; no one deserved to die, regardless of who was commanding their actions, before he turned towards the sea.

A whistle of something flying through the air was all the warning Marco received and it was only instinct that made him take flight automatically. The wind howled though and the rain spattered against his feathers and Marco's eyes widened as he felt something tighten around his leg, where his ankle would be if he was in human form.

Desperately trying to free himself, Marco felt his strength fade as he shifted smaller and smaller. Instead of freeing his leg from the metal clamp though, it changed with him, draining his power and forcing him to go smaller and smaller, until he was smaller than a gull, closer to a garden bird. He was unsuited to fly out to sea in the state he was in and he stilled, frozen in place on the ground. His colour faded and he looked down in disgust at the sea-stone cuff he'd been caught with.

"At last," a voice said and Marco looked up to see a terribly familiar face peering down at him. He cursed his luck; never once had Marco thought that Shiki would show up here and never thought Shiki would have been able to catch him in his phoenix form.

"Whitebeard's phoenix, a Zoan type I've been looking for for years. Imagine how resourceful you'll be for my research," Shiki said, muttering to himself.

Marco wasn't giving up so easily though. He began moving off, walking through the rain and occasionally trying to become airborne. It was useless though – the rain was too heavy and the wind was against him. Even without those factors, though, the band on his leg was connected to a chain, one that Shiki held and wasn't afraid to yank, pulling Marco's feet from under him and sending him sprawling onto the floor.

He opened his wing in effort to try and balance himself, but the pull Shiki had delivered was too strong and his wing crumpled uncomfortable on the ground. Marco thought he was lucky it hadn't broken and wondered how long it would take before Shiki realised his Devil Fruit powers wouldn't work in this form with the sea-stone trapping him.

"Bring the cage!" Shiki roared, grabbing Marco and holding him tightly. Marco's instincts kicked
in and he began to struggle, pecking the arm holding him and scratching with his talons. He pushed with powerful legs and struggled with his wings, but it took a lot out of him and the combination of Shiki's strong hold and the sea-stone cuff was enough to subdue him for a moment, long enough for Shiki to unload him into a cage and pack him into a car.

The first days at Shiki's lab were spent in misery and pain. Pain wasn't something Marco was accustomed to in such large doses without it fading with the burn of flame and he attacked anyone who came towards his cage. The band on his leg had been changed – they'd been able to get a lucky hit and injected him to knock him out cold for the process – to a simple band now, sea-stone dotting the inside. It wasn't as strong as the cuff he'd been wearing before, but it wasn't so weak that Marco could escape.

Shiki himself had yet to show up for any of the tests and Marco had heard whispers that he was in talks with the government over funding for a new project, no doubt one that centred on Marco and his abilities.

"Whitebeard's working up a craze," one of the technicians said one day and Marco shuffled in his cage slightly, interested in their babble for once. "Word is that he's prepared to tear the seas apart to search for his missing first division commander. Made a good start too, destroyed half a dozen small-time crews already."

Marco's heart leapt in his chest at the thought of Whitebeard searching for him. He'd known he would, but it was an entirely different thing to hear that he actually was. They'd soon find him and when they did, Marco would rip Shiki apart for what he was doing.

Marco wasn't the only one here. When he'd first been unloaded, he'd been left in a holding area, locked inside a cell despite still being in a cage. Around him had been scores of others, all Devil Fruit users from what they'd said and the thick cuffs restraining them. Shiki didn't stop at animal experimentation and even turned on his own kind, all for the government and money.

Before he'd been here, seen what Shiki was doing with his own eyes, Marco had found it easy to dismiss the rumours and act as though what Shiki was doing belonged in another world, time or place. Now he knew beyond doubt, Marco knew that he had to do something for them when he was free.

Hope bloomed that night when a figure stole into the lab. Marco could sense his haki and shuffled restlessly, unsure why he of all people would be here. The figure strode through the lab, ignoring the alarm that started to blare, sights set on Marco's cage.

"Come on then," Rayleigh muttered, unlocking the cage with haki and bundling Marco into his arms. "We've somewhere we need to be."

They moved through Shiki's compound as if Rayleigh had built it himself and knew it like the back of his hand. The few guards they came upon were disposed with Rayleigh's clean-cut skills, even cumbered down by Marco as he was. Marco hung uselessly in the crook of his elbow, legs stretched out as he breathed fresh air for the first time in days.

Rayleigh continued to a dark car outside of the lab complex, nodding at the driver. With a wide grin and a familiar straw hat, Marco chirruped as Shanks sped off, joining in the relieved laughter filling the car.

"I'll speak to you later," Rayleigh said a little while later, waking Marco from the slumber he'd fallen into. He realised the car was stationary and Shanks was looking at him with something close to sadness in his eyes, as if Marco wasn't about to set back out to sea and back home. "I'll be taking
And Rayleigh did, exiting the car and out onto the warm streets. The weather was mild and Marco knew by the wind across his feathers and the taste of the air that they were far from the sea. He felt discomfort, but was a little groggy from waking up that he didn't question it too much. Rayleigh could be trusted and Marco was away from Shiki now, effectively ruining whatever plans he'd had in store.

Rayleigh carried him through the alleyways of the area until he stopped at a dingy pub. He entered, despite a closed sign tacked onto the front, and Marco wasn't surprised to see someone waiting for them.

"There's a cage in the back," the old man said, letting Rayleigh pass without hesitation. Marco stiffened, despite knowing Rayleigh was the furthest a person could be from Shiki.

He was set down in the back room, Rayleigh analysing the band on his leg before shaking his head with a sigh.

"Roger's due to be executed in two days," Rayleigh said, sadness ringing in his voice. "I don't like the thought of what I'm about to ask of you, but I can't defy my captain's last orders to me."

Marco gave a nervous trill, blood running cold at the words.

"You don't have to obey," Rayleigh said, crouching on the ground. "Roger seemed to think you would accept, but I don't see why you'd have any incentive to. What I'm asking of you..." Rayleigh cut himself off and sank to a sitting position, eyes looking anywhere but at Marco.

"Shiki is after you, as you well know. Roger seems to think that if we keep you hidden, he'll lose hope and it'll destroy some of his motives. At the moment, the government has called his ideas to study a phoenix Zoan User as ridiculous." Rayleigh gave a wry smile. "Despite Sengoku's form, no one believes that a phoenix can possibly exist, even though a few people have mentioned the bright, blue light they've seen out at sea sometimes."

Marco shuffled a little, glancing down at his dark blue and off-white feathers, a far cry from his usual, burning self. Survival instinct had kicked in and he'd suppressed his powers, his immortality and his inferno, in hopes of having a greater chance to survive. Now that the sea-stone band was on his leg, there was no chance he'd be able to regain his normal form until it was removed.

"But it's not enough to put him to rest and in the unease that'll spring up from Roger's death..." Rayleigh trailed off, not needing to explain what would happen.

The seas were about to become chaos. People would run to sea and the waves would carry men and women, pirates and government workers alike flocking to the shore in Roger's absence. Through it all, Marco knew, would be Shiki, solid and constant, lapping up what he could on both sides and thriving, thriving when even Whitebeard would struggle to keep his hold on the sea.

He tilted his head, asking silently what Roger had been planning.

"He wants you to wait, to stay hidden." From the look on his face, Rayleigh was having trouble saying the words, not wanting to condemn him to imprisonment. They were both men of the sea, men who had lived their whole lives by the surf and clamour of the vast ocean and yet Roger now wanted him to remain chained.

"Even I don't fully understand his reasons, but Roger told me that we'd never be able to take down Shiki as he is now." Rayleigh clenched his fist and Marco sat down, ignoring the cool metal of the
"In a decade, the world will change, he told me. Shiki wanted a phoenix more than anything he wanted before, aside from an alliance with Roger." Rayleigh looked at Marco with a regretful look. "He wants you to wait for ten years or so, stay hidden until the world has calmed down and you can strike at Shiki without abandon. You'll never get to him in the years that are about to come, even I know that."

Marco wanted to ask about Whitebeard and Thatch, about his family and even Rayleigh himself. What was he supposed to do while the rest of the world was fighting like animals just to survive? If this chaos was about to overtake them all, then Marco's skills would be needed. He couldn't just hide away with his head down.

"That's all he said. The barkeep's under instructions to set you free in a few years, even to remove the sea-stone cuff and all. It's up to you whether you stay and keep your head down for a few years or if you go join the battle now... but a lot of people are preparing to sit this one out." Rayleigh ran a hand through his hair, a desperate look in his eyes as he sighed, the entire wind of the ocean escaping his lungs with a mournful sound.

"If Shiki knew you were free and out on the ocean again, he'd stop at nothing to get to you. He doesn't like to have things taken from him and he'll be angrier now than ever before." Rayleigh let that sink in and Marco looked at him sharply, this other perspective making sense.

If he returned home, he'd be inviting Shiki to try and destroy them. He had no doubts they'd be able to hold him off, but if times were about to change, the entire force of the Whitebeard pirates would be pushed to the max. If Marco could protect them then he would do anything, even if he had to wait years before he could return home.

Roger had known that. Most likely because it was what he himself would have done, but Marco felt warmed that Roger had thought of him in his last days, planned this for Marco in hopes they'd survive where he could not.

"I know you can't talk and I don't dare risk taking the sea-stone off – the bar owner thinks you're just a bird, a rare one, but still an ordinary bird. If you... agree to what Roger planned then you'll need to stay in the cage. It's spacious enough for you, I hope, and..." Rayleigh trailed off as Marco made a beeline for the cage, hopping in without hesitation.

He had to protect his nakama and he could do that by waiting. His lifetime had already spanned so many years, extended by his powers, and while he was getting older, he was doing so slowly. Ten years was nothing and he could use the chance to reflect and plan, try to think about Shiki's weakness so he could go for the jugular the moment he was free.

"I hate this," Rayleigh said, not moving to close the cage door. "Surely there's another way, some way for you to protect them and stay with them."

There was a raw wound there, Marco could sense. No one had bought the story that Roger had been captured and it was clear from the stony quality in Rayleigh's voice that something had passed between Roger and him that was more than Roger being captured. No doubt it would fade in time, but it hurt to leave the ones you loved.

But Marco remained firm. It would kill Whitebeard and his family for Marco not to return, but if he could keep them that tiny bit safer then it was what Marco had to do. It went against everything Oyaji believed in for him to do this alone, but what other choice was there?
He pulled at the door to the cage and Rayleigh got the hint, sealing him away. He looked down sadly as Marco began to settle himself in, wishing there was some cloth or other material he could build a nest out of.

"I'm sorry," Rayleigh said, sounding torn. "It'll be a long time before we can meet again. I'll put out hints that you stayed away from the sea to help keep Shiki away from Newgate and your family."

Marco cooed gently, thanking Rayleigh in his own way. Rayleigh cast one look at him before he steeled himself and left, out to the wild and the coast no doubt.

Marco settled down, preparing his vigil. He'd make time his ally rather than an enemy and he took a deep breath, trying to find comfort in his soul and resolve the conflicts he'd felt within himself.

It wouldn't be long before he was home again.

Except, the funny thing about human minds – normal human minds that couldn't heal from even the deadliest of wounds – was they weren't unbreakable. In fact, they were remarkably fragile and as Marco was only a bird to the barkeep, he was inconsequential.

Oh the man was kind and took the best care of him, but because he never knew otherwise and as age crept in, ten years was extended and time began to mean nothing to Marco anymore. The old man was dying, slowly and within the tresses of his own mind, but surely dying.

And Marco had forgotten what the wind felt like and what the salt-licked spray of the sea tasted like. He'd forgotten the joyous cry of the gulls and the shouts of delight of his friends as they saw his fiery form. In fact, Marco was almost certain that had been a dream, that he'd never really been human before and he was simply just a bird who'd invented a fanciful story.

The old barkeep had a daughter. She wasn't fond of him, mainly for Marco pecked any stray fingers that brushed against the bars of his cage, but they tolerated each other. When the old man became too ill to leave the bed, she took over caring for him and tending to the pub, fending off lecherous advantages with an iron fist until no man dared cross her. She earned herself a fine reputation and a nigglng voice in the back of Marco's head said she would have made a fine pirate.

And then one day, the old man slipped away and the woman came to him in tears, unlatching the cage and trying to shoo Marco away, as if by getting rid of the bird she could bring her father back. Marco did leave the cage, but he flew to the woman, perching on her lap and looking up at her. Her tears paused and Marco hopped back into his cage, waiting for it to be shut again.

This cage was important, his instinct told him. He had to stay in here because something was about to change.

The next day it did all change. The woman opened the bar, leaving him in the back room. Sometimes the old man had brought him out to show the patrons, but it had always left Marco feeling too open and uneasy.

"Here's the bird," the woman's voice said suddenly and Marco looked over as the door opened, two middle-aged men in suits smiling down at him.

"According to the will," one of them said, "the bird is to be passed onto Portgas D. Ace upon the original owner's request." He looked at the woman and she nodded without hesitation.

"You can take him whenever. He deserves to go to a home where he'll be cared for. I'll have my
hands rushed off by running the pub; I won't have time for the bird." The woman looked at him sadly before she frowned, turning to the two men.

"Someone came in here asking about the bird, said they worked for government?" There was a note of uncertainty to her words, as if she didn't believe they had told her the truth.

"It looks to be a rare bird, one of its kind," one of the men replied simply. The answer satisfied the woman and she passed off a folder of papers, passing Marco back out into the world and to a new home.

He was packed in a car like a suitcase, even though the men knew how high a price he could fetch. Marco tucked his neck in, staring out at the world miserably, wondering what collection he'd be passed into and whether his new owner would be an upper class man or woman, determined to keep him simply because he was rare.

So when Marco was presented to a man barely out of adolescence and with a tattoo covering his upper arm, Marco wasn't sure what to do. The man – Portgas D. Ace – took his cage with a strong grip, though from the look on his face, Marco knew this was the last thing he wanted to be doing.

The men stayed for a good hour or so, letting Marco observe his new surroundings from his cage. The flat was tidy enough, the odd article of clothing here and there and a half-eaten sandwich on a plant atop the table. There were no personal artefacts, no pictures or anything to suggest Ace had a happy life and Marco pressed his beak against the bars of his cage, wondering if he could come to like this human.

His cage was forgotten after Ace carefully places fresh food and water in. Ace paced around the living room, muttering to himself and shaking his head, staring back at Marco every now and again.

"Fuck," he muttered when he came closer. "Fuck."

He continued to pace, stopping to pick up the den-den mushi and phone someone, sounding absolutely wretched through the brief conversation. Marco looked on in interest, wondering if it was really so terrible that he was here.

The door burst open to let in a boy (he couldn't be a man, he had the innocence of a child and most likely the heart of one) who wasted no time in inspecting Marco and his home. He babbled away, sticking his hand in at one point, to which Marco reprimanded him quickly for, eyes widening slightly as the boy – Luffy – shook his hand, the skin rubbery between the two halves of Marco's beak.

The conversation between them continued, but Marco ignored it, the words filtering in the back of his mind. He only became alert again when the cage door opened. For a moment, Marco waited, then took advantage of the freedom and soared down to the ground. His new home was warm and comforting, though Marco wondered if that had to do more with the owner than the rooms.

The first thing on his agenda was to build a nest. He'd been without for so long that Marco knew this one had to be an amazing one. There was a large sofa and he hopped around, exploring and looking for building materials as the two people above him seemed to come to one conclusion or another.

A piece of bread was waved in front of him from the younger boy. Marco looked at it with disinterest – he couldn't build a comfortable nest with a piece of bread after all, but took it all the same. He wandered off, noting a few socks and other oddities that would be useful for his nest.
Rogue fingers suddenly chased him and Marco pecked at them, narrowing his eyes. He ruffled his feathers and took to the sofa as Luffy got a lucky stroke in and paused as he felt the lick of the sea against his feathers, in a line where the boy had stroked. He was a sea-farer then, a man the ocean loved, and Marco could perhaps forgive him for being as cheeky as he was.

The next hours were spent exploring his new home – every room he could, though after a quick clothing-stealing expedition, Marco had been shut out of the bedroom. The apartment was fairly small, though one man didn't need more than a bathroom, bedroom, kitchen and lounge.

One thing Marco did notice in his first day with Ace was the lack of pictures or personal momentous. Ace had mentioned that his father had died (and it made sense – Marco was supposed to go to him as Ace had no interest in keeping him) yet there weren't any pictures of family. No mention had been made of a mother, but Ace must have had one.

It was sad, as if Ace was simply a ghost caught between two worlds. And Marco could see that he hated it, hated his life with a fierce, fiery passion that he couldn't express. The bird part of Marco called it a dream, but the human part (the part that might have all been a lie) told him that Ace needed to be freed, to fly over sea and land without a care.

When dawn broke, he cried out, looking out of the window. Marco could see the coast, so far away yet there. It let out a song in his chest and he cooed, as if whispering a poem to a lover. The ocean was his everything and he could see her, imagine how she would welcome him home.

Ace broke the mood. He looked awful, deep shadows under his eyes, and he threw a few mealworms on the floor, trusting Marco to clean up the mess, before stumbling back to bed. Marco did make quick work of the dried worms, then he returned to his nest, napping for a little while longer.

Later in the day, Ace flicked through some news channels. Marco ignored it until he heard Ace muttering about how corrupt things were and he cast a look, tracking a smoking crater with his eyes. Something niggled in the back of his head, but Marco couldn't remember and instead stared Ace down, preening himself when he won.

When the tall man entered Ace's flat, every instinct in him rose up and he had to fight everything to keep his feet on the ground and not to flee. He watched from his nest as the man who had captured and tortured him walked in unscathed, looking older and his clothes considerably more expensive. Marco wanted to lunge forwards and tear his eyes out, but a pained memory and the wind of the sea crossed his mind.

Rayleigh. Roger. Oyaji. If he attacked Shiki now, assuming these really were memories and not just delusions, then he'd only be captured and taken away once more.

So Marco did the next best thing. Shiki wanted him, but there was no way Marco would let himself be taken. He landed heavily on Ace's shoulder, staring at Shiki and puffing out his chest. Shiki had never been able to let him out of the cage in fear for Marco leaving - with good reason – but he wanted to show Shiki that Ace was different.

At the notion that he'd become 'tame', he launched himself at Shiki, passing him by with sharp talons. Regardless whether or not his life as a human was real or not, he was still a danger and Shiki should fear him.

Marco landed with a slight frown. His feet were slightly warm, more than he'd expect, and he
turned to Ace, a memory trying to rise through the anger of seeing Shiki. The ocean-boy, the one who's carried the sea n his stride, had mentioned fire… fire as in a Devil Fruit ability. Could Ace possess the power?

Impossible. No one could live so long with such a beautiful, raw power and not become angered by their life. Ace seemed content to live as he did now, not like someone who had power over fire. Marco, or so he believed in his dreams and supposed-memories, was a bird who devoured fire. He thrived on the flames, loved them with unmeasured passion, and couldn't fathom why anyone would denounce that power.

Before he could think more on it though, Marco watched as Ace shut the door behind Shiki, paused and then locked every lock available. He moved closer, not willing to admit it though Marco was concerned. Ace was pale and his hands shaking slightly.

Marco wandered close enough to let Ace stroke him. Both instinct and preference allowed a single stroke, though his finger was warm and comforting, before Marco gave a warning. He didn't like pecking, but it was just one method of self-preservation.

"Shiki wants you for something. He's willing to risk using the name Gold Roger-" and it was at that point that Marco's mind disengaged, lost in the memories of a broad man, a smiling man. How did Ace know of him? How did the pieces fit together?

Ace had already left for bed by the time Marco realised he didn't know. He returned to his nest feeling uncomfortable, as if he had so much to do yet no time to complete his tasks. The night was fitful for both of them.

And then, in a flurry of emotion and adrenaline, Ace removed the sea-stone band from Marco's leg and his head exploded with certainty. Blue light flooded the room and Marco called out, feeling the fire in his chest once more and the call of his family.

He left without a second thought, keeping small as he rose above the clouds. The night was thick with them and Marco let the wind guide him higher, beginning to grow slowly until he was at his peak, big enough to snatch up men from the ground and carry a few.

He avoided Whitebeard's favoured sea points, instead heading for a small land mass out in the open ocean. It was a risk, but if there was anywhere that Rayleigh would be, it would be on Sabaody.

Marco hit the ground with two feet, ignoring the way they tingled as they were exposed for the first time in two decades. Unsurprisingly, his clothes had seen better days, but he could grab something from the archipelago even if Rayleigh wasn't here.

His haki was dull from his entrapment and his head heavy from the surge of memories and the pressure he'd placed upon himself. But Marco wasn't a phoenix for nothing and he stalked through the damp grass, heading towards a closed bar.

"I would say that we're closed," a woman said, smiling as she sat at the bar. Marco had one hand on the door and the other at his side, waiting for her to finish. "But Ray-san told me to always let someone from Whitebeard's crew in."

Marco looked down at his shredded jacket top, noting that part of his tattoo was visible. He nodded his head and took at seat before the woman.
"I'm looking for Rayleigh-san," he said, throat dry. The woman passed him a glass of water and Marco sipped it gratefully.

The woman looked over as a man exited from the back room. She nodded to him and poured him a glass of rum, smiling as he sat beside Marco.

"Roger hadn't planned for me to be released after ten years, did he," Marco said softly, not bothering to make it more than a statement.

"I didn't know. But by that point, you'd made your decision and it was none of my business." Rayleigh's voice was wizened with age, yet it was mellow and warm. He'd lost the sadness and anger he'd held when he was younger and it made him someone Marco could talk to honestly.

"The old man died a few weeks ago," he continued and Rayleigh looked over in interest, swirling the rum in his glass. "I was passed onto someone else, someone Roger must have set up."

He frowned, still trying to work out the connection between Ace, Ace's father and Roger. Marco turned everything over in his mind and then came to a startling conclusion, almost dropping the glass he was holding as the pieces fell into place.

"Did Roger leave anyone behind?" Marco asked quietly, as if the world was hinging on this question. "A woman, a child… anyone?"

Rayleigh was silent for a moment, but then he downed his drink and hummed softly.

"Portgas D. Rouge was the name of a lass Roger once met. He said that if he ever had to leave the sea, he'd set sail to her side and build a family with her." Rayleigh shook his head. "But Roger died before any of that. I heard Rouge died over a year later too."

"No children?" Marco pressed and Rayleigh sent him a scrutinising look, as if he at least suspected the truth yet wasn't about to let anything spill. That wasn't good enough for Marco though and he let his glass of water slide over to the woman at the bar as he pushed it.

"Perhaps the name Portgas D. Ace might ring a bell. And maybe you'd like to know that Shiki is on his tail because of me." Marco stood up and turned away, his anger and loneliness of the past twenty years overcoming him.

"For whatever reason, I was always supposed to go to Roger's child. I was supposed to go to him and now Shiki's chasing him down. Nothing has changed and instead I've wasted twenty years doing nothing." Marco clenched his jaw and forced himself to relax, not willing to apologise yet ashamed of his outburst.

"He needs a guide, is what Roger would have said. You cannot defeat Shiki alone – I doubt anyone could in his current state. He has too much money and too much influence, but perhaps Roger thought you could kill two birds with one stone." Rayleigh looked at him with a knowing twinkle in his eye.

"The life of a phoenix is a lonely one, Marco," he said. "You can only truly love fire, for it is everything you need. As long as you have fire, I doubt you'd need even food or water."

Marco looked down, knowing the words to be true. He'd tried it when he was younger, run away from his home and remained in fledging form. He hadn't eaten, but had slept on hot coals and nestled in embers. Fire sustained him, but no one could have known Ace would have the power of fire.
"Roger didn't know," Rayleigh confirmed his thoughts. "But he planned for every eventuality and if he thought there was a chance you'd never be free of that cage, he would put you in the hands of someone he trusted."

Marco sat back down heavily, the air rushing out of his chest in a huge sigh. He gave a pathetic laugh and let his head rest on the bar, closing his eyes.

"I'm so tired Rayleigh-san," he said and felt a hand press between his shoulder blades gently. "I just want to go home and have all of this over and done with."

Rayleigh was silent for a moment and Marco knew he was smiling.

"You've said all you need to here," he said and the woman gave a gently laugh. "Your old man's been tearing up the seas. I also seem to recall one particular member of the crew who's determined to find you."

Marco smiled. "That would be Thatch," he said, so glad to hear that Thatch was doing okay despite the twenty-year gap.

"When it's all over," Rayleigh began as Marco stood and made for the door, "let Shakky and I supply the alcohol for the party, eh?"

With a grin thrown over his shoulder, Marco took to the skies, a gleaming blue beacon that would be seen for miles around. He heard people calling out in fear and delight, though none of them mattered as he negotiated the surf and rose higher, searching for the Moby Dick and his family.

The world tilted then and Marco hovered in mid-air, heart beating frantically against his ribcage as the huge ships of Whitebeard's fleet came into view.

And then he was free falling, returning home for the first time in twenty years.
Chapter 5

Marco hit cloud cover and pulled himself inwards, changing colours and pulling his phoenix powers back. He stopped when he was the size of a magpie, exactly the same form he'd been in the past twenty years, and landed on one of the sails, hopping down until he could get a proper look at his home.

He'd missed it and Marco needed just a moment to familiarise himself with his home ship again before he revealed himself properly. Already a few people had gathered on deck – many new faces, but some familiar, older ones – one or two gesticulating to the sky and trying to explain what they'd seen.

Marco couldn't stay hidden forever and he didn't want to. He needed this slight break though, to prepare him for facing what he'd missed the past years and getting used to everything once more.

"What's going on? It's the middle of the night!" came a familiar voice and Marco shuffled along the post he was on, trying to get a better look of the man who had just stumbled on deck.

Thatch.

"Someone said they saw something in the sky," someone said.

"I'm telling you it was blue fire," someone else said and Marco saw Thatch turn sharply.

"Are you sure?" he said seriously. Some of the crew who had been dubious and jeering before turned to Thatch, teasing silenced.

The man who'd evidently seen Marco nodded. "A massive blue fire shape. It was flying high in the sky until it got smaller and smaller and then vanished completely."

Marco watched as Thatch peered into the sky, squinting.

"You're sure?" he asked again and the man nodded.

"I swear on my life," he said and Thatch nodded, swallowing thickly before he moved off, muttering something. It didn't take long for the whisper to build up and Marco tilted his head as it got louder.

"He's gone to wake Oyaji?" said someone, disapproval clear in his voice. Marco's heart beat faster in his chest and, for a moment, he feared it would burst from his ribcage.

"Yeah it's a bit crazy, but you know what they're like. Anyone from twenty years ago is always on high alert if someone mentions blue fire or a weird looking bird." The person speaking paused. "Of course the guy who saw it is new so probably had no idea. It's a false alarm and cruel, getting their hopes up for nothing."

It hurt to hear that, but it was simply the truth. Marco had abandoned them – not without reason of course – and every minute of the years he'd spent weighed heavily on his shoulders.

"But to wake Oyaji? Even if it's not a false alarm, it's the middle of the night," a voice said and Marco closed his eyes.

"You're still out here making trouble?" a deep voice said, the sound of wheels joining in his
rumbling laughter. Marco's eyes snapped open as his Oyaji, his captain and father, strode from the depths of their home, IV stand clasped in his hand, but looking well despite it.

"Now, tell me where you saw this blue fire," he said seriously, Thatch stepping up beside him.

The man who had been the one to see Marco nodded shakily and pointed out into the sky. Seeing Whitebeard was all Marco needed and he took a deep breath, unfurling his wings and taking flight.

It was hard, but he managed to get a decent way into the sky, lengthening his wings until he was far enough away that he could take in the sea around the Moby Dick. He could see his family, clustered on one side, and smiled as he let his true power show, growing and erupting in fire, lighting the night sky like a beacon.

Marco called out, not daring to swoop lower down until he knew for sure they could forgive him for what he'd done. The few seconds he hovered above the stunned ship were hell and stretched before him, but then someone shouted out his name, his real name, and Marco swooped down, happiness overflowing inside him.

He landed heavily on deck, knocking a few people over with his wings. None seemed to mind though and Marco felt hands on his feathers, people welcoming him even if they'd never known him.

Suddenly, someone was clinging to his back, having flung themselves onto him. Marco knew there would only be one person daring enough to do it and he called out to Thatch, turning his head as far as he could to see his friend.

Thatch looked understandably older, but he was still Thatch. His eyes were warm and welcoming and his smile was so wide it was ridiculous. Still Marco felt tears well in his eyes and smiled as best he could in phoenix form, wanting to grab everyone and hold them tightly.

The crowd parted a little and even Thatch slid from his back. Marco looked up, knowing instantly who would be there, and looked at Whitebeard in slight trepidation.

And then, as Thatch had, Whitebeard knelt and held Marco tightly, wrapping his huge arms around him. Marco could hear the loud, steady thump of his heart and he wrapped his wings around Whitebeard in return.

After a while, when the crowd had thinned and the sun had begun to peek through the clouds, everyone was ushered to bed. Thatch darted to Marco's side instantly and Whitebeard promised they'd speak properly when Marco had settled in, and then they were off. Thatch led Marco to their old rooms, where the other commander captains were located, and Marco felt elated when he realised his position had been held open. They'd all been waiting for him.

"I know it must be strange being back and I don't know where you've been…" Thatch trailed off as he looked at Marco with a worried expression. "But are you at least able to turn back into your normal self?"

Marco blinked before he realised he was still in his phoenix form. He'd been in a bird form for twenty years and it was more natural than a human form was right now. Coming back home had been uncomfortable and Marco had sought comfort in what he'd known – his bird form.

He didn't want to change yet though, so Marco simply nodded his head and Thatch smiled.

"I'll see you later," Thatch said, opening the door for Marco and nodding to him.
Everyone knew he needed his own space and Marco shut the door with his beak, shifting into his human form. He hadn't had a shower in ages – a proper shower, not just one as a bird – but he couldn't bring himself to now. Marco was tired, so, so tired, and now he was home, beside his bed and out of his cage.

He slipped on a pair of clean, intact pyjama trousers and discarded the jacket he'd been wearing. His tattoo stood out proudly and Marco ran a hand over the ink, smiling as he climbed under his covers. He was home, properly home, and Marco wiggled his toes under the fabric of his bed, letting the gentle rocking of the Moby Dick soothe him.

Sleep wasn't so obtainable, however. Marco's mind was in overdrive, trying to remember all the people and the new faces he'd seen, trying to think of what he could say to Whitebeard and Thatch – and everyone really – about why he had been gone so long, but most of all, he didn't want to be alone right now.

Slipping out of his bed, Marco padded down the corridor, finger trailing over the doors of friends. He didn't wake them, simply slipped into the largest door and shut it quietly behind himself.

The swish of liquid in a bottle alerted Marco to the fact the room's occupant was awake.

"I had a feeling you'd come here," Whitebeard said and Marco nodded, sitting on one of the chairs in the room.

"I couldn't sleep," he said quietly, to which Whitebeard merely nodded.

"I spent most of the time in a cage," Marco continued, not daring to look anywhere but a crease in Whitebeard's covers. "Only last week I changed hands. He was… is a good man. He set me free, Oyaji."

Whitebeard said nothing, taking another deep fill of sake.

"Is it possible to predict the future? Or is life just full of strange coincidences?" Marco asked and Whitebeard hummed to himself. Marco felt his eyes rest on him and sighed, shaking his head.

Slowly, he told his story and let it unravel. He'd only tell Whitebeard the extent of the years, though Thatch would know a good amount of it too. It was a weighty story, one that took Marco many pauses – some to sip the sake Whitebeard offered and some to think about how much had passed him – but he finally finished.

"We could have handled Shiki," Whitebeard said steadily and Marco hung his head. "You didn't need to bear this burden alone."

Marco smiled softly, tears pricking his eyes. He was so tired, finally home and hearing his Oyaji accept him so openly and lovingly was just too much.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. Whitebeard moved until he was beside Marco and placed a huge hand on his shoulder, great smile in place as Marco looked up.

"You're home now and that's all that matters." Whitebeard laughed and Marco felt years of burden lift from his shoulders. It didn't matter that he'd been 'lost' for two decades; what was important was the fact he was home now.

"A war is coming," Whitebeard said suddenly and Marco looked at him carefully, noting the seriousness in his eyes. "Shiki wanted you for your phoenix abilities and now that you're back home, he'll find that out somehow, if he hasn't already."
"I won't give myself up so easily," Marco said quietly. While it was true that he was out of fighting practice (he could feel the loss of muscle definition, though it was nothing compared to what it should be, if he hadn't been a phoenix), but he'd be able to defend himself if the need arose. He wasn't useless.

Whitebeard laughed again, the sea gently knocking against his booming call.

"I never suggested such a thing, my son." He smiled at Marco. "But you won't be attending to any business for a while, if only for your own sake."

Which was the nicest way possible to say that Marco wasn't on top form and would only be let out to fight when he had regained form – and that was fair enough, if a little bruising. Still, he'd waited twenty years so what was a few months here or there?

"What should I do about Ace?" he ventured after a short moment of silence. Whitebeard took a swig of sake and hummed to himself.

"Call it fate, call it planning, call it foresight – call it whatever you will." He paused; another swig. "But that boy was placed on your path for a reason. Roger used him as a precaution and he set you free. Perhaps it was planned that way, perhaps not, but we'll never know." Whitebeard sighed and offered Marco the bottle of sake.

The sake was refined and Marco took three sips before passing it back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand when he was done.

"The question is what do you want to do about Ace? For the first time in a long while, you have a choice." Whitebeard smiled. "And you should trust your instinct. It's protected us many times before, after all."

He nodded and Marco rose. He was tired, ready to sleep now, and sensed the gentle dismissal in his Oyaji's words. He took them, leaving quietly and returning to his room. Marco's head hit the pillow and he closed his eyes, smiling as he was lulled to a peaceful sleep by the ocean waves, welcoming him home for good.

While he'd expected it, being told that there was no way Thatch would spar with him was a little stinging.

"Just one, just to see how I am," Marco asked quietly, aware that they were being watched as they ate lunch. Thatch swallowed the mouthful he was eating and waved a drumstick at Marco.

"You're hardly used to a human form, let alone using it for fighting. I'm not going to fight you, not until you can handle it." Thatch grinned, biting into the chicken. "Besides, take a few days to relax."

Marco shifted uncomfortably, looking around the room. He nodded to a few familiar faces and smiled at the new ones. He'd met with those under his command that morning and he'd explained that while he was back, he wouldn't be out in the field for a while. They'd all shaken it off and exclaimed it was nice to have him back, both old and newcomers.

"I've got it," Thatch said suddenly, the chicken drumstick falling dramatically onto his plate. A few hungry eyes followed its descent, but Thatch cowered them with a quick glance and they backed off. Sometimes Marco wondered how they had earned their fearsome reputation; the men and women on board were animals given half a chance.
"San Faldo," he continued and Marco raised an eyebrow at the mention of the underground fighting club. He'd fought there before, but all of Whitebeard's crew tended to avoid the place as they were too easily noticed.

"The Carnival?" Marco clarified and Thatch nodded, returning to his chicken. A few of the others in the room stood, back to their duties.

"It's got a good reputation now and tighter security. You don't even need to use your Devil Fruit power if you don't want to." Thatch swallowed and Marco raised both eyebrows sharply.

"Considering Shiki's out for me I think I'll keep my abilities away from enclosed spaces with limited exits." Marco downed the last dregs of his ale, grimacing slightly, before he stood up. "And now I'm doing a shift in the communications room so I'll speak to you later."

Thatch waved him off as Marco left, taking a brief pit stop at the kitchen window to pass his dirty plate through. The chefs greeted him with large smiles and tried to pass off a handful of miniature tarts, which Marco declined gratefully. Sticky fingers were never good when tracking numbers and taking calls.

Marco was the only one in the communication room and he took the comfiest seat, glad to note that no one had thought to change the worn down chairs since he'd been gone. It was almost as if he hadn't left and Marco smiled as he turned to his desk, smiling at the generic den-den mushi and scribbling on the corner of the stack of paper beside him to check his pen worked.

He'd been given instructions on what he was to do earlier and Marco began searching through the list of numbers in the huge book before him. It was a phonebook, obviously, of the entire city and he had to make sure that a few very important numbers were still correct.

When he'd finished – making polite conversation with each of their contacts, handing over their own updated numbers (changed every month so that the Marines couldn't track their phones) – Marco flicked through the book of numbers aimlessly. He didn't start off with any goal in mind, but it didn't take long before he was looking up the name 'Portgas D. Ace'.

The number stood between two others, as all numbers in the book did. There was nothing special about it, just a series of numbers, but Marco couldn't take his eyes from them. He jotted the number down on a scrap of paper and sat back in his chair, looking at it with narrowed eyes.

"What are you thinking about so heavily?" a calm voice said and Marco tilted his head to the side until he saw Vista, soft smile on his face.

"Thatch seems to think you've developed a bit of an attachment to someone," Vista continued, nodding to the paper in Marco's hand. Marco frowned.

"I don't appreciate friends talking about me behind my back," he said and Vista shook his head.

"It wasn't like that," he hastened to explain. "He's worried about you, is all. It's been hard without you these years, but especially for Thatch. He's… been lonely."

Marco looked down and nodded.

"I know," he admitted, sighing. He wanted to bury his face in his hands, but Marco couldn't allow himself the weakness. It was true that Vista was a friend, but Marco was the First Division captain. Despite his absence, he was still expected to be strong enough to maintain that position and he would not let his appearance slip.
"We're all adjusting, is all," Vista said, boots clanking against the wooden floor as he began to walk away. "We're worried that you'll vanish again," he said and Marco stiffened, wondering how his crewmates could have such little faith in him anymore.

But oh, wasn't it true? They didn't deserve to trust him, not when Marco had vanished for twenty years.

"Not finished yet?" a voice called and Marco shook his head.

"I finished a while ago," he said and looked up at Thatch as he came to stand next to the chair. "Just been thinking about things."

"You might not look it, but you're such an old man!" Thatch laughed and moved off, pulling another chair over so he could sit down.

"Vista said he'd come to see you," Thatch ventured cautiously and Marco nodded. "We have more trust in you than he thinks."

Marco smiled and nodded, looking at Thatch from the corner of his eye. Thatch was smiling, eyes crinkled with age and the sea's love. The words were the truth though and Marco felt lighter for them.

"I shouldn't have left for so long," he said quietly and Thatch snorted.

"What?" Marco said, unsure what Thatch could find funny.

"Stop being such a sourpuss. What happened in the past doesn't matter – what matters now is you're back." Thatch looked down at the paper in Marco's hand and raised an eyebrow. "Is that his number?"

There was no malice in the words or hint of jealousy. Marco had wondered if Thatch would feel replaced by Marco's bond with Ace (though truth be told, it wasn't much of a bond, but Marco knew it could be something, if they dared), but there didn't seem to be any negativity.

"He's obviously a decent guy," Thatch said, "but you can't get attached. He thinks you're a bird!"

Marco joined in Thatch's laugh and shook his head.

"I wanted to thank him," Marco said, though the words sounded hollow. It wasn't that he didn't want to thank Ace, but there was more, much more, that he wanted to say.

"You're pining," Thatch said suddenly and Marco looked up sharply, eyebrow raised.

"I am not," he denied, but Thatch just shook his head, smile growing.

"You are! You like this guy!" Thatch laughed, though it was not malicious. "Imagine that! The Old Timer's finally found someone he wants to build a nest with!"

Marco winced at Thatch's favourite nickname for him and shook his head.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said, standing. The paper was tucked away into his pocket and he left the room, head held high. Thatch could tease him all he wanted, but he'd never admit anything. It was a foolish infatuation, that was all.

So when he snuck back to the den-den mushis later that night, Marco was only going to thank Ace, nothing more. Thatch, who apparently had a sixth sense, had jumped in and taken the phone off
him when his throat choked up.

"Are you insane?" Thatch asked, a wild gleam in his eyes. "You're insane, you really are."

Marco shook his head, staring down at the den-den mushi he'd just used to contact the outside world.

"Fuck," he said, looking at Thatch. "What the fuck am I doing?"

"I knew you liked him," Thatch said, the wicked gleam still shining in his eyes. "It's not often the mighty phoenix finds someone he loves, but I'll be damned if I let you two part ways forever!"

"I didn't say anything about love!" Marco hissed, but Thatch ignored him and put an arm around his shoulders, steering them to Marco's quarters.

"Now, now, Thatch knows best in the matters of the heart," Thatch said superiorly, chuckling to himself with glee, as if he'd received the best present of all time. "And I'm going to help you!"

Marco resisted the urge to bury his head in his hands and instead nodded, accepting what Thatch was saying politely. There was no way that they'd run into Ace again so he could let Thatch have his matchmaking fantasies and everything would go back to normal.

Or so Marco thought.

"How the fuck did you get him here?" Marco demanded, adjusting his mask and glaring at Thatch.

"What?" Thatch asked, looking around for clues.

"Ace! How did you get him here? I've seen the plans you've been writing and I have to say they're ludicrous, so how did you get him here?" It wasn't funny, not for Marco. He was at the Carnival to prove that he could still fight as well as he could twenty years ago. No one would fight him back on the Moby Dick so he was forced to turn to San Faldo.

Thatch blinked and raised an eyebrow. "Where is he?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest. Marco nodded towards the entrance, where a young man with a flame mask stood, looking completely out of place and bewildered.

"I can assure you that I have no idea why the object of your affection is here, but I'm going to make friends!" Thatch looked positively delighted and Marco swore under his breath. He couldn't go with Thatch unless he forfeited the match and there was no way he'd walk out on such an easy fight.

"I'll be on my best behaviour," Thatch promised, and then he was off, lost to the world.

It wasn't as bad as Marco had anticipated. Thatch behaved himself, Ace – Hiken now – had no idea who they were and, dare Marco say it, they were friends. Without having to do anything under the belt or sneaky, Marco had somehow ended up with Ace back into his life, despite the slight dishonesty he felt at not telling Ace he was the bird he'd looked after.

And everything would have been fine, had Shiki not stuck his nose back in.

"He's only doing it to keep us busy," Izo shouted from behind him and Marco nodded.

"I know, but he's attacking one of our territories in plain sight." Whitebeard's distain was clear to
hear, directed fully at Shiki's cheap shot. He was attacking innocent people just to get them to 'play'. "We need to see him off at any cost."

That was that.

"Marco, a word," Whitebeard said and Marco nodded, stepping up to his Oyaji's chair. Whitebeard himself wouldn't be entering the skirmish, but Marco would.

"You're in command, all of them know that." Marco nodded, knowing that his position as First commander gave him valuable power. He was wise though, smarter than most and had the power to back it… not to mention his Devil Fruit power. He'd be able to lead them through this skirmish and out the other end, regardless of time spent away or not.

"Just be careful. Don't use your powers in front of Shiki unless you can help it." Whitebeard paused, narrowing his eyes at Marco. "I'd be willing to bet he has no idea who you are in my crew and assumes you're a green newbie. Let him think that, it'll make everything easier when we go for him properly."

Marco nodded, understanding. It wasn't Whitebeard's way of telling him to be cautious due to his lack of recent action, but a way of asking Marco to watch and try to find Shiki's weakness.

"Stay safe," Whitebeard said softly and Marco smiled over his shoulder, returning to the three divisions that would be joining him – his own, Thatch's and Izo's.

"Izo, your division will be in charge of protecting any civilians. As usual, see if any want to join us, in particular Users. Make sure they know that they can always count on us," Marco said and Izo nodded, hands gliding over his pistols for a moment.

"Thatch, you'll be with my division, but if Izo needs any help then the Second will be there to help. Other than that, we'll do all we can to stop Shiki's men, but if you get into direct battle with Shiki himself then retreat." A few mutters rose up at that, but Marco held a hand up and they reluctantly quietened.

"It's not that we cannot take Shiki down, but it's not the right time to yet. Our priority is to defend the land and people and Shiki is too powerful for us right now." Although, Marco knew if he came face to face with Shiki then it would be hard not to attack him and get rid of him right away.

"Are we clear?" Marco asked and the group responded, waiting for Marco's signal before they disembarked onto a small boat, crossing the distance to the shore in no time.

It wasn't the worst battle Marco had been in, but it was worse than he'd imagined. More than half of Thatch's division were needed to help Izo's protect civilians and get them to safety and then even more were needed to stop a large fire as it spread through the buildings.

Preoccupied with fighting generic thugs, Marco could only keep half an eye out for Shiki. What he wasn't expecting, however, was for Shiki to literally fly across the square where Marco stood, followed by an angered young man – a man that Marco recognised.

"Leave Ace alone," Monkey D. Luffy said and Marco stooped low, moving to hide behind a pile of rubble, close enough that he could listen.

"Whatever you want with him, drop it," Luffy continued and Marco frowned, wondering what business Shiki could have with Ace. He wouldn't be that desperate to find Marco that he was threatening Ace, would he?
"If he just gives me the bird then I'll let him live," Shiki said, a horrible chuckle leaving his lips as Marco's heart sped up.

"You couldn't get Nami so what makes you think you can get Ace?" Luffy said and the words were accompanied by an explosion of rubble above them, evidence of Luffy's anger and his power. Marco had read up on the almost-insane rookie and his crew yet seeing his raw power before him was more amazing than Marco could have imagined. The kid more than deserved the straw hat sitting atop his head, that much was for sure.

The battle continued and Marco had to fight with everything he had to keep his regenerative powers back when he was wounded. The effort was exhausting, but he wasn't going to give Shiki the satisfaction of knowing where he was when so many normal people could get hurt in the aftermath.

He was almost ready to drop when Thatch came to his side, dirt covering his face and smile on his lips.

"Shiki's finally gone, Mugiwara in hot pursuit. I think they have some kind of personal grudge against Shiki and they're not going to let him get away so easily." Thatch sounded tired too and Marco nodded.

"Their navigator was taken by him," Marco said and Thatch hummed thoughtfully, looking out into the night sky. "And Shiki's been threatening Ace."

Thatch started in surprise at that and looked at Marco.

"Why?" he said, though it was obvious and Marco let the answer hang in the air.

Their divisions were beginning to group around them and Izo stepped up, letting Marco know that he and his division would be staying the night and that they'd return to the Moby Dick in the morning. Marco accepted it, it was normal for one division to stay behind after these situations after all, and directed the others to the boat, noting those who would need medical attention when they returned home.

"Where are you going?" Thatch said as Marco began to walk to shore, pressing a warm hand over the tattoo on Marco's chest. "You shouldn't be coming home with us."

It was what Marco had wanted to do since he'd seen Luffy and Shiki fight, but duty and love for his family had outweighed whatever he'd wanted to do. Now, though, Thatch was telling him it was okay for him to check on Ace, to be there to protect him should Shiki be standing after Luffy was done with him.

"I'll tell Oyaji the truth. You know he'll understand," Thatch whispered and Marco needed no more encouragement, letting his form fade to that of his phoenix one, hurling his body into the sky and away, high enough to hide in the clouds until he was smaller and his colour dimmed. He couldn't take his powers back completely as they were healing the damage dealt in battle, but he could dim his light at least so that he wasn't as easy to spot.

He couldn't heal the exhaustion though and Marco was unconscious by the time he rolled into Ace's home, hitting the floor with a dull hint of pain. He'd made it though and that was all that mattered.

Marco could feel Luffy's silent question and he looked at him, knowing there was no way out. Not
that he wanted to hide, lest of all to Ace, but fate worked in strange ways. Still, he wanted Luffy to know that he was there to protect Ace, to look after him the best he could and… well.

They reached a silent conclusion and Marco respected Luffy for that. He'd speak to Oyaji when he returned home, ask if they wanted to meet with the Mugiwara pirates perhaps, ask if they wanted an unofficial alliance, a friendship of the sea.

Still, the time came when Marco left and when he returned home he felt… strange. Not in an entirely bad way, but in a way that felt as though something was missing. He spoke briefly to Whitebeard before taking to his room and hiding there all day – it was his day off thankfully – until Thatch barged in, no warning or regret.

"Stop moping like a teenage girl," he said, flopping on the bed beside Marco dramatically. "So what if you like him? Just take him back to his place next time we're out and fuck him!"

Though he protested and told Thatch that was the last thing he wanted, it didn't stop Marco from waking up in Ace's bed with a smile. It didn't stop him moving to the kitchen to make breakfast and it certainly didn't stop him from waking Ace with a kiss – though he was careful to cover his Whitebeard mark with the shirt he'd been wearing the night before.

The truth wasn't out between them, but Marco had stopped lying to himself now. He cared for Ace, cared deeply and much more than just as a phoenix for a flame. The truth would come, Shiki or no Shiki.
Chapter 6

Sleep lifted from Ace slowly as he felt someone touch his shoulder gently. He smiled, opening his eyes ever so slightly as Marco brushed their lips together tenderly, welcoming him to the new day. He rolled onto his back as Marco left the bed, eyes half-closed as Marco shrugged his clothes on and left the room, looking back towards the bed with a grin before he ducked out.

It took a moment, but Ace groaned and stretched out, smiling as he heard Marco rattling around in the kitchen. He was making good on his promise of breakfast then, Ace thought, and sat up. He ignored his clothes on the floor and pulled on a pair of shorts and a baggy top, walking out of the room to sit at the small kitchen table, an amused smile on his face as Marco cooked eggs and bacon.

"You didn't have to cook you know," Ace said and Marco turned to him with a raised eyebrow.

"I promised I would," he said, poking at the food in the pan. "And I can't break a promise when it's related to food."

Food was served a moment later and they both dug in quickly. Ace felt his gaze shifting to Marco's face every other bite, Marco himself distracted by a day-old newspaper that had been on the kitchen side. He hummed to himself before looking up, seeming surprised that Ace was watching him.

"Is everything okay?" Marco asked, looking at Ace's plate.

Ace smiled. "Everything's great, it's just odd to see your full face." He shoved a forkful of food into his mouth. "It's nice."

A smile from Marco was all he received and they fell into a comfortable silence, the only sound the flipping of newspaper pages as Marco read the headlines. A soft breeze passed through the flat, the ever-open window the source, and Ace sat back in his chair, sighing contentedly at his full belly.

"Tell me about yourself," Ace said suddenly, looking at Marco with narrowed eyes. He smiled and Marco folded the paper sharply, pushing his plate aside and linking his fingers as he rested his chin on his hands. For a moment, Ace thought he wasn't going to reply, but then he spoke.

"You don't want to know about me," Marco said quietly, but Ace couldn't let that pass. Of course he wanted to know about Marco, had wanted to know about him for weeks, ever since he'd first set eyes on the blue and yellow masked man. He'd grown close through their texts, but they'd never shared anything substantial. At least not in the way he'd wanted.

"I do," Ace insisted. He'd always been strong-willed and stubborn, traits he and Luffy shared and were probably derived from living with shady people in their childhood, so he wasn't about to let Marco get out of this. He wanted Marco, he'd got Marco and he wasn't going to let Marco go.

"I'm dangerous," Marco said after a lengthy, weighted pause. His eyes were shadowed with something akin to regret, but Ace couldn't be fully sure of that. Still, his pulse sped up with Marco's words as his previous ideas were confirmed.

"Because you're a pirate?" he asked and Marco looked directly at him, not remotely surprised Ace had figured that out.

"Because of who I am in the pirate world," Marco corrected, folding his arms over his chest. "And
because of the things I have done, the things I am doing now and the things I will do."

Ace considered the words for a moment. It was logical that Marco would warn him of a dangerous lifestyle, but such warnings were lost on Ace. He was a Logia user, fire to boot, and brother to one of the strongest pirates out on the seas. Not that he'd ever let Luffy know how strong he was, Ace was the older one after all and would always take care of his little brother.

"I'm a Devil Fruit user hunted by the government for what I was born as. I have people after me for something I have no control in. My own family are insane and either running the government or sailing the seas." Ace swallowed thickly, aware not to give too much away. He trusted Marco, but that didn't mean he'd threaten Luffy or his crew.

Instead of speaking, Marco stood up and walked around to Ace, nodding to him. He took Ace's hand silently and placed it over his heart, something almost wild in his eyes.

"Undo my shirt," he said, almost too quietly for Ace to hear. Frowning, Ace obliged, fingers pausing when they hit the third button and a deep, navy blue mark could be seen on a tanned chest.

"What…" he began, not waiting to complete his sentence and instead undoing the rest of the shirt's buttons. When he was done, he pushed the shirt to the floor, eyes wide at the tattoo covering Marco's torso.

"Whitebeard's mark," Ace whispered and Marco nodded. "You're one of the Whitebeard pirates?"

It was a redundant question, but Marco still nodded. Of course he was a member of the Whitebeard pirates; why else would he carry the mark?

"Thatch is too," Marco began. "He's commander of the fourth division."

That surprised Ace and he took half a step back, eyes wide. Everyone knew of Whitebeard and his commanders, feared and revered them. They were the strongest crew on the sea and to know that the leader of the fourth division was his friend came as a shock to Ace.

"Thatch is a commander? One of Whitebeard's commanders?" he couldn't help but say and Marco smiled a little sadly, nodding.

"I am too," Marco said quickly, looking down. His hands were clenched tightly and Ace's mouth fell open. In hindsight, it was predictable, but the shock was enough to make Ace forget any words he'd been about to speak.

"I'm captain of Whitebeard's first division, Marco." He opened his mouth, as if he was about to add something, before shaking his head gently. Ace looked away, eyebrows raised in shock.

"You…" Ace broke off, covering his mouth with his knuckles. "I don't know what to say."

Marco nodded and closed his eyes.

"I'll leave for now, to let that sink in. I'm sorry I…" he trailed off, opening his eyes and the pain in them was almost enough for Ace to launch himself at Marco and hold him until he'd burnt all of his demons away. But then Marco was turning away, expression sad and eyes downcast, believing he'd lost their fledgling connection for the truth.

"Come over for dinner tomorrow," Ace whispered as he caught Marco's arm, pulling him back with a grin. "If you can. I'll give you my den-den mushi number and you can tell me if there will be a problem. I have a friend – a chef, the best fucking chef in the world. I'll get him to cook." Ace
licked his lips; he was rambling now, but he just needed Marco to know he needed him, as ridiculous as that sounded. "It'll be-"

Marco kissed him, pulling Ace to his body tightly. The kiss lasted for only a few moments, but when Marco pulled back his eyes were lighter and he wore a smile.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said and then he was gone, breezing through the house and shutting the door behind him.

Ace spent the day between cleaning and looking out of the windows. He'd called in sick to work, coughing pathetically and been given the time. He had a stellar record anyway, there was no need for them to complain that he was ill. Besides, it wasn't as if Ace cared anymore whether he had a job or not – it would be easier if they did fire him. Now that he knew Marco was with the Whitebeard pirates there was hope – perhaps more than hope even – that he could start his own adventure.

If Ace had to choose turning points in his life, there would be three. His birth, Sabo's death and the moment a bird trapped in a cage was handed to him. The first couldn't be helped and the second had shown him how cruel people could be, how horrific they were. Luffy had been too young to hear and understand the gossip and hadn't bothered to read the letters in the bin that Garp had tried to throw away before anyone could see when he kept them company at the mountain bandit's home.

Ace hadn't been too young though. All three of them had had grand adventures and aspirations of taking out to sea and yet every letter that Garp threw away spoke of the number of people who had been rounded up, the number of people who had been slaughtered, the number of people who were being hunted just for how they were born.

(In reality, it wasn't Sabo's dying that opened Ace's eyes to the misery of the world and crushed his hope. The letters had always been there, but he'd been searching for more, a little hidden note that said Sabo had survived, that it was all a trick and instead of hope he'd seen the truth of the world and it had crushed his childish dreams.

He'd hidden it all from Luffy though, pasting on a brave smile and letting his brother walk into the wide world, clutching the papers every morning and even visiting Garp's office in the first few weeks on the pretence of tea. Neither of them had tea, instead they scanned lists of the caught pirates Garp would somehow manage to get a hold of, nodding to each other and going their separate ways when one Monkey D. Luffy was absent from their list. Garp may have sheltered them by turning a blind eye to their abilities when they were younger, but if either Ace or Luffy were caught using their powers then it would be off to the cells and – most likely – the executioner's block.

These visits had stopped after the first sightings of a kid with a straw hat came in and Ace went back to his mundane life with a spring in his step, safe in the knowledge that Luffy was living his dream.

It was the bird though, really, that had changed Ace's life. He'd gone to San Faldo after that, realised he could be more than an empty shell with the power of fire. His fire was destructive, but he could use that power, use it for something good. All pirates sought freedom and Ace… Ace was sick of being locked up in the government's palm. He wanted, needed, his freedom.

However loosely, the bird had led him to Marco and to the freedom he'd always secretly craved.

Stretching, Ace put down the cloth he held and closed his eyes for a moment. He'd almost finished
and moved to the den-den mushi, punching in the number for the Thousand Sunny's den-den mushi. Franky had managed to get one that connected only to Ace that was off the government list and while he felt bad for using it like this, he had promised Marco a meal by the greatest chef in the world.

"ACE!" came the roar over the phone as Luffy answered, laughing manically. A voice in the background followed and Ace gathered that Luffy had sprinted from the infirmary to pick up the phone. Despite his adorability, Chopper wasn't someone Ace wanted to cross where medicine was concerned.

"Hi Luffy," Ace muttered, smile spreading across his cheeks. "And hi Chopper, I'm sorry my little brother's being a pain."

The phone switched hands and Chopper thanked him, giggling to himself before turning to shout more threats to Luffy.

"I actually called to see if I could borrow Sanji tomorrow," Ace started quietly. He wasn't sure if he could borrow Sanji, but he hoped that it would be okay. He got on well with Sanji, but that didn't mean he was entitled to steal the man away to demand him cook.

Luffy roared out Sanji's name and, a moment later, Ace heard footsteps over the line. He smiled as Luffy gave his trademark call for meat before he was pushed off his chair (or at least that's what Ace could gather from the noises he heard) and Sanji took over the phone.

"Hello?" he said simply, inhaling on his cigarette and leaving Ace to his request.

"I'll be over around lunchtime," Sanji agreed when he'd heard. "It'll be an interesting challenge to cook for you and your… friend."

So perhaps Ace had referred to Marco as just a friend, but while they had spent the night together and had promised to meet again… well Luffy was listening on the other end and it had been less than 24 hours since their relationship had started. Friend was the best way to put it, even if Sanji made it seem something only just short of a scandalous affair.

After a quick text to Marco that said he wouldn't be going to the Carnival tonight, Ace set about making dinner. He'd missed lunch for cleaning and looked disdainfully at the piles of recycling and rubbish he needed to take out after food. He'd been meticulous and disposed of anything that he didn't need – just in case he needed to pack a bag and board a ship. He couldn't waste time rummaging through clothes that no longer fit or books that would be useless.

When he was done and a quick pasta dinner eaten, Ace flicked through the TV channels, ignoring the news and the pressure advertisements that called for any suspicious behaviour to be reported. He eventually settled on a plot-less action film, more guns and explosions than story, and drifted off to sleep.

He woke to a new feature the next morning. It was one of those rag programmes, more rumour and speculation through the grapevine than actual truth, but one of the headlines caught his attention and he shook his head.

There was no way Luffy would form an alliance with Whitebeard. Luffy wouldn't form an alliance for anything other than meat and fun and there was no way a man like Whitebeard needed an ally in Luffy… well, to any extent Ace could think of.

He stood and walked to the kitchen, only mildly surprised at the time. Sanji would be here in an
hour or so, but it wasn't uncommon for Ace to sleep for long periods of time. He had a tendency to fall asleep in the most bizarre places when he was stressed and so tried to sleep as much as possible when he was on his own. Of course that meant he was so used to it that when he slept and didn't need to wake up, he'd keep on sleeping for as long as he could.

Showering and changing into presentable clothes, Ace checked his mobile phone and shot a text to Marco, checking that he was still free for tonight. The reply came a moment later, saying that he was looking forward to that evening, and Ace smiled, letting the phone fall onto the sofa cushions as he headed to make tea. Sanji would appreciate a drink when he got here and the only other things Ace had to offer were alcohol (off limits while Sanji was working his masterpiece) and water. Tea was nicer.

"I apologise in advance," was all Sanji managed to get out when Ace opened the door to him before someone tackled them both, laughter echoing in the corridor.

"ACE!" Luffy shouted, jumping up and running into the apartment. "I came to help!"

It took a few seconds, but eventually both Ace and Sanji were standing again. Thankfully the provisions Sanji had brought were unharmed (trust Luffy to avoid harming food) and soon the kitchen was bustling as Sanji began lunch preparations. They'd eat and then go through what needed to be done for dinner.

"When will your boyfriend get here?" Luffy asked, swinging his chairs while they waited for Sanji to dish up. Ace, who had been taking a sip of tea, choked and turned to Luffy with warm cheeks.

"He's not my boyfriend!" he protested, though it sounded weak and there was a scoff in the direction of the kitchen.

Luffy pouted, but corrected himself. Even if the look he shot Ace made it clear he meant boyfriend.

"When will your friend get here?" he repeated, smiling widely as Sanji dished up lunch – a meat platter for Luffy and a lighter salad for the rest of them.

"You'll be having a filling dinner," Sanji explained and they tucked in.

"He should be here about five or so. We're having an early dinner in case… well in case he has to work." It was a little lie, really. Work, attack, pirate duties, it was all the same really.

"Where did you meet him?" Luffy continued, throwing out a barrage of questions as he stuffed food in his mouth.

A good thing about being rubber was that Luffy didn't choke despite the vast quantities of food he shovelled down his throat. He barely got enough air with the rate he ate. Ace was bad enough but Luffy? Luffy took it to a new level.

"At San Faldo," Ace said, truthfully. There was no point lying about it – there wasn't anywhere else he could meet people unless he literally plucked someone from thin air.

"The Carnival?" Sanji piped in, raising an eyebrow. "Robin-chan will be pleased to know you're using her card," he said with a smile, before returning to his salad and observing the brothers.

"If you could thank her from me," Ace said, frowning as he slapped Luffy's hand away from his lunch.

"So he's a pirate?" was the next question and Ace shrugged, feigning ignorance.
"Is it like one of those stories where the fair maiden gets swept off out to sea by the rugged pirate and they live happily ever after?" Luffy said, laughing at his own words. He pushed his hat further down on his head (they'd hidden it on their walk over in one of the bags – Luffy hadn't been happy, but they had to at least try and hide their identities when visiting Ace) and leant back in his chair.

"No, Luffy," Ace said, shaking his head as he stood to clear the plates. No one was going to rush him off to sea unless he chose to first and he was no fair maiden anyway.

While Sanji cooked, Luffy asked him meaningless questions as they watched cartoons. Nothing of substance was on and Ace began to doze off. A hand patted his cheek gently and he opened his eyes with a frown, rolling his eyes at Luffy's wide grin.

"Your boyfriend's here," he said with a laugh and Ace vaulted off the sofa, looking at the clock in horror.

"Shall I let him in?" Sanji asked, apron on and a spoon in hand. "Dinner's almost done, I just need to add one more thing. You can go and get ready, I'll try to keep Luffy from asking too many bad questions."

That was more motivation than Ace needed to run and hurry to get ready. He threw on a shirt and some jeans, returning to the living room to see Luffy practically wrapped around Marco on the sofa. Luffy's face was right up against Marco's, but Marco was just laughing, answering Luffy's questions.

He was a keeper alright.

"Ace!" Luffy called out, as if they hadn't seen each other for hours, not minutes. "I wanted to hear about Whitebeard's phoenix!"

Ace rolled his eyes, preparing to apologise for Luffy's fairy tales when Marco surprised him.

"You should just come over to our ship. I'll let Oyaji know you have a fascination with our phoenix only." He paused. "And get him to set some meat aside."

Luffy laughed as if his birthday had come early and Sanji poked his head into the room to check everything was okay. He raised an eyebrow to Ace before heading back to add finishing touches.

Meanwhile, Ace's heart was pounding in his chest and he was sure the neighbours would be able to hear it. Unknowingly, Marco had just shattered every illusion Ace had put up that he was okay the bird had left. Because if that bird was any bird, it had to be Whitebeard's phoenix, right?

Sanji eventually managed to drag Luffy away and Ace sat down at the table, picking from various dishes Sanji had provided. He swallowed heavily before launching his heart through his words.

"You didn't have to lie to Luffy, you know." Ace laughed softly. "He's just fixated on the idea of a phoenix."

Marco chewed thoughtfully before answering, eyes honest.

"There really is a phoenix on board the Moby Dick." He took another slice of duck. "And I think Oyaji would be amused by Mugiwara no Luffy's energy. He'll take to him like a duck to water."

"He does have that quality," Ace murmured before shaking his head. "But… a phoenix?"

Marco looked up for a brief moment before he shrugged. He didn't seem comfortable by the topic,
but Ace wanted to know if Whitebeard's phoenix was his phoenix and then if... well if he could see it.

"It's not something that should be talked about in the open," Marco said with a soft smile. "I'll book us a private room at the Carnival for tomorrow. I'll invite Thatch too and we can blow off some steam before I tell you more in the security of the Carnival."

Ace looked down and almost jumped as a warm hand touched his.

"I promise I'll tell you the truth about the bird and any other questions you have tomorrow. At the moment, anyone could be listening in," he said, voice lowered ever so slightly.

Ace understood though and he nodded. At least he would get his answers tomorrow and that was more than he'd ever started the day with. He'd been patient until now and he could be patient until tomorrow. Marco was honest, Ace had known that since the first time they'd met, and he would meet Ace's questions with nothing but the truth.

"Thank you," Ace said and Marco smiled.

"Don't thank me until you hear the rest of it," he said. It puzzled Ace, but he pushed it to the back of his mind. There was plenty time for that tomorrow.

Their evening was gentle. Good food, a slow stream of alcohol and good talk. It was the best evening Ace had had in a while, having forgotten the smaller things in life such as good company, good food and good conversation. He was sure he could talk to Marco every day for the rest of his life and never run out of things to say. Judging by the feeling in his stomach it was something he very much wanted.

"Thank you for dinner tonight," Marco said in the hall as he shrugged his coat on. Outside was deceptively cold, a storm blowing in from the coast. He'd assured Ace he would be okay getting home – back to the Moby Dick that was – when Ace had offered for him to stay. Being the first division commander was harder than just a title and as Marco looked genuinely regretful, Ace wasn't too bothered.

Besides, they needed their space in the fledgling stages of their relationship. At least that's what Ace told himself to make it a little easier every time they parted.

"I'll talk to Oyaji," he said suddenly, eyes ablaze with determination. "If... if you wanted me to that is."

While he hadn't specifically said anything, Ace knew it wasn't hard for anyone to draw the conclusion Marco had. He'd been dropping subtle hints the entire dinner, hints that he had nothing holding him back, that he'd loved adventure as much as Luffy did, that he'd dreamt of the seas when he was younger and was only just starting to believe in those dreams once more.

He left with a kiss and a smile, leaving Ace alone to his thoughts. Tomorrow he'd get the truth about his bird and find out if his dream could finally come true.

I'm sorry it's taken me so long, Sabo, Ace thought to himself as he looked to the window. He moved over to it with a smile and closed it, locking it shut as he began to pack everything of his old life away inside of him.

Tomorrow... well tomorrow was a brand new day.
The Carnival was bustling, more than usual. Ace pushed his way through with a smile, greeting a few familiar masks and nodding as many more noticed him. It had been a while since he’d been here and a few asked if he was to fight tonight. Ace shrugged and laughed, passing so many strangers and wondering if he knew any of them in his day to day life.

His old life.

Thatch and Marco were due to arrive a little while later, they'd sent a text saying they were running behind schedule, but Ace had wanted some time to himself anyway, to adjust to the old self and the new one he was about to become. Even if he wasn't carried away to the seas tonight, Ace was resolved to change his life, no matter how small he started. If that meant standing up when he saw someone being dragged off by the government then he'd stand up. If it meant smiling more to strangers then he'd smile more.

Nothing small changed the world, but it could change a person.

Ace wasn't the best at spotting change, but he felt the change in the Carnival that night. It happened in an instant, the crowd were talking cheerfully and the referee was trying to separate a fight that had gotten out of hand in the ring. Many people were cheering at the ring and perhaps that was what made it too late when people did notice something was wrong.

Like an electric spark, the feeling ran through the crowd and, in an instant, the place fell silent. People turned with drinks half raised and sentences half completed, eyes widening. Ace heard the shattering of glass as some people's hands slipped and he heard many more take steps back, trying to put distance between themselves and the man floating towards the central arena.

Shiki was here.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he said, voice flowing imperiously through the crowd. Men and women began pushing each other in effort to get away from Shiki, but others pushed back and they were only silenced when Shiki set himself down on the arena floor.

"I hope you'll forgive me for not being in disguise. There's not much point in hiding when one wants to be noticed!" He let out a horrific laugh and Ace felt his fire burn deep inside of his body. We're here, the flames said, reassuringly.

"You're all going to help me out in a little experiment," he continued, pacing the arena. His lower legs were swords and he dug deep into the arena floor with each step. It would have been surprising that he could continue walking, until Ace remembered that Shiki was a man who could fly.

"The government paid no mind to my little stunt before," and with that, Shiki began inspecting the crowd, though Ace had a feeling there was only one person he was really looking for. "And I've been keeping the pirates who usually help civilians busy these past weeks. If they're within range to even get here on time, they certainly won't be enough to stop me."

People began trying to flee, but it was no use. They were blocked in by Shiki's men, dressed-up thugs wearing sick smiles. A few of them began pushing through the crowd and ripping masks off people, still searching whoever Shiki was after. Ace was willing to stake his life on the fact that Shiki was after him.

An explosion rocketed the outer rooms and Shiki smiled.

"Your exits have been sealed off, there's no hope anymore." He laughed to himself and Ace took
his mask of himself, throwing it to the floor as people screamed around him and tried to run. They all knew they'd never get anywhere, but it hardly stopped them running and trying. Every single one of them just wanted to live and Ace refused to be the cause of their death.

People moved out of the way as Ace sent his flames towards the arena. Fresh screams echoed round him, but Ace didn't care. He shrugged his shirt off, knowing there was no point if he was to fight with everything he had, and Shiki turned to him with a manic gleam in his eyes.

"Finally showing yourself," he commented, as one commented on the weather. He'd dodged Ace's flames, but they hadn't meant to harm, only draw attention. If he could distract Shiki then perhaps someone would be brave enough to knock out a few of Shiki's men and try to escape. If only Smoker had been there – he was a man who would already be battling Shiki's men.

"You didn't need to make such a display just to get my attention," Ace replied with a smirk. Shiki began circling him but he reciprocated, keeping Shiki in his sight.

"Perhaps not," Shiki said, all humour gone from his face. "But I find one needs to take the things they want or nothing s ever achieved."

Without warning, pieces of the ceiling broke away and were hurled towards Ace. He managed to duck and dodge most of them, though he was caught on his arm and his flesh burst into flame. It hurt, but he was unmarked, thankfully.

It wasn't that Logia users couldn't get hurt. Yes their body would turn into something else – in Ace's case, flames – but that didn't mean they were invincible. Getting hit still hurt and if it was large enough or deadly enough then Ace would still be severely hurt. Unlike a lot of people thought, Logia users weren't immortal.

Shiki kept a constant stream of brick, metal and whatever he could think of flying towards Ace. While he shot back fire whenever he could, Ace knew this would be a losing fight. People had begun to empty the room though, the presence of Shiki's men no longer a threat, and Ace smiled, knowing that they would get out at the very least.

And if they could get out, they'd be safe. And while they were safe, they'd call someone to help, someone who would put Shiki away for good.

(And by that time, Marco and Thatch would be there to drag him off to sea, even if only to lie low for a few days from the government.)

Life wasn't that smooth, however. A chair took Ace by surprise and hit him in the chest, knocking the wind from his lungs. He fell back, startled to feel something against his back. Shiki leant over him, floating with a wide grin.

"I don't need you anymore," he said, eyes widening in madness. "But by killing you, I'll be able to eradicate his blood from the world."

Ace's eyes widened in shock and he flinched as small pieces of rubble fell from above to streak down his torso. He directly up, almost afraid to look away from Shiki, and felt his blood run cold. Not even fire would be able to save him from the cracks in the ceiling. He could try to burn his way free, but with the madness in Shiki's eyes, the man's determination and grudge against Roger (it had to be about his father, there was no one as influential to the seas as Gold Roger and Shiki had accidentally let Ace knew they were somehow acquainted when they'd first met), there was no way Ace was going to get out of this situation alive – short of killing Shiki.
So that was it then, Ace thought. This was it, his life. It hadn't been so bad, though he wished he'd listened to the stir of the ocean in his veins, listened to the spray of sea-salt against his skin and listened to the cry of the gulls as they passed him over.

"I'm sorry, Luffy," he whispered as larger chunks of the ceiling began to fall. His flames protected him from them and he didn't hold them back. Let his fire take San Faldo. Let them burn Shiki to the core and purify his soul. Let him suffer, just as he'd made others suffer.

"I wish I could have seen your dream," he said and Ace's thoughts turned from a laughing Luffy to Marco's soft smile. He was sorry about that too, but Marco was his small secret, a love that would never happen.

Ace closed his eyes and smiled at the huge crack above him.

This was it then, but it was okay. He would die, but that was okay.

The sound of something moving at high speed caught his ear and Ace hoped that Shiki would somehow get trapped as he tried to flee. His eyes began to burn with light and though he thought it might be his fire burning in effort to save him, Ace couldn't feel that much change in his body.

It happened in a few milliseconds. One moment Ace was prepared to die and the next he was opening his eyes as blue fire surrounded him. Around them, the world collapsed forever, but Ace felt the strong heartbeat of the bird and knew, he just knew, that this was his bird – though it was bigger than he'd ever imagined it could be – and that his bird was also Whitebeard's phoenix.

And as he listened to the steady beat of the phoenix's heart and the crackle of its flames, Ace suddenly realised he had been wrong.

It was not okay. He hadn't wanted to die.
Life was an odd thing, Ace mused. It took months to grow, but only seconds to take away. He felt the steady crackle of his flames and watched as they mingled with the bird’s, purple fire swirling amongst the debris.

It was funny though. He’d come so close to dying – accepted his fate even – but now that there was a way out, Ace was desperately clinging to it. He was surrounded entirely by the bird’s flames, despite the fact that the dust had begun to settle, but he still clung to the creature, breathing heavily and thinking how stupid he’d been to just accept his death. What would he have accomplished? He wouldn't have even been able to take Shiki out with him.

The phoenix shifted, uncurling its wings from Ace and taking a steadying step back. Ace let it go a little sadly, his fire returning to his own body with an empty feeling. It wanted to be with the bird and only the small, life-saving touch hadn't been enough. He needed more, craved it more than he’d ever craved anything before.

San Faldo was wrecked. There was nothing left but an empty shell of a warehouse, rubble surrounding them, and Ace ducked down instinctively, looking for Shiki. He saw a figure above them, small but definitely Shiki, and that was when the phoenix reacted. Its eyes narrowed, body lowering as it looked to Ace, clearly gesturing for him to get on its back.

As Shiki moved, Ace didn't need telling twice. He leapt upon the soft feathers, fires mingling once again, and the bird shot upwards, long tail feathers brushing by Shiki as he came for them, too slow and too sure his plan had worked.

The night was cool and dark, stars twinkling above them as they fled for their lives. When they were out at open sea, Ace looked back and noticed that Shiki had abandoned his pursuit. The sea belonged to Whitebeard after all and if Shiki thought he could take on the wrath of Whitebeard (and Luffy, because Luffy would get involved as soon as he could once he knew Ace had been hurt) on his home turf then he was a bigger idiot than Ace had ever suspected.

Contrary to what he'd been expecting, the phoenix passed right over Whitebeard's ship. It was a colossal boat and Ace looked at it for a long while, hands resting against feathers and fire crackling a soft melody that only they could hear. It looked like a kind ship, the sort that would welcome anyone, regardless of whom they were or where they came from.

Still, that didn't resolve the question of where they were headed. At least not, until Ace saw a small island – more a cluster of rocks and a raggedy beach – and a figure pacing, face turned towards the sky.

They touched down and Thatch grabbed Ace right away, pulling him into a tight hug. He ignored the bird completely, looking Ace up and down and sighing in relief.

"Thank goodness you're alright," he said. "When we found out Shiki was at San Faldo we thought the worst. He's been keeping us this far out at sea – your brother's ship too – all week so we were on alert, but no one thought…" he trailed off, laughing in relief.

"He was the only one who could make it on time," Thatch said, jerking his head to the side. He then reached down and Ace noticed the medical kit at his feet. "I'm the stand in medic for this operation. Oyaji wouldn't let him go alone, but there's not enough room for two on his back. Instead of taking you to the ship I thought it would be best to stay here…" Thatch shot a look
towards the bird, discomfort showing in his tense shoulders.

"It's thanks to you that he came back," Thatch said quietly and Ace looked at him sharply, attention fully on Thatch and not the phoenix for once. He hadn't talked about the fact that he'd had the phoenix in his ownership before freeing it, but then again perhaps the phoenix could communicate with people somehow.

"I'm not a medic, but I know the basics. Everyone does," Thatch muttered quickly, grabbing the little bag at his feet. He spent a few moments patching up the scratches and scrapes, touch delicate and eyes raking over every part of Ace's body. The phoenix watched from afar, silent and regal in its stance.

"We were going to talk to you about everything tonight," Thatch said as he closed the medic case. "But of course Shiki had to ruin everything when-" The phoenix stepped forwards and Thatch closed his mouth with a click of teeth. He smiled at Ace, a little sadness and regret shining through, before he patted Ace's shoulder.

"He'll drop me back at the ship before coming back. We owe you the truth," Thatch said, stroking the shoulder of the bird. "And you'll get the truth before you get to rest properly."

With that, the bird was shooting across the sky and Ace could see why Shiki would have given up even if the phoenix had stayed over land. The bird was little more than a blue and gold streak in the sky, the distance between the Moby Dick and the little rocky island he was on closing in minutes. Ace couldn't even see Whitebeard's ship on the horizon yet the bird made the distance seem like a simple stroll.

He didn't want to think about what had happened yet. Ace knew he'd been a coward in accepting his death so easily, but it was the ease in which Shiki had acted, how collected he'd been and how easy he'd carried out his plan. No one had been able to stop him and Ace wondered how many times over the course of history that the same situation had been played out – someone with power taking whatever they wanted from the citizens of an ensnared nation, plucking them from the only place they could feel free and destroying it.

It wasn't fair, but the world wasn't either. Nothing was fair for Devil Fruit users and Ace knew he'd never be able to turn his back on the situation ever again, even if it meant swallowing pride and begging Whitebeard to take him on board.

He saw the blue of the phoenix returning and stood up, preparing to be taken to Whitebeard's ship right away. The bird settled on the island, however, and Ace frowned.

"I thought..." he trailed off and smiled. "Thank you for rescuing me." The bird looked at him before opening its wings, shrinking and thinning until it wasn't a bird at all, until a man stood before Ace.

A man he knew very well.

"Marco?" Ace said, confusion lacing his voice. It was obvious, but Ace simply couldn't comprehend it, couldn't wrap his head around the fact that the man before him, the man he was unofficially seeing and the man he had decided he cared a lot about, was the very same phoenix he'd cared for and set free from Shiki.

"It was more to me, but rescuing you was repaying the debt I owed you for freeing me from that cage." Marco was avoiding his gaze, fingers instead playing with the hem of his open shirt. His hair danced across his forehead as a breeze drifted up from the sea and Ace's world shifted
uncomfortably underneath his feet.

The bird had been Marco all along. There was nothing else that could possibly be running through Ace's head except the revelation that it had been Marco all along, the one who had been trapped by Shiki and hunted mercilessly, the very reason Shiki had just tried to kill him now.

"I'm sorry," Marco said softly. Ace watched with wide eyes as Marco knelt to the ground, bowing his head low in respect. "I wanted to tell you so many times and yet I always failed. The connection I felt between us was too much of a temptation to wait until I'd told you and…" he trailed off, head still downcast at the ground.

Ace knew what he was talking about though, he'd felt the connection Marco spoke of. He'd always felt it, both for the phoenix and for the human sides of Marco. Never before had he thought that the two feelings could be linked, but now things were finally beginning to make sense; such as why he'd always felt close to Marco, why he'd trusted him even when he'd known him for a few minutes and why the attraction between them was so intense.

"There's no need to apologise," Ace said truthfully. And there really wasn't. He didn't feel betrayed or hurt in any sense – though perhaps that was down to the adrenaline still in his blood system. If anything, Ace was relieved to know that the bird he had been searching for, his ray of hope, wasn't just a mythological creature on a page, but a living person he cared for, someone who could keep up with him and some who… well, anything other than that wasn't worth thinking about yet, Ace wasn't one to get too ahead of himself usually.

Marco looked up at him, eyes dark and gaze heavy. Ace smiled slowly and sat on the ground before Marco, looking him dead in the eye.

"You've freed me as much as I freed you. What you might not have said to me before doesn't matter." Ace shrugged and looked over his shoulder, back over the ocean-scape to where he had lived the past nineteen years. He didn't miss it, not even a slight pang.

"I wanted to join you," he continued, looking now at the ground in front of him. "I still do, if it's an option."

There was no warning, just a flash of blue before Ace was knocked to the ground, the phoenix the size of an adult human pressing against his chest. Marco's eyes stared back at him from ringed plumage and Ace really wondered how he'd never been able to see it before. This bird was so obviously Marco that it was blinding.

The feathers faded away until it was Marco once more who was pressing Ace to the ground. His skin was warm and Ace let his flames flicker gently, testing the parameters between them. As the red flames licked across Marco's arms, he smiled gently, lowering himself down a little to whisper in Ace's ear.

"There is nothing that would make me happier," he said before pushing up, arms folding into wings and skin shifting back to feathers. It was still a remarkable sight and Ace took a moment to simply stare in wonder at the mythical bird before he took the hint and climbed atop his back.

Sand and grit rolled off blue flames as Marco shot into the air, making the most of the gentle sea currents to ride them up towards the stars, so high that Ace was afraid for one moment they would simply run away, away from the ocean and its islands, away from the fucked up society in which they lived… yet that could never be. Luffy was here and Ace had lit a fire in his chest that would only be extinguished when the world was right for Devil Fruit users again.
They flew over the sea, dipping down and soaring high, Marco calling out to him in only what could be described as complete joy. Ace laughed with him, throwing his arms high, adrenaline levels down enough for him to recognise that he was alive and he had survived.

"Is this what it's like to be truly free?" Ace whispered softly, pressing his face against Marco's silky feathers. He felt peaceful for the first time in his life. He didn't exactly want to be thanking Shiki, but the man had pointed him in this direction.

They began to slow and Ace looked over Marco's shoulder. The Moby Dick was below them, but they were high enough that the people on deck looked like ants.

"Oyaji will want to speak to you," Marco said. Ace looked at him, fingers slipping through layers of bright blue feathers to rest against warm skin.

"I'll be okay," Ace promised, though his heart fluttered. Thatch and Marco might have accepted him, Whitebeard must have too, but meeting the famed captain would be an experience Ace had never imagined.

Marco dropped slowly, circling the ship a few times. Ace was able to see every side and he couldn't express how amazed he was by the vastness of the ship. Everyone was accepted here, it was plain to see, and when Marco set down on the deck, Ace's heart had calmed.

"Marco," someone called. Ace turned to see a heavy-set man, brow furrowed and eyes narrow. "How did it go?"

"Well," Marco began, shaking the last of blue flames from his fingers, "Shiki's not playing fair. I'm going to talk to Oyaji, but I suspect something will need to be done sooner rather than later."

The man dipped his head, sparing a curious glance for Ace. "Oyaji's in his room. He's expecting you."

Marco did nothing but offer Ace a small smile before leading them inside the huge cabin. It was dimly lit – not all of the torches were in use – and the sway of the ship felt a comfort to Ace. This was where he was supposed to be, where he should have been years before.

(He'd wondered before. If Roger had lived… would Ace have been brought up on the sea? The sea flowed through his body as much as blood, but he'd always denied it. He'd been foolish and scared, but no more.)

"You took your time," a deep voice said, though not unpleasantly. A deep swish of liquid accompanied the words and Ace heard Marco sigh as he pushed a large door open.

"You shouldn't be drinking this late, Oyaji." A rumble of laughter followed, Whitebeard's laughter, and Ace followed Marco, eyes wide as he set eyes upon a legend.

"It's good for my spirit," Whitebeard replied and Marco took a seat at the side of the room.

Whitebeard was seated in a huge chair, IV stand beside him and breathing tubes inserted into his nostrils. He had a huge barrel of sake by his side and a half-smile on his face, eyes fixed on Ace.

"Welcome to the Moby Dick," he said warmly. Ace started a little, the enormous presence Whitebeard possessed taking over the room. He'd had enough of hiding away though and Ace took a deep breath.

"I'm afraid I've upset Shiki," he said simply and Whitebeard's smile spread across his face.
"Annoying creatures should stay hidden, but it looks like we have one to deal with." Whitebeard leant forward slightly and Ace took a slight step forward.

Whitebeard was nothing how the stories had painted him. He was just a man – a mortal man – not a fearsome entity. Ace felt calm, welcomed even, and the weight of oppression he'd faced in his other life was slowly slipping from his shoulders.

"But before everything else," Whitebeard said, "I must thank you for bringing Marco home."

There was a slight sigh from the side and Ace glanced to Marco. He was smiling, eyes only Ace.

"I have no doubt that he's already asked, but would you like to join the Whitebeard pirates? We're a family, something I hear you've been missing for a while." It was hardly a decision. Ace had made his mind up days ago.

He took Whitebeard's outstretched hand and smiled widely. The giant hand enclosed his. It was warm and calloused, an honest hand.

"We'll leave Shiki until tomorrow. No doubt he'll get up to more mischief tonight. I'll leave you in Marco's care and introduce you to the rest of the ship in the morning." Whitebeard let go of his hand and Ace let his arm fall to his side.

Fire sparked inside of Ace's bones as Marco's fingertips touched his shoulder. They left Whitebeard to his sake and memories, walking through the cabin until they came to a set of stairs.

"This is where the crew sleep." He paused, silence stretching between them until Ace realised what he was asking.

"I don't think I'd do well down there tonight," Ace said, making sure to look Marco dead in the eye.

There was still a lot they needed to discuss and things weren't settled between them just yet, but Ace couldn't be alone tonight. He needed something secure, something that had come with him from his old life and someone he could trust. Marco, even when hiding who he was in phoenix form, was someone Ace trusted wholeheartedly.

They walked more instep this time. The corridors were big enough for them to walk side by side, but Ace let Marco lead. Their fingers were close and Ace knew he had to be the one to take a step. Marco had hidden something from him and knew when to back off.

Ace smiled as he slipped his hand into Marco's curling his fingers as blue flames licked at his knuckles.

"Oh," Marco said, voice low in surprise. He turned to Ace, eyes questioning, and Ace pulled him closer, wrapping his free arm around his neck.

"Before you say it, there's nothing for me to forgive." He licked his lips, eyes lowering to Marco's lips. "Thank you for bringing me here."

Marco looped his free arm around Ace's waist, pulling him closer.

"Even if it means you'll be directly fighting one of the most feared men on our seas?" he said and Ace rolled his eyes.

"We can take Shiki," he said with confidence he'd never felt before filling his chest. "As long as I'm with you," he crooned, ignoring the kick to his shin Marco gave and leaning in. He kissed
Marco deeply, closing his eyes and letting his body melt against Marco's. This was where he was supposed to be and this was where he was going to stay.

Marco's room wasn't overly large, but it was pleasant. Plants lined one wall of the room and a vase with deep blue feathers in sat on the desk, aside a collection of papers and quills. They were unmistakably Marco's phoenix feathers and Ace let go of Marco to pick one up.

"I'm surprised you don't sleep in a nest," he said, tucking the feather behind his ear and nodding to the bed.

"Just because I can turn into a phoenix doesn't make me a bird," Marco said over his shoulder, opening his wardrobe and throwing some clothes over his shoulder. "You can wear those, I wouldn't bother showering until tomorrow."

Ace shrugged. The debris from the warehouse had come off during flight and he was too tired to bother with a shower right now. Marco had thrown him a t-shirt, knowing already how he usually slept.

"You enjoyed making a nest on my favourite sofa enough," Ace replied and Marco looked at him slowly, eyes narrowed.

"I did not," he retorted and Ace grinned, slipping his trousers off and changing his shirt.

"Did too," Ace said, as he pulled the feather from behind his ear and moved to the bed. "Do you have a preference?"

Marco hung his shirt up in the wardrobe and his hands moved to the sash around his hips. He shook his head and Ace crawled under the covers, closing his eyes as he leant against the cool wall. He was already dozing when the covers lifted, darkness filling the space around them.

"Thank you for saving me," Ace muttered, rolling onto his side, arm sliding across Marco's bare chest. Marco hummed to himself, lifting Ace's hand and kissing it gently.

After that, Ace drifted into sleep, one hand over Marco's beating heart and the other brushing against the feather tucked under the pillow.

The next few days were the busiest of Ace's life. He was introduced to the majority of Whitebeard's crew and put to work immediately. He barely saw Marco in the day, but they ended the days curled up together in Marco's cabin, Ace enthusiastically recalling the day's events between kisses.

At first, Ace had been unsure about remaining in Marco's room and Marco hadn't pushed the issue, letting Ace decide. It had only been after meeting Izo that Ace had really thought about it and it had been a hot topic over that day's lunch.

"Now, I want the honest truth," Izo said and Ace looked up in interest. Thatch was sitting next to him, the trio the only ones at their table. "How big is Marco's dick?"

Ace promptly choked on the mouthful of meat he was chewing and looked at Thatch for help.

"Izo's been trying to find out for years. It's one of the ship's greatest mysteries; how big is Marco's dick." He laughed, slinging an arm around Ace's shoulders.

"It's called healthy curiosity," Izo muttered. "Not that I have an interest in Marco."
The way Izo's eyes glinted made Ace wonder if his own dick was being mentally measured and he downed his drink, aiming to speak before the question came up.

"So everyone's okay with it. Marco and me I mean," he said, voicing a worry that had been niggling at him for a while. He had no wish to hide his relationship, but Ace didn't want people thinking he was just here because Marco wanted him for sex.

"No one's ever been against inter-crew relationships. Sometimes things get a bit messy and sometimes Oyaji has to sit people down and explain that no babies can exist on the ship." Thatch laughed at Izo's words.

"Marco's happy with you here. You make him happy and it's clear he makes you happy," Thatch continued. Izo nodded and Ace speared his meat with a fork, smiling widely as he chewed.

After a week, Whitebeard called for a meeting. He'd been a constant, warm presence on deck and Ace knew instinctively that now was time for business.

A handful of division commanders – the ones available – joined Ace as he sat at a round table. Whitebeard sat near a window and waved for Ace to take the seat by his side, a surprising gesture. He sat down, dwarfed by his captain, and waited for silence to fall. There was no need for pleasantries between him and Whitebeard, they had a silent, comfort understanding.

Did Whitebeard know of Ace's connection to Roger? Ace knew that Marco knew, but he didn't think anyone else did. If anyone, though, it would be Whitebeard.

"I've been tracking Shiki's movements the past week," Marco opened from Whitebeard's other side. "He's been quite erratic in his movements, but I've been told that he has a deadline at the end of the month and has failed to produce results so far… namely he's failed to produce me."

A titter of laughter swept around the table.

"It means he's becoming more reckless," Marco continued. "Which means we need to be careful how we take him on. If Shiki thinks he can get what he wants, he'll do anything to get it."

"So no attacking head-on?" someone asked and Whitebeard shook his head.

"Shiki's backed by the damned government. If we make a direct move then we'll be covered in marines faster than you can blink," Jozu said blankly and Whitebeard nodded.

"There's to be a public gala celebrating Shiki's contribution to science. Here he'll be showcasing his latest works – the spotlight is supposed to be his phoenix project." There was a pause and Whitebeard shifted.

"A small team will be infiltrating the event. It's too public and televised for Shiki to outright attack, the exact things that will give us an edge." Ace smirked. What better way to bring Shiki down than at his own event in front of thousands of people watching.

"The infiltration will be handled by my division," Marco said. "All other available teams will be close to the venue and ready to back us up."

"Ace and Marco will be going in alone," Whitebeard said and the room fell still. Ace had thought it was silent before, but he'd been wrong. The very air seemed to have stiffened and Ace looked at Whitebeard with wide eyes.

"Some of your division will be on the security and waiting staff at the venue, but you two will be
the only ones attending as guests. Shiki won't be able to identify you, Marco, and Ace will unsettle him.” Whitebeard's voice was steady and let no room for argument. It was probably a good idea; too many people and Shiki would move before they had a chance.

The next hour was spent discussing their tactics and Ace watched, inputting when and where he could. He had a better grasp on the government and what they could pull off without being caught than the others, as well as the geography of the land and the others listened carefully, taking his advice and using it. It was good, Ace thought, to be part of something.

They broke only when the dinner bell sounded. Ace stood to leave with the others, but Whitebeard asked him to stay back. He sat in his chair, watching as Marco lingered long enough to be the last to leave, giving Ace a look that suggested he'd be waiting outside in the corridor.

"Marco can handle Shiki," Whitebeard began. He'd turned to look at Ace and the rest of the room faded away, so strong was Whitebeard's presence.

His words though…

"I may not be as strong as the others, but I have every right to fight Shiki." Ace wasn't weak, he knew that. He may not have had as much training as the rest of Whitebeard's crew, but he'd be able to fight. He'd been able to fight on level with Smoker and while taking on Shiki by himself was, admittedly, optimistic, he wouldn't be by himself. Marco would be there and entire divisions to back them up.

"I know you're strong enough," Whitebeard said fondly. "But I'm not sure you're ready to have blood on your hands."

Ace opened his mouth and paused. Whitebeard was right; how could anyone be ready to have blood on their hands?

"It doesn't matter if I'm ready or not," he said, chest tightening. "I've wasted so many years already, cowering from the government when I should have been doing something. I was given this power for a reason and instead of using it, I hid away, doing exactly what the government wanted me to."

Ace took a steadying breath, fists clenched and hotter than any human could handle.

"I have a right to live," he said quietly, starting slightly as Whitebeard laughed.

"Well said, my son," Whitebeard said fondly.

The words were said so simply, but they hit Ace hard. He sat back in his chair, eyes wide, only just realising the exact implications of Whitebeard accepting him as a son.

He had a home. There was no checking over the shoulder or dead-end job. There was no keeping his head down as he walked through town, no hiding behind closed doors or shuttered blinds. He was free, but not just free. He had a home, a family, and that was more than Ace could have ever hoped for.

Still, there was one more thing that had to be said.

"Gold Roger was my biological father." Ace said the words without emotion. Whitebeard could probably guess the turmoil Ace felt in relation to his father, but he the room didn't need to know. This was for Whitebeard alone.

"You have a little of his look," Whitebeard said simply. "Though it seems you take after your
mother more." He smiled and Ace felt his body shudder, tears welling up in his eyes.

"It doesn't matter who created you," Whitebeard said. "You make you and look how far you've come. You could be Shiki's son for all we care."

Ace sniffed, rubbing his eye with a smile. His heart was open and all he felt was warmth from Whitebeard.

"Thanks, Oyaji," he said, the name slipping from his lips with ease. Whitebeard cracked another smile and nodded to the door.

"Someone's waiting for you. Just go easy on him, he's older than he looks." Ace stood up and wiped his nose, nodding with a grin.

Marco was, as predicted, outside. He held two plates of food, offering one to Ace.

"You're lucky I got these before seconds was announced." Ace took the plate and spooned some rice into his mouth, stomach grumbling in appreciation.

"Where do you want to eat?" Marco asked and Ace took his hand, leading him out on deck. A few other people were about and there looked to be an impromptu party starting on the far end of the deck. Ace reckoned they'd join that later, but he wanted Marco to himself for a while.

The Moby Dick was so vast that small lookout posts had been built all across the ship. It wasn't easy to climb up to one with a plate in one hand, but they managed it and lit the lamp, waving at a few others in nearby lookout posts. Inside was a small, comfortable seat with decent cushions and, most importantly, a clear view to the sky.

"It's beautiful," Ace said, looking up. Marco didn't reply and Ace glanced to him, smiling when he saw Marco was as transfixed by the world above as he was.

"When this is all over, I'll show you the stars how they're meant to be see," Marco promised.

As he spooned more rice into his mouth, Ace was decidedly not smiling soppily at the comment. He caught Marco's eye and flicked a pea at him, aiming for his grin, but gave up after the third pea. He couldn't waste anymore peas.

"I'll hold you to that then," he said eventually. "Though Luffy will probably want to meet you properly now that I'm here before we go on an adventure."

Marco raised an eyebrow.

"He was very excited about the prospect of a phoenix, wasn't he," Marco said and Ace nodded.

"He'll talk you into flying the world with him if he can," Ace warned, completely serious. Luffy had been going on about Whitebeard's phoenix for years.

"He is persuasive," Marco agreed, looking up again. "But I think I'll save the tour of the world for a rainy day."

"There's a lot to do here," Ace nodded, anticipation bubbling into excitement.

No matter how long it took, they were going to do it. The government would crumble and everyone who had ever been oppressed would get to see the stars just as Ace was now; entirely free.

Shiki was just the start.
Walking through the city on a rainy day was hard. Umbrellas bumped against each other as people jostled past, and Ace wrinkled his nose. He was glad he’d forgone his own umbrella, but a hood wasn’t enough to keep out the rain fully.

“How far away is this place,” Ace mumbled. Marco glanced at him, looking as miserable as Ace felt. His nose was pink from the cold, and Ace reached to rearrange Marco’s scarf to cover his face a little more.

“A few more roads away,” Marco said as Ace pulled back. His voice was muffled, but Ace could see he was smiling. He offered a mitten covered hand out to Ace, who took it happily, bare fingers wrapping round wool.

There were a lot of benefits to being able to control fire, and while Ace may be damp, he was comfortably warm. He focused on his hand, hoping that some of his warmth would pass into Marco too.

They walked down the road, avoiding umbrellas and annoyed pedestrians, until Marco directed them to a side street. He tugged Ace along, opening a small, dark door on the outside of a generic, brick building. There was a sign on the outside, but Ace wasn’t able to get a look at it before he was dragged inside.

“I need drink,” Marco said to himself, shaking his arms and peeling himself out of his scarf and coat. His mittens were the last to come off. He tucked them in his pocket and wiggled his fingers, reaching out for Ace’s hand. Ace grinned and tucked Marco’s hand in his pocket, warming him up properly.

They walked down the little corridor they were in until they reached an open doorway. Inside, the most gorgeous bar Ace had seen sat, and he looked around with wide eyes as they entered. Dark wood was accentuated with golden patterns, the chairs in the pub comfortable looking and patterned. It was a nice place, that was for sure, and Ace wondered what exactly they were here for.

“Oh?” a woman’s voice called out. A woman leant over the bar, standing straight and reaching for a bottle behind her as Marco took them to the bar. “What a surprise,” she said with a kind smile, pouring rum into a glass.

“And who’s this?” she said, turning to Ace. She poured him a glass too, and Ace sat down on a stool beside Marco, having released his hand a moment ago. He took it, nodding his thanks.

“Portgas D. Ace,” Marco said, leaning an elbow on the bar counter. “And you can tell the old man listening that he’s going to be leading the second division if the rest of us get our way.”

Ace shot Marco a glare. He’d rejected the offer due to uncertainty, but the reasons to keep denying
the position were becoming fewer and fewer. The entire crew were cheering for him to lead the second division, and Ace knew he’d likely accept once Shiki had been dealt with.

“I’d expect nothing less,” a man said, coming out of a room behind the bar. He had grey hair and an impressive aura. He drew attention, though Ace had the distinct feeling he could be completely unobtrusive if he chose to be.

“Pour me a glass Shakky,” the man said, moving around the bar to take the stool beside Ace. A glass slid in his direction and the man took a sip, smiling widely as he set it back on the bar.

“So then, Ace, how’s life on Whitebeard’s ship treating you?” the man asked, and he seemed genuinely interested. Ace had no idea why, but he wouldn’t be rude.

“We’re not here for small talk, Rayleigh. Host us a celebration after Shiki’s dealt with, and you can have Ace to yourself for the whole party.” Marco was smiling, and the man gave a bark of laughter.

“Being a bird for all those years didn’t do anything to stop how cheeky you can be.” Rayleigh shook his head, placing a hand on Ace’s shoulder. “If you manage to get rid of Shiki then this bar is yours!”

Shakky cleared her throat, and Rayleigh sighed.

“Metaphorically. I suppose we’ll have to host on the Moby Dick.” He let his hand fall from Ace’s shoulder, and Ace relaxed. Something about Rayleigh put him on edge, but he wasn’t entirely sure what it was.

“Been a while since you’ve had a celebration,” Marco said, downing the last of his drink. He looked over at Ace, smiling briefly before returning to Rayleigh.

“Roger did like a good drink,” Rayleigh said, and Ace was able to pin everything together. Rayleigh had been part of his father’s crew, the same Rayleigh who had saved Marco from Shiki the first time around.

Ace remained silent.

“We didn’t come all the way inland in this miserable weather for a chat,” Marco said, and the air grew tense. Shakky moved, handing a large envelope to Rayleigh, and Ace watched as papers were pulled out.

“These,” he said, leafing through a stack, “are for the ones who will be posing as staff. No one knows they’re pirates, as we arranged.”

Rayleigh set the papers on the bar, and Ace looked at them. He was used to documentation, and the papers look sound. They were just the copies that had already been handed to the agency catering the event, but it was still important to check the little details. Marco didn’t re-check them, and the small gesture of trust filled Ace’s chest with glee.

“And these little ones,” Rayleigh continued, “are your tickets. You’re on the guest list already, though you’ll have to forgive me for the name I put down.”

The tickets read ‘Gold Ace + 1’, and Ace’s mouth thinned in anger. It was a common enough surname, he supposed, but it was a name Ace had gone to great lengths to detach himself from.

“It’ll catch Shiki’s attention,” Raleigh said softly. “You look nothing like Roger.”
Ace looked at him sharply, the anger fading with Rayleigh’s simple sentence. He didn’t look like his father: good. There was more than one person who had given him life, and Ace could put his mother’s name aside for one night if it stopped Shiki.

And anyway, Shiki loved elaborate displays. What was more elaborate than Ace flaunting whose son he was?

Ace set the tickets down on top of the papers and smiled at Rayleigh. He would like to learn more from Rayleigh, but now wasn’t the time. He would save his questions for their celebrations.

With the papers and tickets that would grant them entry to Shiki’s gala – and how exactly Rayleigh had procured the items, Ace wasn’t sure he wanted to know – there wasn’t any reason for them to linger. Marco began to stand, slowly suiting himself up against the cold outside, and Ace downed his rum, nodding to Rayleigh and thanking Shakky.

The rain was still hammering down outside and Ace laughed at Marco’s sigh. They stepped into the downpour and headed to Ace’s old house. They had decided to stay there until the gala, their nakama who would form the staff moving into the district too. Whitebeard had a lot of people who owed him a lot of favours, and he’d called as many in as he could to make their plan work.

They didn’t talk until they arrived at Ace’s block, and Ace could see the relief on Marco’s face when they stepped out of the rain. They were soggy as they rode in the lift, shaking themselves free of as much rain as possible.

“I need hot chocolate,” Ace muttered as he put his key in the door.

There was an odd feeling to the apartment, and Ace froze. Marco bumped into him, instantly alert when he recognised that Ace felt something was wrong.

The sound of a pan clinking came from the kitchen, and Ace knew someone was in his house. Instantly, he let his fire warm inside of him, preparing to use it if Shiki had decided to try and surprise him.

Ace barely had time to register exactly who was in the kitchen before he was pushed backwards, an intruder, though not a threat, clinging to him with watery eyes.

“Ace!” Luffy warbled. “You went missing.”

Ace wrapped his arms around Luffy and hauled him up. Luffy clung to him tightly, and Ace knew he was crying. He should have contacted Luffy earlier, he realised in hindsight, but they’d gone longer without seeing each other before so Ace hadn’t thought it would be a problem.

“I’m sorry, Luffy,” he said, smiling. Luffy looked at him, tears dry and nose wiped clean. Probably on Ace’s shirt, but he had plenty of clothes still here. He hadn’t exactly planned to run off to sea when he had, and there had been no clear opportunity to come back and pack up everything.

“You can play with the phoenix if you want though,” Ace said, turning a cruel grin to face Marco as he wandered slowly to the kitchen. Luffy was instantly taken with the idea and left Ace to follow Marco, questioning him as they entered the kitchen.

With little choice, Ace joined them. Brook sat sipping at some tea, and he nodded politely.

“I’m sorry for the intrusion,” he excused, but Ace didn’t mind in truth. He’d missed Luffy. “I’m making some pasta if you’d like some.”
And so that was how Ace’s kitchen table came to be filled with a skeleton, a phoenix (in true bird form), and an amazed Luffy. Months ago, Ace would have thrown them all out in fear of being caught by the government, but he now sat eating pasta with them, laughing as Brook elaborated on some recent adventures. It was a wonder what confidence and the protection of a family could offer.

When dinner had been eaten, they moved to the lounge. Marco let Luffy play with his tail feathers as they took up one sofa (Marco’s favourite), and he and Brook took the other.

“Do you think you could have babies, and I can have one of the chicks?” Luffy said, voice entirely serious and eyes trained on Marco.

“I don’t think it works like that,” Marco said, arranging himself to sit on Luffy’s lap. Well, as much of himself as he could fit on Luffy; it was only panic that had forced Marco to shrink in size, he’d told Ace, back when Shiki had trapped him with seastone.

Luffy made a noise of disappointment.

“I didn’t think so, but I was hoping you’d lay mystery eggs.” He grinned, turning to Ace. The smile fell off of his lips, and his mood became serious.

It was times like this that Ace knew Luffy’s dream was more than just a dream. One day, they’d all see him become the pirate king, and Ace couldn’t wait for that day. He was proud of who Luffy had become, even if seeing him completely serious looked odd on him still.

“Do I need to punch Shiki?” he said, and Ace understood the full reason Luffy wanted to see him.

“We have a plan,” Ace replied, sitting back. His sofa was really rather comfortable. Maybe he could get it moved aboard the Moby Dick. “We’re going after Shiki at his gala. Whitebeard’s planned it all out.”

Ace couldn’t stop the excitement from bleeding into his voice, and Luffy grinned, teeth flashing.

“We’re having a party when it’s over,” Ace offered. He wouldn’t allow Luffy to go against Shiki (not this time; it was Ace’s fight and he needed to do it with his own nakama), but he wanted him to meet his nakama. Luffy would always be his brother, after all.

“If he hurts you again, I will punch him,” Luffy said, hands clenching around Marco’s feathers. Ace watched the flames curl against Luffy’s fingers, but Marco didn’t appear to be in any discomfort. “You won’t be able to stop me.”

As if Ace could control anything Luffy ever did. He’d be a fool to think so.

After Luffy and Brook had left – both protected against the rain and hardly distinguishable as notorious pirate captain and skeleton – Ace locked the front door and sat on the same sofa as Marco, sighing.

Marco looked down at him as he stretched out. He was still in his bird form, and he pecked Ace’s shoulder gently, fire fading as he shifted back into a human. They shifted until they were comfortable, Ace tucked against Marco’s chest, Marco’s legs either side of his own and arms settled on Ace’s belly.

“Thanks for letting Luffy play with you,” Ace said, closing his eyes and leaning back against Marco. “He’ll still want that ride though.”
Marco kissed the back of Ace’s head, lifting one of his hands up to run through Ace’s hair. His entire body felt as though it had turned to jelly, and Ace sighed happily, smiling as Marco massaged his head.

“That’s nice,” he said quietly, falling into a light doze as Marco continued to play with his hair, other hand joining the first.

It was dark when Ace woke. One of Marco’s hands was still tangled in his hair, and the other draped over his chest. He was snoring softly and Ace smiled, sliding out of his embrace and standing. His back ached a little so he stretched, watching Marco frown and shift in his sleep, searching for Ace’s warmth.

Marco’s frown deepened, and Ace couldn’t hold back his smile as Marco’s hands twitched, an eye opening blearily to find Ace’s whereabouts.

“What are you doing over there?” Marco asked, voice higher than usual and sleepy. He sat up, frown miserable on his face.

“Come on,” Ace said, grabbing Marco’s arm and hauling him to the bedroom. “We have a proper bed here.”

Marco went willingly, still half asleep and leaning into Ace. They snuck under the covers quickly, Ace removing his clothes before he settled in. Marco moved awkwardly under the duvet, throwing his clothes out after he’d got rid of them.

“I promise I’ll wake you up with a treat in the morning,” Marco said, already drifting back into slumber. “Just stay nice and warm…”

Ace tried not to laugh, but he did as told and threw an arm over Marco’s belly, shuffling close. He was comfortably warm and kissed Marco’s shoulder as he closed his eyes. This would be the last peaceful night they had before Shiki’s gala, and Ace couldn’t think of any better way to spend it than in a little cocoon of warmth with Marco.

Ace hadn’t really thought about what Marco’s treat would be. In fact, he’d forgotten it entirely so, when he woke up with a smile on his lips and a spreading warmth on his belly, Ace was surprised to see Marco between his thighs, licking the length of his cock.

“You’re cruel,” Ace said, biting his bottom lip and shifting his hip. The head of his cock brushed against Marco’s nose, and air hit his erection. It felt good, really good, and Ace wanted more.

“I promised I’d wake you up with a treat,” Marco said with a grin, teeth gently grazing the very top of Ace’s cock. The sensitive skin tightened as Ace jerked his hips, shuddering as Marco flicked his tongue over the slit.

“And I always,” Marco began, taking Ace in fully, wetting his cock with a noisy suck, “keep my promises.” He pulled back and licked his lips, hand still moving up and down, wrist rotating as Ace let his head fall back, breath coming in shorter pants.

Marco’s hand continued to massage his dick, but his tongue moved lower. Ace felt Marco run his nose over his balls, tongue trailing after. The sensation made Ace shift, pushing down to encourage Marco and his stupid, gorgeous tongue. It didn’t stop there though, and Ace’s back arched as Marco sucked at the skin, tracing around one of his balls with the tip of his tongue, hand still jerking him off.
Moaning deep in his throat, Ace’s hands gripped at the sheets around him. He heard a noise of satisfaction escape Marco and couldn’t decide whether to try and kick him or just give into the feeling of his tongue at the base of his cock.

He gave in, of course, rolling his hips against Marco’s palm. It felt good, ridiculously good, and Ace could feel sweat slide over his skin as he came close and closer to orgasm.

“Will you fuck me?” Ace said, able to get the words out before he let out a heavy breath, closing his eyes tightly as his world jolted in pleasure.

“You want me to?” Marco asked, voice deep and sultry, though Ace could tell his question was serious. He pulled back from Ace’s dick, hand smoothing over Ace’s thigh. His leg twitched, and Ace moved forwards, kissing Marco gently.

“I really want you to,” he replied, and Marco nodded. He already knew where Ace kept the lube and he left to fetch it, stretching over the bed to Ace’s bedside drawer.

“You asked very nicely,” Marco said with a grin, kissing Ace deeply. Ace ran a hand over Marco’s tattoo, biting at his lips before running an arm around his shoulders and pulling him close. He could feel Marco’s erection against his own, and it sent thrills running through his entire body to think it would be inside of him soon.

“I really, really want you,” Ace said as he pulled back. Marco’s lips were wet, and his eyes were hooded, desire clear in his gaze.

Ace fell back with Marco’s guidance. He watched as Marco spread his legs, lube bottle in his hand and soft smile on his lips. He covered his fingers in lube, squeezing some more over Ace’s opening as he spread Ace open. It was a little strange to be so exposed, even more strange when Marco’s finger slowly entered, but it wasn’t a terrible strange.

Ace liked it.

He liked it even more when Marco added more fingers, stretching him comfortably. Ace’s erection had flagged against his stomach, and he moved his hand over it lazily, locking eyes with Marco and tilting his head for a kiss.

Marco delivered, fingers slipping free and leaving Ace with an empty feeling. He frowned into the kiss, pulling back.

“Don’t stop,” he demanded, feeling his muscles clench in abandonment. Marco only offered a smile in return, opening the wrapper to a condom he’d picked up while grabbing the lube.

“Don’t worry,” he assured, and Ace lay back, placated for the moment. He watched as Marco touched himself, making sure he was coated with lube, and he licked his lips, wanting to be filled with something more, something better, than just fingers.

Marco was slow as he entered, and he stopped at one point.

“Never too much lube,” he said against the shell of Ace’s ear, and Ace gave a snort of laughter, focusing on breathing as the incredible sensation of being stretched and filled overtook him. His arms were around Marco’s shoulders, but they slipped down to claw at Marco’s back when he began to move, slowly building the pressure as he rocked them.

“Shit,” Ace said, closing his eyes. He couldn’t bring himself to touch his cock in fear that he’d come too soon.
Kissing the side of his jaw, Marco curled himself a little tighter, re-angling his cock inside of Ace ever so slightly. He brushed Ace’s prostate, and Ace gasped, giving a low moan as Marco filled him again.

Marco’s arms were by Ace’s shoulders, and as Ace felt the gritty pressure building at the base of his stomach, he wrapped his hand around Marco’s wrist, squeezing as he came. Marco lowered himself, slowing his pace through Ace’s orgasm and kissing him languidly, a groan escaping his throat as he came too.

They lay still for a moment, the only movement their shallow breaths. Ace looked at Marco and shifted his hips a little, the sensation of Marco still inside of him not an unpleasant one.

“Are you going to make me breakfast?” Ace asked. Marco kissed him, pushed up and pulled out slowly, pulling the condom off and tying it.

“I suppose I can,” he said, shuffling off of the bed and leaving the room, most likely to throw the condom away and start Ace’s meal.

“I’m very lucky!” Ace called after him, wiping the mess on his stomach off with the covers. He’d wash them today anyway.

For two people planning to go undercover and take down one of the government’s top scientists, Ace thought they were rather calm. They spent the morning naked, poured all over each other at almost every moment. Ace wasn’t ashamed to say that he came three more times and had needed a nap just after lunch.

Late afternoon arrived, and the atmosphere changed. The gala was that night, and a grim faced member of Marco’s division showed up at the door.

“Delivery for Portgas D. Ace,” he said when Ace opened the door, loudly. “Your suits, sir,” he continued, winking as he continued to thank Ace for his patronage to the ‘dry cleaners’ and wishing him a good evening.

Inside the suit protectors were two sheets of paper – instructions for them both and a map of the venue. They memorised the map, scanned the plan they’d devised on the Moby Dick, and Ace burnt the papers to a crisp.

It was Marco’s suggestion that they part to get dressed, and it was shot down automatically.

“I want to see you get dressed up,” Ace grinned, moving behind Marco and into the bathroom. “I promise I won’t jump you. I’m too tired, and I don’t think I have any more come in me anyway.”

Ace saw Marco wrinkle his nose, but then he was gone and in the shower. He tried not to think too much about the upcoming evening as he let the water wash over him, but it was incredibly hard. What they were about to do would change the entire world.

Devil fruit users had always faced persecution. No matter where they went or how much they tried to hide, the government was always after them. Everyone knew Shiki had powers, and yet the government kept him because he was useful to them. If they took Shiki out, not only would the government know that they weren’t going to stand for this anymore, but the entire world would see the corruption in plain light, not just mumbled whispers.

When he was dry, Ace fumbled with his suit. He managed, until the tie, and he exited the bathroom sheepishly. Marco was dressed, bow tie perfect on his crisp, white shirt, and Ace looked at him with a desperate frown.
“Come here,” Marco said, and Ace went quickly, smile beaming across his face. Marco would sort him out, thankfully.

Marco’s hands worked quickly, and he finished, holding onto the end of Ace’s tie instead of letting him go. He pulled Ace close, fingers trailing up the fabric of the tie until their lips met. Ace lingered after the kiss, resting his forehead against Marco’s and closing his eyes.

“It’ll be over tonight,” he whispered. Marco wrapped his arms around the small of Ace’s back, pulling him tight.

“It’ll be the start tonight,” he countered, and electricity ran through Ace at the thought. Marco was right. This was the start of a new rebellion. The government wouldn’t be able to hide the truth about Shiki after tonight and the world would rock with the aftermath.

A black car was waiting for them outside, and Ace locked up, hiding the key under the welcome mat. Some of Whitebeard’s men would be in here later that evening to collect Ace’s things. They’d keep his apartment, using it in the future if they needed a place to stay on land. It was important to have options covered; they’d definitely be coming back to take on the government more than once.

The drive to the venue was sat in silence. The chauffeur – a woman Ace recognised as belonging to the third division – told them everything was according to plan before she fell silent. Ace’s fingers brushed Marco’s as he set his hand on the empty seat between them, watching the outside world fade from lower income districts to the elaborate wealth of the rich.

As they drew closer and closer to the gala, the wealth only became more extravagant. Giant statues of nameless people, awarded for something terrible such as enforcing the death of devil fruit users, seemed to stand on every street corner, and the pavement was pristine. Ace hated to think how much money was being pumped into appearance for this one part of the city, especially when he walked past the homeless and the hungry commonly in his area (and his was far from the worst).

Their progress slowed, and they joined a long queue of traffic. Ace watched people of supposed importance and glamour as they passed him, smiling widely. Women were dressed and made up impeccably, the men all sleaze and smoothness. Everyone here was fake.

As they stepped free of the car, Ace first, he felt a rush of confidence. Stepping into this crowd was no different to stepping into the carnival. Gold Ace could become his new Hiken, and Ace drew calm from this thought.

The gala was being held in a large, marble building. Ace had no idea what its use aside from tonight was, but he had to admit it looked gorgeous. At least his taxes were paying for a beautiful event.

“Shiki won’t be appearing until an hour before he presents his findings,” Marco whispered as they passed the entrance. Their invitations were checked, and they were allowed through, no one finding any interest in Ace’s name.

Rayleigh’s gamble was paying off, it seemed.

They moved through the venue slowly, engaging in small talk with some guests – Ace was involved in jewellery making and Marco the stock market – while they mapped the event. They had the blueprints of the building and had memorised them, but things moved inside. Ace had already seen one exit blocked by a huge flower arrangement, and they knew now where they could escape from if worst came to worst.
They were mid-conversation with an elderly couple when Shiki made his grand appearance. He entered the hall as if there was nothing to it, dressed up in fine clothes. Ace had to hold back a snort of laughter at the cape he’d brought along too.

“He’s playing dress-up,” Ace muttered, for Marco’s ears only.

“Long live the king,” Marco replied, voice flat and unamused look on his face. Who exactly did Shiki think he was?

No reporters had been allowed into this hall – they were all setting up in the room where Shiki would make his speech – and so Shiki moved easily through the crowd, gliding through as if he were a swan on a lake. The crowd parted before him, simpering and adoring, and Ace watched in disgust. Shiki had so much blood on his hands, yet these people truly celebrated him.

As if there were some magnetic pull between them, Shiki locked eyes upon Ace. There was half a room between them, and Ace met his stare with a level gaze, turning away and engaging Marco in what he hoped seem like casual conversation.

“He noticed me,” Ace said softly, smiling and laughing, pretending he’d cracked a joke. Marco smiled along too, sipping at his drink.

“He’s making his way over,” Marco commented, grabbing a champagne flute from a passing waiter, handing it to Ace.

Shiki’s heavy footsteps stopped as he stood next to Ace. Shiki was tall and broad, but he had nothing on Whitebeard. Ace was unafraid to look up into his eyes, smile playing on his lips. The entire room seemed focused on them, but just this room wasn’t enough.

“What a… surprise to see you,” Shiki greeted. The grip on his glass had tightened, and Ace wondered if he’d smash the glass.

“Well, my partner and I couldn’t miss such an event.” Ace’s smile widened, and he leant closer to Shiki. “You deserve all this celebration!”

There was a momentary look of fury on Shiki’s face, but he covered it quickly. He had to be graceful and a man of importance tonight. Letting himself get upset by a few comments wouldn’t do, Ace supposed.

“If you cause any trouble-“ Shiki began, and that was when Ace knew their plan would work. Shiki cared too much about his reputation, and he knew they held the key to his undoing. If they showed him up, there was no hidden exit Shiki could take to get out of it. The government had protected him on the grounds that he’d provide them with what they wanted.

And Ace, not Shiki, had what they wanted.

“We won’t,” Ace promised faithfully. They weren’t there for trouble; they were there for a revolution.

Shiki left them after that, a sheen of sweat gleaming on his brow. He’d barely spared one glance at Marco, and that was exactly how they’d hoped. Marco was no one to Shiki, which would make his reaction even better.

A portly looking man called for them to enter the press room, and Marco led them into the huge room. It held plenty of seating, but there were two reserved under Ace’s name at the very back and end of the room. They were beside a huge, glass wall, though it wouldn’t be standing for much
longer. The glass wall led out into a courtyard and then up – where Ace and Marco were planning
to lead Shiki.

If he wanted his phoenix, Shiki would have no choice but to follow and reveal his powers. There
was no doubt in Ace’s mind that he’d pursue. After they were gone, their nakama inside the venue
would make sure videos and reports went viral, condemning Shiki.

Of course, they had to fight Shiki when they left the gala, but Ace was fully confident they could
do it.

He hoped.

For now, Marco was warm at his side, and Ace slipped his hand into Marco’s, offering a shaky
smile. Marco squeezed his fingers, bringing them to his lips to kiss.

“So if Luffy’s coming to our ship, how much food will we need?” Ace tried not to laugh at the
question, turning to Marco with a considering look on his face.

“He can out-eat me,” Ace began, ignoring the look of disbelief that spread across Marco’s face.
“By a lot.”

“Rayleigh’s dodged a bullet in not needing to supply the food,” Marco muttered, his eyes drifting
to Ace’s lips.

“I want to kiss you,” he said, voice quiet and higher than usual. Marco was pleading with him, Ace
realised, and he wanted nothing more than to kiss Marco back.

“After this is over, you’ll get the best kiss I’ve ever given you.” Ace promised. They needed no
attention or distractions until their moment of revealing. Plus, Ace felt as though he’d more likely
throw up on Marco than kiss him, on account of the butterflies swirling in his stomach.

Shiki took his place on the panel at the front of the room. At his side were scientists, their lanyards
all printed with the government’s insignia. Shiki wasn’t amongst friends here, which would mean
less resistance for Marco and Ace.

One of the officials stood up, introducing Shiki and stating that they’d be taking questions on his
latest research once he’d been through his presentation. Shiki looked uncomfortable, and it was
easy to guess why. His presentation wouldn’t have the live evidence he’d wanted. Of course, he
was likely to be presenting other information than that on his phoenix project, but it would pale in
comparison.

Reporters shuffled expectantly, and cameras were powered on as Shiki stood. He was composed,
mouth thin and eyes darting over the crowd. He seemed to lock eyes with Ace before the lights
dimmed, his presentation beaming onto the screen that covered the wall behind him.

Ace paid little attention as Shiki talked about his revolutionary weapons. He spoke of a colleague
he planned to work with in order to manufacture the weapons, but it was no one Ace had heard of
before. Marco twitched at the name Clown, but he didn’t seem tense or annoyed, and so Ace
returned to stroking the back of Marco’s hand, waiting for the presentation to be over.

The phoenix project was skimmed over, Shiki turning his shoulder to the crowd as he presented a
bullshit amount of ‘data’. The crowd hummed in excitement as Shiki provided a single photograph
of Marco, back how he’d looked with seastone strapped around his leg. The change between then
and now was incredible, and Ace wondered how life had ever taken such a turn.
The presentation ended in pleased applause, and the lights came on softly. Now would be the time for questions and now would be the time they took to the stage.

“Can we see the phoenix?” a reporter said, halfway through the questions on Shiki’s plans to increase weapon production.

The reporter looked familiar, though she wasn’t who Ace was expecting when Whitebeard had said he’d have a friend take care of the question. Shakky held up the camera she was holding, tilting her head curiously for Shiki’s answer.

As planned, other voices joined in her request, and Shakky slunk back, turning her camera to Marco and Ace. She’d catch the entire thing before anyone else.

Ace stood, fire burning inside of him, ready to unleash. He sent a small flame upwards and the room fell silent, muffled screams dying out as Ace made it clear all he wanted to use his powers for was to grab attention.

“Shiki’s experiments have been nothing more than cover for torturing devil fruit users!” Ace shouted, climbing onto his chair. “He keeps his position in the government because he gives them what they want – control over Users and dead bodies.”

A few mutters broke out at Ace’s words, but he wasn’t done yet. Ace looked into Shakky’s camera, ignoring the anger he could feel building from the panel. No one had shot him down yet because he hadn’t given them reason to – he wasn’t a threat enough yet, and this was a respectable venue. However much they wanted to, they couldn’t just pile his body with seastone bullets.

“Shiki caught his phoenix in a clash against the Whitebeard Pirates!” Ace announced, throwing his arms wide. “He is a User himself, yet the government let him carry on protected because he does exactly what they want.”

Ace grinned, locking eyes with Shiki. There was nothing but anger in his eyes, and Ace was glad. An angry Shiki was an irrational Shiki. An irrational Shiki was one who would charge into battle and follow them.

“But he’s told the biggest lie tonight.” The crowd shrank back as Ace’s fire flickered over his hands, excitement and nervousness seeping through his control. “His biggest lie is with his phoenix!”

That made them move. Ace watched as government officials stood and began making their way to him, Shiki left alone at the table, hands clenched into tight fists. Angry didn’t even cover what Shiki looked anymore; he was furious.

“He had the phoenix once, years ago. Since then he’s been trying to look for it, but he never found it.” Ace let his hands fall, one brushing Marco’s shoulder.

Ace watched anxious faces fade to shock as Marco transformed. His wings spread out, and he stood up on his legs, high enough for Ace to climb onto when they needed to escape. Shocked cries died down, and Ace stared blankly at Shiki. The government officials had come to a stand-still, clearly unprepared for this situation.

“Shiki was planning on torturing the phoenix to get his weapons against Users. He’s tortured countless others – others whom he shares an affinity with!” Ace move forwards as Marco pushed up, wings sending them flying.

They were in the air quickly, flying over the heads of the crowd and towards Shiki, goading him.
Ace tucked his head low when Marco turned to the side, crashing through the glass wall. He landed on the ground, body low and flat, and Ace sat up, watching Shiki as he walked calmly through the broken glass.

“You,” he hissed, footsteps becoming lighter. Ace’s heart hammered in his chest, and he sunk lower against Marco’s back, preparing for the push upwards they’d make in a moment. “You’ve ruined everything.”

Ace wasn’t sure whether Shiki was talking to him or Marco, but it didn’t matter. Marco shot upwards as Shiki flew towards them, hands slapping against the empty part of the building and bringing them with him. Ace could hear screams from below, and he couldn’t hold back his grin. The truth was out.

Fire burnt Ace’s shirt as they flew upwards, his flames ready to battle. Shiki floated in the air, rubble at each side, as Marco came to an almost-stop, wings beating slowly to keep them steady.

“All you had to do was hand the fucking bird to me!” Shiki roared, the building to his right splintering with his anger. “If you had done what I wanted, everything would have worked out okay. You could have carried on your simple life, and I’d not be a wanted man.”

The government had already moved, then. Shiki had most likely been hoping to appease them at the gala, but that was now as shattered as the glass Marco had broken.

Shiki moved quickly, rubble flying at Marco as if it were nothing. Flying high, Marco dodged the largest chunks, shielding Ace from the smaller ones and allowing his body to heal the damage.

“We need to take him further,” Ace said, sitting up on Marco’s back and bringing his hands together. He took a deep breath, collecting his fire and pouring it into a stream, aimed straight at Shiki.

He avoided the attack, of course, and Ace switched to firing smaller bullet-flames, twisting so that he sat backwards on Marco as they began to fly over the city. Wind howled around Ace, but he didn’t feel the chill in the air. He didn’t see the city below and missed the people looking up, taken by the bright bird and building tops being ripped and hurled into the sky.

“You’re just like that man!” Shiki shouted over the skies, Marco landing on one of the abandoned warehouses. Ace could see the ocean when he jumped off of Marco’s back, and he felt strengthened by it. His freedom was there, ready for the taking, and nothing would stop Ace now.

Shiki set down on the roof of the warehouse, feet clunking against the metal as he took a few steps towards them. His eyes were narrowed, and jaw clenched tightly.

They had a moment to react before Shiki tore the warehouse roof off, hurling it at them. Marco took to the sky, flying straight at Shiki as Ace rolled out of the strip of metal’s way, hands outstretched and fire shooting towards Shiki’s back.

Shiki’s left sleeve caught fire, but he snuffed it out quickly, whirling to face Ace. He pulled something from his sleeve, something small, but Ace couldn’t quite see what it was. Without looking, Shiki fired the weapon towards Marco, ripping up part of the roof to follow, and both attacks caught his wing, bending it back with a horrifying crunch.

Ace watched as Marco shifted, good hand instantly trying to dig into the small wound Shiki had given him, trying to get something out.

“It’s seastone!” Marco shouted, above the wind and the clang of metal. Fear pooled in Ace’s
stomach, and he crouched low, preparing to dodge Shiki’s attack no matter what.

Moving with the confidence of someone who had exactly the power he’d craved, Shiki took slow steps towards Ace, dodging the warning flames Ace sent at him. Ace wanted to watch the situation, plan before he made a move, and he needed Marco to get the seastone out of his arm.

Three things happened in quick succession. Shiki bent low, the warehouse shuddering at his command and tilting. It sent Marco falling towards the ground below, fingers still buried in his arm and unable to grab onto anything. Ace moved to help, but a terrible pain split his side and he looked down in horror, blood slipping from a small hole above his hip.

Instantly, Ace’s knees buckled. He wrapped a hand around the wound, shock overtaking him. His fire, his constant companion even when he’d hated it was gone.

The third thing trapped him completely. Metal screeched as Shiki sent it towards Ace, pressing down on him. A jagged edge cut into his side, and Ace let out a cry of pain, torn between curling up or digging his fingers into the wound. He had no idea how deep the bullet went, and he could feel himself weakening. If he was going to live, he needed to do it quickly.

“Stupid boy,” Shiki said, teeth flashing as he grinned, stepping closer. “You’re going to learn what it’s like to drown.”

Shiki moved down, slamming his palms against the warehouse. He seemed to struggle with an enormous, invisible weight, until the entire warehouse shifted, pulling out of the ground and towards the ocean. The motion jarred the metal against Ace’s side, and he felt it pierce his flesh. He gritted his teeth, trying to stay as still as possible, though it was hard.

Ace’s fingers moved, slipping against wet blood. His entire side was bloody and what clothes hadn’t been destroyed by his fire earlier had definitely been ruined by blood. He gasped as his fingers pressed into his wound, mindful of the metal cutting into him, seeking out the bullet. If Marco could do it, so could Ace. There was no other option, unless he wanted to die.

“I’ve waited for this day for so long,” Shiki said, crouching down in front of Ace. One of his hands pushed the metal down, and Ace gritted his teeth. His hand was pushed further in and he fought not to make a sound. He needed Shiki to think he couldn’t get it out, or he might suffer another bullet.

“He was the reason the government found out about my powers,” Shiki said, leaning in lower. Ace had no idea who Shiki was referring to, but it was clear he hated the man he was talking about. “And you’re the reason they almost put me in Impel Down.”

His fingers brushed against something small, caught between thick lumps of soft tissue. Ace felt his hand numb when he touched it, and he knew it was the bullet.

Shiki stood, stilling the warehouse. Ace could hear the rush of the sea below them, and his stomach dropped. He didn’t want to believe this was it, not when he was so close to being free and living.

Ace’s fingers closed around the bullet, tearing it out of himself with a shout. Blood poured down his side, but Ace’s flames were back, and he pushed the metal off of himself, heating it until it bent to his will.

Shiki looked furious, surprised at how Ace had managed to free himself, and he made to shoot Ace again, hand trembling as he raised his arm. He never got a chance to shoot, however, and the gun skittered across the remainder of the warehouse roof, within Ace’s reach.
Marco stood over Shiki, half-human, half-bird. Talons had Shiki pinned to the metal of the warehouse, and there was a wild look in his eyes. Ace looked at him in relief, bending down to pick up the gun.

“That was a nasty wound you gave me,” Marco said, voice low and dangerous. His talons dug deeper, and Shiki pressed his fingertips against the metal around him, ripping the warehouse apart once more and throwing it up.

The entire roof began to fall then, the infrastructure completely torn apart. There was hardly anything to cling to, and Ace lowered himself down, ignoring their progression towards the sea. He tucked the gun under his chest, hand hidden from Shiki’s sight.

Marco had no choice. He let go of Shiki and flew higher, looking down at Ace.

“You shouldn’t have sold yourself to the government,” Ace said, pushing himself up into a crouch. His side hurt, and he could feel blood trickle down his side, but he wasn’t going to let that stop him. The gun in his grasp was light, and Ace felt nothing when he fired it, bullet lodging itself in Shiki’s shoulder.

The effect was dramatic. The warehouse instantly dropped from under their feet, falling faster towards the sea. Shiki began to fall too, hands trying to reach out and grasp something – anything – that would help him. There was nothing though, and Ace tried to keep his eyes open as he fell too, watching a desperate man try and cling to life.

As he fell, Ace felt a hand slip into his empty one. He turned to the side, eyes watering as he looked at Marco, fully human and alive. They were both alive.

Ace wrapped himself around Marco in an instant, not caring that his stomach had escaped his body moments before. His arms circled Marco’s shoulders, and his legs tightened around his waist, kissing Marco as if they were never going to stop falling. He wanted Marco to know exactly how he felt, exactly how loved he was, and exactly how free they were now that Shiki had been dealt with.

Bright blue burst into colour around them as Marco unfurled his wings. They slowed instantly, gliding on the currents instead of passing desperately through them. Shiki was nothing more than a tiny spec now, and Marco let Ace drop down, throwing him upwards with a strong talon before Ace could land on his back. It was an awkward way to do things, but Ace didn’t fancy taking a quick dip in the sea, especially with the amount of rubble falling from the sky.

If Shiki managed to survive the weakness of the seastone and then the ocean herself, he wouldn’t be able to survive the earth and metal rushing to fall on top of him now.

They stayed circling the area until they were sure Shiki wasn’t about to surface, Ace’s fingers tangled in soft, flame-covered feathers. He couldn’t believe it was over.

Marco turned, drifting towards where the Moby Dick would be anchored, away from the city and in open waters. The deck was quiet when they touched down, and Marco shed his bird form with a groan, holding the arm Shiki had broken. A violent bruise marked the skin, and Ace met Marco’s eyes with worry.

“Sheastone’s nasty, and Shiki’s was strong.” The skin had already begun to lighten, Marco’s powers kicking in fully.

“It’ll take a day to heal this arm properly,” Marco commented, wiping away some of the blood at
Ace’s side with his suit jacket. “This, on the other hand, needs proper medical attention.”

He vanished, returning with a doctor and a hefty medical bag. She smiled at Ace, launching into how amazing they had been, and how everyone must have seen the videos by now. Ace listened as she explained that the media were turning on the government and being questioned, while other Users were grouping together and trying to get in contact with the media, with the government, and even with Whitebeard himself.

“Lie down, I need to stitch this,” the doctor said, not bothering to ask him to control his flames. She was a brave one, that was for sure, though Ace didn’t think he had any energy to burn anyone right now.

She sewed him up quickly, warning him not to stretch himself. It was a clean wound, she said, and injected him with something as a precaution, due to the cut being made by warehouse metal. She left after a thorough exam, returning to watch the news.

“You can go in if you want,” Ace said, still lying down on the wood of the deck, staring up at the stars. “I’ll be fine out here.”

Marco lay down beside him, taking the gun Ace had still been holding and pushing it out of reach.

“You didn’t do a bad thing,” Marco said, taking Ace’s hand and rolling on his side. He was pressed up against Ace, warm and everything Ace had ever needed from someone. “If you hadn’t shot him, we’d probably be dead by now.”

Ace nodded, closing his eyes and rolling over, curling himself against Marco. He was exhausted, physically and mentally, and he hated to feel guilty about Shiki. And he did, just the smallest bit.

“His death has already caused an uproar,” Marco said, hugging Ace tightly and resting his chin against the top of Ace’s head. “We’ll be able to help so many more people now.”

And, really, that was the truth. Exposing part of the government’s corruption and stopping a terrible man was only the start. Whitebeard had made it clear they would continue, and Ace knew he’d be fighting alongside them all the way.

“We can topple them completely,” Ace said, pulling back so that he could look Marco in the eye. “We’ll make a fresh start for everyone. No one needs to face persecution because of who they are.”

He leant forward, kissing Marco gently and sealing his promise.

Music played loudly behind Ace, and he ducked out of the way of a line of people, dancing merrily. One toppled over, and the rest followed, raucous laughter echoing into the evening sky.

Scanning the Moby Dick, Ace caught sight of Sanji still dishing out huge portions of food, Thatch at his side helping. Chopper sat on Whitebeard’s lap, most likely running a test of some sort while he could. Ace looked around for other familiar faces, smiling as he located the other Straw Hats, though one in particular was missing.

He found Luffy at the head of the ship, lying on top of the figurehead with Marco at his side. Marco was preening his feathers, Luffy’s hands playing with the long, golden tail feathers he’d taken a liking to.
“Ace!” Luffy cried when he set eyes on him, wide grin in pace. “Marco’s going to take me for a ride later.”

He looked so happy that Ace felt no envy, even though he loved riding on Marco’s back as they crossed the ocean more than anything. Luffy kicked his legs a little, chin resting on hands as he looked out around them.

“I got to see Rayleigh again too,” he announced, sounding very pleased with himself. His hands untangled from Marco’s feathers, and Marco shifted, climbing back onto deck and passing Ace, leaving the brothers alone.

“You know, there’s a lot of things to see in the world,” Luffy said, trademark smile stamped across his face. He shifted, sitting up, and Ace sat next to him, looking out at the sunset.

“Shall I tell you a secret?” Luffy said with a wide grin, as if what he was about to say wasn’t a secret at all.

Ace sighed, throwing an arm around Luffy’s shoulders and pulling him close.

“Go on then,” he said, wondering what Luffy would come up with next.

“Phoenixes are real,” Luffy said, giggling loudly. Ace looked at him, unimpressed, but the laughter was too infectious and he found himself clutching his stomach, eyes closed tightly and laughter bubbling from his chest.

Luffy was right, though. There were a lot of things for Ace to see, and it was all thanks to Marco that he’d opened his eyes. The government wouldn’t be toppled from their lone act, but this was just the start.

Something bigger and better was on the horizon, and nothing would stop Ace from reaching for it. Not now that he was free. Not now that he had so many people behind him. Not now that he had Marco.

“You could come with us now,” Luffy ventured, though Ace could tell he didn’t believe in his words.

“You don’t need to keep checking on me,” Ace replied, ruffling Luffy’s hair. “I didn’t choose this ship just because it was the first one I saw.”

Luffy wiggled his toes, humming happily to himself.

“Sanji promised me more meat,” Luffy said, pulling himself off of the whale figurehead and leaving Ace behind. “I’m starving.”

There was no way that Luffy was starving, but Ace knew his little brother well. Luffy was a bottomless pit, and they were lucky to have Sanji helping out with the food. No one else would have been able to keep up with the demand, even on a ship as vast as the Moby Dick.

Rolling onto his stomach, Ace rested his chin in his hands and watched the sun creep closer to the horizon. The stars were already out, and he was content to watch the beauty of the open seas for a while. He felt a presence behind him, but Ace didn't bother to move until Marco sat down, pushing a plate in front of him.

"I managed to wrestle some away from your brother,” Marco said, taking a bite of chicken drumstick as he spoke. "It's a shame his crew are so loyal to him. His cook's pretty amazing."
Ace shifted his weight onto one elbow, using the other hand to pick up food.

"Sanji’s a god," Ace murmured, sighing happily as he bit into his steak.

"Should I be jealous," Marco said, nudging Ace's shoulder with his elbow.

Setting his plate on the ship, Ace sat up, raising an eyebrow at Marco.

"You're absolutely, one hundred percent, stuck with me now," he said, voice serious. Ace managed to hold back his smile for a moment, breaking when Marco rolled his eyes.

“There’s no one I’d rather be stuck with,” Marco replied, holding up a spare drumstick. Ace took it with a smile, letting his head fall onto Marco’s shoulders as they watched the light disappear, the sun finally hidden.

“Thank you,” Ace said quietly. Marco slipped an arm around his side, careful not to press against his wound. Their breathing synchronised, and Ace felt at complete peace.

Fear would never hold Ace back again, because now he knew what life could be like, how life was supposed to be. Being here with Marco, with an entire world before them, was what it meant to be free.

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